



Nathaniel, Brittney (2025) *Non-traditional entry routes to higher education: a cross-national study of inclusion in access for adults in New York State and Scotland*. PhD thesis.

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/85628/>

Copyright and moral rights for this work are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge

This work cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission from the author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

Enlighten: Theses

<https://theses.gla.ac.uk/>

[research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:research-enlighten@glasgow.ac.uk)

# **Non-Traditional Entry Routes to Higher Education: A Cross-National Study of Inclusion in Access for Adults in New York State and Scotland**

Brittney Nathaniel

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Education

University of Glasgow  
College of Social  
Sciences

October 2024

## Abstract

The lifelong learning topics of 'widening access' and 'widening participation', particularly for 'mature learners', have been of discerning interest to academics, educators, and policymakers for decades (Gallacher, 2010). In both the UK and U.S., initiatives have aimed to recruit and retain students from more intersectionally diverse and historically excluded backgrounds, particularly those above the traditional school transition age (e.g. Espinosa et al., 2019; Gallacher, 2010; Riddell, 2015). Such 'widening recruitment' initiatives have seen significant growth in each country (e.g. Calahan et al., 2022; Espinosa et al., 2019; Boliver, Gorard, Siddiqui, 2021). Scotland and New York State, in particular, both have a longstanding history of lifelong learning programmes and initiatives to address urgent skill shortages, enhance social and economic mobility, and support workforce development (Boeren, 2016; Reder, 2007; Roumell, Salajan, & Todoran, 2020; White & Lee, 2020). Despite this, most recent widening access policy still primarily benefit young, full-time, first-degree undergraduates, (e.g. Commission on Widening Access [CoWA] in Scotland; Excelsior Scholarship, 2017 & José Peralta New York State Dream Act, 2019). In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, mature student enrolment in higher education (HE) continues to decline in both regions (HESA, 2023; Kamssu & Kouam, 2021), highlighting the urgent need for the present multilevel, exploratory and experiential research in adult learning inclusive policy and practice. Using an ecological lens, it examines how individual, institutional, and policy factors interact to impact participation in higher education, guided by Boeren's (2016) *Integrative Model of Lifelong Learning Participation* as the core conceptual framework for this analysis.

Situated within their respective policy contexts, this cross-national, multilevel qualitative study examines the impact of non-traditional trajectories into HE and the strategies employed by university stakeholders to facilitate access in the face of dwindling government funding in both regions. It explores the experiences of 24 adult learners (Scotland n=14, New York n=10) and the perspectives of 7 university stakeholders (Scotland n=4, New York n=3), to gain triangulated insights into current and future inclusivity of widening access and participation programmes for mature learners in a post-COVID world.

These triangulated findings highlight the significant impact of institutional habitus, learners' identity/belonging, as well as university 'reputation' and perceived elite status, on both learners' experiences and stakeholders' approaches to widening access. It further highlights the shared, and differential, institutional and learner experiences of bureaucratic/policy-related barriers to both mature student access and HEI facilitation of access, into retention, achievement, and ideally satisfaction and shared belonging.

Ultimately, this study contributes to our understanding of how institutional and national policies affect mature learners' trajectories, as well as how organisational identity and regional policies affect university stakeholders' facilitation practices. It calls for strengthened, ongoing collaboration among researchers, HEIs/practitioners, and policymakers to develop sustainable strategies for mitigating challenges to mature student access and participation in higher education in a post-COVID world.

# Table of Contents

|                                                                             |            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>List of Tables .....</b>                                                 | <b>5</b>   |
| <b>List of Figures.....</b>                                                 | <b>6</b>   |
| <b>Glossary .....</b>                                                       | <b>7</b>   |
| <b>Acknowledgement.....</b>                                                 | <b>8</b>   |
| <b>Author's Declaration .....</b>                                           | <b>9</b>   |
| <b>Chapter 1 Introduction .....</b>                                         | <b>10</b>  |
| 1.1 Widening Access/Participation Current Research Context .....            | 10         |
| 1.2 Why 'Cross-national'? .....                                             | 17         |
| 1.3 Key Terms: Adult, Mature, and Non-traditional .....                     | 19         |
| 1.4 Research Questions .....                                                | 20         |
| 1.5 Structure of the Thesis .....                                           | 21         |
| <b>Chapter 2 Literature Review .....</b>                                    | <b>25</b>  |
| 2.1 Introduction .....                                                      | 25         |
| 2.2 Background .....                                                        | 26         |
| 2.3 Review of the Literature.....                                           | 47         |
| 2.4 Theoretical Frameworks and Conceptual Models .....                      | 68         |
| 2.5 Justification for the Selected Frameworks .....                         | 87         |
| 2.6 Summary.....                                                            | 90         |
| <b>Chapter 3 Methodology.....</b>                                           | <b>92</b>  |
| 3.1 Design Overview .....                                                   | 92         |
| 3.2 Research Paradigm.....                                                  | 94         |
| 3.3 Reflexivity Statement.....                                              | 94         |
| 3.4 Research Methods and Design .....                                       | 95         |
| 3.5 Population, Setting, & Sampling .....                                   | 98         |
| 3.6 Phases 1 & 2 Interviews .....                                           | 103        |
| 3.7 Measures: Interview Topic Guides .....                                  | 115        |
| 3.8 Procedure.....                                                          | 117        |
| 3.9 Ethical Considerations.....                                             | 119        |
| 3.10 Analysis.....                                                          | 121        |
| 3.11 Trustworthiness and Credibility of the Research.....                   | 124        |
| 3.12 Summary.....                                                           | 126        |
| <b>Chapter 4 Phase One: University Stakeholder Qualitative Results.....</b> | <b>128</b> |
| 4.1 Introduction .....                                                      | 128        |
| 4.2 Theme 1: Meeting capacity demands .....                                 | 132        |
| 4.3 Theme 2: Fostering student sense of belonging .....                     | 140        |
| 4.4 Theme 3: Institutional habitus and organisational identity .....        | 150        |

|                                                                      |                                                                              |            |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 4.5                                                                  | Theme 4: Bureaucratic barriers to facilitating access .....                  | 159        |
| 4.6                                                                  | Theme 5: Impact of COVID-19 .....                                            | 166        |
| 4.7                                                                  | Phase 1 Discussion .....                                                     | 170        |
| 4.8                                                                  | Summary.....                                                                 | 174        |
| <b>Chapter 5 Phase Two: Mature Learner Qualitative Results .....</b> |                                                                              | <b>175</b> |
| 5.1                                                                  | Introduction .....                                                           | 175        |
| 5.2                                                                  | Theme 1: Nonlinear trajectories into higher education.....                   | 181        |
| 5.3                                                                  | Theme 2: Negotiating belonging.....                                          | 191        |
| 5.4                                                                  | Theme 3: Bureaucratic barriers to post-secondary access.....                 | 202        |
| 5.5                                                                  | Theme 4: Emancipation, isolation, and in-between: Impact of<br>COVID-19..... | 210        |
| 5.6                                                                  | Phase 2 Discussion .....                                                     | 218        |
| 5.7                                                                  | Summary.....                                                                 | 220        |
| <b>Chapter 6 Discussion .....</b>                                    |                                                                              | <b>221</b> |
| 6.1                                                                  | Introduction .....                                                           | 221        |
| 6.2                                                                  | Triangulated Discussion .....                                                | 222        |
| 6.3                                                                  | Triangulated Findings .....                                                  | 237        |
| 6.4                                                                  | Limitations of the Study .....                                               | 242        |
| 6.5                                                                  | Strengths and Contributions of the Study .....                               | 245        |
| 6.6                                                                  | Recommendations for Future Research, Practice, and Policy.....               | 251        |
| 6.7                                                                  | Thesis Conclusions .....                                                     | 268        |
| 6.8                                                                  | Reflexivity Statement: Final Thoughts .....                                  | 269        |
| <b>References .....</b>                                              |                                                                              | <b>272</b> |
| <b>Appendices .....</b>                                              |                                                                              | <b>297</b> |
| 7.1                                                                  | Appendix 1 .....                                                             | 297        |
| 7.2                                                                  | Appendix 2 .....                                                             | 312        |
| 7.3                                                                  | Appendix 3 .....                                                             | 322        |
| 7.4                                                                  | Appendix 4 .....                                                             | 329        |

## List of Tables

|                                                                                                                                    |     |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Table 1 Overview of Post-Devolution Widening Access & Participation Policy (Scotland)                                              | 33  |
| Table 2 Seminal Widening Access & Participation Policy (United States).....                                                        | 42  |
| Table 3 Seminal Widening Access & Participation Policy (New York State) .....                                                      | 45  |
| Table 4 Comparative Overview of Pathways into Higher Education .....                                                               | 50  |
| Table 5 Reder's (2007) Typology of Adult Access Programmes Adapted from Reder, 2007, pp. 23-24 .....                               | 56  |
| Table 6 Zafft et al.'s (2006) Typology of Adult Education Programmes Adapted from Zafft et. al., 2006, pp. 15; 18; 21; 24; 28..... | 57  |
| Table 7 Cross' (1981) Chain of Response – Barriers to participation Adapted from Cross (1981) .....                                | 76  |
| Table 8 Selective Institutions .....                                                                                               | 100 |
| Table 9 Recruiting Institutions .....                                                                                              | 100 |
| Table 10 Overview of Scottish Institutional Stakeholders .....                                                                     | 107 |
| Table 11 Overview of New York Institutional Stakeholders .....                                                                     | 109 |
| Table 12 Overview of Scottish Learners.....                                                                                        | 112 |
| Table 13 Overview of New York Learners .....                                                                                       | 114 |
| Table 14 Overview of approach to interview data analysis, adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019) .....                           | 122 |
| Table 15 Overview of Scottish Institutional Stakeholders .....                                                                     | 130 |
| Table 16 Overview of New York Institutional Stakeholders .....                                                                     | 130 |
| Table 17 Theme 1 sub-themes .....                                                                                                  | 132 |
| Table 18 Theme 2 sub-themes .....                                                                                                  | 140 |
| Table 19 Theme 3 sub-themes .....                                                                                                  | 150 |
| Table 20 Theme 4 sub-themes .....                                                                                                  | 159 |
| Table 21 Theme 5 sub-themes .....                                                                                                  | 166 |
| Table 22 Overview of Scottish Learners.....                                                                                        | 177 |
| Table 23 Overview of New York Learners .....                                                                                       | 179 |
| Table 24 Theme 1 sub-themes .....                                                                                                  | 182 |
| Table 25 Theme 2 sub-themes .....                                                                                                  | 192 |
| Table 26 Theme 3 sub-themes .....                                                                                                  | 204 |
| Table 27 Theme 4 sub-themes .....                                                                                                  | 211 |

## List of Figures

|                                                                                                               |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Figure 1 Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model of Attrition.....                                           | 70  |
| Figure 2 Tinto's (1987, 1993) (Revised) Student Integration Model of Attrition .....                          | 71  |
| Figure 3 Bean and Metzner (1985) The Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition ..... | 80  |
| Figure 4 Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation Model .....                              | 85  |
| Figure 5 Flowchart of stakeholder themes and sub-themes .....                                                 | 131 |
| Figure 6 Flowchart of learner themes and sub-themes.....                                                      | 180 |
| Figure 7 Core findings of the present study (adapted from Boeren, 2016) .....                                 | 248 |

## **Glossary**

ABE - Adult Basic Education

CoWA - Commission on Widening Access

CUNY - City University of New York

DOE - (U.S.) Department of Education

EOP - Educational Opportunity Program

FE - Further Education

GED - General Educational Development

HE - Higher Education

HEI - Higher Education Institution

HEA - Higher Education Act of 1965

HESA - Higher Education Statistics Agency

NCES - National Center for Education Statistics

MPA - Managerial, Professional, and Administrative NY - New York

NYS - New York State

SFC - Scottish Funding Council

SIMD - Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation SIT - Social Identity Theory

SUNY - State University of New York

SWAP - Scottish Widening Access Programme

UCAS - The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

WP - Widening Participation



## Acknowledgement

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincerest thanks to my PhD supervisors, Prof. Catherine Lido, Prof. Ellen Boeren, and Prof. Michael Osborne for their support through this process. It has been a long and difficult journey, and I am incredibly grateful for your guidance, patience, and encouragement.

To my participants, who generously gave me their time and entrusted me with sharing their stories. Your perspectives have been integral to the outcome of this project and this thesis would not have been possible without you.

To my “Virtual Office” PGR pals—Catherine and Zy—thank you for the many days and nights spent on Zoom talking through our research, chatting about the mundane, and thesis-writing away in comfortable silence in our respective Zoom squares. Your friendship has been the silver lining to my Pandemic PhD experience and was one of the best things to have come out of lockdown for me.

Special thanks to my family and friends back home (Meagan, Vereena, Tedra, Leial!), as well as the friends I’ve made along the way here in Scotland (Papoula, Melissa, Inés!). I especially would like to thank my parents and my brother, Jerome, who have always been my biggest supporters ever since I was turning in handwritten book reports. A separate “thank you” to my mom who flew out to Scotland for a month to help with babysitting whilst I write up, and a massive “thank you” to my in-laws, Elaine and David, who graciously stepped in to babysit once my mom returned home.

Last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my husband, Kenneth, who held down the fort in the crazymaking final weeks of the thesis. I absolutely could not have done this without you. And the biggest of “thank yous” to my exuberant little boy, Cameron. Your fearlessness and curiosity about the world inspire me to never stop learning.

## Author's Declaration

"I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, that this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution."

Printed Name:           Brittney          

Nathaniel                     Signature:

# Chapter 1 Introduction

“The paradox of education is precisely this— that as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which [they are] being educated.”

- James Baldwin, taken from “A Talk to Teachers”, an address to a group of educators (October 1963), first published in *the Saturday Review* (December 1963)

## 1.1 Widening Access/Participation Current Research Context

*Lifelong learning* refers to the continuous, voluntary, informal and formal pursuit of knowledge for personal or professional reasons (Laal & Salamati, 2012). Tackling urgent skill shortages, fostering social and economic mobility, and advancing workforce development have been pivotal concerns for both academics and various governmental bodies (Cappelli, 2015; Gallacher & Reeve, 2019). Often the response to these urgent issues has been to understand and improve the role of lifelong learning. However, the need for learning throughout the lifecycle goes beyond skill development, with links to improved health, economic, and social outcomes (Field, 2012; Marmot, 2010; OECD, 2020).

*Widening access* and *widening participation* are closely linked concepts that focus on increasing the inclusion of learners from under-represented or historically excluded backgrounds in higher education (HE). Though often used interchangeably, more narrowly, *widening access* refers to the focus on removing barriers to HE entry. These barriers may include financial, social, or institutional factors that disproportionately affect disadvantaged groups, such as individuals from low socio-economic or working-class backgrounds, racially/ethnically minoritised people, disabled people, and/or mature learners (Gorard et al., 2007). *Widening participation*, however, focuses not only on access but also on the progression and attainment of these learners (Wardrop et al., 2016).

These concepts both highlight the wider goal of creating a more inclusive and supportive higher education system for learners of all backgrounds and needs.

Lifelong learning, particularly in the context of widening access and participation for mature learners, has been of discerning interest to academics, educators, and policymakers for decades (Brooks & Everett; 2008; Field, 2011; Kasworm, 2012; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Similarly, the growing interest in recruiting and retaining learners from more intersectionally diverse backgrounds—specifically under-represented or historically excluded learner groups beyond the traditional school transition age—has led to a range of initiatives aimed at addressing these needs (Espinosa et al., 2019; Gallacher, 2010; Riddell, 2015).

In Scotland, recent higher education (HE) enrolment data show that first-degree entrants aged 20 and under are almost universally full-time, with only 1.4% studying part-time. Among those aged 21-24, 14.5% enter part-time, rising to 32.1% for ages 25-29 and 48.4% for those aged 30 and over (Higher Education Statistics Agency [HESA], 2024). Part-time entry is therefore more common among mature students, with the proportion studying part-time increasing steadily with age. Socio-economic background also shapes patterns of entry. In 2023/24, 12.9% of entrants under 21 came from the most deprived SIMD20 communities, compared with 16.5% of mature entrants. When extending to the most deprived 40% of communities, 27.0% of entrants under 21 and 32.7% of mature entrants came from these areas (SFC, 2024). Retention rates show similar variation by age. Among under-21 students, second-year retention ranged from 86.8% in SIMD20 areas to 92.8% in the least deprived quintile, with an overall average of 90.2%. For those aged 21 and over, retention ranged from 85.3% to 88.5%, with an overall average of 86.5% (SFC, 2024). These patterns suggest that whilst mature learners are more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds, they also face greater risks of non-continuation.

In terms of Scotland's post-secondary landscape, Scotland has 19 universities and 26 colleges, with colleges delivering 20% of higher education provision nationally. Access pathways outside of universities are particularly important

for adults. The Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), for instance, is a consortia of colleges and universities that provide structured routes into higher education for adults without traditional qualifications. Community Learning and Development (CLD) also offer literacy, numeracy, and employability programmes, which play a crucial role in re-engaging adults with education, whilst the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) Scotland delivers community-based adult learning that also helps learners build the skills and confidence to progress towards further or higher education (see Sections 2.2.1. and 2.2.2 for further details.)

In contrast to Scotland, where enrolment and progression data disaggregated by age are routinely published, public reporting on HE enrolment data is more limited in New York. The New York State Education Department (NYSED) does not publish student age in its higher education statistical reports (NYSED, 2025). This section therefore draws on a combination of New York-specific figures made available through the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) and broader national U.S. data to provide insight into patterns of access and participation, beginning with national trends before situating New York within that landscape.

At the national level, progression data for first-degree (bachelor's) students entering in 2022 show clear age-related differences. Among full-time entrants, 90.9% of those aged 20 or younger progressed into their second year, compared with 69.6% of those aged 21-24 and 63.0% of those aged 25 or older. Progression rates were significantly lower for part-time entrants, with 68.7% for those aged 20 or younger, 52.5% for those aged 21-24, and 48.6% for those aged 25 or older (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2023). In New York State, a similar pattern can be seen. Among first-degree entrants, 83.0% of those aged 20 or younger progressed into their second year, compared with 59.5% of those aged 21-24 and 59.7% of those aged 25 or older (NSC/NYSED, 2023). These particular figures, which include both two- and four-year undergraduate degree courses, show that older students are far less likely than their younger peers to progress in higher education.

As with Scotland, these patterns also show how age and enrolment intensity are closely linked, with first-degree mature learners more likely to study part-time,

and part-time students as a group more likely to discontinue their studies. Within this subset, mature learners are at an especially high risk, as the likelihood of leaving their studies increases much more sharply for them than for younger students. Whilst the Scottish and U.S. national progression data by age make this link between enrolment intensity and continuation clear, the New York State progression data by age published through the NSC did not differentiate between full- and part-time study.

Regarding its post-secondary landscape, New York State differs structurally from Scotland but is similarly diverse in its provision, comprised of three post-secondary systems: the State University of New York (SUNY), the City University of New York, and private HEIs. SUNY includes 64 campuses, of which 30 are community colleges, while CUNY consists of 25 campuses, including 7 community colleges (CUNY, n.d.; SUNY, n.d.). Alongside these public systems, more than 100 private colleges and universities deliver HE provision across the state. In total, New York has between up to 290 degree-granting institutions (New York State Comptroller, 2024), with the variation depending on whether branch campuses and specialised institutions such as medical or law colleges, are counted separately (NCES, 2023).

New York community colleges in particular play a significant role in facilitating HE access, serving as open-access institutions that provide associate degrees and transfer routes into four-year universities. High school equivalency routes, such as the General Education Development (GED), enable adults without a high school diploma to pursue further study. Adult literacy and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programmes, often funded through state or federal initiatives, also provide critical access points. In addition, non-profit organisations and community-based providers offer vocational training, literacy development, and preparatory courses (see section 2.3.1), creating multiple routes for adults to re-enter higher education.

Both the UK and the U.S., and more specifically Scotland and New York State, have a long history of lifelong learning programmes, initiatives, and strategies to address urgent skill shortages, enhancing social and economic mobility, and for overall workforce development (Boeren, 2016; Reder, 2007; Roumell,

Salajan, & Todoran, 2020; White & Lee, 2020). Despite these efforts, recent policies continue to focus primarily on young, full-time, first-degree undergraduates, as evidenced by initiatives like Scottish Government's Commission on Widening Access (CoWA) and *the Blueprint for Fairness (2016)* and New York State's *Excelsior Scholarship Program (2017)* and the *José Peralta New York State Dream Act (2019)*. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, mature student enrolment in higher education continues to decline in both regions (HESA, 2023; Kamssu & Kouam, 2021).

The pandemic not only disrupted education systems globally but also highlighted the existing inequalities within these systems (Kandlur, Hagar, & Glenn, 2024; Wells, 2023). As both Khan (2021) and Turu, Rossum, and Gridley (2023) note, whilst the emergency shift to online learning provision enhanced the accessibility and flexibility of higher education for some, including those with physical disabilities, and/or those with restricted schedules due to work, family, and/or caring responsibilities, others were confronted with increased challenges in maintaining their educational pursuits amid the social and economic upheaval caused by the pandemic.

Additionally, COVID-19 had also further exacerbated global issues of digital exclusion, especially for those without access to technology devices and/or reliable broadband (Elahi, 2020; Roesse, 2021; Lido, Hirsu, & Wessels, 2021; OECD, 2021), thus widening the digital divide. As such, whilst the pandemic prompted necessary innovations in educational delivery, it also highlighted the existing inequalities that continue to disadvantage some mature learners (Speirs, 2021).

In the post-pandemic context, there is a renewed necessity for lifelong learning, as many adults require retraining and upskilling to remain competitive in an increasingly precarious labour market in both regions (Kim, 2023; Scottish Government, 2022). In Scotland, the importance of lifelong learning has long been recognised in policy frameworks aimed at fostering inclusion and economic development. The Commission on Widening Access (CoWA), formed in 2016, was developed as a 'blueprint' for ensuring that higher education is accessible to all, regardless of socio-economic background. Whilst these efforts have primarily focused on younger students, the principles

underpinning the CoWA's recommendations are equally relevant to mature learners. The Scottish Government has repeatedly emphasised the need to remove financial and practical barriers to education, with the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) Access and Inclusion Strategy calling for targeted interventions to support under-represented groups, including mature students (Scottish Government, 2019).

Despite these initiatives, however, mature students remain significantly under-represented in higher education. For example, many mature learners in Scotland enrol in part-time courses due to family or work commitments. New York State presents a similar but distinct educational policy landscape. New York State Government has introduced several initiatives to widen access to higher education, most notably the Excelsior Scholarship, which aims to make public colleges and universities tuition-free for middle-income families (New York State Government, 2017). Whilst an initially promising initiative in widening access to higher education within New York state, given the high and rising tuition costs nationwide, its requirement for full-time enrolment excludes many adult learners, who typically enrol part-time due to competing responsibilities.

Such exclusions highlight a broader issue in both New York State and the wider U.S. educational system, where mature learners are often marginalised in policy frameworks that are designed around the needs of younger, full-time students (Chen, 2017; Kasworm, 2018; Ortagus et al., 2020; Soares, Gagliardi, & Nellum 2017). Moreover, whilst New York's *José Peralta New York State Dream Act* (2019) expanded access to financial aid for undocumented immigrants, mature students—especially those who can only pursue part-time study—continue to fall through the cracks of New York widening access policies.

Moreover, lifelong learning has become more imperative than ever before. The global economy is increasingly knowledge-based, with continuous learning and skills development necessary to remain competitive in the labour market (Green, 2016; Holzer, 2019; OECD, 2020). Mature learners represent a significant portion of the current workforce, and their ability to access and succeed in higher education has profound implications for both economic development and social mobility.



In both Scotland and New York, lifelong learning initiatives have been framed not only as a means of enhancing individual employability but also as a broader strategy for addressing skills shortages, improving economic competitiveness, and increasing opportunities for social mobility (Gallacher & Raffe, 2011).

Moreover, the focus on widening access in Scotland and New York provides a valuable foundation for broader, cross-national qualitative work on lifelong learning. Both regions have long histories of lifelong learning initiatives, but they operate within distinct political, economic, and cultural contexts.

Scotland's centralised education system, for instance, allows for more coordinated and consistent implementation of access policies, whilst New York's decentralised system requires a more fragmented approach, with individual institutions often developing their own strategies to support mature learners (Ortagus et al., 2020). By comparing the approaches taken in these two regions, this research offers insights into how different policy environments shape the experiences of mature learners and the effectiveness of widening access initiatives.

The cross-national nature of this study also enriches its contribution to the field of lifelong learning. Cross-national research emphasises the importance of understanding how national and 'sub-national' policy contexts shape educational structures, opportunities, and outcomes (Hantrais, 2009; see also section 1.2). This is particularly critical when comparing widening access policies across different geographic regions with distinct governance systems and policy environments. In this research, the distinct policy environments of Scotland and New York will be examined to understand how they shape the design and implementation of widening access initiatives for mature learners. By analysing the widening participation strategies of Scotland and New York, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how different cultural contexts shape the educational experiences of mature learners.

This thesis explores the impact of current widening participation policies and practices on mature learners, particularly those enrolled in undergraduate (bachelor's) degree programmes in Scotland and New York. It will examine how individual, institutional, and policy factors intersect to shape the educational

experiences of mature learners in both regions, drawing lessons from and for each geographic context, and demonstrate the value of cross-national research in assessing the current and future inclusivity of widening access programmes across contexts. The following section will further elaborate on the cross-national lens of this study.

## 1.2 Why ‘Cross-national’?

This thesis utilises a cross-national approach to explore widening access to higher education for adult learners in Scotland and New York. *Cross-national research*, as described by Hantrais (2009), involves comparative analysis of policies, systems, or experiences across different national or ‘sub-national’ contexts. Importantly, such studies need not be confined to sovereign nations or states. In this vein, whilst neither Scotland nor New York is a sovereign nation, both operate with significant autonomy over higher education policy in their respective geographic context (Gallacher & Raffe, 2011; New York State Higher Education, 2024). Scotland, as a devolved nation within the United Kingdom, and New York, as a federated state within the United States, offer contrasting but structurally comparable settings for examining how mature learners access and navigate higher education.

Hantrais (2009) also argues that cross-national comparisons provide valuable insights into how local policy goals, governance structures, and societal values influence the formulation and delivery of public policy. Therefore, such comparisons are particularly useful when examining the ways in which different systems respond to shared challenges, such as improving access for mature learners, within structurally distinct contexts. By focusing on Scotland and New York, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how two contrasting policy environments shape widening participation strategies and mature learner experiences.

As such, the present research paradigm does not constitute a ‘comparative research methodology’ in the traditional sense. Whilst it does entail comparing two or more entities in order to identify similarities and differences in specific higher education (HE) phenomena, it does not involve the

methodological strategy for conducting a systematic comparison, where researchers uncover patterns, test theories, and assess the generalisability of findings across diverse settings (e.g. Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). Rather, it is exploratory and experiential in nature. As a cross-national study, the present research can better explore the impact of differing policy environments on how universities facilitate access, as well as on the educational trajectories of mature learners. These experiential dimensions are not only influenced by institutional practices, but also by the broader governance frameworks and ‘policy logics’ (Hantrais, 2009) in which the higher education system is embedded, making a cross-national lens especially valuable. More broadly, cross-national comparison seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how regional context, organisational/institutional practices, and national policy frameworks can potentially influence the behaviours, opportunities, and outcomes of learners (Hantrais, 1999).

Scotland and New York offer unique, yet complementary, contexts for cross-national study, due to their distinct approaches to higher education, whilst sharing common goals in widening access. Scotland’s centralised and tuition-free higher education system enables more consistent implementation of access initiatives across the country, ensuring a uniform approach to supporting under-represented groups. In contrast, New York operates within the de-centralised U.S. federal/national system, where education policy is shaped at the state level, reflecting the broader complexities of a diverse system. Despite these structural differences, both regions prioritise expanding educational opportunities for underserved populations.

As Ortagus et al. (2020) highlight, the diversity within the U.S. education system makes it challenging to assess the impact of national policies on adult learner participation. Rather than a broad national lens, this study adopts a more localised focus on New York, offering a more nuanced understanding of how state-level policies affect access and retention for mature learners (Gándara & Rutherford, 2020; Ortagus et al., 2020). Similarly, examining Scotland’s more unified approach offers insights into the effectiveness of centralised initiatives. Both contexts, each with globally recognised institutions like the University of Edinburgh and Columbia University, provide a balanced foundation for

understanding how different policy environments influence widening participation efforts for adult learners.

### 1.3 Key Terms: Adult, Mature, and Non-traditional

In the context of this study, the terms *adult* and *mature* are used interchangeably to describe learners who enter higher education later than the school-leaver route, and often after some time spent in the workforce and/or managing other life responsibilities (Kasworm, 2003; Merrill, 2015; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). According to Kasworm, an adult is “one who represents the status of age...the status of maturity and developmental complexity acquired through life responsibilities, perspectives, and financial independence; and the status of responsible and often competing sets of adult roles reflecting work, family, community, and college student commitments” (Kasworm, 2003, p. 3). Whilst *adult* is more commonly used in U.S. scholarship and *mature* more prevalent in UK educational research, their use in this thesis reflects their alignment with educational data classifications of *adult* and *mature* rather than strictly legal definitions of adulthood (please see Scottish Funding Council [SFC], 2020; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). For example, in Scotland (and the rest of the UK), this age range typically begins at 21 (HESA, 2020; Scottish Funding Council, 2020; UCAS, 2024), whereas in New York and the broader U.S. context, 25 is the common marker used in federal and state reporting (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). These differing thresholds reflect distinct educational and policy traditions, but they also point to conceptual questions around how maturity and mature learner status are framed in relation to age.

Therefore, whilst the policy definitions for mature and adult learner are used for conducting this research, this study also recognises that maturity cannot be reduced to chronological age alone. As described by Bowl (2001) and Schuller & Watson (2009), age typically intersects with life

stage, familial responsibilities, work histories, and social expectations.

Therefore, two learners of the same age might experience maturity very differently depending on their life circumstances or how these factors intersect. Thus, with the age range captured by this thesis, it is important to

acknowledge the heterogeneity of experience: learners in their early twenties may face different challenges from those in midlife or later adulthood. For example, older learners may experience generational gaps in digital fluency or comfort (Vogel, 2021; see also 6.4), greater visibility as ‘non-traditional’ students and thus more likely to experience feelings of alienation or social isolation, and/or have family/care responsibilities (Reay, Ball, & David, 2002).

Lastly, unless discussing the research or findings of other studies within the field, this thesis will make a concerted effort to avoid the use of *non-traditional* as a descriptor for the mature students themselves, as this language reasserts privilege “constructed around notions of youth” (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001) and highlights a deviation from a standard that, as recent enrolment statistics have shown, mainly exists in societal perceptions of who participates in higher education. It is also worth noting that the *non-traditional* label for students was originally created to describe those who possessed one or more “risk” factors to their enrolment— “financial independence, part-time attendance, delayed enrolment, full-time work, dependents, single parenthood, [and/or] lack of a high school diploma (Choy, 2002, p. 11)” —a manner of deficit thinking from which this study aims to move away.

## 1.4 Research Questions

This thesis draws from the efforts made in Scotland and the U.S. state of New York to widen mature student access and participation in higher education in order to interrogate the following research questions:

1. What types of interventions have Scottish and New York higher education institutions (HEIs) implemented to widen access and participation?
2. What role does institutional support play in a student’s decision to remain or leave higher education?
3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected Scottish and New York HEIs’ approach to adult student recruitment and support provision?
4. What strategies have adult students developed or employed in order to mitigate any challenges faced in their access to and participation in higher education both before and during the pandemic?

Given the nature of the research aim and research questions, this research utilises a cross-national framework to explore non-traditional trajectories into higher education, which offers a unique opportunity to address the attainment gap in higher education access, progression, and attainment for mature learners in both locations.

## 1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is comprised of six chapters. In this introductory chapter, the researcher has set the scene on the context and rationale of the study, defined key terms, and presented the overarching research questions that underpin this project.

In **Chapter Two**, the researcher will situate this thesis within the wider debate of theories and empirical studies on mature student access to and progression in higher education. To achieve this, the chapter begins with a brief historical overview of higher education access in the UK/Scotland and the U.S./New York State, a discussion of key widening access and participation policies in Scotland and New York, followed by a review of the existing research on mature student access and progression in each location. This review is organised according to how *widening* access and *widening* participation are understood and operationalised within this study, with *widening access* pertaining to entry routes into higher education and *widening participation* encompassing the subsequent experiences of progression and attainment (see section 1.1). More specifically, it follows the educational journey of widening access and participation for mature learners in higher education, examining mechanisms of access (e.g., FE-to-HE transfer and access/transition programmes) in section 2.3.1, the nature of student transition and progression in section 2.3.2, and issues of student attrition and retention in section 2.3.3.

The chapter then introduces the theoretical frameworks and conceptual models employed as an analytic lens for the project—Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) Student Integration Model of Attrition in section 2.4.1, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory in section 2.4.2, Cross (1981) Chain of Response Model in section 2.4.3, Bourdieu's (1986) Social Reproduction Theory in section

2.4.5, and Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation Model in section 2.4.6—as well as justifies this combination of frameworks in section 2.5. By first reviewing the empirical literature and then turning to the theoretical frameworks, this structure follows the guidance of Hart (1998), who argues that literature reviews in social science research should move from a descriptive mapping of what is known toward the conceptual lenses that can best interrogate the gaps and issues revealed. This approach ensures that the frameworks are introduced only after the 'empirical patterns' they are intended to interrogate have been established. The chapter then concludes with a summary of the gaps identified in the literature and thus the researcher's unique contribution to the wider debate.

**Chapter Three** details the research design for this cross-national, triangulated, multilevel qualitative study, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on its earlier iterations. With its focus on addressing inequalities in access and assertion that research should play an explicit role in identifying and confronting social inequalities, the chapter grounds the study in the transformative research perspective. This chapter also describes the project's ecological approach guided by Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation Model (see section 2.4.7) in its scoping of the widening participation policy landscape in both regions (section 2.2), as well as in conducting interviews with both university stakeholders (Chapter 4) and mature learners (Chapter 5), for deeper insights into the complex interplay between the three key components of widening access: the Learning Provider (HEI), the Individual, and the broader policy context. It details the researcher's approach to identifying the key population, setting, and sampling strategy for participant recruitment; the construction of the interview protocol for stakeholder and learner participants using Patton's (2002) interview topic guide approach; and how the data were analysed by employing Braun & Clarke's (2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

**Chapter Four** discusses the qualitative results from the Phase One interviews with 7 university stakeholders, 4 based in Scotland and 3 based in New York. The researcher narratively discusses the five key themes which emerged from the data analysis. These were namely—*Meeting capacity demands*, *Fostering*

*student sense of belonging*, *Institutional habitus and organisational identity*, *Bureaucratic barriers to facilitating access*, and *Impact of COVID*—comparing and contrasting their presentation between Scotland and New York, as well as across institution types. Respectively, the greatest contrast based on geographic context was detected in the theme *Fostering student sense of belonging*, particularly stakeholders’ conceptualisation of representation and diversity within administration. The greatest contrast based on stakeholder institution type was detected in the theme of *Institutional habitus and organisational identity*. Whilst the project employs a triangulated approach and integrates results from Phases 1 and 2 for a more nuanced interpretation of the data, each phase offers significant insights that address the specific research questions relevant to its participant group. As such, these findings are presented in a ‘mini-discussion’ on stakeholder approaches to facilitating access and participation at the end of the chapter, before being fully integrated in Chapter 6.

**Chapter Five** then presents the qualitative narrative of the Phase Two interview analysis, emerging from the 24 mature learners, with 14 participants based in Scotland and the remaining 10 in New York. The following four key themes are identified within the data: *Nonlinear trajectories into higher education*, *Negotiating belonging*, *Bureaucratic barriers to post-secondary access*, and *Impact of COVID-19*. In this group of interviews, the greatest contrast based on geographic context was found in *Influence of parental attitudes toward education*. In terms of institution type, the greatest contrast was identified in *(De)constructing an academic identity*, particularly with regard to mitigating feelings of imposter phenomenon for learners at selective HEIs. As in Chapter 4, findings especially relevant in answering a research question specific to learners are presented in a discussion at the end of the chapter, in which the role of family, partner, and community support in mature learner progression and perseverance are explored.

Lastly, **Chapter Six** is a triangulated discussion between Phase One and Phase Two interview findings, situated within the policy context of each region. This concluding chapter also considers limitations of the study, discusses its strengths and contributions to research, and presents recommendations for



future research, policy, and practice.

It discusses the three key findings of the present study, which are: 1) institutional habitus and university reputation impact both learners' experiences of, as well as stakeholders' approaches to, widening access and participation in both geographic contexts; 2) Existing policy contributes to bureaucratic barriers for both students and university stakeholders in both geographic contexts; 3) The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly introduced new ways of working and learning, with mixed results for both learners and stakeholders

The chapter concludes by critically reflecting on these findings in relation to prior research and policy, offering a set of recommendations for future research, practice, and policy in both geographic contexts. Key messages include more sustainable, integrated and accessible approaches to addressing financial, structural, and digital barriers in a post-COVID world.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings of a comprehensive review of the literature on access to higher education for adult learners in Scotland/the UK and New York State/the United States. This chapter first provides an overview of the widening access and participation policy landscape in each location (section 2.2), followed by a discussion of both seminal texts and recent studies on mature student access and inclusion in higher education (section 2.3).

These studies will be organised according to the stage or aspect of the student educational trajectory they focus on, thus mirroring the pipeline from intake to graduate—access/entry; student transition and progression; stopout, dropout, and graduation—they examine.

In the subsequent section 2.4, some of the foundational theories within the field, in addition to the conceptual and applied models that inform this area of educational research, will also be assessed. The theoretical frameworks and models that underpin this thesis, and justification for their selection, are included in this discussion, before concluding the chapter with a summary of the gaps within the literature.

The search for foundational and recent studies for this review was conducted using the University of Glasgow and Teachers College, Columbia University online library portals. These digital catalogues facilitated access to the following databases: SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, Sage Journals, ProQuest, EBSCO Host, ERIC, and JSTOR. ResearchGate and Google Scholar were also utilised to locate more recent publications.

The search terms used to locate sources for this review initially were as follows: *adult undergraduates, non-traditional students, widening access, college transfer, bridge programs, adult OR mature learners in higher education, adult OR mature student retention, adult OR mature student progression and access OR transition programmes*. Variations of these terms, specifically modifications based on differences in spelling between British English and American English,

were also used. As the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mature student progression and sense of belonging became more apparent to the researcher, additional sources were located using the following terms: *sense of belonging AND mature OR adult students AND pandemic OR COVID*.

In the sections that follow, the specific Scottish/UK and New York/U.S. policy contexts will be individually considered.

## **2.2 Background**

As this study utilises a multilevel cross-national approach, it is essential to first provide a comprehensive understanding of the regional contexts under comparison: Scotland and New York. The upcoming subsections will therefore set the stage for this analysis. Subsection 2.2.1 will present the historical context of widening access and participation efforts in Scotland prior to devolution, providing insight into the policies and practices that shaped the landscape during that time. Subsection 2.2.2 will then examine how these efforts evolved following devolution of powers in 1999, in which Scotland gained the autonomy to develop its own educational policies.

The focus will then shift to the New York/American context in Sections 2.2.3 and 2.2.4, offering a detailed overview of similar efforts in the United States, with particular attention to New York State's initiatives and challenges. Finally, Section 2.2.5 will provide a comparative analysis, drawing out the similarities and differences between Scotland and New York's approaches to widening access and participation in higher education.

### **2.2.1 The Scottish Context, Pre-Devolution: Widening Access and Participation Policy**

Scotland's approach to widening participation in higher education has evolved over more than a century, influenced by both national policy developments and a distinctive tradition of adult education rooted in social purpose and community engagement. The foundation for this development was significantly influenced by the Robbins Report (1963), which advocated for the massification of higher education based on the principle that higher education should be available to all who could benefit from it, challenging elitist conceptions of

university and establishing a framework for subsequent access initiatives (Robbins, 1963; see Section 2.2.4 for a similar discussion of the massification of U.S. higher education). In this vein, The Robbins Report (1963) marked a major turning point in British higher education policy, leading to significant expansion in university provision throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and establishing the policy foundation for systematic approaches to widening access and participation that would follow (Scott, 1995). Therefore, for the purpose of this section, the focus is on post-Robbins developments.

In the earliest stages of widening participation activity in Scotland, widening participation initiatives were primarily focused on vocationalism and engaging adults from low socio-economic backgrounds (Osborne, 2013). This activity was situated within a longer Scottish tradition of university extension and continuing education, local authority evening classes, and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), founded in 1903 as a national movement dedicated to bringing high quality education into working-class communities (WEA, n.d.). WEA Scotland played a key role democratising education, providing working-class adults with opportunities for intellectual development and political consciousness-raising whilst establishing a model that combined social justice with academic rigor, creating pathways for learners from marginalised backgrounds long before formal widening participation policies existed (Davidson, 2018; Field, 2015; WEA Scotland, n.d.). Alongside WEA, local authority evening institutes and community-based programmes offered low-cost, non-formal learning opportunities, forming a broad but fragmented network of provision that sustained opportunities for personal development, community learning, and even entry into further or higher education, therefore laying the groundwork for later widening access policy (Tett, 2006). As such, this tradition of learning combined social purpose with routes into formal study (Davidson, 2018; Field, 2015).

A significant milestone came with the Alexander Report (1975), a comprehensive review of adult education in Scotland that observed that “those to whom adult education should be of most value are least involved” and proposed aligning adult education with youth and community work in a unified community education service, thus creating the conceptual framework for

Community Learning and Development [CLD]. CLD would become central to Scotland's approach to lifelong learning by integrating formal and informal educational opportunities within local communities and emphasising the link between personal development and collective social change (Tett, 2006). This framework later informed the development of Adult Community Learning (ACL), which emerged as a practical expression of CLD's principles by providing flexible, often locally delivered provision targeted at disadvantaged adults. ACL remains significant in widening access and participation debates because it maintains the community-based ethos of earlier access movements, whilst also responding to policy mandates around employability and skills (Shaw & Crowther, 2015).

The momentum for systematic change in facilitating HE access gained further impetus through the Department of Education and Science (DES) White Paper of 1978 entitled "Higher Education into the 1990s", which had predicted a decline in school leavers and recommended that "more systematic opportunities for recurrent education by mature students" be created (DES, 1978 as cited in Osborne, 2013). By the late 1970s, this partnership ethos began to translate into specific higher education entry routes. The earliest instance of formalised access to higher education in Scotland was in the form of part-time courses for mature learners at Glasgow in 1979 and Dundee in 1980. At Glasgow, these early Access courses developed alongside continuing education provision, with university units, local services, and WEA Scotland working together to support adult returners into study (Davidson, 2018).

The commitment to expanding access was reinforced through the UK government's 1987 White Paper "Meeting the Challenge", where the DES made clear its objective to expand access to higher education provision through a national framework (DES, 1987). It was during this period that a national consortia-based initiative called the *Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP)* would also be founded in 1987 (Osborne, 2013; also see section 2.2.2). At this time, access provision was a conglomerate of relatively small, regional arrangements across the United Kingdom. Despite apprehension from higher education institutions (HEI), who were wary of admitting students without a 'traditional' educational record, subsequent

studies soon revealed that mature students performed just as well—and in some cases better—than their traditional counterparts (Christie et al., 2008; Osborne, 2013; Smith, 2008).

From the late 1980s into the 1990s, further education colleges became integral to widening access in Scotland, with Higher National (HNC/HND) qualifications providing structured pathways into degree programmes (Morgan-Klein, 2003). This expansion of FE provision built upon the “Robbinsian” principle of massification of higher education, enhancing FE's role in HE delivery and in FE-to-HE pathways, and subsequently facilitating HE access to some of Scotland's most disadvantaged student groups. However, as will be discussed later in this chapter, this expansion was not without significant challenges in articulation between sectors, such as curricular disconnect between FE and HE provision (see Section 2.3.1) and educational stratification (see section 2.2.2; Humes, 2018; Iannelli, 2018; Morgan-Klein, 2003).

The movement toward even more systematic policy approaches accelerated during the late 1990s as widening access' ascent into greater visibility within the public debate was spurred by a series of reports across the UK in the late 1990s (Osborne, 2013; Riddell, 2015). At the end of this period, the Dearing Report (1997) and the Scottish Committee's Garrick Report (1997) placed widening participation firmly on the policy agenda, whilst the Kennedy Report (1997) framed further education as critical to the widening access and participation agenda (Kennedy, 1997; National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997a; National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997b; Weedon, 2010). The UK government communicated its vision for a 'learning society', one that would “embrace people at all levels of achievement”, whilst also emphasising the value of a “broad base of knowledge” and enhancing employability (Field, 2006; Osborne, 2013, p. 319). In this vein, two of the three major factors leading to access-as-policy within educational systems were, firstly, encouraging participation among social groups who were often systematically excluded from formal education, and secondly, increasing access as a form of national investment in human capital, with the desired outcome of economic growth and a competitive edge over international rivals in the global economy (Gallacher, Osborne, & Postle, 1996;

Riddell, Minty, & Weedon, 2015). The latter motivation was made evident in parts of the 1999 Green Paper, *Opportunity Scotland*, which argued that individuals would need to “take personal responsibility to ensure their future employability, through updating their skills” whilst also making the claim that encouraging adults to engage in lifelong learning activity would be the government’s greatest challenge (Crowther et al., 2010; Osborne, 2013, p. 319). However, this period also saw concerning developments in the positioning of adult learning within national policy, with Field (2015) observing that policy and funding in Scotland “focussed almost exclusively on children and younger people”, leaving adult learning comparatively marginal within the national narrative (see also Davidson, 2018). This marginalisation coincided with wider policy shifts that increasingly prioritised younger learners and employability outcomes over community-based adult learning.

Additionally, new policy directions were also beginning to embed market-orientated principles into higher education. Analyses of the late 1980s and 1990s highlight the growing influence of managerialism, marketisation and performative accountability, which reshaped adult learning provision and the tools used to widen access in the years immediately before devolution (Ball, 2012; Humes, 2018). For adult education specifically, this translated into a move away from the community-based provision that had characterised earlier decades toward more standardised, qualification-focused programmes designed to meet economic objectives (Allatt & Tett, 2018; Tett, 2023).

This rationale continues to inform the dominant narrative on adult learning today. In order to meet the demands of an ever-changing and competitive global market, adult learners are still expected to continually upskill and amass post- secondary qualifications (Field, 2006). In this vein, with the onus placed on the individual to participate in lifelong learning activities, the success or failure to do so also resides with the individual, rather than the government (Boeren, 2019). Given the systematic and systemic exclusion of historically marginalised groups from educational participation, this logic will only further enable—if not exacerbate—existing inequalities in access, participation, and attainment (Reay, 2018; Sosu et al., 2016). Furthermore, with the growing emphasis on measurable outcomes over the decades, the success of widening

access initiatives has become increasingly defined through quantifiable metrics such as enrolment numbers and completion rates, rather than broader social or developmental outcomes traditionally valued in adult education (Field, 2006; Olssen & Peters, 2005). These shifts have created a tension between the social justice origins of Scotland's access movement and the more market-driven, neoliberal approach of today.

This thesis now turns to the period following devolution in 1999, in which Scotland—in addition to the other devolved nations, Northern Ireland and Wales—gained the authority to shape its own educational policies, including approaches to widening access and participation. These post-1999 developments, most notably Scotland's abolition of tuition fees, the impact of tuition-free policy on HE enrolments, and the introduction of fair access targets and contextual admissions, are considered in detail in Section 2.2.2.

### **2.2.2 The Scottish Context, Post-Devolution: Widening Access and Participation Policy in Scotland**

The devolution of powers in 1999 marked a significant shift in UK higher education governance and policy. With legislative powers transferred from UK Parliament at Westminster to the newly formed devolved governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, each nation gained autonomy in governing over regional public policy areas, such as education, healthcare, and the justice system (Gallacher & Raffe, 2011; Riddell et al., 2015). As such, key differences would eventually emerge between Scotland's higher education policies and those of the other UK nations, particularly with regard to its widening access approach (Riddell et al., 2015), one of the most notable being Scotland's decision to abolish tuition fees for Scottish-domiciled students enrolled at Scottish universities in 2000, a sharp contrast to England's fee-based system (Scottish Government, 2011).

Whilst this policy shift was intended to remove a significant financial barrier for many prospective students, research shows that the abolition of tuition fees in Scotland did not significantly increase overall participation among disadvantaged groups (Gallacher & Raffe, 2011; Hunter Blackburn et al., 2016; Riddell & Weedon, 2018; Sosu et al., 2016). This is further evidenced by



Scotland historically reporting lower direct university entry rates compared to other parts of the UK, partly due to a higher proportion of students--especially from working-class backgrounds--still pursuing sub-degree qualifications in further education colleges rather than university degrees (Iannelli, 2007; Riddell & Hunter Blackburn, 2018). Despite this broader participation in tertiary education, significant participation gaps by socio-economic background persist, with students from advantaged families much more likely to enter university than those from less advantaged backgrounds (Iannelli, Smyth, & Klein, 2016; Sosu et al., 2016). This further supports Gallacher and Raffae (2011) who claim that financial policies alone are insufficient in mitigating persistent inequalities in access to and participation in higher education.

However, the bulk of existing studies on the impact of Scotland's tuition-free policy have concentrated on young entrants and school leavers, examining participation rates and socio-economic disparities at the point of transition from school. By comparison, the specific impact of free tuition on mature learners remains an under-researched area, with very limited empirical research evaluating the extent to which the removal of tuition fees has affected access and participation for this group in Scottish higher education. Whilst evidence shows that financial challenges are a main area of concern for mature learners (SWAP & The Robertson Trust, 2025), mature students are also more likely to face additional barriers such as childcare and/or caring responsibilities, navigating inflexible course structures, and work-related time pressures or constraints (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cross, 1981; Kasworm, 2003; Osborne, Marks, & Turner, 2004; SWAP & The Robertson Trust, 2025). This gap in the literature highlights the need for further research focused specifically on the impact of tuition-free policy on mature learners, such as to what extent has it mitigated their additional barriers to HE, to determine whether there are differences in impact between young entrants and mature students, and to assess if or how the abolition of tuition fees in Scotland has affected mature student access and participation over time.

Nonetheless, Scotland has introduced several key policies and initiatives to widen access and reduce barriers to higher education, particularly for mature

learners, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and other under-represented student groups. Table 1 summarises some of the most significant policies in Scotland's widening access efforts, which reflect the country's commitment to promoting fairness and lifelong learning opportunities in higher education.

**Table 1 Overview of Post-Devolution Widening Access & Participation Policy (Scotland)**

| Policy                                                                                    | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Scottish Wider Access Programme [SWAP] (1989)*</b>                                     | A national framework designed to facilitate access to higher education for mature learners, particularly those from disadvantaged or non-traditional educational backgrounds. Provides university prep and offers support and guidance throughout the university application process |
| <b>Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy (2007)</b>                             | Highlights the need to enhance the skills of Scotland's working-age population, including through higher education and introduced measures to improve transfer links between further and higher education                                                                            |
| <b>The Post-16 Education (Scotland) Act 2013</b>                                          | Sets the current strategy regarding equity as it relates to further and higher education in Scotland                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>The Higher Education Governance Act of 2016</b>                                        | The most current official document defining the national higher education strategy in Scotland                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>A Blueprint for Fairness: Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access (2016)</b> | By setting out concrete targets for the participation of specific equity groups, this document makes 34 recommendations to the government, higher education institutions, and relevant stakeholders for ensuring wider access to university                                          |

The landscape of widening participation in Scotland has undergone significant transformation in recent decades, with a stronger focus on ensuring access to higher education for students from historically excluded and disadvantaged backgrounds, including a clearer policy emphasis on overlapping forms of disadvantage (e.g., socio-economic deprivation, age, race/ethnicity, disability, and care experience) and a call for the use of intersectional approaches in evidence and policy more broadly (Scottish Government, 2016a; Scottish

Government, 2022; Scottish Funding Council, 2024; Commissioner for Fair Access, 2024). Efforts by Scottish Government and educational institutions have aimed to address socio-economic barriers which may hinder participation, particularly for students from low-income households, rural areas, and other under-represented groups such as care-experienced and refugee/asylum-seeking HE applicants (Duta et al., 2021; Riddell, Weedon, & Minty, 2017; Scottish Government, 2016a; Scottish Funding Council, 2024; Sosu, Smith, & McKendry, 2016). Initiatives such as the Scottish Funding Council's National Schools Programme (delivered through Schools for Higher Education Programme [SHEP] and Access to High-Demand Professions) and the Scottish Government's Commission on Widening Access' (CoWA) targets (e.g., 20% of students from the most deprived areas in higher education by 2030), both demonstrate an enduring national commitment to inclusivity, although progress toward these targets has been slow and inequalities in access and participation remain pronounced (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2024; Scottish Funding Council, 2024; Scottish Government, 2016a). Universities have also implemented contextual admissions processes, offering more holistic evaluations of applicants beyond just academic achievement (Riddell & Weedon, 2018; Scottish Government, 2016b), though indicators used in institutional practice such as first-in-family are not consistently captured in national SFC reporting, which monitors SIMD, age, ethnicity, disability and care experience (Scottish Funding Council, 2024).

In addition to governmental and institutional strategies, there has been an increased emphasis on partnerships between schools, colleges, and universities to create smoother transitions for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. In other words, policymakers call for a “whole system” approach to widening access, in which a shared effort across all levels of education and related sectors are required to facilitate fair access to higher education (Scottish Government, 2016a). This is delivered through national partnership programmes such as the SFC's SHEP, which targets schools with historically low progression to HE and coordinates activity across universities, colleges, and local authorities (Scottish Funding Council, 2024). Additionally, flexible college-university pathways supported by the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) offer structured transition routes for mature learners (SWAP/The Robert Trust,

2025).

Programmes like SHEP and SWAP (see Table 1) may also have contributed to a potentially more inclusive education system, with SFC data showing gradual improvement in access for the most disadvantaged (e.g., the share of full-time first-degree entrants from SIMD20 areas increased from 10.8% in 2013-14 to 16.3% in 2022-23 [Scottish Funding Council, 2024]. Yet, as O'Toole et al. (2024) argue, the emphasis on quantitative measures of access does not capture whether students are enabled to stay and succeed, and challenges remain around retention and support throughout the student journey (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2024; Scottish Funding Council, 2024).

The evolving policies and partnerships reflect Scotland's broader commitment to creating an equitable education system but must go further to reflect the increasing diversity of its population (see SFC's *Report on Widening Access 2022-23*, which publishes Scottish-domiciled entrant data by age, ethnicity, disability etc). Therefore, we now consider a similar counter-part region for comparison in the United States. In the sections to follow, an overview of the U.S. higher education policy landscape will be provided (see sections 2.2.3 and 2.2.4), before honing in on the region-specific context of New York (see section 2.2.4.1).

### **2.2.3 The American Context: The Policy Interrelationship Between Federal and State**

Before providing an overview of the legislation informing the policy landscape of U.S. higher education, it is imperative to first examine the complex policy interrelationship that exists between federal and state governments. By and large, federal oversight of education in the U.S. is limited by the American constitution (Milana & McBain, 2015). As a result, the federal government sets mandates for widening access and awards competitive grants to institutions that establish programmes within specific parameters. One such example of this is the TRIO Programs, a suite of eight federal outreach and student services programs designed to facilitate post-secondary access to and support the progression of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education,

<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html>).

Beyond the occasional, specialised mandates set forth by federal government, public higher education in the U.S. is authorised at the state level, and therefore basic funding for public colleges and universities is largely at the discretion of state governments. However, there have been brief periods of active federal leadership over U.S. higher education, mainly 1860-90 at the time of the Morrill Land-Grant Acts (see section 2.2.4) and 1955-85 at the passing of the Adult Education Act of 1964, Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 1965, and its subsequent re-authorisations (see section 2.2.4 and Table 2) (McGuinness, 2011).

Thus, in the section that follows, the researcher will provide further context into these brief periods of active federal leadership by outlining a brief historical overview of widening access and participation policy in the United States.

### **2.2.4 The American Context: Widening Access and Participation Policy in the United States**

The first notable instance of widening access policy within U.S. higher education began with the passage of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. Unlike the Northwest Ordinance (1787) that preceded them, which focused exclusively on the northwestern region of the country, the Morrill Land-Grant Acts awarded funding to *any* state that established new higher education institutions, under two conditions: that at least one of those colleges would specialise in agriculture or the *mechanical arts* (Engineering), and that these disciplines would be taught alongside classical and scientific subjects. As such, this legislation resulted in the founding of 106 ‘land-grant institutions’—some as recently as 1994—including the University of California, Texas A&M University, and Pennsylvania State University, also known as Penn State (National Institute of Food and Agriculture, n.d.). Though the demand for advanced study in technical subjects was overestimated at the time the Morrill Land-Grant Acts were introduced (Engineering did not grow in post-secondary enrolments until after 1890), in contrast to continental Europe, where modern languages and

technical subjects were relegated to ‘less prestigious’ institutions, the enactment of the Morrill Acts would ultimately enable young working-class men to study at the same institutions as their more affluent counterparts (Geiger, 2015).

As noted in the previous section (2.2.3) of this chapter, 1860-1890 was one of two brief periods of federal-dominant oversight of U.S. higher education. During this time, lawmakers believed that it was the responsibility of the federal government to support states in establishing institutions of higher learning, as well as broadening access to post-secondary education (Johnson, 2014). In line with this ideal and building upon the conditions set out in the First Morrill Act (1862), the Second Morrill Act (1890) was introduced in order to expand post-secondary access to Black Americans. States that wished to benefit from this new source of funding, however, were required to either demonstrate that their existing HEIs did not deny admission based on race or establish a ‘separate but equal’ land-grant institution for Black students to attend (Johnson, 2014; Rose, 2017). This legislation resulted in the founding of seventeen Black colleges, which would later come to be known as *Historically Black Colleges and Universities* or simply *HBCUs*. Today, there are now 99 HBCUs throughout the country (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), though only 21 are considered land-grant institutions (Allen & Esters, 2018). Nonetheless, in practice, the ‘separate but equal’ option of the Second Morrill Act (1890) further enabled states to enforce segregationist policy in public higher education, with white students largely entering the original land-grants whilst Black students were only admitted into 1890 institutions that faced persistent resource constraints and chronic under-funding (Allen & Esters, 2018; Geiger, 2015).

Though admission into a land-grant institution was not guaranteed, the founding of these colleges and universities did signal a growing belief that access to higher education should not be limited to young men from affluent backgrounds (Johnson, 2014; Landry & Neubauer, 2016). The sentiment behind this belief, however, has been subject for debate. Whilst academics have argued that the Morrill Acts were an exemplary piece of education reform, others also suggest that they were born out of more economical interests, due

to its namesake's—U.S. House representative Justin Smith Morrill—emphasis on the economic benefits of American agriculture (Geiger, 2015).

Furthermore, in terms of educational structure, by the early twentieth century, the American standard for higher education was more clearly defined: two years of general studies, followed by two years of subject-specific or specialised study, with admission open exclusively to high school graduates (Geiger, 2015). As post-secondary enrolments continued to rapidly increase through the 1920s, this exponential growth would trigger the transition from elite to mass higher education. According to Trow (1974), an *elite form of education* is one comprised of full-time residential students, a classic liberal arts education, the pursuit of higher learning for character building, and graduates who are bound for high-status jobs and professions (e.g., law, medicine, clergy, etc.). In contrast, a *mass form of education* is one that can be part-time and/or comprised of commuter students, has an emphasis on practical or applied knowledge, the pursuit of higher education for job preparation, and graduates bound for technical or semi-professional jobs.

Following this structural shift from elite to mass education, by 1930, the biggest American HEIs were no longer research institutions, but rather, municipal universities with large numbers of students with irregular enrolment patterns. For example, by this point, part-time and summer-enrolled students exceeded full-time students at New York, Northwestern, Southern California, Boston, and Western Reserve Universities (Geiger, 2015). Along this trajectory, in the 1940's, there was significant development in alternative, more flexible forms of post-secondary access for adults. With the introduction of “night/evening school” (also known as extension, continuing education, or evening colleges), mature students were able to attend learning provision “segregated from the day-, youth-oriented academic structures” of traditional colleges and universities (Kasworm, 2018, p.79). In addition to accessing post-secondary education outwith daytime hours, these specialised units also offered part-time learning options, as well as extended academic learning to off-campus locations (Kasworm, 2018).

However, it would be the second instance of federal-dominant oversight of

higher education—the passing of the *Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944* (also known as the *GI Bill*)—that would increase the visibility of mature undergraduates on the traditional college and university campus. A policy through which Second World War veterans could receive a funded post-secondary education in addition to other financial benefits through the federal government (see table 2), the *GI Bill* yielded a “dramatic wave of adult students” that “influenced youth-segregated collegiate institutions to open their campuses to adult student veterans” (Kasworm, 2018, p.79). In the immediate years following the war, veterans accounted for around 70 percent of all male college and university enrolments, and total post-secondary enrolment increased by more than 50 percent, rising from 1.3 million in 1939 to over 2 million in 1946, with further increases through 1949 (Bound & Turner, 2002). Overall, more than 2.2 million Second World War veterans, or approximately one in eight returning servicemen, attended college or university under the GI Bill (Olson, 1974, as cited in Bound & Turner, 2002). Coupled with the *Truman’s Commission Report of 1947* call for state governments to form a free local community college system to expand post-secondary access (Zook, 1947), mature students soon became a recognisable presence in the changing landscape of U.S. post-secondary enrolment.

It is worth noting, however, that despite these strides made in expanding college and university access, exclusionary practices were still enacted in a variety of ways. For example, following their return from the Second World War, Black military veterans still faced immense racial discrimination in the United States. This was also reflected in the administration of GI Bill benefits, which relied heavily on state and local actors like public agencies and local Veterans Affairs officials, such that racially discriminatory practices in many jurisdictions curtailed access for Black veterans despite statutory eligibility (Katznelson, 2005). As a consequence, these veterans were often illegally denied access to the educational and financial benefits that were readily available to their white counterparts (Alexander & Stivers, 2020). Though lauded as a transformational policy for an entire generation of U.S. war veterans, the negative impact of this inequity in access to the GI Bill was so severe, the National Bureau of Economic Research later concluded, that the bill further exacerbated the economic and educational disparity between Black and



white Americans (Alexander & Strivers, 2020).

Finally, the 1960's marked a pivotal era in widening access and participation policy at the federal level in the United States. Not only did federal legislation at the time result in new sources of post-secondary funding and a new direction for adult basic education, but it also reflected a growing awareness of the need to address the economic and educational disparities faced by disadvantaged adults (U.S. Department of Education, 2013; Rose, 1991).

The *Adult Education Act of 1964* focused on improving the literacy and basic education of those who did not receive or complete a high school education (Ellis, 1984; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The act thus provided federal funding to educational institutions and third sector organisations for establishing adult basic education (ABE) programmes, with the aim to ultimately equip adults with the skills needed for improved employment opportunities and a pathway out of poverty (Ellis, 1984). By targeting learners from historically excluded populations, the act recognised education as key to facilitating economic independence and social mobility.

As noted by Peters (2021), this legislation also established a foundational framework for federally supported ABE initiatives, marking a significant commitment to lifelong learning and workforce development. The act's emphasis on continuing education highlights the belief that learning does not end with traditional schooling; rather, it continues throughout the life course, which is essential for adapting to changing job markets and societal demands (Benson, 2017). The historical impact of the act has been substantial, influencing a variety of educational programmes—such as the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative (NYALI), for example—focused on enhancing adult literacy and skill training across the United States (Levine, 2019). As such, the *Adult Education Act of 1964* represents a pivotal shift in federal educational policy, emphasising the necessity of adult education as a means to address national literacy, support workforce readiness, and promote personal development. This legislation has contributed to the broader societal goal of encouraging the growth of an educated population, capable of contributing effectively to the economy and community life (Chisolm, 2018; U.S.

