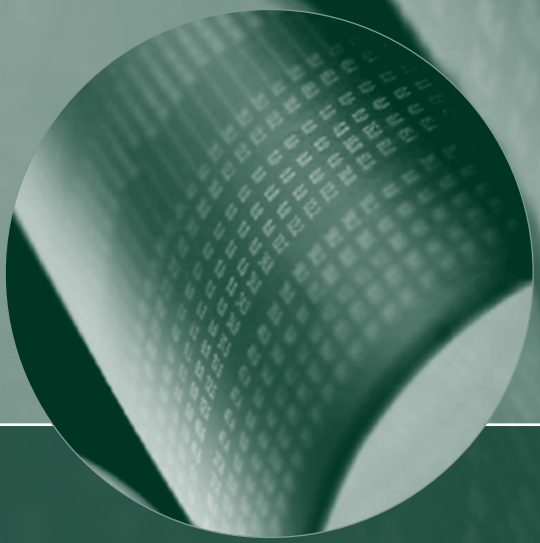
SWAP East Tracking and Retention Project Report



SWAP Scottish Wider Access Programme

2010

Exploring the dynamics of former SWAP students' progression through university

Director's Statement

The SWAP East Tracking and Retention Project was launched in 2007, with the aim of deriving full value from the wealth of student data and feedback collected consistently over a number of years. The project tracks successive cohorts of SWAP students from college into and through university, analysing patterns of progression and retention.

The first report, Tracking the progression of former Access students into university: what retention issues are raised for future Access provision? (2008) added significantly to understanding of the adult access student's experience in the early stages of higher education. For SWAP, the report produced important insights and recommendations that have influenced the partnership and helped us develop new strategies for supporting transition and retention over the last two years.

In this much-anticipated second report, Dr Winterton considers the extent to which factors such as gender, institutional processes and family commitments impact on students' decisions to leave their courses early. She is particularly interested in students who leave at the later stages of the degree course, at what could be described as the last hurdle.

The report is timely. With the effects of the economic downturn being felt across further and higher education, the focus is more than ever on gaining the best returns on investment. The emphasis in widening participation has turned to retention of non-traditional entrants through to completion of their higher education courses. Dr Winterton's research exposes the complexity of the mature student's experience and raises key questions about how we can best support them.

Ruth Howard
Director, SWAP East

The Author

Dr Mandy Winterton is a Research Fellow on Timescapes, an ESRC Qualitative Longitudinal Study at the University of Leeds. She has taught, researched and published in many areas of education and social inequality. She has a sustained interest in and commitment to widening participation and under-represented groups in UK Higher Education. Her PhD (2007) was a qualitative analysis of mature male students' journeys to and in ancient Scottish Universities.

Acknowledgements

Sincerest thanks go to the former SWAP students who kindly gave their time to participate in this research, particularly so because they were asked about some of the difficulties of their HE engagement. Gratitude is also due to Tracey Kerr, the tireless SWAP East Student Co-ordinator for her magnificent effort and continued determination in pursuing and collating the tracking data within her own demanding workload. Thanks also go to Ruth Howard, Director of SWAP East, for her sustained support throughout the twists and turns of this research project.

Dr Mandy Winterton

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Across the UK 86% of mature students who entered universities in 2007/08 were still in university the following year and across the UK the rate of mature student non-continuation has been declining for some time. Given the additional pressures faced by mature students throughout their HE endeavour, this is a remarkable achievement. This study uses national data to present a more complex picture of mature student retention across the UK and within Edinburgh. It also uses data from qualitative interviews with former SWAP students who left their university courses before completion and those who completed or were close to it. In so doing it highlights the complex nature of the mature student HE experience and highlights the factors that may lead some students to leave early, whilst others are able to remain on course.

Scotland and Wales have the highest percentages of mature students in their HE sectors within the UK. Students over the age of 21 consistently make up around 23%-24% of the student body in these countries. Scotland stands out from the rest of the UK in that over half of those mature students who enter HE are already in possession of an HE level qualification. Whilst the rest of the UK are better at retaining mature students with prior HE qualifications than they are at retaining those without , this is not the case in Scotland. Here mature students without prior HE qualifications are more likely to continue or qualify at the same HEI than they are in England or Wales. This may be explained in a number of ways. It could be that those who already possess an HE level qualification can more readily leave their studies as they already have qualifications to take to the labour market. It may also be that, because Scotland has a greater proportion of its population with HE qualifications, then those mature students without previous HE qualifications are even more inclined to remain on their courses because of a more regionally competitive labour market.

Current tracking systems do not permit the reasons for leaving to be so intricately recorded. Indeed, the experience of trying to track former SWAP students has found a less than comprehensive system. Whilst qualitative data can help to throw light on the reasons why mature students, specifically former SWAP students, left their courses, one recommendation from this report is that non-continuation and retention data record more detail on reasons for students' leaving. This would be invaluable at local and national level. It would also be useful for tracking students if there was some continuity in the allocation of student identification numbers between various education institutions (e.g. SQA, UCAS, HEIs). Such a system would enable codes to be attached to student identification numbers so that future retention research would more readily be able to ascertain student educational trajectories from institutional and national databases. The fact that retention is at the forefront of policy concerns adds weight to such a request.

There is a significant body of in-depth qualitative research with mature students that shows the ways in which their HE experiences are both pleasurable and challenging. HE increases their confidence, employability and knowledge of the wider social environment.

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Many appreciate the social aspects of HE and also the opportunity to be seen as role models for others. The research also shows how mature students often have to 'choose' their universities and courses according to how they fit with existing familial and employment commitments. It also reveals how mature students' HE journeys are more stressful and risky than those of younger students, as they continuously negotiate these competing demands and often do so with insufficient resources (time, money, knowledge of HE processes). The limited qualitative research on non-continuation shows that mature students do not leave for the same reasons as younger students (such as poor choice of course, insufficient commitment or satisfaction) but rather that external/familial demands often interrupt the journeys which they were formerly most committed to.

