

The Mature Student Experience of Blended Learning

A provider perspective on factors that can prevent or enable participation

Mature students

Previous research found that Irish mature students were satisfied with their experience of blended learning, compared with face-to-face learning, due to ease of access and degree of control (O'Connor McGowan, 2020). Some professions have established specific access routes for mature students, to increase diversity. Hibernia College operates a blended learning model underpinned by universal design for learning. Here we seek to integrate published evidence with our own perspective, informed by learners' lived experience.

Mature students are defined by the Higher Education Authority as anyone above the age of 23 on 1 January of the year of their entry into higher education (HEA, 2021). Given the wide chronological bracket, mature students' backgrounds will vary significantly, and this will shape their experiences.

Broadly speaking, mature students may fall into several categories: 1. professionals seeking career advancement; 2. individuals seeking a career change; 3. individuals returning to education; and 4. first-time students. These categories are fluid and overlapping. For example, while 1 and 2 may share characteristics of age, domestic arrangements, and so on, financial constraints may be more evident and acute in category 2.

All students, irrespective of discipline, face multiple challenges. However, mature students can face unique combinations or exacerbated challenges to full engagement in their studies, arising from financial hardship, social or peer interactions, health and welfare concerns, domestic or family responsibilities, integration to the academic environment, and technological difficulties.



Dr Robin Flynn

Quality, Enhancement and Registrations
Manager, Office of the Registrar, Hibernia
College



Ms Elva Casey

Director of School Placement, Froebel
Department of Primary and Early
Childhood Education, Maynooth
University

Blending learning has particular benefits for mature students because of the unique or exacerbated challenges they experience. This article looks at the complex ecosystem of factors that must be considered in order to attract and support mature learners in a blended environment. It integrates wider research with Hibernia College's model, which has evolved with technological and social developments.

Moreover, these challenges are often intersectional. For example, financial difficulties magnify difficulties with social integration (Creedon, 2015), and challenges can be pronounced in cases where mature students also identify as disabled (Thompson, 2021).

The promise of blended learning

Blended learning – learning in both physical and online environments – has evolved from earlier iterations that involved distance learning and open education efforts. Blended learning as we currently understand it came into being as technology-enhanced learning matured (Friesen, 2012). It provides advantages to some students through greater flexibility, inclusivity, and personalisation. The extent to which these are felt by a student depends on their circumstances and the constraints of a particular provider or programme.

It is therefore reasonable to expect that blended programmes may meet the needs of mature learners joining study for the first time or after a gap and for those who are continuing study. Likewise, providers who operate with validation or accreditation may have conditions attached to their institute or to particular programmes that limit mature-student participation, despite the attraction of blended learning.

On balance, however, the effectiveness of blended learning has been demonstrated through student learning outcomes (Han, 2023), improvement in self-study abilities (Tong et al., 2022), and student satisfaction (Melton et al., 2009).

Push and pull

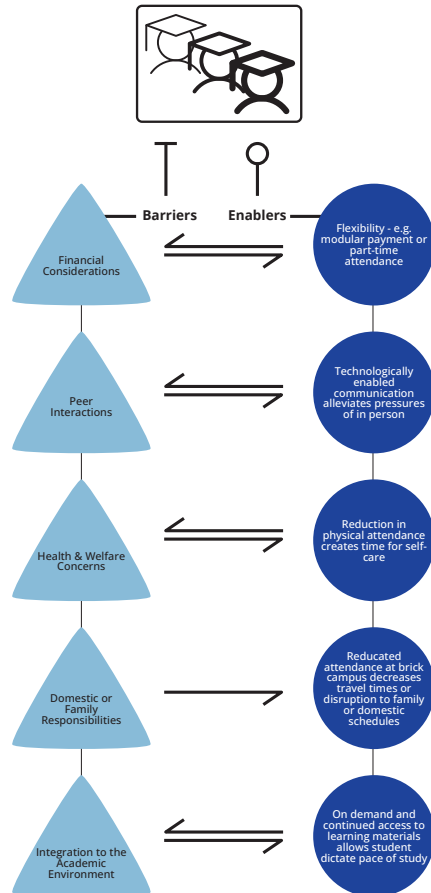
Nationally, the rate of mature-student engagement with higher education has declined from a peak in 2010/11 to 2018/19 (HEA, 2021). This is a result of improvement in the national economy, fewer learners in further education and training, and other factors. The same HEA report, however, notes that blended learning may attract more mature students.