Department of Education, 2021).

Building upon these efforts in adult education, and enacted as part of the Civil Rights Movement, the *Higher Education Act of 1965* further expanded post-secondary access by mitigating the financial and information barriers faced by low-income and first-generation students. This resulted in federal government establishing a framework for a national financial aid programme in the form of grants, loans, and work-study opportunities. The Higher Education Act would also facilitate the creation of a suite of support services programmes known as the *TRIO Programs* (Gladieux et al., 2005). The name dating back to when there were only three such programmes, this provision has since grown to eight offerings (see section 2.2.4.1 for details).

The table on the following page provides an overview of the key U.S. policy shifts discussed, illustrating the evolution of federal support for educational access. Whilst this table highlights the significant developments, a comprehensive analysis of each policy lies beyond the scope of this thesis; for a more detailed exploration, readers are encouraged to consult the provided references and weblinks.

In this section, the researcher has provided an overview of the U.S. policy landscape. The thesis now narrows its policy scoping to New York State, highlighting the key widening access and participation policies of the state.

Table 2 Seminal Widening Access &amp; Participation Policy (United States)

| Policy                                                    | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Link                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944</b>          | Also known as the GI Bill, provided funding for WWII veterans attending college or university, in addition to housing and unemployment insurance. Future generations of U.S. military veterans also benefit from this piece of legislation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <a href="https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/servicemens-readjustment-act">https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/servicemens-readjustment-act</a>                                                                                                       |
| <b>Truman's Commission Report of 1947</b>                 | Called for each state to establish a community college system, extending free public education beyond secondary school                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | <a href="https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine">https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/truman-doctrine</a>                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Adult Education Act of 1964</b>                        | Mandated adult literacy and high school equivalency programmes for those who could not read at a secondary school level or could not read at all; those who had not completed high school; and those learning English as another language                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              | <a href="https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/235/statement-president-making-public-report-commission-higher-education">https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/235/statement-president-making-public-report-commission-higher-education</a> |
| <b>The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEA) of 1965</b> | <p>Considered the most overt and significant piece of U.S. widening access legislation, enacted as part of the Civil Rights Movement.</p> <p>It contains major provisions of Federal Student Financial Aid, grants and loans being the major forms of financial aid, as well as the founding legislation for the TRIO Programs (Upward Bound, Talent Search, Student Support Services, Educational Opportunity Centers, Veterans Upward Bound, Upward Bound Math-Science, Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program)</p> |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

### **2.2.4.1 New York State: Recent Widening Access and Participation Initiatives**

New York's HE policy landscape is primarily formed by legislation that aims to widen access through financial aid programmes, flexible admissions policy through several City University of New York (CUNY) and State University of New York institutions, and student support services, to those from low socio-economic status, first-in-family or first generation, and/or racially/ethnically marginalised backgrounds. In this subsection, these key legislative policies will be briefly discussed, as well as their impact on widening access activity in New York, with special attention paid to the Excelsior Scholarship Program.

The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), founded in 1967, is a New York State-funded initiative designed to improve access to higher education for students from low-income and other under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds. EOP utilises a contextualised admissions approach, providing targeted financial and academic assistance (i.e., tutoring, academic advising, etc.) to support students admitted through this route (State University of New York, n.d.; City University of New York, n.d.). Research indicates that such comprehensive or 'wraparound' support services are effective in promoting higher retention and graduation rates among disadvantaged student populations, highlighting the value of these programmes in addressing educational inequities by providing personalised resources and consistent guidance that enables students to build the skills and confidence necessary to navigate their university environment (Swail, 2000; Chaney, 2010).

The New York State (NYS) Dream Act (2019), also known as the José Peralta New York State Dream Act (2019), is a significant piece of legislation that enables

undocumented immigrants (e.g., foreign-born nationals without immigration documentation) to qualify for in-state tuition rates, as well as have access to state financial aid, such as the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), the Excelsior Scholarship, and other New York State-administered financial aid programs (HESC, n.d.; New York State Senate, 2019). By expanding access to state financial aid programmes to New York's undocumented immigrant population, policymakers also envisaged this policy would strengthen the state's workforce and create a more educated state population that would contribute to the state's economy (Trivette & English, 2017). However, to what extent does this policy impact undocumented mature learners? With eligibility criteria that focus on students who have graduated from a New York high school, or earned a high school equivalency diploma, within a specified timeframe (usually within the last five to ten years) this requirement may create challenges for older mature learners who fall outwith these criteria.

This issue with eligibility criteria that are incompatible with the enrolment patterns of most mature learners is also present in the Excelsior Scholarship (2017), another major initiative aimed at reducing financial barriers to higher education in New York. The Excelsior Scholarship provides tuition-free access to New York State public colleges for families earning up to \$125,000 per year.

Whilst this programme was designed to alleviate the financial burden on lower- and middle-income families, its strict eligibility requirements, such as full-time enrolment and continuous enrolment without significant breaks, have created challenges for mature students, many of whom may not be able to adhere to these conditions due to work, family, or other responsibilities (Carr, 2019). The limitations of both the NYS Dream Act and the Excelsior Scholarship highlight the need for more flexible policies that accommodate the unique circumstances of mature learners, particularly those who are undocumented or have non-traditional educational trajectories.

Table 3 Seminal Widening Access &amp; Participation Policy (New York State)

| Policy Name                                                  | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), 1967</b>           | Part of the federal Trio programs (please see section 2.2.4), supports economically and academically disadvantaged students at SUNY with financial aid, tutoring, counselling, and mentorship services                                                 |
| <b>Tuition Assistance Program (TAP), 1974</b>                | A grant-based financial aid programme for New York residents attending in-state public or private institutions. These awards vary based on annual income and enrolment status (i.e., part-time or full-time)                                           |
| <b>Excelsior Scholarship, 2017</b>                           | Provides tuition-free education at State University of New York (SUNY) and City University of New York (CUNY) institutions for eligible New York State residents. Students must meet income thresholds and commit to post-graduation work in NY        |
| <b>The José Peralta New York State (NYS) DREAM Act, 2019</b> | Enables undocumented students (e.g., foreign-born and resides in the U.S. without immigration documentation) who've attended a NYS high school to apply for state financial aid, under certain conditions (i.e., TAP, the Excelsior Scholarship, etc.) |

*Adapted from New York State Higher Education Services Corporation (HESC), n.d.*

### 2.2.5 Overview of Scotland & New York Policy Contrast

As the previous sections have shown, higher education policies in Scotland and New York State both emphasise widening access to education, yet they approach these goals with distinct strategies shaped by their local contexts, government structures, and historical developments. Scottish higher education policy has been shaped by its strong emphasis on principles of social justice and inclusivity, with a strong focus on removing financial barriers for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Initiatives such as free tuition for Scottish-domiciled students attending Scottish universities demonstrate a commitment to removing financial barriers (Gallacher & Raffe, 2011).

In contrast, New York State's higher education policy focuses significantly on financial aid programmes that target low-income, first-generation, and under-represented students to make college more affordable and accessible. The Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) and the Excelsior Scholarship are central components of this strategy, providing substantial financial support to students attending the State University of New York (SUNY) and City University of New York (CUNY) systems. Unlike Scotland's model of free tuition, these programmes offer conditional financial aid designed to cover tuition costs for students who meet specific criteria, such as residency requirements and credit-hour minimums (New York State Higher Education Services Corporation, n.d.).

One key difference between the two regions is the approach to contextualised admissions and the treatment of non-traditional qualifications. Scotland's policies, particularly through initiatives like the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), focus heavily on providing clear routes into HE for students from FE colleges, acknowledging the importance of non-traditional educational pathways and vocational qualifications (Osborne, 2022). New York, on the other hand, tends to focus more on academic and financial support after admission, with significant emphasis on programmes that provide mentoring, tutoring, and career counselling to help under-represented students succeed once they have entered higher education (Castleman & Page, 2014). This reflects a broader focus on support mechanisms within the

university system itself rather than on the entry process.

Despite their differences, both Scotland and New York State have made significant progress in implementing policies that address the needs of under-represented groups in higher education. However, challenges remain in both contexts. In Scotland, whilst articulation pathways are well established, issues such as curricular mismatches between FE and HE and the inconsistent recognition of Higher National qualifications by universities pose barriers to seamless progression (Morgan-Klein, 2003). In New York, despite the availability of financial aid through TAP, Excelsior, and later the Dream Act, strict eligibility requirements and the full-time study condition have been criticised for excluding part-time and mature students who need more flexibility due to work or family commitments (Friedman, 2017).

## **2.3 Review of the Literature**

In this section, the researcher will provide a comprehensive review of the literature on mature student inclusion in access to higher education in Scotland and the United Kingdom, as well as New York State or the United States. Few studies within U.S. higher education research examine the enrolment behaviour and patterns of adult students who are also first-generation (Kamer & Ishitani, 2019). An interest in studying how entry route may also influence adult student enrolment behaviour is also relatively recent within the literature (Zafft, Kallenbach, & Spohn, 2006), with previous research on adult learner participation in transition programmes relatively limited in U.S. research (Karmelita, 2018), as are studies comparing different types of U.S. college transition programmes in general (Hallett, Kezar, Perez, & Kitchen, 2020). In terms of the prevailing theoretical frameworks utilised in earlier studies, attrition models based on the enrolment patterns of traditional undergraduates are most frequently used to understand dropouts among adult students. Such models, like Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975, 1987, 1993), champion academic and social integration key to student attrition and academic progression (see section 2.4.1).

However, many researchers have found that the progression of mature students is most affected by non-collegiate factors such as family life, finances, and



outside encouragement, rather than campus environment. Such findings form the basis of conceptual models and theoretical frameworks like Cross' (1981) Chain of Response Model (see section 2.4.3) and Bean & Metzner's (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition (see section 2.4.4).

In the subsections that follow, the researcher interrogates the literature on mature student inclusion and access based on the pipeline from intake to graduate, captured in three themes: *Mechanisms of access* (section 2.3.1); *Student transition and progression* (section 2.3.2); and *Stopout, dropout, and graduation* (section 2.3.3).

### **2.3.1 Mechanisms of Access**

In this section, two crucial aspects of higher education access for mature students will be explored: Vertical Transfer (see section 2.3.1.1) and Access/Transition Programmes (see section 2.3.1.2). The Vertical Transfer section examines the process of students moving from two- year to four-year institutions, highlighting its significance as a pathway to higher education for under-represented and disadvantaged students in both Scotland/UK and New York/US. As such, it explores the challenges of the vertical transfer process, such as credit recognition issues, institutional stratification, and 'credit loss'. The discussion compares the Scottish and New York contexts, emphasising ongoing efforts as well as the barriers that persist.

The Access/Transition Programme section then focuses on programmes that adopt a 'preparatory model' designed to facilitate entry into higher education for mature students. It contrasts the robust research on such programmes in the UK, particularly Scotland, with the limited studies in the U.S., and by extension, New York. The section outlines various models of these programmes, their objectives, and their role in equipping mature learners with both academic and non-cognitive skills essential for higher education.

However, before examining the mechanisms of access in Scotland/UK and New York/US, it is first necessary to outline the main pathways into higher education in each context. Mature students often enter through non-traditional

routes that differ from the standard school-leaver trajectory, and a comparative overview helps to situate the discussion of vertical transfer and access/transition programmes. On the following page, Table 4 briefly summarises these pathways, listing the entry route, its function or key feature, and how it is implemented in each context.

Table 4 Comparative Overview of Pathways into Higher Education

| HE Entry Route                                                                  | Key Feature                                                                                                                                                                  | Scotland                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | New York                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>School-leaver / High School (HS) Graduate route</b><br>(Traditional pathway) | Direct entry into HE from school                                                                                                                                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- National</li> <li>- Highers</li> <li>- Advanced Highers</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                       | High School Diploma                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>High School Equivalency</b><br>(Non-traditional pathway)                     | Provides 'second-chance' credential in lieu of HS diploma, enabling direct entry into HE after passing 4 subject exams (i.e., Maths, Social Science, Language Arts, Science) | <i>Scotland does not have a high school equivalency credential.</i>                                                                                                                                                                                               | General Education Development (GED)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Further Education / Community College</b><br>(Non-traditional pathway)       | Offers post-secondary qualifications that can prepare for employment, or facilitate progression into an HEI                                                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Higher National Certificate (≈1 year of HE)</li> <li>- Higher National Diploma (≈2 years of HE)</li> </ul>                                                                                                               | Associate's Degree, (≈2 years of HE)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Alternative routes outwith qualifications</b><br>(Non-traditional pathway)   | Provides 'second-chance' entry for mature learners without conventional school-leaving qualifications, typically through preparatory programmes                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Access to HE courses (often via FE colleges, but some within HE)</li> <li>- SWAP (see Section 2.3.1.2)</li> <li>- Adult and Community Education programmes (e.g., CLD, WEA Scotland, etc.; see Section 2.2.1)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- 'Bridging'/Access to HE courses within community colleges and universities</li> <li>- Adult and Community education programmes (e.g., the YMCA, Community Impact, etc.; see <a href="https://www.acces.nysed.gov/aepp/welcome-adult-education-programs-and-policy-aepp">https://www.acces.nysed.gov/aepp/welcome-adult-education-programs-and-policy-aepp</a> )</li> </ul> |

As this comparative overview demonstrates, both Scotland and New York provide a range of non-traditional routes into higher education. For mature learners, these routes often represent the only viable pathway into higher education, given disrupted educational trajectories or gaps in prior qualifications (Gallacher & Reeve, 2019; Merrill & Johnston, 2020; Osborne, 2022). However, such routes can be associated with distinct challenges, including credit transfer difficulties, curricular misalignment, and institutional stratification (Morgan-Klein, 2003; Taylor & Jain, 2017). One of the most significant of these challenges is vertical transfer, which will be examined more closely in the upcoming section.

### **2.3.1.1 Vertical Transfer**

*Vertical transfer* (also known as *upward transfer*) refers to students who move their enrolment from a two-year to four-year institution (Hartman, 2022). This entry route is particularly significant for students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds in both Scotland/UK and New York/US (Gallacher & Reeve, 2019; Morgan-Klein, 2003; Osborne, 2022).

In Scotland, despite a longstanding focus on improving articulation agreements and strengthening transfer links between further education (FE) colleges and higher education (HE) institutions, significant challenges in the FE-to-HE transfer process still remain. Pedagogical and epistemological differences resulting in curricular mismatch between both systems is one of these fundamental issues (Gallacher & Reeve, 2019; Morgan-Klein, 2003; Osborne, 2022; O'Toole, 2024).

For example, Morgan-Klein (2003) argues that the rigid academic structures of traditional universities often fail to accommodate the vocationally-orientated learning structure of FE courses. This curricular disconnect not only delays student progression, but also contributes to educational stratification, in which these students are disproportionately funnelled into post-1992 universities due to their more inclusive and flexible credit transfer policies (Morgan-Klein, 2003). Recent research indicates that whilst progress has been made over the decades in improving articulation pathways, this lack of standardisation in credit transfer practices continues to restrict the mobility of students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds (Gallacher & Reeve, 2019;

Osborne, 2022; Sosu et al., 2016). Extending this point further, Gallacher and Reeve (2019) also emphasise that the persisting curricular disconnect between the FE and HE sectors limits the alignment of educational outcomes with labour market needs. Osborne noting that traditional HE institutions still undervalue vocational learning, thereby reinforcing systemic barriers to credit transfer.

Whilst FE-to-HE transfer in Scotland has made strides in widening access to higher education, as discussed above, significant challenges persist. The research shows that there are still issues of credit recognition, institutional stratification, and the need for targeted support for articulating or college transfer students. As Scotland continues to refine its articulation policies and practices, ongoing research will be imperative for informing evidence-based interventions and ensure equitable access to and progression in higher education.

In the U.S., one of the biggest challenges in vertical transfer is credit loss. *Credit loss* refers to the phenomenon in which students ‘lose’ previously earned academic credits when transferring from one institution to another, often resulting in needing to retake modules, thus delaying graduation and incurring further tuition costs and fees (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). This occurs when the receiving institution does not accept all of a student’s prior coursework credits, either due to differences in curricula or institutional policies (Taylor & Jain, 2017). Furthermore, this issue disproportionately affects students from low- income backgrounds, as they are more likely to attend community colleges as a cost-saving measure before transferring to university (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014).

Research highlights the importance of seamless credit transfer systems in reducing credit loss and improving student outcomes (Baker, 2016). Specifically in New York, initiatives such as the *Transfer Guarantee* aim to streamline the transfer process from two-year to four-year institutions within the State University System of New York (SUNY) system, ensuring that students who complete a two-year degree qualification can transfer all earned credits to a bachelor’s degree course. However, challenges remain in aligning curricula between two- and four-year institutions outwith the state and city university

systems, particularly with regard to private HEIs (i.e., New York University, Fordham University, Columbia University, etc.), which are generally more prestigious and whose institutional autonomy can hinder standardised approaches (Xu et al., 2018).

Despite vertical transfer being vital to widening access and participation to higher education in both Scotland and New York/the U.S., challenges related to credit transfer, institutional stratification, and support for transfer students after they matriculate persist. In both regions, policymakers and educators must continue working to address these barriers by standardising articulation agreements, aligning curricula, and providing targeted support for disadvantaged students to ensure equitable access to higher education opportunities.

#### **2.3.1.2 Access & Transition Programme Models**

The core objective of an access or transition programme is to prepare students for entry into higher education and promote degree completion (Karmelita, 2020; Zafft, Kallenback, & Spohn, 2006). Despite an increase in transition programmes across the United States, there is still limited research on their effectiveness or impact on mature student entry and progression (Karmelita, 2021; Karmelita, 2020; Valentine et al., 2009). A further gap in the U.S. literature on access and transition programmes is a lack of research on the perspectives of mature learner experiences in such programmes, as well as to what extent has their participation in a transition programme aided them in gaining entry into higher education (Karmelita, 2020). This is in contrast to UK literature on mature student access programme participation, where there is a relatively robust body of research that explores the experiences and transitions of mature learners in access programmes such as the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), university-based access courses, etc. (please see Christie, Munro, & Wager, 2005; Hudson, Burnell, and Murray, 2020; Pearce, 2017).

These programmes have been key in facilitating mature students' entry into higher education, providing targeted support to help students navigate the transition and succeed academically. SWAP, for example, is designed

specifically for adults who have been out of education for some time, providing a pathway into higher education through tailored courses that prepare students for the rigors of academic study. Research on SWAP and similar programmes has shown that they play a crucial role in widening access to higher education in Scotland, particularly for disadvantaged and under-represented groups (Pearce, 2017; Gallacher & Reeve, 2019).

Through a series of multi-state studies, Zafft, Kallenbach, and Spohn (2006) and Reder (2007) have developed profiles of existing adult access programme types and their target populations, respectively, in the U.S. In doing so, their overarching aim is to encourage state policy changes that will upgrade the current adult education system from high school equivalency to true post-secondary readiness and preparation (Reder, 2007; Zafft et. al., 2006). In describing the primary function of access programmes, Reder (2007) argues that it should not simply focus on remediation, but on also equipping adult learners with essential skills like how to access pertinent college or university information, time management, navigating academic policies, etc. (Reder, 2007). In other words, there is a need for a greater emphasis on the non-cognitive factors that impact persistence and attainment.

As the U.S. adult education system currently stands, helping prepare students to take and pass the high school equivalency exam for their secondary school credential, literacy and ESOL programmes, and vocational training are the main forms of post-secondary preparation (Reder, 2007). However, more recent types of adult education such as access or transition programmes also “provide students with enhanced skill development...how to get information about colleges, apply for financial aid, complete application forms for admission, use online catalogues to select courses and majors, and so forth” (Reder, 2007, p. 2). Therefore, in addition to remediation, these programmatic efforts are also intended to develop the essential non-cognitive skills needed for pursuing a post-secondary education. In this policy brief, Reder also identifies a surprisingly large unserved target population of adults who “already have the basic skills needed for success in postsecondary education but face many of these other barriers to college entry and completion” (p. 4). By broadening the adult education system’s scope of post-secondary preparation offerings, these adults will

constitute a large new target population that could be better served by further enhancing the posts-secondary readiness component.

With a restructured adult education system in mind, Reder (2007) suggests segmenting its target population into the three groups or components: *High School Equivalent*, *College Equivalent*, and *College Ready*. The findings in Reder's (2007) policy brief are mostly consistent with what is discussed in Zafft et al.'s multi-state study. However, whilst Reder's (2007) aim is to identify the target populations served by the U.S. adult education system, Zafft et al.'s (2006) approach is to profile adult education programmes across the New England area (comprised of the states of Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine), Texas, Oregon, and Kentucky, in order to develop a typology of U.S. adult education systems. In doing so, they identify five existing programme types (see Table 5).



**Table 5 Reder's (2007) Typology of Adult Access Programmes Adapted from Reder, 2007, pp. 23-24**

| Reder's (2007) Typology of Adult Access Programmes                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| High School Equivalent                                                                                                                                                                                               | College Equivalent                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | College Ready                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p>The target population currently being served by the adult education system. Some individuals with high school diplomas or higher levels of educational attainment still need to develop skills to this level.</p> | <p>This target population already has a high school equivalent skills but does not possess a college degree (2- or 4-year) nor the skills needed to attain one. The objective for this population would be to raise their skills to the college-ready level. Most students in this component would have a high school diploma, but some may have a GED. Akin to the approach used in the High School Equivalent component, Reder suggests developing and implementing a college-ready skills certification. Its design would be a collaborative effort between developmental/remedial postsecondary education professionals and researchers. How to identify the target skill level for such certification will be described in the remaining component below.</p> | <p>The proposed new target population of the adult education system. This component would already have college-equivalent skills but not a college degree. Most importantly, this group also would not have access to the persistence supports needed to obtain one. Earlier research has revealed a range of non-cognitive factors that impact postsecondary persistence and attainment rates even when skill levels are adequate. These factors include access to college information, the financial aid application process, completing college applications, and perusing online course catalogs.</p> |
| Adapted from Reder, 2007, pp. 23-24                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

**Table 6 Zafft et al.'s (2006) Typology of Adult Education Programmes Adapted from Zafft et. al., 2006, pp. 15; 18; 21; 24; 28**

| Zafft et al.'s (2006) Typology of Adult Education Programmes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Advising                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | GED-Plus                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | ESOL                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| <p>The goal of this model is to raise students' awareness of postsecondary education options and admissions processes. Key features of this model include: (1) dissemination of information through presentations and workshops that students may choose to attend; (2) individual advising rather than class or cohort advising; and (3) wide variation in the intensity of services from program to program. From our experience, adult education programs often begin developing transition services by disseminating information about postsecondary education to their students, both formally and informally. This model of individual advising coupled with optional presentations and workshops is similar to the admission services offered by many colleges to prospective students.</p> | <p>The goal of the GED-Plus model is to accelerate learning for adult education students interested in pursuing postsecondary education. Key features of this model include: (1) some alignment of the GED curriculum to include academic and/or student success skills needed for entry into postsecondary education; and (2) concurrent preparation for the GED and postsecondary education and/or dual enrollment in adult and postsecondary education. This model covers a wide variety of activities and services ranging from programs that address academic skill development, educational counseling, and college survival skills, to programs that add stand-alone workshops on the college admissions process. The GED-Plus model may use strategies seen in other models, such as the workshops seen in the Advising model or classes seen in the College Preparatory model. However, these programs are specifically for students enrolled in GED classes. Currently, this model may be the most feasible to institute because, in theory, it aligns two existing systems rather than requiring new educational segments.</p> | <p>The ESOL model targets non-speakers of English. The goal of this model is to reduce the time and expense of additional ESOL/ESL7 coursework at the start of the student's college career. The key features of this model are: (1) a focus on advancing language skills required for academic settings with little or no math preparation; (2) high program intensity; and (3) a well-articulated curricula with clear academic benchmarks for admission.</p> |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Career Pathways                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | College Preparatory                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--|
| <p>The goal of the Career Pathways model is to get students with limited education into advanced training and college-level programs in high-wage, high-growth employment sectors. Key features of this model include: (1) teaching and learning of basic education and technical skills that are contextualized around a specific employment sector; (2) multiple levels of instruction; (3) curriculum that is “chunked” into clear stepping stones that are recognized by employers (e.g., specific certificates with increased job responsibilities and higher pay) and articulate to academic and career advancement pathways; and (4) intensive support services tailored to the expected challenges of the specific pathway (e.g., intensive support in math and sciences for high-tech careers). Career Pathways programs ideally work closely with area employers, municipalities, and community colleges to develop and implement contextualized curriculum relevant to prevailing employment trends. The model builds on short-term, academic steps for students and early successes in these steps are thought to increase long-term retention.</p> | <p>The goal of the College Preparatory or “College Prep” model is to enable students to transition successfully into college-level courses or, at the very least, begin their college career at the upper tier of developmental education. Key features of this model include: (1) direct instruction to address the gaps between the knowledge and skills required to complete the GED and those needed for success in college; (2) a learning environment that teaches college success skills by simulating a college environment in terms of class format, expectations, scheduling, etc.; (3) a comprehensive counseling component; and (4) student cohorts or learning communities.</p> |  |
| <p>(Zafft et al., 2006, pp. 15; 18; 21; 24; 28)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |  |

Whilst all five transition programme types share a common goal of widening access and success for adults in post-secondary education (p. 31), how each model works toward this aim largely depends on the variety and intensity of instructional and counselling/advising services on offer. In order to ensure as seamless of a transition to post-secondary education as possible, the access programmes surveyed had to “reach out to various departments and offices in the targeted postsecondary institutions” (p. 35) and build strong connections. This required constant communication between the access programmes and post-secondary institutions, in addition to forging agreements between them. The transition programmes also formed relationships with staff in the admissions and financial aid offices so that students could secure timely and enough support around funding and course placement.

Nonetheless, even for the most enterprising programmes, the amount of time it takes to make an impact on the landscape of the adult education system at the programmatic, institutional, and state level is a major challenge. Zafft et. al therefore call for “multiple levels of collaboration at state, municipal, and programmatic levels” (p. 48) in order to better align the two systems of adult and post-secondary education effectively. This entails articulating the two systems’ respective roles and responsibilities in supporting the transition and progression of adult students.

Although the main objective of the Obama 2020 College Completion goal of 2009 was to target a population of adults who had completed “some college, but no degree” (Shapiro, Ryu, Huie, & Liu, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2011), up until the 2015-2016 academic year, the U.S. National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) only required institutions to submit progression and graduation data on first-time undergraduates. Whilst returning and/or transfer students are now included in the graduation outcomes data, their demographic information like age, gender, and ethnic background are not collected.

Therefore, one must gather U.S. data from various sources— and wisely—in order to piece together the current landscape of American post-secondary education (Soares et al., 2017). This has therefore made it difficult to

better understand the nature of adult student enrolment, a student group who are most likely to have a more complex enrolment history than that of their traditional student peers (Soares et al., 2017). Scotland (and the UK at-large), however, keeps extensive, centralised data on student enrolment patterns and entry routes through the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (HESA, 2020; Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2017). As mentioned in Chapter One, this is not the case with available U.S. data.

### **2.3.2 Student Transition and Progression**

To help adult learners get the most out of their participation in access courses, and as a proactive measure for supporting their progression, we must also understand what aids or hinders transitions into and throughout higher education. Christie, Tett, Cree, and McCune (2014) conducted a longitudinal study that examines the subsequent transitions that students continue to encounter even after entry into higher education. The sample for this study is a group of 45 students who were admitted from further education colleges through a widening access initiative at a prestigious, research-intensive university in Scotland. These students were interviewed throughout their degree programme and 20 were interviewed in their third and fourth years (Christie et al., 2014).

Christie et al. (2014) found that one problem adult students face in their transition is developing their sense of learner identity. In the study, participants reported having struggled in their first year to become independent learners, and in their third and fourth years they grappled with becoming critical thinkers...By their third and fourth years of study the students had developed learning identities that had not been accessible to them in first year (Christie et al., 2014). These students managed to move into these identities by first “engaging in the practices of academic literacy that enabled them to become full members of the university community” and secondly, “participating in the process of critical reflection” (Christie et al, 2014, p. 10). These findings support Christie et al.’s claim that the learning process goes beyond just developing a set of cognitive skills to be transferred from one learning environment or context to another.

In other words, learning is dynamic and contextualised, especially as adult learners bring with them a cluster of pre-conceived notions about the nature of knowledge and what the process of teaching and learning should look like. To an extent, this also supports Reder's (2007) point that there are a range of non- cognitive skills that impact post-secondary persistence even when academic skill levels are considered adequate. Such factors must be considered, and further research is needed to assess in what ways might they influence adult retention and persistence. In another article, Christie, Munro, and Wager (2005) approach the development of student identity among Access Course participants from a student engagement perspective. The sample studied were SWAP students.

Although elements of Tinto's (1975) Social Integration Model of Attrition are used to interpret their data, Bergman, Gross, Berry, Shuck's (2012) study also draws from Bean and Metzner's (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition (1985) and Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon's (2004) Theory of Student Departure in Commuter College and Universities in order to develop and apply their own conceptual model of adult student progression, the Theory of Adult Learner Persistence in Degree Completion Programs (2012).

Bergman et al.'s (2012) study focuses on the persistence of adult students enrolled in a 4-year degree programme. Bergman et. al.'s (2012) Theory of Adult Learner Persistence in Degree Completion Programs examines how the confluence of Student Entry Characteristics, Internal Campus/Academic Environment, and External Environment might impact an adult student's progression to degree attainment. Their sample includes 437 current and former Bachelor of Sciences students between the ages of 25 and 67, all of whom are surveyed at a single institution (Bergman et al., 2014). These students belonged to an adult degree completion programme, a sub-category of post-secondary education designed to accommodate working adults who have acquired 60 or more college credits during previous enrolments (Bergman, 2014). As such, both programmes discussed are exclusively comprised of mature learners.

Of all student entry characteristics, Bergman et al. (2014) found that only educational goals—a label the authors used to describe the highest degree level a student would like to attain (p. 96)—were significantly related to likelihood of progressing. As educational aspirations increased from one post-secondary degree level to the next, the likelihood of persisting also increased by approximately 90 percent. In terms of external environmental factors, having the finances to complete a degree as well as receiving encouragement from family were also positively associated with the odds of persisting. As students agreed more strongly that they had the finances to complete their programme, the probability of persisting increased by around 40 percent. Similarly, students who placed greater importance on family encouragement were about 61 percent more likely to persist. Unsurprisingly, for students who felt more strongly that their work and course schedule conflicted, their chances of persisting decreased by approximately 78 percent. Although it has been recognised by Bergman et al., it still must be said that a major drawback of this study is its use of a sample drawn from a single, specialised programme of study at a single institution.

### **2.3.2.1 Student Identity & Sense of Belonging**

A plethora of research over recent decades has begun to emphasise how sense of belonging plays an integral part in students' transition to and progression in higher education (see Stuart et al. 2011a; 2011b). Further to this, the 'experience of belonging' is one that is connected to identity, both students' sense of self-identification as well as their sense of belonging to a group or community, not just theoretically but in applied learning and teaching practice (Dost & Smith, 2023, p.823) Student sense of belonging has been found to be just as important for mature learners as it is for their traditional student counterparts (Cross, 1981; MacFarlane, 2018), if not more so given they may face more feelings of marginalisation and isolation.

In their mixed-methods study, Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2010) employ *institutional habitus* to examine the degree to which learner identity formation can modify, reinforce, or transform UK students' working-class

identity at four UK universities. Although this study primarily focused on social class, their sample included mature learners and highlights the ways in which belonging becomes a stronger indicator for multiply marginalised learners. In this vein, Reay et. al. (2010) compare and contrast the social and learning experiences of 27 working-class students based on HEI type or *academic status*; e.g. a university's externally-facing perceived reputation, or an HEI's "position in the university hierarchy" such as ranking metrics (p. 109).

Reay et. al (2010) found that for working-class students who attended HEIs that enabled them to maintain congruence between individual and institutional habitus, they retained the comforts of the familiar at a cost. The researchers argue that this continuity in the familiar can 'lull' into a sense of security and symmetry, rather than facilitate the "change and transformation of working- class" experienced at elite institutions (Reay et. al., 2010, p.112). They also found that participants attending the elite institution seemed more integrated into the university environment and shared a stronger sense of university student identity. In contrast, they argued that the majority of their participants attending a recruiting institution had "learner identities that [were] more fragile and unconfident" (Reay et. al., 2010, p. 117).

Similarly, studies by Bergman et al. (2012) and Wyatt (2005) focused on the interaction between students and their campus environments, analysing how this relationship influences student progression. Wyatt's research, in particular, evaluated how non-traditional students' perceptions of satisfaction and engagement with the campus environment affected their academic journey. Based on adult student participants from the University of Memphis, Wyatt discusses an online, quantitative campus climate survey that was developed and used to gather information about adult student experiences. The survey was assessed according to six categories: (a) students/peers, (b) faculty, (c) campus environment, (d) memberships in student organizations/clubs, (e) campus community, and (f) the University College. The last section of the survey was a general questions section designed to glean advice and recommendations for future adult students in



degree-bearing programmes.

For Wyatt (2005), her findings confirmed that non-traditional undergraduate students based their decisions about engagement and its importance on their college experience on how it directly affects them. In this vein, level of engagement with the campus environment is not only an individual choice, but “the term ‘engagement’ itself means very different things to each student and is often left open to interpretation (Wyatt, 2005).”

*Engagement* could consist of engaging in interactions with faculty, staff, or students/peers, as well as taking part in a campus event or activity.

Whatever the connotation of the term, Wyatt's results seem to indicate that the non-traditional students surveyed were more invested in getting the best, and most affordable, education. Unless their families could be included, these students were not interested in engaging in any campus activities outside of their academic studies.

Participants in the study repeatedly stated in focus group sessions, interviews, and journals that they had multiple obligations in their lives, and college was just one of them. Consequently, research findings suggest that there is nothing that the institution could do to engage students in the collegiate environment and campus life due to their hectic lifestyle and personal preferences. Non-traditional student participants readily admitted that they did not consider engagement an integral part of the non-traditional college experience. Whilst some indicated that “their college experience may have been better if they had been able to participate in activities and events that they found interesting (2011, p. 16)”, many indicated that non-traditional students need to be able to interact and engage with warm, friendly, supportive faculty and staff. In fact, most SWAP completers who participated in the study “saw University as a 9-5 activity, contained within the working week, rather than as an all-embracing experience” (Christie et. al., 2005, p.11).

As a result, these students perceived themselves as “day students”, for whom their day-to-day lives involved the spatial and temporal separation of home and University as two very distinct worlds (Christie et. al., 2005).

However, as Wyatt had also discovered with students in her study, SWAP completers did admit to feeling a disconnect when reflecting on their limited access to informal, peer-generated knowledge about how things worked at the institution (2005). This, however, raises the question of how much more difficult their transitions would have been had they not participated in SWAP, rather than highlight a shortcoming of Access programmes in general.

Both studies offer some insight on factors that can influence adult enrolment behaviour; however, they do not provide us with tools that can be utilised beyond the institutional level. In what ways can we affect adult enrolment behaviour in a more far-reaching manner? A main objective of this cross-national study is to identify strategies that can be implemented on a much larger scale.

As both Bergman and Wyatt's research on campus engagement and retention revealed, the relationship between adult learners and their universities is highly complex, where notions of *studenthood* and the desire to become immersed in the university environment is carefully considered (Bergman et. al., 2014; Christie et. al, 2005; Wyatt, 2011).

### **2.3.3 Stop-out, Drop-out, and Attainment**

As the preceding section (2.3.2) has shown, several UK and US studies have evidenced how sense of belonging is one fundamental component to facilitating students' successful transition to and progression in higher education. However, what exactly constitutes 'best practice' for achieving this aim concretely remains unclear to university stakeholders. In addition, other tangible factors must be identified for promoting student retention and success, with consideration as to how belonging might moderate learner journeys (Mckendry, Wright, & Stevenson, 2014). Similarly, how to successfully mitigate or address issues of student attrition remains a longstanding concern and challenge for higher education institutions, educationalists, and policymakers around the world.

*Attrition* is a wide-ranging term that refers to student programme-leavers who end their study before the enrolled completion date (Advance HE, 2016). However, this definition does not account for the multitude of reasons behind students' difficult decisions to depart from a course or programme prior to completion. In other words, *attrition* does not differentiate between students who transfer institutions, returners or *stop-outs* who have simply not completed their programme within the 'normal' timeframe—for instance, gaps within their enrolment due to deferral or temporarily discontinuing their studies only to resume/return years later, sometimes at a different institution (Hoyt & Winn, 2004)—versus those who opt to leave/drop-out and never return to higher education (Tinto, 1993).

Prior studies have shown that these attrition types offer a significant distinction, not only when analysing attrition data, but also in better understanding student retention (Grabsch et al., 2021; Hoyt & Winn, 2004). This is particularly of importance as 'irregular' higher education enrolment and withdrawal patterns are considered in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic (Farcnik, Domadenik Muren, and Franca, 2022). Therefore, this distinction is of increasing interest to financial stakeholders of institutions, as deferral is very different to departure, but also to social scientists and educationalists who model attrition intentions based on social-psychological and education-specific phenomena.

Therefore, attrition/drop-out, and its positive counterpart retention, are of the utmost importance for higher education researchers—not only for student wellbeing (Sharp & Theiler, 2018) and increasing civic engagement (Campbell, 2006; OECD, 2023), but also for economic considerations of the institutions in terms of fee-paying students (Tight, 2020). In addition, there are reputational concerns in both countries, whereby student satisfaction and retention count towards the ranking and perceived quality of the institutions (e.g., the *Research Excellence Framework* in the U.K. [Boeren, 2023] and the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings in the U.S. [Gnolek, Falciano, and Kuncl, 2014]). Given the significance of these factors, understanding the nuances of student attrition and retention becomes even more imperative in shaping institutional strategies and policies in improving student outcomes.

In their investigation of the efficacy of university retention strategies, Mckendry et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative study to examine the learning experiences and motivations of 46 first-year nursing and midwifery students at an urban Scottish HEI with “a reputation for widening participation” (p.872). As such, the researchers highlighted the diversity of their sample, comprised of 32 mature learners and 14 traditional students, all of whom were female with the exception of two male participants. Their research supports existing literature that emphasises the importance of social integration, sense of belonging, and institutional support in retaining diverse student populations, particularly ‘non- traditional’ and/or mature learners. These results align with Tinto's (1993) theory of student departure, which posits that a strong sense of connection to both the academic and social aspects of university life is crucial for student persistence and success. The emphasis on realistic expectations also resonates with Yorke and Longden's (2004) work, which highlights that clarity about programme demands and alignment between students' expectations and their actual experiences has a significant impact on progression rates.

A relatively recent paradigm shift in retention studies turned attention from determining *who* is likely to leave education to investigating *what* makes students stay (Wray, Aspland, and Barrett, 2013). For example, in a two-phase study involving six focus groups, Mckendry et al. (2014) explored students' motivations for enrolling in their course and the types of university support they accessed. In addition, they too aimed to uncover factors which facilitated students' sense of belonging to their programme. Although they sought to make recommendations on how to improve School support of students, navigating their first year of university, they ultimately argued that it is still unclear to university stakeholders and policymakers what factors are needed tangibly for promoting student retention and success. But one significant, and perhaps surprising, finding of the study was the significance of having a role model as a major source of support or for professional/personal inspiration. This highlights the complex interplay between social support networks and the influence of role models, alongside

formal HEI structures, in fostering a sense of belonging and ultimately contributing to student retention. The study by McKendry et al. also situates itself within a long-standing field of research focused on university student attrition and progression (Aljohani, 2016; Berger, Ramirez, and Lyon, 2012). Their research continues to build on these foundational theories by exploring not just the factors that lead to student departure but also the supportive elements that encourage students to persist in their educational journey.

## 2.4 Theoretical Frameworks and Conceptual Models

Post-secondary student attrition and progression as a defined area of research developed in the early 1970s (Aljohani, 2016; Berger, Ramirez, and Lyon, 2012). A phenomenon that had been of longstanding concern to educational institutions and educators since the formalisation of the education system (Aljohani, 2016; Burke, 2019; Tinto, 1993), student attrition was primarily “explained in terms of students’ characteristics, personal attributes and shortcomings” up until this point (Aljohani, 2016, p. 2). The 1970s, however, signalled a notable shift from this singular focus on students’ attributes and “shortcomings” to examining how students interact with their campus environment, and the ways in which their relationship to their institution could influence academic progression (Aljohani, 2016a; Berger et al., 2012; Burke, 2019). Subsequently, educational researchers also began to develop theoretical frameworks and conceptual models that sought to analyse this notion of the student-college/university relationship more specifically (Aljohani, 2016; Bean, 1980; Tinto, 1975).

In this section, some of the foundational theoretical frameworks and conceptual models within student attrition and progression research will be discussed, in addition to the guiding models for this project. The discussion of the frameworks and models that follow—*Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) Student Integration Model of Attrition* (section 2.4.1); *Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory* (section 2.4.2); *Tajfel & Turner’s (1979) Social Identity Theory* (section 2.4.3); *Cross’ (1981) Barriers to Adult Participation in Higher Education* (section 2.4.4); *Bean and Metzner’s (1985)*

*Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition* (section 2.4.5); *Bourdieu's (1986) Social Reproduction Theory* (section 2.4.6); and *Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation Model* (section 2.4.7)—is organised chronologically. Organising the theories in this way not only reflects the evolution of approaches to interrogating WA/WP, but also enables us to trace how each framework builds on or departs from previous ones (Ridley, 2012). Together, these frameworks provide a multidimensional understanding of the mature learner experience, from initial motivations and barriers to questions of identity, integration, and structural inequality. The major tenets and limitations of each framework and conceptual model will be critically evaluated in the following sections.

Whilst these theories are not exhaustive, and additional sociological, psychological and educational theories were reviewed, such as *Astin's (1984) Theory of Student Involvement* and *Chickering's (1969) Theory of Identity Development*, these were chosen as the foundations upon which to build the present work as each offers explanatory value to address the present research aims, research questions, and outcomes, as is justified in section 2.5 of this thesis.

#### **2.4.1 Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) Student Integration Model of Attrition**

Among the most influential models in student attrition and progression research (Braxton & Hirschy, 2004; Burke, 2019; Davidson & Wilson, 2013), Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) Student Integration Model of Attrition is based on the argument that student withdrawal from university—or from the higher education system at- large—is due to the student's lack of academic and social integration into their institutional environment.

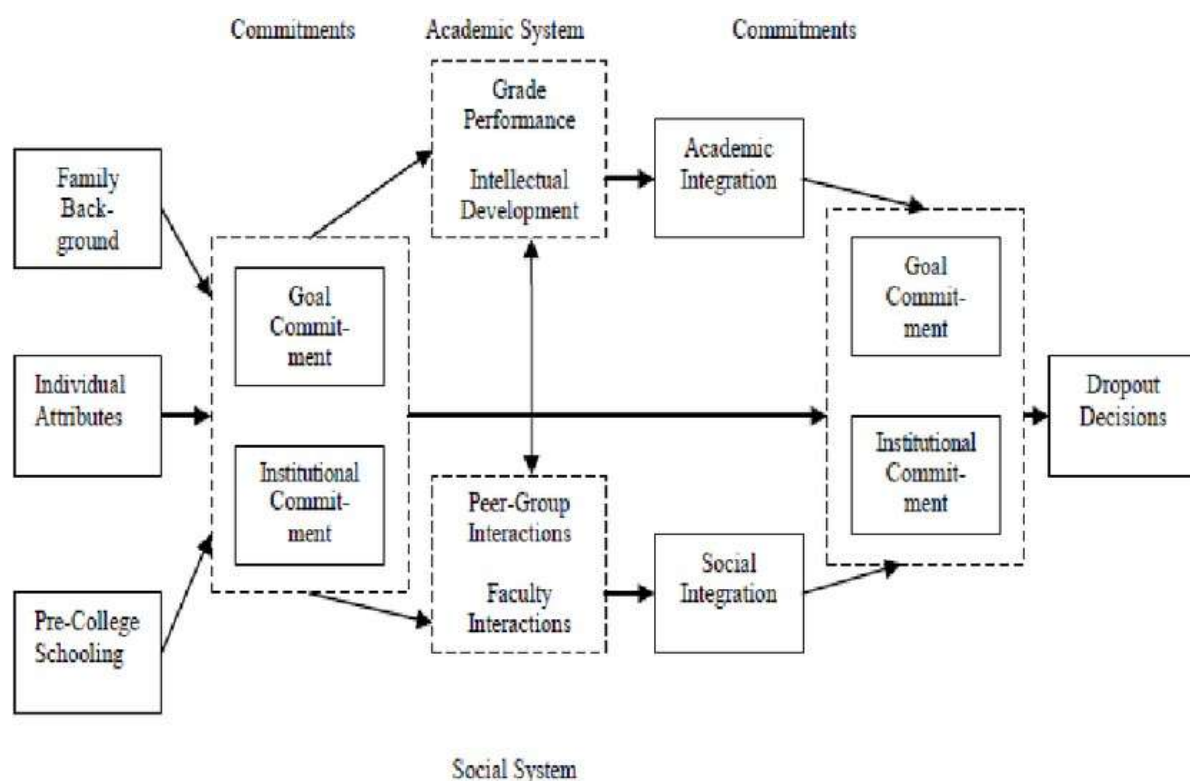


**Figure 1 Tinto's (1975) Student Integration Model of Attrition**

As illustrated in Figure 1 above, Tinto (1975) believed that students entered university with a set of personal and pre-enrolment characteristics. These characteristics were identified as Individual Attributes, Pre-college Schooling (or experiences), and Family Background. Each of these characteristics will have direct and indirect effects on a student's Goal Commitment (such as degree completion) and Institutional Commitment (e.g., progressing at that specific institution). According to Tinto (1975), students who are fully integrated academically and socially into their campus environment are more likely to graduate. Tinto's (1975) conceptualisation of academic and social integration have drawn the most interest in retention studies. In this vein, the greater the institution's ability to facilitate this integration, the stronger the student's commitment to completing their degree at that specific institution. Thus, he asserts, it is the longitudinal interaction between the student's Goal Commitment to achieving their degree as well as their Institutional Commitment to degree completion at their specific institution that ultimately determines student progression in or dropout from an HEI.

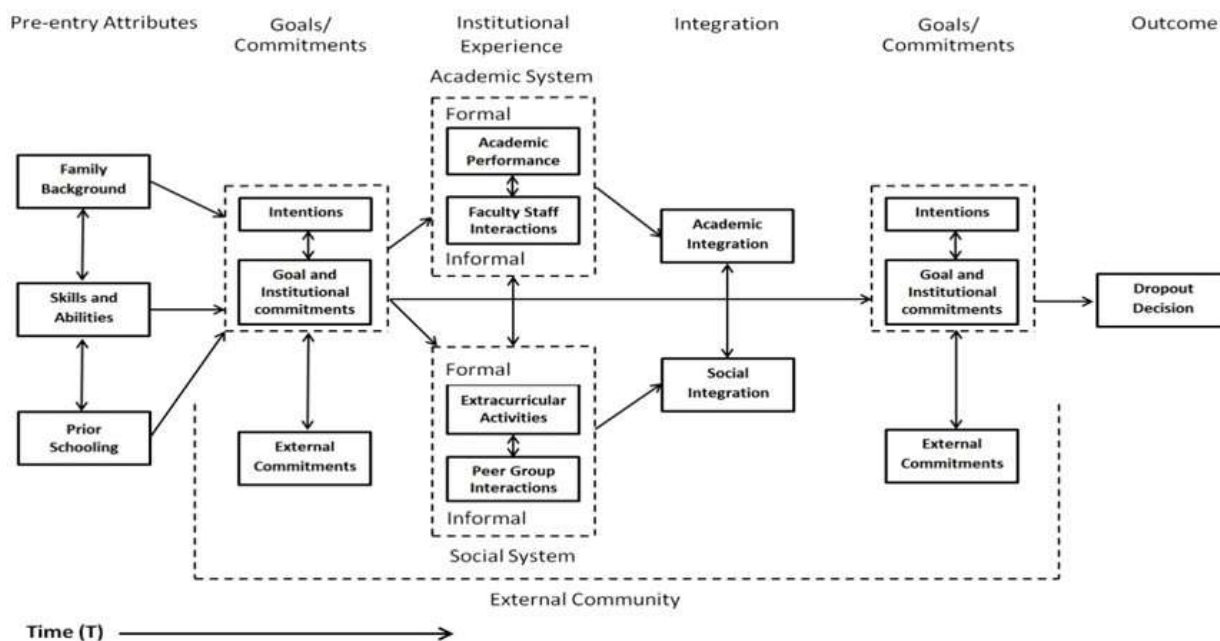


Figure 2 Tinto's (1987, 1993) (Revised) Student Integration Model of Attrition

Over the next two decades, Tinto (1987, 1993) would revise his model to include *External Commitments* (i.e., family, work) and *Intentions* (in place of *Goal Commitments*), as well as add *External Community* (i.e., one's off-campus, non- university relationships or home environment). With these modifications (Figure 2), Tinto expanded his theory to also examine the tension between students' university and home environments, asserting that one must fully embrace and integrate into the former in order to successfully complete their degree.

Subsequently, according to Tinto, one must also disassociate from their home community to an extent in order for full integration at university to occur. As such, Tinto described the integration process in three stages: 1) Partial separation from the student's external or past community, 2) Transition into their new, institutional environment or community, and 3) Full integration into their institutional community, reflected in how well they adapt to their university's norms, values, and culture.

Whilst Tinto's model has been used extensively within educational research, it is not without its limitations. Among the earliest and most prevailing



criticisms of Tinto's theory is that it is limited in terms of understanding why adult students leave (Bean, 1980; Merrill, 2015) as it is based on middle class, younger adults (Merrill, 2015). Additionally, Tinto's model also does not consider commuter students, as its over-emphasis on social integration is very residential student focused (Merrill, 2015). Lastly, prior to the modifications made to the model in 1987 and 1993, Tinto's (1975) initial theory also ignored the influence of students' external environment and commitments, two factors that researchers argued were especially significant in mature student progression (Bean, 1980). For these reasons, and in response to Tinto's (1975) original model, Bean (1980) would first conceptualise his *Model of College Student Dropout Syndrome*, before ultimately developing Bean and Metzner's (1985) *Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition* (see section 2.4.4).

From the *Critical Race Theory* (CRT) perspective, Rendón, Jaloma, & Nora (2000) challenged Tinto's deficit interpretation of *dual environments* and their impact on student progression. In the context of educational research, CRT challenges the institutional structures, systems, and policies that are commonly accepted as 'neutral', aiming to interrogate their role in maintaining societal and systemic racial inequalities (Donnor & Ladson-Billings, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Similarly, Rendón et al. (2000) argued that especially for students from collectivist cultures, undergoing the separation process can be traumatic, or in some cases, not even considered a viable option. Thus, they also argued that Tinto's model may make culturally biased assumptions that do not consider how students from collectivist cultures may derive support to progress from their home community. Ultimately, they conclude that institutions should assume more responsibility in supporting students as they navigate dual environments (Rendón et al., 2000). Progression should not be based on individual separation from one environment in search of membership to a new one (Rendón et. al., 2000). Instead, Rendón recommends convergence of the two as a way of allowing individuals to function more effectively and less stressfully in both worlds (Rendón et. al., 2000).

Further to this, Tinto's model also ignores the impact of socio-economic status and cultural background (Merrill, 2015); ignores external factors like health problems and finances (Merrill, 2015), and posits that students must conform to institutional culture or environment rather than the university try to accommodate a heterogeneous student population (Merrill, 2015). A final key critique of Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) theoretical framework is its failure to consider the broader impact of the policy landscape on student entry and retention (Braxton, 2004). As such, this particular limitation is one of the reasons for the researcher's decision to incorporate an ecological model into the project's analytic lens (further details in section 2.4.6), as well as employ it as the guiding framework for the overall research design of the study (see section 3.3).

### **2.4.2 Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory**

Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory (1979) is a social psychology theory that has been widely used within educational research. A particularly powerful tool for examining student identity development and sense of belonging (Groenewald, 2024). SIT has been utilised to examine the challenges faced by mature students in navigating their multiple social identities within the university environment (Howard & Davies, 2012). At its core, SIT argues that individuals define their identity according to their membership to certain social groups (Islam, 2014). Whilst a full consideration of this theory is beyond the scope of this thesis, this section will discuss the theoretical concepts that were employed in this study: *social categorisation*, *social comparison*, *social identification*, and most importantly, *salience*.

*Social categorisation* is a process by which individuals organise their social environment and others into groups based on perceived shared characteristics, such as age, race, or educational background. In doing so, this enables individuals to simplify complex social environments by establishing clear distinctions between *in-groups* (the groups to which individuals belong) and *out-groups* (the groups to which individuals do not belong). In other words, social categorization "provides a system of

orientation for self-reference” thus, “creat[ing] and defin[ing] the individual’s place in society” (p. 40). Once individuals categorise themselves, they move on to the *social identification* stage, in which they identify themselves with an in-group, aligning their behaviour and attitudes with group expectations and norms. This stage of identification can significantly shape how individuals perceive themselves and their place within broader society.

Following social identification, individuals then engage in *social comparison*. In this phase of social identity formation, individuals evaluate their in-group against out-groups based on attitudes, members, and perceived advantages. As such, this process enables individuals to derive a sense of positive distinctiveness from other groups, as they seek to see their group as superior, thereby enhancing their self-esteem. In educational settings, this comparison can be particularly salient, such as when mature students compare themselves with traditional-aged students, which can impact their self-concept and engagement (Ellemers et al., 1999).

Finally, *salience* refers to the prominence of an individual’s specific social identity in specific contexts. For example, a mature student’s identity may become more salient in situations where they are one of few mature learners in a class or at an institution, thus affecting their sense of belonging and their overall participation in academic life (Haslam et al., 2010). In other words, for mature learners, they may experience isolation or marginalisation when their identity as mature learners becomes salient in the university environment.

Research by Read, Archer, and Leathwood (2003) show that mature students frequently compare themselves with younger students, which can impact their academic confidence and self-perception. Furthermore, studies like those by Kasworm (2010) highlight the importance of social identification with peer groups, noting that mature students often find solidarity with others who share similar life experiences, such as balancing education with work or family responsibilities. This sense of shared identity can positively influence their persistence and success in higher education (Kasworm,

2010).

O'Shea (2016) explores how adult learners can feel marginalised in academic settings, which affects their motivation and retention. Additionally, Bamber and Tett (2000) focus on the role of SIT in widening participation initiatives, emphasising that institutions must acknowledge the diverse identities of students and foster environments that promote inclusion and belonging.

Research suggests that mature students frequently compare themselves to their younger peers, which can negatively impact their academic confidence and sense of competence (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003). For mature learners, social identification with peer groups that share similar life experiences, such as work or family responsibilities, plays a significant role in their academic progression and success (Kasworm, 2010).

### **2.4.3 Cross' (1981) Chain of Response Model**

Although not the first to discuss barriers to educational participation, as Johnstone & Rivera (1965) were first to describe 'situational and dispositional deterrents' (Boeren, 2016; Lee, 2017), and Ekstrom (1972) the first to establish barrier types in her literature review of barriers to women's participation in higher education (Osam, Bergman, Cumberland, 2017), Cross emerged as a leader in "alerting HE to the developmental needs and concerns" of mature students in the late 1970's (Strange, 1999, p.572). In her seminal work, *Adults as Learners: Increasing Participation and Facilitating Learning*, Cross (1981) introduced her Chain of Response model, which examines three potential barriers to adult learners' access and participation in education, displayed in table 6 on the following page:

**Table 7 Cross' (1981) Chain of Response – Barriers to participation Adapted from Cross (1981)**

| Barrier              | Description                                                          |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Situational</b>   | Those relating to the student's life circumstances                   |
| <b>Institutional</b> | Those relating to current policies and practices in higher education |
| <b>Dispositional</b> | Student attitudes toward and perceptions of education                |

As such, her model emphasises how an individual's decision to participate in education is influenced by a complex interplay of these three factors. This process starts with self-perception or self-evaluation, in which the learner takes stock of their personal goals, needs, and perceived skills. This is followed by a consideration of one's attitude toward education, which may be shaped by past educational experiences and self-confidence. Situational factors—such as opportunities, barriers, and social support—also play a significant role in an adult learner's decision to return to education.

As previously mentioned, understanding the potential barriers (see Table 6) to adults' participation in education is at the core of Cross (1981) theoretical model. With regard to *situational barriers* to participation, financial constraints, work schedule, and family responsibilities are all examples of situational barriers (Cross, 1981). Among these, financial constraints are considered the primary situational barrier to higher education for mature learners. Financial responsibilities of mature students most typically include, but are not limited to, the cost of childcare, transportation, and private accommodation. For hourly workers, studying may also take away from the ability to accumulate additional work hours and earn more pay.

Furthermore, in the American context, further costs such as high tuition fees and healthcare are additional financial burdens that mature learners must bear (Bergman et al., 2014). A lack of time due to juggling multiple

life commitments, such as work and family responsibilities, is another major situational barrier faced by adults (Cross, 1981). Cross found that potential learners in the 25- to 45-year-old age group were especially impacted by this situational barrier (Cross, 1981). This observation aligns with Smith (2008) and Comings et al. (2000) findings, in which older adults were shown to have higher progression rates in the UK and U.S., respectively. Their findings suggest that this could be attributed to differences in ‘maturity level’, or the assumption that older students are less likely to have the additional responsibility of caring for small children (Comings et al., 2000).

*Institutional barriers* refers to the policies, procedures, and practices that hinders adult learners’ ability to participate in educational activities within an institution (Cross, 1981). Cross further divides these barriers into five categories: 1. Course scheduling and availability, 2. Location or transportation issues, 3. Lack of appealing, relevant, or practical course offerings, 4. Procedural problems or time requirements and, 5. Lack of transparency on policies and procedures (Cross, 1981). Many adults have reported that lack of information about learning opportunities, financial aid, and admissions procedures can make it difficult to understand the process for enrolling at a higher education institution (Cross, 1981; Lambrechts, 2020)

One significant institutional barrier within the U.S. higher education system is the prevalence of remedial or developmental education classes. As such, remedial classes usually incur additional costs, delay graduation as they do not count toward degree requirements, and may need to be taken in addition to a regular courseload (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). Additionally, since they are often non-credit courses, students must enrol in extra credit-bearing courses to maintain full-time status for financial aid eligibility (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010). This creates an added burden on students, particularly those from low- income backgrounds, who face increased financial pressure and a longer time to degree completion.

In addition to institutional barriers, according to Cross’ framework, many

adult learners grapple with *dispositional barriers*, such as self-doubt and a lack of confidence in their academic abilities. Dispositional barriers can also describe one's perception of school and learning based on earlier experiences (Cross, 1981). Because adult learners are more likely to indicate experiencing negative educational experiences in the past, they are also more likely to experience feelings of isolation and alienation. As a result, adult students are also less likely to seek out or know how to seek out additional help and support (Kasworm, 2008).

Lastly, due to past negative experiences in education and limited exposure to post-secondary learning, adults may also suffer from lower self-confidence about their ability to learn (Cross, 1981). The learning process goes beyond just developing a set of cognitive skills to be transferred from one learning environment or context to another, as adult learners bring with them a cluster of preconceived notions about the nature of knowledge and what the process of teaching and learning should look like (Christie, Tett, Cree, & McCune, 2014).

Since Cross' work, other researchers have contributed to our understanding of barriers to adult participation in higher education. Darkenwald and Merriam (1982), for example, identified a fourth barrier, *informational barriers* (Boeren, 2016). Boeren (2016) also critically explored the role of information in reproducing inequities in post-secondary access, though not exclusively a barrier for mature students, however, and may be more of a by-product of having first- gen status and thus potentially 'lacking' in social capital. MacFarlane (2015) also implies this in her study on widening access for young adults.

#### **2.4.4 Bean and Metzner's (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition**

Bean and Metzner's (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition was initially selected as an analytical framework for the quantitative phase of the project's original research design, and guided the design of the topic guide developed for the

qualitative interviews (see section 3.7). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, delays in access to individual-level HESA data made this phase of research unfeasible within thesis time constraints (see section 3.3).

Whilst this framework was no longer used as part of the project's analytic lens, it still informed the topic guide's design, and thus a brief overview of the model is provided in this section.

In response to earlier student attrition models like Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993; also please see section 2.4.1), which were mainly based on the traditional, residential student experience (Bean, 1980; Merrill, 2015, Bean and Metzner's (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition was developed to address the greater impact of the external environment on the non-traditional student. Students who are 25 or older, enrolled part-time, or commute to campus are all considered "non-traditional" in this model. This conceptual framework highlights four sets of variables: *Background and Defining Variables*, *Academic Variables*, *Environmental Variables*, and *Social Integration Variables* (e.g., degree of campus involvement, student peer relationships, and relationships with faculty outside of class). A non-traditional student's decision to persist or dropout is based on how these four constructs interact. Unlike Tinto's model, Bean and Metzner's framework evaluates student supports primarily on external factors, thus arguing that non-traditional student attrition is most affected by *Environmental Variables*.



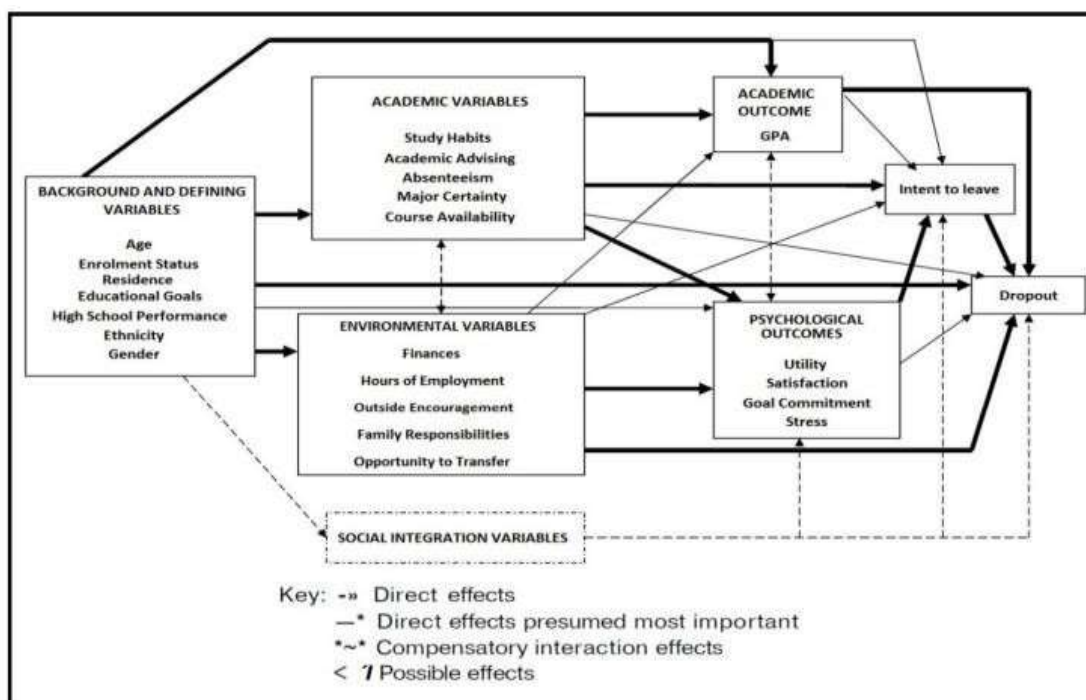


**Figure 3 Bean and Metzner (1985) The Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition**

Based on this argument, the model also suggests the following: 1) Students are more likely to progress when scoring high on both Academic and Environmental Variables, but are likely to dropout when scoring low on both, 2) Students are more likely to dropout when scoring high on Academic Variables, but low on Environmental Variables, 3) Students are more likely to progress when scoring high on Environmental Variables, but low on Academic variables.