Data from qualitative interviews with former SWAP students shows that there is no simple difference in the HE experience between those who continued with their university studies and those who did not. Both groups of respondents reported problematic episodes as they continued on their courses. Unexpected familial commitments disrupted the studies among the non-continuation students and those who remained. In some cases, the nature of the familial needs was such that there was no option but to leave. In such cases former SWAP students did not regret their decisions to leave and also spoke of the benefits of the HE they had experienced so far. Indeed, all those who had left their studies before completion expressed a similar sentiment (even where their university studies had been much more problematic) and all intended to return to some form of education in the future. Thus the research suggests that a 'partial' involvement with HE should not necessarily be seen so readily as negative. Realistically it may be hard to reconcile this more positive position in a sector with an increasing audit culture, but we should resist a wholly negative interpretation of non-continuation data. Non-continuation statistics are a crude measure of student satisfaction; they hide the positive aspects of time spent in higher education and the reasons for the decisions to leave in many cases.

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In this research it emerged that reasons for leaving early were often multi-dimensional and also cumulative. It was rare for students to leave for a single reason (although financial pressures were often the case here). Among those who did not continue there was often an issue that received what they saw as an inadequate institutional response. This then led to other issues compounding the original problem. This confirms that non-continuation should be seen as part of an interactional process; there is not a problem with the student but rather there are things going awry in the way that institutions and their mature students respond to one another over time. Non-continuation is a process, not a static event.

For example, where there had been a breakdown in practical support networks, or where the demands of placements that were outside of university hours began to impact on students' university and familial commitments, respondents spoke of university staff who they believe failed to understand the nature and the weight of the problems they were facing. Being told to 'hang on in there' or offered inappropriate new deadlines then heaped on more pressure which the student then attempted to manage whilst still juggling the different aspects of their lives. There was a sense that responses did not fully comprehend the competing demands (of family, study and sometimes employment also) that mature students had to juggle and that the solutions would be more appropriate for younger students who did not have these additional layers of stress or commitment. From this finding comes the recommendation that staff and institutions ought to be aware of the implicit ways in which the 'traditional' student norm is evidenced in their practice. It might be that more creative ways of assessing students who have experienced such disruptions (rather than the re-scheduling of existing submissions within a limited institutional timeframe) should be considered. Placement practices should be scrutinised to ensure that they are timetabled to be more suitable to those with existing commitments and the relational politics of staff requires attention to ensure that mature students are not being treated in a demeaning way. These are strong findings in this research.

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Disruptions to HE trajectories were also evident in the interviews of former SWAP students who remained on course. However among this group it was more evident that they had strong support networks in place throughout their studies. No-one who continued had lost a key support mechanism during their HE journey. It was also noticeable that among those who continued no-one had paid employment beyond their 2nd year, a few did not have responsibility for dependents and those that did spoke of the consistent support of other family members or of the financial security to provide paid childcare. It seems therefore that the security of support mechanisms is an important factor in why some students remained on course whilst others did not. Of course, there is little universities can do to stabilise the domestic arrangements of mature students. However, what emerges from this research is that universities and their staff need to more fully comprehend the impact of the disruption to support arrangements for mature students. If they offered more workable alternatives than what has been evidenced in this research, then perhaps some students who did not continue, may actually have done so.

Domestic support mechanisms emerged as a more important factor in retention rather than gender, per se, although there may well be a link between the two. Women often retained the role as primary (or sole) carer for children and if in cohabiting relationships took the greater share of domestic responsibilities whilst studying; thus they may be seen as more likely to be in positions to experience competing demands compared to men. However, in this research we also see men as primary or more equal care givers, (for their parents and/or children) which intrudes significantly on their capacities to remain on course. In many cases it is the availability of others to share the load, and/or contribute to it, which is significant and this research shows that we should not assume too readily that this is gender specific.

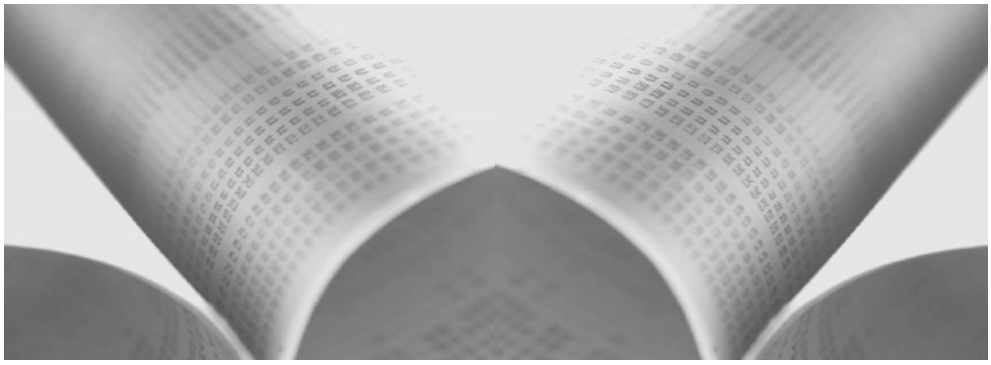
Students who both continued and did not continue spoke of a lack of recognition of their presence within the HE environment and the research suggests that this aspect of the mature student experience needs addressing. Whilst no-one left university primarily from feeling 'out of place' in their institution, when other aspects of their experience are less than satisfactory, the sense of isolation may indeed impact on students' propensity to remain on course. It was certainly a frequent subject in the qualitative data. Being treated the same as young students was not seen as fitting; different kinds of social spaces and social engagements supported by the institution were called for and existing provision aimed at young students was seen as inadequate. A financially resourced mature students' society was nominated as a mechanism by which universities could help mature students to support one another, and be supported by and legitimised by their institutions. As this report has shown, there is a wealth of qualitative research which shows the particularities of the mature student HE experience, and which validates the sentiment expressed here that mature students need some kind of support mechanism that represents their particular needs and validates them as a valuable part of the HE sector.

Tables and Figures

Tables

1 Introduction

Attention to widening participation within Higher Education (HE) is increasingly being directed towards issues of retention and progression. There are economic reasons for this shift; increased levels of Government investment in the sector means increased attention to efficiencies and accountability for those in receipt of that funding (e.g. Christie et al 2004, RANLHE 2009). But attention to the dynamics of retention and progression also addresses dimensions of social justice and equity; with greater numbers of UK university students now drawn from sectors of society that have historically been under-represented therein, understanding who does and who does not progress is essential in assessing the degree to which the HE experience is fair beyond the point of access.