Mature students identified the most significant barriers as financial cost (67%), family responsibilities and commitments (42%), job commitments (33%), and distance to study (26%). The barriers to their participation in higher education may therefore be overcome, in full or in part, through blended delivery.

There is clearly a complex ecosystem of factors, external and internal, which must be considered carefully to create a balance that attracts, supports, and sustains mature learners in a blended environment. Something that attracts one student may hinder another – or the same learner if it is not managed

The effectiveness of blended learning has been demonstrated through student learning outcomes (Han, 2023), improvement in self-study abilities (Tong et al., 2022), and student satisfaction (Melton et al., 2009).

carefully. This push and pull of the mature student in the blended learning environment is represented in the figure below.



Institutional perspective

Since its inception, Hibernia College has offered blended learning, and this has evolved as technology has matured alongside a student-centred digital learning environment (Hibernia College, 2019–20). This has allowed students to:

- » set their own pace of study, enabling student-led integration into the academic environment: 'The course offered me the freedom to create my own study timetable and hours tailored to my lifestyle'
- » undertake a career change: 'I loved my work but always wanted to teach younger children, at primary-school level'
- » engage in study alongside managing domestic or family responsibilities: 'gave me the flexibility I needed to work around my own three children'.

While the experiences of those seeking flexibility in returning to study or advancing their career are positive, we must be cognisant of the need for flexibility and the potential for impacts on academic success that come with setting a personalised pace of learning. This is acute where there are time limits on study or external registration requirements.

Future considerations

For blended learning to fully realise its potential in the inclusion of all mature students in higher education, a balancing act is required. The factors that overcome traditional barriers must be leveraged in a personalised way to ensure they do not counter their intrinsic benefits. This may involve developing

and setting personalised learning plans based on programme requirements being aligned with students' circumstances.

At systems level, there is more scope for focused monitoring, from admission to graduation, assessing the impacts of these enablers and barriers on mature students' engagement and success. Comparing providers and programmes will uncover universal elements and may also reveal previously unidentified barriers to engagement with particular programmes or professions.

REFERENCES

Creedon, D. (2015) 'The experience of financial hardship on mature students' social and academic integration', *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education*, 5(2), 2471–2481.

Friesen, N. (2012) *Defining Blended Learning*. Boise.

Han, X. (2023) 'Evaluating blended learning effectiveness: An empirical study from undergraduates' perspectives using structural equation modeling', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1059282

Hibernia College (2019–20) *Annual Quality Report*. Dublin: Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

Higher Education Authority (HEA) (2021) *Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education: What Are the Challenges? Recommendations for the Future*. Dublin: HEA.

O'Connor McGowan, S. (2020) 'A case study exploring mature students' expectations and experiences of the fully online mode of learning in a higher education institution in Ireland'. PhD thesis, Dublin City University.

Melton, B., Graf, H., and Chopak-Foss, J. (2009) 'Achievement and satisfaction in blended learning versus traditional general health course designs', *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 3(1).

Thompson, C. (2021) 'From self-doubt to self-belief: The experiences of mature students with disabilities in higher education in Ireland', *AHEAD Journal*, 13.

Tong, D.H., Uyen, B.P., and Ngan, L.K. (2022) 'The effectiveness of blended learning on students' academic achievement, self-study skills and learning attitudes: A quasi-experiment study in teaching the conventions for coordinates in the plane', *Heliyon*. DOI: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e12657