Whilst this framework was groundbreaking in the study of adult student progression and retention, as with any theory, it comes with several limitations. For example, one major oversight in designing the model was the exclusion of socio-economic status and class. Both U.S. and UK studies have demonstrated that adult learners are more likely to come from economically disadvantaged or low-income backgrounds (Kamer & Ishitani, 2019; Pearce, 2017). Another limitation of Bean and Metzner's study is the narrow definition of persistence and student departure under which it operates.

For the purposes of developing the model, Bean and Metzner defined “dropout” as a student who “enrols at an institution one semester but does not enrol the next” and “has not completed his or her formally declared program of study” (Bean & Metzner, 1985, p.489). The researchers recognise that such a narrow scope does not allow for differentiation between stopouts (i.e., those students who take one or more breaks in their post-secondary education) and dropouts in their study. As adult students are more likely to have complex enrolment patterns (drop-out, stop-out, transfer, etc.), this too is a major drawback of the model (Lee, 2025).

At the time Bean and Metzner’s model was created, there was little to no existing contemporary research on the progression of adult students at 4-year institutions. Furthermore, due to the “inconsistent performance of variables at different [U.S.] institutions” (Bean & Metzner, p. 529), utilising the model for a multi-institutional study beyond state systems with vertical transfer agreements or in countries with a unified system may present issues.

#### **2.4.5 Bourdieu’s (1986) Social Reproduction Theory**

Among the most widely discussed and operationalised theoretical frameworks in educational access research is Bourdieu’s (1986) Social Reproduction Theory. In fact, this theory and associated concepts such as forms of capital and habitus, have become nearly ubiquitous in research on educational inequalities, though applied with varying degrees of critical engagement (Mills & Gale, 2007). Whilst a full consideration of this theory is beyond the scope of this thesis, instead, this section will explore the specific Bourdieusian concepts that are employed by the present study—Social capital, cultural capital, and habitus.

How Bourdieu conceptualises capital extends beyond just economic wealth. Instead, *capital* is understood to be the “accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when

appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor” (p.241). In other words, *capital* refers to an individual’s or group’s accumulated resources that can be used to gain advantages or leverage power within different social contexts.

Bourdieu uses the term *social capital* to describe one’s access to powerful social networks. As with any form of capital, social capital carries value; it can be amassed, monopolised, and hoarded, particularly among elite or upper-class circles (Bourdieu, 1986). This hoarding of social capital within elite classes thus contributes to the persistence of class inequality. For the prospective university student, having at least one parent who has attended university is one example of social capital. Prospective students with this advantage are able to ‘tap into’ their parents’ knowledge of or personal experience with navigating tertiary education as a resource, whether that is for guidance on the admissions process, understanding timetables, and course syllabi, etc (for further work applying Bourdieu to HE processes please see Burnell, 2015; Dingel & Sage, 2021; West, Fleming, and Finnegan, 2013).

*Cultural capital* is similarly important to HE researchers, particularly in Widening access, participation and success/attrition domains. Bourdieu describes cultural capital as the knowledge and behaviours that are highly valued within certain social contexts (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). In other words, *cultural capital* refers to the knowledge and skills that are often transmitted through one’s family as well as social institutions, giving individuals or groups an advantage in navigating certain social contexts, such as higher education. For example, a student whose family are actively involved in their education may have an easier time navigating university environments than those who do not. Such *cultural capital* can take the form of prior knowledge that aligns with what is expected in higher education or familiarity with academic norms.

This gives those who possess the cultural capital a distinct advantage over students who do not have similar exposure, thus perpetuating inequalities. In this way, social and cultural capital intersect to shape educational

opportunities and success (for further reviews on this area, please see Almeida et al, 2021; Gaddis, 2013; Pather & Chetty, 2015)

*Habitus* is a set of socialised beliefs or values that shapes one's view of the world and informs the individual's perception of one's role within it (Bourdieu, 1986). It is inherited from one's community and transmitted unconsciously (Bourdieu, 1986). *Habitus* is also offered as an explanation for how inequalities of power and privilege are perpetuated without public outrage or resistance (Swartz, 1999). For example, because children from working-class families rarely see members of their class succeed academically or achieve high levels of educational attainment compared to their middle-class peers, they inadvertently succumb to self-defeat. In other words, they are resigned to believing that this is "just how the world works", and they must set their expectations for themselves accordingly (Dougherty & Hammack, 1990; Swartz, 1999).

This concept has been further extended by researchers McDonough (1997), Horvat and Antonio (1999), and Reay (2001) in order to conceptualise *Organisational habitus*. This term refers to "class-based dispositions, perceptions, and appreciations transmitted to individuals in a common organizational culture" (Horvat & Antonio, 1999, p. 320, paraphrasing McDonough, 1997). In the context of this study, organisational habitus plays a significant role in shaping how learners perceive their place within university. For working-class students, for example, the organisational habitus of an HEI can either reinforce feelings of exclusion or help challenge internalised sense of self- defeat by reshaping class-based expectations of the HE.

Research by Reay, David, and Ball (2005) further supports this perspective, also asserting that the institutional culture of universities can either significantly affect working-class students' sense of fit and academic self-confidence, or simply exacerbate feelings of marginalisation. Lastly, organisational habitus can also be used to described how institutions conceptualise their role in relation to the student, e.g., the *university culture* or *university*

*environment* they wish to project. In the higher education context, variables like programme structure and course content, student supports, campus events, traditions or rituals, faculty and administration attitudes toward students, institutional expectations of students, etc. all contribute to university culture/environment (see Ahmed, Kloot, and Collier-Reed, 2015; Cornbleth, 2010; McDonough, 1997; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton, 2009;).

Aside from the prevailing criticism that Bourdieu's framework runs 'too smoothly', Bourdieu's theory also fails to consider the relationship between State and 'Schoolhouse', and how governmental educational policies also contribute to reproducing social inequalities (Swartz, 1999). As a consequence of this oversight, Bourdieu's theory exaggerates the autonomy of teachers. Similarly, due to its assumption that access to social capital is fixed or pre-determined based on class or that one's habitus is unchanging, Bourdieu's framework has also been accused of ignoring student agency (Burnell, 2015). Reay et al. (2009) respond to these critiques by introducing the concept of a 'permeable habitus,' which emphasises that habitus is not fixed but rather adaptable and fluid, capable of evolving in response to changes in personal circumstances. This perspective acknowledges that individuals are not entirely constrained by their social origins; instead, they can modify their habitus when exposed to new social, cultural, or educational contexts, thereby allowing for greater agency than Bourdieu's original framework suggests.

Lastly, Bourdieu's conceptual framework has also come under heavy criticism from critical race theorists. Thus, CRT is used as a tool for confronting and interrogating "deficit theorizing" (Yosso, 2005). *Deficit theorizing* is when a theory is predicated on the belief that normative forms of knowledge and experiences exist, using that society's dominant group as the standard by which to critically analyse and measure the experience of marginalised groups. Therefore, according to the CRT school of thought, Bourdieu centres white middle- and upper-class cultures as the standard by which to explain why other groups may not achieve similar levels of success in education. In this vein, rather than question or challenge an inequitable system, Bourdieu's conceptual framework simply perpetuates the existing

hegemonic structure and does not intend to problematise it.

#### 2.4.6 Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation Model

Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Model offers a multilevel framework to understand the complex interplay of factors that influence adult participation in lifelong learning. The model integrates three key components: the Individual (micro-level), Learning Provider (meso-level), and Country (or policy context, in the case of this thesis) at the macro-level, providing a layered approach to the analysis of lifelong learning participation.

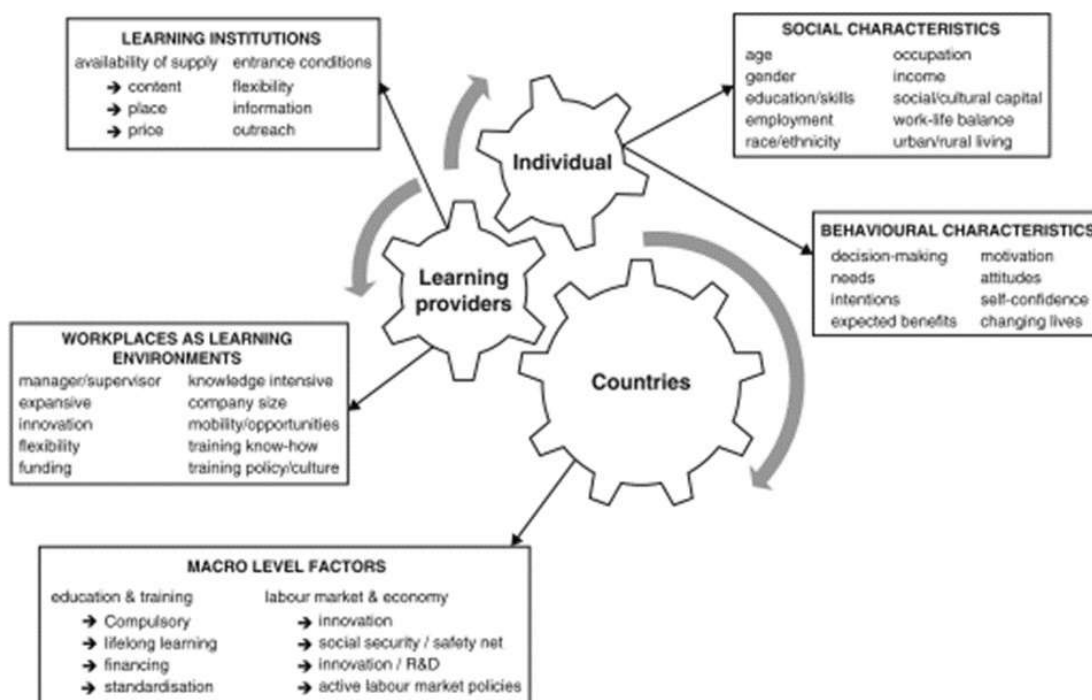


Figure 4 Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation Model

At the micro-level, the model focuses on the characteristics of individual learners, including their motivations, attitudes, confidence, and previous educational experiences. These personal attributes, shaped by their socio-economic background, significantly influence their likelihood of engaging in lifelong learning. For example, individuals with higher educational attainment or 'white-collar' jobs tend to participate more, whereas those

from disadvantaged backgrounds may be more likely to experience dispositional barriers to learning. Boeren (2016) draws on psychological theories such as *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1977) and *motivation* (Deci & Ryan, 2013) to explain how these personal factors impact learners' decisions about participation.

The meso-level emphasises the role of education and training providers, highlighting that the availability, accessibility, and structure of learning opportunities influence participation. Institutions that offer flexible learning formats, such as online or part-time options, are more likely to attract mature learners, especially those juggling multiple commitments. The meso-level thus highlights the importance of institutional support in facilitating or hindering lifelong learning.

At the macro-level, Boeren's model considers the broader societal context, such as government policies, economic conditions, and labour market demands. Regional or national policies on education and social welfare, as well as the overall strength of the economy, significantly shape the opportunities available to adults for continuing education. For instance, countries with robust welfare systems and active labour market policies, such as the Nordic countries, tend to have higher rates of lifelong learning participation compared to countries with weaker social safety nets.

Employing Boeren's (2016) model entails analysing participation data across these three levels and understanding how they interact to influence learner behaviour. Multilevel analysis is essential, as it allows researchers to account for the nested structure of learners within institutions and policy landscapes, revealing the interdependencies between individual, institutional, and systemic factors (Hernaes et al., 2024; Köhler, 2024). As such, from the perspective of this research, it is understood that how adults access HE is a “function of three factors: regulatory and policy landscape; the diversity of HE structural and institutional forms that this landscape fosters; and the situational and dispositional characteristics of adults” (Osborne, 2016, p. 122). Student attrition models most often fail to provide this broader picture. The nature of higher education access and

participation is far too complex to rely on the operationalisation of student attrition models alone. This is mainly due to attrition models' small ecosystem of examining the Student and the ways in which they engage with their learning environment. A narrow scope such as this does not take the impact of macro-level factors like government policy—or major anomalies, as was the case with the COVID-19 outbreak—into account.

In this vein, the model's strength lies in its holistic approach, integrating insights from various domains of research to offer a more nuanced understanding of lifelong learning participation specifically. It moves beyond individualistic explanations, considering how structural inequalities and institutional barriers contribute to disparities in learning.

In this thesis, Boeren's model will be employed as an analytical tool to examine widening access policies and participation in higher education in Scotland and New York. By utilising the micro-meso-macro framework, the study will explore how individual learner characteristics, institutional practices, and national policies interact to shape adult learners' experiences in both contexts. This layered approach will provide deeper, triangulated insights into the systemic and institutional challenges faced by mature learners, whilst also allowing for cross- cultural comparisons between Scotland and New York.

By examining the interaction between Learning Provider (in this context, HEIs), Individual, and Country (in this context, policy landscape), this can help to better inform our understanding of how higher education institutions facilitate access to adult learners both prior to and during the global pandemic, the institutional mechanisms in place to support mature students' progression, and individual student experiences of accessing university resources and support.

## **2.5 Justification for the Selected Frameworks**

Although not exhaustive, this thesis has reviewed and synthesised some relevant historical and recent models, including; Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993)



Student Integration Model of Attrition, Tajfel & Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory, Cross's (1981) Chain of Response Model, Bourdieu's (1986) Social Reproduction Theory, and Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation Model.

These were selected to complement one another and offer a powerful and effective analytic lens for examining access and participation for mature learners in HE research. As discussed in section 2.4.1, the overarching aim of Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) framework is to get the student to the point of academic and social integration into the university environment. When achieved—and maintained, as Tinto asserts progression is a longitudinal process of interactions between the learner and institution—students are more likely to persist when they feel both connected to the academic environment and the social networks within their institution.

This principle offers a strong end-goal for exploring the nature of transition and progression at a specific institution. In other words, understanding that the student must reach and maintain a level of social and academic integration into the university environment—However that might look for the student—In order to increase their likelihood of progression and attainment at their institution. As such, this objective lies at the core of progression and attainment. When taking into consideration that many mature learners may experience feelings of social and academic isolation due to their 'non-traditional' status—e.g., are not residential students; are more likely to be balancing work, family and/or caring responsibilities, etc.—this is not a straightforward process.

In this way, Tinto's model does not explicitly address the external factors that affect mature learners, particularly the policy context, which is where Boeren's (2016) model of lifelong learning complements and extends Tinto's framework. Boeren's (2016) model accounts for micro-level (individual), meso-level (institutional), and macro-level (societal/policy) factors on participation in lifelong learning, not only offering an ecological perspective on the barriers that mature learners face in accessing and participating in

higher education. Boeren (2016) allows for a more nuanced understanding of the barriers that mature learners face, such as financial constraints or institutional inflexibility, which are less central in Tinto's original framework. Furthermore, its assertion that individual characteristics (such as prior educational experiences), institutional practices, and national or regional policies all interact to shape the experiences of lifelong learners.

Cross' (1981) Chain of Response model also further enhances Tinto's conceptualisations of integration by highlighting the dispositional (i.e., self-doubt) and situational barriers (i.e., family or work commitments) that adults must overcome to access and participate in higher education. Cross (1981) argues that it is these barriers that have a significant impact on adults' decision-making process on whether to participate in learning. Thus, mitigating these barriers is essential to facilitating their participation. Further to this, Cross' framework also resonates with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of *habitus*, as the internalised beliefs and dispositions formed by learners' social backgrounds may exacerbate self-doubt and shape perceptions of whether higher education is a viable option for them.

Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of *cultural* and *social capital*, alongside *habitus*, all offer a critical lens for understanding in what ways can students' social background impact their academic and social integration into university. When combined with Tinto's theory in this way, Bourdieu's framework can demonstrate how limited access to these forms of capital, in addition to the impact of *habitus*, can hinder mature learners' ability to successfully integrate into the university environment. In this vein, examining how the fit of social and cultural capital, as well as the influence of one's prior *habitus* in the existing HE field, can potentially affect mature students' ability to identify with and feel a sense of belonging in higher education environments, integrates Tajfel & Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory (SIT) with the above frameworks, to further facilitate learner-in-context analyses.

Thus, finally, Tajfel & Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory (SIT) brings the notion of sense of belonging and identity into perspective. For mature

learners, who often have highly salient identities due to juggling multiple commitments, their ability to see themselves as “legitimate students” is therefore critical for their sense of belonging in higher education (Kasworm, 2010; O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). In this context, SIT would suggest that if mature learners do not perceive themselves as part of the university community or feel they do not ‘fit in’, they will find it difficult to integrate, both socially and academically, within the university environment. This ties directly into Tinto’s ideas of academic and social integration, with SIT offering a psychological lens for understanding why this integration may or may not occur, and how best to facilitate it through cultivating students’ sense of belonging.

The synthesis of these models allows for a holistic approach to analysing access and participation for mature learners. Tinto’s focus on academic and social integration provides the foundation, whilst Boeren (2016), Cross (1981), Bourdieu (1986), and Tajfel & Turner (1979) add critical dimensions such as socio-political factors, external barriers, and identity formation. Together, they account for the internal psychological processes, external barriers, institutional practices, and socio-political dynamics that shape the experiences of mature learners in higher education. This multi-theoretical framework offers a robust lens for understanding how mature learners navigate the higher education landscape across institutional and policy contexts.

## **2.6 Summary**

This chapter has reviewed a range of prominent, and more modern integrated, theoretical foundations. As detailed in section 2.5, this thesis employs Boeren’s (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation Model with the added concepts of Tinto’s (1975, 1987, 1993) academic and social integration, Bourdieu’s (1986) social and cultural capital as well as habitus, Cross’ (1981) barriers to participation, and Tajfel & Turner’s (1979) Social Identity Theory to form a powerful multi-theoretical framework of analysis.

A review of the empirical literature further reveals several, significant gaps

in both the UK/Scotland and U.S./New York State. Firstly, that there is limited U.S. and UK research regarding first-generation student status/identity in adult learners—this persists, despite the fact that an ever-increasing percentage of adult students now identify as first-generation (Kamer & Ishitani, 2019). In addition, in both Scotland and New York/the U.S. there is limited research on the progression and outcomes of mature learners who entered higher education through an access or transition programme. A more significant gap in the U.S. literature is a lack of research on the perspectives of mature learner experiences in such programmes, as well as to what extent has their participation in a transition programme aided them in gaining entry into higher education (Karmelita, 2020). In this way, there is a relatively robust body of research that explores the experiences and transitions of mature learners in access programmes—such as the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP), university-based access courses, etc. (Christie, Munro, and Wager, 2005; Hudson, Burnell, and Murray, 2020; Pearce, 2017)—in Scotland.

Regarding the wider literature on stop-out, drop-out, and attainment, most studies tend to focus on full-time undergraduate enrolment, occasionally examining part-time undergraduate enrolment separately. However, this narrow focus often overlooks students who occupy a "mixed enrolment" status, such as those who switch between full-time and part-time enrolment through the course of their studies. These flexible and non-linear trajectories, particularly common among adult learners, may be better explored through qualitative research rather than enrolment data. Such research could provide more insight into how mixed enrolment patterns affect student attrition and progression.

In the next chapter, the methodology and research design of the present study will be discussed, detailing its cross-national and triangulated approach to collecting—as well as analysing—qualitative data on widening access and participation activity in Scotland and New York.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Design Overview

This cross-national (please see section 1.2), exploratory qualitative study employed a triangulated approach to examine the inequalities in access to and participation in higher education (HE) for mature learners in Scotland and New York. *Triangulation* is a research approach or strategy that merges findings from two or more data sources in a single study to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2005; also see section 6.2). To this aim, primary interview data were collected in two phases, with Phase 1 interviews conducted with university stakeholders (see sections 3.6.1 and 3.6.2 for details on sample) and Phase 2 interviews conducted with mature learners (see sections 3.6.3 and 3.6.4 for details on sample). These integrated findings were then contextualised within the policy landscape (scoped in section 2.2) in order to assess the present and future inclusivity of approaches to widening HE access and participation in each region.

This approach also reflects the study's multilevel qualitative design. *Multilevel qualitative research* refers to an approach that explores how individual or collective experiences are embedded within complex, layered contexts using qualitative methods (Köhler, 2024). It also considers how interactions across different "levels of influence" (e.g., the individual, institutional, and policy domains) can shape a given phenomenon (Hernaus, Potocnik, Lira, & LeBreton, 2024; Köhler, 2024). In this study, *multilevel* is therefore employed in a conceptual and analytic sense. Additionally, an ecological lens was also used to examine how the interaction between individual, institutional, and policy factors affected mature learners' participation in higher education. Boeren's (2016) Integrative Model of Lifelong Learning Participation provided the core conceptual framework for this analysis (see section 2.4.6). In this vein, the present study also investigated the relationship between non-traditional trajectories into HE for mature learners, and their progression and attainment.

In the upcoming sections, the methodological choices and underpinnings of this research project will be explained. As such, this chapter begins with a brief overview of the study's research paradigm (section 3.2), followed by a discussion of the research methods and design used for this thesis (section 3.3.), taking into account the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on earlier iterations whilst also highlighting the strengths of the final design. Section 3.4 describes the researcher's purposive sampling approach to participant recruitment, whilst section 3.5 presents the researcher's reflexivity statement. An overview of Phase 1 and Phase 2 participants by geographic context is provided in section 3.6, and the qualitative instrument used for collecting interview data is discussed in the following section 3.7. The remaining sections of the chapter cover the logistics of scheduling and conducting participant interviews (section 3.8), ethical considerations of the project (section 3.9), the researcher's data analysis process (section 3.10), and concludes with a summary of the chapter (section 3.11).

Before shifting to a discussion of this thesis' research paradigm, based on the literature and theory gaps posed above, the researcher posits the following research questions (previewed in Chapter 1):

1. What types of interventions have Scottish and New York higher education institutions (HEIs) implemented to widen access and participation?
2. What role does institutional support play in a student's decision to stay or leave higher education?
3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected Scottish and New York HEIs' approach to adult student recruitment and support provision?
4. What strategies have adult students developed or employed in order to mitigate any challenges faced in their access to and participation in higher education both before and during the pandemic?

This cross-national comparison of non-traditional trajectories into higher education offers a unique opportunity to address the attainment gap in higher education access, progression, and attainment. As discussed in section 1.1, it is envisaged that this research will have policy implications for both regions in the face of decreasing funding for adult learners, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter now

turns to an overview of the research paradigm for this study.

### **3.2 Research Paradigm**

The research design of this project is informed by the transformative research tradition. According to Mertens (2021), a study that utilises a transformative research lens must be “designed to explicitly address inequities in order to optimize its contribution to social, economic, and environmental justice” (p. 2). Therefore, in the context of this project, centring the voices of those most affected by widening access and participation policy for adults—the learners *and* the university personnel who serve them—is considered critical to affecting change. As further explained in section 3.6, the researcher’s methodological choice of the educational life histories approach to student interviews is also informed by this tenet.

Another aspect of this study that’s guided by the transformative paradigm was the researcher’s decision to offer participants the option to request a copy of the final thesis (Mertens, 2021; also see section 3.9). This act of transparency enables participants to see how their involvement in the study has contributed to research findings. Lastly, research rooted in the transformative perspective is characterised by its assertion that research should not only examine social inequalities but also play an explicit role in identifying and confronting them, and thus should also contain an action agenda for reform (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Mertens, 2007). This project’s investigation of inequalities in mature student access and participation in higher education, along with its carefully considered recommendations for future research, practice, and policy (see section 6.4) based on triangulated findings (see section 6.3), aligns with this goal.

### **3.3 Reflexivity Statement**

Critical reflexivity and researcher transparency are fundamental to the transformative research process (Anderson & McLachlan, 2016). This practice enables us to reflect on how our position as academic researchers benefit from existing knowledge hierarchies and to examine our individual

roles in perpetuating and participating in these systems. In this vein, reflexivity also aids us in understanding how we might leverage our position to problematise or disrupt these imbalances in knowledge production. In line with these principles as a transformative research project, it is therefore imperative that I use this space to acknowledge and reflect on the confluence of my personal, social and professional identities, and to consider their impact on this thesis.

I come to this project as a Black American woman from a working-class background in Brooklyn, New York, and therefore also as a foreigner in the UK. With a decade of professional experience in college and university administration, as well as lifelong learning, I have witnessed firsthand some of the administrative ‘hoops’ that many mature students must jump through in order to return to education in the United States and have experienced supporting them as they navigate that daunting process emotionally and practically. Therefore, my motivation for conducting this research stems from these observations and interactions, and has evolved into a personal investment in improving the state of higher education opportunities for mature learners.

Furthermore, despite my marginalised identities, I recognise the social privilege tied to my nationality, professional background, education, and role as Researcher of this thesis. As such, I aimed to use my unique position to centre and amplify the experiences of those who also belonged to historically excluded communities in this research. Finally, drawing from my professional background in higher education, I am also invested in creating a space for practitioner insights to be heard and used in informing policy and research, as well as facilitate further knowledge exchange and collaboration between practitioners and researchers.

### **3.4 Research Methods and Design**

The research design of this study has undergone three revisions as a result of the global pandemic. Initially designed to employ a mixed-methods, explanatory sequential approach, secondary HE data was to be analysed in the first phase of data collection in order to contextualise mature student



entry, progression, and achievement in Scotland and New York State. Utilising logistic regression in R, the quantitative strand would have entailed analysing aggregate, individual-level Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data to explore the relationship between student social characteristics and educational trajectory. For New York State, a combination of institutional-level open access data from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and New York State Higher Education Reports were to be used for this analysis.

This phase of data collection would have then been followed by a second, qualitative strand: A series of one-to-one, in-person interviews with student services staff and adult learners at HE institutions across New York State and Scotland. Bean and Metzner's (1985) *Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition* (please see section 2.4.4) would have served as an analytical framework for this quantitative phase, and as such, was also used to guide the design of the topic guide developed for the qualitative interviews (see section 3.7).

However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, delays in access to individual-level HESA data made this phase of research unfeasible within thesis time constraints (see section 3.3). Whilst this framework was no longer used as part of the project's analytic lens, it still informed the topic guide's design, and thus a brief overview of the model is provided in this section.

In mid-March 2020, however, the original design and timeline of this research was majorly affected by COVID-19. Most immediately, the ability to conduct in-person interviews safely was no longer possible, due to the rapid spread of the virus, severity of infections, and subsequent lockdowns across the globe. In response to growing uncertainty surrounding when or *if* a return to normality would occur, the method of interview was changed to online delivery via Zoom. Further to this, another consequence of the pandemic was significant delays in access to individual-level HESA data. Hosted on the NHS' Electronic Data Research and Innovation Service (eDRIS) Safe Haven system, a secure online environment for accessing individual-

level UK data, access for COVID research was prioritised whilst unrelated projects were—justifiably—placed on hold. Thus, the research design was modified to instead utilise an exploratory convergent mixed-methods approach, in which the qualitative strand would precede the statistical analysis phase of data collection. This revised approach was envisaged to also better enable the study to further contextualise qualitative findings in the broader scope of national statistical data. Nonetheless, further delays in access to HESA data on the Safe Haven system made this research design no longer feasible within the project’s time constraints.

Despite these setbacks, conducting qualitative interviews at the height of the pandemic did provide rich and unique insights into COVID-19’s immediate impact on mature students’ lives and learning experiences, as well as on widening access and participation activity at HEIs in both regions (see sections 5.5 and 4.6 for the related findings in Results chapters, respectively). These interviews also enabled the researcher to compare and contrast student participants’ experiences at their HEIs from before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, yielding rich and dynamic findings that may not only inform future recommendations for widening access and participation, but for also building resilience and preparing the sector for potential, future global crises. These insights would have not yet been achievable with the national statistical data available at the time.

In addition to the methodological changes discussed above, revisions were also made to the original research questions for this project in response to COVID-19. These changes resulted in the inclusion of Research Question 3, “How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected Scottish and New York HEIs’ approach to adult student recruitment and support provision?”, and revising Research Question 4 from “What strategies have adult students developed or employed in order to mitigate any challenges faced in their access to and participation in higher education?” to “What strategies have adult students developed or employed in order to mitigate any challenges faced in their access to and participation in higher education *both before and during the pandemic?*” Due to the pandemic’s immediate, large-scale impact on teaching and learning across the sector and beyond (Bozkurt et al., 2022)

and wanting to better understand the potential long-term effects of COVID-19 on mature student access to and participation in HE, the researcher deemed these revisions vital to the project.

Despite these design changes, the qualitative strand of the research still utilised an ecological approach guided by Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation Model (see section 2.4.6) in its scoping of the widening participation policy landscape in both regions (section 2.2), as well as in conducting interviews with both university stakeholders and mature learners, for deeper insights into the complex interplay between the three key components of widening access: the Learning Provider (HEI), the Individual, and the broader policy context.

## **3.5 Population, Setting, & Sampling**

### **3.5.1 Population**

As previously described in section 3.1, qualitative interviews were comprised of two distinct participant groups in both Scotland and New York: institutional stakeholders and mature learners. The institutional stakeholder sample in this study was comprised of university staff in student services and support roles who have had experience working with mature learners. These roles could be either student-facing or primarily responsible for the logistics and oversight of support provision.

With regard to the mature learner population, age was used as a key part of the sampling criteria for both locations. This was due to Scotland and the U.S.' emphasis on student age in their classification of adult or mature student status in their national statistics and admissions data. According to the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and HESA, undergraduate students aged 21 and over at the time of entry are considered mature learners in the United Kingdom (HESA, 2020; UCAS, 2024). In the American post-secondary context, however, this designation applies to any undergraduate aged 25 and over at the time of entry, based on the age criterion for "non-traditional students" outlined by the National Center for Education Statistics website

(<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp>).

In designing the student sampling strategy (see section 3.5.4), consideration was not only given to the age-related classification of mature learners within each policy context, but also to other key characteristics relevant to widening access such as class, marginalised or historically excluded racial/ethnic groups, gender, disability, and first-in-family or ‘first generation’ status. In this respect, the aim of the researcher was to also capture the intersectional diversity of mature learners, recognising the heterogeneity and richness of socio-cultural identities within this student group. However, as discussed briefly in section 3.5.4 and more fully in section 6.4, there were limitations in achieving this in practice. Additional sampling criteria, such as being currently enrolled at university or a recent graduate with no more than one year post-graduation<sup>1</sup>, were added after evaluating the results of the pilot study. For a detailed evaluation of the pilot study and how it contributed to refining the sampling criteria, please see section 3.7.

### **3.5.2 Setting: Sites of Data Collection**

As part of this project’s examination of inequalities in access to higher education, it was also deemed essential to explore the relationship between access and institutional reputation or selectivity. According to Boliver (2017), in “an era of mass participation in a highly diverse HE sector, it is important to focus not just on access to higher education in general, but on access to highly selective and prestigious universities as well (p. 2).” Subsequently, to what extent does organisational identity impact an institution’s widening participation activity, and whether this contributes to creating an education funnel rather than an education pipeline, was of interest to this research (Boliver, Powell, & Moreira, 2018; Osborne, 2016; Reay, 2010). HEIs were thus assigned one of two possible designations—Selective or Recruiting—based on the criteria outlined in Tables 8 and 9.

**Table 8 Selective Institutions**

| Inclusion Criteria                                                                                                                                  | Exclusion Criteria                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher education institution (HEI)</li> <li>• Research-intensive</li> <li>• Pre-1992 (Scotland)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further education college (FEC) or two-year institution</li> <li>• Vocational institution</li> <li>• For-profit institution (New York)</li> <li>• Post-1992 (Scotland)</li> </ul> |

**Table 9 Recruiting Institutions**

| Inclusion Criteria                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Exclusion Criteria                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher education institution (HEI)</li> <li>• Post-1992 (Scotland)</li> <li>• Part of the State University of New York (SUNY) or City University of New York system (New York)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further education college (FEC) or two-year institution</li> <li>• Vocational institution</li> <li>• Pre-1992 (Scotland) or university centre (New York)</li> <li>• Statutory or contract college (New York)</li> <li>• For-profit Institution (New York)</li> </ul> |

### 3.5.3 Institutional Stakeholder Sampling Strategy

Upon conclusion of pilot interviews and interview protocol revisions (see section 3.7), recruitment of institutional stakeholder participants was initiated. Based on the selection criteria outlined in section 3.5.2, purposive sampling was employed in identifying and contacting potential participants at 10 select HE institutions. Purposive sampling is the prevailing approach within qualitative research, as it enables researchers to “select cases and units of analysis precisely because they will allow the researchers to answer the research questions in a way that is as meaningful and informative as possible (Clark et al., 2021, p.380).” Aligned with this principle, the researcher performed a search on each select HE institution’s website, specifically targeting widening participation and student support office webpages. In doing so, the researcher reviewed the relevant department’s landing and *About* pages, visited the staff directory, and located the relevant staff member based on job title and/or staff bio, wherever applicable, and contacted individuals of interest by email. Prior to making email contact with prospects, the researcher had a pre-drafted approach message introducing herself, briefly describing the purpose of the study, and extending an invite to participate (Appendices 7.8 and 7.9).

Of the 4 institutional stakeholders who were contacted directly at Scottish HEIs, all 4 responded to schedule and complete an interview, with one interview involving a 2-person team. In contrast, out of the 13 institutional stakeholders who were contacted directly at New York HEIs, 4 responded to schedule an interview and 3 interviews were ultimately completed. The strengths of this approach were its time-effectiveness and accessibility, especially when in- person interaction was limited due to COVID-19 restrictions, as well as enabling the researcher to identify individuals best suited in helping to answer the study’s research questions (Patton, 2002). Conversely, the weaknesses of purposive sampling in general are the potential for a low response rate, especially when using cold contact methods, as well as the risk of selecting a participant who may not be suitable for the study.

### 3.5.4 Student Sampling Strategy

In order to participate in the study, adult students were required to meet the following criteria: 1) Be at least 21 years of age or older at time of entry if in Scotland, OR 2) Be at least 25 years of age or older at time of entry at a State University of New York (SUNY) institution if in New York, AND 3) Studying or recently graduated (1 year  $\geq$ ) from a bachelor's degree course. Due to challenges in finding enough participants within the parameter stated in criterion 3, however, the researcher expanded the “recent graduate” designation from one year post-graduation to those who graduated university within the last three years. Whilst this adjustment increased recruitment numbers for Scottish participants, the response rate and uptake for New York participants remained low. As a result, the researcher had further expanded criterion 2 to also include students and recent graduates from City of the University of New York (CUNY) and private New York institutions.

A combination of snowball sampling and voluntary response sampling were implemented to recruit student participants in both locations. Clark et al. (2021) suggest that snowball sampling is a particularly effective form of sampling when conducting a study that focuses on a network or community of individuals. To execute the former, all organisational participants were asked to share the interview recruitment flyer with their mature student cohorts (Appendices 7.6 and 7.7). The researcher also tapped into her existing organisational contacts for assistance with wider circulation of recruitment material. A strength of employing this sampling method is reaching potential participants through a trusted or recognised member of their university network (Clark et al., 2021). To cast as wide a net as possible, the researcher also used voluntary response sampling by sharing the recruitment flyer across social media platforms, specifically Twitter and Facebook (e.g., location-specific, institution-specific, cultural- or gender-specific Facebook groups, etc). This approach enabled the researcher to reach a broader, more varied audience. However, as Robinson (2013) explains, the weaknesses of these sampling approaches lie in the potential for selection bias on both accounts, as those who are more open or interested in a topic are more likely to put themselves forward to participate in a related study (please see section 6.4 for further

consideration of this limitation).

Lastly, in terms of sampling outcomes, the final sample of mature learners leaned heavily toward those enrolled in their course on a full-time basis, as well as having had some form of previous university study experience prior to entering their course. Whilst this provided valuable insight into the experiences of navigating university after a break in education, it also presents a limitation in the applicability of findings to those undertaking part-time study or who are entering higher education for the first time after an extended absence from formal education. This limitation is further evaluated in section 6.4.

### **3.6 Phases 1 & 2 Interviews**

For this project, a series of semi-structured, one-to-one Zoom interviews were conducted in two phases: the first (Phase 1), with university administrators across New York State and Scotland; and the second (Phase 2), with adult learners from each location. All interview participants were either based at, or— in the case of several adult learners— recently graduated from a higher education institution. In Phase 1, a total of 4 Scottish university staff interviews (including one 2-person team interview) and a total of 3 New York university staff interviews and were completed. An overview of Phase 1 Scottish and New York samples are provided in sections 3.6.1 and 3.6.2 respectively, in addition to a written narrative of qualitative results in Chapter 4.

In Phase 2, a total of 14 mature learners in Scotland were interviewed and 10 mature learners based in New York. Thus, a combined total of 7 staff interviews and 24 adult learner interviews were completed, transcribed, and analysed for this study. A twenty-fifth student interview—which would have been the eleventh for New York—was conducted but later discarded, as this participant did not meet the non-traditional entry nor age requirements for this study. An overview of Phase 2 Scottish and New York participants is provided in sections 3.6.3 and 3.6.4 respectively, in addition to a written narrative of qualitative results in Chapter 5.



The student interviews in this study were guided by the educational life histories approach, a biographical method used to explore how individuals' educational experiences are shaped by and intersect with broader life events (e.g. significant life transitions or life-altering events) and social contexts (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). In this vein, this approach is particularly effective for deepening our understanding of non-traditional trajectories into higher education, such as those of adult undergraduates, as it enables researchers to delve into the personal, social, and cultural factors influencing educational choices and learning experiences over time (Goodson & Sikes, 2001), as well as the importance and meanings learners attach to particular life changes and/or events (Field, Merrill, and West, 2012; Goodson & Sikes, 2001).

This methodological choice is further supported by the wider research that shows adults often decide to return to education following significant life transitions or life-altering events (O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Reay, Ball, and David, 2002). Referred to as transformative experiences, Mezirow (1981) asserts that these events can prompt mature learners to undergo a fundamental shift in perspective, leading them to re-enter education. By focusing on the 'stories' behind student transitions, not only does the educational life histories approach highlight students' personal motivations and experiences, but also provides valuable insights that can inform policy recommendations rooted in lived experience (Alheit & Dausien, 2002). This then is consistent with the transformative paradigm of the present study, as the educational life histories approach enables the researcher to amplify historically excluded voices and 'reveal the stories' that cannot be captured by statistical data alone.

As described in section 3.2, one-to-one interviews were conducted online via Zoom in response to the global pandemic. Although it was not the interview modality of the initial research design, conducting online interviews were found to afford greater flexibility in scheduling. For instance, Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez, and Joffe (2022) highlight how online interviews better enable researchers to have "tighter schedule gaps" between interviews, as well as allow for participants to "reschedule at short

notice”, if needed (p. 4). In this vein, virtual interviews are particularly useful for research projects with limited timeframes, such as a PhD thesis, as they allow for more efficient data collection by enabling the researcher to conduct a series of interviews with tighter schedule gaps (Salmons, 2021). Utilising Zoom also enabled the researcher to interview several participants across a wide geographic spread across New York and Scotland in quick succession, a feat that would not have been logistically possible with face-to-face interviews (Archibald et al., 2019). Another advantage to conducting online interviews was that it enabled learners and stakeholders to select an environment where they felt most comfortable interviewing, which can contribute to more open and relaxed discussions (O’Connor & Madge, 2017).

Lastly, the online format helped mitigate barriers related to the physical, time, and/or financial costs of having to travel to an interview site, thus increasing accessibility to participate in this project (Keen, Lomeli-Rodriguez, and Joffe, 2022; Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman, 2020). According to Lobe, Morgan, and Hoffman (2020), by reducing these logistical challenges, online interviews also increase the inclusivity for participants from diverse demographic backgrounds. These advantages highlight the value of conducting online interviews, irrespective of whether face-to-face meetings are not feasible (Archibald et al., 2019).

### **3.6.1 Phase 1: Scottish Institutional Stakeholder Sample**

In accordance with the ethical considerations outlined in section 3.9, pseudonyms were chosen and used for participants in all transcripts and write-ups of interview data. Other personal identifiers, such as name and specific location of institution, faculty, and staff names, etc. were also changed or redacted where needed to further protect participant identities. As such, the names that appear in Tables 9 and 10 are not the participants’ real names. As seen in Table 9 a total of five Scottish institutional stakeholders were interviewed across four institutions. Two of the stakeholders—Malcolm and Margaret from Recruiting Scottish HEI #2—decided to participate in an interview together as part of a team. Whilst there was an even split between institution types represented within the sample, all but one HEI was located within the Central Belt area (e.g., the

region surrounding Glasgow, Edinburgh, and their neighbouring towns). With regard to *Role of Department*, three stakeholders— Adam of Recruiting Scottish HEI #1, Debbie of Selective Scottish HEI #1, and Iain of Selective Scottish HEI #2—worked for student-facing offices whose primary function was to facilitate access to higher education in some capacity, whether in the form of FE-to-HE transfer, access and short courses, or under the Widening Participation umbrella. This contrasted with Malcolm and Margaret's department, which was responsible for the administrative oversight of various student support services across their university. This same distinction in *Role of Department* also extended to stakeholders' individual job roles, where the former group of participants all worked directly with students. Further to individual roles, only one stakeholder held an officer post, whilst all other participants were in a managerial or department head position.

**Table 10 Overview of Scottish Institutional Stakeholders**

| Participant Pseudonym                             | Institution Type | HEI                        | Role        | Role of Department                       | Location     |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------------|--------------|
| <b>Adam</b>                                       | Recruiting       | Recruiting Scottish HEI #1 | Officer     | FE-to-HE transfer                        | Central Belt |
| <b>Debbie</b>                                     | Selective        | Selective Scottish HEI #1  | Deputy Head | Access & short courses                   | Central Belt |
| <b>Malcolm<br/>(Team interview with Margaret)</b> | Recruiting       | Recruiting Scottish HEI #2 | Manager     | University-wide student support services | North        |
| <b>Margaret<br/>(Team interview with Malcolm)</b> | Recruiting       | Recruiting Scottish HEI #2 | Manager     | University-wide student support services | North        |
| <b>Iain</b>                                       | Selective        | Selective Scottish HEI #2  | Head        | Widening participation                   | Central Belt |

### **3.6.2 Phase 1: New York Institutional Stakeholder Sample**

The New York institutional stakeholder sample was comprised of three participants. Of this group, two participants were based at a recruiting institution—Brandon from Recruiting NY HEI #1 and Jess from Recruiting NY HEI# 2—whilst the remaining stakeholder, Laura, at a selective university. All three interview participants worked at an institution located in Upstate New York and within heavily student-facing departments or offices. Whilst Laura and Jess worked with widening participation populations specifically, Brandon’s department provided academic support services to the wider institution. Lastly, as shown on the next page in Table 10, these stakeholders all shared the same job title of ‘Director’.

**Table 11 Overview of New York Institutional Stakeholders**

| Participant Pseudonym | Institution Type | HEI                  | Role     | Role of Department                       | Location         |
|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|----------|------------------------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Brandon</b>        | Recruiting       | Recruiting NY HEI #1 | Director | University-wide student support services | Upstate New York |
| <b>Laura</b>          | Selective        | Selective NY HEI     | Director | Access & WP student support services     | Upstate New York |
| <b>Jess</b>           | Recruiting       | Recruiting NY HEI #2 | Director | Access & WP student support services     | Upstate New York |

### **3.6.3 Phase 2: Scottish Student Sample**

The researcher conducted a total of 14 one-to-one interviews with adult learners across Scotland. Six of the participants were either currently enrolled in or recently graduated from a recruiting university, whilst eight participants were either currently enrolled in or recently graduated from a selective university. All learners represented within the sample were at least in their third year of study, with four having already graduated in the last three years, and four being in their fourth or final year of study. Only three students were enrolled in their course on a part-time basis.

Regarding demographics and social characteristics, exactly half of participants were between the ages of 31 and 39, five participants were in their 20's, and two participants were between the ages of 45 and 50. The youngest and eldest participants within the sample were ages 23 and 50, respectively. In terms of sex, the majority of learners interviewed were female at 78.6% of the sample. As expected, most participants stated 'Scottish' as their nationality at a total of nine learners, with another four identifying as either English or British (including one dual national), and one participant who was Brazilian. Further to this, 10 out of the 14 participants were white, with two learners identifying as mixed heritage, one learner identifying as Black British, and a fourth participant for whom her race or ethnicity was not disclosed. Lastly, five of the interview participants disclosed having one or more disabilities.

### **3.6.4 Phase 2: New York Student Sample**

The researcher also conducted a total of 10 one-to-one Zoom interviews with mature learners across New York. Half of these participants were either currently enrolled in or recently graduated from a recruiting public university, whilst the other half were either currently enrolled in or recently graduated from a selective private university. All but one learner was at least in their third year of study, with three in their third year, two having already graduated in the last three years, two in their final year, one due to graduate in 2023, and one in her second year. The circumstances surrounding the remaining student's—Ron— year of study were complex. For Ron, he was able to be readmitted into and resume a course he had initially left decades before. Under

these special circumstances, Ron could apply his previously earned credit toward his current degree and has since decided to also declare a “double major”, or in other words, to study an additional undergraduate course concurrently.

Regarding demographics and social characteristics, exactly half of participants were between the ages of 31 and 39, two participants were in their late 20’s, another two were in their early 40’s, and one participant was just over 60. The youngest and eldest interview participants were ages 28 and 61, respectively. In terms of sex, the sample skewed female at 70%. All learners had American nationality, with half of participants describing their ethnicity as Latinx, including one learner who specifically identified as Afro-Latina. Four of the remaining learners were white, whilst one learner’s race or ethnicity was not disclosed. Finally, exactly half of learners within the sample disclosed having a disability.



Table 12 Overview of Scottish Learners

| Participant Pseudonym | Institution Type | Age   | Sex    | Parenting or Caring Responsibilities | Nationality                           | Race/ Ethnicity                         | Disability Status           | Course of Study       | Year of Study         | Enrolment Status |
|-----------------------|------------------|-------|--------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Sean-James            | Recruiting       | 33    | Male   | No                                   | Scottish                              | White                                   | None disclosed              | Business              | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year  | Full-time        |
| Tina                  | Recruiting       | 36/37 | Female | Yes                                  | Scottish                              | White                                   | None disclosed              | Law                   | Graduated Spring 2021 | Full-time        |
| Sam                   | Recruiting       | 50    | Female | Yes                                  | English                               | White                                   | Autism, Dyslexia, ADHD, OCD | Film & Media          | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year  | Part-time        |
| Maisie                | Recruiting       | 26    | Female | No                                   | English                               | Mixed heritage (White, Black Caribbean) | None disclosed              | Primary Education     | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year  | Full-time        |
| Gillian               | Selective        | 28    | Female | No                                   | Scottish                              | White                                   | Yes, but not specified      | Neuroscience          | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year  | Full-time        |
| Adele                 | Selective        | 36    | Female | Yes                                  | Scottish                              | White                                   | None disclosed              | Community Development | 4 <sup>th</sup> year  | Full-time        |
| Emmanuel              | Selective        | 23    | Male   | No                                   | British                               | Black                                   | None disclosed              | Computer Science      | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year  | Full-time        |
| Anchal                | Selective        | 27    | Female | No                                   | Dual national - Bangladeshi & British | Mixed heritage (South Asian, White)     | None disclosed              | Law                   | Graduated Spring 2021 | Full-time        |
| Catherine             | Recruiting       | 36    | Female | Yes                                  | Scottish                              | White                                   | None disclosed              | Primary Education     | Graduated 2019        | Full-time        |
| Alistair              | Selective        | 27    | Male   | No                                   | Scottish                              | White                                   | Severe Anxiety              | English Literature    | Started in 2015       | Part-time        |
| Janet                 | Selective        | 46    | Female | No                                   | Scottish                              | White                                   | None disclosed              | Geography             | Graduated             | Full-time        |
| Adrienne              | Selective        | 35    | Female | No                                   | Scottish                              | White                                   | Hypermobility disorder      | Philosophy            | 4 <sup>th</sup> year  | Full-time        |

|                       |            |    |        |     |           |               |                            |                        |            |           |
|-----------------------|------------|----|--------|-----|-----------|---------------|----------------------------|------------------------|------------|-----------|
| <b>Mary-Elizabeth</b> | Selective  | 37 | Female | No  | Scottish  | White         | Connective tissue disorder | Sciences               | Final year | Part-time |
| <b>Thaia</b>          | Recruiting | 35 | Female | Yes | Brazilian | Not disclosed | None disclosed             | International Business | Final year | Full-time |

Table 13 Overview of New York Learners

| Participant Pseudonym | Institution Type   | Age  | Sex    | Parenting or Caring Responsibilities | Nationality | Race/ Ethnicity | Disability Status   | Course                                                        | Year of Study                                          | Enrolment Status         |
|-----------------------|--------------------|------|--------|--------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Cynthia</b>        | Recruiting, public | 42   | Female | Yes                                  | American    | White           | None disclosed      | Individual Studies (Sociology & Finance)                      | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year                                   | Part-time                |
| <b>Sebastian</b>      | Selective, private | 32   | Male   | No                                   | American    | Latino          | None disclosed      | Economics                                                     | Graduated 2021                                         | Full-time                |
| <b>Hector</b>         | Recruiting, public | 31   | Male   | No                                   | American    | Latino          | None disclosed      | Business & Philosophy                                         | Graduated 2021                                         | Mixed enrollment pattern |
| <b>Natalie</b>        | Selective, private | 33   | Female | No                                   | American    | Latina          | Clinical depression | Latin American & Caribbean Studies                            | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year                                   | Part-time                |
| <b>Josefina</b>       | Recruiting, public | 29   | Female | No                                   | American    | Afro-Latina     | Bipolar disorder    | Psychology                                                    | Final Year                                             | Mixed enrollment pattern |
| <b>Madeline</b>       | Recruiting, public | 32   | Female | No                                   | American    | Not disclosed   | None disclosed      | Individual Studies (Eastern European Cultures & Film studies) | Graduating 2023                                        | Full-time                |
| <b>Alex</b>           | Selective, private | 41   | Female | Yes                                  | American    | Latina          | None disclosed      | Non-Fiction Literature & Race Studies                         | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year                                   | Full-time                |
| <b>Ron</b>            | Recruiting, public | 61   | Male   | No                                   | American    | White           | ADHD                | Computer Science & Education                                  | ***                                                    | Full-time                |
| <b>Carmen</b>         | Selective, private | 28   | Female | No                                   | American    | White           | ADHD                | Psychology                                                    | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year (1 <sup>st</sup> semester junior) | Full-time                |
| <b>Kathleen</b>       | Selective, private | 30's | Female | Yes                                  | American    | White           | ADHD                | Neuroscience                                                  | Final Year                                             | Full-time                |

### 3.7 Measures: Interview Topic Guides

Using the interview topic guide method in conjunction with Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation model as a framework for the research design (see section 3.3), two separate interview protocols were developed for guiding these conversations and gathering data for this project (see Appendices 7.4 and 7.5). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), an interview guide provides a more systematic and comprehensive approach to interviewing. As such, Patton's (2002) were scoped for developing a framework by which to organise the researcher's questions for each participant group. In their work, Patton (2002) identify six categories of interview questions: experiential and behavioural, opinion and value questions, emotional questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and demographic questions.

Based on these question types, the following question foci or themes were developed for the adult learner interview protocol (see Appendix 7.5): *Student Background, Institutional Experience, Impact of COVID, Reflections on Educational Experiences, Advice, and Further Remarks*. As described in sections 2.4.4 and 3.4, Bean and Metzner's (1985) *Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition* was originally selected as an analytical framework for the quantitative phase of the initial research design. Whilst this framework is no longer part of this project's analytic lens, it is worth noting its role in shaping the design of the interview guide at the time this project was conceptualised. The researcher drew from the model's four constructs—*Background and Defining Variables, Academic Variables, Environmental Variables, and Social Integration Variables* (i.e., degree of campus involvement, student peer relationships, and relationships with faculty outside of class)—upon which Bean & Metzner argue that a non-traditional student's decision to leave or progress in their course is based on the interaction between these groups of variables.

Learner interview questions were finalised in consultation with the researcher's supervisors. After reviewing the initial interview protocols, it was determined that

additional probing questions were necessary for the mature learners topic guide in order to yield richer data (see Appendices 7.7.1 and 7.7.2 for earlier drafts). In response, the researcher developed and incorporated the following line of questioning into the protocol: 1) How students were financing their education, 2) If they have ever considered leaving their course, 3) What advice would they give to a young person in their family about university, and 4) Their thoughts on how policymakers can better support mature learners. These additional questions were seamlessly integrated into the existing structure of the interview topic guide.

In contrast, revisions to the stakeholders' interview topic guide were minimal, however (see Appendices 7.7.3 for final draft of interview protocols). Also mirroring Patton's (2002) six types of interview questions, the interview protocol for university stakeholders were organised into these categories: *[Professional] Roles, Conceptualisation of Access & Participation, Student Support, Student Attrition, Impact of COVID-19* (divided into two parts, support provision and recruitment), *Student Recruitment, Future Considerations, and Further Remarks*. Upon review of the initial protocol, a change in category name from *Student Recruitment* to *Student Recruitment & Outreach* was made, in addition to incorporating a question based on the student admissions process.

Lastly, a pilot study was conducted in order to validate the effectiveness of the interview protocol. Conducting pilot interviews is a crucial step in qualitative research, as it helps to identify potential issues in protocol structure, clarity, and depth of questions, enabling researchers to make adjustments before full-scale data collection (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). For this study, a total of four pilot interviews were completed, with one institutional stakeholder and one adult learner from New York State, and one institutional stakeholder and one adult learner from the United Kingdom. To mitigate the risk of spoiling the main study, all pilot participants were selected using convenience sampling, which is consistent with recommendations for minimising bias in pilot testing (Kim, 2011). In this vein, it is also worth noting that due to limited availability among organisational contacts invited to participate in the Scotland pilot, the final stakeholder interviewed was based at an English institution. Of the adult learner

interviews completed in the pilot, both participants had graduated from university at least ten years prior but were considered mature students at the time of their enrolment. The most apparent drawback of this selection was the inability to discuss the potential impact of the pandemic on their learning experience, their personal lives, and ultimately, their academic progression. Additionally, due to how much time had passed since they were enrolled in university, there were some points at which each participant was unable to recall certain aspects of their experience, which affected their ability to answer some questions fully. Such issues highlight the benefit of conducting pilot studies, as they reveal potential challenges to participant selection as well as the relevance of drafted questions (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

As deepening our understanding of the potential effects of COVID-19 on adult student entry and progression became increasingly more vital to this research, especially the ways in which the pandemic could exacerbate existing inequalities in HE access, subsequent changes were made to the sampling approach to minimise this problem in the full study. Thus, the scope of the student participant criteria was narrowed to those who were currently enrolled at university and recent graduates who were no more than one year post-graduation. Both institutional stakeholders interviewed worked at institutions that primarily served mature student populations. This selection proved valuable in testing the researcher's qualitative instrument without risk of spoiling the study, as the New York institution exclusively served military students and the UK university was outwith Scotland.

### **3.8 Procedure**

All interviews were held online using Zoom. With the exception of one 2-person team interview conducted in Phase 1, these interviews were one-to-one and lasted approximately 40 minutes to one hour. Employing the sampling strategies described in 3.4.3 and 3.4.4, and in accordance with the ethical considerations discussed in section 3.9, confirmed participants received an email with the relevant Participant Information Sheet, Consent form, and Privacy Notice enclosed

for their review prior to interview (see Appendices 7.1, 7.2, and 7.3). The email also asked for participants' availability for scheduling the meeting. Lastly, the researcher encouraged participants to contact her with any questions or concerns they might have. In the event a response was not received within 5 - 7 calendar days, the researcher would send a follow up message asking if the participant was still interested or had any questions about the project-related documents received.

Once a date and time were set, the researcher confirmed with a calendar invite with the interview Zoom link enclosed email (see appendix 7.10 for learner interview scheduling email; see appendix 7.11 for stakeholder interview scheduling emails). At the time of interview, the researcher provided a verbal overview of the project, reiterated per the Consent form that participants may withdraw from the project at any time including after the interview had concluded, and confirmed that participants were still comfortable with being recorded for transcription purposes. All but one participant opted to interview with their cameras on.

Participants were also invited to ask any further questions about the project or the project-related documents they received. For participants who did not send their completed and signed Consent form in advance of the meeting, they had done so during this stage of the Zoom call, returning it to the researcher before interviewing commenced.

All participants who confirmed a date and time to speak with the researcher successfully attended their interview. Whilst the researcher did not encounter any missed appointments or cancellations, there were several cases in which the researcher was unable to secure a date with a prospective participant due to lack of further response. Additionally, of the 25 student interviews, one interview was later discarded once learned that the participant did not meet all the selection criteria. This brought the researcher's final interview total for learners to 24.

Among the most commonly identified challenges to conducting online interviews

are technical difficulties (de Villiers, Farooq, and Molinari, 2021), as well as building and maintaining rapport with research participants (de Villiers, Farooq, and Molinari, 2021; O'Connor & Madge, 2017). With regard to the former, technical difficulties did not arise as an issue with any sample of participants, though the researcher was prepared to mitigate the challenge of connectivity issues, such as suggesting participants turn off their cameras to conserve bandwidth (de Villiers, Farooq, and Molinari, 2021). To build and maintain rapport, the researcher was able to connect with stakeholders based on her own professional background in university administration, whilst being a postgraduate researcher and/or native New Yorker resonated with most student participants.

Lastly, whilst minor interruptions did occur in less than a handful of Zoom calls, such as one participant needing to take a work call, another needing to have a brief interaction with their child, and two whose pets were demanding their attention, these scenarios were not considered disruptive and were simply a part of being invited into the homes of participants by way of virtual interviews.

### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

This project was considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee in the College of Social Sciences (CoSS) at the University of Glasgow. According to Creswell (2012), researchers should consider the codes of ethics of their respective field or professional association early in the development of their project. As such, whilst the interviews for this research covered educational and personal aspects of participants' work and life experiences, confidentiality, anonymity, and the right to withdraw data at any point were carefully observed in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines (BERA, 2018).

Prior to primary data collection, and as part of the ethical review process for this project, the researcher prepared a data management plan (see Appendix 7.9) that covered all data protection aspects of the project. In accordance with this plan, audio recordings were only retained for the duration of this research and will be



destroyed at its conclusion; meanwhile, transcripts of interview data will be retained for at least 10 years, post-project. As advised by BERA (2018) ethical guidelines, researchers “should take all reasonable precautions to avoid identification [of participants]” (para. 45). To this aim, in order to further de-identify research data, pseudonyms were chosen and used for participants in all transcripts and write-ups of interview data. Other personal identifiers, such as name and specific location of institution, faculty, and staff names, etc. were also changed or redacted where needed to further protect participant identities (BERA, 2018).

During the data collection phase, interview participants were supplied with a Plain Language Statement, Privacy Notice, and Informed Consent form to review and complete in advance of their online interview (Appendices 7.1, 7.2, & 7.3). At the time of interview, participants were given the opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns about the documentation with the researcher. As student interviews involved personal reflections on childhood and familial relationships, experiences of academic failure, institutional exclusion, or economic hardship, these topics were treated. In line with best ethical practice, the researcher monitored participants throughout for signs of emotional discomfort or distress. This included non-verbal cues such as prolonged silence, changes in vocal tone, visible agitation or tearfulness, or expressions of distress (Webster, Lewis, & Brown, 2014; Wiles, 2012).

Although no signs or instances of distress were observed at any point in the lead up to, during, or following interviews with participants, the researcher was prepared to provide onward support links for any participants experiencing academic-related or other stress, or anxiety, including open online counselling resources available through participants’ respective HE institution, NHS stress and anxiety support for Scotland-based participants, and New York State pro-bono mental health services.

As part of researcher transparency and in line with the transformative research tradition, participants may also have access to the final thesis (Mertens, 2021) and

have been provided with the option to request so on their Informed Consent form. Lastly, participants were invited to contact the researcher should they have any further questions or concerns about the project in the future.

### **3.10 Analysis**

The researcher employed an iterative approach to analysing interview data collected in Phases 1 and 2 of the project. Utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-stage framework for conducting a reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher performed her analysis of interview data in the following stages: 1) Data familiarisation, 2) Initial coding, 3) Search for patterns and identification of themes, 4) Review of themes, 5) Naming and solidifying themes, 6) Write up.

As an iterative approach, it is worth noting that these stages did not necessarily occur linearly. For example, the researcher revisited the interview data multiple times, not only during the data familiarisation stage, but also to continually revise and refine initial codes as needed. This cyclical engagement with the data contributed to the analysis and shaping of interview findings as new insights emerged. Throughout this process, the researcher employed reflexive thematic analysis, which emphasises subjectivity and the researcher's interpretive role in the analytic process, recognising that meaning is not "discovered" but constructed through active and reflexive engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2018). As such, this approach supported the development of themes through interpretive depth rather than prescriptive categorisation approaches such as codebooks (Clarke & Braun, 2018). A brief overview of the researcher's approach to data analysis has been provided in Table 14, followed by a detailed discussion of the researcher's analytic process.

**Table 14 Overview of approach to interview data analysis, adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006, 2019)**

| Stage of analysis                                          | Researcher's process                                                                                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1. Data familiarisation</b>                             | Listening to interview recordings and correcting Zoom-generated transcripts in NVivo                                                              |
| <b>2. Initial coding</b>                                   | Noting initial impressions using NVivo's Annotation feature, performing light coding alongside transcript corrections                             |
| <b>3. Search for patterns and identification of themes</b> | Open coding of fully corrected transcripts, writing up preliminary connections made between interviews in separate Microsoft Office Word document |
| <b>4. Review of themes</b>                                 | Critical discussion of preliminary themes with PhD supervisors, ensuring their consistency and relevance to the study                             |
| <b>5. Naming and solidifying themes</b>                    | Closed coding – Second phase of coding in order to consolidate overlapping initial codes, refining and naming themes                              |
| <b>6. Write-up</b>                                         | Producing a written report of findings, providing a detailed analysis of each theme, supported by direct quotes from interview transcripts        |

Because this thesis spans across two distinct educational systems and policy contexts as a cross-national study, not only were the experiences of mature learners and staff considered in the interpretation of data, but also the unique institutional and policy contexts of Scotland and New York. For example, Braun and Clarke (2019) highlight that reflexive thematic analysis is not simply data extraction, but immersion into one's data in order to understand participants' subjective experiences. As a cross-national study, then, this is inclusive of familiarising oneself with the different policy contexts of each region in advance of data collection and on an ongoing basis throughout qualitative data analysis (Liamputtong, 2022; also refer to 2.2).

Thus, when in the initial coding stage of analysis, the researcher assigned codes that captured experiences in both locations—such as *Student financial concerns*—and then generated subcodes that highlighted region-specific issues or features—such as *Significant loan debt* for New York learners or *No summer funding (SAAS)*

for Scottish learners—to capture how *Student financial concerns* manifest differently across geographic contexts. In searching for themes in the third stage of analysis, the researcher took care in distinguishing themes that reflected shared experiences between both regions and those that were region-specific. At this stage, particularly in a cross-national qualitative study, it was imperative that the researcher engaged in reflexivity, ensuring that broader themes were not based on assumptions from one cultural context and being erroneously applied to the other (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Liamputtong, 2022).

In the *Review of Themes* stage, as noted previously, the researcher refined potential themes in consultation with her PhD supervisors. Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) emphasise the importance of ensuring that themes are coherent and distinct, whilst also reflecting the dataset accurately. In the context of this study, this meant not only refining the actual themes and subthemes, but also considering how they operate differently in each set of interviews based on geographic context, as well as institution types (please see section 3.5.2) in some cases. In doing so, this exercise enabled the researcher to identify any tensions or conceptual differences within the theme or subtheme. For example, a subtheme such as *Representation and diversity within administration* emerged across both regions of stakeholders in the study, however, how ‘representation’ was conceptualised in this subtheme differed between geographic contexts (see section 4.3.2 for further discussion of this subtheme).