Mature students are more likely not to continue to completion than those from the traditional student constituency. Latest data show rates of mature student attrition within UK universities at 14%. This compares to 7.2% among young full time first degree entrants (HESA 2010). Whilst it is wrong to assume that 'traditional students'[1] progress smoothly to and through their university courses (see Power et al 2003), there is a wealth of evidence that shows how the HE journeys for those outwith the traditional student population are much more problematic (e.g. Reay et al 2009, Lucey et al 2003). Various constituencies of non-traditional students (e.g. mature students, those from lower socio-economic groups, those with additional support needs or from backgrounds in the care system) often experience or reject university as a very risky endeavour; their limited knowledge of the expectations, demands and processes of the HE sector has both practical and psychological repercussions, their limited finances mean negotiating employment commitments or hardship whilst studying and mature students also confront familial and caring commitments that compete with the demands of studying. So, in relation to the statistics that opened this paragraph, it should be seen as something of an achievement that, despite the additional pressures mature students are known to face, 86% of those who enrolled in UK universities in 2007/08 were still at university the following year.

Nonetheless, mature student attrition rates are higher than their more traditional student peers and there is a need, for both the economic and equity reasons cited earlier, to understand the dynamics of their progression and non-continuation in HE. In order to access such understandings researchers face the significant problem of trying to trace those who have left, and this means understandings in this arena are under-developed relative to other aspects of the 'non-traditional' student experience. Researchers also face an additional methodological issue in researching those who have left their university studies before completion of their intended course; approaching former students, even if they have previously agreed to be tracked, about what may have been a less than positive aspect of their lives is fraught with ethical difficulties.

[1] i.e. those who enter university from school, with A levels or Highers and family histories where university is seen as a normal part of the lifecourse.

2 About the study

This research examines the experiences of former SWAP students who completed their intended university courses, those in their final years of their programme, and those who have made the decision to leave before the completion of their intended degree. In so doing it highlights the complex dynamics that impact on the university trajectories of mature (SWAP East) access course students to try to understand the factors that may impact on their abilities to remain within those institutions for the duration of their original course. It uses data from four cohorts (2004/05, 2005/06, 2006/07, 2007/08) of former SWAP (East) access course students who at the time of their access course enrolment gave permission to be tracked by that organisation. It uses institutional data and results from a postal questionnaire to ascertain patterns of progression among SWAP cohorts, including the variety of reasons given for leaving their courses early. It also garners deeper insight from questionnaire and qualitative interviews conducted between 2008/09 and 2009/10 which asked about the former SWAP students' experiences of higher education, their decisions to leave (where appropriate) and their reflections on those HE experiences.

The study is important for a number of reasons. To begin with, it includes evidence from an under-researched population, those who have left their courses early, and it is important to provide insight into the institutional and wider social/cultural processes that contributed to their decisions to leave. There is a growing momentum in academic circles to reposition the experience of leaving so that the positive aspects of even 'partial' HE engagement is not overlooked (see RANLHE 2009) and this research will contribute to that emerging field of interest also. The research is of further importance because of its comparative dimension; it explores progression issues by looking at those who have left their courses before completion as well as those who have continued to completion or are close to it. This comparative design is an essential tool in developing a deeper understanding of the dynamics of retention and non-progression. As Christie et al (2004) rightly emphasise, how can we know which factors are influential in either scenario unless we compare across scenarios. Comparisons enable researchers to make more valid claims about factors that may be significant in either trajectory, although it remains relatively under-explored among research on 'non-traditional' student populations[2].

The research is also timely, given the emphasis on austerity currently enveloping the UK, in HE and other policy arenas. Student non-progression is generally conceived of as financially wasteful[3] and represents an inadequate return on the initial educational investment, whether that investment is conceived of as that made by the state, by education institutions, by families or by the individuals embarking on further study. Thus research which furthers an understanding of the factors surrounding progression and non-progression will provide useful insight for those contemplating how future investments in education may be more effectively directed. Finally, and also linked to the current economic downturn, the research is important because it incorporates a consideration of the gendered dimensions of HE experience; it wants to know whether women and men face different kinds of challenges and opportunities during their HE endeavour. This is because in times of increasing unemployment, men with low educational qualifications are seen as being particularly at risk of becoming socially and economically disenfranchised, and their re-engagement in education needs to be regarded as a priority (see McGivney 1999, 2004).

[2] Christie et al 2004 and Power et al 2003 are equally critical of research which claims insight into the uniqueness of particular aspects of the non-traditional student experience. In their view, the bases of such claims are undermined unless relevant comparisons have been made.

[3] Of course, there are other kinds of benefits accrued through higher education, not least increased self-confidence and self-awareness, increased motivation and public engagement, better employment opportunities and the inter-generational transfer of knowledge and perceptions etc.

3 The structure of the report

The report will first set the scene in which to locate the findings of the study. It begins by presenting national and local patterns of non-continuation and resumption from quantitative data, locating Scotland in the broader context of the UK, showing differences between patterns of mature student non-continuation and resumption and their young peers, and finally differences between the HE institutions in Edinburgh. It then presents an overview of the key features of the HE experience of mature students that have emerged primarily from many small scale in-depth qualitative research projects.

This includes some evidence on early leavers and a more substantive consideration of the extent to which gender is seen to be a factor in how mature students engage with higher education. This is followed by an explanation of the research design and methods and the report then presents the research findings. It first presents findings from those who left their courses early and this is followed by findings from those former SWAP students who have completed or are near to completing their intended studies. Next, the discussion section presents the implications of these findings for an understanding of why some students leave university before completing their intended course and why others continue. The report ends by making recommendations on the basis of what has been revealed during the research.

4 Patterns of retention among mature students

A comparative perspective

This section takes a comparative look at patterns of non-continuation and resumption of studies among mature students. The data for the following tables are extracted from the Performance Indicators in Higher Education released annually by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). It is important to note that HESA data defines mature students as those who were 21 or over at the start of the academic year (30th Sept) in which they entered university. The section looks at differences between mature and young students' non-continuation in Scotland and across the rest of the UK, between mature students with and without prior higher education qualifications, and then looks at patterns of resumption in the same manner. It ends by presenting patterns of non-continuation across the four Edinburgh HEIs. The intention of the institutional map is to provide a sense of difference among the universities rather than to provide a means of comparison. Wherever possible, the report will try not to present a snapshot of one particular year as this year may be unrepresentative. Instead it intends to convey a sense of trends or movements in the retention/progression story.

To begin this section, it is first necessary to map the dimensions of mature student HE participation over the time period relevant to the participants in this research. Table 1 below shows small changes in the relative representation of mature students as a percentage of the student body over that time period. The picture in Northern Ireland is of a smaller representation of mature students within the HE population, at about 17%, but of that figure being relatively stable throughout the period. Wales consistently has the largest representation of mature students within its HE sector, although there has been a slight decline from 25% to 24% between 2004/05 to 2007/08. Scotland has the next largest representation of mature students and in contrast to the rest of the UK, their relative presence has increased between the years covered here, from 21.5% to 23.2%. England has seen the largest rate of decline in mature student representation with their presence dropping for 22.5% of the student body in 2004/05 to just below 21% of the student body in 2007/08.

Table 1 Representation of mature students as full-time, first degree entrants, UK, 2004/05 - 2007/08

	2004/05 n (% intake)	2005/06 n (%intake)	2006/07 n (%intake)	2007/08 n (%intake)	% change 2004/05-2007/08
England	57,555 (22.5%)	58,730 (21.5%)	55,475 (21.2%)	57,190 (20.9%)	-1.6%
Wales	4,770 (25%)	4,610 (23.7%)	4,850 (24.4%)	4,830 (24.0%)	- 1.0%
Scotland	6,425 (21.5%)	7,050 (22.8%)	6,765 (22.7%)	*6,870 *(23.2%)	+ 1.7%
N. Ireland	1,645 (17.8%)	1,630 (17.2%)	1,420 (16.7%)	1,580 (17.3%)	- 0.5%

** Taken from table T1, data not included on T2a.*

Source: Taken from HESA Performance Indicators in Higher Education, table T2a.

However, mature students are not an homogeneous group and table 2 below depicts their representation according to their possession of HE qualifications on entry.

4 Patterns of retention among mature students (a comparative perspective)

The table comes with an important warning regarding the way in which the data can be read. As table 2 indicates, the proportion of mature students where prior HE data is known varies considerably between the four UK nations. Until 2006/07 data for Northern Ireland and Wales was based on knowledge of less than 70% of their mature student intakes, and in England and Scotland it is based on knowledge of between 81%-88% of their mature student intake. Thus there needs to be extreme caution in drawing any kind of inference from such partial recordings. From 2006/07 onwards there is more consistent recording with over 90% of this data being recorded for mature entrants across the whole of the UK. Unfortunately changes in the recording of other mature student criteria since this time mean that data for Scotland has not been released by HESA as it is no longer comparable to the rest of the UK[4] and so table 2 presents data until that point only.

Table 2 Proportions of mature, full time students with no previous HE qualifications, 2004/05 - 2006/07, UK

	2004/05		2005/06		2006/07	
	% of mature student intake with known data (n)	% no prior HE	% of mature student intake with known data (n)	% no prior HE	% of mature student intake with known data (n)	% no prior HE
England	88% (50,610)	**74.7%**	88% (51,755)	**70.6%**	96% (53,235)	**76.0%**
Wales	65% (3,140)	99.0%	67% (3,115)	71.5%	93% (4,525)	98.9%
Scotland	88% (5,625)	**51.0%**	81% (5,715)	**42.5%**	95% (6,460)	**55.6%**
N. Ireland	61% (1,000)	69.0%	65% (1,065)	62.2%	92% (1,310)	89.7%

Source: constructed from HESA Performance Indicators in Higher Education, table T2a.

With the caveat regarding the reliability of the data above, it may be noted from table 2 that Scotland appears to have a greater proportion of mature students entering its universities who already possess HE level qualifications compared to the rest of the UK. In 2004/05 almost half (49%) of the mature students entering Scottish universities already possessed an HE level qualification, in 2005/06 more than half of them did (57.5%) and whilst this figure had dropped, by 2006/07 44.4% of the mature student intake still possessed an HE level qualification. In England, consistently, over 70% of the mature student intake did not have prior HE qualifications. The data for Wales and Northern Ireland are too unreliable as a basis for comparison, given that they are based on smaller absolute numbers, and on data from approximately 60%-67% of the mature student population. But in 2006/07 where both of these nations recorded data for over 90% of their mature student intake, they still show that most of their mature entrants did not possess prior HE qualifications. Even with the caution that must be exercised with the above data, it is safe to assert that among the rest of the UK a clear majority of mature students who enter university do not possess HE level qualifications a priori, which stands in contrast to patterns of mature student entry in Scotland.

[4] Mature student entry is also recorded according to residence in areas of low HE participation. From 2005/06 onwards the measure of low HE participation was derived from the POLAR 2 neighbourhood maps. HESA suggests this data now mis-represents Scotland's contribution to widening participation and their data have thereafter been withheld until the issue is resolved. See note 5 at: http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1688&Itemid=141

4 Patterns of retention among mature students (a comparative perspective)

The greater proportions of mature students with HE level qualifications in Scotland almost certainly reflects its particular education structures. In Scotland the further education (FE) sector plays an important role in providing HE level qualifications and has led to a greater proportion of the Scottish population having HE qualifications than, for example, in England[5] (see SFCFHE 2005). This is an important difference to bear in mind as the report continues to explore patterns of non-continuation and retention among mature students. The data above are also useful in illustrating that mature students should not be perceived as a relatively homogenous population; there are differences within them that should be recognised in any discerning analyses.

4.1 Non-Continuation: Scotland and the UK

The numbers and percentages of mature students who did not continue automatically into their 2nd year across the four UK nations are presented in Table 3 below. The table shows that Scotland and Wales have similarly high rates of non-continuation; in 2007/08 approximately 15% of their mature students did not continue automatically into the next year of their studies. In England and Northern Ireland the rate is lower, 13.9% and 11.7% respectively.

Table 3 Non-continuation following year of entry, mature full-time first degree entrants, UK, 2007/08

	Number of mature entrants	Number of mature non-continuation	Mature non-continuation as % of mature students
England	57,175	7,945	13.9
Wales	4,828	715	14.9
Scotland	6,860	1,025	15.0
N. Ireland	1,580	185	11.7

Source: Taken from HESA Performance Indicators, table T3a.