This then leads into the penultimate stage of naming and solidifying themes, in which Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019) emphasise the importance of explaining what makes each theme significant, whilst also considering how it will ultimately fit into the overall narrative or ‘story’ of the research. For example, the researcher considered how the theme *Institutional habitus and organisational identity* manifested differently according to institution type, and then the geographic context in which that institution type was situated. In this vein, the researcher observed that stakeholders at selective institutions across both regions were more likely to have to advocate for their students than those at recruiting institutions (see section 4.4.3). However, having to deal with overt classism was a challenge

unique to Scottish selective HEI stakeholders in the study (see section 4.4.1). Thus, for a cross-national study, this stage of analysis necessitated that the researcher interpreted data through the wider socio-cultural/-political contexts that shape participants' experiences (Liamputtong, 2022).

Lastly, for the final write-up of each set of interview results, the researcher produced a clear and cohesive narrative highlighting both the tensions and commonalities within each set of findings (see Chapter 4 for stakeholder findings; see Chapter 5 for learner findings) across geographic contexts and institution types based on the established themes. In each of these write-ups, the researcher incorporated exemplifying quotes from the interview data and referenced the relevant research to provide further context or support preliminary conclusions. As described in section 3.1, the researcher also merged findings from both learner and stakeholder interviews for an integrated analysis of the data, thus culminating in a triangulated discussion (see section 6.2) and examination of the triangulated findings (see section 6.3), offering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the data.

### **3.11 Trustworthiness and Credibility of the Research**

Trustworthiness and credibility of data are integral to academic research. As qualitative research typically yields findings that are “specific to a small number of particular environments and individuals” (Shenton, 2004, p.69), thus rendering broad generalisability not possible, it is still imperative that a qualitative project demonstrates methodological rigour, accountability, and transparency in generating meaningful and useful results (Nowell, Norris, & Moules, 2017). Trustworthiness within a qualitative research context comprises of four key criteria: *Credibility*, *Transferability*, *Dependability*, and *Confirmability* (Nowell et al., 2017; Shenton, 2004). These criteria provide a framework for evaluating the robustness of a qualitative research project and the plausibility of its findings. In the paragraphs that follow, the researcher briefly describes the strategies used within this study to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the present research.

First and foremost, in order to fulfill *Credibility*, the researcher adopted methods of data collection that are well-established within qualitative research (Shenton, 2004), specifically semi-structured interviews (see sections 3.1, 3.4, and 3.6). This approach allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' individual experiences whilst also maintaining a consistent structure for data collection across interviews (Kalloi, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016) achieved through the development and use of topic guides (see section 3.7). Iterative questioning was also used during interviews to encourage participants to elaborate on their responses, and piloting the interview topic guides in advance of data collection (see section 3.7) ensured that prompts were relevant, clearly phrased, and aligned with the study's aims (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). A strong emphasis on reflexivity further supported credibility of the research, with frequent supervision meetings throughout all phases of research design, data collection and coding (Nowell, Norris, & Moules, 2017), analysis (Shenton, 2004; also see section 3.10) and final write-up of the thesis.

Shenton (2004) further argues that since broad generalisability is not achievable, qualitative researchers should thus provide sufficient contextualising information and “thick description” of the phenomenon under investigation to enable readers to compare the findings and conclusions of the research to their own contexts and, subsequently, determine their applicability. In other words, the role of the qualitative researcher is to provide the contextual information needed for making this informed judgement. In this study, *Transferability* was upheld by providing thick description of the phenomenon within each geographic context (see section 2.2), as well as detailed information on participant groups (see section 3.6) and institutional settings (see section 3.5.2) in both Scotland and New York. As recommended by Shenton (2004), this thesis also outlines key information such as methods of data collection (see section 3.4), selection criteria for sites of data collection (see section 3.5.2) and participants (see sections 3.5.3 and 3.5.4), and participant characteristics (see section 3.6), allowing readers or other researchers to assess the degree of similarity between this study and their own geographic, institutional, and/or policy settings. Additionally, providing such detailed information on the research design of the project also fulfills the *Dependability*

criterion.

To further satisfy *dependability*, the researcher has documented in detail the research design of the present study and its implementation (see sections 3.1-3.4), the operational procedures for data collection (see section 3.4), and provided a reflective appraisal of the study's strengths (see section 6.5) and limitations (see section 6.4). This aligns with Shenton's (2004) recommendation that qualitative work should serve as a "prototype model", enabling others to evaluate the rigour and consistency of the approach undertaken. *Confirmability*, meanwhile, is concerned with ensuring that the findings are shaped by participants' accounts rather than researcher bias (Shenton, 2004). As Nowell et al. (2017) explain, this requires the researcher to demonstrate how interpretations and conclusions were clearly derived from the data. Consistent with Koch (1994, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017), this study includes 'transparent markers' throughout the research process, such as the rationale for theoretical, methodological, and analytical decisions, so that readers can trace how and why particular choices were made for the present research. Reflexivity was embedded throughout the project, supported by ongoing documentation of analytical decisions and regular supervisory discussions. In line with Shenton's (2004) guidance, this thesis discusses the beliefs underpinning the decisions made and the methods adopted (see sections 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4); it also outlines the reasons for selecting one approach when alternatives existed and openly acknowledges the limitations of techniques used, particularly with regard to sampling strategy (see sections 3.5.3 and 3.5.4) and overall study limitations (see section 6.4).

### **3.12 Summary**

Despite the COVID-19 outbreak's impact on the initial research design, the rigorous approach to data collection and analysis had remained the same for this project. Utilising an ecological model for the project design not only proved to be most apt for examining the various effects of the pandemic on mature students' lives and learning experiences, but also for exploring how institutional

stakeholders in both Scotland and New York continued to facilitate access and support for this under-represented group. Additionally, by employing Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Model, this enabled the researcher to closely examine the interplay between individual, institutional, and policy/societal factors, a critical aspect of cross-national research. This guiding framework not only facilitated a multilevel comparison of how sub-national policy contexts shape institutional practices, but also the ways in which they impact the learning experiences of mature students across different governance systems. In this respect, the cross-national design of the study allowed for a nuanced exploration of how widening access/participation is conceptualised and facilitated in regionally distinct yet also comparable education systems.

Furthermore, by conducting online interviews, barriers to participation such as the cost of transport, time to travel, or the physical demands of travel were minimised for potential participants. This increased flexibility helped to broaden the participant pool and also enabled the researcher to conduct interviews with participants across a broad geographic spread in quick succession. Furthermore, qualitative interviews also enabled the researcher to gain immediate insight into the learning experiences of mature students at the height of the global pandemic, as well as stakeholder experiences of mitigating the challenge of widening access and participation activity amid a global crisis. These findings can be found in the proceeding Chapters 4 (for stakeholders) and 5 (for learners) and are further interpreted in a triangulated discussion in the concluding Chapter 6.



## Chapter 4 Phase One: University Stakeholder Qualitative Results

### 4.1 Introduction

As detailed in Chapter 3, the interview data for this research were collected in two phases. In Phase 1, seven semi-structured Zoom interviews were conducted with university administrators from HEIs in both Scotland and New York. Phase 2 followed with a total of 24 learner interviews between the two locations. To better understand how mature learners access higher education and how institutions facilitate access to this student demographic, this project was thus designed to collect data from the two distinct participant groups of institutional/university staff and mature learners. Accordingly, two separate interview protocols were developed and utilised for guiding these conversations (see Appendix 7.4 for stakeholder interview topic guide).

In this chapter, the qualitative results of Phase 1's stakeholder interviews will be discussed. Tables 14 and 15 summarise these participants' demographic details by geographic context. As discussed in the previous chapter, all participant data have been de-identified, and pseudonyms have been used for participants.

Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-stage method of thematic analysis was used for analysing the data (please see section 3.10). This iterative approach enabled the researcher to identify five main themes, as shown on the following page in Figure 5, across the stakeholder interviews: *Meeting Capacity Demands*, *Fostering Student Sense of Belonging*, *Organisational Identity and Institutional Habitus*, *Bureaucratic Barriers to Facilitating Access*, and *Impact of COVID*. Whilst these themes were present across all seven interviews regardless of region, they were expressed and experienced by stakeholders in different ways. These nuances—and at times stark contrasts—became more evident in the sub- themes that emerged. Furthermore, these differences manifested in a variety of ways, depending on institution type and organisational identity, geographic location (i.e., urban vs. suburban or rural), national context, and even staff conceptualisations of their student cohorts. In the narratives that

follow, these shared themes and the tensions that lie within their sub-themes will be examined more closely. A table overview of sub-themes will be provided for each of the key themes.

**Table 15 Overview of Scottish Institutional Stakeholders**

| Participant Pseudonym                             | Institution Type | HEI                        | Role        | Role of Department                       | Location       |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|-------------|------------------------------------------|----------------|
| <b>Adam</b>                                       | Recruiting       | Recruiting Scottish HEI #1 | Officer     | FE-to-HE transfer                        | Urban          |
| <b>Debbie</b>                                     | Selective        | Selective Scottish HEI #1  | Deputy Head | Access & short courses                   | Urban          |
| <b>Malcolm<br/>(Team interview with Margaret)</b> | Recruiting       | Recruiting Scottish HEI #2 | Manager     | University-wide student support services | Suburban/Rural |
| <b>Margaret<br/>(Team interview with Malcolm)</b> | Recruiting       | Recruiting Scottish HEI #2 | Manager     | University-wide student support services | Suburban/Rural |
| <b>Iain</b>                                       | Selective        | Selective Scottish HEI #2  | Head        | Widening participation                   | Urban          |

**Table 16 Overview of New York Institutional Stakeholders**

| Participant Pseudonym | Institution Type | HEI                  | Role     | Role of Department                       | Location         |
|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|----------|------------------------------------------|------------------|
| <b>Brandon</b>        | Recruiting       | Recruiting NY HEI #1 | Director | University-wide student support services | Upstate New York |
| <b>Laura</b>          | Selective        | Selective NY HEI     | Director | Access & WP student support services     | Upstate New York |
| <b>Jess</b>           | Recruiting       | Recruiting NY HEI #2 | Director | Access & WP student support services     | Upstate New York |

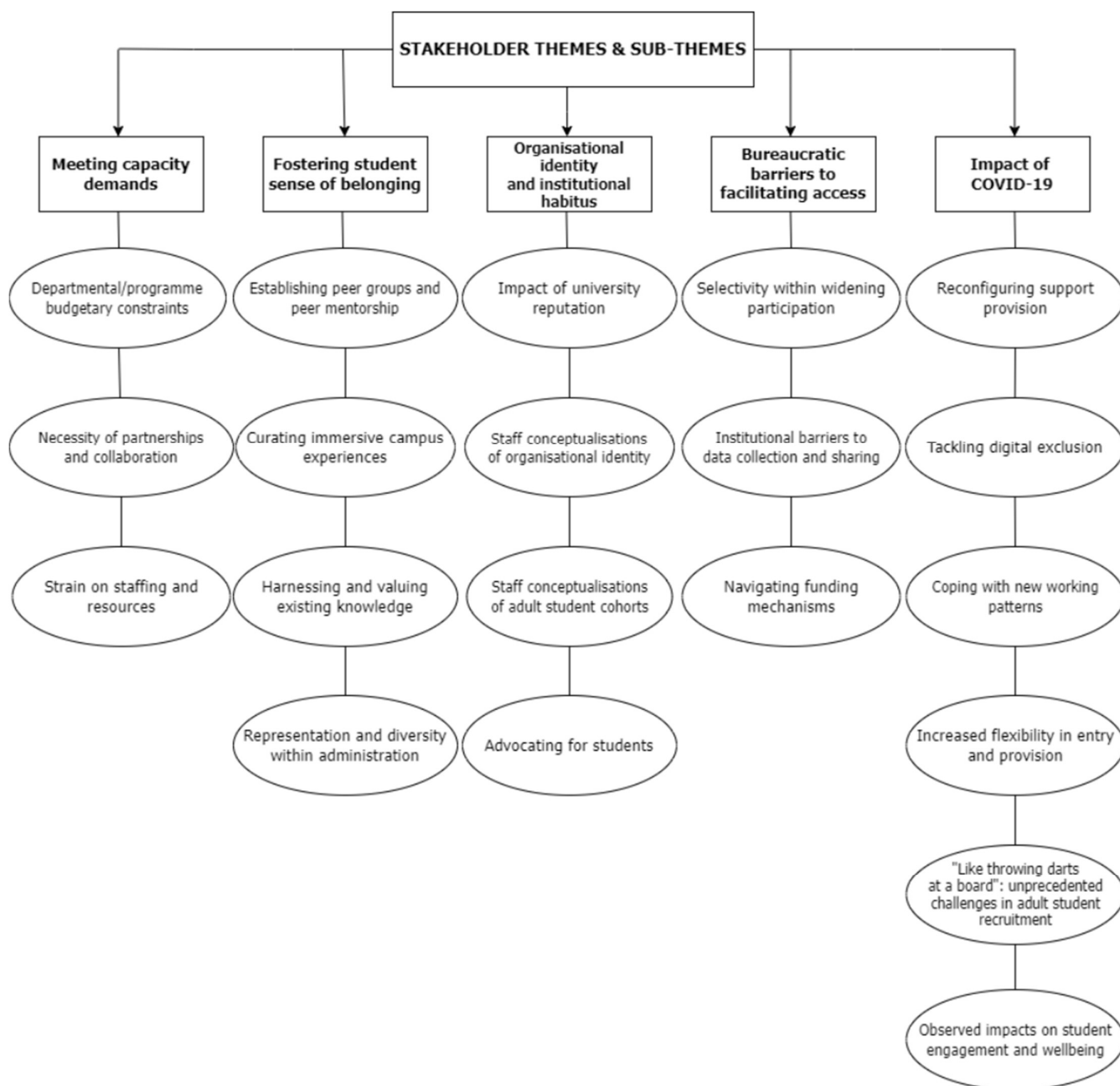


Figure 5 Flowchart of stakeholder themes and sub-themes

## 4.2 Theme 1: Meeting capacity demands

Table 17 Theme 1 sub-themes

| Sub-theme                                            | Sample quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Departmental/programme budgetary constraints</b>  | "We were one of the only ones that did not have an EOP [Educational Opportunity Program]. So, we pursued that, but because of budgetary constraints, we were not granted the funding [by federal government] ( <i>Jess, Recruiting NY HEI #2</i> )." |
| <b>Strain on staffing and resources</b>              | "Some of the weaknesses of our programme is we're a limited team and there's only so much that we can do. So, we're very limited in terms of our capacity to engage but we try and do our best. ( <i>Adam, Recruiting, Scottish HEI #1</i> )."       |
| <b>Necessity of partnerships &amp; collaboration</b> | "...the key to all this work is partnership work, you know? You can't do this on your own as an institution and you can't do this on your own as a team at an institution. ( <i>Iain, Selective Scottish HEI #1</i> )."                              |

The first theme to emerge was that of *Meeting Capacity Demands*, which included sub-themes of financial constraints, internal and external collaboration, and working with limited resources (see Table 16). Though participants were generally positive and enthusiastic about the nature of their work, all eight institutional stakeholders expressed grappling with the capacity to meet operational demands, to execute upscaling their programmes, and to provide high-touch support to their students. These challenges manifested in several competing demands, which were often felt from institutional pressures to grow and retain student numbers; adequately prepare students for transitioning into university courses; all whilst working within budgetary and/or staffing constraints.

#### **4.2.1 Departmental/programme budgetary constraints**

As government spending on higher education continues on a downward trajectory in both locations (Ogden, & Thomas, 2024; Universities Scotland, 2023; McKillop, 2023), perhaps unsurprisingly, the most prominent sub-theme across all seven stakeholder interviews was 'Departmental/programme budgetary constraints'. Whilst budgetary constraints were an ongoing issue which all stakeholders grappled, there were notable differences in the approaches or strategies utilised to mitigate these constraints, particularly between stakeholders at a selective Scottish HEI and a counterpart based at a recruiting New York institution.

For example, Debbie, a Deputy Head at a selective Scottish university, shared her desire to upscale a few of her programmes despite budgetary challenges. Though only in the feasibility planning stage of this endeavour, she explained, *“a lot of my time is spent speaking with different individuals, finding out how I can make sure that my programmes are financially sustainable.”* Here, Debbie expresses that the onus is on her to ensure the current viability of her department's programmes.

Further to this, Debbie continued to explain how she must also look to external funding streams in order to expand her department's remit: *"I'm writing funding bids and funding applications to try and bring funding in so we can open up new Pathways' programmes."* In the meantime, as she routinely assesses the sustainability of her current programmes and explores funding opportunities for developing new ones, Debbie also stated that one of her programmes currently functions as an *"income generating arm"* for another. Recognising the precarity of this funding structure, she acknowledged that her department could not rely on this arrangement forever, and therefore emphasised the necessity of ensuring her department has further financial support. Debbie suggested that in the event university departments fall short financially even after exhausting their funding options, having access to backup funding from Scottish Government—or what she called a "safety net"—could be a solution to this problem.

Whilst Debbie's story emphasises how government can do more to support the widening participation activity of university departments under financial strain, Jess at a recruiting HEI in New York shares how U.S. federal policy can be an obstacle for such departments.

Though also running into budgetary constraints for her programme initially, Jess' experience as a Director at a recruiting institution in New York sharply contrasted with that of Debbie's. Although her HEI was "one of the only ones [in New York State] that did not have an EOP [Educational Opportunity Program]," Jess recounted, when her department finally applied for the federal funding needed to launch EOP at her institution, their application was rejected— Ironically, *"because of budgetary constraints (Jess, Recruiting NYS HEI #2"*. In other words, Jess' department budget did not meet the financial requirements to support an EOP, and thus were not awarded federal funding. This outcome is just one example of bureaucratic barriers' impact on facilitating access, a finding that will be discussed more fully in section 4.5 of this chapter.

Despite this negative outcome, Jess was able to mitigate this financial roadblock due to the direct support of senior leadership at her university. More specifically, the University President of Jess' institution had intervened. Jess further explained her HEI's President *"decided that we were going to move forward with creating a programme anyway because it's something that a group of us felt like it was time, so he was gracious enough to allow us to move forward and we decided to create the [Name Redacted] Program (Jess, Recruiting NYS HEI #2)."* Without this intervention and direct support from senior leadership, the budgetary constraints of Jess' department could have prevented her programme from ever launching.

Whilst securing grants is still a main responsibility of her role, and to *"use money to make sure that [she] can make the programme scalable and maintain the budget (Jess, Recruiting NYS HEI #2)"*, Jess' experience is also an example of to what extent can support from senior leadership influence the outcome of new programme development for widening access and participation activity. Furthermore, like Debbie (Selective Scottish HEI #1), her story also draws attention to the state of precarity in which some stakeholders most often find their departments. In this vein, Jess' story also seems to reinforce Debbie's point that some form of safety net is needed for departments like theirs.

#### **4.2.2 Strain on staffing and resources**

Naturally, participant discussions surrounding budgetary constraints typically led into highlighting limited staff and departmental resources as another significant and ongoing issue at institutions. When asked what advice he would give to his university for improving outreach and support for adult learners, for example, Iain from a selective Scottish institution joked, *"...give me more staff, give me some more money! That's what anybody would say! (Iain, Selective Scottish HEI #2)."* As such, these stakeholder experiences culminated in *strain on staffing and resources* as a significant theme within the data.

Particularly for the Scottish university staff based at selective institutions, the



institutional pressures also evidenced themselves in the pressure to grow programmes quickly, but often with a lack of resources to support such growth: *“I’m aware that we really can grow. I think we’re not meeting the need; I think the need is far higher than what we are able to meet at the moment (Debbie, Selective Scottish HEI #1)”*, and *“...we’ve increased [the number of mature student entrants] from maybe 80 to 100 a year to about 250 a year. Because I know that they’re valuable learners—the University does know that now as well—but it does then create this greater need to providing the support, if it’s required (Iain, Selective Scottish HEI #2).”* Obviously, there would be a need for more staff if programmes continue to grow as expected, but often this resource heavily lags the recruitment.

Nonetheless, for many stakeholders, irrespective of geographic location, there was a sense of duty to persevere through the shortages and strain, as they felt committed to the perceived necessity of their work: *“Some of the weaknesses of our programme is we’re a limited team and there’s only so much that we can do. So, we’re very limited in terms of our capacity to engage but we try and do our best (Adam, Recruiting, Scottish HEI #1).”* This can also be seen in the quote by Jess, from a recruiting New York institution, who says, *“our team has to grow: like I just put in a request for a new position because we’re looking to have another hundred students come in in the fall. I need another full-timer for an advisor. So, as we get more students, I have to add more staff (Jess, Recruiting, NYS HEI #2).”*

Whilst this group of stakeholders’ dedication to their work is evident, the question remains for how long such strain can be born—including the potential for student support staff burnout (Marshall et al. 2016)—and under what circumstances can long-term consequences of being under-resourced be mitigated. In the section to follow, the researcher explores one prominent way in which stakeholders attempt to bridge the gap in resources and lessen the strain in the sub-theme *Necessity of partnerships and collaboration*. In addition, relying on staff goodwill and overworking removes attention from much-needed structural systems reform, and as some argue, the larger neo-liberal movement towards a massification of higher education (McCowan, 2019;

Tight, 2023). This so-called business model for higher education, has led to ever-increasing student numbers in the face of dwindling staff resources, as opposed to adequately resourced pipelines of structural support benefiting both learners and managerial, professional, and administrative (MPA) staff (McCowan, 2019).

### 4.2.3 Necessity of partnerships and collaboration

To help cope with the strain on staffing and resources, and irrespective of institutional ranking or reputation, several stakeholders emphasised the significance of cross-campus collaboration and external partnerships to their work. These experiences solidified *Necessity of partnerships and collaboration* as a sub-theme worth investigating further. Not only did these relationships help mitigate programme capacity issues, but they also raised awareness of adult learners within the wider university community. For instance, Iain, who works at Selective Scottish HEI #1, felt so strongly about this priority that he stated, *“the key to all this work is partnership work...You can't do this on your own as an institution and you can't do this on your own as a team at an institution (Iain, Selective Scottish HEI #1).”*

Expanding upon this point further, Adam from a recruiting Scottish institution also emphasised the significance of collaborative work, particularly as a tool for recruiting more widely and intensely: *“we are a team that are solely focused on recruitment activity, conversion activity, and transition activity that's delivered to college students, working with college partners to increase participation (Adam, Recruiting Scottish HEI #1).”*

At Margaret and Malcolm's university, they had formed a “community of practice” with their counterparts across the institution, not only to keep abreast of what they all worked on, but in order to exchange ideas, knowledge, and share best practices: *“...we both created practitioner groups where we bring all these people together into regular meetings so that we can share what's going on—maybe within the wider sector—and try and drive the work that we should be doing and that we're driven to do (Margaret, Scottish*

*Recruiting HEI #2).*”

For Debbie, whose programme has run for just a few years and is relatively new to her post at Selective Scottish HEI #2, she sees collaboration with external stakeholders as an opportunity to gain greater insights into widening participation trends and data: *“We’re going to work with the Scottish Widening Access Programme (SWAP) to find out what sort of data they’re gathering on their students and see how we can align (Debbie, Selective Scottish HEI #2).”* Because her programme is too young to yield substantive data, she explains, her project with SWAP will help to fulfil the aim of “making sure [her department is] reaching the students who need [them] and finding out what could be the measure.”

Among the New York interviews, this sub-theme also emerged but presented quite differently, particularly with regard to cross-campus collaboration. For example, apart from Jess at Recruiting NYS HEI #2, the New York stakeholders were more likely to describe having to navigate institutions that operated within silos. When asked about key enrolment trends at her institution, Laura from Selective NY HEI admitted: *“I want to be transparent in that I don’t [know the key enrolment trends], just because the way that our institution is set up.”* Further to this, Laura also adds that there is no clear institutional strategy for recruiting or engaging with adult learners at her HEI: *“I feel like it’s almost in a way left up to the departments to kind of figure out and engage that if they choose to do so, because right now there is no penalty if you choose not to do so.”*

Likewise, Brandon at Recruiting NYS HEI #2 remarked that when he first started in his role as a Director of student support services, he had spent the first few years *“going office to office and department to department and sell them on culture change...ultimately what [his department] were trying to do is change the campus culture from one of very typical, siloed ‘We do this, you do that’ [or] ‘I’ll send you this, you go to that person’, to more of a collaborative approach...(Brandon, Recruiting NYS HEI #1).”* For Brandon, it was just as important to include teaching staff in the standard of cross-campus

collaboration he hoped to forge, stating that: *“...A faculty member should be able to talk to their student about what they need to do to be successful and know at the end of the day what the resources are for that student...”*

Despite having to work against the drawback of silos at his institution initially, Brandon was confident in the strength of his university’s external partnerships, particularly with regard to recruitment activity: *“Our Admissions area particularly has done a really good job at building those relationships. They build relationships with institutions, with high schools and areas in high schools, and other colleges—Where, you know, we have people who are going to say good things and help their students find us here (Brandon, Recruiting NYS HEI #1).”*

This leads us to the next theme, there were indeed many challenges highlighted by the stakeholders in both countries, although differentially experienced as described, and yet the concept of creating and fostering institutional and departmental belonging may act as a mitigating theme in the face of increasing strain and dwindling resources

## 4.3 Theme 2: Fostering student sense of belonging

Table 18 Theme 2 sub-themes

| Sub-theme                                                 | Sample quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Establishing peer groups and peer mentorship</b>       | "[In cohorts] you're more likely to develop partnership situations where students can work with one another, instead of feeling like they're alone and I think that in the online environment in general, creating community—a sense of community—is important. ( <i>Jess, Recruiting NY HEI #2</i> )."                                                                                                             |
| <b>Representation and diversity within administration</b> | "So many times you go into certain offices, and you basically see the same type of folks everywhere that you go...we know that the literature states if you see folks who look like you, you tend to feel a little bit more comfortable when you go into these situations and spaces ( <i>Laura, Selective NY HEI</i> )."                                                                                           |
| <b>Curating immersive campus experiences</b>              | "...it's taking a step further in terms of it's exposing the learners to the learning environments and all that, and the skills that they'll have to be able to use, have to be familiar with, use well when they're students. Exposing them to that, in that controlled friendly environment where there's no pressure, there's no high stakes there to pass an exam. ( <i>Iain, Selective Scottish HEI #1</i> )." |

|                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Harnessing and valuing existing knowledge</b> | “...sometimes it's just kind of reinforcing that they already have those skills and qualities, it's just applying them in a different context, it's contextualising them to this new learning context ( <i>Adam, Recruiting Scottish HEI #1</i> ).” |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

The second theme identified was that of *Fostering student sense of belonging*, which included sub-themes of establishing peer groups, curating immersive experiences, harnessing existing knowledge, and representation/diversity within administration. As a group these stakeholders felt it was critical to foster a sense of belonging not only for recruitment, but more importantly, for student transition and progression, making this theme integral to the stakeholders' interviews (see Table 17).

#### 4.3.1 Establishing peer groups and peer mentorship

The differences between stakeholder responses within this sub-theme fell along student population lines (i.e., predominantly mature cohorts vs. all-student services) rather than geographically. Of the three participants who worked directly with predominantly mature cohorts—Iain at Selective Scottish HEI #1, Jess at Recruiting NYS HEI #2, and Debbie at Selective Scottish HEI #2— all three recognised the benefits of *Establishing peer groups and peer mentorship networks* for their students. Especially for Iain at Selective Scottish HEI #1 and Jess at Recruiting NYS HEI #2, peer networks were viewed as a critical part of fostering their students' sense of belonging. For Iain, “...*doing that is an invaluable thing...getting them in touch with their peers...because students are in these tightknit Access courses, they will often come to the University knowing somebody who's already been in that course and that, in terms of widening access and widening participation, is the most crucial thing* (Iain, Selective Scottish HEI #1).” Further to this, Iain notes, facilitating these connections is also about the ways in which they could extend beyond the classroom; so that students got “*somebody to meet for a cup of tea in the morning and to go to their lecture with or to queue up to go and get their registration card.*”

In addition to the social benefits of peer networks, Jess' enthusiasm for cohort-based learning expands upon Iain's point further. Emphasising a link between accountability and fulfilling social needs, Jess attributed the effectiveness of the cohort model to students “look[ing] at the group that's there, and...want[ing] everybody else in that group to succeed, too. [They're] more

likely to develop partnership situations where [they] can work with one another, instead of feeling like they're alone (*Jess, Recruiting NYS HEI #2*).” This, however, is not said without Jess also acknowledging the socio-emotional significance these networks carry, especially for students who may lack familial support. She further explains, “*not all families are supportive of what [the students are] doing...Sometimes the College community has to function as that piece of family that they're missing...there's a lot of trauma that's happening, especially with my group.*”

Like Jess, Debbie also discusses how creating bonds through a shared experience like a study course is an important aspect of peer connection. Optimistic about the peer connections formed in her Access course, she states, “*...everyone's in the same boat, and we hope that by having the Access programme that the relationships they build there will be lasting—and they seem to be* (Debbie, Selective Scottish HEI #2).” Whilst she also lauded the strength of her institution’s approach to facilitating access to peer mentorship for all widening access students, there is slight trepidation about the capacity to facilitate peer- to-peer engagement for those who have fully transitioned into their undergraduate courses: “*If you're an adult learner, there's no guarantee there'll be another adult learner in your cohort...You might not have a peer demographic there in the class with you. And we can try and provide that as much as we can with the classroom peer mentors, but that will be difficult.*”

Unlike the stakeholders discussed above, Laura at Selective NYS HEI and Brandon at Recruiting NYS HEI #1 most often worked with traditional university-age students, though their departments’ services were open to and therefore sometimes accessed by mature learners. In their experience, mature learners’ other identities often took precedence over their status as adult students. Laura states, “*when we kind of started going through this [interview], I was like, ‘ha, I wonder how many students actually identify as adult learners?’...Sometimes there are other identities that are more prevalent when it comes to being an adult learner* (Laura, Selective NY HEI).”

Brandon’s observation extends Laura’s point further. He explains that his institution has a large Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) student



population, which typically included one or two mature learners each intake. In this vein, he shares, they “*have their identity—They’re still EOP students. They’re embraced in that way (Brandon, Recruiting NY HEI #1).*”

Recalling his department’s past attempts at planning targeted events for mature students, he shares:

*...When we’ve done that in the past, nobody’s shown up or there’s not an interest for that. Adult learners—which anyone 25 and over—They don’t necessarily identify themselves as a group of adult learners. Adult learners are not getting together and saying, “Hey, let’s all hang out because we’re all the adults!” They are living their lives (Brandon, Recruiting NY HEI #1).*

In Laura and Brandon’s experience, the heterogeneity of adult students can present challenges to how all-student services can adequately support mature learners as a distinct student group. This sentiment also resonates with research on the complexity of mature students’ identities (Gardner et al., 2021) and the salience of those identities. Nonetheless, whilst mature students may engage with university services or events according to what other facets of their identity they might appeal, Lauren and Brandon’s points do raise important questions as to how universities might prevent other mature students from ‘falling through the cracks’. Their insights suggest further consideration is needed into what additional strategies could be used to facilitate their sense of belonging.

#### **4.3.2 Representation and diversity within administration**

A sub-theme that is worth further discussion within this overall theme of *Fostering student sense of belonging* is that of *Representation and diversity within administration*. This sub-theme—discussed at multiple points by Malcom and Margaret from Recruiting Scottish HEI #2 and Laura from Selective NYS HEI, concerning various social and personal identities (racial/ethnic identity, local identity, parent identity, etc.)—presented the most differently between locations.

When it came to discussing *student* social and personal identities, such as key widening participation (WP) enrolment trends or target demographic for WP

recruitment at their institution, Scottish stakeholders were more likely to emphasise class or socio-economic status, local community ties, care-experienced background, carers, and/or estranged students. Asylum seekers and refugees were also mentioned in two (Adam of Recruiting Scottish HEI #1 and Iain of Selective Scottish HEI #2) of the four Scottish stakeholder interviews.

Unlike the New York interviews, however, racial or ethnic identity were not explicitly discussed as a target student demographic by Scottish stakeholders. In fact, Adam at Recruiting Scottish HEI #1 acknowledged that whilst his office—which specialises in FE-to-HE transfer activity—were not asked to report on student of colour access to their programmes, he believed that it “*is something that [his office] should be reporting on.*” He further explains that the university captures student of colour access at point of application and point of entry, whereas his department focuses more on point of engagement. As racial and ethnic diversity in Scotland continues to grow (Walsh et al., 2019), and subsequently diversity among university enrolments, consistent tracking of such data throughout these students’ educational trajectories will be key to monitoring the progression and attainment of racially and/or ethnically under-represented groups.

Within the context of representation within university staff, Malcolm and Margaret from Recruiting Scottish HEI #2 talked about the connection between mature student enrolment and the strength of their institution’s local community ties. For instance, Malcolm explains, “*a lot of our smaller academic partners particularly, staff know people in the community. Everybody knows each other (Malcolm, Recruiting Scottish HEI #2).*” Having locals represented within administration at the smaller partner institutions was contrasted with the student experience at larger partners, as Malcolm continues:

There isn't the same sense of community [at larger partners] and there's a big barrier to walking in there and saying, 'I'd like to study.' Because even though we might have the majority of folks—mature students—when people see the students going to college they go, 'Och, young people, I can't do that'...That's a total contrast to our smaller partners where you can't live in the village or the town and not know somebody

who works in the college; and it's not scary and it's just very, very integrated (*Malcolm, Recruiting Scottish HEI #2*).

In this vein, both Malcolm's quotes demonstrate the significance of having locals represented among university staff in order to create a strong sense of community within the institution, not only one to which prospective mature students can envisage themselves belonging, but one that is also well-integrated into their external environment. Additionally, these community links provide prospective adult students with access to informal channels of information about the institution. In other words, these community links facilitate access to a form of social capital to local, prospective mature students. This point is further reinforced by Margaret's as she remarks:

...there's good links, as Malcolm mentioned previously, between the colleges and their communities as well. Definitely when Freshers' Fairs are being organised, it's how they're promoted maybe to more vulnerable areas of society....to try and encourage people to come through the door...(Margaret, Recruiting Scottish HEI #2).

In the New York context, Laura at a selective upstate institution believes that representation and racial or ethnic diversity within administration play an integral role in making students feel comfortable in the university environment, especially as it pertains to student-facing offices. For her, the racial and ethnic diversity of her office is a positive attribute that sets her department apart from others at her institution. She shares:

*...The makeup of our office is very different than most offices on campus where I—as the Director—identify as an African-American female. The two other colleagues that work in my office as advisors, one is a young man who identifies as being Black and Italian. And then, a white male in our office; our admin identifies as Asian-American...So many times you go into certain offices, and you basically see the same type of folks everywhere that you go to, and we know that the literature states if you see folks who look like you, you tend to feel a little bit more comfortable when you go into these situations and spaces (Laura, Selective NYS HEI).*

Although Laura's quote focuses more on matriculated students, rather than recruitment activity like Malcolm and Margaret's statements, what connects these observations are their emphasis on the importance of "informal" or "passive" manifestations of fostering sense of belonging. From Laura and Malcolm's perspective, when students can see aspects of their social identity

reflected in university staff, this better enables them to feel more comfortable in or as a part of the university community. Whilst the reported benefits of peer groups are numerous due to the shared commonalities in experience between students, as discussed in section 4.3.1, the advantages of representation and diversity within staff are worth investigating further.

### **4.3.3 Curating immersive campus experiences**

Another sub-theme that emerged within *Fostering student sense of belonging* was that of curating immersive campus experiences. Generally, access and educational opportunity programmes rely heavily on providing students with an immersive university experience in a highly structured, learning environment. When asked about student recruitment and outreach activity prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, most stakeholders reported engaging prospective students or new entrants in structured learning and/or social activities on campus. This was typically in the form of ‘open houses/open days’ or ‘freshers fairs’, in which prospective or newly admitted students are invited to campus to learn more about the university and its course offerings, as well as engage with various members of the university community (e.g. lecturing and MPA staff, returning students, etc.).

By familiarising prospective students or new entrants with the university environment through a series of on-campus activities, these stakeholders believed this practice better enabled learners to envisage themselves as university students at their institution. For stakeholders who worked directly with access and college transition programmes, hosting learners on campus for ‘summer school’ was another way of engaging them prior to matriculation. Iain at Selective Scottish HEI #2 further elaborates on this point:

*... it's taking a step further in terms of it's exposing the learners to the learning environments and all that, and the skills that they'll have to be able to use, have to be familiar with, use well when they're students.*

*Exposing them to that, in that controlled friendly environment where there's no pressure, there's no high stakes there to pass an exam (Iain, Selective Scottish HEI #2).*

This recruitment practice of tailoring immersive university experiences to

mature students demonstrates the ways in which opportunities to facilitate sense of belonging do occur well before a student enrolls in university. Closer attention should be paid to the impact of participation in these activities not only in terms of influencing university choice (see section 5.3.1), but also on student transition and progression.

#### 4.3.4 Harnessing and valuing existing knowledge

This sub-theme concerns drawing on and valuing mature students' existing knowledge in a formal educational setting; in doing so, this reaffirms for students that they belong. For instance, stakeholders working at HEIs informed by the transformative education tradition in Scotland and New York both provided insights into this key practice for supporting their mature students. For Adam from Recruiting Scottish HEI #1, he shares, *"sometimes it's just kind of reinforcing that they already have those skills and qualities, it's just applying them in a different context, it's contextualising them to this new learning context."* From this perspective, highlighting the transferability of his students' skills is also an exercise in confidence building and fostering self-efficacy. As explained in the researcher's discussion of Cross' (1981) Chain of Response Model in section 2.3.2, and to be examined more fully in Chapter 6, many mature students' participation in higher education is impeded by a dispositional barrier.

In this vein, Jess from Recruiting NY HEI #2 extends Adam's point further with her statement:

*I think part of breaking down the barrier is really thinking about what education is, what learning is, and not being exclusive about 'well, you can only include things that have been done in a classroom', because we don't really learn that way all the time, and we are really trying to not discount the knowledge that people actually have (Jess, Recruiting NY HEI #2).*

In addition to reaffirming to her students that they belong in higher education, Jess also explains how recognising their prior or experiential knowledge can have more tangible advantages as well. Here, Jess describes a measurable way of valuing her students' knowledge in the form of a prior learning assessment: *"I've evaluated people in topics like Publishing—For instance, I had a woman who wrote 10 books on [subject redacted]...And she got eight credits for that single*

*subject—So, what do [sic] our students actually bring to the table that can help them put their fingerprint on their programme as well as to expedite their process...”*

In the quotes above, Adam and Jess both emphasise the ways in which their students already possess some of the skills and knowledge needed to be successful in higher education. However, this conceptualisation sharply contrasted with a stakeholder from a more selective institution in Scotland. When describing the support and learning structure of her programme, Debbie explained: *“We monitor them again far more closely than they would get monitored at the undergraduate level. So, our whole programme is about kind of racing them up to the standard of an undergraduate—So, going from zero to kind of get career ready for first year (Debbie, Selective Scottish HEI #1).”* This sentiment differs from Adam and Jess’ in its emphasis on ‘catching students up’ or ‘bringing them up to speed’. The statement also implies that students will have come to her programme with no to minimal relevant skills for university. In other words, Debbie’s remark highlights the potential weaknesses or perceived deficiencies that students might bring with them to the university environment.

These differences thus demonstrate two distinct conceptualisations of the nature of transition to HE for mature students between the stakeholders discussed: strengths- or assets-based and deficit-based. In the next theme to follow, the researcher explores the ways in which institutional culture and organisational identity might influence staff approaches to and understanding of widening access and participation at their university.

## 4.4 Theme 3: Institutional habitus and organisational identity

Table 19 Theme 3 sub-themes

| Sub-theme                                                  | Sample quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Impact of university reputation</b>                     | "...in terms of a Russell Group university, a challenge can even be a student's accent—So, how you speak, how you look, what your culture is—and we find that students do struggle with that and feel that they can be kind of labelled because of the way that they speak ( <i>Debbie, Selective Scottish HEI #2</i> )."                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Staff conceptualisations of organisational identity</b> | "...one of the ethos of the university is to bring higher education to those that do live in remote and rural areas so that they can access it rather than having to move to a big city ( <i>Margaret, Recruiting Scottish HEI #2</i> )."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Advocating for students</b>                             | "A lot of what I have [had] to—and it doesn't have to be done as much now—but I've had to do over the years, is having the discussions with academic departments who would be coming from the angle of, 'oh, these mature students just don't perform as well, they're not as capable' and having to say, 'no, no, it's not because they're less capable'—it's because of the reasons that we were talking about earlier, you know, that they've got more complex lives. ( <i>Iain, Selective Scottish HEI #2</i> )." |

The greatest contrast between stakeholder interviews, particularly based on institution type, was uncovered in the theme of *Institutional habitus and organisational identity*, particularly among sub-themes dealing with university reputation and staff conceptualisations of adult undergraduates.

#### 4.4.1 Impact of university reputation

The impact of university reputation on mature student access to and participation in higher education was mainly discussed by stakeholders from selective Scottish institutions. When asked about mature student recruitment activity for her programmes, Debbie at Selective Scottish HEI #1 admits to having a self-selecting pool of applicants: “We didn't need to recruit, because students were just finding us...*Most students find us quite simply by going on our website...*” However, recognising the consequence of self-selection and its impact on her programmes’ reach, she continues, “*...but I don't think that's good enough and I want to make sure that we find out how we can be reaching those who need us...we need to come away from the internet and go to paper. We need to go to community centres and libraries, and have flyers...*” Debbie’s observation of self-selecting student pools for her programmes also resonates with Iain’s own experience at his selective institution.

Extending Debbie’s point further, Iain at Selective Scottish HEI #2 shared that the impact of university reputation on mature student recruitment was two-fold for his programmes: “*...because the university [sic] we are, it can entice people to apply because we are regarded as an elite university. Similarly, it can put people off and be intimidating...We have to constantly work at that (Iain, Selective Scottish HEI #2).*” In this vein, whilst name recognition can work to attract prospective mature students to his institution, Iain is also cognizant of how its elite reputation can be a deterrent to some.

In an effort to address this issue of a self-selecting pool of students, Iain adds that there are points of contact on his staff for the more vulnerable student groups, such as care-experienced, estranged, carers, etc. These staff members are responsible for “*work[ing] with the learners pre-entry—application, admission*” as well as “*support them when they're on course...up until putting*



*them on a course, getting them through to graduation and beyond (Iain, Selective Scottish HEI #1).*” Debbie and Iain’s experience raises several important questions for selective institutions in Scotland to consider. Firstly, to what extent does university reputation affect who engages with their widening access and participation provision? Secondly, how does it affect the reach of their widening access and participation activity? And lastly, to what extent are they mitigating these challenges?

Whilst Iain mainly discussed the effect his HEI’s reputation had on attracting mature students to his university, Debbie at Selective Scottish HEI #1 also described how studying at a selective institution can negatively impact the learning experience of some matriculated mature students. When asked what challenges she thought adult undergraduates faced, she reflected:

*...in terms of a Russell Group university, a challenge can even be a student's accent—So, how you speak, how you look, what your culture is— and we find that students do struggle with that and feel that they can be kind of labelled because of the way that they speak (Debbie, Selective Scottish HEI #1).*

Here, Debbie draws attention to the issue of classism and the barrier to participation it creates for some mature students at her university. In this same vein, Debbie further explains, *“your accent absolutely pins you down exactly where you come from and it can be really difficult, I think.”* Whilst she shares that her university has been responsive to this issue as a broader institutional problem, Debbie’s consideration of classism as a barrier to participation for mature students highlights the ongoing need for selective institutions to be aware of and sensitive to the potential impact of classism on mature student entry and progression at their institution.

In contrast, issues of classism, and subsequently the significance placed on accent as a marker of class or socio-economic status, were not raised in the New York stakeholder interviews. However, problems with lecturer perception of mature students did arise in the NY Selective HEI stakeholder interview. This issue, and stakeholders’ need to advocate on behalf of their students, will be explored more fully in section 4.4.4 of the thesis. However, in the subsequent section, the researcher turns to staff conceptualisations of organisational or

institutional identity to explore to what extent does organisational/institutional identity influence their approach to facilitating access.

#### 4.4.2 Staff conceptualisations of organisational identity

In this sub-theme, stakeholders shared their perceptions of their university's ethos or mission, and how this influences their institutional approach to widening access and participation. Among the Scottish universities, and as discussed in section 4.3.2, Malcolm and Margaret (Scottish Recruiting HEI #2) reported having a more community-orientated approach to student recruitment at their institution. As a result, this plays an integral part in how they conceptualise their university's institutional identity and mission. When asked to what capacity does her institution work with adult undergraduates, Margaret highlights: *"One of the ethos of the University is to bring higher education to those that do live in remote and rural areas so that they can access it rather than having to move to a big city (Margaret, Recruiting Scottish HEI #2)."*

Malcolm further extends Margaret's conceptualisation by offering examples of how their HEI achieves this. To this aim, Malcolm believes that their institution's connections to the surrounding community is a core component of widening access: *"...staff know people in the community. Everybody knows each other. There'll be posters up in the GP surgery for things that are happening in the College, it's very much part of the community and I think we've got a benefit from that, in that widening access roots have kind of always been there, so it's part of what we do (Malcolm, Recruiting Scottish HEI #2)."* For them, conceptualising their institution as one entrenched in the community also informs their perception of who their target student demographic is, as well as their HEI's recruitment and outreach strategy. The significance of university staff conceptualisations of mature learners and organisation identity, and its potential impact on institutional widening access/participation activity, is further discussed in section 6.3.1 of the thesis.

For Jess at Recruiting NY HEI #2, recognising and respecting mature students' prior knowledge was a core institutional value at her university:

*...reaching adults where they are; thinking about what knowledge they're bringing to the table, and how that factors into the degree. I think that at [name redacted], we really respect the experience that students might bring to the table. You have individuals that have been out in the field and that have experienced life and they do have this college-level learning that has occurred outside of the classroom (Jess, Recruiting NYS HEI #2).*

As discussed in section 4.3.4, Jess expressed the belief that education and learning should not be exclusive to what students have done in the classroom, but rather, should also encompass knowledge obtained from other learning experiences (e.g., work experience or professional training). As part of Jess' role within her department, she assesses students' prior learning, knowledge, and experience for potential university credit. Jess' conceptualisation of her HEI as one that values students' prior knowledge appears to resonate with her expressed understanding of what education and learning are. How organisational or institutional identity influences university staff's perception of their work is a connection worthy of further exploration (please see section 6.3.1).

In contrast, Laura indicates that in her experience at selective NYS HEI, there is no institutional incentive for recruiting adult learners:

*...there has been no real conversation about the non-traditional students at all. And again, I think it's one of those things where you have to think about as an institution, what are their priorities, what do they consider to be a priority, and it right now is just not on their radar (Laura, Selective NYS).*

In addition to how conceptualisations of organisational identity shaped some stakeholders' perception of their work, for others, they shared how conceptualisations of organisational identity also affected their institution's work culture. Specifically, with the exception of Jess at Recruiting NYS HEI #1, New York stakeholders were more likely to highlight the competitive nature between HEIs within their university system. Additionally, these stakeholders also discussed often working in silos at their respective institutions (also discussed in section 4.2.3). For example, reflecting on a perceived competitive nature within the State University of New York System (SUNY), Brandon explains:

*...SUNY's been working to conglomerate SUNY. We are SUNY, we do a lot of communities of practice and some of them are wonderful but there's still that old feeling of at the end of the day, we're still competition. We're still...[there's a] limited number of students in the state and we're competing for them (Brandon, Recruiting NYS HEI #1, in reference to SUNY trying to expand its online offerings).*

Given the emphasis placed on partnership-based approaches to widening access/participation in stakeholder interviews, and their utility for facilitating access especially when financial and staffing resources are under pressure (please see section 4.2.3; also see section 6.2.1), inter-institutional competition could hinder meaningful collaboration and partnership opportunities between institutions (OECD, 2017). To address this issue for New York stakeholders, the researcher has offered a set of recommendations in the Discussion chapter of the thesis (please see section 6.6.4).

#### **4.4.3 Advocating for students**

A surprising yet notable sub-theme to emerge from the interview data was “Advocating for students”. Of the three stakeholders based at a selective university, two participants—Iain at Selective Scottish HEI #2 and Laura at Selective NYS HEI—expressed having to advocate on behalf of their students at within their own institution. This ‘advocacy’ manifested in different ways, in which the former had to navigate working with colleagues who were resistant to allowing mature learners to enrol in their department’s classes, whilst the latter was met with such resistance from lecturing staff in her previous role that she and her team had developed an unofficial *Green Book*. In other words, they had collated a document for advising students on class selection based on staff accounts of instructor attitudes toward their mature—and other under-represented groups—students.

Whilst Iain clarified that he no longer experiences the need to advocate for students as frequently as in years prior, he recounts having had “*discussions with academic departments who would be coming from the angle of, ‘oh, these mature students just don't perform as well, they're not as capable’ and having to say, ‘no, no, it's not because they're less capable’—it's because of the reasons that we were talking about earlier, you know, that they've got more*

*complex lives.*” Here, Iain’s statement draws attention to the fact that despite there being established widening participation activity at his institution, this did not translate into automatic ‘buy-in’ by other academic departments, in his experience. Subsequently, Iain found himself placed in a position where he had to defend his mature student cohorts against negative perceptions of mature learners, dispelling the misconceptions upon which they were based. This example reveals that not only is it important to consider potential alienation experienced by mature students from their peers, but also by university departments or staff. Further to this, if Iain had not been willing to ‘go the extra mile’ for his students, this scenario raises the question of how the initial resistance to mature learners might have affected their access to those courses.

As previously stated, Iain had mentioned that he seldom faced this issue now. In this vein, he further explains that his work in widening participation at his university is *“a lot easier here than I know it is at other institutions, because we’ve got a senior management group from the Principal down who’s very committed to this, this work (Iain, Selective Scottish HEI #2).”* This statement raises a couple of important issues. Firstly, it implies that there can be institutional obstacles similar to what Iain had previously experienced—such as negative perceptions of mature learners among some university staff—to facilitating widening access and participation activity at other Scottish universities. This sentiment should be of concern to Scottish HEIs, particularly selective institutions, and prompts consideration of the following questions: What are the institutional habitus-related barriers to facilitating widening access and participation within one’s own university? To what extent are there misconceptions about mature learners within academic departments or among university staff? And what can institutions do to address these issues? Such questions form the basis of this study’s key finding on institutional habitus’ impact on staff approaches to and perceptions of widening access for mature learners (see section 6.3.1), as well as recommendations for HEIs and practitioners (see section 6.4.3), going forward.

Lastly, Iain’s comment also highlights the significance of support from senior management in the success of widening access and participation activity. This

point resonates with Jess' (Recruiting NYS #2) anecdote discussed in section 4.2.1, in which when faced with budgetary constraints, support from senior leadership influenced the creation of the widening participation initiative she now manages at her university. For Iain, senior management support of his department's work in widening participation has made all the difference in his experience of facilitating access at his institution.

For Laura, how she advocated for students was reflected in grappling with lecturing staff perceptions of her students. She shared that she usually hopes that if a student is struggling with external factors and explains such to their lecturer, that they will be "shown grace". However, she explains: *"Sometimes that does not happen...sometimes their response is, 'well, this is an institution of learning, and we must set standards' (Laura, NY Selective HEI)."* Laura further explains that this issue with lecturing staff had "happened for so long" with even traditional students at her institution, that in a previous office she worked in at her HEI, she and colleagues had, *"carried a list and we knew for certain subjects if students would come in and tell us they're taking this course, and they have this professor, don't take them...it's almost like a 'Green Book' for the University (Laura, Selective NYS HEI)."* In this context, Laura borrows the term "Green Book" from a Jim Crow era guidebook series entitled "The Negro Motorist Green Book". This book advised Black American travellers on how to navigate the segregated U.S. safely, including a list of Black-friendly businesses, towns, and establishments as well as those to avoid (Driscoll, 2015).

Thus, Laura's word-choice here draws attention to the perceived hostility students at her HEI face from some lecturers. The significance of this scenario lies in how mature learners are perceived and treated within their institution—by university lecturing and support staff—can have a significant impact on their sense of belonging, and subsequently, their progression at an institution (Brinthaup & Eady, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). Quality of interactions with staff has also been found to play an important role in the university experiences of the learners interviewed for the present study (see section 5.3.3.3 of learners' findings; see also 6.2.2 for triangulated discussion).

In the next section, the researcher examines the bureaucratic barriers faced by

institutional stakeholders and their impact on widening access/participation activity at their institution.

## 4.5 Theme 4: Bureaucratic barriers to facilitating access

Table 20 Theme 4 sub-themes

| Sub-theme                                                    | Sample quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Selectivity within widening participation</b>             | "...at the moment, both the Access and the [redacted] programme are only feeding into the [non-STEM] Colleges. So, students' honours programmes can only go to degrees that are available within those Colleges, although we do have a couple of kind of outliers who go to Geography and things in Science and Engineering ( <i>Debbie, Selective Scottish HEI #1</i> )."                     |
| <b>Institutional barriers to data collection and sharing</b> | "We are over 50% transfer students, and we are surrounded by three very large feeder community colleges, all whom have a large veteran population—We should be getting more veteran students on campus who self-identify. We could have more, but if they don't self-identify, then we don't know ( <i>Brandon, Recruiting NYS HEI #1</i> )."                                                  |
| <b>Navigating funding mechanisms</b>                         | "I'm looking at building up the Foundation Programmes at University, so a lot of my time is spent speaking with different individuals, finding out how I can make sure that our programmes are financially sustainable; I'm writing funding bids and funding applications to try and bring funding in so we can open up new Pathways programmes ( <i>Debbie, Selective Scottish HEI #1</i> )." |



The fourth theme identified in the data was *Bureaucratic barriers to facilitating access*. With its overlapping sub-themes of “Selectivity within widening participation”, “Institutional barriers to data collection and sharing”, and “Navigating funding mechanisms”, this theme highlighted how institutional procedures and practices such as admitting Access students into certain courses; university approaches to information sharing; and how institutional expectations of students to ‘intuitively’ self-identify or self-report certain demographic information can impact mature student access to higher education. Additionally, this theme also drew attention to barriers created by governmental procedure in both Scotland and New York, particularly with regard to navigating funding mechanisms for both institutions and students. Due to the interconnectedness of these findings, “Selectivity within widening participation” will be discussed within the larger narrative, with the remaining sub-themes discussed briefly in the respective subsection.

Interestingly, the issue of selectivity within widening participation was only discussed in interviews with Scottish stakeholders. Debbie, a Deputy Head for Access and short courses at Selective Scottish HEI #1, recognised that both her “Access and the [name redacted] programme [sic] are only feeding into the [non-STEM] Colleges.” As such, she further explains: *“Students in our programmes can only go to degrees that are available within those Colleges although we do have a couple of kind of outliers who go to Geography and things in Science and Engineering (Debbie, Selective Scottish HEI #1).”* Whilst Debbie continues on to express her desire to expand her programmes so *“[they’ve] got access across the University”*, her remark underscores how Access and some short course students at her HEI are almost exclusively “fed into” non-STEM courses at present. Although no further context or explanation is provided, this institutional practice does raise several questions to consider. For instance, what is the decision-making process for determining which courses or subjects can Access students be admitted into at Debbie’s institution? On what grounds are exceptions made to this institutional policy, so that “outliers” are able to go on to these courses?

Adam at Recruiting Scottish HEI #1 believes that selectivity within widening participation is not an issue at his university, however, he does share an

awareness of it being a potentially larger problem within Scottish higher education. When asked what advice he would give for improving outreach and support activities for mature students at his institution, for example, Adam posed the following hypothetical question:

*...why do certain agreements limit participation? Looking at the admissions and applications process and really having a fundamental review: What limits participation? Why do we set admission criteria all the way 'up here'? And is it to do with setting students up to fail or—And this is a hypothetical question—is it to do with managing numbers? So that's a barrier to widening participation, is purposely trying to limit numbers.*

#### **4.5.1 Institutional barriers to data collection and sharing**

Whilst there is an abundance of educational research on institutional barriers to mature student access and participation (Boeren, 2016; Cross, 1981; Shapiro et al., 2019), university staff experiences of institutional barriers to *facilitating* access or student support is hardly discussed within the literature. In this vein, an interesting 'blindspot' which arose, for some stakeholders in both locations, were institutional barriers to data collection and sharing. This was especially the case with regard to active-duty military and veteran student populations. This finding was particularly surprising for stakeholders in the U.S., where there is a long and well-documented history of veterans in higher education since the end of the Second World War (Geiger, 2015; Kasworm, 2018; see also section 2.2.4). And although such data is sometimes collected and analysed, it is far from standard.

When asked about the widening access recruitment and enrolment trends at his institution, and prefacing his response with "...it's silly that we haven't done more before this...particularly with the military-affiliated students...", Brandon at Recruiting NYS HEI#1 later admits:

*We are over 50% transfer students, and we are surrounded by three very large feeder community colleges, all whom have a large veteran population—We should be getting more veteran students on campus who self-identify. We could have more, but if they don't self-identify, then we don't know (Brandon, Recruiting NYS HEI #1).*

Although Brandon shares that his institution has a reputation as a ‘veteran-friendly’ HEI, he expresses concern over a perceived discrepancy between this reputation and the reality of resource allocation for this group: “*We have a Veterans Affairs Office that is **one** work study student who helps them fill out their paperwork—That’s **not** a Veterans Affairs Office.*” Further to this, Brandon also adds that he and his department base their military-affiliated student estimates on the types of financial aid awarded to a segment of students. Drawing from these numbers, he concludes, “*...we only have about two-thirds of our military-affiliated students actually identified in our system (Brandon, Recruiting NYS HEI #1).*”

At a recruiting Scottish HEI, Adam shared facing the same problem in gathering data on military student engagement with his programme, and reflects:

*I think we could improve our sharing of and collecting of data in terms of military families and veterans. We very much rely on people declaring that information to us and also people understanding the correct definitions to which they would apply for as veterans (Adam, Recruiting Scottish HEI #1).*

Whilst all seven stakeholders agreed on the importance of cross-campus collaboration and/or external partnerships to their work in supporting mature learners, as discussed in section 4.2.3, improving institutional data sharing practices is integral to the effectiveness of this work. Therefore, policy and practice implications extend beyond educational processes and practices for inclusion but also to data processes and practices for transparency and equity. Yet, the data collection processes and procedures do not necessarily support diversity disclosures or follow up on trends for further recruitment and outreach.

#### **4.5.2 Navigating funding mechanisms**

Issues of navigating the complexities of funding mechanisms were discussed by stakeholders in two key ways: firstly, these mechanisms’ impact on how stakeholders facilitate widening access and participation at their institution; and secondly, how they impact students’ ability to access funding for their studies.

Whilst this issue affected all stakeholders regardless of geographic context or institution type, the New York stakeholders were more likely to discuss the complexities of acquiring and utilising New York State funding to support their programmes.

As described in section 4.2.1, Jess at Recruiting NY HEI #2 shared how her department's grant application for New York State funding was rejected due to budgetary constraints. As a result, this led to her University President intervening and supporting the launch of an internal programme modelled after the Educational Opportunity Program. Nonetheless, Jess' experience with the strict budgetary requirements for New York State funding parallels Laura's own experience at her selective NYS institution, though hers is from the student recruitment side. In other words, students must meet strict income criteria in order to be eligible for the programme. For Laura, this strict requirement has presented recruitment challenges for her and her team:

*...in terms of recruiting, on our last call that we had with them, there's some very interesting legislation things that are coming down the pipeline, in terms of who we identify to recruit. There's talk right now of widening the income requirements for our programme, which will be great for a lot of people. There's talk about discretion when it comes to—normally, if a student applied and they were—and I kid you not—\$1 over the income requirements, we were mandated to deny the students (Laura, Selective NYS HEI).*

Here, Laura's quote reveals how students who would otherwise qualify for EOP can be excluded for simply exceeding the income threshold by a narrow margin. Whilst Laura was hopeful that potential policy revisions would allow more discretion in these cases, to date, such changes are not reflected on the SUNY EOP website to date (SUNY, 2024). In contrast, because it is not supported by New York State funding, Jess' programme benefits from greater flexibility in student recruitment and admissions. As such, this autonomy allows her department to set its own income thresholds, as well as exercise discretion in how strictly the income requirement for the programme is applied.

Jess and Laura's experiences of navigating New York State funding mechanisms demonstrate 'two sides of the same coin'—For Jess department, budgetary

constraints resulted in a rejection of their application to launch an EOP with New York State funding, whilst Laura's is mandated to exclude students who surpass the income threshold to participate in EOP by a narrow margin. These cases highlight the urgent need for New York State government to re-evaluate current policies regarding both the awarding of EOP funding and the strict income requirements for student eligibility, a point further extended in the researcher's recommendations for New York State/US policymakers (see section 6.4.4.).

Lastly, in these discussions of navigating funding mechanisms as a bureaucratic barrier to facilitating access, stakeholders also highlighted how existing funding mechanisms presented issues for students applying for financial support for their studies. For Debbie who oversees a part-time Access programme at a selective Scottish HEI, supporting students through the application process for the Part- Time Free Grant (PTFG) presented challenges for both her and her staff. This was due to the process being partially paper-based at the time, a configuration that was further complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic:

*[The Part-Time Fee Grant] process has been quite difficult...we ended up helping [students] out with our process this year...we took the student applications for them and then passed them on to SAAS, because it was paper-based before and they had no way to submit them online in the pandemic...(Debbie, Selective Scottish HEI #1)*

Debbie and her HEI would not be alone in this problem, however. This problem was so widespread across the sector, that it would later become the catalyst for SAAS' launch of a Digital Transformation Programme, which saw the introduction of a fully online process for applying for a Part-Time Fee Grant in 2021 (SAAS, 2022). Whilst Debbie highlighted a procedural issues in her quote, Jess raised broader systemic concerns regarding financial aid opportunities for mature students in New York:

*I think some of the most robust forms of aid are catered toward traditional students...[the Excelsior grant] does not allow for any stopping out, you need to be full-time, there's a specific time[frame]—adults can't work within those constraints. You can't have completed any college credit prior to X date (Jess, Recruiting NYS HEI #2).*

Here, Jess highlights how the “most robust forms of aid” available to students

in New York—especially the Excelsior Scholarship Program (please see section 2.2.4.1)—come with eligibility criteria that disproportionately exclude many adult learners. For example, its requirements for continuous full-time enrolment, strict completion timeframes, and limitations on prior college or university credits are incompatible with the typical circumstances and needs of mature students (Kasworm, 2010; Markle, 2015; Wyatt, 2011). In this vein, such criteria reflect a broader systemic issue in which financial aid policies are often tailored to the educational trajectories of ‘traditional-age’ students, overlooking the complex lives and needs of mature learners, who often need to enrol part-time in order to balance their studies with work and/or family responsibilities, are more likely to have accumulated post-secondary credit from previous enrolments, or may need to take time off from their studies (Kasworm 2010).

This incompatibility between New York’s largest, most recent financial aid initiative and mature learner realities is yet another bureaucratic barrier to access for this student demographic, and thus informs this study’s recommendation for New York policymakers in section 6.4.4.

In the fifth and final theme identified in stakeholder interviews, the researcher explores the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on HEIs’ widening access and participation activity.

## 4.6 Theme 5: Impact of COVID-19

Table 21 Theme 5 sub-themes

| Sub-theme                               | Sample quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Reconfiguring support provision</b>  | “one of our five-year goals was to digitise...it was something that a lot of people, when I started, did not want to get rid of that paper. And so, it was one of those things that we made a lot of progress in...when COVID happened, in about a week and a half, in less than 10 days we were fully functional online--Everything was fully functional online ( <i>Brandon, Recruiting NY HEI #1</i> ).”                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Tackling digital exclusion</b>       | “When COVID first hit, we’d been talking a long time about how we can support students digitally. We just took for granted, because we are predominantly offering a good number of our courses online, we just thought everybody had a laptop at home—No, they don’t! And a lot of our staff don’t either ( <i>Margaret, Recruiting Scottish HEI #2</i> ).”                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Coping with new working patterns</b> | “...for a lot of people, especially at traditional campuses, they are just not used to [meeting virtually]...I had a tracking spreadsheet of everybody that I wanted to reach out to, who I actually got in touch with, when I was meeting with them, or if I didn't get in touch with them, what are the dates that I emailed them—like I had to track everything...doing everything electronically when others are not accustomed to doing things electronically was definitely a struggle ( <i>Jess, Recruiting NY HEI #2</i> ).” |

|                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Increased flexibility in entry and provision</b>                                            | 'New York State's also become test optional, which means that the SAT's and ACT's aren't required for admission anymore ( <i>Brandon, Recruiting NY HEI #1</i> ).'                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>'like throwing darts at a board': unprecedented challenges in adult student recruitment</b> | "...It's hard. It's really hard. It's [pronounced pause] kind of a—I don't know what the best word is, it's all—it's like throwing darts at a board, you know. We've tried a lot of different approaches. One of our main recruiting events as an institution is our open houses and we go all out for these open houses. So, we did a virtual open house and the numbers just weren't what they were. ( <i>Brandon, Recruiting NY HEI #1</i> )." |
| <b>Observed impacts on student engagement &amp; wellbeing</b>                                  | "...we've successfully ported everything online. But I think for students it's trying to maintain that sense of belonging and that identity as [Recruiting Scottish HEI #1] students, [it] has been quite challenging because a lot of students feel quite detached from the institution ( <i>Adam, Recruiting Scottish HEI #1</i> )."                                                                                                            |



The fifth and final theme to be identified within the data was *Impact of COVID-19*. Unsurprisingly, this theme yielded the most sub-themes across the stakeholder interviews and was marked with tension, particularly within that of “Tackling digital exclusion”. For this reason, this has been the sub-theme selected for further discussion within this final theme.

#### 4.6.1 Tackling digital exclusion

Whilst advancements in digital technology have facilitated increased flexibility and access to HE learning provision in recent decades (Watling, 2012), in turn, this digitisation of higher education has also led to the exclusion of a segment of learners, thereby creating a digital divide in tertiary education (Watling, 2012). Although discussions of how to mitigate inequities in access to digital technology are not new among researchers, HE practitioners, or policymakers, the COVID-19 pandemic had—as one stakeholder articulated—“ripped off the band aid” on just how dire the divide has become. This revelation was especially true for stakeholders with students residing in more rural or remote parts of their respective country. Apart from one participant, stakeholders from recruiting HEIs had emphasised the departmental and institutional challenges of tackling digital exclusion during the pandemic. In reflecting on the early days of global lockdown, Margaret recounts:

When COVID first hit, we’d been talking a long time about how we can support students digitally. We just took for granted, because we are predominantly offering a good number of our courses online, we just thought everybody had a laptop at home—No, they don’t! And a lot of our staff don’t either (Margaret, Recruiting Scottish HEI #2).

Upon recognition of the urgency of this need, Margaret shared that several colleges within her institution had to empty classrooms of their laptops, reallocating the equipment to students so they could continue their course from home. This initial ad hoc approach, Margaret admitted, was due to her institution’s lack of the financial resources needed to operate a formalised laptop loan scheme.

However, with the introduction of the Scottish Funding Council's (SFC) digital inclusion funding in August 2020 (SFC, 2020), Margaret's institution were soon able to establish and manage a laptop loan scheme for their students more sustainably. She shares: *"We didn't have laptop loan schemes before...that's not something we had consistently done, but because of that money, we've now got a bank of laptops (Margaret, Recruiting Scottish HEI #2)."* Shortly after receiving money from the fund, Margaret's institution were able to purchase 450 laptops for the scheme. Although an application process and income requirement were introduced in order to ensure laptops were allocated to students with the greatest need, Margaret believed SFC's digital inclusion funding had been an extraordinary help to her institution and will have a lasting impact on their student support provision. Her experience highlights how critical government funding is not only in times of crisis, but for launching and supporting interventions that meet a pre-existing need within the sector and extend their utility far beyond unprecedented times.

Nonetheless, whilst Margaret's colleague Malcolm also shared in her enthusiasm, he also caveated that they are still aware of:

...those pockets of people who can't access suitable broadband...It's something that people need to be aware of, that people *need* sufficient broadband. The pandemic put a huge strain on the internet in general...I suppose the other side of that is it is improving all the time, you know...it is getting rolled out all the time and they are filling in the gaps, but for those who *don't* have it, it's not much consolation that whatever proportion of the population now has fast internet.

This particular point above resonates with Jess from a recruiting NYS HEI. In contrast to Margaret and Malcolm's university, however, Jess' (Recruiting NYS HEI #2) institution already managed a laptop loan scheme prior to the pandemic. In this vein, tackling inequalities in access to reliable broadband were at the forefront of her institution's COVID-19 lockdown strategy, though with mixed results:

...the pandemic has kind of ripped off the band aid in many ways. Digital access and the digital divide, I think, is a huge issue. We assume that everybody has access to internet. We provide students with laptops, but how are they actually going to use the internet to get to those [online]

classes? We have tried to do things like provide hotspots...so if a student were to sit in the parking lot then they could use the hotspot, but some of our locations are in places where you can't get there without a car (Jess, Recruiting NYS HEI #2).

Here, Jess' quote shows whilst her institution can mitigate some barriers to digital access, such as providing the necessary hardware, the disparities in access to sufficient broadband ties into a much greater structural problem within the region.

As such, these narratives above clearly link into a wider discussion on the various ways in which rural areas and communities are disproportionately affected by digital exclusion. These conversations emphasise that in addition to closing the gap in access to technology equipment, mitigating the urban-rural gap in digital (Elahi, 2020; Roese, 2021) and higher education access (Borbely, 2024; Brownie et al., 2023) will also necessitate further strides in improving access to sufficient broadband connection (please see section 6.4.1 for recommendations).

## 4.7 Phase 1 Discussion

As described in sections 3.1 and 6.2, this thesis utilised a triangulated approach, and the Discussion Chapter 6 integrates results from Phases 1 and 2 interviews to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive interpretation of the data, within the policy context. However, as results from each phase still offers significant insights in answering the research question most relevant to its participant group, these findings merit some discussion separately. It is worth noting, however, that all four research questions will be fully addressed in the triangulated discussion (particularly sections 6.2.1 - 6.2.4). In light of this, the section to follow examines **RQ1: What types of interventions have Scottish and New York higher education institutions (HEIs) implemented to widen access and participation?** below:

The general story of this section has centred around stakeholders mitigating the challenges of facilitating HE access and participation to mature learners whilst under financial and staffing constraints. However, more specific findings

emerged here around interventions, for which stakeholders had particular insights. Broadly speaking, these are categorised as *Participation in internal and external partnerships* (please see section 4.2.3), *Community engagement activity* (please see section 4.3.2), *Curating immersive campus experiences* (please see section 4.3.3), and *Establishing formalised peer-to-peer support* (please see section 4.3.1). These were the key types of interventions identified by stakeholders for facilitating access and participation for mature learners at their institution. Of these intervention types, partnership-based approaches were shown to be the most crucial, and thus a separate, more in-depth treatment of this intervention type has been reserved for the triangulated discussion (see section 6.2.1). Additionally, for an examination of *Establishing formalised peer-to-peer support*, please see section 4.3.1. In the paragraphs to follow, the remaining key intervention types uncovered in the stakeholder findings will now be discussed.

Community engagement activity was particularly strong among stakeholders from recruiting HEIs regardless of geographic context, with the exception of one stakeholder from a Selective Scottish HEI, whose department was quite active in community engagement. Whilst the remaining Selective Scottish HEI stakeholder was not currently implementing this strategy, it was being considered for future widening access activity. For those already employing the community engagement approach, a combination of passive marketing strategies (e.g., placing posters about university events in local GP surgeries) and direct, ‘on the ground’ community engagement activity (e.g., induction sessions for local or commuter students) was used to draw the interest of prospective and/or newly- admitted mature students to their institution.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, by normalising or embedding messaging about university study for adults within familiar community spaces—such as GP surgeries—this appeals to prospective students’ *habitus*. In other words, by situating the university as part of the local community, this outreach subtly communicates that not only do learners not need to leave their community to pursue higher education, but it is an institution deeply embedded within the local community. An example of a similar strategy can be seen in U.S. research that explores how social class and schools structure opportunity,

particularly through examining elite high schools' and the strategies they use to create a 'college/university-going culture' (McClafferty, McDonough, and Nuñez, 2002; McDonough, 1998; Welton & Williams, 2015). This creates an environment in which going to university is not only 'the norm', but the cultural expectation.

Unfortunately, engagement with passive marketing approaches, such as print-based advertising, is not easily measurable and can also be costly. However, it is an important strategy for reaching those who may not be digitally connected, which is significant for reaching digitally excluded groups. Other passive marketing approaches stakeholders have cited using are radio adverts, billboards, and online geo-fencing/regionally targeted adverts on social media.

Whilst obviously more resource-intensive, active community engagement strategies yielded more meaningful connections with prospective mature learners. These strategies included intergenerational or longitudinal activities, such as family engagement projects targeting schools in areas of multiple deprivation. As one stakeholder explains: "[my colleague] *works with families, to increase 'aspirations' and to kind of get them thinking about the role and the value of education for themselves, not just for the children.*" Thus, by engaging both pupils and their parents in this way, this approach helps to develop social capital within the family unit and community. As such, Bourdieu's concept of social capital is especially relevant here, as these activities not only expand the networks of relationships that mature learners can draw upon to increase their access to higher education opportunities, but will ultimately enable their children to 'tap into' these resources.

Curating immersive campus experiences is underpinned by the aim to facilitate student sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018; Thomas, 2012). Scottish stakeholders were particularly strong in this area across institution types. Two models were identified in this category of interventions: one that engages with prospective students in the form of 'open days' (Scotland) or 'open houses' (New York), and another that involves hosting newly-admitted students on campus for a series of structured on-campus activities, such as study skills sessions. As the utility of the open day/open house model has already been discussed in section 4.3.3, the focus here shifts to the latter model, which

more directly engages with students after admission.

An example of this model is the ‘Summer School’, which invites newly-admitted mature students to campus to partake in practical activities such as study skill days, in addition to opportunities to socialise with peers and meet widening participation and other university staff. According to one Scottish stakeholder from a selective HEI, participation in this event is completely voluntary and is not offered as a condition of entry. In addition to developing practical skills, the Summer School was also beneficial for familiarising learners with studying in the physical university environment. In addition to developing study skills, more subtly, the Summer School model enables students to acclimate to the university environment, enhancing their comfort and familiarity with the campus environment. This aspect is especially important for selective institutions, for which one stakeholder noted that an institution’s prestige may make it seem unattainable to local, working-class students. Social Identity Theory helps to contextualise these efforts by explaining that students’ sense of belonging within the university community is crucial for their engagement and identity development. When students perceive themselves as valued members of the academic group, their motivation and commitment to their studies are strengthened (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). In this way, the Summer School not only aids in skill-building, but also plays an important role in ‘laying the groundwork’ for learners forming a student identity, helping them see themselves as members of the institution.

From the perspective of a stakeholder at a Scottish recruiting HEI, this model can also serve to reinforce the value of students’ pre-existing knowledge. In his work with college transfer students, for example, he utilises this model to affirm for students that they are building upon their existing post-secondary experiences and are simply applying them to a new context. This approach is consistent with Rendón’s (1994) *Validation Theory*, which emphasises the importance of affirming students’ capabilities and prior experiences in fostering academic success. Gale and Parker’s (2014) research on both the UK and US further supports this, noting that acknowledgement of students’ prior experiences and knowledge is essential for facilitating students’ seamless transition into higher education.

Other events like "Day in the Life" activities, in which each faculty or school hosts newly-admitted students and enable them to meet lecturing and managerial/professional/administrative (MPA) staff, as well as attend lectures especially designed for them, are other immersive exercises in cultivating student sense of belonging. These immersive experiences not only facilitate students' academic and social integration into the university environment, but they also appeal to the psychological and social alignment of students with the institutional environment, strengthening their identity as members of the university community. Supporting students' identity formation in this way can lead to increased motivation, engagement, and progression in their studies (Brenner, Serpe, and Stryker, 2014). Furthermore, this approach is particularly relevant for widening access initiatives, as it helps to bridge the gap between students' pre-existing identities and their new academic environment, potentially mitigating feelings of imposter syndrome or cultural mismatch that can be barriers to transition, progression, and attainment for mature learners.

## 4.8 Summary

This group of stakeholder interviews highlighted the significant impact of government funding cuts to higher education in both locations. It also revealed the creative solutions and workarounds practitioners must employ and negotiate as they operate within the constraints of limited financial and staffing resources. Further to this, stakeholder interview results also demonstrated to what extent had the COVID- 19 pandemic also further exacerbated the challenges faced by a sector already under considerable strain. Differences in how mature learners were conceptualised were also uncovered, with stakeholders from recruiting HEIs more likely to adopt a strengths-/assets-based approach to their mature student cohorts, and stakeholders from Scottish selective HEIs more likely to have to consider the impact of classism on some of their students. In the next chapter, the results of the mature learners interviews will now be explored.

## Chapter 5 Phase Two: Mature Learner Qualitative Results

### 5.1 Introduction

In Phase 2 of qualitative data collection, a total of 24 adult learners were interviewed, with 14 learners based in Scotland and 10 in New York State. A twenty-fifth student interview was conducted but later discarded, as this participant did not meet the non-traditional pathway nor age requirements for this study (please see section 3.6). As described in Chapter 3, student interviews were guided by the educational life histories approach (please see section 3.6). The rationale for this methodological choice is based on the premise that biographical approaches “allow Researchers to explore the meanings and importance that people attach to particular changes in their lives, including those that have to do with transitions between different life stages...and those that involve significant and often unexpected challenges to someone’s status and role” (Field, Merrill, & West, 2012, p.80). For mature learners in particular, the literature shows that the decision to return to education is frequently motivated by a transformative experience or life-altering event (Mezirow, 1981), a claim that is further supported by findings from the present study (see section 5.2.3).

Like stakeholder interviews, Braun & Clarke’s (2006) method of thematic analysis was utilised for examining learner interview data (see section 3.10 for further discussion). This iterative approach facilitated a close analysis of the data, thus enabling the researcher to identify key patterns related to learners’ motivations for returning to education; the personal, institutional, and societal challenges faced through the course of their educational journey; and how learners’ reflect on or ‘make sense’ of these series of experiences. Furthermore, through this exploration of individual learner stories, findings that revealed areas in need of further research (sections 5.2.1 and 5.3.1) and those consistent with existing research (see sections 5.2.2, 5.2.3, and 5.4.2) were also uncovered.

In this chapter, the qualitative results of interviews will be discussed. Tables 22



and 23 summarise these participants' demographic details by geographic location.

Table 22 Overview of Scottish Learners

| Participant Pseudonym | Institution Type | Age   | Sex    | Parenting or Caring Responsibilities | Nationality                           | Race/ Ethnicity                         | Disability Status           | Course of Study       | Year of Study         | Enrolment Status |
|-----------------------|------------------|-------|--------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| Sean-James            | Recruiting       | 33    | Male   | No                                   | Scottish                              | White                                   | None disclosed              | Business              | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year  | Full-time        |
| Tina                  | Recruiting       | 36/37 | Female | Yes                                  | Scottish                              | White                                   | None disclosed              | Law                   | Graduated Spring 2021 | Full-time        |
| Sam                   | Recruiting       | 50    | Female | Yes                                  | English                               | White                                   | Autism, Dyslexia, ADHD, OCD | Film & Media          | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year  | Part-time        |
| Maisie                | Recruiting       | 26    | Female | No                                   | English                               | Mixed heritage (Black Caribbean, White) | None disclosed              | Primary Education     | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year  | Full-time        |
| Gillian               | Selective        | 28    | Female | No                                   | Scottish                              | White                                   | Yes, but not specified      | Neuroscience          | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year  | Full-time        |
| Adele                 | Selective        | 36    | Female | Yes                                  | Scottish                              | White                                   | None disclosed              | Community Development | 4 <sup>th</sup> year  | Full-time        |
| Emmanuel              | Selective        | 23    | Male   | No                                   | British                               | Black                                   | None disclosed              | Computer Science      | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year  | Full-time        |
| Anchal                | Selective        | 27    | Female | No                                   | Dual national - Bangladeshi & British | Mixed heritage (South Asian, White)     | None disclosed              | Law                   | Graduated Spring 2021 | Full-time        |
| Catherine             | Recruiting       | 36    | Female | Yes                                  | Scottish                              | White                                   | None disclosed              | Primary Education     | Graduated 2019        | Full-time        |

|                       |            |    |        |     |           |               |                            |                        |                      |           |
|-----------------------|------------|----|--------|-----|-----------|---------------|----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------|
| <b>Alistair</b>       | Selective  | 27 | Male   | No  | Scottish  | White         | Severe Anxiety             | English Literature     | Started in 2015      | Part-time |
| <b>Janet</b>          | Selective  | 46 | Female | No  | Scottish  | White         | None disclosed             | Geography              | Graduated            | Full-time |
| <b>Adrienne</b>       | Selective  | 35 | Female | No  | Scottish  | White         | Hypermobility disorder     | Philosophy             | 4 <sup>th</sup> year | Full-time |
| <b>Mary-Elizabeth</b> | Selective  | 37 | Female | No  | Scottish  | White         | Connective tissue disorder | Sciences               | Final year           | Part-time |
| <b>Thaïsa</b>         | Recruiting | 35 | Female | Yes | Brazilian | Not disclosed | None disclosed             | International Business | Final year           | Full-time |

Table 23 Overview of New York Learners

| Participant Pseudonym | Institution Type   | Age  | Sex    | Parenting or Caring Responsibilities | Nationality | Race/ Ethnicity | Disability Status   | Course                                                        | Year of Study                                          | Enrolment Status         |
|-----------------------|--------------------|------|--------|--------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Cynthia</b>        | Recruiting, public | 42   | Female | Yes                                  | American    | White           | None disclosed      | Individual Studies (Sociology & Finance)                      | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year                                   | Part-time                |
| <b>Sebastian</b>      | Selective, private | 32   | Male   | No                                   | American    | Latino          | None disclosed      | Economics                                                     | Graduated 2021                                         | Full-time                |
| <b>Hector</b>         | Recruiting, public | 31   | Male   | No                                   | American    | Latino          | None disclosed      | Business & Philosophy                                         | Graduated 2021                                         | Mixed enrollment pattern |
| <b>Natalie</b>        | Selective, private | 33   | Female | No                                   | American    | Latina          | Clinical depression | Latin American & Caribbean Studies                            | 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year                                   | Part-time                |
| <b>Josefina</b>       | Recruiting, public | 29   | Female | No                                   | American    | Afro-Latina     | Bipolar disorder    | Psychology                                                    | Final Year                                             | Mixed enrollment pattern |
| <b>Madeline</b>       | Recruiting, public | 32   | Female | No                                   | American    | Not disclosed   | None disclosed      | Individual Studies (Eastern European Cultures & Film studies) | Graduating 2023                                        | Full-time                |
| <b>Alex</b>           | Selective, private | 41   | Female | Yes                                  | American    | Latina          | None disclosed      | Non-Fiction Literature & Race Studies                         | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year                                   | Full-time                |
| <b>Ron</b>            | Recruiting, public | 61   | Male   | No                                   | American    | White           | ADHD                | Computer Science & Education                                  | ***                                                    | Full-time                |
| <b>Carmen</b>         | Selective, private | 28   | Female | No                                   | American    | White           | ADHD                | Psychology                                                    | 3 <sup>rd</sup> year (1 <sup>st</sup> semester junior) | Full-time                |
| <b>Kathleen</b>       | Selective, private | 30's | Female | Yes                                  | American    | White           | ADHD                | Neuroscience                                                  | Final Year                                             | Full-time                |

As performed for the stakeholder interviews, pseudonyms were chosen and used for student participants. Other personal identifiers, such as name and specific location of institution, faculty, and staff names, etc. were also changed or redacted where needed to further protect participant identities.

As shown in Figure 6 below, four main themes were identified across both Scottish and New York learner interviews: *Nonlinear trajectories into higher education*, *Negotiating belonging*, *Bureaucratic barriers to post-secondary access*, and *Emancipation, isolation, and in-between: Impact of COVID*.

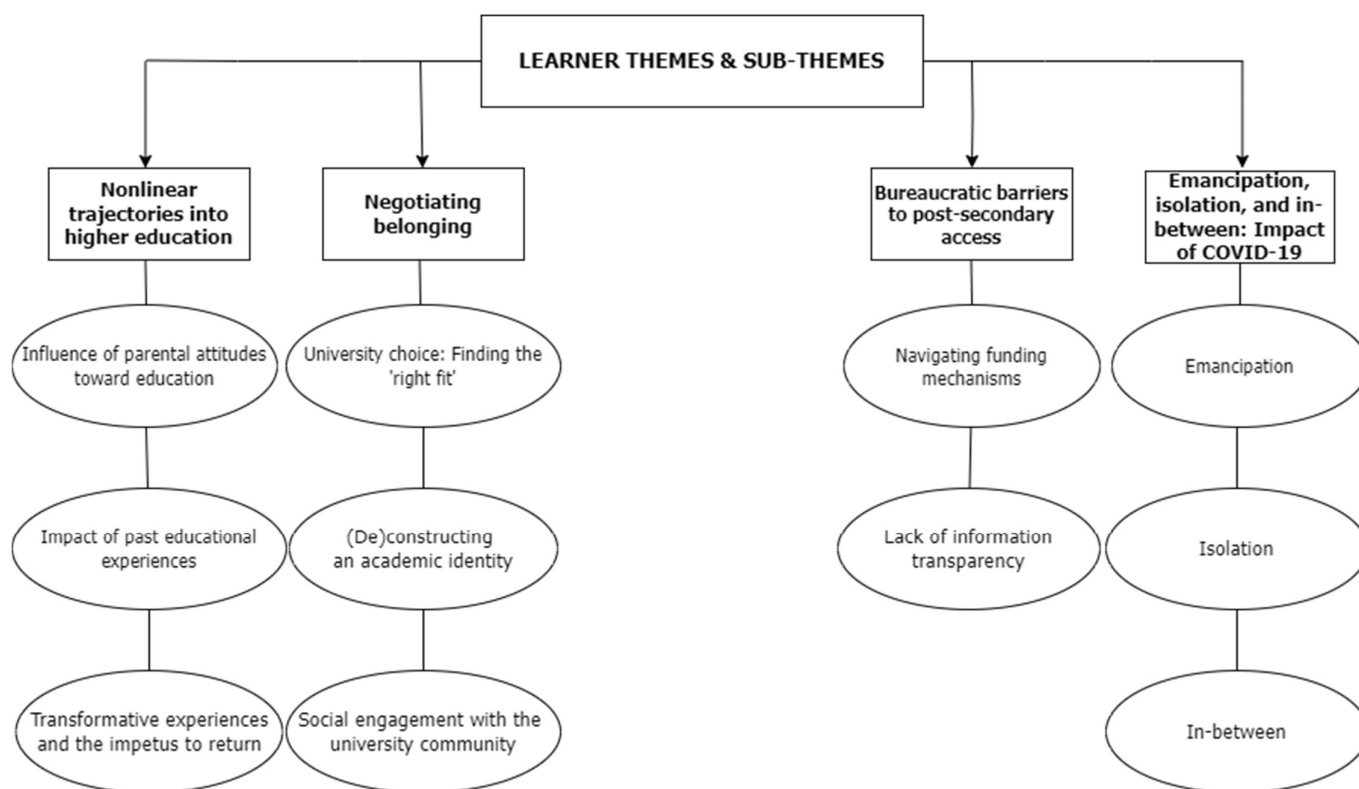


**Figure 6 Flowchart of learner themes and sub-themes**

In the following sections, a table overview of sub-themes and sample quotes will be provided for each of the key themes. These shared themes will then be examined in greater depth in the subsequent narratives.

## 5.2 Theme 1: Nonlinear trajectories into higher education

*Non-linear trajectories into higher education* was the first theme identified within the data. This theme included the sub-themes *Influence of parental attitudes toward education*, *Impact of past educational experiences*, and *Transformative experiences and the impetus to return*. Additionally, this theme revealed that for many participants, their current university enrolment was not their first attempt at completing a degree. A significant number of learners, particularly within the New York sample, were pursuing their bachelor's degree for the second or even third time. Precisely 4 out of the 14 Scottish learners and 9 out of the 10 New York learners interviewed were attempting to complete their degree after a previous stop-out (please see section 2.3.3 for more on this term). Within the Scottish sample, two mature students—Anchal (Selective Scottish HEI) and Thaisa (Recruiting Scottish HEI)—had already earned degrees from other universities, one from another UK university and the other from a Brazilian university, though they were not counted among those making a repeat attempt. Irregular/mixed enrolment patterns or stop-outs are not uncommon among mature learners (Kasworm, 2014), however, current approaches to analysing attrition data often fail to differentiate between “stop-out” and “dropout” statistics, thus conflating these enrolment phenomena (Grabsch et al., 2021; Hoyt & Winn, 2004; also see section 2.3.3).

The sub-themes that follow explore the ways in which the student learners' parental or familial attitudes, early educational experiences, and cataclysmic life events impacted their non-linear trajectory into higher education. These sub-themes are also displayed in Table 24 on the following page, each of which are accompanied by an exemplifying or sample quote.

Table 24 Theme 1 sub-themes

| Sub-theme                                                   | Sample quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Influence of parental attitudes toward education</b>     | "[My dad's] always been very much 'you work your way to what you want to do' type thing, but my mum's the total opposite, she was really proud because I went to university...so she was really supportive, my dad not so much (Mary-Elizabeth, 37, Scottish Selective Institution)."                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Impact of past educational experiences</b>               | "Elementary school was pretty easy. And then middle school [I] started having some problems. And then, you know, high school had some problems as well...I was like an A, B and C student just depending on what was going on in my life at the time...I definitely struggled with my studies, I was not very motivated to learn a lot of things in high school (Carmen, 28, NY Selective Institution)."              |
| <b>Transformative experiences and the impetus to return</b> | "...losing my job during the financial crisis was the catalyst for wanting to go back to school...and then when I was in the process of becoming a mom, I knew I wanted to kind of do better for my son...But truly, what kind of pushed me to face my fears and just go for it was actually a break up...I didn't want to have to rely on anybody, I wanted to be independent (Alex, 41, NY Selective Institution)." |

### 5.2.1 Influence of parental attitudes toward education

For many of the participants, parental or familial attitudes toward education not only had a significant influence on their earlier relationship to learning and formal education but continued to do so well into adulthood. These familial attitudes ranged from having family members who were both supportive as well as university-educated, family members who were supportive but did not attend university, those who were encouraging but did not ‘push’ the pursuit of post- secondary education, and those who were unsupportive or even critical of pursuing a post-secondary education.

A notable difference identified between Scottish and New York participants within this sub-theme was that Scottish learners were more likely to describe belonging to family who emphasised earning a wage over pursuing a degree after high school. This finding was irrespective of whether the participant attended a selective or recruiting institution. In contrast, the New York group of learners were much more likely to express having family who believed in the return on investment in obtaining a degree, in spite of high tuition costs in the United States, and irrespective of familial socio-economic status.

For example, Adele, a mature student at a Selective Scottish Institution and self- described as coming from a working-class background, reflected on how higher education was never part of her family’s expectations for her and her siblings: “[*University*] was never something that my family had suggested...it was never encouraged to go to uni (Adele, 36, Selective Scottish HEI).” Although she was quite academic in school, she recalled her mother’s perspective on post-high school plans being, “[my siblings and I] could earn a wage then we’d be fine.” Whilst Adele does not suggest that her mother actively discouraged further study, her statements do demonstrate that immediate employment was prioritised and perceived as the more secure option. Nonetheless, Adele had still applied and was successfully admitted into university immediately after high school, but she ultimately decided not to enrol, believing at the time: “People like me don’t go to uni.” Unfortunately, Adele’s experience is consistent with the wider research on the impact of class-



based identity on participation in higher education, particularly with regard to how working-class identity can shape one's perception of higher education as an exclusively middle class space (Archer & Leathwood, 2005; Reay et al., 2010), and thus not for 'people like them'. Whilst Adele would eventually return to formal education nearly two decades later, her experience serves as a reminder of the long-term impact of class-based barriers to higher education access.

For other Scottish learners within the sample, family attitudes toward higher education were not as straightforward. Interestingly, there were three Scottish participants who were in families that held opposing views on education; two of these learners—Sean-James at a Recruiting Scottish HEI and Catherine who graduated from a Scottish HEI—belonged to the same family. Mary-Elizabeth, a final year student at a Selective Scottish HEI, recalled the contrasting attitudes toward education between her parents. According to her, her father was *“never really interested in education”*, but her mother was *“really quite proud that [she] passed all [her] exams and got good grades.”* She believed that because her father worked hard to climb the career ladder without a tertiary qualification, *“to him, that was how you succeed...by working your way up, and it's not to do with education (Mary-Elizabeth, 37, Selective Scottish HEI).”* As such, Mary-Elizabeth also shared that even now, her father was not supportive of her decision to return to higher education, whereas her mother was proud and *“always kind of known [she] had it in [her].”*

Sean-James discussed a similar dynamic within his own family, particularly during his earlier educational experiences. When asked about his family's attitudes toward higher education, he recounted: *“...mum and dad's families...[had] slightly different takes—Or at least did, things have changed now.”* In his experience, his maternal uncles, all of whom were schoolteachers, strongly encouraged pursuing a university degree. However, Sean-James' father's approach was much like Mary-Elizabeth's father at the time, where a stronger emphasis was placed on seeking employment after high school: *“go and get yourself a job,”* Sean-James recalled, *“a proper job that you can be in for your whole life (Sean-James, 33, Recruiting Scottish HEI).”* Sean-James later admitted that despite his mother's encouragement, however, he felt that he and his siblings were perhaps not pushed enough in thinking

about their post-high school options. Sean-James' older sister, Catherine (36, Recruiting Scottish HEI), who he later referred to participate in a learner interview for this study, provided the following insight into their mother's outlook on university:

She was the only girl out of ten boys, and the boys were all put through education...She didn't train [as a nurse] at the time that they put [nurses] through degrees...I think she always felt like she kind of missed out that way, but she was easy-osey with us in terms of supportive if we wanted to go to university and supportive if we didn't (Catherine, 36, Recruiting Scottish HEI).

Whilst Catherine did not share any remarks with regard to her and Sean-James' father's perspective on education, her comment seems to align with his reflections on their mother's encouraging but more passive form of educational support.

As stated earlier in this section, interview results showed that New York learner participants were much more likely to have family with positive attitudes toward higher education regardless of socio-economic status. Sebastian, a student from a Selective NY Institution, is a key example of this. As he reflected on his parents views on education, Sebastian shared that he was always told: *"I needed to go to school, I needed to go to college...it was never not an option."* Although his parents did not have the opportunity to complete their secondary education in their country of origin, Mexico, they strongly emphasised the necessity of a university education to Sebastian and his siblings. As one of the younger children in his family, he also remembered looking to his older siblings as a source of inspiration. He later recalled: *"My older siblings' kind of set the example. I just remember kind of looking up to them and just always having a clear sense in my head, like I never questioned whether I would go to [university], I just knew that I needed to do it (Sebastian, 32, Selective New York HEI)."* For Sebastian, having these parental expectations of going to university and witnessing his older siblings' success along this trajectory not only made higher education an attractive option, but in his view the *only* option for him and his future. Whilst these factors served as motivation for Sebastian, in the case of Hector who came from a similar socio-economic and cultural background, such set expectations had the opposite effect on his earlier relationship to higher education.

Whilst these expectations motivated Sebastian, Hector—who shared a similar socio-economic and cultural background—experienced them far differently. In his interview, Hector shared how his mother had “*high expectations for each of [them] academically*”, especially since his older his sister went to an ivy league university. As such, he added, “*my mother expected [ivy league] type effort from us* (Hector, 31, Recruiting NY HEI).” Rather than perceive his sister’s educational success as inspiring at the time, Hector resented his mother’s insistence that he follow her example. Later reflecting on his relationship to studying as a teenager, he remarked: “*Being the teenaged rebel that I was, I didn’t want to do what you wanted me to do. I didn’t want to be like my sister— I hated that [my mother] would compare me to my older sister.*”

These drastically different responses to similar parental attitudes toward education are perhaps demonstrative of a ‘parental influence-parental pressure’ spectrum, or in other words, a point at which parental influence becomes parental pressure for the individual. For some learners, such as Sebastian, parental influence can serve as motivation, whilst for others, like Hector, it may manifest as pressure, leading to resistance from the individual. In this vein, another New York learner, Kathleen from a Selective New York Institution, also discussed her earlier experiences of parental pressure to go to university.

Although neither of her parents had obtained a bachelor’s degree, Kathleen mentioned, she further explained that: “*They pressured me to go to university after high school because I was smart, and that’s what I needed to do to have a good, prosperous life* (Kathleen, 30’s, Selective NY HEI).” Whilst Kathleen was successfully admitted into university directly from high school on a sports scholarship, she believed that the pressure to attend and the uncertainty of what course to study ultimately led to her withdrawal.

Overall, these narratives demonstrate how familial attitudes toward education can manifest in supportive, passive, or dismissive ways, and how these perspectives have shaped adult learners’ early relationship to education. In the next section, this study will explore the impact of participants’ past experiences

of formal education on their educational journeys.

### **5.2.2 Impact of past educational experiences**

For many adult learners, a nonlinear trajectory into higher education is often shaped by past educational experiences (Knowles, Holton, and Swanson, 2015). These experiences often significantly influence their relationship to learning, as well as their self-perception and academic aspirations (Cross, 1981). Whilst not all participants had reported experiences of early childhood or adolescent trauma, it was a subject that came up frequently in these discussions of past educational experiences, irrespective of geographic context. Interestingly, this finding was consistent with stakeholder Jess' experience of working with mature students at her recruiting NYS HEI (please see section 4.3.1). As discussed in Chapter 4, Jess worked with mature students accepted into the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at her institution. When describing the advantages of cohort-based learning and student peer networks, she explained, "...there's a lot of trauma that's happening, especially with my group."

In this way, the narrative that follows thus highlights the impact of trauma on many of the participants' past educational experiences—particularly during their secondary school years—and will be contrasted with those who did not share this aspect. In the case of this latter group of participants, feeling a lack of academic challenge and/or being drawn to socialising with peers had more of an impact on their early learning experiences.

For Alistair, who was enrolled at a Selective Scottish HEI, he recalled from a young age that his primary and high school teachers strongly encouraged him to pursue university. This sense of pressure only increased by the time he had enrolled at a private high school and was further exacerbated by what would later become a battle with prolonged illness. When asked what he had initially planned for himself after high school, Alistair reflected:

I wanted to be a writer [pause] I think...I was sort of told that it would be something I would be good at. It was a very strange experience because obviously a whole generation of kids grew up with the expectation that they're going to do something more practical...whereas for me, [being a writer] became the expectation, which was quite a lot of pressure. There was sort of talk of me going to Oxford from the Head of my year—Which

when someone's been ill, that became quite hard because it felt like all those sort of expectations were being [pause]—I was disappointing people (Alistair, 27, Selective Scottish HEI).

Alistair would eventually leave school at the age of 15 and would not revisit the idea of pursuing university until he began receiving treatment for his illness at 19. Up until this point, he shared, he experienced a series of misdiagnoses and even being undiagnosed over the course of the four years. Despite having to leave school due to the extent of his health condition, Alistair still recalled: *"There was always the implication from teachers, and doctors, and [my] parents that it was all in my head (Alistair, 27, Selective Scottish HEI)."*

In contrast to Alistair's experience, in which the ongoing pressure to follow a high-achieving, academic path and poor health contributed to his past educational trauma, Alex's (Selective NY HEI) story was that of constant alienation and total neglect. When asked about her relationship to learning before university, Alex admitted: *"I actually don't have a good relationship with school systems in general."* In addition to having *"[felt] excluded"* and *"being treated as an Other even by teachers"*, they recounted a particularly damaging incident from middle school that would significantly affect their life well into adulthood. In sixth grade (equivalent to S1 in Scotland), Alex had disclosed to their school counsellor that they were being sexually abused, but it was never reported to the police. *"[My school counsellor] didn't call the police,"* Alex recalled, *"Like there was no police. She called my mom, but there was no resources or anything given to me afterwards...she just let it go...I think a lot of it had to do with the fact my mom couldn't speak English, and so we were kind of like pushed aside (Alex, 41, Selective NY HEI)."*

Alex believed that the issues they later endured in high school were a by-product of their middle school's failure to properly report the abuse. They described their high school years as time spent in *"survival mode"*, rather than planning for the future: *"I didn't think about the future, I didn't think about future plans, or future self (Alex, 41, Selective NY HEI)."* Ultimately, Alex would leave high school without obtaining their diploma and would eventually find work in the mortgage industry. It would not be until they experienced a series of transformative life events, which will be explored more fully in the

next section 4.2.3, that Alex decides to return to education.

In contrast to Alistair and Alex’s traumatic educational experiences, Sean-James (Recruiting Scottish HEI), Hector (Recruiting NY HEI), and Carmen (Selective NY HEI) all shared feeling more invested in the social side of high school rather than the learning experience. Interestingly, with the exception of Sean-James, none of the other Scottish learners reported disengaging from school due to socialising with peers or intellectual boredom, instead either experiencing school-related trauma or generally enjoying their school learning. For Sean-James, feeling unchallenged and subsequently bored by his classes led to his disengagement from school:

*I enjoyed the social aspect of [school]...but the actual sitting in class I found really boring. I was a very good student until I was about 13 or 14. And I think it was probably quite a lot of arrogance and also like boredom in that the classes I was in, I found it really easy. And so, I found other ways to kind of occupy myself (Sean-James, 33, Recruiting Scottish HEI).*

Similarly, when asked about their relationship to learning growing up in their interviews, Hector and Carmen both shared that socialising with friends took precedence over their studies in high school:

*“I wanted to hang out with my friends more than go to school. I never cut school, though—I went to all my classes...I just didn’t try (Hector, 31, Recruiting NY HEI).”*

*“...I was not very motivated to learn a lot of things in high school. I had been caught multiple times in high school like cheating on exams because I didn’t want to study, I just wanted to get the grade and, you know, I think in high school I was more focused on seeing friends and things like that (Carmen, 28, Selective NY HEI).”*

This broad spectrum of educational experiences discussed—ranging from trauma- induced disengagement to prioritising social engagement with peers over academics—highlight the variety of factors that can impact mature learners’ early relationships with education. These findings are consistent with Knowles et al.’s (2015) emphasis on the diversity of adult learners’ past educational experiences and how these experiences shape their early relationship to learning. Given the prevalence of trauma among mature learners (Douglass, Threlkeld, and Merriweather, 2022), it is essential for

higher education institutions to truly invest in trauma-informed pastoral care and student support and familiarising mature learners with these services. As is further explored in section 6.2.2 of this thesis, institutional support plays a critical role in mature student progression in higher education.

### 5.2.3 Transformative experiences and the impetus to return

For many participants in this study across geographic contexts and institution types, the aspiration to pursue a degree had always been there, yet life circumstances often made higher education seem unattainable or not feasible at the time. However, transformative life events—such as needing career advancement opportunities/a career change, or the end of a long-term relationship—served as the catalysts for these mature learners' decisions to return to higher education. This particular finding was unsurprising and was consistent with wider research, further supporting the notion that significant life changes often trigger self-reflection, leading adults to seek higher education as a means of regaining control over their lives or improving their life circumstances (O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Merrill, 2015). In this way, many studies suggest that these moments of disruption provide both the motivation and the practical necessity for adults to pursue higher education opportunities (Reay, 2002; Field, 2012).

For Tina, a participant from a recruiting Scottish HEI and Alex from a selective New York HEI, both shared that the breakdown of their long-term romantic relationships was a major turning point for their respective returns to higher education. In this vein, Tina noted that the end of her marriage marked the moment in which she decided to prioritise herself, stating:

*I kept thinking about [university] and putting it off—how was I going to afford it, could I be a student, and how much was it going to cost—and stuff like that. And my marriage broke down and I suddenly thought, 'you know what? It's not going to impact on anybody else but me. So, I just decided to go for it (Tina, 36/37, Recruiting Scottish HEI).*

Similarly, Alex described how, in addition to her breakup, losing her job during the financial crisis and becoming a mother made her want to 'do better':

*...losing my job during the financial crisis was the catalyst for wanting to*

*go back to school...and then when I was in the process of becoming a mom, I knew I wanted to kind of do better for my son...But truly, what kind of pushed me to face my fears and just go for it was actually a break up...I didn't want to have to rely on anybody, I wanted to be independent (Alex, 41, NY Selective Institution).*

For Madeline at a recruiting New York HEI, she shared having always been interested in going to university, but feeling discouraged due financial constraints and a lack of parental support. However, after starting a new job and meeting her now-husband, Madeline began to revisit the idea of attending university. Whilst her new relationship and career refuelled her interest in returning to education, it was the familial pressure to have children and “*go the traditional route*” that ultimately pushed her to ‘take the leap’. Recalling this particular moment, Madeline reflects: “*This is the time...it was like really one day of having a complete breakdown, where I decided to go back to school [university].*”

Despite the slight differences in these learners’ transformative experiences, the underlying theme here is the connection they have made between education and empowerment. In this way, these transformative experiences not only served as catalysts for returning to education, but also as a way for these learners to reclaim agency over their lives and futures.

### **5.3 Theme 2: Negotiating belonging**

The next theme that was identified in the interview data was that of *Negotiating belonging*. Through the sub-themes of *University choice: Finding the ‘right fit’*, *(De)constructing an academic identity*, and *Social engagement with the university community*, this second theme explores how students’ career goals and sense of self initially informed their choice of course and institution, the ways in which their studies reaffirmed or challenged their sense of self, and how their interactions with the wider university community impacted their sense of belonging at their chosen institution.



Table 25 Theme 2 sub-themes

| Sub-theme                                              | Sample quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>University choice: Finding the 'right fit'</b>      | "I was doing some research and I had read they had a Comparative Literature department, I think only [redacted] College had that as well [but] it logistically wouldn't have worked because of my office at the time was on the Upper West Side...Then I always heard that [redacted] was like champions of the working-class—And, I don't know, for some reason it stands out in that way (Madeline, 32, NY Recruiting Institution)." |
| <b>(De)constructing an academic identity</b>           | "[The degree] actually offered me the opportunity to question my values and my beliefs. I initially went into it thinking of everything I was going to bring to it...But actually, I learned a whole load about myself along the way (Catherine, 36, Scottish Recruiting Institution)."                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Social engagement with the university community</b> | "All my fellow students treated me like a tutor or treated me like their mum...I don't want to be treated differently but I'm getting treated differently and it's a bit frustrating because I don't think that differently to them (Sam, 50, Scottish Recruiting Institution)."                                                                                                                                                       |

### 5.3.1 University choice: finding the ‘right fit’

For most participants, irrespective of geographic context, much forethought went into choosing their course, in addition to selecting an institution best suited for achieving their academic and professional goals. As these learners navigated employment over the years, they ‘took stock’ of their existing strengths, interests, skillsets, and desired career trajectory, and once making the decision to return to education, researched what HEIs were best suited for helping them to achieve their aim. Beyond academic considerations, practical factors, such as proximity to home or work, also played a significant role in their decision-making process. In other words, navigating university choice typically warranted a careful and considered approach for this group of learners.

One such example of this was Sam at a Recruiting Scottish HEI. Proximity to home, along with having strong industry links in her course subject, were both a significant part of her university choice criteria. In explaining why and how she decided to attend her current HEI, she shared:

*I couldn't go to [Selective Scottish HEI] because the logistics of that for me—60 minutes away and 60 miles away, I just couldn't do it...there's only [Recruiting Scottish HEI #1], really, or [Recruiting Scottish HEI #2] 30 minutes away from me. [Recruiting Scottish HEI #1] doesn't really run the same kind of Film course and [Recruiting Scottish HEI #2] does have a really good reputation for its Film and Media...I don't just read what they tell me what the course is about and believe all the hype. I look into everybody that's working [there] and all the tutors, previous students on LinkedIn and what they've been up to...[the lecturers have] had proper jobs in the industry. So, it's not like they're just teaching about it with no experience of it—they've experienced it and then they're teaching from what they've learned (Sam, 50, Recruiting Scottish HEI).*

Here, Sam describes a meticulous approach to assessing her university options and determining the right institutional fit for her. Like Sam, convenience of location was also a university choice criterion for Madeline (NY Recruiting HEI), choosing her current HEI based on its proximity to her job at the time. In addition to this consideration, however, she expressed how she was also drawn to the institution’s reputation as “champions of the working-class”:

*I was doing some research and I had read they had a Comparative Literature department, I think only [redacted] College had that as well [but] it logistically wouldn't have worked because of my office at the time was on the Upper West Side...Then I always heard that [redacted] was like champions of the working-class—And, I don't know, for some reason it stands out in that way (Madeline, 32, NY Recruiting HEI).*

For others, like Tina, being able to envisage herself studying at that specific institution was an important factor, and thus finding a university environment that suited their needs:

*I went for an Open Day and fell in love with it. Just absolutely loved it. It's tranquil, especially as a mature student, because it's not in the centre, it's not all about the nightlife and stuff like that...I actually got an offer from [another HEI] the year before after doing my HNC...I got rejected from [my current HEI]. I did my HND and then got into [my current HEI]. I actually put off and waited for my offer from [my current HEI] because I wanted that campus (Tina, 36/37, Recruiting Scottish HEI).*

For Tina, visiting campus to get a sense of the university environment played an important part in her decision-making process. Having enjoyed her visit during Open Day, and despite her initial application to the university being rejected, Tina chose to wait and reapply for admission because of how much the campus environment resonated with her.

In summary, whilst Sam and Madeline's pragmatic approaches aligned with existing research on mature student university choice, for whom convenience (i.e., proximity, class scheduling, etc.) and course quality are significant factors, unfortunately, research on this topic is still limited (Broekemier, 2002; Malhotra & Apicerno, 2023). Further to this, Tina's emphasis on university environment as a criterion also reveals a potentially under-explored area of research within the literature on mature student university choice. As adult student enrolments continue to decline in Scotland (UCAS, 2022) and slowly recover from the pandemic in a gradual increase in New York public universities (New York State Education Department, 2023) developing a better understanding of mature learners' HEI decision-making processes should also be a point of interest to HEIs in both locations.

### 5.3.2(De)constructing an academic identity

Consistent with Mezirow's (2000) work on transformative learning, the mature students in this study experienced significant turning points throughout their educational journeys. Whilst transformative experiences initially served as catalysts for their return to formal education (please see section 5.2.3), all learners in this study, irrespective of geographic context, also encountered additional transformative moments along the way, resulting in a meaningful shift in their self-concept and/or world view. For example, many learners dealt with feelings of imposter phenomenon and the impulse to prove they deserved to be at their HEI. Struggling with adapting to and navigating a more 'academically competitive' environment was a prevailing reflection that arose among learners at selective HEIs, irrespective of location.

For Sebastian, his transition from community college to a selective NY institution was a "rollercoaster", experiencing "*culture shock*" from the academic intensity and academically competitive environment of his new institution. Although he reported struggling with self-doubt and imposter phenomenon in his first semester, these feelings would eventually subside as he progressed through his course. Reflecting on this journey, Sebastian shared: "*It gives me a lot of confidence to know that there's nothing that I can't learn or pick up or do, as long as I maintain my discipline and do the work* (Sebastian, 32, Selective NY HEI)."

In contrast, Kathleen did not share in Sebastian's takeaway in terms of her experience with intense academic competition at her selective NY HEI. After realising how negatively trying to conform to her institution's competitive norms was affecting her sense of self and overall wellbeing, she describes ultimately rejecting her university's culture of competition:

*I got very caught up in the 'You have to be on top'...I was starting to get very caught up in sacrificing pieces of myself for 'the brand' and it took me taking off this past summer and doing a lot of therapy and introspection to realise that I've done all the other stuff on my terms, I'm going to do this on my terms too* (Kathleen, 30's Selective NY HEI).

For her, (de)constructing her academic identity manifested in reclaiming her autonomy within the academic space, realising she did not need to conform to a competitive university culture in order to succeed. Her trajectory resonates with Baxter Magolda's (2009) concept of self-authorship, where learners begin to shift from external to internal sources of validation, making decisions based on their own values and beliefs rather than internalise external expectations. In this vein, Kathleen's realisation aligns with self-authorship's emphasis on individuals' internal authority to navigate and define their paths in life.

Like Sebastian and Kathleen, Catherine's (Recruiting Scottish HEI) learning experience also took her on a journey of self-discovery and critical reflection:

[The degree] actually offered me the opportunity to question my values and my beliefs. I initially went into it thinking of everything I was going to bring to it...But actually, I learned a whole load about myself along the way (Catherine, 36, Scottish Recruiting Institution).

Here, Catherine admits that she began her studies with a clear sense of the knowledge and value she would bring to her course, only to find as she progressed, that the learning experience would actually prompt her to critically interrogate her personal beliefs and values.

These narratives highlight the diverse ways in which mature students interact with their academic environments. Kathleen's rejection of external pressures and embrace of self-authorship contrasts with Sebastian's journey of overcoming self-doubt and embracing the challenge as a path to personal growth, whilst Catherine found a way to anchor her educational experience in personal growth and self-discovery. This range in experience highlights the diversity of the 'mature student experience', demonstrating that higher education not only serves as a space for formal learning, but also as a critical space for personal reflection and (re)negotiation of identity.

### **5.3.3 Social engagement with the university community**

The ways in which a student engages with their university community and the quality of those interactions play a critical role in students' sense of belonging. Whilst the ways in which university stakeholders facilitate student sense of

belonging was explored in the previous chapter (see section 4.3), this subtheme encapsulates learners' interactions with all members of their university community, such as their student peers (section 5.3.3.1), lecturers (section 5.3.3.2), and MPA staff (section 5.3.3.3). As such, the narrative for this section has been organised according to these three distinct categories of university stakeholders. Of these interactions, students' experiences with lecturers and staff were the most varied, ranging from highly supportive and developing strong mentorship bonds to feeling overlooked or neglected. Further to this, older participants irrespective of location were either more likely to feel treated as equals by lecturers and tutors or worried they would be expected to know more than their younger classmates. The full extent of this subtheme's impact on participants' learning experience will be examined more closely through the lens of Social Identity Theory in the subsequent Discussion chapter (see section 6.2.2).

### **5.3.3.1 Student Peers**

Whilst most learners interviewed admitted to prioritising their studies over connecting or socialising with peers, they generally found classmates friendly but unrelatable. In other words, participants reported feeling a disconnect with younger students due to differences in lifestyle—such as little interest in partying and having to prioritise multiple, external commitments—as well as having more lived experience. Further to this, many participants also reported 'keeping to themselves', whether actively or unintentionally, as a way of staying focused on their studies.

Some participants found academic-related conversations easy to engage in, but they still struggled to connect with younger peers beyond university-related matters. Tina (Recruiting Scottish HEI), for example, enjoyed networking with her peers academically but found her priorities, especially being a parent, created a barrier to socialising with them beyond this: *"They're lovely people and you get on with them, and it's kind of a networking thing where you could message them and get information or whatever. But actually, going out to the pub or whatever, it would be a totally different story* (Tina, 36/37, Recruiting Scottish HEI)."

Sam (Recruiting Scottish HEI) also reflected on how her age and status as a parent shaped her interactions with peers. However, in contrast to Tina, she focused on how she believed her younger peers perceived her. She described being treated as a “mum” or a tutor by her peers, highlighting the age-related dynamics that influenced her university social experience. Whilst she did not want to be treated differently, she believed her age shaped how her younger classmates viewed and interacted with her, adding a layer of frustration and sense of alienation to her academic journey:

*All my fellow students treated me like a tutor or treated me like their mum...I don't want to be treated differently but I'm getting treated differently and it's a bit frustrating because I don't think that differently to them (Sam, 50, Scottish Recruiting Institution).*

In addition to being treated differently by peers, a lack of representation within the university community can also contribute to mature students' sense of alienation. For example, at one point in his academic journey, Alistair (Selective Scottish HEI) considered transferring out of his university due to low enrolment numbers among mature students. This should be worrying to institutions, given the financial implications, but also demonstrates how the lack of intersectionally diverse student populations can lead to feelings of Othering and isolation:

*...I was hoping to transfer to a different university, because [my university] seems to have a shockingly low number of mature learners (Alistair, 27, Selective Scottish HEI)*

Hector, at a recruiting NY HEI, described a different form of social isolation, one in which his focus on his studies led him to adopt a “lone wolf” approach, reflecting a common narrative among mature students who prioritise academic goals over a social university experience: “Typically, I was kind of like a ‘lone wolf’, but not intentionally. It was only just because I was studying, I was really focused. (Hector, 31, Recruiting NY HEI).”

Whilst Josefina (Recruiting NY HEI) also admitted to not seeking friendships with her younger peers, her explanation revealed a sense of inner conflict with this choice. Although she shared that she interacted with her peers, and would

welcome the opportunity to form friendships, she was hesitant to make an effort due to the age gap between them:

*...I know this is not like entirely true, but I'm about 10 years older than a lot of my classmates right now. So, I kind of keep to myself. I interact with them, but I'm not really looking to make friends...I would, you know, welcome the opportunity but I'm not making an effort on that front, specifically because of the age gap (Josefina, 29, Recruiting NY HEI).*

Hector and Josefina's quotes demonstrate how mature students often navigate a delicate balance between academic focus and social integration, with age differences sometimes acting as a barrier. Whilst some, like Hector, did not mind isolation as a byproduct of their academic priorities, others, like Josefina, grappled with the desire for connection but feeling self-conscious about age differences. However, not all mature learners experienced varying degrees of isolation, and some were able to develop meaningful peer connections. For example, Janet (Selective Scottish HEI) shared her positive experience in a student society, where she felt a sense of camaraderie and connection with both staff and students, reflecting the potential for peer support in smaller, close-knit departments or academic units:

*I was in the [redacted] Society, so we had a lot of like events and things. And [my institution] is wee, so you kind of get to know everybody in different years as well... [my department] is like super friendly—staff and the students—so we all kind of knew each other (Janet, 46, Selective Scottish HEI).*

Therefore, in this section we can see how mature learners navigate university life differently, often keeping social engagement with younger student peers to a minimum, either by choice or due to feelings of isolation or othering, as they navigate the complexities of balancing academic and personal commitments. This reflects the wider literature on mature learners, where age, life experience, and external responsibilities shape not only their academic journeys or educational trajectories, but also their social experiences within higher education (Kasworm, 2008; O'Shea & Stone, 2011).

### **5.3.3.2 Lecturers**

The previous section focused on the thoughts and experiences of students in



relation to their peers. However, this next section highlights how attitudes toward and connections with faculty staff not only play an important role in shaping students' learning experience, but also their sense of belonging. According to Tinto (1993), positive interactions with faculty staff are linked to higher levels of student engagement with the university community, thus facilitating a stronger connection to one's higher education institution.

Perhaps the best exemplar of this theme would be the experiences of Sebastian (Selective NY HEI). In his final year of study, Sebastian described his severe adverse circumstances, sharing that he was struggling with unemployment and temporary houselessness, often having to sleep in his car:

*The professor that I opened up to, she ended up giving me a better grade than I should have gotten just based off of me being honest with her about what I was going through...In another class I had like a really bad experience. I had to do a group presentation and...I just got up there, and I just completely flubbed it...it was the first time that I felt like such an imposter I was like, 'what the fuck am I doing at [Selective NY HEI], I'm not as smart as these kids...*

Seeking guidance on how to navigate this situation, Sebastian confided in the University chaplain, who validated him; *"he's like, 'based off of everything you said, how could you focus on either presentation?'"* Unfortunately, this supportive response would contrast drastically with the reaction of his professor for the module, who was less than understanding:

*I told him everything that was going on...I just spilled it out real quick without emotion, because at that point, I was just like 'damn'. He was like, 'Okay, because I wish you had told me this before. So, your telling me now, it's like I think it's difficult to believe'—And I understood [that]...I just remember thinking, 'Man this sucks, like I'm really in this by myself' (Sebastian, 32, Selective NY HEI).*

This worrying example demonstrates the critical role of not only university support services, but the 'lottery' that is lecturer support. In other words, Sebastian's starkly different interactions with faculty highlight that whilst some students in difficult situations may experience empathy and understanding from their lecturers, others may find themselves facing indifference or even scepticism, which can significantly impact their sense of belonging. Research shows that when students perceive their professors as approachable and empathetic, they are more likely to proactively seek help

and ultimately progress at their institution (Kuh, 2001; Tindle et al., 2022). Whilst instilling approachability and empathy in staff may be difficult to conceptualise in practical terms, what institutions should consider is developing clear guidelines for faculty on how to handle student disclosures of personal issues and challenges (e.g., clear signposting protocol), as well as providing training on institutional Good Cause policy.

### 5.3.3.3 Academic Support / Student Support Staff

Participants were much more likely to discuss their experiences with academic support (U.S.) or student support services (UK) as a whole. However, what stood out to many learners were their individual interactions with staff members who played a critical role in their educational journey, for better or worse.

Learners Sam (Recruiting Scottish HEI) and Adrienne (Selective Scottish HEI) both shared positive experiences with Disability Support Services at their respective institutions, highlighting the critical support this type of provision played in making them feel empowered and able to take ownership of their learning experience. Similarly, Gillian's (Selective Scottish HEI) positive interaction with Wellbeing Services reflected how mental health support can greatly impact students' ability to focus and succeed academically.

Ron, a mature learner from a recruiting NY HEI, is the best exemplar of this particular finding, however:

*...Twice a semester [I] check-in with my Disability Advisor and she's mostly just a cheerleader, but a really good one. I walk out of there feeling extremely encouraged and energised...I have three advisors: the General Advisor, the Accessibility Advisor, and the Computer Science [Advisor] and it's just great to talk to them (Ron, 61, Recruiting NY HEI).*

For Ron, these individualised 'touchpoints' not only provided guidance, but also emotional encouragement, reinforcing the powerful impact that positive interactions with MPA staff can have on mature learners. This finding is also consistent with the wider research, suggesting that meaningful connections with staff are crucial for fostering student sense of belonging (Soria, 2012; Strayhorn, 2015).

In contrast, Sebastian at a selective NY HEI described his interactions with his academic advisor as less invested and more transactional, reflecting the common concern about overworked academic advisors in the literature (Winfield & Paris, 2022). Sebastian explains: *“Like meeting with my [academic] advisor always felt kind of rushed. Always felt like they were super busy, and that they were checking boxes off of the list* (Sebastian, 32, Selective NY HEI).”

U.S. research shows that academic advisors are frequently burdened with high caseloads and increased job demands, often without additional resources. This can negatively affect the quality of academic advising and the advisors’ ability to engage meaningfully with students, as burnout is associated with reduced job satisfaction and higher turnover rates (Winfield & Paris, 2022). Overloaded advisors may struggle to provide the kind of personalised, attentive support that is critical for student success, resulting in more transactional interactions, which Sebastian’s experience exemplifies. This factor is particularly concerning, as research has shown that consistent, high-quality advising is linked to improved student outcomes, progression, and a sense of belonging (Soria, 2012). Therefore, the workload and well-being of academic advisors remain essential factors in the student experience.

Although overall positive in evaluation, it was clear that the effectiveness of these services varied greatly. Even in instances where advisors were helpful and encouraging, they were often seen as struggling under the weight of their workload, which sometimes impacted the quality of support they could provide. The varying degrees of effectiveness in support provision highlight the need for institutions to address workload issues for professional and support staff in order to improve consistent quality in academic guidance throughout students’ HE careers.

### **5.4 Theme 3: Bureaucratic barriers to post-secondary access**

The third theme identified was that of *Bureaucratic barriers to post-secondary access*, revealing an overlap in a main theme (*Bureaucratic barriers to facilitating access*) and one sub-theme (“Navigating funding mechanisms”)

between the learner and stakeholder interviews. As discussed in the previous chapter, navigating complex funding structures such as numerous funding bids and applications, being legally required to deny Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) applications from students one dollar over the income requirement, or having to develop an in-house version of EOP due to failing to meet the budgetary requirements to receive government funding, were just some of the ways in which university stakeholders were impacted by bureaucratic barriers to facilitating access (please see section 4.5.2).

In the learner interviews, it was found that the subject of bureaucratic barriers to HE access arose frequently, particularly with regard to navigating funding and accessing institutional information.

Table 26 Theme 3 sub-themes

| Sub-theme                                             | Sample quote                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Navigating funding mechanisms</b>                  | “I went [to an out-of-state university] when I was 19...that wasn't a good fit and I couldn't really afford it at all, I had to take out loans for it...For the 2013 to 2014 school year I was at [redacted] Community [College]...Unfortunately, we couldn't afford that either. Because my parents hadn't filed their taxes in a bit, I couldn't get financial aid... (Josefina, 29, Recruiting NY HEI).” |
| <b>Lack of institutional information transparency</b> | “...My advisor did tell me [the University] have like emergency housing available and that, you know, I could have taken advantage of that, so I think there are programmes...Had I shared it with the right people or had I've been like more forthcoming with my advisor I think I probably could have gotten more assistance (Sebastian, 32, Selective NY HEI).”                                         |

### 5.4.1 Navigating funding mechanisms

Although post-secondary tuition is free for most full-time students ordinarily resident in Scotland, this benefit did not come without challenges for the learners interviewed, particularly students with parenting and/or caring responsibilities. Among New York learners, navigating funding mechanisms were even more complex. Due to high tuition costs in the United States, taking out federal loans, applying to financial aid programmes, or using other forms of funding to supplement costs are not unusual (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). In this vein, findings surrounding New York participants will be split into two brief, separate discussions based on those using a form of financial aid versus those using another form of funding to supplement their tuition costs.

Up until the 2024-2025 academic year, Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) funding for full-time undergraduates did not extend to the summer months (Scottish Government, 2024). Due to this factor at the time of her enrollment, and unable to increase her working hours with her full-time job in the summer before her final year of full-time university study, Catherine (Recruiting Scottish HEI) was forced to look for a second job. In addition to finding a part-time job that would suit her full-time work schedule, as a parent, Catherine also had childcare to consider:

*I was always reliant on having to up my hours over summer, but it wasn't possible that year for the business to be able to do that, so then I was having to pick up another job as well...It's not as if I could've just taken a job working at a bar at night because I had my daughter. So, I would have to be there for her. And, like, I wouldn't necessarily have been able to rely on anybody else to be able to do that. (Catherine, 36, Recruiting Scottish HEI)*

Here, Catherine's experience aligns with the 'latter literature, in which mature learners with caregiving responsibilities often struggle to balance the competing demands of work, study, and family life (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Moreover, research has also shown that these competing priorities can often create a sense of overwhelm, especially when students are forced to make difficult choices about their employment and care responsibilities, often leading to increased stress and financial hardship

(Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Nonetheless, Catherine's story supports the significance of SAAS' decision to start offering summer funding, as it provides an additional layer of much-needed support for students like her.

For Sam—A part-time student at a Recruiting Scottish HEI and parent to a child with additional support needs— “*walking [the] tightrope*” between SAAS part-time funding and receiving Carer's Allowance made financing her education a complicated endeavour. In her interview she explained that whilst she believed she had the scheduling capacity to enrol in three modules a week during her son's school hours, because she was also a full-time carer to her son, she “*then [couldn't]—by [Carer's Allowance's] logic—do a full-time university course because [she] couldn't do it all (Sam, 50, Recruiting Scottish HEI).*” By studying part-time, Sam earlier explained in the interview, it will take her six instead of four years to complete her degree. To further complicate matters, Sam shared, she must also navigate fulfilling the eligibility requirements for receiving part-time funding from SAAS without emphasizing her Carer's Allowance:

*Part-time funding has to be 40 credits, so there's this tiny tightrope, fine line between the fact that I can be a full-time carer and a part-time student. Just if anything [about my situation] changes, I am screwed...They have to make everything so difficult! (Sam, 50, Recruiting Scottish HEI).*

Sam's situation highlights the significant constraints faced by some carers in higher education who must carefully manage their study load in order to maintain eligibility for essential benefits like Carer's Allowance. As policymakers consider ways of enhancing the inclusivity of existing policies, further work is needed to understand the overlap between benefit entitlements and student loans, with the aim to reduce policy conflicts and eligibility issues that can negatively impact prospective students-carers.