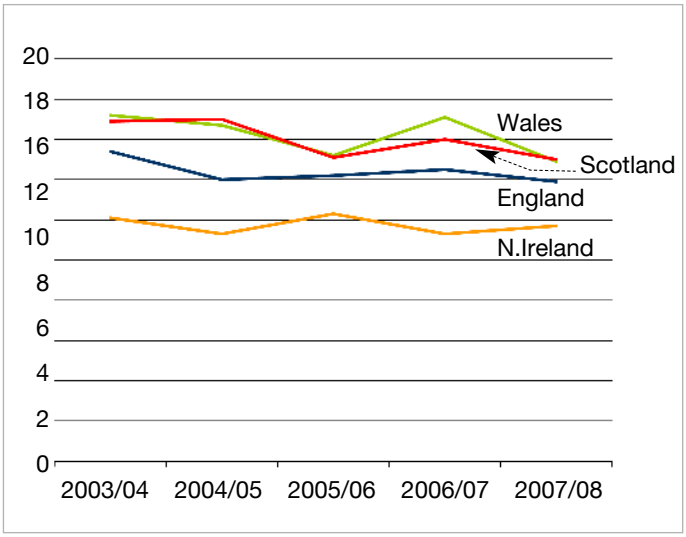
However, it should be borne in mind that Wales and then Scotland enrol proportionately greater numbers of mature students into their universities than do the other UK nations. As table 1 (page 10) showed, in 2007/08 mature students made up 24% of the student intake in Wales and 23.3% of the student intake in Scotland. (They made up 20.9% and 17.3% of the respective student bodies in England and Northern Ireland in that same year.) It could be suggested therefore that Wales and Scotland provide a greater proportion of mature students with the opportunity to enter university in the first place, and that one might expect higher rates of non-continuation as a consequence of widening opportunity in this way. Simplistically, by providing greater opportunities to enter HE, these two countries are also providing greater opportunities for more students not to continue. It is also important to note from table 3 above, the differences in absolute numbers of mature students in each UK nation. Small changes in the numbers of students progressing or not-continuing in Ireland, Wales and Scotland would have a more noticeable impact on their percentage figures compared to the figures for England. Thus it is important to recognise the complexity when dealing with 'objective' numerical data.

[5] In 2002, 29% of women and 27% of men aged between 16-64 in Scotland possessed an HE level qualification, compared to 24% of both men and women across the UK. Source: SFCFHE 2005:29-30.

4 Patterns of retention among mature students (a comparative perspective)

Figure 1 below succinctly illustrates general patterns of non-continuation of mature students by looking across the four UK nations[6] over time. With the exception of Northern Ireland, it shows a general trend across the UK of a reduction in the rates of non-continuation among mature students since 2003-04.

Figure 1 Percentage of mature full-time first degree entrants not continuing in HE after their first year, 2003/04 - 2007/08



Source: Taken from HESA Performance Indicators, table T3a.

Figure 1 shows that Scotland and Wales begin and end with higher rates of mature student non-continuation, and that both countries experienced similar patterns of fluctuation over the period. The picture in these two nations is of a general decline over time. England begins and ends the period with lower rates of mature student non-continuation than Scotland and Wales. It too shows a general reduction in the rate, although this is less dramatic than the rate evident in Scotland and Wales. Table 4 below illustrates the changes numerically and summarises the percentage change overall.

Table 4 Percentage of mature full-time first degree entrants not continuing in HE after their first year, UK, 2003/04 - 2007/08

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	% change 2003/04 - 2007/08
England	15.4	14	14.2	14.5	13.9	-1.5%
Wales	17.2	16.7	15.2	17.1	14.9	- 2.3%
Scotland	16.9	17	15.1	16.0	15.0	- 1.9%
N. Ireland	12.1	11.3	12.3	11.3	11.7	- 0.4%

Source: Taken from HESA Performance Indicators, table T3a.

Table 4 clearly shows that the rate of non-continuation among mature students is being reduced over time, and shows how the rate of this deceleration differs between the four nations. In Wales the rate of mature student non-continuation has been reduced by 2.3% in the period 2003/04 - 2007/08, in Scotland the reduction has been 1.9%, in England 1.5% whilst Northern Ireland has seen a much smaller reduction of 0.4%.

[6] HESA: non-continuation data is based on tracking students from the year they enter an institution to the following year. http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1695&Itemid=141

4 Patterns of retention among mature students (a comparative perspective)

Whilst the reduction in the rate of non-continuation in England is not as great as that recorded by Wales, and is still a slower rate of deceleration than that in Scotland, it should not be forgotten that the percentages for England are based on substantially greater numbers of students than the percentages for the rest of the UK. In absolute terms, percentages for England are based on over 11 times more students than the percentages for Wales, and over 8 times more students than the percentages for Scotland. As table 3 showed, England admitted over 57,000 mature students in 2007/08 and almost 8,000 did not continue. This compares to just over 4,800 mature entrants in Wales with just over 700 not-continuing. Thus it only takes a small amount of change in the data from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to have a significant impact on the kinds of percentages cited above, whereas the degree of change would have to be much greater in England for it to impact significantly on their percentages. This is not to deny the validity of the patterns suggested by the above data, but is simply a reminder of the wider context in which such percentages sit.

How does the pattern among mature students compare to their younger peers?

Whilst the rate of non-continuation is lower among young students compared to mature students in each of the four UK nations, as table 5 below illustrates, there is a slower rate of improvement among young students over the same period examined above. Table 5 shows the rate of non-continuation amongst young students has slowed by 1.7% in Scotland, 1.3% % in Northern Ireland and 1.1% in Wales. This compares to a slowdown in mature student non-continuation of 1.9% in Scotland, 2.3% in Wales, and 1.5% in England. Northern Ireland is the only nation in which rates of non-continuation for young students have declined faster than they have for mature students. England, Scotland and Wales all show decreases in non-continuation rates among both mature and young students, but in Wales and England the rate of decrease is more substantial among mature students. This is marginally so in Scotland, although this may reflect the fact that it has recorded the largest rate of decline in its young student non-continuation rate within the UK.