Whilst Catherine and Sam's experiences demonstrated the financial and logistical challenges faced by carers and parents in higher education within the Scottish context, this group of New York learners exemplify the complexities of the U.S. financial aid and fee-paying landscape. For both Josefina (Recruiting NY HEI) and Kathleen (Selective NY HEI), who had relied on various

types of government financial aid to help finance their education, the aid award process presented significant logistical challenges. Josefina, for example, faced a barrier to aid when attempting to secure funding for her second attempt at post-secondary education in 2013. As a dependent at the time, her application for government aid was denied because her parents had not recently filed their taxes:

*I went [to an out-of-state university] when I was 19...that wasn't a good fit and I couldn't really afford it at all, I had to take out loans for it...For the 2013 to 2014 school year I was at [redacted] Community [College]...Unfortunately, [my parents and I] couldn't afford that either. Because my parents hadn't filed their taxes in a bit, I couldn't get financial aid... (Josefina, 29, Recruiting NY HEI).*

As a result of this outcome, Josefina was forced to work in order to save money and finance her education, delaying her academic progress. Her experience demonstrates the impact that financial—and in this case, the additional layer of bureaucratic—barriers can have on the educational trajectories of mature learners.

Whilst Josefina's case highlighted how bureaucratic/policy barriers can hinder access to higher education, Kathleen's (Selective NY HEI) experience shows how even those with guaranteed funding can face challenges due to institutional policy. For instance, as a U.S. military spouse, Kathleen was able to use the tuition benefits of the GI Bill (refer to discussion of *Servicemen's Readjustment Act* in section 2.2.4 for details; also see Table 2) to fund her education. Whilst the bill provides substantial financial support to 'military-connected' students, there is a tuition cap, with HEIs deciding how much of the remaining costs they will cover. However, due to Kathleen's faculty being under-funded at her selective institution, they did not fully cover the difference, thus leaving her to make up the difference through student loans:

*The GI bill at [my institution]...had I gone to any other [Selective HEI], I wouldn't have a single student loan. The way the GI bill works at [my institution], because [my School] is so under-funded, is that the GI bill covers about \$26,000 every year...[Veteran Affairs] kicks in 10 grand, [my institution] has to kick in 10 grand. [My institution] can increase their contribution if they wish to—*



*Every other [Selective HEI] would have given me complete contribution...So, that was frustrating. I make up the difference in student loans. (Kathleen, 30's, Selective NY HEI)*

Despite the debt incurred by attending this particular selective HEI, Kathleen concluded, *"...at the end of the day, I'm really going to be leaving [my institution] with 45-ish thousand dollars in student loans, which compared to what the full price tag is, I cannot complain* (Kathleen, 30's, Selective NY HEI). Kathleen's statement here highlights, unfortunately, the troubling reality that for many American learners, taking on substantial university debt is seen as an unavoidable cost to participation in higher education. Even with robust targeted support like the GI Bill, the financial strain remains a persistent challenge for many students, particularly at selective institutions where tuition fees are significantly higher. As Baum et al. (2022) suggest, significant policy reform is needed in order to better align government funding with the actual costs of attendance.

For these next couple of New York learners, alternative forms of funding were utilized to supplement their tuition costs. Although Natalie, a full-time employee at the Selective NY HEI where she studied, was able to cover the cost of tuition through her staff benefits, she was still responsible for paying additional student fees. These fees, according to Natalie, mainly covered the use of campus facilities such as health services, the university gym, printing services, etc.—Facilities that *"[she] didn't use as a part-time student, full-time staff member* (Natalie, 33, Selective NY HEI).*"* Unfortunately, Natalie further explained, *"Right now [student fees are] \$700 and for me, I'm a working professional trying to get their bachelor's...so I'm one of the lowest paid employees within the School. Asking me to cough up \$700 for things that I don't use was a big sore point for me* (Natalie, 33, Selective NY HEI).*"* Aware that her employer allocated a budget of \$1,500 per staff member in professional development funding and hoping to mitigate the financial burden of students fees, Natalie's request was not considered by her employer: *"Unfortunately, that was unable to be covered, so I ended up taking a loan because of the short notice* (Natalie, 33, Selective NY HEI).*"*

For Ron, he relied on a combination of inheritance money and retirement savings to finance his education. He described the precarious nature of his

situation explaining:

*...there's money left over [from my spouse's parents], so that has paid my tuition. My spouse is the administrator and she said, 'okay let's use this for you'...I [also] have a little inheritance and some money I saved for retirement. And I'm spending that to live and it's scary as hell...it's not enough to retire [on]...[and] since I'm not 65 yet, I'm paying tremendous penalties for withdrawing early. So, I'm placing a bet that this all is going to pay off, and it is so scary (Ron, 61, Recruiting NY HEI).*

Ron's decision to tap into his limited financial resources demonstrates his belief in the return on investment of higher education. However, in the face of rapidly increasing tuition fees in the United States, students like Ron are often forced to make difficult choices that put their financial security at risk in pursuit of their educational goals. This should be concerning to policymakers, as research shows that financial stress not only impacts graduate outcomes, but also long-term well-being (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Moore et al., 2021). In other words, as Goldrick-Rab's (2016) and Moore et al.'s (2021) studies both indicate, students facing high levels of financial insecurity are more likely to experience anxiety, lower academic performance, and even attrition from their courses. As such, these outcomes highlight the need for a more sustainable approach to higher education funding that does not jeopardise the financial stability of mature learners.

Therefore, and perhaps unsurprisingly, funding mechanisms and broader financial issues were of the utmost importance, not only for academic performance but also for well-being and quality of life. Addressing these challenges through more accessible and comprehensive student funding policies could potentially enhance educational outcomes, as well as support the overall mental health and economic stability of mature students.

#### **5.4.2 Lack of institutional information transparency**

Informational barriers to higher education access and participation are widely researched within the literature (Boeren, 2016; Lambrechts, 2020; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016). These barriers often arise from a lack of access to information on institutional policy and/or support provision. Additionally, many mature learners are also hesitant to access university support, a reluctance due to

various factors such as time constraints or scheduling conflicts, perceived stigma, self-reliance, or negative past experiences (Mallman & Lee, 2014; Merrill, 2015; Pearce, 2017).

Sebastian, a learner from a selective New York HEI, faced this challenge during a period of houselessness. Having learned about emergency housing services from his academic advisor only after the situation had passed, he reflected: *“Had I shared it with the right people or had I’ve been like more forthcoming with my advisor I think I probably could have gotten more assistance.”* His experience shows how the combination of lack of access to information and hesitancy in asking for help can leave mature learners without support in times of need, even when services exist.

This narrative highlights the importance of building trust and rapport with students. It emphasizes the need for higher education institutions to actively mitigate informational barriers, whilst also creating an environment where mature students feel confident and encouraged to access available resources.

## **5.5 Theme 4: Emancipation, isolation, and in-between: Impact of COVID-19**

Learners shared a breadth of experiences when reflecting on the impact of COVID-19 on their studies. Whilst the pandemic undoubtedly caused disruption to the daily lives of all participants, its effect was far from clearcut or straightforward. For some participants, the pivot to online learning and support provision had a liberating or emancipatory effect on their learning experience, whilst for others, the transition was far more challenging and isolating. As highlighted in the literature (please see sections 2.4.1 and 2.4.4), external factors and the external environment significantly affect mature student progression. The COVID-19 pandemic was of no exception and, in many ways, laid bare the inequities that have long shaped this struggle by putting the wider student community in this group’s ‘shoes’.

Table 27 Theme 4 sub-themes

| Sub-theme           | Sample quotes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Emancipation</b> | “It’s kind of changed the way that I work because the lectures are all recorded...I can actually pause it... thinking back to like pre-recorded lectures...I wouldn’t really take much in because it’s so much information kind of being just piled on you. And then, when I was like studying for exams, I would have to go through the entire lecture and like Google things and read things and make notes, whereas now I can kind of Google things as I go. So, it’s kind of changed my like timetable (Maisie, 26, Recruiting Scottish HEI).” |
| <b>Isolation</b>    | “Going remote was the right decision, but it’s hell, it’s terrible—It’s not right for me...I think there’s so much that happens as you’re filing out of the classroom and chatting with classmates...‘What did you get for number four?’ [or] ‘Hey, why don’t we get together in the library and go over these problems?’ that kind of thing (Ron, 61, Recruiting NY HEI).”                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>In-Between</b>   | “It was hard because you couldn’t leave your flat and I live out in the countryside, and I know no one in my village—So that was very isolating. But...I sort of have long-time difficulty with anxiety anyway, and the fact that student societies have been moving online made that strangely sort of the most connected—I felt <i>very</i> connected during that semester, or at least more so than I do normally (Alistair, 27, Scottish Selective Institution).”                                                                              |

### 5.5.1 Emancipation

For this subtheme, Emancipation describes a newfound sense of flexibility and ownership of the learning experience in a way that students might not have felt or experienced previously. For several participants, the shift to online learning during COVID-19 had an emancipatory effect on their studying experience in a variety of ways. For Adrienne (Selective Scottish HEI) and Maisie (Recruiting Scottish HEI), for example, asynchronous online learning gave them a new, effective way to engage with their studies. Adrienne found that the sudden shift to online provision, “*really gave [her] a chance to find good ways of working.*” Whilst a limited number of in-person classes had resumed at the time of her participant interview, Adrienne still found that it “*just makes more sense for [her] to watch the recorded lecture. Because [she] can pause it and think about it (Adrienne, 35, Selective Scottish HEI).*” Despite having the option of a partial return to in-person learning, Adrienne preferred the flexibility and extra time online asynchronous classes afforded her in reflecting on and processing lecture material at her own pace.

In addition to better supporting how she learned, online learning was also beneficial to Adrienne from a logistical standpoint. Due to having a hypermobility spectrum disorder and a long commute—Initially living in the same city as her university before moving outwith the area—travelling to campus was often a taxing ordeal. Though she was eventually able to arrange travel accommodation through her university’s disability services, she was still travelling nearly 40 miles to get to campus. However, with the transition to online learning, Adrienne was now able to reallocate the time spent on commuting to university toward studying more effectively at home:

“[Previously], I had no real way of emphasizin my notes or my papers or printouts. But now, halfway through last year, I finally sort of started collecting every class into one thing and like marking the numbers of the lectures. That really helped me...so I continue to do that...I don’t think I would have been able to do that if I’d been going in [to campus] everyday (Adrienne, 35, Selective

Scottish HEI).”

Here, Adrienne’s experience emphasises with the research on the benefits of online learning, particularly for individuals with physical disabilities. Seale (2010) suggests that for students with physical disabilities, the flexibility of online learning has been shown to reduce stress associated with navigating physical environments, as well as provides more control or ownership over the learning process.

Similarly, Maisie, a third-year Primary Education student at a Recruiting Scottish HEI, also recognised how the shift to asynchronous online learning and accessing lectures ‘on demand’ had “*changed the way that [she studied]* (Maisie, 26, Recruiting Scottish HEI).” Now having the ability to pause a lecture, Maisie reflected:

...thinking back to like [before] recorded lectures...I wouldn’t really take much in because it’s so much information kind of being just piled on you. And then, when I was like studying for exams, I would have to go through the entire lecture and like Google things and read things and make notes, whereas now I can kind of Google things as I go (Maisie, 26, Recruiting Scottish HEI).

For both students, the pandemic’s impact on the mode of delivery for their modules resulted in a positive change to their existing study habits and patterns, specifically the access to recorded lectures. Further to this, their experience of the shift to asynchronous learning not only highlighted the increased flexibility in terms of *when* course content could be accessed, but also in *how* they could choose to access or engage with lectures in ways that in-person or synchronous learning could not facilitate.

In contrast to Adrienne and Maisie experiences, it was the pivot from asynchronous to synchronous online learning that made the most positive impact on Madeline’s (NY Recruiting HEI) learning experience during COVID. Having taken several asynchronous online classes prior to the pandemic, not only did changing to synchronous learning enable her to feel more connected to her peers, but this new format also better suited Madeline’s work schedule. Additionally, she observed:

*...I was able to work from home and all my classes were on Zoom...And everybody I felt like was getting put into my shoes in a way, where they had to learn how to work outside the box and be online...Because at that point I had already taken like two or three fully online classes at [community college] which I really didn't love, but I felt like the pandemic really shifted everything to not just asynchronous, no connection, it was synchronous online classes and that was just easier for me to work with...I just remember like suddenly feeling I had the advantage and nobody else did (Madeline, 32, Recruiting NY HEI).*

Madeline felt empowered by this new standard of working and studying. Whereas she had previously felt on the periphery of her college community, and perhaps even at a disadvantage due to pursuing part of her studies online, the pandemic's widespread impact on course delivery now increased her engagement with peers and shifted her usual mode of study into the mainstream. Whilst Madeline benefitted from the shift to wider online course delivery in a different way to Adrienne and Maisie, what connects their experiences is the enhanced accessibility they all gained from the mass pivot to online learning.

This increase in accessibility was not limited to enhanced learning experiences, however. For some students, the move to online provision also facilitated their social integration within their university environment. For Sam (Recruiting Scottish HEI), who shared her disability can make in-person interactions a challenge for her, and who was time-poor due to being a full-time carer for her son, her university's shift to entirely online not only allowed her the time to participate in university clubs and societies, but to also socially engage with peers more comfortably:

*[My classmates] weren't with their cameras on... to me, this is like the best thing in the world, because I don't have to make eye contact with people. So, I can communicate like this a lot easier than I can if I'm in a room with you. I think for a lot of people with special needs and with challenges like that, it's made life so much more easy and accessible.*

*Because I'm a full-time carer for my son, I can't go into campus after school hours, so I've never been in any groups, or any societies, or anything. And I joined one last year because I could, because it was all online I could do that (Sam, 50, Recruiting*

*Scottish HEI).*

Sam's experience demonstrates how the flexibility of online university environments can not only enhance the learning experience for some students, but also create social opportunities that can facilitate deeper connections with their peers, especially for students balancing multiple responsibilities or those with specific accessibility needs. The ability to participate in societies and clubs remotely has the potential to cultivate a sense of belonging and connection that might otherwise be difficult to achieve for some mature students. Sam's experience thus highlights the broader impact of digital accessibility in higher education, opening new pathways for social engagement and inclusive participation.

### **5.5.2 Isolation**

For Ron at a Recruiting NY HEI, the transition to online learning was one marked with social isolation and feeling disconnected from the social aspect of in-person learning. Although he ultimately believed that remote course delivery was the right decision, Ron highlighted how he missed the informal social opportunities that are difficult to recreate in a virtual environment:

*Going remote was the right decision, but it's hell, it's terrible—It's not right for me...I think there's so much that happens as you're filing out of the classroom and chatting with classmates...'What did you get for number four?' [or] 'Hey, why don't we get together in the library and go over these problems?' that kind of thing. The Professor I had for a while, I asked could we make some forums to simulate the study hall and—So, you know, you probably know—now there are so many group chats on WhatsApp and all various media and they help a lot (Ron, 61, Recruiting NY HEI).*

Here, Ron describes the difficulty of trying to replicate informal social interactions in an online environment. In this way, he also highlights the value of spontaneous, in-person interactions in fostering a sense of community and peer support among students, a notion further supported by research on the challenges of online student connectedness (Bolliger & Inan, 2012). Whilst digital platforms like group chats and online forums



helped to mitigate this challenge, Ron's experience shows that in terms of facilitating informal social interactions in a way that feels more organic, they are limited. As institutions consider their post-pandemic approach to online learning and support provision, it is critical to understand this aspect of student engagement and interaction that online platforms struggle to facilitate, emphasizing the potential need for more innovative solutions to bridge the social gap in remote learning environments.

### 5.5.3 In-Between

For most learners, the impact of COVID-19 on their studies and learning experience was far from straightforward, existing in a grey area with both positives and negatives.

For example, having been enrolled in college at the start of the pandemic, Thaisa (Recruiting Scottish HEI) was already accustomed to online study by the time she began her university course. Whilst she did not mind accessing lectures or course material online, even admitting that she “[liked] the classes to be online” and “*didn't think they had to be in-person, to be honest*”, she did miss the opportunity to connect with her classmates:

*...I do like the fact that they have now the option to have to have tutorials [in person] because I do think it's important to be able to build the connection that they cannot build online—that's for me that's the worst part of the online thing, is inability to make connection, basically, with other people (Thaisa, 35, Recruiting Scottish HEI).*

Thaisa also elaborated on how her cultural and generational differences from her peers added another layer of difficulty to establishing these connections in a virtual environment, explaining, “*I am Brazilian, I speak in a different way, I have a different culture—These kind of things. And I am older, I'm from a different generation, so for me it's even harder to make these connections online.*” For Thaisa, her experience highlights how individual characteristics like age and cultural background can

amplify the challenges of forming meaningful connections with peers in an online learning context.

In contrast, Alistair (Scottish Selective Institution), who initially struggled with the isolation of studying remotely during lockdown, found a surprising sense of peer connection through student clubs and societies' pivot to online. For him, this change facilitated a level of engagement with the university community he had not had previously:

*It was hard because you couldn't leave your flat and I live out in the countryside, and I know no one in my village—So that was very isolating. But...I sort of have long-time difficulty with anxiety anyway, and the fact that student societies have been moving online made that strangely sort of the most connected—I felt very connected during that semester, or at least more so than I do normally (Alistair, 27, Scottish Selective Institution).*

Meanwhile, Carmen (Selective NY HEI) approached the mass pivot to online learning from a pragmatic stance. Acknowledging the necessity of the shift to online learning, she was also keenly aware of its drawbacks:

*...Online learning, it's necessary—It's not ideal. I feel like it's harder to pay attention when we're just staring at a screen. And I think because of like the technology issues that people have been running into [they] can be a bit disruptive to some classes...I had a class last semester that we didn't get through a lot of the material because of just consistent technological issues. But, you know, I would rather be doing this than, you know, more people getting hurt (Carmen, 28, Selective NY HEI).*

These varied experiences reflect the complex reality of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst digital platforms provided some participants increased flexibility in their learning and unexpected opportunities in peer engagement, they also created barriers to engagement and peer interaction for others. As institutions move forward in a post-COVID world, it will be critical for them to consider how to balance the benefits of online provision with strategies that address its limitations, ensuring that efforts are made to enhance inclusivity and online student connectedness across diverse student populations.

## 5.6 Phase 2 Discussion

As was the case for Phase 1 stakeholder interview results (please see section 4.7), there were also results from this second phase of interviews that offered interesting insights in response to one of the four main research questions, thus meriting a brief separate discussion in this section. It is worth reminding, however, that all four research questions will be fully addressed in the triangulated discussion (particularly sections 6.2.1 - 6.2.4). In this vein, the section to follow examines the question of **RQ4: What strategies have adult students developed or employed in order to mitigate any challenges faced in their access to and participation in higher education both before and during the pandemic?:**

The role family and partner support plays in helping mature learners manage the demands of studying is widely researched within the literature (Kasworm, 2018; Markle, 2015; O'Shea, 2016). Furthermore, support from family members not only manifests in emotional encouragement, but also in more logistical ways, such as partners or even learners' parents stepping into childcare roles, coordinating household and other family-related responsibilities to better enable the learner's focus on their studies, etc. (Wainwright & Marandet, 2010; Brown & Nichols, 2012).

In both Scottish and New York learner samples, being able to rely on family and partner support was consistently mentioned as an important factor across institution types, reinforcing the significance these personal networks play in students' progression. However, one particularly noteworthy finding was the role of community networks as an additional source of support, as demonstrated by Emmanuel, a 23-year-old Black British learner attending a selective Scottish HEI. Not only did Emmanuel rely on family support to mitigate challenges in HE access and participation, but he also drew from the support of his wider community. In other words, he often tapped into his community social networks for

advice on class selection, help with securing off-campus housing, and even insights into the social life at his institution. At one point, when Emmanuel considered leaving his course due to financial difficulties—balancing work with his studies still leaving him under financial strain—a friend from his home community offered to lend him money for his university fees, enabling him to continue his education.

This engagement with community networks and informal knowledge-sharing aligns with Yosso's (2005) *Community Cultural Wealth* framework, which highlights the non-dominant cultural capital that racially/ethnically marginalised groups leverage to progress in post-secondary environments. In this way, Yosso's (2005) theory challenges Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, which traditionally emphasises the knowledge, skills, and behaviours aligned with the dominant class as necessary for academic success (Bourdieu, 1986). Yosso (2005) further problematises this notion by arguing that racially/ethnically marginalised communities possess their own forms of capital—such as *familial*, *navigational*, and their own form of *social* capital—that help them succeed despite systemic barriers to access and participation (please see Yosso, 2005 for full consideration of these concepts). For this Emmanuel, his ability to tap into community links for housing advice, financial support, and university advice demonstrates the power of social capital within his community, though not conceptualised in the Bourdieusian or 'western' way (Yosso, 2005).

This learner's experience highlights the limitations of Bourdieu's framework, might not fully account for the ways in which racially/ethnically marginalised students access and employ resources that are not traditionally valued in higher education contexts. As such, Yosso's concepts provide a more expansive understanding of the assets that learners from ethnically or racially diverse backgrounds bring into post-secondary spaces (Harper, 2010). Her framework highlights how community-based knowledge and support can be crucial in navigating the complexities of higher education. In the context of mature learners, such examples of drawing from community networks reflect broader coping strategies documented in the wider literature, in which mature learners rely on external supports to balance their academic and personal lives

(Fleming & Grace, 2015; O'Shea, 2016). Whilst it should be clarified that as the only Scottish person of colour to participate in this study, this discussion should not be mistaken for a generalisable finding, but rather, should encourage further research into the racially or ethnically intersectional experiences of mature learners in the widening access and participation literature. which

## 5.7 Summary

Findings from learner interviews showed that, surprisingly, the majority of participants were currently enrolled in their studies on a full-time basis. Furthermore, findings also uncovered that the most significant difference between learners based on geographic context was regarding parental or familial attitudes toward higher education. Despite high tuition costs and the severity of the U.S. student loan crisis, New York mature learners still believed strongly in the return on investment in higher education and were also more likely to come from families of origin who shared this same belief, regardless of socio-economic status.

In contrast, Scottish participants were more likely to have family members who encouraged them to enter the workforce immediately after high school, rather than go on to university. How learners engaged with other members of their university community also played a critical part in their learning experience, with most learners highlighting the quality of their interactions with lecturing and MPA staff in particular.

As anticipated, most learners at selective institutions in each location experienced imposter phenomenon at some point in their journey, and student- parents reported struggling with reconciling their parent and student identities. Lastly, whilst the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruption to learners' daily lives, its impact on their learning experiences was far from straightforward. The findings of both qualitative chapters, in light of policy and literature context, will now be triangulated and considered in the overall discussion chapter.

## Chapter 6 Discussion

### 6.1 Introduction

This cross-national exploratory study collected and analysed primary interview data from both Scotland and New York samples of learners and stakeholders. This was conducted in order to assess the current and future inclusivity of widening access and participation activity for mature learners in each location. Utilising Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation Model (please see section 2.4.7), the project employed an ecological approach to its research design (refer to see section 3.4) by way of scoping widening participation policy (presented in section 2.2), as well as conducting interviews with both university stakeholders (findings in Chapter 4) and mature learners (findings in Chapter 5) in these two locations. Additionally, Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) Student Integration Model of Attrition (please see section 2.4.1), Tajfel & Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory (please see section 2.4.3), Cross' (1981) Barriers to Adult Participation (see section 2.4), and Bourdieu's (1986) Social Reproduction Theory (please see section 2.4.6) were also used as a powerful analytic lens for interpreting both sets of interview data.

By applying these theoretical models and frameworks, with a qualitative multi- method phased approach, this thesis offers a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing widening access and participation, offering deeper insights into the current state of these initiatives in Scotland and New York contexts (please see section 2.5 for details on this multi-theoretical framework). In doing so, this triangulated discussion (see section 6.2) will revisit research questions, answering them with findings integrated from the data phases, considering them critically with regard to previous research as well as in the context of policy. It considers a nuanced understanding of the current state of play on widening access and participation activity across two different geographic contexts, discusses the limitations (see section 6.4) and the strengths (see section 6.5) of the present study, and concludes with a set of recommendations for future research, practice,

and policy (see section 6.6) in both locations. Ultimately, this project calls for strengthened, ongoing collaboration among researchers, HEIs/practitioners, and policymakers to develop sustainable strategies for mitigating challenges to mature student access and participation in higher education in a post-COVID world.

A reminder of the four research questions of this thesis is provided below:

1. What types of interventions have Scottish and New York higher education institutions (HEIs) implemented to widen access and participation?
2. What role does institutional support play in a student's decision to remain or leave higher education?
3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected Scottish and New York HEIs' approach to adult student recruitment and support provision?
4. What strategies have adult students developed or employed in order to mitigate any challenges faced in their access to and participation in higher education both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?

## 6.2 Triangulated Discussion

*Triangulation* is a research approach, process or phase (as opposed to a methodology itself), that integrates findings from two or more data sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2005; also please see section 3.1). Most often, triangulation in the social sciences refers to considering simultaneously data from multiple methodologies (i.e., mixed or multi-methods) within the same study (Creswell & Creswell, 2005; Thurmond, 2001). For instance, this may be considering simultaneously results from the same methodology but from distinct samples (e.g. interview cohorts), data from two different paradigms, such as quantitative and qualitative data phases (e.g. survey and focus group data, etc.), or a multi-method approach of two data strands within a paradigm, such as two qualitative methods (e.g. interviews and focus groups). Furthermore, this process

might also involve not just varying the methodology or data under consideration, but also the theoretical or conceptual framework for analysis, for example, triangulation may involve applying more than one theory to analyse the same phenomenon (e.g. Thematic and Discourse analytic approaches), or multiple lenses from investigators/researchers (i.e., multiple researchers to collect and/or interpret data from a social psychological and critical sociology stance). As such, this approach not only enhances the credibility and validity of one's research findings through cross-verifiability, but also provides deeper insights into a research problem. Thus, it enables the researcher to corroborate results and/or uncover unexpected findings that may not emerge from a 'single strategy' approach (Thurmond, 2001).

In this vein, the present study utilises data triangulation (please see section 3.1 for brief overview), as well as theoretical triangulation (please see section 2.5), in order to reach deeper, but also more widely applicable findings for the multi-level analysis from stakeholders, learners, embedded within the policy context. Specifically, this was achieved by first analysing each data source separately using Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-stage approach to thematic analysis (see Chapter 4 for Phase 1 interview results; see Chapter 5 for Phase 2 interview results), examining the similarities and differences across geographic contexts/policy landscapes and institution types within each phase (please see section 2.2.5).

These findings were then integrated for a final interpretation of the merged data (see sub-sections 6.2.1 - 6.2.4), identifying key patterns or unexpected findings (see section 6.3), in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of widening access and participation activity in Scotland and New York (please see section 3.10 for a detailed account of this analysis process).

Before turning to the triangulated findings presented in subsections 6.2.1 to 6.2.4, Phase 1 and Phase 2 findings will now be briefly revisited. In Chapter 4, findings from university stakeholder interviews revealed the profound effects of government cuts to higher education funding in both



locations, as well as the creative solutions and sometimes workarounds practitioners must employ as they operate within the constraints of limited financial and staffing resources. Further to this, stakeholder interview results also demonstrated to what extent has the COVID-19 pandemic also further exacerbated the challenges faced by a sector already under considerable strain. Differences in how mature learners were conceptualised were also uncovered, with stakeholders from recruiting HEIs more likely to adopt a strengths-/assets-based approach to their mature student cohorts, and stakeholders from Scottish selective HEIs more likely to have to consider the impact of classism on some of their students.

In Chapter 5, findings from learner interviews showed that, surprisingly, the majority of participants were currently enrolled in their studies on a full-time basis. This contrasts with the wider university enrolment trends, where research consistently shows adult students typically opt for part-time study to balance work, family, and educational commitments. Furthermore, findings also uncovered that the most significant difference between learners based on geographic context was regarding parental or familial attitudes toward higher education. Despite high tuition costs and the severity of the U.S. student loan crisis, New York mature learners still believed strongly in the return on investment in higher education and were also more likely to come from families of origin who shared this same belief, regardless of socio-economic status. In contrast, Scottish participants were more likely to have family members who encouraged them to enter the workforce immediately after high school, rather than go on to university. How learners engaged with other members of their university community also played a critical part in their learning experience, with most learners highlighting the quality of their interactions with lecturing and managerial/professional/support (MPA) staff in particular. As anticipated, most learners at selective institutions in each location experienced imposter phenomenon at some point in their journey, and student-parents reported struggling with reconciling their parent and student identities. Lastly, whilst the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant disruption to learners' daily lives, its impact on their

learning experiences was far from straightforward.

In the subsections to follow, a triangulated discussion of these findings will be presented in answer to this thesis' research questions.

### **6.2.1 RQ1: What types of interventions have Scottish and New York higher education institutions (HEIs) implemented to widen access and participation?**

Based on both sets of interviews across both geographic contexts, the present study found inter-departmental and cross-campus collaboration, external partnerships, and knowledge exchange—or, in other words, institutional capacity building strategies—as crucial to HEIs' efforts to develop and implement interventions to widen access/participation in both Scotland and New York. In practice, this approach ranged from stakeholders collaborating with other departments at their institution to deliver summer schools and recruitment activity at open days, to forming external partnerships with further education/community colleges, or participating in consortia like the Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP). Additionally, most of the stakeholders interviewed also mentioned engaging in communities of practice for further insights into effective strategies for facilitating access and participation. In this vein, this finding was consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of partnerships to widening access and participation activity (Boeren, 2016; Coles et al., 2002; Murphy & Fleming, 2003; Watt & Patterson, 2000), for which Murphy and Fleming (2003) had concluded in their case study on the utility of 'partnership-based approaches' in widening access that it would likely become an "increasingly significant aspect of HE delivery in the future" (p.26).

In contrast to the aforementioned studies, however, this thesis has the added dimension of stakeholders' interviews in order to enhance the interpretation of this study's findings. By integrating both sets of stakeholder and learners' interview data, it becomes clear that whilst stakeholder insights reveal the critical role partnership-based strategies

play in mitigating the financial and staffing pressures faced by the sector due to reduced government funding in both locations, conversations with learners also revealed that most participants entered their current HEI through some form of partnership pathway or programme. In other words, the majority of the Scottish learner sample had participated in a SWAP or university Access course, often choosing these pathways based on word-of-mouth recommendations from friends. Additionally, some had completed an HNC/HND at some point before transitioning into higher education. Similarly, most learners in the New York sample had either attended community college prior to their current enrolment or transferred university credits from previous HE enrolments. This finding from learners' interviews therefore supports this sample of stakeholders' assertion that partnerships are integral to their work.

Despite how prevalent non-traditional trajectories or pathways into higher education were among the mature learners in this study, however, many still faced transferability issues at the Learner Provider level. More specifically, Scottish learners were more likely to experience a lack of clear guidance on vertical (FE-to-HE) or lateral (HEI-to-HEI) transfer processes, especially in terms of understanding what coursework would count toward their prospective HE course. This finding unfortunately aligns with the wider literature on weak vertical transfer links in Scotland, particularly with regard to curricular misalignment between FE and HE, as discussed in section 2.3.1.1 of this thesis' literature review (Gallacher & Reeve, 2019; Morgan-Klein, 2003; Osborne, 2022; O'Toole, 2024; Watt & Paterson, 2000). These learner experiences are also consistent with one Scottish stakeholder's assertion that improved **articulation agreements** are needed in order to facilitate a smoother transition from FE to HE for students. As explored before in section 2.3.1.1, ongoing challenges with curricular disconnect and inconsistent recognition of FE qualifications, continue to hinder or delay student progression in Scotland (Gallacher & Reeve, 2019; Morgan-Klein, 2003; Osborne, 2022).

From a theoretical perspective, this finding also supports Boeren's (2016) assertion that all three 'key players'— the Individual/Student, the

Learning Provider/HEI, and the National/Regional context—must work in concert. This further supports the importance of institutions building partnerships with community organisations and other HEIs to mitigate information barriers and facilitate a smooth transition across levels of education (Boeren, 2016).

Lastly, it is worth noting that Scottish learners who entered higher education through a university access or SWAP course were more likely to share having a positive transfer experience. This sub-group of Scottish learners within the sample also reported valuing the peer connections made during their access or SWAP course, some of whom maintained these relationships beyond their programme.

Drawing from these triangulated findings, the present study builds upon previous qualitative research (Coles et al., 2002; Murphy & Fleming, 2003; Watt & Patterson, 2000) on the utility of partnership-based approaches to facilitating access and participation. However, particularly for Scotland, further mixed- methods or quantitative research is needed (please see section 6.6.2 for recommendations for future research) to better understand the measurable impacts of non-traditional pathways for mature student entry into higher education, as there is currently limited Scottish Government data published on students over the age of 21 in this domain (Scottish Government, 2024).

Now turning to the next research question, the role of institutional support in informing mature students' decision to remain or leave higher education will be discussed, based on the study's integrated findings.

### **6.2.2 RQ2: What role does institutional support play in a student's decision to remain or leave higher education?**

Based on both sets of interviews across both geographic contexts, positive experiences with institutional support greatly enhanced mature students' learning experiences and were critical to most of the learners' decision to remain in higher education. More specifically, learners who shared overwhelmingly positive experiences with their institution's disability

support and/or counselling services—such as feeling fully supported by having special accommodations in place for their learning—were more likely to express overall satisfaction with their learning experience at their HEI, regardless of geographic context or institution type.

Furthermore, whilst not all students who accessed disability and/or counselling support provision engaged in extracurricular activities at their HEI, the majority of those who were heavily involved in the university social environment—such as active participation in student societies, attending events, and regularly interacting with university staff—were more often those who received support from these services (with only one exception across both learner samples). Nonetheless, this overlap applied to a very small subset of students within the study.

The finding that positive experiences with university support provision helped to facilitate academic integration for some learners is in line with Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), who argued that both **academic and social integration** are key to student progression. However, the social integration process was a far more complex experience for this group of learners, with greatest variation seen between student-parents or carers and those without parenting or caring responsibilities. In this vein, studies on acculturation, such as those by Berry (1997) as well as Meeuwisse, Severiens, and Born (2010), suggest that acculturation is neither a linear nor homogeneous process for students. These studies highlight the importance of considering intersectional issues, such as marginalisation and social identity, in understanding the varied integration experiences of different student groups.

This finding thus raises important questions about how institutions might facilitate such opportunities for student-parents, and those with other caregiving responsibilities, to socially integrate into the university environment. Both formalised and informal peer-to-peer support were deemed especially beneficial to some student-parents interviewed. This perspective was shared by a couple of student-parents attending a selective institution in New York, as well as another at a selective institution in Scotland, who nearly withdrew from her course at the onset of COVID-19. However, the encouragement and support she received from

her peers played a crucial role in her decision to remain enrolled (see 6.2.4 for more on significance of peer-to-peer support).

Additionally, several students, irrespective of geographic context or institution type, identified lecturing or MPA staff who were key to their progression, and for some, even inspiring them to pursue post-graduate study. This aligns with Tinto's (1998) assertion that for non-residential students, "academic involvements"—such as in-classroom interactions with lecturing staff and peers—play a more significant role than other forms of campus social activities (p.169). The importance of these campus relationships is also highlighted by Davidson and Wilson (2013) as well as Thomas (2012), who both suggest that meaningful connections with members of the university community significantly increase the likelihood of students progressing in their studies.

In this vein, some learners (e.g., Carmen from a Selective NY HEI) even recommended that other adult learners have a "designated staff member" that they can go to for support, perhaps even a role model to guide the process. In practice, this might entail assigning specific staff members—such as academic advisors—to work one-to-one with mature learners, providing not only academic guidance but also support (and sharing their own experiences) in navigating the university environment, and signposting students to relevant university resources and support provision as needed. Such relationships could bridge the gap between students and the institution, helping them feel more connected to the university community. Findings in Yenney's (2020) study on rural students at a Minnesotan university further supports this approach, highlighting the significance of advisor-student relationships in facilitating marginalised student groups' sense of belonging. She found that by **building rapport**, clarifying institutional processes, and offering students assurance, academic advisors can play a critical role in helping students from under-represented backgrounds feel supported and valued. Thus, by formalising these supportive roles, institutions can create a more inclusive environment that acknowledges and responds to the unique needs of mature learners, facilitating student transition and progression.

From the stakeholder perspective, representation and diversity within university administration was suggested as a key component to encouraging student entry as well as progression. At a selective HEI in New York, one stakeholder highlighted the significance of having staff members who can relate to students' life experiences, noting that this connection can enhance students' sense of belonging, especially for those who may not have formed strong peer connections.

In this way, she shared how her own experience as a Black woman, mature learner, and student-parent, along with her familiarity with having to navigate complex U.S. government systems like social welfare, enabled her to relate to and support some of her students more effectively. By drawing from her own experiences and background, this stakeholder not only provides students guidance but also a relatable figure through whom students can see themselves reflected within the university environment.

This resonates with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; also see section 2.4.2), as students in this context may develop a sense of identity and connection within the university through shared experiences with university staff. Having staff who share similar backgrounds with students can help facilitate a sense of belonging and community, which are essential components to supporting student progression especially for those from under-represented or historically excluded backgrounds (Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Kumar, 2023; Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora, 2000).

Similarly, stakeholders at a recruiting Scottish HEI highlighted the significance of local representation among university staff in order to create a strong sense of community within the institution, not only one to which prospective mature students can envisage themselves belonging, but one that is also well-integrated into their external environment. Additionally, these community links facilitate informal information-sharing channels, providing prospective mature learners with insights into the university that may otherwise not be available to them through more formal means of gathering information.

Likewise, local representation enables this HEI's learners the accumulation of social capital (Bourdieu, 1986), in which these local relationships and connections offer tangible benefits to those with access to them. By having members of the community reflected within the institution's administration, this allows prospective and newly-admitted local students to tap into a pre-existing network of support and information, strengthening their sense of belonging and potentially making the transition to university less daunting. Furthermore, this embeddedness of community ties reflects a form of cultural capital, as students who share common social backgrounds with staff members can draw on shared knowledge and values, reinforcing their sense of belonging within the institution.

By hiring staff with backgrounds and experiences that are relatable to mature students, institutions would not only support social identity formation within their university community but also contribute to the broader goal of creating an inclusive and supportive environment that addresses the unique needs of mature learners, especially those with intersectional identities. Hurtado and Carter's (1997) study on campus racial climate supports this notion, suggesting that students of colour, for example, who identify with or can relate to their university's staff feel a stronger sense of connection and belonging to their institution, thus helping to facilitate their social and academic integration into the university environment. Similarly, Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2000) emphasise that marginalised students who share commonalities with faculty or staff in terms of background, experiences, or cultural identity are more likely to feel validated (see also Rendón, 1994), which they found key to successful transition and progression.

These findings on the significance of quality interactions and shared identities with university staff are particularly relevant in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which highlighted the need for institutions to offer robust support provision that could readily adapt to the challenges faced by diverse student populations. Research conducted during this period has shown that facilitating strong connections between students and



university staff were critical in helping students navigate the academic and emotional challenges spurred by the crisis (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Marinoni, Van't, & Jensen, 2020), whereas the alternative is isolation, marginalisation and even attrition.

In line with this, the discussion now shifts to the next subsection, which will present the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mature student recruitment and support provision by integrating the perspectives of stakeholders and mature learners from each geographic context.

### **6.2.3 RQ3: How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected Scottish and New York HEIs' approach to adult student recruitment and support provision?**

Stakeholder participants reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively affected adult student recruitment activity in Scotland and New York; it has yielded innovative approaches to support provision for institutions, but with mixed results. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect across all sectors of public life. In addition to having caused widespread global disruption to daily life, this public health crisis also further exacerbated existing social inequalities, with hospitalisation and mortality rates disproportionately affecting historically marginalised communities such as individuals with disabilities, working-class communities, people of colour, immigrant communities, etc., for example (Riley & Glymour, 2024; Tai et al., 2021).

McNamara, McKee, and Stuckler (2021) further highlight how individuals from these social groups were also more likely to be employed in precarious work situations. Within this broader context, the COVID-19 pandemic has also worsened existing hardships for the most vulnerable student groups in both the UK and the US. For example, according to a study conducted by Aucejo et al. (2020) at a large U.S. public university, students from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to experience significant academic disruptions such as delayed graduation or deferred enrolment, compared to their middleclass peers. These students also

faced significant financial challenges, including job loss and/or reductions in family income, as a consequence of the pandemic. Similarly, in the UK, research by Campbell et al., 2022 found that socio-economically disadvantaged students experienced additional challenges during lockdown, such as inadequate study spaces, limited access to technology, and financial instability.

However, the pandemic's impact on higher education also extended beyond individual student hardships to the institutional level. Universities were forced to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances, abruptly shifting teaching and learning from in-person to online delivery, leading to what is now commonly referred to as 'pandemic pedagogy' (Schwartzman, 2020). This approach not only applied to adjustments in instructional delivery but also student support provision. Taking these various factors into account, it is no surprise then that the pandemic would have a negative impact on adult student recruitment activity.

At the height of the pandemic, stakeholders in both locations were confronted with significant challenges in sustaining student engagement levels, particularly in terms of student recruitment and outreach, for a number of reasons. Most notably, stakeholders struggled with the lack of rapport building activity with prospective and/or newly-admitted students leading up to the 2020/2021 academic year. As one Scottish stakeholder at a recruiting HEI explained, the absence of initial face-to-face interactions created a general sense of disconnection among their newly-admitted students, making it harder for them to at least feel socially integrated into the university environment (Hari Rajan, Herbert, and Polly, 2024).

Further to this, whilst some stakeholders were able to easily adapt recruitment events—such as open houses—for the online environment, attendance numbers and attendee engagement were still significantly lower than pre-pandemic levels. In this vein, most stakeholders reported a significant decline in recruitment numbers, with the exception of a New York selective HEI stakeholder, who was surprised to still receive a steady number of applications.

These scenarios appeared consistent with accounts from learners, irrespective of geographic context, who were first-year students at the start of the pandemic. When asked how they chose their institution, for instance, most first-year students in the sample did not mention attending any recruitment events or activities. In fact, one New York student at a recruiting institution even shared having deferred her enrolment to the 2021/2022 academic year due to the uncertainty caused by the pandemic.

In this way, her experience ties into the broader context of the newly-admitted student response to the pandemic, as many had to navigate difficult decisions about their educational trajectories amid the global uncertainty of COVID-19. For example, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), there was a significant decline in first-year student enrolments across the United States, with a 9% decrease in the autumn of 2020 compared to autumn the previous year. Part of this decline was attributed to students choosing to defer their enrolment due to the disruption and unpredictability caused by the COVID- 19 pandemic (Kamssu & Kouam, 2021).

Nonetheless, there were some ‘bright spots’ shared in the stakeholder interviews, as stakeholders highlighted some positive outcomes amid the challenges in student recruitment and delivering support provision. Specifically, a team interview with stakeholders at a recruiting Scottish HEI revealed that financial support from the SFC Digital Inclusion funding enabled the launch of a formal laptop loan scheme at their institution. This initiative not only provided a vital resource to students who did not have access to technology, but also alleviated pressure on an institution that previously lacked the capacity to address the digital barriers faced by some students both before and during the pandemic in a sustainable way (consult section 4.6.1 for further details).

Despite this innovation, however, challenges remained. As further supported by a New York stakeholder at a recruiting HEI, despite the effectiveness of **laptop loan** schemes during the pandemic dependent upon connectivity and digital literacies; mature learners with no or limited access to reliable broadband continued to face real digital

barriers. This was a challenge particularly for stakeholders serving students located in rural or remote areas in both geographic contexts. This infrastructure issue not only highlights the persistent challenge of digital exclusion for some learners, but how it is one that cannot be fully addressed by institutional initiatives alone. Whilst, unfortunately, learners studying in rural areas were not represented in the study, this nonetheless points to the need for broader, coordinated support across actors (Policy Context and Learner Provider level) in order to mitigate the impact of digital exclusion. This observation forms the basis of the researcher's recommendation for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in section 6.4.1.

Nearly five years onwards, the post-COVID 'reconstruction' phase has prompted various sectors to reassess their contingency plans and build resilience for future crises (Babacan, 2022; Roese, 2021). Research has increasingly emphasised the importance of shifting from short-term recovery measures—such as 'pandemic pedagogy'—to building resilient systems that can adapt to future challenges (Roese, 2021). In other words, this undertaking is critical not only to prepare for future pandemics, but to also ensure that higher education systems are better prepared for future global crises, whether they are health-related or tied to broader societal challenges (Moon et al., 2023; Sá & Sherpa, 2020). Doing so would require significant investment in flexible structures and holistic strategies that can support vulnerable populations in the long-term (Oleksiyenko et al., 2023). UNESCO's (2021) focus on *Resilience and Inclusion* similarly highlights how the post-pandemic recovery phase is critical for strengthening systems to ensure inclusivity.

In practical and policy terms, this calls for an urgent need to address the **digital divide**, ensuring support for marginalised groups, as well as preparing for future disruptions (UNESCO, 2021; also see section 6.6.1 for further consideration and recommendations for future research, practice, and policy). Beyond simply improving connectivity, it is also essential to focus on enhancing digital skills and digital literacies, as these are equally critical for individuals to fully engage with educational opportunities in an increasingly digital world (Lido, Hirsu, and Wessels, 2021; Lido, Hirsu, and

Wessels, 2021). Building resilience in educational access and participation will not only help to manage future crises but also address systemic inequalities that have long existed in many educational systems (Farquharson, McNally, and Tahir, 2024).

#### **6.2.4RQ4: What strategies have adult students developed or employed in order to mitigate any challenges faced in their access to and participation in higher education both before and during the pandemic?**

Adult students employed systematic time management strategies, as well as drawing from family, partner, and peer-to-peer support to navigate the challenges of accessing and participating in higher education both before and during the pandemic. There is extensive research on the complex lives of adult learners, which often entails juggling multiple commitments, such as family and/or caring responsibilities, and employment, alongside the demands of their university studies (Gardner et al., 2021; Markle, 2015). This ‘balancing act’ requires mature learners to adopt various coping strategies to ensure their success in higher education (Mercer, 2007; Xavier & Meneses, 2022).

Moreover, the findings of the present study are largely consistent with the salience of mature learner identities being a potential challenge for university stakeholders (please see section 4.31), particularly with regard to student- parents. According to Mallman and Lee (2016), mature students often struggle to integrate their identities as learners with their existing roles and responsibilities. This is due to the conflicting pressures that arise when their non-academic identities are more salient, thus leading to role conflict (Home, 1998). Along these lines, New York stakeholders in particular shared struggling with the heterogeneity of their mature student population and determining how best to approach developing campus events or initiatives that would facilitate mature learners’ sense of belonging and social integration into the campus community. New York stakeholders also observed a further fragmentation even within academic identity, for example, in which mature EOP students seemed more likely to identify “EOP” as their affinity group, as

opposed to having a “mature student identity”. This then aligns with a study by O’Boyle (2015), who found that mature students often formed sub-groups based on shared experiences or programme affiliations rather than adopt a unified mature student identity.

For some learner participants, particularly student-parents, reconciling their academic and family roles was especially challenging. This tension was marked by moments of ‘dissonance’, with one Scottish learner describing a feeling of “hav[ing] two worlds”, whilst another reported sometimes feeling “parentified” by younger peers. These accounts reflect SIT’s concept of in-group and out-group dynamics, in which mature learners may perceive themselves as outsiders within the traditional student body, contributing to feelings of isolation or Othering. Such experiences also aligned with the existing literature on the importance of peer-to-peer support in fostering a sense of belonging (Read et al., 2018; Thomas, 2012), a claim that is further supported by the findings of this study. For example, some stakeholders highlighted the benefits of establishing peer networks in supporting their learners’ transition into the wider university community, whilst New York student-parents at a selective HEI noted the positive impact of participating in a “buddy up” programme, where they were coincidentally paired with fellow student-parents. Such in-group connections support SIT’s emphasis on the importance of shared group identity in promoting belonging and enhancing social cohesion.

In summary, specific research questions were addressed in the discussion of each results chapter (presented in section 4.7 for stakeholders and section 5.6 for learners), and in addition the overall ‘story’ of the research questions is presented above. Therefore, the next section will triangulate the key findings for the overall story of the thesis beyond individual research questions.

### **6.3 Triangulated Findings**

In this section, the discussion shifts from responding in direct answer to

the research questions to exploring the key triangulated findings to have emerged after integrating both phases of data. As such, these findings identify key areas for further inquiry and action which serve to extend the wider conversation on widening access and participation activity in each location by identifying new areas of action and inquiry.

The first key finding (see section 6.3.1) highlights **institutional habitus** (see section 2.4.5) and the impact of university reputation on both learners' experiences of, as well as stakeholders' approaches to, widening access and participation. Triangulated findings not only revealed the ways in which institutional habitus impacts learners' sense of belonging and identity, but more unexpectedly, how it also influences university staff's conceptualisation of their roles in facilitating access and participation.

The second key finding (see section 6.3.2) highlights the **bureaucratic barriers** created by existing policies, which impact both students and university stakeholders in Scotland and New York. Whilst mature learners often face challenges navigating complex funding mechanisms (see section 5.4.1), the research also highlights how these same policies complicate the work of professional and support staff (see section 4.5.2) tasked with implementing access and participation strategies.

The third and final key finding (see section 6.3.3) discusses the significant and mixed-result **impact of the COVID-19 pandemic** on the HE sector, specifically with regard to the abrupt shift to online learning and remote working patterns. Whilst it introduced new levels of flexibility and accessibility, it also revealed significant gaps in digital inclusion and consistency in online course quality.

### **6.3.1 Key finding 1: Institutional habitus and university reputation influences both learners' experiences and stakeholders' approaches to widening access**

As explored in section 2.4.6, Bourdieu's theoretical concept of *habitus*—further developed by researchers McDonough (1997), Horvat and Antonio (1999), and Reay (2001) into the concept of ***institutional habitus***—has been widely researched within widening access and participation over the

last two decades. This body of research highlights institutional habitus' impact on how students conceptualise their place within higher education—and at their institution, specifically—as well as its effect on student transition, retention, and progression (Thomas, 2002).

However, this study revealed that there is limited research on the ways in which institutional habitus influences university staff's conceptualisation of their role within the institution (O'Shea et al., 2015), particularly among managerial/professional/support (MPA) staff. It is also unclear to what extent these conceptualisations might impact MPA staff's engagement or interactions with students (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). For example, MPA staff who perceive their roles as purely administrative may adopt a more passive approach to student interactions, focusing on task completion rather than actively seeking out opportunities to support students. This then should be of interest to both HEIs and researchers, as MPA staff are often the first point of contact for students seeking help (e.g., financial services, disability services, student support, etc.). In other words, there is limited insight into how institutional habitus influences MPA staff perceptions of their roles, their work with diverse student populations, and how these perceptions might influence approaches to support provision and, ultimately, the overall student experience (see section 6.6.4 for recommendations for future practice).

Jones, Hall, and Bragg's (2018) research on university admissions and recruitment staff at a selective English university and Boliver, Powell, and Moreira's (2018) research on admissions practices at selective Scottish universities touch upon these issues to some extent. In the former study, the researchers highlight the tension between staff's personal identities and professional practices, particularly with regard to reconciling their personal beliefs with the exclusionary practice of a selective admissions process. The findings of this thesis therefore point to the need to further develop this understanding beyond admissions and recruitment work, which emphasises contextualising in terms of policy enactment of student recruitment but not student engagement.

Given the research context outlined above, the researcher fully



anticipated that the impact of institutional habitus and university reputation would emerge as a key issue for learners' experiences. However, the extent to which these factors also shaped stakeholders' perceptions of WP—in some ways affecting their strategies for facilitating access, conceptualisations of 'the mature student', and attitudes within other academic units (please see sections 4.4.2 and 4.4.3)—was unexpected, given the limited research in this area.

With institutional habitus most often discussed in terms of its impact on learner experiences, the present study's findings uncovered its potentially broader influence. In this vein, the research revealed that institutional habitus can shape stakeholders' views on who their students were and what they needed, revealing both strengths- or assets-based and deficit-based approaches to WP activity (see section 4.3.4). Recognising and mitigating these potential dynamics is essential for creating inclusive environments that genuinely support mature learners.

### **6.3.2 Key finding 2: Existing policy contributes to bureaucratic barriers for both students and university stakeholders**

The present study revealed that existing policies in both Scotland and New York often contribute to bureaucratic barriers that hinder access to higher education for mature learners (please see section 5.4.1), whilst also creating challenges for university stakeholders tasked with facilitating access and participation (please see section 4.5).

In Scotland, for example, one of the key bureaucratic barriers for mature learners (and later, university stakeholders) was the *Part-Time Fee Grant* (PTFG) application process. Until the pandemic, this process was partially paper-based. However, during lockdown, this system imposed additional administrative burdens on university stakeholders, who had to assist students in completing and submitting the necessary paperwork. As a result, the pandemic acted as a catalyst for change for SAAS, prompting the introduction of their *Digital Transformation Programme* that led to the PTFG application process becoming fully online (SAAS, 2022). This

shift reduced some of the bureaucratic barriers, but challenges remain, as SAAS' Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) application process has still not been fully transitioned to having an online option at the time of this writing. Additionally, as discussed in section 5.4.1, some students in caring roles may face significant constraints in managing their study load in order to maintain their eligibility for essential benefits like Carer's Allowance.

As policymakers consider ways of enhancing the inclusivity of existing policies, further work is needed to understand the overlap between benefit entitlements and student loans, with the aim to reduce policy conflicts and eligibility issues that can negatively impact prospective student-carers.

In New York State, there are also significant bureaucratic challenges to widening access and participation to address. For university stakeholders, this is reflected in state government's stringent financial requirements for institutions seeking to establish an Educational Opportunity Program (please see section 4.5.2). Meanwhile, for students, navigating the financial aid landscape presents several issues, such as having to meet strict income eligibility criteria for EOP, as well as managing the complexities of the financial aid application process. Furthermore, student funding initiatives like the New York Excelsior Scholarship have been criticised for failing to widen access for working-class or low SES New Yorkers, as highlighted in recent studies (see McKillop, 2023; also please see section 2.2.4.1). These challenges emphasise the need for policy reforms that simplify application procedures and reduce bureaucratic barriers to better support mature learners and the institutions that serve them (please see section 6.6.4 for future recommendations for policymakers).

### **6.3.3 Key finding 3: The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly introduced new ways of working and learning, with mixed results for both learners and stakeholders**

The abrupt transition to delivering and accessing provision online affected the working and learning patterns of both cohorts of participants in

significant, though not clearcut ways. Both groups highlighted the flexibility in working from home, with stakeholders having more flexibility in scheduling student appointments and working outwith usual office hours if it better suited their schedule, and some learners reported ‘recouping’ extra study time as they no longer needed to commute to campus. For learners with access to asynchronous modules, they were now able to pause and rewind lectures in order to take notes, or to research for clarity on a concept they did not understand.

Asynchronous learning provision also afforded learners more flexibility in how to structure/plan their day. Stakeholders from rural areas in Scotland and New York were able to adapt more quickly due to being used to working at a university with a large geographic spread, thus accustomed to working with many colleagues mostly online. Whilst working patterns were not disrupted, an online-intensive approach exposed the extent of digital exclusion among their students (see section 6.6.1 for recommendations for future research, practice, and policy).

Whilst, unfortunately, learners studying in rural areas were not represented in the study, both cohorts of participants agreed that a major challenge was getting to grips with ‘pandemic pedagogy’ and gaps in consistent quality and engagement with online courses. Synchronous learning, particularly with regard to the ‘cameras on/off’ debate, were also a sore point. Before considering the implications of the triangulated findings of the thesis, it is important to consider the weaknesses and limitations of the current research.

## **6.4 Limitations of the Study**

As with any research, this study does have limitations. Some of these limitations are due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one significant limitation arises from the fact that all interviews were conducted online. As such, this introduces the issue of digital exclusion, which refers to individuals who lack access to internet, reliable broadband and/or digital devices, as well as those with limited digital literacy (Lathen & Laestadius, 2021). This issue is particularly relevant to

the study as the digitally excluded is most often comprised of the most vulnerable groups of mature learners (Heagney & Benson, 2017). A related limitation thus concerns the use of social media as a primary method for recruiting student participants. Whilst social media platforms offer a broad reach, they are only accessible to individuals who actively use them, excluding those without social media accounts or with limited digital engagement. Vogel (2021) notes that this is especially relevant for older adult learners, those who may be less comfortable with technology, or simply wary of online platforms due to privacy concerns.

Regarding New York stakeholders, a limitation of the sample is that there is only one selective HEI. One possible reason for this could be because of utilising ‘cold emailing’ as a stakeholder recruitment method. Like ‘cold calling’, ‘cold emailing’ refers to reaching out to individuals or institutions without prior contact or relationship. Whilst this method was necessary for the present study due to COVID-19 restrictions, emailing potential U.S. stakeholders from a UK university address may have resulted in lower engagement due to a lack of immediate name recognition or having a foreign domain name in the email address (e.g., “co.uk”) (Sauermann & Roach, 2013).

Regarding both learner samples, although the study aimed to represent a wide range of mature learner experiences, the final sample skewed toward full-time students, many of whom had some prior experience in higher education (see sections 3.51, 3.5.4, and 5.7). This thus shapes the kinds of insights the study can offer, with findings reflecting the experiences of learners who have reached a point in their educational trajectory at which they might be more institutionally embedded or educationally prepared compared to their ‘first-time’ counterparts. As such, this sampling outcome may reflect several overlapping factors. For example, compared to their part-time counterparts, full-time mature learners are more likely to be integrated into their university environments to some extent, thus possessing stronger connections with staff or peers which can increase their accessibility for research recruitment. This factor is particularly relevant when considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on having to rely on

online recruitment strategies and trying to tap into student communities at a time when students felt most disconnected from their institution. Research has shown that part-time students were harder to reach during periods of online learning and reduced campus presence.

Additionally, individuals with prior higher education experience may feel more confident engaging in research studies, and may view participation as an opportunity to reflect on their educational journeys or share advice they wish they had received earlier in their academic careers. Nonetheless, this group offers valuable insight into the resilience and persistence that often characterise mature learner trajectories.

Another limitation within both learner samples was that there were no rural students represented within the study, thus limiting this thesis' ability to capture the unique experiences and perspectives of those studying in rural or remote locations (see section 6.6.2 for recommendations for future research). This is particularly significant in Scotland, where nearly a fifth of the population resides in rural areas, which are experiencing faster population growth compared to urban regions (Scottish Government, 2021). Rural students often face distinct challenges, such as geographical isolation, limited access to transportation, and fewer HEIs within a reasonable distance (Skerratt et al., 2016). These challenges can result in reduced educational opportunities and access to student support services (Skerratt et al., 2016).

For the Scottish learner sample, despite efforts to also circulate the recruitment flyer in social media groups specifically targeting Scottish communities of colour, the response was significantly low. The resulting lack of ethnic and racial diversity in the sample may limit the study's ability to also capture the intersectional experiences of mature learners from ethnically or racially marginalised communities (see section 6.6.2 for recommendations for future research). This reflects a broader challenge in recruitment for qualitative research, where reaching marginalised communities often requires more targeted, relationship-based recruitment strategies (Heath et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its occurrence prior to data collection commencing, the researcher was unable to cultivate these relationships with Scottish communities of colour.

Finally, self-selection bias is an inherent aspect of qualitative research, as those who are more open or interested in a topic are more likely to volunteer to participate in a study (Robinson, 2013). However, its impact is twofold. Whilst it may result in skewing toward those who are simply more likely to come forward, on the other hand, it also connects the researcher to enthusiastic participants who are passionate about the research topic. This engagement and investment from participants can add significant value to the study, as they are likely to provide more in-depth and thoughtful responses. Furthermore, this type of engagement is particularly valuable for research that explores the lived experiences of a marginalised group, as there is potential for personal and emotionally significant topics to emerge.

## **6.5 Strengths and Contributions of the Study**

A major strength of the study was its use of multilevel qualitative research design and analysis of multiple data sources (e.g., policy scoping, learner interview data, and stakeholder data) to explore the same research questions from different HE role and cross-national angles/perspectives. Incorporating cross-national perspectives enables a comparative exploration of how context-specific factors—such as local policies and cultural attitudes or expectations—shape the experiences of learners and MPA staff in different regions. By drawing on and comparing contextualised data from Scotland and New York, the study contributes to a broader understanding of how regionally embedded policy frameworks affect the educational trajectories of mature learners and inform institutional stakeholder responses to both policy and student need. As detailed in section 1.2, cross-national comparisons are particularly beneficial for identifying patterns across geographic contexts as well as localised challenges. Thus, in this research context, this cross-national

design not only highlights the barriers to access and participation that mature learners face, but also how these barriers are perceived and addressed differently by stakeholders across cultural contexts, yielding lessons for both regions.

Furthermore, this study extended its insights beyond the learner level through a triangulated research design and interpretation of data, integrating holistically with wider stakeholder and institutional policy lenses. As such, it offers a nuanced understanding of how mature learners' educational trajectories are shaped by their educational experiences, transformative life events, dispositional and situational factors, as well as by the institutional environment and national policy context in which they are situated.

These insights helped highlight the differences and similarities between the Scottish and New York contexts, in terms of differences in the impact of class identity on learners' experiences as well as having to mitigate the impact of classism as stakeholders, and familial influence on early relationships to learning. At the same time, the study revealed similarities in motivations to return to education, their decision-making process in choosing a university, as well as stakeholders' recruitment strategies and partnership-based approaches to widening access.

Additionally, the present study contributed to the evidence base with research that compares the extensive UK and U.S. literature, with a narrower focus on the distinct geographic contexts of Scotland and New York. In doing so, this thesis makes the unique contribution of honing in on a specific U.S. state for cross-national analysis, which is especially valuable given the de-centralised nature of U.S. higher education governance, where HE policy is primarily determined at the state level.

Another strength is the study's timeliness, capturing participants' insights amid a global crisis, not only providing unique perspectives on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected mature students' learning experiences and access to higher education during an unprecedented time, but also insights into how facilitation of access was impacted from

stakeholder perspectives. By drawing on this unique point in time, the research will be able to offer sustainable recommendations for the future.

Beyond these empirical strengths, this thesis also makes a distinct theoretical contribution to the knowledge base by applying and extending Boeren's (2016) Integrative Lifelong Learning Participation Model. This thesis is most firmly grounded in Boeren's (2016) Integrative Model of Lifelong Learning Participation, which conceptualises participation as the interaction between factors at the micro (individual), meso (institutional), and macro (policy) levels. Whilst studies (e.g. Jones, 2021) have applied the framework in specific contexts such as UK community-based learning, this thesis is distinctive in its cross-national application to higher education with triangulated perspectives from learners and institutional stakeholders within their policy landscape.

To illustrate this contribution, Figure 7 adapts Boeren's (2016) original cog model, showing how the micro, meso, and macro levels map onto the findings of this thesis and interact to shape mature learners' access to and participation in higher education.