Table 5 Percentage of young and mature full-time first degree entrants not continuing in HE after their first year, change over 2003/04 - 2007/08

	2003/04		2007/08		% change 2003/04 - 2007/08	
	Young	Mature	Young	Mature	Young	Mature
England	7.2	15.4	6.9	13.9	- 0.3	-1.5%
Wales	8.5	17.2	7.4	14.9	- 1.1	- 2.3%
Scotland	10.0	16.9	8.3	15.0	- 1.7	- 1.9%
N. Ireland	11.2	12.1	9.9	11.7	- 1.3	- 0.4%

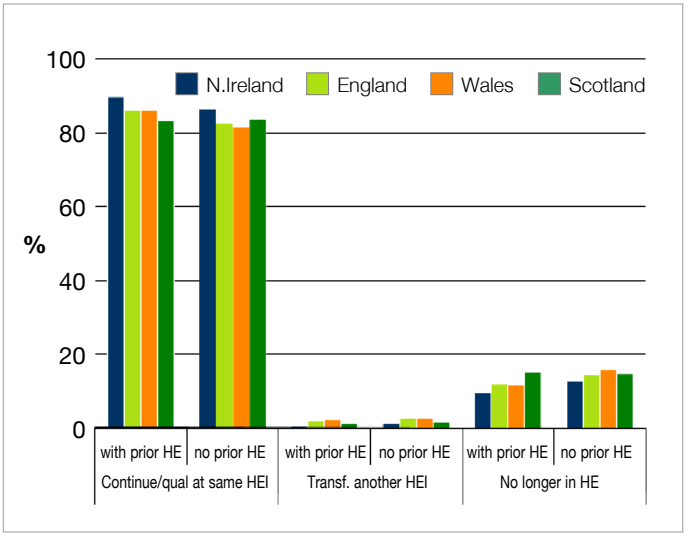
Source: Taken from HESA Performance Indicators, table T3a.

Such data reveal the importance of examining the rate of mature student non-completion in the wider context of decreasing attrition rates overall, and more rapidly decreasing attrition rates among mature student populations more specifically. This may reflect the outcomes of more effective widening participation policies within the HE sector and individual institutions, but one may speculate also that mature students' increasing propensity to remain on their studies could be something to do with them feeling like a more legitimate part of their institutions as their representation becomes more established among the student body.

4 Patterns of retention among mature students (a comparative perspective)

What are the patterns of non-continuation? Non-continuation refers to those students who are recorded as not automatically progressing from their first year into their second. Three different options are recorded by institutions, documenting whether non-continuing students resume at their institution or leave it with a qualification, whether the student transfers to another Higher Education Institution (HEI) or whether they are no longer in HE. Figure 2 below maps the nature of mature student non-continuation across the UK in 2007/08.

Figure 2 Non-continuation following year of entry: mature full time first degree entrants, 2007/08



Source: Adapted from HESA Performance Indicators, table T3c.

Figure 2 illustrates that across the UK, the overwhelming majority of mature students who did not automatically continue into the 2nd year of their studies either went on to resume their studies at that institution or left with a qualification from that institution later that year. The figure indicates that there is a slightly higher likelihood of this among mature students with prior HE qualifications, whereas those with no prior HE qualifications seem slightly more likely to transfer to another HEI and also appear slightly more likely to leave HE than those with prior HE qualifications. However, the patterns are not uniform across the four UK nations, and from the picture above it is evident that Scotland may be different to the rest of the UK. Table 6 below presents more detailed information.

Table 6 Non-continuation following year of entry: mature full-time first degree entrants, UK, 2007/08

	With previous HE qualifications			With no previous HE qualifications		
	% continue or qualify at same HE*	% transfer to another HEI	% no longer in HE	% continue or qualify at same HE*	% transfer to another HEI	% no longer in HE
England	86.2	1.9	11.9	82.6	2.8	14.6
Wales	86.2	2.2	11.6	81.5	2.6	15.9
Scotland	**83.5**	**1.4**	**15.1**	**83.6**	**1.7**	**14.7**
N. Ireland	89.8	0.6	9.6	86.6	1.2	12.7

** those who exited with undergraduate qualification are included as continuing students.*
Source: Adapted from HESA Performance Indicators, table T3c.

4 Patterns of retention among mature students (a comparative perspective)

The data above show a complicated picture in Scotland. Compared to England and Wales[7], Scotland shows weaker resumption/qualification rates for mature non-continuation students with prior HE (83.5% compared to 86.2% documented for both England and Wales). But the relative weakness only applies to those with prior HE, as Scotland has stronger resumption/qualification rates for mature non-continuation students without prior HE compared to England and Wales (83.6% compared to 82.6% and 81.5% respectively). The data in table 6 above also indicate that Scotland has smaller rates of transfer to other HEIs amongst all mature students compared to England and Wales; just 1.4% of mature students with prior HE qualifications and 1.7% of those without prior HE qualifications transfer to other HEIs in Scotland.

Data in table 6 above also show that among all three nations, rates of transfer to other HEIs are higher for mature students without prior HE qualifications compared to those who enter university with HE qualifications. One might make sense of this by suggesting that it is perhaps those students without existing HE experience who were more likely to have made the wrong choice initially and so be more likely to need to look elsewhere. However, this remains supposition at this point. Equally propositional, one might reason that without an existing HE qualification to 'fall back on' these mature students may thus be more committed to continuing on a HE trajectory than those who already had an HE level qualification.

Table 6 also shows that compared to England and Wales, Scotland has higher rates of attrition (i.e. those no longer in HE) amongst mature students with prior HE qualifications (15.1% compared to 11.9% and 11.6% respectively). And unlike in England and Wales, in Scotland mature students with prior HE qualifications are more likely to leave HE than those who enter without such qualifications (15.1% compared to 14.7% respectively). Elsewhere in the UK, mature entrants without prior HE qualifications are significantly more likely to leave HE than those with prior HE qualifications. In England 11.9% of those with prior HE leave HE compared to 14.6% of those without; in Wales 11.6% of mature entrants with prior HE leave compared to 15.9% of mature entrants without; in Northern Ireland 9.6% of mature entrants with prior HE leave compared to 12.7% without. In this context, the trend in Scotland seems even more unusual.