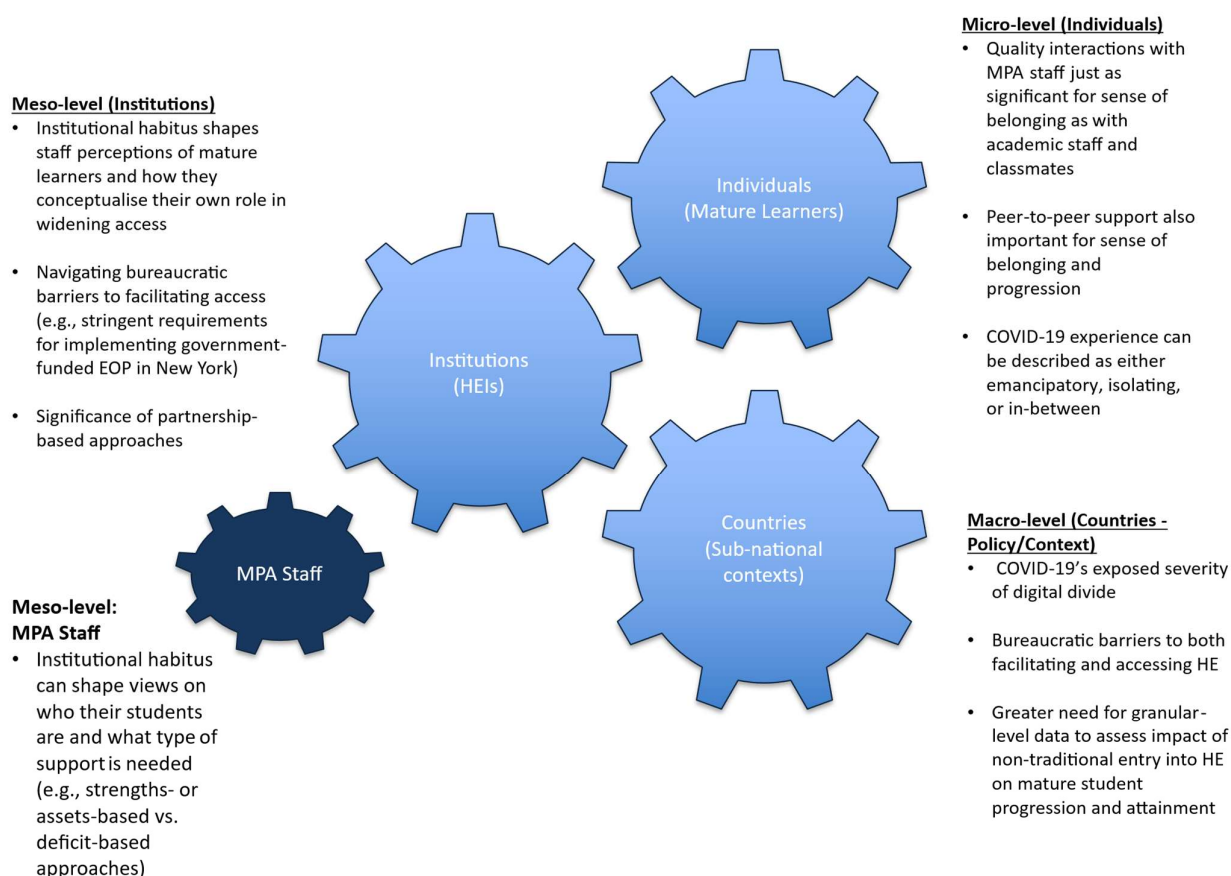


**Figure 7 Core findings of the present study (adapted from Boeren, 2016)**

As the figure shows, widening access and participation cannot be understood by focusing on a single level; rather, they are the outcome of dynamic interactions between individual experiences, institutional practices, and policy frameworks. This cross-national study is the first to apply Boeren's model in a design that directly compares sub-national contexts across continents, therefore demonstrating both the model's versatility and the value of a qualitative multilevel approach to understanding HE access and participation for mature learners. In doing so, it advances understanding of widening participation by showing how mature learners' experiences are shaped through the interaction of individual, institutional, and policy factors across two very different systems of higher education governance. Positioned within a transformative research paradigm, this study also applies Boeren's framework as more than an explanatory model, but as a tool for

identifying inequities and proposing an action plan for enacting change, advancing an approach that prioritises equity and inclusion.

The research contributes empirical support for Boeren's model by demonstrating its applicability to widening access to HE for mature learners. The findings of this study show that learner participants' decisions and trajectories were shaped by micro-level factors including parental/familial influence (section 5.2.1), past educational experiences (section 5.2.2), and transformative experiences (section 5.2.3); meso-level factors such as quality of interactions with the university community (section 5.3.3); and macro-level bureaucratic/policy barriers including SAAS funding limitations in summer and the complexities of the U.S. federal loan system (section 5.4.1). In this vein, this qualitative multilevel analysis across Scottish and New York contexts extends Boeren's model beyond its original application in adult education and community learning, demonstrating its broader theoretical utility for widening access and participation research.

Findings of the present research also extend Boeren's theory by incorporating several key refinements. At the meso level, the study highlights the role of MPA staff, who are often overlooked in the literature (see Section 6.3.1), in shaping learners' experiences and access to support. Institutional habitus (Horvat and Antonio, 1999; McDonough, 1997; Reay, 2001) is shown to influence not only how students perceive themselves within the HE environment but also how staff conceptualise "the mature student" and their institution's widening access mission. Therefore, a potential amendment or enhancement to Boeren's model suggested by these findings is the need to look more closely at the individuals who operate within the meso-level itself. Whilst senior management may articulate widening access and participation through institutional strategy, values, or mission statements, the actual enactment of policy depends on the interpretation and practices of staff working, sometimes with limited resources (see Section 4.2.2). Thus, the present research shows that the

meso-level is not only about institutions as abstract entities but also encompasses the staff or personnel within them, whose interpretations and practices form an extension of the meso-level as they mediate between macro-level policy and micro-level learner experiences on behalf of the meso-level.

Lastly, this project also offers a ‘crisis response’ perspective. By comparing and contrasting learners’ experiences before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as examining how stakeholders’ strategies shifted in response to disruption to daily life, the present study yields rich findings that may not only inform widening access practice but also efforts to build resilience and prepare the sector for future global disruptions. By applying Boeren’s framework to data collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, this thesis demonstrates its robustness as an explanatory tool under crisis conditions, whilst also highlighting the need for resilience to be made a more explicit element of the model. Specifically, this study has shown that the model has strong potential for guiding studies concerned with resilience in educational access and participation for adults, as it can capture how major national or global disruptions affect dynamics at the micro, meso, and macro levels. This contribution is especially significant in the face of growing political and cultural threats to higher education and diversity initiatives in places such as the U.S., where understanding how resilience can be embedded in widening access and participation efforts is increasingly urgent.

Overall, this thesis advances knowledge by applying Boeren’s model in a novel way: as the first qualitative multilevel study of widening participation for mature learners to employ a cross-national analysis at the sub-national level, it evidences and extends the framework through cross-continental comparison and demonstrates its explanatory power in both stable and crisis conditions. The research contributes new insights by incorporating institutional habitus, sub-national policy variation, and the role of institutional actors within the meso-level. It also proposes that resilience be more explicitly acknowledged within the framework, ensuring that participation is understood in relation to conditions of

disruption as well as stability. In doing so, it provides theoretical insights that are timely and consequential for higher education systems facing intensifying challenges to access, inclusion, and participation.

Building on both the demonstrated versatility of Boeren's (2016) framework and the amendments or enhancements suggested by this study, the present research also extends Cross' (1981) and Bourdieu's (1986) theories. It extended Cross' (1981) theory in that it explicitly engaged with the bureaucratic/policy barriers to learners' access and participation in higher education, as well as the bureaucratic/policy barriers that hinder institutions' facilitation of access and participation to mature students. Additionally, the present study also extended Bourdieusian (1986) theory in that it revealed the potential impact of institutional habitus on university admin outwith Admissions staff, demonstrating how their conceptualisations of mature students and organisational identity can influence their approaches to widening access and participation, as well as how institutional habitus can influence other academic departments' attitudes toward mature learners.

In the section to follow, the present study will offer practical recommendations as well as suggestions for further research for both geographic locations.

## **6.6 Recommendations for Future Research, Practice, and Policy**

### **6.6.1 For researchers, practitioners, and policymakers: Ongoing collaboration is needed to mitigate digital exclusion in post- COVID world**

The present study has shown that for some learners, the emergency shift to online learning and support provision has enhanced higher education's accessibility and flexibility (Khan, 2021; Turu, Rossum, & Gridley, 2023; also please see section 5.5.1).

However, the findings also revealed the severity of the **digital divide** in

both geographic contexts, particularly for stakeholders working with rural and/or remote mature student populations observing the most impact (please see section 4.6.2). Whilst interventions like laptop loan schemes helped to provide a temporary solution for these HEIs, insufficient broadband access remained a significant problem for many of their students. Thus, in addition to closing the gap in access to technology equipment, addressing the urban-rural gap in reliable broadband access is especially needed, requiring government investment in expanding infrastructure (Elahi, 2020; Roese, 2021; Lido, Hirsu, & Wessels, 2021; OECD, 2021). Based on the findings of this research and the shared challenges of mitigating digital exclusion in both contexts, the recommendations that follow are therefore relevant for both Scotland and New York State.

Accordingly, **tackling digital exclusion** in higher education access requires a collaborative approach, one that **prioritises improvements to broadband access** itself. At the **policy level**, this requires ongoing investment in expanding access to reliable broadband, both residential and public Wi-Fi infrastructure, to facilitate more sustainable digital inclusion. Such infrastructure expansion is imperative for meeting Scotland's and New York's widening access and participation goals, as students experiencing digital exclusion are also more likely to come from marginalised or historically excluded backgrounds. For example, research shows that those most likely to have limited access to broadband are people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, older adults, people of colour, those living in rural areas, and limited English-speaking households (Kruger and Gilroy, 2019; Ryan, 2018). Expansion of access to reliable broadband can therefore potentially lead to improved access to and participation in higher education among these groups, as digital connectivity is recognised as a key enabler of educational opportunity and social inclusion (Warschauer, 2004).

This **matters especially for mature learners**, who are disproportionately from lower socio-economic backgrounds and are more likely to study locally rather than relocate due to work and caring responsibilities

(Busher & James, 2019). Rural institutions particularly serve these populations, with U.S. research showing that rural HEIs typically enrol older students from the local population (Hillman, 2021), whilst Scotland's University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) reports that 69% of its HE students are mature (UHI, 2023/24). These enrolment patterns demonstrate why improving access to reliable broadband infrastructure is essential to enhancing equitable access to HE for mature student populations.

In the meantime, there are immediate adaptations to HE provision universities can implement in order to enhance accessibility within existing constraints. One such **institutional-level intervention** is making course content and access to online university resources more mobile-friendly. More broadly, research supports the idea that **mobile-based learning** is a significant avenue for enhancing access to education (Lido, Hirsu, and Wessels, 2021). Further to this, Kukulska-Hulme (2010) identifies mobile phone-based learning as a viable short-term solution to addressing digital exclusion. This is especially relevant in poor or rural communities where mobile phones are more widely available than computers or reliable broadband. As Lido, Hirsu, and Wessels (2021) also note, mobile phones have reached saturation in many countries, and in urban centres, public Wi-Fi is becoming more widely available. As such, this makes mobile technology an effective tool for reaching marginalised populations with limited access to broadband infrastructure. Therefore, ensuring that educational content is also mobile-friendly can significantly increase access for under-served populations, especially whilst ongoing improvements to broadband infrastructure and expansion are being made.

Whilst the pandemic has 'ripped off the band aid' and exposed the severity of this issue more tangibly, it is imperative that policymakers, institutions, and researchers continue to work closely together on the long-term goal of developing more sustainable approaches to addressing the digital divide. **In practice**, this would require **clearly established or formalised partnerships** between HEIs, researchers, and policymakers.

For example, HEIs could establish formal partnerships with researchers to conduct studies tracking digital exclusion patterns across the sector, examining not only which student populations are most affected based on personal demographics, institution type, and geographic location; but also, the types of interventions HEIs have implemented to mitigate digital exclusion at their institution and an assessment of their impact. For these studies, researchers should draw from diverse data sources, such as student surveys, institutional analytics on online engagement (and whether engagement is through mobile or computer), desk-based research on existing interventions at HEIs, and qualitative interviews with students from digitally excluded communities in addition the university stakeholders who support them.

The resulting evidence base could then **directly inform national or state policy** development, ensuring that funding allocations and regulatory frameworks (i.e., Scotland's Digital Poverty Funding and New York's Digital Inclusion Fund) are grounded in empirical understanding of digital exclusion within higher education, whilst also demonstrating how improved access to reliable broadband can advance widening access and participation goals by supporting greater student engagement and inclusion. Findings from the recommended research can **also support HEIs** in developing more evidence-based approaches to digital inclusion, enabling them to gain better insight into digital exclusion trends within their own institution or region. Furthermore, this information can further support universities in piloting mobile-responsive learning platforms that work effectively on smartphones, in developing offline content that enables students to download materials for later use, and in implementing flexible assessment formats that accommodate differing levels of technological access. These pilots can be further strengthened by HEIs engaging in **cross-university networks or communities of practice**, participating in knowledge sharing about successful innovations and lessons learned. Such engagement might include formal consortia, regular practitioner conferences, or shared digital repositories of inclusive practice, providing structured means for disseminating and embedding effective strategies across the sector (See section 6.6.4 for more on

HEI/MPA staff recommendations).

This coordinated approach would ensure that HE digital inclusion strategies are research-informed and complement longer-term policy interventions, creating an integrated strategy that addresses infrastructure barriers and practical accessibility challenges. The collaborative framework recommended above would also link practice, research, and policy through continuous feedback loops, enabling responsive approaches to narrowing the digital divide based on quantitative data and qualitative insights into the lived realities of digital exclusion, as well as the practical challenges of delivering HE provision to affected student populations.

### 6.6.2 For researchers:

Researchers might consider incorporating not only **mixed-methods** but also **multi-method research** that captures the perspectives of diverse university stakeholders, as this study does. Whilst this study utilised a single qualitative method of semi-structured interviews, it **drew on two distinct participant groups** (mature students and university staff) **situated within their respective policy landscapes**, thus facilitating a **multilevel analysis of educational access and participation**. This highlights the potential for future studies to adopt more **explicitly multilevel qualitative research designs**, which conceptualise individual experience as situated within broader organisational and policy contexts (see section 3.1). Expanding our understanding of multilevel research to include qualitative methods could enrich the field's capacity to examine the interplay between structure and agency in widening access. Additionally, employing a **triangulated approach** to the research design and analysis has also proven to yield rich data in the present study, uncovering insights that might not have emerged through a single-strand analysis. Therefore, a triangulated approach is strongly recommended to maximise the depth and breadth of research findings.

On a more granular level, the researcher highlights the potential explanatory power of mixed-method research that examines **administrative data** to capture large-scale information on the student



population and their trajectories. Referring back to the initial design of this project (see section 3.4), future studies are encouraged to utilise administrative data to enhance our understanding of how non-traditional pathways into HE impact mature student access, progression, and attainment. It is therefore essential that quantitative strands of mixed-methods research examine the measurable impacts of these **non-traditional pathways** for mature learners. This need is particularly important given the current lack of detailed Scottish Government data on the entry routes of students over the age of 21 (please see section 6.2.1). Without such data and considering the cuts to access and foundation programmes in other parts of the UK, such as England, it is crucial to assess the full extent of the demand for and/or benefits of these non-traditional pathways. Such analyses are essential for potentially building a case for increased government investment in these programmes in Scotland.

As the strength and richness of the interview data in the present study show, there is incredible value in gathering insights from the individual experiences of learners, as well as those from university stakeholders. For this reason, the researcher strongly advocates for maintaining a qualitative strand in future research, particularly one that enables individual perspectives and experiences to be shared. Doing so lends contextualising power, offering potential explanations that cannot be fully captured by statistical data alone. For example, qualitative research can facilitate a deeper understanding of nuanced topics such as student identity, sense of belonging, and campus climate/institutional culture. These aspects are crucial for understanding student engagement and progression, as they influence how students connect with their university environment (Thomas, 2012; also see section 2.3.2 of literature review).

In addition, there are messages regarding recommendations for future research based on geographic context:

For Scotland:

A noted limitation of this study was a lack of **racial/ethnic diversity**

represented in the sample (please see section 6.4). As Scotland becomes an increasingly more racially and ethnically diverse nation (Walsh et al., 2019), more research that explores the intersectional experiences of mature learners of colour is needed in widening access and participation literature. Research indicates that marginalised communities may experience distrust in academic institutions or researchers due to historical exclusion or negative interactions with these institutions (Liamputtong, 2007). This is particularly relevant when researching under-represented groups in higher education, as there is often a perceived disconnect between these communities and the institutions conducting the research. To overcome such barriers, both Bhopal (2018) and Lewis et al. (2023) recommend employing more **relationship-based recruitment strategies**, which may include working with community leaders, creating long-term engagement plans with specific communities, and/or conducting in-person outreach through trusted contacts or networks.

For New York:

A limitation of this study is the limited representation of selective higher education institutions (HEIs) in the stakeholder sample, as well as the absence of **rural students** in the learner sample (please see section 6.4). This was despite New York State having numerous rural institutions, including several SUNY campuses (e.g., SUNY Plattsburgh, SUNY Potsdam, SUNY Cortland) and private HEIs (e.g., St. Lawrence University, Colgate University). To better understand how access and participation for mature learners vary across institutional types in New York—including how their respective stakeholders facilitate access—a **large-scale**, statewide study is needed across New York's three higher education systems: State University of New York (SUNY), City University of New York (CUNY), and private universities (e.g., New York University, Columbia University, Fordham University).

A comprehensive **cross-system analysis**, including institutions outwith the New York metropolitan area, is essential for addressing gaps in mature learner access across the state. A **statewide study** to this degree would also capture the complexities of access for rural, mature learners—

including those who relocate to urban centres for better educational opportunities— and could provide essential data to inform policy decisions aimed at improving educational equity across the state. Deepening our understanding of the barriers mature learners face across all three levels of New York's higher education is imperative for shaping more inclusive and equitable state-level education policies.

Given the challenges of de-centralised data collection practices in the United States (see section 6.6.4 for further recommendations for future policy), especially with regard to the autonomy of private HEIs, the researcher recommends that a multi-method or mixed-method approach be undertaken in order to achieve this aim.

### **6.6.3 For mature learners:**

It is imperative to note that these recommendations are offered to acknowledge and honour learners' agency, and not to place the onus on marginalised learners to repair learning environments and systems that historically excluded them:

To the mature learners themselves, the researcher hopes this study serves as a reminder of the wealth of lived experience, prior knowledge and professional insight, and resilience they bring to higher education. These are qualities to be celebrated and valued, especially considering the realities of navigating university environments that historically were not structured or created with adult students in mind.

Importantly, this study recognises that feeling integrated into the university community is not limited to attending campus events or joining societies, especially when these activities may conflict with external commitments and responsibilities. For many of the mature students in this research, the quality of their interactions with other members of the university community played a significant role in their learning experience.

Therefore, one key recommendation from this study for mature learners is to seek out and engage with peer networks and peer-to-peer support. Many

participants consistently highlighted the value of connecting with others who shared similar life experiences or social identities at their institution. Whether through friendships with classmates, participation in buddy-up schemes, tapping into cultural community ties, or continued connections with access programme cohortmates, these networks were a source of motivation, solidarity, and encouragement for participants (see sections 5.3.3 and 6.2.4).

Also significant was the role of academic and MPA staff in several participants' academic journey, particularly the motivational power of positive interactions with university staff. These learners spoke of lecturers, advisors, and counsellors who made them feel respected, validated, and supported, providing not only institutional guidance, but also acting as mentors, advocates, or “cheerleaders” (see sections 5.3.3.2 and 5.3.3.3). For these learners, such relationships also helped them believe in their capacity to succeed and progress, and for some, even inspired them to pursue postgraduate study. On this basis, the researcher also recommends that mature learners consider building meaningful connections with university staff. Practically, this can range from proactively speaking with lecturers about coursework to engaging with support services staff (e.g., study skills advisors, disability and learning support staff, wellbeing services, etc). Even small but consistent interactions with trusted staff members may help to facilitate this.

Lastly, the researcher encourages mature learners to recognise the value of the knowledge and experience they already bring into university. Let this recognition serve as a challenge to any internalised deficit-thinking, and as a reminder: You are enough, you are fully capable, and you do belong.

#### **6.6.4 For HEIs and MPA Staff:**

This study has yielded many messages for HEIs, both in terms of how policy is implemented, as well as how **MPA staff** deliver such support ‘on the ground’. There are messages regarding practices for HEIs, including MPA staff, in both locations as follows:

With **institutional habitus** most often discussed in terms of its impact on learner experiences, the present study’s findings uncovered its potentially

broader influence. Along these lines, the present research revealed that institutional habitus can also shape stakeholders' or MPA staff's views on who their students were and what they needed, revealing both strengths- or assets-based and deficit-based approaches to WP activity (please see sections 4.3.4 and 6.3.1). Recognising and mitigating these potential dynamics is essential for creating inclusive environments that genuinely support mature learners.

Understanding these dynamics requires examining both individual and institutional levels of practice. It is important to acknowledge the dedicated work and resourcefulness of MPA staff who support mature learners, often operating within constrained resources and complex institutional environments (see Sections 4.2 and 4.4.3). The findings of this demonstrate how the quality of staff-student interactions can have a significant impact on mature learners' experiences and progression (see Section 6.2.2). However, even well-intentioned staff can unconsciously perpetuate deficit-based approaches when institutional culture reinforces certain assumptions about mature learners.

Therefore, the researcher encourages MPA staff to engage in **ongoing self-reflective practice**, especially when working with marginalised student populations such as mature learners. This involves being mindful of one's own assumptions about student capabilities and needs, recognising how personal biases and institutional culture may influence interactions, and remaining conscious of the powerful role they play in either reinforcing or challenging deficit-based narratives about mature learners. Such reflective practice not only benefits students but also supports staff in developing more equitable and effective approaches to their widening participation work.

Whilst individual reflection is essential, sustainable change requires institutional-level transformation. More broadly, it is crucial for HEIs to recognise and actively improve their understanding of how institutional culture and organisational identity impact widening participation activity at their institution. In practical terms, HEIs should organise a working group comprised of staff and mature student leaders to conduct a comprehensive review of institutional policies and practices, identifying any potential barriers that disproportionately impact mature students.

This includes, but is in no terms limited to, evaluating admission criteria; timetabling, especially for ‘high demand’ or selective courses; university-wide communications and media (e.g., types of messaging around mature learners—or potential lack thereof, as well as potentially age-exclusionary language, etc.).

Additionally, HEIs should also review and analyse institutional enrolment data to identify potential trends in mature student enrolment behaviour at their institution. This exercise would entail examining which courses have higher or lower rates of mature student drop-out, for example, attempting to understand the potential factors behind the data. Beyond this, ensuring that such data are made available to and are shared with academic departments is crucial, as it enables them to develop more targeted strategies to address the specific challenges faced by mature students in their modules or courses. Providing academic units with access to this information allows for better-informed decision-making, ultimately helping to improve retention and success rates among nontraditional learners.

For New York:

The issue of operating in **silos** within one’s institution or wider university system emerged in the New York stakeholder interviews. Considering the necessity of partnership-based approaches to WP activity, especially when operating under strained financial and staffing resources (please see section 4.2.3; also see section 6.2.1), **inter-institutional competition** could hinder meaningful collaboration and partnership opportunities between institutions (OECD, 2017). In terms of siloes within a single institution, this could lead to inconsistencies in quality of institutional support for mature learners. The researcher therefore recommends New York HEIs create more opportunities for **inter-departmental and multi-campus collaboration**, such as inter-departmental meetings (i.e., monthly meetings between programme coordinators of undergraduate courses), collaborative projects (i.e., new intervention development that combines department or HEI resources), or themed working groups.

In addition, there are messages regarding lessons by institutional type—Particularly for Selective Scottish HEIs:

Consider the **impact of classism** on the student experience, especially for mature students who are more likely to come from working-class or other historically excluded communities (Busher & James, 2019). As class is not a legally protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010, thus no formalised guidance or legal processes for addressing it, institutions must take extra steps to ensure that class-based inequalities are acknowledged and addressed through institutional policy and practice. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort—with inter-departmental/intracampus ‘buy-in’—to create policies and practices that are not only inclusive but also actively dismantle the biases and structural inequalities that perpetuate classism. It is imperative not only to increase the recruitment of students from working-class backgrounds, but to create an inclusive and welcoming environment for students.

In practice, this would require senior management to develop and communicate a clear strategic goal around **tackling classism** at the university; open dialogue at the university about classism and understanding the impact of class-based assumptions, such as lecture series and incorporating the diverse perspectives of working-class communities into the curriculum; fostering student peer networks; steering groups comprised of university staff and students; and centralised, institutional tracking of how the university is meeting this strategic goal. By embedding tackling classism into the institution’s strategic goals, selective HEIs can work toward dismantling classism’s impact on their university environment and make their institution a more inclusive space for mature learners from working-class backgrounds.

#### **6.6.5 For policymakers:**

This study has important implications for regional and even national policymakers in both geographic contexts. Based on the findings of the

present study, further consideration should be given to prioritising mitigating **bureaucratic barriers** (see sections 4.5 and 5.4) that not only hinder mature student access and participation in higher education but also affect university stakeholders' capacity to facilitate such access. Addressing these barriers is critical to creating a more inclusive and equitable higher education system that will also better serve the needs of mature learners in both locations.

As such, there are additional messages here for such policy decision-makers as follows:

For both Scotland and New York:

Unsurprisingly, the dwindling funding of higher education has put the sector under significant pressure and the COVID-19 pandemic has only further exacerbated existing inequalities in educational access (see section 6.2.3), leaving universities to 'pick up the pieces' whilst still under-resourced. As economies look to rebuild post-COVID, a stronger higher education system is needed now more than ever, and is critical to driving innovation, economic growth, and social mobility, which are essential for recovery.

Whilst university stakeholders have worked diligently to mitigate these challenges despite strain on staffing resources, through inter-departmental collaboration and/or external partnerships, seeking external funding opportunities, or even funding WP activity through more lucrative university programmes due to many stakeholders' personal investment in this work, the researcher cautions against heavily relying on stakeholders' ingenuity. Both HEI senior management and policymakers must recognise the unsustainability of this approach. To build a more resilient higher education system, it is essential for policymakers to develop robust funding models that provide sustainable financial support for WP activity and address the structural inequalities that have been further exacerbated by the pandemic.



For Scotland:

As highlighted in section 6.2.1, **access to richer datasets** is needed, particularly to measure the impacts of non-traditional pathways for mature student entry, as there is currently limited Scottish Government data published on students over the age of 21 in this domain (Scottish Government, 2024). At present, the SFC and the Commissioner for Fair Access publish annual reports on widening access, with the CoWA metric focussing primarily on full-time, Scottish domiciled, first-degree entrants (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2024). As also acknowledged by the most recent Commissioner for Fair Access report, this approach thus risks overlooking other significant pathways into higher education, such as sub-degree qualifications and adult access routes, both of which have been shown to play a critical role in facilitating access to HE for mature learners in the present research.

Furthermore, whilst the SFC and HESA do publish some age-disaggregated data on participation and attainment, these datasets group ‘older’ students into a broad age band (e.g., “30 years and over” for both SFC and HESA data). In doing so, they potentially mask important variation across different stages of adulthood, such as the distinct needs of mature learners with childcare responsibilities versus older adult learners. Another limitation of both SFC and HESA datasets is that neither allow for longitudinal tracking of individual learners, limiting the ability to examine how mature students’ progress through higher education, including those who “stop out” (see section 2.3.3) and later re-enter. For example, HESA’s Non-Continuation indicator is not conducive to tracking students who have returned to higher education after an extended gap in their previous attempt. As the present research shows, there are instances in which mature learners initially attempted HE previous, whether through the traditional route of direct entry after school or through a non-traditional pathway, but had ultimately withdrawn from their studies. Further to this, there are limitations within the publicly available data in terms of examining Non-Continuation by age, with researchers are only able to

filter by the designations "Young" or "Mature", with more granular age data only available by request.

Given these limitations, this lack of granular data prevents us from closely examining and fully understanding the potential impact of non-traditional entry on mature student progression and attainment. As a consequence, it hinders the ability to develop evidence-based interventions that could potentially improve mature student outcomes. Along these lines, there is a critical need for access to **individual-level HESA and SFC data**, particularly with a unique identifier variable that would allow for **longitudinal tracking** and analysis of student pathways. Access to such data would enable researchers to identify patterns, outcomes, and the potential factors influencing the trajectories of mature learners in higher education.

Lastly, as discussed in sections 5.4.1 and 6.3.2, as policymakers aim to make existing policies more inclusive, further investigation is needed into the overlap between benefit entitlements and student funding. In other words, policymakers should assess to what extent the eligibility requirements for these systems could contradict, creating conflict for those who benefit from them.

By streamlining access to administrative data and mitigating or resolving potential conflict between national benefits and student funding systems, Scottish policymakers can significantly enhance the inclusivity of higher education for mature learners.

For New York State:

On a state policy level, policymakers should minimise the financial barriers to HEIs seeking to implement an EOP at their institution. As discussed in section 4.5 of the thesis, existing eligibility requirements for receiving EOP funding can disproportionately exclude 'non-traditional' student serving HEIs. In addition to this recommendation, policymakers should also consider implementing additional small-scale grant awards to support HEIs looking to expand their WP activity, allowing them to

allocate resources to existing support services for under-represented students at their institution. New York policymakers should also consider incorporating a discretionary element into the strict income requirements imposed on prospective EOP students, enabling HEIs to use their judgment in admitting students who may fall slightly outwith this criterion.

Additionally, the Excelsior Scholarship programme and its strict eligibility requirements should be revisited and revised. As detailed in sections 4.5.2 and 6.3., its full-time enrolment requirements, as well as stipulating no pauses in enrolment (except under extenuating circumstances) and the requirement for students to be in “good standing” on any previous student loans, all prevent a significant proportion of mature learners from accessing funding. The present study has shown that mature learners are more likely to have mixed-enrolment patterns, including temporary stop-outs, at some point in their educational trajectory.

On a national policy level, improving access to quality, integrated statistical data is imperative. At present, the Institute of Education Sciences' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) provides open-access data on eight key areas: institutional characteristics, institutional prices, admissions, enrolment, student financial aid, degrees and certificates conferred, student persistence and success, and institutional resources (specifically, university staff employment data, institutional revenues, and academic libraries). Although IPEDS disaggregates enrolment and attainment data by age group, gender, and race/ethnicity, it requires enrolment reporting by age category only in odd-numbered fall terms, with reporting optional in even-numbered years. Whilst ‘non-first-time’ or transfer students are included in IPEDs’ outcomes data, retention and progression rates are only collected on first-time undergraduates, excluding many mature students who re-enter higher education through non-traditional routes.

Meanwhile, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) publishes Higher Education Data Reports covering admissions, enrolment, retention, transfer, graduation, financial aid, institutional activity, student migration

status, disability services, and campus safety (NYSED, n.d.). Like IPEDS, its retention data are restricted to first-time undergraduates, thus offering limited insight into the experiences of mature learners who more commonly enter through transfer or for whom this would not be their first attempt at a bachelor's degree. Whilst NYSED's reports on enrolment, transfer, and financial aid are inclusive of non-first-time students, and gathers demographic data on student disability, race/ethnicity, and gender, age is excluded from its published data altogether. Similarly, as in Scotland, current reporting does not adequately capture the extent of 'stopping out' (see section 2.3.3) enrolment patterns, which this study has shown to be especially common among mature students.

Also given these data limitations, a challenge for the initial design of the present study was the need to utilise a combination of institutional-level data from both sources (see section 3.4). This approach would have required merging datasets from IPEDS and NYSED, reconciling different variables, and addressing gaps where measures would have been missing across reporting systems.

Therefore, adopting a more standardised approach to institutional data collection and reporting is essential. Incorporating longitudinal tracking at the state level—particularly across the three major systems (SUNY, CUNY, and private institutions)—would provide policymakers with the evidence base needed to design equitable funding mechanisms, evaluate the impact of policies such as the Excelsior Scholarship on non-traditional learners, and ensure that widening access goals encompass mature as well as traditional-age students.

Whilst the de-centralised nature of U.S. higher education is acknowledged, adopting a more standardised approach to institutional data collection and reporting could help to identify states (and institutions) with the most significant disparities in educational access and participation.

## 6.7 Thesis Conclusions

This thesis, as a **cross-national study**, explored widening access and participation to higher education for mature learners in Scotland and New York State. By focusing on these two distinct regions, the research provided insights into how different institution types and policy frameworks impact mature learners' access to higher education. Both mature learners and university stakeholders were interviewed, allowing for a **triangulated approach** to understanding the policy landscape of widening participation activity in these regions. The study revealed that the **COVID-19 pandemic** had a complex impact on mature learners, with some feeling a sense of emancipation in their learning. The present research also highlighted the significance of **partner-based approaches** to facilitating HE access and the impact of **institutional habitus** on **MPA staff conceptualisations** of mature learners.

The use of an ecological model proved advantageous in analysing these complexities. Boeren's (2016) framework allowed for a deeper examination of how individual learner characteristics and experiences (micro; see Chapter 5), institutional practices (meso; see Chapter 4), and policy contexts (macro; see section 2.2) interact to shape educational access and participation. This **qualitative multilevel approach** was not only effective in demonstrating how participation requires all three levels to work in tandem, but in also showing how studies on mature learners need to go beyond focusing solely on the individual level of the learner. In other words, the model provided a framework to explore the importance of **wider stakeholders** to enable participation—such as the HEIs themselves and policymakers—in addressing barriers to HE access and participation. By recognising these barriers, wider stakeholders can put structural supports in place to reduce them and further increase access to and participation in higher education for mature learners.

The study offered key insights into the importance of **inclusive policymaking** and **institutional flexibility** in supporting mature learners. The findings suggest that in order to support the entry and progression of

a diverse student group such as mature learners, **higher education systems** must move beyond one-size-fits-all solutions and instead offer accessibility and flexibility (e.g., in **articulation processes**) to meet the diverse and **intersectional** needs of learners, including more **diverse staff** with **lived experienced** navigating the complex processes.

It is hoped that this thesis will inspire and activate further cross-national—as well as triangulated—research on widening access and participation, particularly as learning provision itself becomes more digital, global, and connected—but with the added risks of further exclusion and marginalisation of under-represented learner groups. It is also hoped that the present study has shown how such research can offer a more holistic understanding of the factors that shape access and participation in higher education in both geographic contexts, as well as help to facilitate the development of future interventions that are more tailored, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs of mature learners in higher education.

## 6.8 Reflexivity Statement: Final Thoughts

When I first conceptualised this project, I was a full-time university admin at a selective New York HEI, having just completed my Master's in Higher and Post-Secondary Education and still keen to further my research interest in mature learners in higher education. Up until that point, I had worked extensively with mature learners as an academic advisor, supporting students in all stages of life and learning, from young working professionals looking for a career change to pensioners auditing classes for personal enrichment. And although I had observed recurring patterns in the barriers and challenges they faced, it was not until I dove into the wider research through my Master's course that I realised these themes were potentially a part of larger systemic issues. It was then that I knew that whilst I was making impact on-the-ground, I wanted to contribute more broadly to the knowledgebase by generating new insights.

Widening access and participation in Scotland came to my attention when

I was contacted by a Scottish counterpart in widening participation, who had plans to visit New York. She reached out due to her interest in designing a programme similar to the one I supported in my role as Academic Advisor. That professional connection sparked my interest in conducting cross-national research on widening participation in Scotland and New York State, ultimately leading me to apply to pursue doctoral research in Scotland.

However, shortly after I began my PhD, the COVID-19 pandemic caused significant global disruption. This would significantly impact my research in a number of ways. From a logistical standpoint, I had to pivot from planning for in-person interviews to adopting an online interview approach. Furthermore, I would ultimately have to pivot from designing a mixed-methods study due to delays in access to individual-level HESA data. However, the pandemic also presented a unique opportunity: it enabled me to capture and explore how HEIs in both Scotland and New York adapted their widening access and participation activity amid the pandemic, as well as how mature learners were affected by this global crisis.

Throughout the data collection process, I continually reflected on my role as Researcher and was mindful in working to address any power imbalances between myself and the learner participants. In this way, and as I was utilising a life histories approach to these particular interviews, I aimed to create a safe space where students can share their personal experiences and educational journeys. Meanwhile, my experience as a former HEI administrator enabled me to quite readily establish trust and rapport with stakeholder participants.

My research also allowed me to reflect on my own previous experience as a university staff member at a selective New York HEI. Particularly, this project has prompted me to reflect on how institutional habitus and organisational identity have subtly shaped my own interactions and engagement with students.

I truly believe that participation in this study's interviews helped support stakeholder and learner participants—and was in some ways cathartic—in that it offered them a space for self-reflection during a time of great uncertainty.

However, I have found this project to be a transformative learning experience for myself as well. Over the course of this thesis, I have since become a mother and this affected my final write-up phase as I had to manage the balance between academic work and my new caregiving responsibilities. However, it is not lost on me that this scenario mirrors the experiences of many of my participants, including stakeholders who similarly navigated the challenges of work-life balance and childcare during the national lockdowns in Scotland.

Reflecting on my own research and personal journey has reaffirmed my commitment to advancing inclusive higher education policies that honour the complex lives of mature learners. Through this process, I have grown both as a researcher and as an individual, and I hope that my findings will contribute to meaningful conversations, research, or even policy in widening access and participation in higher education.



## References

- Adams, G., & Markus, H. R. (2003). Toward a conception of culture suitable for a social psychology of culture. In *The psychological foundations of culture* (pp. 344-369). Psychology Press.
- Allatt, G., & Tett, L. (2018). Adult literacy practitioners and employability skills: resisting neo-liberalism? *Journal of Education Policy*, 34(4), 577-594. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2018.1493144>
- Alexander, K. J. W. (1975). *Adult education: The challenge of change* (Alexander Report). Edinburgh: HMSO.
- Alexander, J., & Stivers, C. (2020). Racial Bias: A Buried Cornerstone of the Administrative State. *Administration & Society*, 52(10), 1470-1490. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399720921508>
- Alheit, P., & Dausien, B. (2002). The 'double face' of lifelong learning: Two analytical perspectives on a 'silent revolution.' *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 34(1), 3-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2002.11661458>
- Allen, B. C. M., & Esters, L. T. (2018). Historically Black land-grant universities: Overcoming barriers and achieving success. *Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions*.
- Anderson, C. R., & McLachlan, S. M. (2016). Transformative research as knowledge mobilization: Transmedia, bridges, and layers. *Action Research*, 14(3), 295-317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750315616684>
- Archer, L., & Leathwood, C. (2005). Identities, inequalities and higher education. In *Higher education and social class* (pp. 187-204). Routledge.
- Archibald, M. M., Ambagtsheer, R. C., Casey, M. G., & Lawless, M. (2019). Using zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection: perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants. *International journal of qualitative methods*, 18, 1609406919874596.
- Aucejo, E. M., French, J., Araya, M. P. U., & Zafar, B. (2020). The impact of COVID-19 on student experiences and expectations: Evidence from a survey. *Journal of public economics*, 191, 104271.
- Babacan, H. (2022). Conference Keynote-After COVID-19: Building Inclusive and Sustainable Economies for Resilience. *Community Empowerment, Sustainable Cities, and Transformative Economies*, 7-19.
- Baker, R. (2016). The effects of structured transfer pathways in community colleges. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 38(4), 626-646.
- Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global Education Inc.: New policy networks and the neoliberal imaginary*. Routledge.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2009). *Authoring Your Life: Developing an Internal Voice to Navigate Life's Challenges*. Stylus Publishing.

- Bean, J., & Metzner, B. (1985). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, 55, 485-540.
- Becker, M., Vignoles, V. L., Owe, E., Easterbrook, M. J., Brown, R., Smith, P. B., Bond, M. H., Regalia, C., Manzi, C., Brambilla, M., Aldhafri, S., González, R., Carrasco, D., Paz Cadena, M., Lay, S., Schweiger Gallo, I., Torres, A., Camino, L., Özgen, E., ... Koller,
- S. H. (2014). Cultural Bases for Self-Evaluation: Seeing Oneself Positively in Different Cultural Contexts. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 40(5), 657-675. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167214522836>
- Bergman M., Gross J. P. K., Berry M., Shuck B. (2014). If life happened but a degree didn't: Examining factors that impact adult student persistence. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 62, 90-101.
- Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 46(1), 5-34. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.1997.tb01087.x>
- Bhopal, K. (2018). *White privilege: The myth of a post-racial society*. Policy Press.
- Boeren, E. (2016). *Lifelong Learning Participation in a Changing Policy Context*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boeren, E. (2017). Understanding adult lifelong learning participation as a layered problem. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 39(2), 161-175. doi:10.1080/0158037x.2017.1310096
- Boeren, E., & James, N. (2019). *Being an Adult Learner in Austere Times* (E. Boeren & N. James Eds. 1 ed.): Palgrave Macmillan.
- Boeren, E. (2023). Investigating the relationship between research income and research excellence in education: Evidence from the REF2021-UoA23 data. *British Educational Research Journal*, 49(6), 1312-1337.
- Boliver, V., Gorard, S., & Siddiqui, N. (2021). Using contextual data to widen access to higher education. *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 25(1), 7-13.
- Boliver, V., Powell, M., & Moreira, T. (2018). Organisational Identity as a Barrier to Widening Access in Scottish Universities. *Social Sciences*, 7(9), Article 151. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7090151>
- Bolliger, D. U., & Inan, F. A. (2012). Development and validation of the online student connectedness survey (OSCS). *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 13(3), 41-65.
- Borbely, D., Gehrsitz, M., McIntyre, S., Rossi, G., & Roy, G. (2024). Rurality, socio-economic disadvantage and educational mobility: A Scottish case

- study. *British Educational Research Journal*, 50(1), 162-182.
- Bound, J., & Turner, S. (2002). Going to War and Going to College: Did World War II and the G.I. Bill Increase Educational Attainment for Returning Veterans? *Journal of Labor Economics*, 20(4), 784-815.  
<https://doi.org/10.1086/342012>
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241-258). Greenwood.
- Bowl, M. (2001). Experiencing the barriers: Non-traditional students entering higher education. *Research Papers in Education*, 16(2), 141-160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520110037410>
- Bozkurt, A., Karakaya, K., Turk, M., Karakaya, Ö., & Castellanos-Reyes, D. (2022). The impact of COVID-19 on education: A meta-narrative review. *TechTrends*, 66(5), 883-896.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589-597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Brenner, P. S., Serpe, R. T., & Stryker, S. (2014). The Causal Ordering of Prominence and Salience in Identity Theory: An Empirical Examination. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 77(3), 231-252.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272513518337>
- Brine, J., & Waller, R. (2004). Working-class women on an Access course: Risk, opportunity and (re)constructing identities. *Gender and Education*, 16(1), 97-113. doi:10.1080/0954025032000170363
- Brinthaupt, T. M., & Eady, E. (2014). Faculty members' attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors toward their nontraditional students. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 62(3), 131-140.
- Broekemier, G. M. (2002). A comparison of two-year and four-year adult students: Motivations to attend college and the importance of choice criteria. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 12(1), 31-48.
- Brooks, R., & Everett, G. (2008). The impact of higher education on lifelong learning. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 27(3), 239-254.
- Brownie, S., Yan, A.-R., Broman, P., Comer, L., & Blanchard, D. (2023). Geographic location of students and course choice, completion, and achievement in higher education: A scoping review. *Equity in Education & Society*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/27526461231200280>
- Burke, A. (2019). Student retention models in higher education: A literature review. *College and University*, 94(2), 12-21.  
Retrieved from  
<http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/sc-hola-rly-journals/student-retention-models-higher-education/docview/2232610556/se-2>

- Busher, H., & James, N. (2019). Mature students' socio-economic backgrounds and their choices of Access to Higher Education courses. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(5), 640-652.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1576857>
- Cahalan, M. W., Addison, M., Brunt, N., Patel, P. R., Vaughan III, T., Genao, A., & Perna, L. W. (2022). Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 2022 Historical Trend Report. *Pell institute for the study of opportunity in higher education*.
- Campbell, D. E. (2006, March). What is education's impact on civic and social engagement. In *Measuring the effects of education on health and civic engagement: Proceedings of the Copenhagen symposium* (pp. 25-126).
- Campbell, F., Blank, L., Cantrell, A., Baxter, S., Blackmore, C., Dixon, J., & Goyder, E. (2022). Factors that influence mental health of university and college students in the UK: a systematic review. *BMC public health*, 22(1), 1778.
- Cappelli, Peter. (2015). Skill Gaps, Skill Shortages, and Skill Mismatches. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*. 68. 251-290.  
10.1177/0019793914564961.
- Chambers, A., Daniels, H., Dooris, J., Luna, A. Y. M., & Riordan, S. (2023). Does the Starting Point Matter? Analyzing Bachelor's Degree Attainment for Adult Students by Institutional Type. The AIR Professional File, Spring 2023. Article 158. *Association for Institutional Research*.
- Chaney, B. W. (2010). National evaluation of student support services: Examination of student outcomes after six years.
- Chen, J. C. (2017). Nontraditional adult learners: The neglected diversity in postsecondary education. *Sage Open*, 7(1), 2158244017697161.
- Choy, Susan. (2002). Nontraditional Undergraduates (NCES 2002-012). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.
- Christie, H., Munro, M., & Wager, F. (2005). 'Day students' in higher education: widening access students and successful transitions to university life. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 15(1), 3-30.  
doi:10.1080/09620210500200129
- Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V. E., & McCune, V. (2017). 'It all just clicked': a longitudinal perspective on transitions within university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 41(3), 478-490. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2014.942271
- City University of New York (CUNY). (n.d.). *About the Educational Opportunity Program*. Retrieved from <https://www.cuny.edu/admissions/financial-aid/special-programs/eop/>
- City University of New York (CUNY). (n.d.). *About CUNY*. Retrieved from

<https://www.cuny.edu/about/>

- Clark, T., Foster, L., Bryman, A., & Sloan, L. (2021). *Bryman's social research methods*. Oxford university press.
- Clarke, V. and Braun, V. (2018). Using thematic analysis in counselling and psychotherapy research: A critical reflection. *Couns. Psychother. Res.*, 18: 107-110. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12165>
- Coles, A. S., Conley, D. T., Davies, G. K., King, J. E., Portch, S. R., & Tinto, V. (2002). The challenge of access and persistence.
- Comings, J., Parrella, A. and Soricone, L. (2000). Helping adults persist: Four supports, Boston: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsall.net/index.html?id=332.html>
- Commissioner for Fair Access. (2024). *Higher education - Renewing the alliance for fair access* (Sixth annual report). Scottish Government. <https://www.fairaccess.scot/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Sixth-Renewing-Alliance-for-Fair-Access-annual-report-January-2024.pdf>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2005). Mixed methods research: Developments, debates, and dilemmas. *Research in organizations: Foundations and methods of inquiry*, 2, 315-326.
- Crisp, G., & Nuñez, A. M. (2014). Understanding the racial transfer gap: Modeling underrepresented minority and nonminority students' pathways from two-to four-year institutions. *The Review of Higher Education*, 37(3), 291-320.
- Davidson, C., & Wilson, K. (2013). Reassessing Tinto's Concepts of Social and Academic Integration in Student Retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 15(3), 329-346. <https://doi.org/10.2190/CS.15.3.b>
- Department of Education and Science (1987) *Higher education: meeting the challenge*, Cm 114, London, HMSO.
- de Villiers, C., Farooq, M. B., & Molinari, M. (2021). Qualitative Research Interviews Using Online Video Technology-Challenges and Opportunities. *Meditari Accountancy Research*.
- Driscoll, Jay (July 30, 2015). "An atlas of self-reliance: The Negro Motorist's Green Book (1937-1964)". National Museum of American History. Retrieved from <https://americanhistory.si.edu/explore/stories/atlas-self-reliance-negro-motorists-green-book-1937-1964>
- Dost, G., & Mazzoli Smith, L. (2023). Understanding higher education students' sense of belonging: a qualitative meta-ethnographic analysis. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 47(6), 822-849. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2023.2191176>

- Douglass, L. L., Threlkeld, A., & Merriweather, L. R. (Eds.). (2022). *Trauma in adult and higher education: Conversations and critical reflections*. Information Age Publishing.
- Dubois, G. (1999). State university of New York: Fulfilling the promise. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 23(3), 255-268. doi:10.1080/106689299264882
- Eagan, K. (2016). *The American freshman: Fifty-year trends, 1966-2015*. Higher Education Research Institute, Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Edgerton, J. D., & Roberts, L. W. (2014). Cultural capital or habitus? Bourdieu and beyond in the explanation of enduring educational inequality. *Theory and Research in Education*, 12(2), 193-220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878514530231>
- Ellemers, N., Kortekaas, Paulien, & Ouwerkerk, Jaap. (1999). Self-categorisation, commitment to the group and group self-esteem as related but distinct aspects of social identity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 29. 10.1002/(SICI)1099-0992(199903/05)29:2/33.3.CO;2-L.
- Ellis, J. (1984). A history and analysis of the Adult Education Act, 1964-1984. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 252 658).
- Espinosa, L. L., Turk, J. M., Taylor, M., & Chessman, H. M. (2019). Race and ethnicity in higher education: A status report.
- Farquharson, C., McNally, S., & Tahir, I. (2024). Education inequalities. *Oxford Open Economics*, 3(Supplement\_1), i760-i820.
- Farcnik, D., Domadenik Muren, P., & Franca, V. (2022). Drop-out, stop-out or prolong? The effect of COVID-19 on students' choices. *International Journal of Manpower*, 43(7), 1700-1718.
- Field, J. (2006). *Lifelong learning and the new educational order*. Trentham Books.
- Field, J. (2012). Transitions in lifelong learning: Public issues, private troubles, liminal identities. *Studies for the Learning Society*, 2(2-3), 4-11.
- Field, J. (2015). Policies for adult learning in Scotland. In *Global perspectives on adult education and learning policy* (pp. 15-28). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137388254\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137388254_2)
- Field, J., Gallacher, J., & Ingram, R. (2009). *Researching transitions in lifelong learning*: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.
- Field, J., & Morgan-Klein, N. (2013). Reappraising the importance of class in higher education entry and persistence. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 45(2), 162-176. doi:10.1080/02660830.2013.11661649



- Gale, T., & Parker, S. (2014). Navigating change: a typology of student transition in higher education. *Studies in higher education*, 39(5), 734-753.
- Gallacher, J. (2006). Blurring the boundaries or creating diversity? The contribution of the further education colleges to higher education in Scotland. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 30(1), 43-58.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03098770500432013>
- Gallacher, J., Osborne, M., & Postle, G (1996). Increasing and widening access to higher education: a comparative study of policy and provision in Scotland and Australia, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 15:6, 418-437, DOI: 10.1080/0260137960150603
- Gallacher, J., & Raffe, D. (2011). Higher education policy in post-devolution UK: more convergence than divergence? *Journal of Education Policy*, 27(4), 467-490. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2011.626080>
- Gallacher, J., & Reeve, F. (2019). FE and skills in Scotland: the implications of a policy led and 'managed' approach? *Journal of Education and Work*, 32(3), 238-250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2019.1621274>
- Gándara, D., & Rutherford, A. (2020). Completion at the expense of access? The relationship between performance-funding policies and access to public 4-year universities. *Educational Researcher*, 49(5), 321-334.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20927386>
- Gardner, A. C., Maietta, H. N., Gardner, P. D., & Perkins, N. (2021). Online Postsecondary Adult Learners: An Analysis of Adult Learner Characteristics and Online Course Taking Preferences. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 36(3), 176-192.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2021.1928434>
- Geiger, R. L. (2015). *The History of American Higher education: Learning and Culture From the Founding to World War II*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gilroy, A. A. & Pechtoll, C.L. (2019). Broadband internet access and the digital divide: Federal assistance programs. Congressional Research Service.
- Gladieux, L. E., King, J. E., & Corrigan, M. E. (2005). The federal government and higher education. *American higher education in the twenty-first century: Social, political, and economic challenges*, 2, 163-97.
- Gnolek, S. L., Falciano, V. T., & Kuncl, R. W. (2014). Modeling change and variation in US News & World Report college rankings: What would it really take to be in the top 20?. *Research in Higher Education*, 55(8), 761-779.
- Goldrick-Rab, S., Kelchen, R., Harris, D. N., & Benson, J. (2016). Reducing income inequality in educational attainment: Experimental evidence on the impact of financial aid on college completion. *American Journal of Sociology*, 121(6), 1762-1817.

- Goncalves, S. A., & Trunk, D. (2014). Obstacles to success for the nontraditional student in higher education. *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research*, 19(4).
- Goodson, I., & Sikes, P. (2001). Life history research in educational settings: Learning from lives. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Grabsch, D. K., Sutro O'Brien, L., Kirschner, C., Chinnam, D., Waddell, Z., Leibowitz, R., & Madsen, M. (2024). Characterizing Nonreturning College Students and Their Departure Intentions. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 26(1), 19-40. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251211056296>
- Green, F. (2016). Skills demand, training and skills mismatch: A review of key concepts, theory and evidence. *Foresight, Government Office for Science*.
- Groenewald, E. (2024). Navigating a diverse university context in South Africa: A student's narrative about identity formation. *Issues in Educational Research*, 34(3), 1053-1069
- Hantrais, L. (1999). Contextualization in cross-national comparative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 2(2), 93-108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/136455799295078>
- Hantrais, L. (2009). *International Comparative Research: Theory, Methods and Practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hari Rajan, M., Herbert, C., & Polly, P. (2024). Disrupted student engagement and motivation: observations from online and face-to-face university learning environments. *Frontiers In Education (Lausanne)*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1320822>
- Harper, S. R. (2010). An anti-deficit achievement framework for research on students of color in STEM. *New directions for institutional research*, 2010(148), 63-74.
- Harris, B. A. (2006). The Importance of Creating a "Sense of Community". *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 8(1), 83-105. doi:10.2190/AMNM-2VKP-V6MH-D1GF
- Hartman, C. (2022). A Review of Vertical and Horizontal Transfer Student Transitions and Experiences. In: Perna, L.W. (eds) *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*. Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research, vol 38. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06696-2\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-06696-2_7)
- Heagney, M., & Benson, R. (2017). How mature-age students succeed in higher education: implications for institutional support. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 39(3), 216-234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2017.1300986>
- Hernaus, T., Potočník, K., Lira, E. M., & LeBreton, J. M. (2024). Multilevel



empirical research: A call for more mixed-methods approaches. *European Management Journal*, 42(4), 452-

461. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2024.06.001>

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). (2020). *About HESA*. Cheltenham: Higher Education Statistics Agency. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/about>

HESA. (2023, January 19). *Higher Education Student Statistics: UK, 2021/22 - Student numbers and characteristics* | HESA. [www.hesa.ac.uk. https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-01-2023/sb265-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers](https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/19-01-2023/sb265-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers)

HESA. (2024). *Who's Studying in HE?* Data page. <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/whos-in-he>. Cheltenham: HESA.

Hillman, N. W., Colston, J., Bach-Hanson, J., & Peek, A. (2021). *Mapping rural colleges and their communities*. Student Success Through Applied Research (SSTAR), University of Wisconsin-Madison. [https://mappingruralcolleges.wisc.edu/documents/sstar\\_mapping\\_rural\\_colleges\\_2021.pdf](https://mappingruralcolleges.wisc.edu/documents/sstar_mapping_rural_colleges_2021.pdf)

Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. SAGE Publications.

Holzer, H. J. (2019). *The US labor market in 2050: Supply, demand and policies to improve outcomes* (No. 148). IZA Policy Paper

Home, A. M. (1998). Predicting role conflict, overload and contagion in adult women university students with families and jobs. *Adult education quarterly*, 48(2), 85-97.

Horn, L., Cataldi, E., & Sikora, A. (2005). *Waiting to Attend College. Undergraduates Who Delay Their Postsecondary Enrollment. Postsecondary Education Descriptive Analysis Report*. NCES 2005?152. National Center for Education Statistics.

Horvat, E. M., & Antonio, A. L. (1999). "Hey, those shoes are out of uniform": African American girls in an elite high school and the importance of habitus. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 30(3), 317-342.

Howard, C., & Davies, P. (2012). Attracting mature students into higher education: The impact of approaches to learning and social identity. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 37(6), 769-785. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2012.684038>

Hoyt, J. E., & Winn, B. A. (2004). Understanding Retention and College Student Bodies: Differences Between Drop-Outs, Stop-Outs, Opt-Outs, and Transfer-Outs. *NASPA Journal*, 41(3), 395-417. <https://doi.org/10.2202/1949-6605.1351>

Hudson, A., Burnell, I., & Murray, D. (2020). *The Place of Widening Participation*. FACE: Forum for Access and Continuing Education.

- Humpherys, B., & Acker-Hocevar, M. (2012). Adult Education Transition Programs: A Return to Community College Access. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(9), 733-737. doi:10.1080/10668926.2012.685800
- Hunter Blackburn, S., Kadar-Satat, G., Riddell, S., and Weedon, E. (2016) Access to Higher Education for People from Less Advantaged Backgrounds in Scotland. London, The Sutton Trust.
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of education*, 324-345.
- Hussar, W. J., & Bailey, T. M. (2019). Projections of education statistics to 2027 (NCES 2019001). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2019/2019001.pdf>.
- Iannelli, C. (2007). Inequalities in Entry to Higher Education: a Comparison Over Time between Scotland and England and Wales. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61, 306-333. <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1468-2273.2007.00357.X>.
- Iannelli, C., Smyth, E., & Klein, M. (2016). Curriculum differentiation and social inequality in higher education entry in Scotland and Ireland. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42(4), 561-581.
- Islam, G. (2014). Social Identity Theory. In: Teo, T. (eds) Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology. Springer, New York, NY. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7\\_289](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7_289)
- Kallio, H., Pietilä, A.M., Johnson, M., Kangasniemi, M (2016). Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*. 72(12), 2954-2965. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/jan.13031>
- Kallison, J. M. (2017). The Effects of an Intensive Postsecondary Transition Program on College Readiness for Adult Learners. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 67(4), 302-321. doi:10.1177/0741713617725394
- Kamer, J. A., & Ishitani, T. T. (2019). First-Year, Nontraditional Student Retention at Four-Year Institutions: How Predictors of Attrition Vary Across Time. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 1521025119858732. doi:10.1177/1521025119858732
- Kamssu, A. J., & Kouam, R. B. (2021). The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on university student enrollment decisions and higher education resource allocation. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 21(12).
- Karmelita, C. E. (2018). Exploring the experiences of adult learners in a transition program. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 24(2), 141-164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971418791587>

- Karmelita, C.E. (2020). Advising adult learners during the transition to college. *NACADA Journal*, 40(1), 64-79.
- Karmelita, C. E. (2021). Outcomes of Participation in a Transition Program: One Year Later. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 71(1), 59-76. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2021.1969826>
- Kanter, M., Ochoa, E., Nassif, R., & Chong, F. (2011). Meeting President Obama's 2020 college completion goal. Retrieved from <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/meeting-president-obamas-2020-college-completion-goal>
- Kasworm, C. E. (2003). Setting the Stage: Adults in Higher Education. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2003(102), 3-10. doi:10.1002/ss.83
- Kasworm, C. E. (2010). Adult Learners in a Research University: Negotiating Undergraduate Student Identity. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60(2), 143-160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713609336110>
- Kasworm, C. E. (2012). US adult higher education: One context of lifelong learning. *International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning*, 5(1), 1-19.
- Kasworm, C.E. (2014). Paradoxical understandings regarding adult undergraduate persistence. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 62, 67-77. doi: 10.1080/07377363.2014.916587
- Kasworm, C. E. (2018). Adult Students: A Confusing World in Undergraduate Higher Education. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 66(2), 77-87. doi:10.1080/07377363.2018.1469077
- Katznelson, I. (2005). When affirmative action was white: An untold history of racial inequality in twentieth-century America. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Kennedy, H. (1997). *Learning Works: widening participation in further education*. The Council.
- Khan, M. A. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on UK higher education students: experiences, observations and suggestions for the way forward. *Corporate Governance: The International Journal of Business in Society*, 21(6), 1172-1193.
- Kim, J. (2023). Toward a lifelong learning society for working adults across boundaries. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2023, 105-112. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.20506>
- Kim, Y. (2011). The pilot study in qualitative inquiry: Identifying issues and learning lessons for culturally competent research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 10(2), 190-206.
- Kinser, K., & Deitchman, J. (2007). Tenacious Persisters: Returning Adult Students in Higher Education. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 9(1), 75-94. doi:10.2190/W143-56H0-6181-

- Knowles, M. S., Holton III, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2015). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development*. Routledge.
- Köhler, T. (2024). Multilevel qualitative research: Insights from practice. *European Management Journal*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2024.03.011>
- Kuh, G. D. (2001). Assessing what really matters to student learning inside the national survey of student engagement. *Change: The magazine of higher learning*, 33(3), 10-17.
- Kukulska-Hulme, A. (2010). *Mobile learning for quality education and social inclusion*, UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education.
- Kumar, R. (2023). Challenges and Strategies for Improving Minority Education Access and Success. *Sage Science Review of Educational Technology*, 6(1), 48-58.
- Laal, M., & Salamati, P. (2012). Lifelong learning; why do we need it?. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 31, 399-403.
- Lathen, L., & Laestadius, L. (2021). Reflections on online focus group research with low socio-economic status African-American adults during COVID-19. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20, 1-10.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211021713>
- Lee, I. (2025). What Makes Adult Learners Persist in College? An Analysis Using the Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model. *Education Sciences*, 15(9), 1085. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci15091085>
- Lewis, C., Mehmet, M., Quinton, S., & Reynolds, N. (2023). Methodologies for researching marginalised and/or potentially vulnerable groups. *International Journal of Market Research*, 65(2-3), 147-154.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14707853231155238>
- Liamputtong, P. (Ed.). (2022). *Handbook of qualitative cross-cultural research methods : A social science perspective*. Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.
- Lido, C., Hirsu, L. & Wessels, B. (2021). “UIL Background paper - Digital and Data literacies for inclusion of marginalised citizens in learning cities”. In: Howells and R. Valdes-Cotera. *Inclusive lifelong learning in cities: Policies and practices for vulnerable groups*. Hamburg: UIL.
- Mallman, M., & Lee, H. (2014). Stigmatised learners: mature-age students negotiating university culture. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 37(5), 684-701. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2014.973017>
- Malhotra, N., & Apicerno, A. (2023). The State of Adult Student Re- Entry. *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy*, 4(5), 45-49.