Generally then the picture in Scotland is that mature students without prior HE are as likely to resume studies/qualify as those with prior HE, which stands in contrast to England and Wales. In Scotland there are fewer transfers to other HEIs and also greater rates of attrition among those with prior HE compared to England and Wales. *Can we make sense of such patterns?* It should be noted that relatively speaking, the absolute numbers of mature students on which these percentages are constructed are relatively low compared to the absolute numbers of young students in HE. Thus small differences in percentage trends should not be over emphasised. However one might suggest that the geography of Scotland, and the greater distribution of HE among the populace[8] may be reasons why mature students without HE therein are more likely to remain in HE than those with prior HE qualifications. The need to compete in more competitive employment marketplace may be exasperated by the density of the population geographically in Scotland. However, the lower rates of articulation (among all mature student groups) in Scotland should not be overlooked. This may suggest a lack of choice or availability of articulation arrangements compared to England and Wales which may act in contradictory ways, either to reduce or to compound mature student non-continuation.

[7] Data for Northern Ireland shows a contrary pattern. Given the smaller numbers on which the data is based (see table 3, page 12) the analysis of patterns for N. Ireland will not be pursued here.

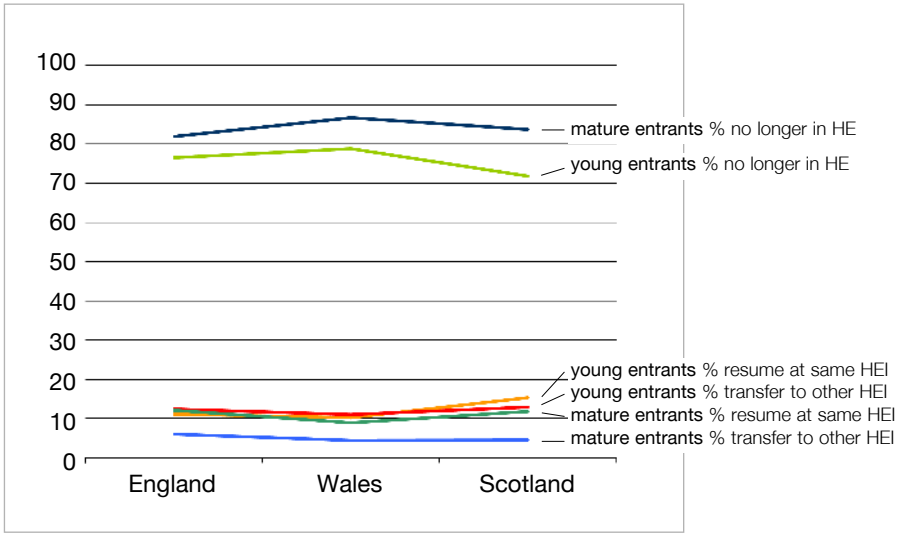
[8] In 2002, 29% of women and 27% of men aged between 16-64 in Scotland possessed an HE level qualification, compared to 24% of both men and women across the UK. Source SFCFHE 2005:29-30.

4 Patterns of retention among mature students (a comparative perspective)

4.2 Resumption of studies

Whereas non-continuation data tracks the progress during the year following entry of those students who did not progress directly onto the 2nd year of their programmes, resumption data documents what happens to those students who were recorded as absent from HE the year after they entered it. Similar to non-continuation data it tracks three routes: those students who then returned to study at the same institution, those students who then returned to study at another HEI, and those who were no longer in HE. As figure 3 below illustrates, there are some differences among young and mature entrants regarding their likelihood of pursuing such options.

Figure 3 Resumption of study in 2007/08, after year out of HE in 2006/07: full-time first degree entrants 2005/06, percentages, England, Scotland and Wales



Source: HESA Performance Indicators in Higher Education, table T4a.

Figure 3 shows that whilst the most likely trajectory of those missing from university for a year is that they do not resume their studies and that the rate of this is higher among mature students compared to their younger peers. Figure 3 also shows that across England, Wales and Scotland mature students are the least likely to resume their studies by transferring to another HEI. Greater detail is provided in table 7 below.

Table 7 Resumption of study in 2007/08, after year out of HE in 2006/07: full-time first degree entrants 2005/06, UK

	Young entrants not in HE 2006/07			Mature entrants not in HE 2006/07		
	% resume at same HEI	% transfer to other HEI	% no longer in HE	% resume at same HEI	% transfer to other HEI	% no longer in HE
England	11.1	12.4	76.5	12.1	6.0	81.9
Wales	10.2	11.0	78.8	8.9	4.4	86.7
Scotland	15.3	12.9	71.8	11.8	4.5	83.7
N. Ireland	14.3	9.2	76.4	13.5	4.0	82.5

Source: HESA Performance Indicators in Higher Education, table T4a.

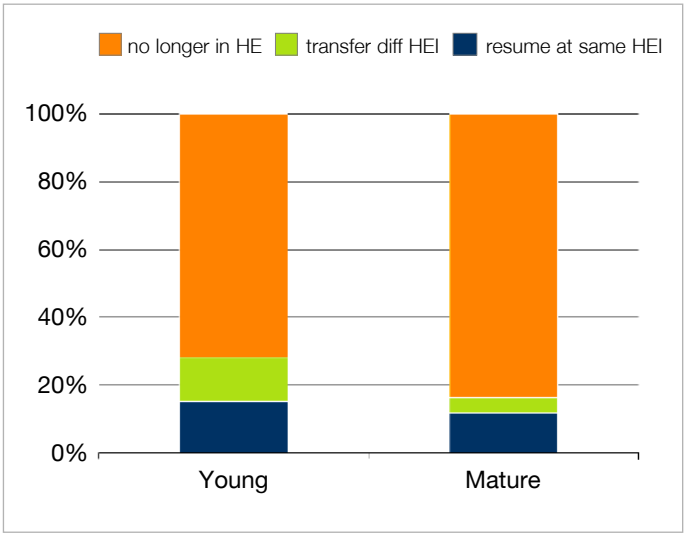
4 Patterns of retention among mature students (a comparative perspective)

The data above suggests that mature students are almost 10% more likely not to resume their studies after a break compared to younger students who take a break. Across the UK between 72% and 76% of young students who took a year out of HE, left after doing so. Among mature students the figures are between 82% and 86.7%. Scotland seems to be more successful than the rest of the UK in getting *younger* students to resume their studies (15.3% return to the same institution compared to just over 10% and 11% in Wales and England) and is more successful than Wales (but less successful than England) in retaining mature students who took a break. Table 7 clearly shows that younger students are more likely to transfer to another HEI after a year out compared to mature students who also took a break from their studies. Between 11-13% of younger students resumed at another HEI in England, Wales and Scotland whereas the figures for mature students are between 4-6%.