- Marandet, E., & Wainwright, E. (2010). Invisible experiences: understanding the choices and needs of university students with dependent children. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(5), 787-805.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27896113>
- Marinoni, G., Van't Land, H., & Jensen, T. (2020). The impact of Covid 19 on higher education around the world. *IAU global survey report*, 23(1), 1-17.
- Markle, G. (2015). Factors influencing persistence among nontraditional university students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 65(3), 267-285.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713615583085>
- Marshall, S. M., Gardner, M. M., Hughes, C., & Lowery, U. (2016). Attrition from Student Affairs: Perspectives from Those Who Exited the Profession. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 53(2), 146-159.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2016.1147359>
- Meeuwisse, M., Severiens, S. E., & Born, M. P. (2010). Learning environment, interaction, sense of belonging and study success in ethnically diverse student groups. *Research in Higher Education*, 51, 528-545.
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. New York, NY: John Wiley
- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to think like an adult: Core concepts of transformation theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Process* (pp. 3-34). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- McClafferty, K. A., McDonough, P. M., & Nuñez, A. M. (2002). What is a college culture? Facilitating college preparation through organizational change.
- McCowan, T. (2019). *Higher education for and beyond the sustainable development goals*. Springer Nature.
- Mckendry, S., Wright, M., & Stevenson, K. (2014). Why here and why stay? Students' voices on the retention strategies of a widening participation university. *Nurse education today*, 34(5), 872-877.
- McNamara CL, McKee M, Stuckler D. Precarious employment and health in the context of COVID-19: a rapid scoping umbrella review. *Eur J Public Health*. 2021 Nov 9;31(Supplement\_4):iv40-iv49. doi: 10.1093/eurpub/ckab159. PMID: 34751369; PMCID: PMC8576296.
- McNeil, J. C., Ohland, M. W., & Long, R. A. (2016). *Entry pathways, academic performance, and persistence of nontraditional students in engineering by transfer status*. Paper presented at the 46th Annual Frontiers in Education Conference, FIE 2016.
- Merrill, B. (2015). Determined to stay or determined to leave? A tale of learner identities, biographies and adult students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(10), 1859-1871.  
doi:10.1080/03075079.2014.914918

- Merrill, B., & Johnston, R. (2011). Access and retention: Experiences of nontraditional learners in HE. Literature review: Final extended version. In.
- Merrill, B., & West, L. (2009). *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*: SAGE.
- Mertens, D. M. (2021). Transformative Research Methods to Increase Social Impact for Vulnerable Groups and Cultural Minorities. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211051563>
- Miller, N. (2014). Nontraditional Student Graduation Rate Benchmarks. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 62(3), pp.141-151.
- Monaghan, D. B., & Attewell, P. (2015). The community college route to the bachelor's degree. *Educational Evaluation and policy analysis*, 37(1), 70-91.
- Moon, J., Randell, M., Zhang, Y., & Li, M. (2023). Crisis management during the COVID-19 pandemic response within an Australian higher education institution - a qualitative analysis. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 46(1), 92-106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2023.2255963>
- Moore, A., Nguyen, A., Rivas, S., Bany-Mohammed, A., Majeika, J., & Martinez, L. (2021). A qualitative examination of the impacts of financial stress on college students' well-being: Insights from a large, private institution. *SAGE Open Medicine*, 9, 20503121211018122.
- Moore, J., Sanders, J., & Higham, L. (2013). Literature review of research into widening participation to higher education. In (pp. xii, 181 p.). London: Aimhigher Research and Consultancy Network.
- Morgan-Klein, B. (2003). Scottish Higher Education and the FE-HE Nexus. *Higher Education Quarterly*. 57. 338 - 354. 10.1111/j.0951-5224.2003.00251.x.
- Murphy, M., & Fleming, T. (2003). Partners in Participation: Integrated Approaches to Widening Access in Higher Education. *European Journal of Education*, 38(1), 25-39. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1503480>
- Murray, N. L., & Klinger, C. M. (2012). Dimensions of conflict: Reflections on the higher education experience from an access education perspective. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 31(2), 117-133. doi:10.1080/02601370.2012.663802
- National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). (2023). *Digest of education statistics, Table 317.20: Degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by control and classification of institution and state or jurisdiction: 2022-23*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23\\_317.20.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_317.20.asp)



- National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.). Definitions and data: who is nontraditional? <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs/web/97578e.asp>
- National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) (1997a) Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the National Committee (Dearing Report) (Norwich, HMSO).
- National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) (1997b) Higher Education in the Learning Society: Report of the Scottish Committee (Garrick Report) (Norwich, HMSO).
- National Institute of Food and Agriculture (n.d.). Land-Grant Colleges and Universities. <https://www.nifa.usda.gov/about-nifa/how-we-work/partnerships/land-grant-colleges-universities>
- Nevins, Allan. *The State Universities and Democracy*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 1962.
- New York State Comptroller. (2024). *DiNapoli: New York's higher education sector boosts state and local economies, but job recovery lags*. Office of the New York State Comptroller. <https://www.osc.ny.gov/press/releases/2024/09/dinapoli-new-yorks-higher-education-sector-boosts-state-and-local-economies-job-recovery-lags>
- New York State Education Department (NYSED). (2025). *Higher Education Data Collection Forms and Instructions*. Retrieved from <https://www.nysed.gov/information-reporting-services/higher-education-data-collection-forms-and-instructions>
- New York State Education Department (NYSED). (2024). *Statewide plan for higher education*. Retrieved from <https://www.highered.nysed.gov/swp/>
- New York State Government (2017). "Governor Cuomo Announces First-in-the- Nation Excelsior Scholarship Program Will Provide Tuition-Free College to Middle-Class Families." <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-announces-first-nation-excelsior-scholarship-program-will-provide-tuitionfree#:~:text=Governor%20Andrew%20M.,the%20FY%202018%20Budget%20agreement>. Press release, April 8, 2017.
- New York State Senate. *Senate passes the José Peralta New York State DREAM Act*. (January 23, 2019). NYSenate.gov. <https://www.nysenate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2019/senate-passes-jose-peralta-new-york-state-dream-act>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Obama, B. (2009). Remarks of President Obama—Address to Joint Session of

Congress. Retrieved from <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-pressoffice/remarks-president-barack-obama-address-joint-session-congress>

- O'Boyle, N. (2015). The risks of 'university speak': relationship management and identity negotiation by mature students off campus. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 25(2), 93-111.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09620214.2015.1018921>
- O'Connor, H., & Madge, C. (2017). Online interviewing. In *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods* (pp. 416-434). SAGE Publications Ltd,  
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473957992>
- O'Donnell, V. L., & Tobbell, J. (2007). The Transition of Adult Students to Higher Education: Legitimate Peripheral Participation in a Community of Practice? *Adult Education Quarterly*, 57(4), 312-328.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713607302686>
- OECD (2023), "How are social outcomes related to education?", in *Education at a Glance 2023: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris. DOI:  
<https://doi.org/10.1787/192b44ac-en>
- OECD. (2020). Digital Transformation in the Age of COVID-19: Building Resilience and Bridging Divides. *Digital Economy Outlook 2020 Supplement*.
- Oertle, K. M., Kim, S., Taylor, J. L., Bragg, D. D., & Harmon, T. (2010). *Illinois Adult Education Bridge Evaluation: A Technical Report*. Retrieved from Champaign, IL: <https://occrl.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider4/adult-bridge/aebe-evaluation.pdf?sfvrsn=8>
- Office for National Statistics. (2017, February). *Higher Education Statistics Agency data: Quality assurance of administrative data used in population statistics*. Office for National Statistics.  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/methodologies/highereducationstatisticsagencydataqualityassuranceofadministratedatausedinpopulationstatisticsfeb2017>
- Olssen, M., & Peters, M. A. (2005). Neoliberalism, higher education and the knowledge economy: From the free market to knowledge capitalism. *Journal of education policy*, 20(3), 313-345.
- Ortagus, J. C., Kelchen, R., Rosinger, K., & Voorhees, N. (2020). Performance-Based Funding in American Higher Education: A Systematic Synthesis of the Intended and Unintended Consequences. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 42(4), 520-550.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373720953128>
- Osborne, M. (2013) Access and retention. In: Bryce, T.G.K., Humes, W.M., Gillies, D. and Kennedy, A. (eds.) *Scottish Education (4th Edition)*. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, UK, pp. 316-326. I
- Osborne, M. (2016). Access to Higher Education. In J. E. Côté & A.



Furlong (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of the Sociology of higher education* (pp. 119- 127). New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.

- Osborne, M. (2022). The barriers to access in higher education and their alleviation. In *Routledge Handbook of the Sociology of Higher Education* (pp. 160-173). Routledge.
- Osborne, M., Marks, A., & Turner, E. (2004). Becoming a mature student: How adult applicants weigh the advantages and disadvantages of higher education. *Higher Education*, 48, 291-315.  
10.1023/B:HIG.0000035541.40952.ab.
- O'Shea, S., Lysaght, P., Roberts, J., & Harwood, V. (2015). Shifting the blame in higher education - social inclusion and deficit discourses. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 35(2), 322-336.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1087388>
- O'Shea, S., & Stone, C. (2011). Transformations and self-discovery: mature-age women's reflections on returning to university study. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33(3), 273-288.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2011.565046>
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Page, L. C., & Scott-Clayton, J. (2016). Improving college access in the United States: Barriers and policy responses. *Economics of Education Review*, 51, 4-22.
- Pearce, N. (2017). Exploring the learning experiences of older mature undergraduate students. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 19, 59-76. 10.5456/WPLL.19.1.59.
- Prins, E., Kassab, C., & Campbell, K. (2015). Adult Learners in Higher Education: A Rural-Urban Analysis of Pennsylvania FAFSA Applicants' Educational, Demographic, and Financial Characteristics. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 63(2), 71-85. doi:10.1080/07377363.2015.1042999
- Read, B., Archer, L., & Leathwood, C. (2003). Challenging Cultures? Student Conceptions of "Belonging" and "Isolation" at a Post-1992 University. *Studies in Higher Education*, 28(3), 261-277.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070309290>
- Reay, D. (2018). Working class educational transitions to university: The limits of success. *European Journal of Education*, 53(4), 528-540.
- Reay, D., Ball, S., & David, M. (2002). 'It's taking me a long time but I'll get there in the end': Mature students on access courses and higher education choice. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(1), 5-19.  
doi:10.1080/01411920120109711
- Reay, D., David, M., & Ball, S. (2005). *Degrees of choice: Social class, race and gender in higher education*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham.

- Reay, D., Crozier, G., & Clayton, J. (2009). 'Strangers in paradise'? Working-class students in elite universities. *Sociology*, 43(6), 1103-1121.
- Reay, D., Crozier, G. and Clayton, J. (2010), 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36: 107- 124.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920902878925>
- Reder, S. (2007). Adult education and postsecondary success (National Commission on Adult Literacy Policy Brief). New York, NY: Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL) . Retrieved from  
<http://www.caalusa.org/content/rederpolicybriefrev10807.pdf>
- Rendón, L.I. (1999). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innov High Educ* 19, 33-51 (1994).  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01191156>
- Rendón, L. I., Jalomo, R. E., & Nora, A. (2000). Theoretical considerations in the study of minority student retention in higher education. *Reworking the student departure puzzle*, 1, 127-156.
- Riddell, S. (2015) "Scottish Higher Education and Devolution" in Riddell, S., Weedon, E., and Minty, S. (eds) *Higher Education in Scotland and the UK: Diverging or Converging Systems*. pp.1 - 18.  
<https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474404587.003.0001>
- Riddell, S., & Blackburn, L. H. (2018). Social justice and widening access to higher education in Scotland: the role of Scottish colleges. In *New Frontiers for College Education* (pp. 182-201). Routledge.
- Riddell, S., Minty, S., Weedon, E. & Hunter Blackburn, L. (2015), 'Higher education and the referendum on Scottish independence', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 86, no. 2, pp. 240-248. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12164>
- Riddell, S., Weedon, E. (2018). Fees Regimes and Widening Access in the Four UK Nations: Are No-Fees Regimes Necessarily More Socially Inclusive?. In: Shah, M., McKay, J. (eds) *Achieving Equity and Quality in Higher Education*. Palgrave Studies in Excellence and Equity in Global Education. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78316-1\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78316-1_12)
- Riley, A. R., & Glymour, M. M. (2024). Social Class, Poverty, and COVID-19. *The Social Epidemiology of the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 54.
- Robbins, L. (1963). *Higher education: Report of the Committee appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins* (Robbins Report). London: HMSO.
- Robinson, O. C. (2013). Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(1), 25-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543>

- Roese, J. (2021, January). COVID-19 exposed the digital divide. Here's how we can close it. In *World Economic Forum* (Vol. 27).
- Rose, A. D. (1991). Ends or means: An overview of the history of the Adult Education Act.
- Ryan, C. (2018). Computer and internet use in the United States: 2016. U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey Reports, ACS-39.
- Sá, M. J., & Serpa, S. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to foster the sustainable development of teaching in higher education. *Sustainability*, 12 (20), 8525.
- Salmons, J. E. (2021). *Doing Qualitative Research Online*. SAGE.
- Samuels, W., Beach, A. L., & Palmer, L. B. (2011). Persistence of Adult Undergraduates on a Traditionally-Oriented University Campus: Does Donaldson and Graham's Model of College Outcomes for Adult Students Still Apply? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 13(3), 351-371. doi:10.2190/CS.13.3.e
- Schuller, T., & Watson, D. (2009). *Learning Through Life: Inquiry into the Future for Lifelong Learning*. National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.
- Scott, P. (1995). *The meanings of mass higher education*. Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press.
- Scottish Education Department (1975). Adult Education: the Challenge of Change (The Alexander Report), Edinburgh: HMSO
- Scottish Funding Council. (2024). *Report on widening access 2022-23* (SFC/ST/05/2024). <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/publications/report-on-widening-access-2022-23/>
- Scottish Funding Council. (n.d.). *National Schools Programme*. <https://www.sfc.ac.uk/student-interests/fair-access/national-schools-programme/>
- Scottish Government (2007). "Skills for Scotland: A Lifelong Skills Strategy." Scottish Government (2011). "Putting Learners at the Centre: Delivering our Ambitions for Post-16 Education
- Scottish Government. (2016a). *A blueprint for fairness: The final report of the Commission on Widening Access*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/>
- Scottish Government. (2016b). *Contextual higher education admissions: Discussion paper*. <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/factsheet/2017/06/contextual-higher-education-admissions-discussion-paper/documents/contextual-higher-education-admissions-pdf/contextual-higher-education-admissions->

[pdf/govscot%3Adocument/contextual%2Bhigher%2Beducation%2Badmission  
s.pdf](https://www.gov.scot/publications/contextual-higher-education-admission-s.pdf)

Scottish Government (2021). "Rural Scotland Key Facts 2021." Available from:  
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/rural-scotland-key-facts-2021/>

Scottish Government (2022, May 10). "Adult learning strategy for Scotland 2022-2027." Available from: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/adult-learning-strategy-scotland-2022-27/>

Scottish Government. (2022). *Using intersectionality to understand structural inequality in Scotland: Evidence synthesis*.  
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/using-intersectionality-understand-structural-inequality-scotland-evidence-synthesis/>

Scottish Government (2024). "Higher Education: Commissioner for Fair Access annual report 2024 - response." Available from:  
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/higher-education-commissioner-for-fair-access-annual-report-response>

Scottish Government Commission on Widening Access (2016) *A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government. Available from:  
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/blueprint-fairness-finalreport-commission-widening-access/>

Scottish Wider Access Programme [SWAP] & The Robertson Trust. (2025). *Report on Key Issues affecting mature students in higher education*. The Robertson Trust.  
<https://www.therobertsontrust.org.uk/publications/issues-affecting-mature-students-in-higher-education/>

Shapiro, D., Dunder, A., Yuan, X., Harrell, A., Wild, J., Ziskin, M. (2014, July). *Some College, No Degree: A National View of Students with Some College Enrollment, but No Completion*. Retrieved from Herndon, VA:

Shapiro, D., Ryu, M., Huie, F., & Liu, Q. (October 2019). *Some College, No Degree, A 2019 Snapshot for the Nation and 50 States*. Retrieved from Herndon, VA:

Sharp J., Theiler S. (2018). A review of psychological distress among university students: Pervasiveness, implications and potential points of intervention. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 40, 193-212.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-018-9321-7>

Shaw, M., & Crowther, J. (2014). Adult education, community development and democracy: renegotiating the terms of engagement. *Community Development Journal*, 49(3), 390-406.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for information*, 22(2), 63-75.

Sissel, P.A., Hansman, C.A., and Kasworm, C.E. (2001) *The Politics of Neglect: Adult Learners in Higher Education*, New Directions for Adult and

## Continuing Education, 91

- Skerratt, S., Atterton, J., McCracken, D.I., McMorran, R., & Thomson, S.G. (2016). *Rural Scotland in Focus - 2016*.
- Smith, J. (2008). *Mature learners: a synthesis of research*. York, UK: Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/node/3963/>
- Smithers, A. & Griffin, A (1986). Mature students at university: entry experience and outcomes. *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 257-268.
- Soares, L., Gagliardi, J. S., & Nellum, C. J. (2017). The post-traditional learners manifesto revisited.
- Soria, K. M. (2012). Creating a successful transition for working-class first-year students. *The Journal of College Orientation and Transition*, 20(1), 44-55. <https://doi.org/10.24926/jcotr.v20i1.2820>
- Sosu, E. M., Smith, L. N., McKendry, S., Santoro, N., & Ellis, S. (2016). *Widening access to higher education for students from Economically disadvantaged backgrounds: what works and why?*. Glasgow: University of Strathclyde.
- State University of New York (SUNY). (n.d.). *Educational Opportunity Program (EOP)*. Retrieved from <https://www.suny.edu/attend/academics/eop/>
- Stone, C., & O'Shea, S. (2019). Older, online and first: Recommendations for retention and success. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 35(1).
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2018). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.
- Student Awards Agency Scotland. (2024). Annual Report and Accounts 2022-2023. Available from: <https://www.saas.gov.uk/files/757/saas-annual-report-2022-23.pdf>
- State University of New York (SUNY). (n.d.). *About SUNY*. Retrieved from <https://www.suny.edu/about/about-suny/>
- Sutton, C.E. (2019) *Mature Students and Social Isolation: Being Excluded or Choosing to Be Alone?* In: Boeren E., James N. (eds) *Being an Adult Learner in Austere Times*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97208-4\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-97208-4_5)
- Swail, W. S. (2000). Preparing America's disadvantaged for college: Programs that increase college opportunity. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2000(107), 85-101.
- Tai, D. B. G., Shah, A., Doubeni, C. A., Sia, I. G., & Wieland, M. L. (2021). The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. *Clinical infectious diseases*, 72(4), 703-706.

- Taylor, J. L., & Jain, D. (2017). The multiple dimensions of transfer: Examining the transfer function in American higher education. *Community College Review*, 45(4), 273-293.
- Tett, L. (2006). *Community education, lifelong learning and social inclusion*. Dunedin Academic Press.
- Tett, L. (2023). Community-Based Adult Learning: A Scottish Case Study in the Time of COVID-19. *Adult Literacy Education*, 5(1), 21-35.
- Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: the role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423-442. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930210140257>
- Thomas, L. (2012). *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: A summary of findings and recommendations from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/building-student-engagement-and-belonging>.
- Tight, M. (2019). Student retention and engagement in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 44(5), 689-704. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2019.1576860>
- Tight, M. (2023). Massification and access: a slow-motion collision. In *Handbook on Higher Education Management and Governance* (pp. 160-171). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Tindle, R., Castillo, P., Doring, N., Grant, L., & Willis, R. (2022). Developing and validating a university needs instrument to measure the psychosocial needs of university students. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(4), 1550-1570.
- Tinto, V. (1998). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *The Review of Higher Education*, 12(2), 167-177.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of educational research*, 45(1), 89-125.
- Trivette, M. J., & English, D. J. (2017). Finding Freedom: Facilitating Postsecondary Pathways for Undocumented Students. *Educational Policy*, 31(6), 858-894. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904817719526>
- Turu, M., Van Rossum, T., & Gridley, N. (2023). Starting university during the COVID-19 pandemic: A small-scale study of first-year education students' expectations, experiences and preferences. *Learning and Teaching*, 16(1), 77-97.
- University of the Highlands and Islands. (2025). *Facts and figures: Student numbers 2023/24*. <https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/about-uhi/facts-and-figures/>
- U.S. Department of Education, College Completion Tool Kit, Washington, D.C., 2011



- U.S. Department of Education & Office of Vocational and Adult Education (2012). *Promoting College and Career Readiness: Bridge Programs for Low-Skill Adults*. Retrieved from Washington, D.C.: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/cclo/brief-1-bridge-programs.pdf>
- Universities UK. (2018). Patterns and Trends in UK Higher Education 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-08/patterns-and-trends-in-uk-higher-education-2018.pdf>
- Van Teijlingen, E., & Hundley, V. (2001). The importance of pilot studies. *Social research update*, (35), 1-4.
- Vogels, E. A. (2021). Some digital divides between rural, urban, suburban America persist | Pew Research Center.
- Walker, L. (2000). Predicting or guessing: the progress of Scottish Wider Access Programme (SWAP) students at the University of Glasgow. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 19(4), 342-356. doi:10.1080/02601370050110392
- Walsh, D., Buchanan, D., Douglas, A., Erdman, J., Fischbacher, C., McCartney, G., ... & Whyte, B. (2019). Increasingly diverse: the changing ethnic profiles of Scotland and Glasgow and the implications for population health. *Applied Spatial Analysis and Policy*, 12, 983-1009.
- Warschauer, M. (2004). *Technology and social inclusion: Rethinking the digital divide*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Watling, S. (2012). Invisible publics: higher education and digital exclusion. *Towards Teaching in Public: Reshaping the Modern University*, 83.
- Watt, S., & Paterson, L. C. (2000). Pathways and Partnerships: Widening access to higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 24(1), 107-116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/030987700112354>
- Webster, S., Lewis, J., & Brown, A. (2014). "Ethical Considerations in Qualitative Research." pp. 77-107 in *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students & Researchers*, edited by Ritchie, J. Lewis, C. M. N. Nicolls, and R. Ormston. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, and Washington, DC: Sage Publications Ltd
- Wells, R. S. (2023). Learning from COVID-19: Unchanging inequality and ideology in higher education. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 67(13), 1655-1664.
- Welton, A., & Williams, M. (2015). Accountability Strain, College Readiness Drain: Sociopolitical Tensions Involved in Maintaining a College-going Culture in a High "Minority", High Poverty, Texas High School. *The High School Journal* 98(2), 181-204. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2015.0001>.

- West, L., Fleming, T., & Finnegan, F. (2013). Connecting Bourdieu, Winnicott, and Honneth: Understanding the experiences of non-traditional learners through an interdisciplinary lens. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 45(2), 119-134. doi:10.1080/02660830.2013.11661646
- Wiles, R. (2013). *What are qualitative research ethics?* Bloomsbury Academic.
- Winfield, J., & Paris, J. (2022). Burnout and working conditions in higher education during covid-19: Recommendations for policy and practice. *COVID-19 Research*.
- Wojtas, O. (2000). Scotland leads rest of UK in widening participation. *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 1,456(64):  
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/scotland-leads-rest-of-uk-in-widening-participation/153784.article>
- Workers' Educational Association (WEA). (n.d.). *WEA Scotland: working with you*. <https://www.wea.org.uk/scotland>
- Wray, J., Aspland, J., & Barrett, D. (2013). Choosing to stay: looking at retention from a different perspective. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(9), 1700-1714. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.806461>
- Wyatt, L. G. 2011. Nontraditional student engagement: Increasing adult student success and retention. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 59(1): 10-20.
- Xavier, M., & Meneses, J. (2022). Persistence and time challenges in an open online university: a case study of the experiences of first-year learners. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 19(1), 31.
- Xu, D., Ran, F. X., Fink, J., Jenkins, D., & Dundar, A. (2018). Collaboratively clearing the path to a baccalaureate degree: Identifying effective 2-to 4-year college transfer partnerships. *Community College Review*, 46(3), 231-256.
- Yenney, C. B. (2020). "I Trusted Her More Than I Trusted Myself": The impact of academic advising on rural students' sense of belonging in college. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2020, 29-36.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20362>
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race ethnicity and education*, 8(1), 69-91.
- Yu, H., McKinney, L., Burrridge, A. et al. (2024). How First-Year Academic Momentum Influences Transfer Outcomes Among Different Racial and Ethnic Groups. *Res High Educ* (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-024-09803-9>
- Zafft, C., Kallenbach, S., & Spohn, J. (2006). *Transitioning Adults to College: Adult Basic Education Program Models*. Retrieved from Cambridge, MA: [http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/op\\_collegetransitio](http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/op_collegetransitio)



[ns.pdf](#)

- Zafft, C. K. (2008). Bridging the Great Divide: Approaches That Help Adults Navigate From Adult Education to College. *Adult Learning*, 19(1-2), 6-11.
- Zook, G. F. (1947). The President's Commission on Higher Education. *Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors* (1915-1955), 33(1), 10-28. doi:10.2307/40221180

## Appendices

### 7.1 Appendix 1



College of Social  
Sciences

#### 7.1.1 Sample Participant Information Sheet

##### Participant Information Sheet

'Non-Traditional Entry Routes to Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Inclusion in Access for Adults in New York State and Scotland'

Brittney Nathaniel, PhD Researcher  
[b.nathaniel.1@research.gla.ac.uk](mailto:b.nathaniel.1@research.gla.ac.uk)

Supervised by:

Prof. Catherine Lido  
[catherine.lido@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:catherine.lido@glasgow.ac.uk)

Prof. Ellen Boeren  
[ellen.boeren@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:ellen.boeren@glasgow.ac.uk)

Prof. Michael Osborne  
[michael.osborne@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:michael.osborne@glasgow.ac.uk)

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it entails. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher/s if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

This study will examine access to higher education in New York State and Scotland, with a particular focus on adults in bachelor's degree programmes. It will also look at the relationship between non-traditional entry into higher education (such as through college transfer; access, bridge, or transition programmes) student progression, and student graduation outcomes. Participation in this study is

completely voluntary and you may decline to participate at any time.

To partake in this study, you will be invited to an online, one-to-one interview with the principal researcher, Brittney Nathaniel. You will be interviewed by Zoom and may choose to have your camera turned on or off. This interview will last approximately 60 minutes and will be recorded for audio transcription.

Please note that due to the small number of participants, full confidentiality may not be guaranteed; however, the following steps will be taken to protect your identity:

- All participant names will be changed and will be referred to by this name change/pseudonym during interview, in the audio recording, and in any publication on this research
- Other personal identifiers (i.e., institution name and location, professor names, etc.) will also be changed where needed to further protect participant identities
- All audio recordings will be kept confidential, stored in a secure location, and destroyed at the conclusion of this project

The data collected for this study will be used for the production of a final PhD thesis, and may also be used for publication in conference papers, journals, and other research outputs online or in print. Interview transcripts will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research, and may only be accessed by authenticated researchers who agree to preserve the confidentiality of participants based on the measures outlined above.

This project has been considered and approved by the College Research Ethics Committee. To pursue any complaint about the conduct of the research: contact the College of Social Sciences Ethics Officer, Dr Muir Houston, email: [Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Muir.Houston@glasgow.ac.uk)

---

End of Participant Information Sheet

---

### 7.1.2 Privacy Notice



## PRIVACY NOTICE

---

**Privacy Notice for Participation in Research Project:** 'Non-Traditional Entry Routes to Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Inclusion in Access for Adults in New York State and Scotland' by Brittney Nathaniel

**Your Personal Data**

**The University of Glasgow** will be what's known as the 'Data Controller' of your personal data processed in relation to your participation in the research project 'Non-Traditional Entry Routes to Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Inclusion in Access for Adults in New York State and Scotland'. This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow will process your personal data.

### **Why we need it**

We are collecting basic personal data such as your name and contact details in order to conduct our research. Your name and contact details will only be used to arrange the interview or potentially follow up on the data you have provided. Your name and contact details will not be shared with others nor appear in any publication on this research.

We only collect data that we need for the research project and will de-identify your personal data from the research data through pseudonymisation.

Please see accompanying **Participant Information Sheet**

### **Legal basis for processing your data**

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. As this processing is for Academic Research we will be relying upon **Task in the Public Interest** in order to process the basic personal data that you provide. For any special categories data collected we will be processing this on the basis that it is **necessary for archiving purposes, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes**

Alongside this, in order to fulfil our ethical obligations, we will ask for your **Consent** to take part in the study. Please see accompanying **Consent Form**.

### **What we do with it and who we share it with**

All the personal data you submit is processed by the Principal Researcher and Supervisors of this research project at the University of Glasgow in the United Kingdom. In addition, security measures are in place to ensure that your personal data remains safe:

- Pseudonymisation of participant names, as well as de-identifying other identifying information where needed, such as institution name and location, professor names, etc.
- All recordings will be kept confidential, stored in a secure location, and destroyed at the conclusion of this project.
- All interview transcripts will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research, and may only be accessed by authenticated researchers who agree to preserve the confidentiality of participants in accordance to the measures above.

Please consult the **Consent form** and **Participant Information Sheet** which accompanies this notice.

Due to the nature of this research it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way in the Consent Form.

We will provide you with a copy of the final thesis upon request.

### **What are your rights?\***

GDPR provides that individuals have certain rights including: to request access to, copies of and rectification or erasure of personal data and to object to processing. In addition, data subjects may also have the right to restrict the processing of the personal data and to data portability. You can request access to the information we process about you at any time.

If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected, or erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Please note that as we are processing your personal data for research purposes, the ability to exercise these rights may vary as there are potentially applicable research exemptions under the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information on these exemptions, please see [UofG Research with personal and special categories of data](#).

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the [webform](#) or contact [dp@gla.ac.uk](mailto:dp@gla.ac.uk)

### **Complaints**

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter. Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at [dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk)

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) <https://ico.org.uk/>

### **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved via the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

### **How long do we keep it for?**

Your **personal** data will be retained by the University only for as long as is necessary for processing and no longer than the period of ethical approval end date of 27/09/2023. After this time, personal data will be securely deleted.

Your **research** data will be retained for a period of ten years in line with the University of Glasgow Guidelines. Specific details in relation to research data storage are provided on the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form which accompany this notice.

End of Privacy Notice

---

### 7.1.3 Sample Consent Form



University  
of Glasgow

---

College of Social  
Sciences

#### Consent Form

Title of Project: Non-Traditional Entry Routes to Higher  
Education: A Comparative Study of  
Inclusion in Access for Adults in New York

State and Scotland Name of Researcher: Brittney Nathaniel

Name of Supervisors: Prof. Catherine Lido, Prof. Ellen Boeren, &  
Prof. Michael Osborne

- ☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- ☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
  - ☐ I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my grades/employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.
  - ☐ I acknowledge that this interview will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes only.
  - ☐ I acknowledge that I may choose to interview with my camera turned on or turned off.
  - ☐ I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by pseudonym during the interview, in the audio recording, and in any publication on this research.
  - ☐ I acknowledge that all names and other material likely to identify individuals will be changed in any publication on this research.
- ☐ I acknowledge that all interview audio recordings will be kept confidential and stored in a secure location during analysis of the interview data.
- ☐ I acknowledge that all interview audio recordings will be

destroyed at the conclusion of this project.

- ☐ I acknowledge that interview transcripts will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research.
- ☐ I acknowledge that I may request a copy of the final thesis.
- ☐ I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
- ☐ I understand that other authenticated researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form
- ☐ I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded.

Name of Participant ..... Signature

..... Date .....

I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant ..... Signature .....

Date .....

Name of Researcher .....Signature

..... Date .....



### 7.1.4 Data Management Plan (for Primary Interview Data and Secondary Data from Initial Research Design)

University of Glasgow

Data Management Plan template for PGR students

| 1. Overview                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Student name</b>              | Brittney Nathaniel                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Supervisor name</b>           | Prof. Catherine Lido, Prof. Ellen Boeren, and Prof. Michael Osborne                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Project title</b>             | Non-Traditional Entry Routes to Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Inclusion in Access for Adults in New York State and Scotland                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Funder &amp; award number</b> | College of Social Sciences                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Project Summary</b>           | <p>This mixed-methods project aims to address inequalities in access to post-secondary education for adult learners and their retention at higher education (HE) institutions. Using secondary (quantitative) and primary (qualitative) data collected from New York State and Scotland, this project aims to assess the historical, present, and future inclusivity of programmes to widen post-secondary access and participation for mature learners. It will identify any demographic difference in access, retention, and outcome success based on non-traditional entry.</p> <p>This cross-national comparison of non-traditional trajectories into higher education offers a unique opportunity to address the attainment gap in higher education progression, retention, and achievement, as</p> |

|  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | well as explore their impact on successful employment outcomes post-graduation. It is envisaged that this research will have policy implications for both places in the face of decreasing funding for adult learners. |
|--|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

| 2. Data                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>What types of data will be collected or created?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <p>In <b>Phase One</b>, aggregate <a href="#">Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)</a> data on the <a href="#">National Safe Haven</a>—to which this project has successfully secured permission to access through the <a href="#">Urban Big Data Centre (UBDC)</a>—will be analysed using linear regressions in R in order to contextualise non-traditional student entry, progression, and degree outcomes in Scotland. For New York State, a combination of institutional-level open access data from the <a href="#">Institute of Education Services (IES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)</a> and <a href="#">New York State Higher Education Reports</a> will be used. Utilising an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach would enable this study to gain further insight into the findings that the aforementioned data analysis might yield.</p> <p><b>Phase Two</b> will be a series of semi-structured, one-to-one online interviews with up to 8 Widening Participation (WP) office staff in total and up to a total of 40 adult learners across 6 - 8 universities between New York State and Scotland. Each interview will last for approximately one hour, will be audio-recorded, and transcribed for further analysis using voice-to-text software.</p> |
| <b>What formats will you use?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <p>Interview data will be stored in audio format, later to be transcribed using GDPR-compliant, voice-to-text transcription software and stored in a text format.</p> <p>Analytic output of secondary data will be in R script and stored in the National Safe Haven.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>How much data will you collect?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <p>For primary data, I will have approximately one hour of audio per interview. For each 1-hour interview, there may be approximately 30 - 40 pages of transcription. Based on the Audio Archive and File Size Calculators (<a href="http://www.theaudioarchive.com/TAA_Resources_File_Size.htm/">http://www.theaudioarchive.com/TAA_Resources_File_Size.htm/</a>), each interview file may be approximately 620 MB.</p> <p>For secondary data, I will be examining New York State and Scottish higher education data from the last 10 years.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

| 3. Documentation                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>How will the data be documented and described?</b>                                                                                                                                           |
| Interview data collected for this project will be documented using qualitative data analysis software. R code used for analysing secondary data will also be included as part of documentation. |
| <b>Are there any standards for this in your field of research?</b>                                                                                                                              |
| No.                                                                                                                                                                                             |

| 4. Ethics and Intellectual Property |
|-------------------------------------|
|-------------------------------------|

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Who owns the data in your project?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| I will own the primary data. Scottish secondary data is owned by HESA, and New York secondary data are owned by the Institute of Education Services & National Center for Education Statistics and New York Department of Education.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Detail any ethical, legal or commercial considerations relating to your research data</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| An ethical and legal consideration of this project is upholding the data protection principles of GDPR.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>How will these concerns be dealt with?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <p>I have familiarised myself with GDPR policy through successful completion of the University's compulsory GDPR Training, as well as the MRC online course 'Research, GDPR and confidentiality' for access to HESA data on the National Safe Haven.</p> <p>Additionally, analytic outputs of HESA data cannot be migrated from the National Safe Haven until they are approved by an assigned National Services Scotland (NSS) Research Coordinator to ensure all personally identifiable information has been removed and that collected data does not contain any information that could be used in conjunction with other data to identify an individual. This security measure is also outlined in detail in the 'Protocol for research dealing with non-standard human data - Social Media, Online, Social Networking, Secondary data, Big Data' form and the National Safe Haven user agreement with NSS attached for further consideration with this application.</p> <p>Furthermore, in addition to applying for Ethics approval from CoSS' College Research Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research involving Human Participants/Data, I will obtain ethics consent from research participants. Each interviewee will be provided a Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, and Privacy Notice ahead of the interview, as well as given an opportunity to discuss any questions or concerns about the project.</p> <p>Lastly, all participants will be pseudonymised in any publication arising from the research and audio files will be destroyed at the conclusion of my PhD course. Each participant will be given a pseudonym. Where deemed appropriate, other personal identifiers (i.e., institution name and location) may also be changed to further protect participants' identities. A copy of the final manuscript may also be made available to the interviewees upon their request.</p> |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>5. Storage and organisation</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>How will the data be named, organised and structured?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <p>Both audio and transcript files of interview data will adhere to the following naming convention: institution, widening participation (WP) personnel or individual student (IS), and interviewee alias (ex: Glasgow_WP_Jane).</p> <p>To organise these files, I will create a project Phase Two folder that will contain two sub-folders: 'U.S. Data' and 'Scotland Data'. Each sub-folder will contain a folder for audio files and another for transcripts.</p> |
| <b>How will the data be stored for the duration of the project?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Interview data and analytic outputs from institutional-level open access New York data will be stored on the University of Glasgow's OneDrive server.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| HESA data and all related analytic outputs are stored on the National Safe Haven and cannot be migrated unless National Services Scotland (NSS) Research Coordinator approval is granted to do so. |
| <b>How will the data be backed up during the project?</b>                                                                                                                                          |
| Interview data and New York institutional-level open access data will be backed up via the University of Glasgow's OneDrive server. HESA data are backed up on the National Safe Haven.            |
| <b>Does access to the data need to be controlled for the duration of the project?</b>                                                                                                              |
| Yes, access to the data will need to be controlled in order to be compliant with GDPR.                                                                                                             |
| <b>Who has the right to access the data during the project?</b>                                                                                                                                    |
| My supervisors (Prof. Catherine Lido, Prof. Ellen Boeren, and Prof. Michael Osborne) and myself have the right to access the data during the project.                                              |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>6. Deposit and long-term preservation</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Which data should be retained long-term?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Transcripts of the interview data and the R code used for analysing secondary data should be retained long-term.                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>How long will data be retained for?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| I will retain audio and transcripts of interview data for the duration of this project. In order to de-identify data as much as possible, audio files will be destroyed at the conclusion of my PhD course. As recommended, transcripts of interview data will be retained for at least 10 years, post-project. |
| <b>Where will the data be archived at the end of the project?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Data will be deposited in the University's repository.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>What formats will the data be archived in?</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Interview data will be stored in PDF format. R code will be stored in R script format.                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>7. Data sharing</b>                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Is any of the data suitable for sharing?</b>                                                                                                                                                                 |
| The transcripts of interview data and R code for quantitative data analysis will be suitable for sharing. Analytic outputs of HESA data will be suitable for sharing pending NSS Research Coordinator approval. |
| <b>How will the data be shared?</b>                                                                                                                                                                             |
| These data will be shared in my thesis, in conference papers/presentations and/or journal articles, as well as by data repository.                                                                              |
| <b>Who should be able to access and use the shared data?</b>                                                                                                                                                    |
| Data will be accessible to other researchers, in addition those who also have access to conferences and journals within the field.                                                                              |

|                                                                                |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>8. Implementation</b>                                                       |
| <b>Who is responsible for implementing this plan?</b>                          |
| I, my supervisors, and UBDC will be responsible for implementing this plan.    |
| <b>How will this plan be kept up-to-date?</b>                                  |
| I will review my data management plan annually in order to keep it up-to-date. |
| <b>What actions are necessary to implement this plan?</b>                      |

A successful Ethics Application, adhering to the user agreement with NSS and UBDC, and upholding GDPR for this project are needed to implement this plan. Furthermore, acquisition of voice-to-text transcription software, qualitative analysis software, and R code are also necessary.

**What training or further information are needed to implement this plan?**

I have already successfully completed the MRC online course 'Research, GDPR and confidentiality' for access to HESA data on the National Safe Haven and am a member of the UBDC Educational Disadvantage & Place team.

## 7.1.5 Confirmation of Ethical Approval



College of Social  
Sciences

### College Research Ethics Committee

Request for Amendments - Reviewer Feedback

Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

---

#### Application Details

|                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application                                                                                                        | Student id. Number:                                             |
| Supervisor/s if Student Application:                                                                                                                    | Prof. Catherine Lido, Prof. Ellen Boeren, Prof. Michael Osborne |
| Application Number:                                                                                                                                     | 400190226                                                       |
| Applicant's Name:                                                                                                                                       | Brittney Nathaniel                                              |
| Project Title: 'Non-Traditional Entry Routes to Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Inclusion in Access for Adults in New York State and Scotland' |                                                                 |
| Original <b>Start</b> Date of Ethics Application Approval:                                                                                              | 21/08/2020                                                      |
| Original <b>End</b> Date of Ethics Application Approval:                                                                                                | 27/09/2023                                                      |
|                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                 |
| Date of Amendments Approved:                                                                                                                            | 23/05/2021                                                      |
|                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                 |
| Outcome:                                                                                                                                                | Amendments Approved                                             |

---

#### Reviewer Comments

## 7.1.6 Ethics Amendment to New York Learner Recruitment



College of Social  
Sciences

Research Ethics Committee

Staff and PGR Student Request for Amendments to an Approved Ethics  
Application

Justification for Amendments proposed: *e.g. Reason  
extension to approval end date required; addition of new participant group;  
change in project focus.*

This Ethics application has been amended:

1. Participant Group, change or addition: Due to failure to recruit New York State student participants within the narrow scope of institutions specified in the original application, I have decided to open up to a wider sample of adult learners across New York State and Scotland.

List of Supporting Documents attached:

Ethics Application Form with proposed change highlighted in yellow

Declaration:

I certify that to the best of my knowledge the information given above, together with any accompanying information, is complete and correct.

Signature(s)

Applicant: Brittney Nathaniel

Supervisor (if student project): Prof. Catherine

Lido (Name of Supervisor)

End of Request Form

---

### 7.1.6.1 Confirmation of ethical amendment approval



College of Social  
Sciences

#### College Research Ethics Committee

Request for Amendments - Reviewer Feedback

Ethics Committee for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Subjects

---

#### Application Details

Postgraduate Student Research Ethics

Application Student id. Number if  
applicable:

Supervisor/s if Student Application: Prof. Catherine

Lido, Prof. Ellen Boeren, Prof. Michael Osborne

Application Number: 400190226

Applicant's Name: Brittney Nathaniel

Project Title: 'Non-Traditional Entry Routes  
to Higher Education: A Comparative Study of Inclusion in Access for  
Adults in New York State and Scotland'

Original **Start** Date of Ethics Application Approval: 21/08/2020

Original **End** Date of Ethics Application Approval: 27/09/2023

Date of Amendments Approved: 22/11/2021

Outcome: Amendments Approved

---



## 7.2 Appendix 2

### 7.2.1 Interview Topic Guides

#### 7.2.1.1 First draft for organisational stakeholders

##### Introduction:

- Introduce myself, role and thank them for participating
- Explain the aim and purpose of the research
- Explain the format of the interview and give brief overview of topics of interests
- Explain confidentiality/pseudonymisation and re-ask permission to audio- record interview

| Drafted interview questions for organisational stakeholders |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Focus or Theme                                              | Questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Opening question:<br>Roles                                  | <p>Please tell me a bit about your role and your office's role within the university?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job title?</li> <li>• What is the scope of responsibilities in your role?</li> <li>• Nature of responsibilities/functions performed</li> <li>• Types of programmes offered by office</li> </ul> <p>In what capacity does your office work with adult undergraduates?</p>                                                                                        |
| Conceptualisation of Access & Participation                 | <p>Can you tell me about your understanding of widening access and participation for adults at your institution? Who are the target groups? What are the key trends at your university?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probe: Transfer, access course; age, sex, gender, race/ethnicity, class/SES, migrant status, disability, neurodiversity; mode of study, mode of qualification, course of study</li> </ul>                                                                     |
| Student support                                             | <p>In what ways do you or your office engage with these students? Are there any resources that your office provides, and if so, what are they?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do adult students access them?</li> <li>• What about university resources?</li> <li>• Probe: learning communities; non-cognitive skill building (time management, independent learning, carer counselling, etc.); childcare; bursaries; university transportation for commuter students</li> </ul> |

|                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Student attrition                    | <p>Are there challenges faced by adult undergraduates? If so, what are they? How do these challenges differ from the experiences of their 'traditional' counterparts?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Probe: Work commitments, familial commitments (children, carer, etc.), finances, social isolation</li> </ul> <p>Are there strategies that you, your office, or the university use to address or mitigate these challenges? Can you describe them for me?</p> |
| Impact of COVID-19: Part I           | <p>Has COVID affected or changed your office's approach to student support? If so, how?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Probe: online, pre-recorded, Zoom, intensity, etc.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Student recruitment                  | <p>What is being done (or has been done prior to COVID) to recruit adults at the university? In your experience, what are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Impact of COVID-19: Part II          | <p>Has COVID affected or changed your recruitment activities? If so, how?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has volume of applications and/or enrolments changed? If so, how?</li> <li>Probe: yield/enrolment numbers, online, pre-recorded, Zoom, intensity, etc.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Future considerations                | <p>If asked by your university, what advice would you give for improving recruitment and support activities for adult undergraduates, going forward?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Closing question:<br>Further remarks | <p>Is there anything I didn't ask that you'd like to share about you, your office, or institution's approach to widening access and participation?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

**Closing remarks:**

- Ask if it would be okay to get back in touch for queries and clarification (if needed) at a later date
- Thank them for participation and valuable insight

### 7.2.1.2 Final draft for organisational stakeholders

#### Introduction:

- Introduce myself, role and thank them for participating
- Explain the aim and purpose of the research
- Explain the format of the interview and give brief overview of topics of interests
- Explain confidentiality/pseudonymisation and re-ask permission to audio record interview
- Ask that—wherever possible—if they can back up their answers with evidence from data they collect on the issues to be discussed

| Drafted interview questions for organisational stakeholders |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Focus or Theme                                              | Questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Opening question: Roles                                     | <p>Please tell me a bit about your role and your office's role within the university?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job title?</li> <li>• What is the scope of responsibilities in your role?</li> <li>• Nature of responsibilities/functions performed</li> <li>• Types of programmes offered by office</li> </ul> <p>In what capacity does your office work with adult undergraduates?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How many?</li> </ul> |
| Conceptualisation of Access & Participation                 | <p>Can you tell me about your understanding of widening access and participation for adults at your institution? Who are the target groups? What are the key trends at your university?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probe: Transfer, access course; age, sex, gender, race/ethnicity, class/SES, migrant status, disability, neurodiversity; mode of study, mode of qualification, course of study</li> </ul>                                            |

|                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Student support                  | <p>In what ways do you or your office engage with these students? Are there any interventions or resources that your office provides, and if so, what are they?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do adult students access them?</li> </ul> <p>Probe: Online (synchronous, asynchronous); flexibility (hours of operation, access points [laptop, phone, app, etc.], etc.)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What about other university resources?</li> </ul> <p>Probe: learning communities; non-cognitive skill building (time management, independent learning, carer counselling, etc.); childcare; bursaries; university transportation for commuter students</p> |
| Student attrition                | <p>Are there challenges faced by adult undergraduates? If so, what are they? How do these challenges differ from the experiences of their 'traditional' counterparts?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probe: Work commitments, familial commitments (children, carer, etc.), finances, social isolation</li> </ul> <p>Are there strategies that you, your office, or the university use to address or mitigate these challenges? Can you describe them for me?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Impact of COVID-19: Part I       | <p>Has COVID affected or changed your office's approach to student support? If so, how?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probe: online, pre-recorded, Zoom, intensity, etc.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Student recruitment and outreach | <p>What is being done (or has been done prior to COVID) to recruit adults at the university? Tell me about current outreach activities, if any.</p> <p>In your experience, what are the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach?</p> <p>How do prospective adult students apply</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Impact of COVID-19: Part II      | <p>Has COVID affected or changed your recruitment activities? If so, how?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has volume of applications and/or enrolments changed? If so, how?</li> </ul> <p>Probe: yield/enrolment numbers, online, pre-recorded, Zoom, intensity, etc.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |

|                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Future considerations                | <p>If asked by your university, what advice would you give for improving outreach and support activities for adult undergraduates at the institution?</p> <p>What do you think policymakers can do to support adult learners in a post-COVID world?</p> |
| Closing question:<br>Further remarks | Is there anything I didn't ask that you'd like to share about you, your office, or institution's approach to widening access and participation?                                                                                                         |

**Closing remarks:**

- Ask if it would be okay to get back in touch for queries and clarification (if needed) at a later date
- Thank them for participation and valuable insight

### 7.2.1.3 First draft for adult learners

**Introduction:**

- Introduce myself, role and thank them for participating
- Explain the aim and purpose of the research
- Explain the format of the interview and give brief overview of topics of interests
- Explain confidentiality/pseudonymisation and re-ask permission to audio- record interview

| Drafted interview questions for adult learners |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Focus or Theme                                 | Questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Opening question:<br><br>Student background    | <p>Tell me a little bit about yourself.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where are you from? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ If outwith Scotland/New York or location of institution: How long have you lived in x? What's that been like for you?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Age (approximation fine)</li> <li>• If already graduated, when?</li> <li>• When not studying, what do you do?</li> </ul> <p>Probe: Work, carer, family, hobbies (sport, volunteering, etc.)</p> |
|                                                | What do/did you study at university?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |

|                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Institutional Experience | <p>Probe: Subject area, classes, qualification, mode of study (FT/PT; F2F/online/hybrid)</p> <p>How is it going so far [before COVID] (current student)/how was it for you (graduated)?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What does/did a typical day of university [pre-COVID] look like for you?</li> </ul> <p>Probe: University/campus engagement, course content, courseload, level of difficulty, assignments, professors</p> <p>How did you hear about your course?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How or why did you choose it?</li> <li>• How did you choose your university?</li> </ul> <p>Probe: Career advancement, career change, personal interest, familial influence; online, university website or email, flyers, university event/information sessions</p>                                                                          |
|                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| Impact of COVID          | <p>Has COVID affected your studies? If so, how?</p> <p>(Skip for graduates)</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                          | <p>Walk me through your decision to attend university.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How and why?</li> <li>• What were you doing before?</li> </ul> <p>Probe: Working, studying at FE/CC, stay-at-home parent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you remember feeling?</li> </ul> <p>Probe: Life transition, transformative experience; institution choice</p> <p>What was the application process like?</p> <p>Probe: Application requirements, (difficulty) finding information, getting information from university or admissions staff, university point of contact, campus visit</p> <p>Need to add questions about interacting with peers, faculty, admin; access to support, know how/were to seek support, etc. Perhaps split into separate interview categories? Though I think I run the risk of making the interview too long</p> |

|                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Educational Experiences              | <p>Talk to me about what learning, and studying was like for you before university.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is learning and studying <i>now</i> similar to your past experiences? How is it different?</li> <li>• What was your relationship to learning before university? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ What do you remember about studying in school?</li> <li>○ What was it like for you?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• What were your plans for when you finished school?</li> </ul> |
| Family Educational Background        | What were your family's attitudes toward education?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Advice                               | If asked by your university, what advice would you give for improving recruitment and support for adult students, going forward?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Future aspirations/Post-graduation   | What are your plans post-graduation?/What has life been like since graduation?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Closing question:<br>Further remarks | Is there anything I didn't ask that you'd like to share about yourself or your educational experiences?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

**Closing remarks:**

- Ask if it would be okay to get back in touch for queries and clarification (if needed) at a later date
- Thank them for participation and valuable insight

### 7.2.1.4 Final draft for adult learners

#### Introduction:

- Introduce myself, role and thank them for participating
- Explain the aim and purpose of the research
- Explain the format of the interview and give brief overview of topics of interests
- Explain confidentiality/pseudonymisation and re-ask permission to audio-record interview

| Drafted interview questions for adult learners |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Focus or Theme                                 | Questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
| Opening question:<br><br>Student background    | <p>Tell me a little bit about yourself.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where are you from? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ If outwith Scotland/New York, or location of institution:</li> <li>◦ How long have you lived in x? What's that been like for you?</li> <li>◦ Have you ever lived on campus?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• What do you do for a living?</li> <li>• How old are you?</li> <li>• How do you self-identify?</li> <li>• Are you the first in your family to go to university?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Institutional Experience                       | <p>What do you study at university?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Subject area</li> <li>• Enrolment status (FT/PT)</li> <li>• Mode of study (Online/hybrid/F2F)</li> </ul> <p>How is it going so far?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probe: Engagement, content/material, courseload, level of difficulty, assignments, professors; adjustment to study during COVID; study habits</li> </ul> <p>What does a typical week of studying look like for you?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probe: study habits, time management, course time (in the mornings, afternoons, evenings, on weekends, etc.)</li> </ul> <p>In what ways do you interact with your classmates or peers? How about your professors?</p> <p>How did you hear about your course?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How or why did you choose it?</li> <li>• How did you choose your university?</li> </ul> <p>Probe: Career advancement, career change, personal interest, familial influence; online, university website or email, flyers, university event/information sessions</p> |



|                                        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                        | <p>Were there additional steps you needed to take to prepare for your studies? If so, what were they?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probe: Access/transition course, HNC/HND, GED/TASC (NY), ESOL course, etc.</li> <li>• What about financially?</li> </ul> <p>Walk me through your decision to attend university.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What impacted your decision?</li> <li>• How did your partner respond to your decision? Have they been supportive?</li> </ul> <p>Probe: Life transition, transformative experience; institution choice</p> <p>What do you think are the benefits of obtaining a degree?</p> <p>Have you experienced any challenges whilst pursuing your degree? If so, what were they? How did you approach them?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probe: Work/study balance, family commitments, financial difficulty, etc.</li> <li>• Have you ever thought of leaving? If so, why?</li> </ul> <p>Are there student resources or support services available at your university? What are they and which have you used, if any?</p> |
| Impact of COVID                        | Has COVID affected your studies? If so, how?                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Reflections on Educational Experiences | <p>Talk to me about what learning and studying was like for you before university.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How is university similar to your past educational experiences? In what ways is it different?</li> <li>• What was your relationship to studying before university? What do you remember about your time at school?</li> <li>• Growing up, what were your family's attitudes toward education?</li> <li>• Back then, what were your plans for after you finished school?</li> <li>• What advice would you give to a 16-year-old in your family about university?</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Advice                                 | <p>If asked by your university, what advice would you give for improving outreach and support activities for adult undergraduates at the institution?</p> <p>What do you think policymakers can do to support adult learners in a post-COVID world?</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

|                                      |                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Closing question:<br>Further remarks | Is there anything I didn't ask that you'd like to share about yourself or your educational experiences? |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

**Closing remarks:**

- Ask if it would be okay to get back in touch for queries and clarification (if needed) at a later date
- Thank them for participation and valuable insight

## 7.3 Appendix 3

### 7.3.1 Learner Participant Recruitment Flyers

#### 7.3.1.1 For Scottish learners



Do you consider yourself a  
**non-traditional student** or from an  
**underrepresented background?**  
We want to hear from you!

Our study explores access to higher education for adults in Scotland and New York, focusing on the educational journeys, experiences, and challenges of mature students in undergraduate courses.

Who can participate?  
Students at least **21 years of age or older at time of entry, STUDYING or RECENTLY** graduated from a bachelor's degree programme

What's involved?  
A one-to-one online interview lasting no more than 1 hour

For more information, or to schedule an interview,  
**Please Contact:**  
Brittney Nathaniel  
PhD Researcher  
[b.nathaniel.1@research.gla.ac.uk](mailto:b.nathaniel.1@research.gla.ac.uk)



## 7.3.1.2 For NY learners



Do you consider yourself a  
**non-traditional student** or from an  
**underrepresented background**?  
We want to hear from you!

Our study explores college access for adults in New York and Scotland,  
focusing on the educational journeys, experiences, and challenges of  
adult students in bachelor's degree programs.

Who can participate?  
Students at least **25 years of age or older at time of entry,**  
**STUDYING or RECENTLY** graduated from a bachelor's degree program  
at a New York college or university

What's involved?  
A one-on-one online interview lasting no more than 1 hour

For more information, or to schedule an interview,  
Please Contact:  
Brittney Nathaniel  
PhD Researcher  
[b.nathaniel.1@research.gla.ac.uk](mailto:b.nathaniel.1@research.gla.ac.uk)



## 7.3.2 Stakeholder Approach Email

### 7.3.2.1 For Scottish stakeholders

SUBJECT: Zoom Interview for PhD Thesis on Widening Access and Participation for Adult Learners

Dear [INSERT NAME HERE],

I hope this message finds you safe and well.

My name is Brittney Nathaniel and I am a PhD researcher based in the School of Education at the University of Glasgow.

My thesis is a mixed-methods study on inequalities in access to higher education (HE) for adults in Scotland and New York. I am particularly interested in adult undergraduates from marginalised communities (race/ethnicity, sex, gender identity, immigration status, disability, etc.) and how HE institutions facilitate access to and inclusion of these student groups. Lastly, I also aim to examine the impact of non-traditional trajectories into HE (participation in an Access course, FE-to-HE transfer, etc.) on adult student progression, retention, and degree attainment. For my qualitative phase, I am first interviewing WP staff at various institutions, and then mature students from those same institutions in my second stage of interviews.

[INSERT DETAIL RELEVANT TO SPECIFIC HEI] has been of interest to me. I therefore wanted to ask if you would be interested in partaking in a one-to-one interview as part of my doctoral research? Participation requires only one Zoom interview for approximately 30 - 60 minutes and I can schedule at a time that is most convenient for you.

If you are interested, or would like to recommend a colleague to reach out to, I'd be greatly appreciative if you could let me know! I am also happy to share confirmation of Ethics approval, a copy of the Participant Information sheet, and/or Consent form to provide further context for

the study.

Thank you for your time in reading my message!

Warm regards,

Brittney

Brittney Nathaniel

PhD Researcher

School of Education, University of Glasgow

Researcher Profile:

<https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/education/research/students/brittneynathaniel/>

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/brittneynathaniel-545a937/>

The University of Glasgow, charity number SC004401

### 7.3.2.2 For New York stakeholders

SUBJECT: Zoom Interview for PhD Dissertation on Broadening College Access and Participation for Adult Learners

Dear [INSERT NAME HERE],

I hope this message finds you safe and well.

My name is Brittney Nathaniel and I am an American PhD student based in the School of Education at the University of Glasgow.

My dissertation is a mixed-methods study on inequalities in access to higher education (HE) for adults in New York and Scotland for adult learners. I am particularly interested in adult undergraduates from marginalised communities (race/ethnicity, sex, gender identity, immigration status, disability, etc.) and how HE institutions facilitate access to and inclusion of these student groups. Lastly, I also aim to examine the impact of non-traditional trajectories into HE (participation in a pre-college program, college transfer, etc.) on adult student progression, retention, and degree attainment.

I previously worked as a higher education professional in New York and have been closely following [INSERT DETAIL RELEVANT TO SPECIFIC HEI]. I therefore wanted to ask if you would be interested in partaking in a one-to-one interview as part of my doctoral research? Participation requires only one Zoom interview for approximately 30 - 60 minutes and I can schedule at a time that is most convenient for you.

If this sounds like something you would be interested in partaking in, or if you would like to recommend a colleague to reach out to, I'd be greatly appreciative if you could let me know! I am also happy to share confirmation of research ethics approval from my university, a copy of the Participant Information sheet, and/or Consent form to provide further context for the study. Thank you for your time in reading my message!

Warm regards,  
Brittney

Brittney Nathaniel  
PhD Candidate  
School of Education, University of Glasgow  
Researcher Profile:  
<https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/education/research/students/brittneyathaniel/>  
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/brittney-nathaniel-545a937/>  
The University of Glasgow, charity number SC004401

### 7.3.4 Interview Scheduling Emails

#### 7.3.4.1 Learner Interview Scheduling Email

Hello [INSERT NAME],

Thank you so much for your interest in my study! I would love to set up a time to speak over Zoom.

Please let me know what dates and times would suit you for a Zoom interview in the coming week.

Since the interview will be conducted virtually, I am sending along the following three documents in advance, in case you might have any questions about them:

- Participant Information Sheet—This provides further background on the study; why the research is being done and what participation entails.
- Privacy Notice
- Consent form (to be completed and signed; you may type in your name for signature)

Should you have any questions or concerns at any point, please do not hesitate to let me know!

Warm regards,  
Brittney



#### 7.3.4.2 Stakeholder Interview Scheduling Email

Hello [INSERT NAME],

Thank you for agreeing to participate! I really appreciate it. 1pm next Thursday, 21<sup>st</sup> January works well for me. I will follow up with a calendar invite with the Zoom link enclosed shortly.

Since the interview will be conducted virtually, I am sending along the following three documents for your advanced review:

- Participant Information Sheet
- Privacy Notice
- Consent form (to be completed and signed)

Please be sure to complete, sign, and return the Consent form to me in advance of our meeting. Typing in your name for 'Signature' is fine if you do not currently have access to a scanner or have an electronic signature.

Lastly, should you have any questions or concerns at any point, please do not hesitate to get in touch!

Warm regards,  
Brittney

## 7.4 Appendix 4

### 7.4.1 Preliminary and Finalised Interview Themes/Subthemes

#### 7.4.1.1 Phase 1: Stakeholders

| Preliminary Themes/Subthemes                         | Finalised Themes/Subthemes                                                              |
|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Organisational identity/Institutional habitus</b> | <b>Organisational identity and institutional habitus</b>                                |
| Admission practices                                  | Staff conceptualisations of adult student cohorts                                       |
| Faculty attitudes                                    | Advocating for students                                                                 |
| University reputation                                | Impact of university reputation                                                         |
| 'Institutional fit'                                  | Staff conceptualisations of organisational identity                                     |
| <b>Capacity</b>                                      | <b>Meeting capacity demands</b>                                                         |
| WP staff challenges                                  | Strain on staffing and resources                                                        |
| Departmental/programme budgetary constraints         | Departmental/programme budgetary constraints                                            |
| University facilities                                | ****                                                                                    |
| Partnership and collaboration                        | Necessity of partnerships and collaboration                                             |
| <b>Student sense of belonging</b>                    | <b>Fostering student sense of belonging</b>                                             |
| Establishing peer groups and peer mentorship         | Establishing peer groups and peer mentorship                                            |
| Representation                                       | Representation and diversity within administration                                      |
| ****                                                 | Curating immersive campus experiences                                                   |
| ****                                                 | Harnessing and valuing existing knowledge                                               |
| <b>COVID Impact</b>                                  | <b>Impact of COVID-19</b>                                                               |
| Addressing digital exclusion                         | Tackling digital exclusion                                                              |
| Admissions practices and recruitment                 | "Like throwing darts at a board": unprecedented challenges in adult student recruitment |
| Adjusting course delivery and scheduling             | Increased flexibility in entry and provision                                            |
| Impact on student engagement and wellbeing           | Observed impacts on student engagement and wellbeing                                    |
| Future considerations and takeaways                  | Tackling digital exclusion                                                              |
| ****                                                 | Coping with new working patterns                                                        |
| <b>Bureaucratic barriers</b>                         | <b>Bureaucratic barriers to facilitating access</b>                                     |
| ****                                                 | Selectivity within widening participation                                               |
| ****                                                 | Institutional barriers to data collection and sharing                                   |
| ****                                                 | Navigating funding mechanisms                                                           |
| <b>Information sharing practices</b>                 | ****                                                                                    |
| <b>Flexibility</b>                                   | ****                                                                                    |
| Admission practices                                  | ****                                                                                    |
| Class delivery and scheduling                        | ****                                                                                    |
| Awarding university credit                           | ****                                                                                    |
| Course selection                                     | ****                                                                                    |
| Access to student resources                          | ****                                                                                    |

### 7.4.1.2 Phase 2: Learners

| Preliminary Themes/Subthemes                                                                   | Finalised Themes/Subthemes                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Life transitions and nonlinear trajectories</b>                                             | <b>Nonlinear trajectories into higher education</b>                |
| Influence of parental attitudes on education                                                   | Influence of parental attitudes on education                       |
| Impact of past educational experiences                                                         | Impact of past educational experiences                             |
| Seismic shift in relationship to learning                                                      | Transformative experiences and the impetus to return               |
| <b>Negotiating sense of belonging</b>                                                          | <b>Negotiating belonging</b>                                       |
| Finding the 'right fit'                                                                        | University choice: Finding the 'right fit'                         |
| Constructing a learner identity                                                                | (De)constructing an academic identity                              |
| Establishing peer-to-peer connections                                                          | Social engagement with the university community                    |
| Navigating lecturer and staff interactions                                                     |                                                                    |
| <b>Bureaucratic barriers to post-secondary access</b>                                          | <b>Bureaucratic barriers to post-secondary access</b>              |
| Lack of access to institutional information                                                    | Lack of institutional information transparency                     |
| Navigating funding mechanisms                                                                  | Navigating funding mechanisms                                      |
| Self-advocacy                                                                                  |                                                                    |
| <b>Bridging the gap between external and university environments</b>                           | ****                                                               |
| Merging personal, social, and learning identities                                              | ****                                                               |
| <b>Impact of COVID-19</b>                                                                      | <b>Emancipation, isolation, and in-between: Impact of COVID-19</b> |
| Emancipatory effects of remote learning                                                        | Emancipation                                                       |
| When external and university environments collide: Negative consequences of blurred boundaries | Isolation                                                          |
| ****                                                                                           | In-between                                                         |