This could suggest that the difficulties faced by mature students when they take a year out are less resolvable than those faced by younger students. It may also be that mature students tend to leave their courses only when their issues have become less resolvable compared to their younger peers. Although this current piece of SWAP research has no way of assessing such difference[9], it may add to the findings of seminal research by Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998) which found that mature students leave due to external/familial difficulties rather than academic problems or dissatisfaction (which is more prominent among younger early-leavers). However, as Osborne et al (2004) point out, mature leavers may be more reluctant than younger students to admit not being able to meet academic standards, and so they may highlight other factors that have led them to leave instead.

The picture of resumption in Scotland is graphically presented in figure 4 below and shows quite a sharp contrast between resumption patterns of mature and young students in Scotland.

Figure 4 Resumption of study in 2007/08 after year out of HE in 2006/07: full-time, first degree entrants, Scotland



Source: from HESA Performance Indicators in Higher Education, table T3c.

[9] To do so validly, it would need to interview younger students also.

4 Patterns of retention among mature students (a comparative perspective)

4.3 The Universities of Edinburgh

The final set of data to be presented in this section examines the four universities of Edinburgh. Whilst former SWAP students do not progress only to these institutions, data on retention within them is useful for a number of reasons. A majority of former SWAP East students do progress to these institutions and so they are important here for that reason. It makes more sense to look at institutions in the same city rather than within a broader region in order to make a more sensible group for comparison. All four institutions cover the degree of differentiation (c.f. Gallacher 2005) within the Scottish University sector and so whilst no single institution can be seen as representative of their particular kind of institution (i.e. ancient, civic, old and post-92) together they provide a picture of the sectorial variety within Scottish Higher Education. This section will only present data on patterns of non-continuation between the four universities as data for resumption of studies is based on such small numbers that any kind of representation would have been inherently unstable[10]. Table 8 below provides a picture of current patterns of resumption of study among mature students, according to possession of prior HE level qualifications.

Table 8 Non-continuation following year of entry, mature full time first degree entrants, 2007/08, by institution

	Prior HE qualification				No prior HE qualification			
	n	Cont same HEI*	Transf. another HEI	no longer in HE	n	Cont same HEI*	Transf. another HEI	no longer in HE
Edinburgh University	125	89.6%	1.6%	8.8%	186	84.6%	2.7%	12.6%
Edinburgh Napier University	375	77.5%	1.9%	20.6%	435	79.2%	2.3%	18.5%
Heriot Watt University	75	77.9%	3.6%	18.2%	110	81.3%	2.7%	16.1%
QMU: Queen Margaret University	85	80.0%	3.5%	16.5%	155	77.6%	1.9%	20.5%

** Continue also includes those who left with an exit qualification.*

Source: HESA Performance Indicators in Higher Education, table T3c.

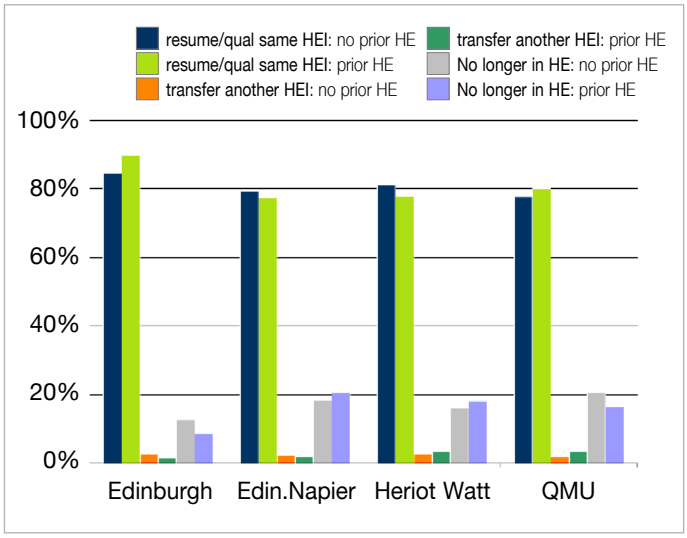
Table 8 above shows Edinburgh University, the ancient institution, with the lowest rates of non-continuing students who are found to have subsequently left Higher Education. This is by a substantial margin amongst those with prior HE qualification (8.8% compared to 16% to 20% range amongst the other institutions) and still by a small margin amongst mature students without prior HE qualifications (12.6% compared to 16% to 20% range among the three other Edinburgh HEIs). The data are presented graphically in Figure 5 below, and the subtle differences between the Edinburgh institutions are nicely illustrated. These results may be indicative of findings from qualitative research by Reay et al (2009) which looked at mature student experiences across a range of university types. It concluded that resource rich 'elite' institutions were able to offer students 'fat' rather than 'lean and mean' pedagogies which led to enhanced learning experiences among the non-traditional students therein.

[10] For example, the numbers of mature students on which statistical representations would emerge for Edinburgh, Heriot Watt and Queen Margaret universities are 30, 25 and 35 respectively. Source: HESA Performance Indicators in Higher Education 2008/09, table T4a.

4 Patterns of retention among mature students (a comparative perspective)

Table 8 also shows higher rates of transfer to other HEIs for two institutions (Heriot Watt and Queen Margaret University) for mature students with prior HE qualifications compared to those without, whereas the reverse is true for Edinburgh University and Edinburgh Napier University; in these two institutions mature students without prior HE are more likely to transfer than those with prior HE. What is also noteworthy is the representation of mature students with Edinburgh Napier University and to a lesser extent, Edinburgh University. The fact that Edinburgh Napier University admits almost 4 times more mature students than both Heriot Watt and Queen Margaret universities, and also more than twice the numbers admitted to Edinburgh University cannot be over-emphasised. Given that post-1992 universities are most likely to be 'resource poor' compared to others (c.f. Reay et al 2009), and that this institution accepts significantly greater numbers of mature students than the others, their higher attrition rates (i.e. those 'no longer in HE') should be so understood. This needs to be born in mind when examining the representation of this non-continuation data in figure 5 below and thus be deterred from making any simplistic comparisons.

Figure 5 Non-continuation following year of entry, mature full time first degree entrants, 2007/08, by institution



Source: HESA performance Indicators in Higher Education, table T3c.

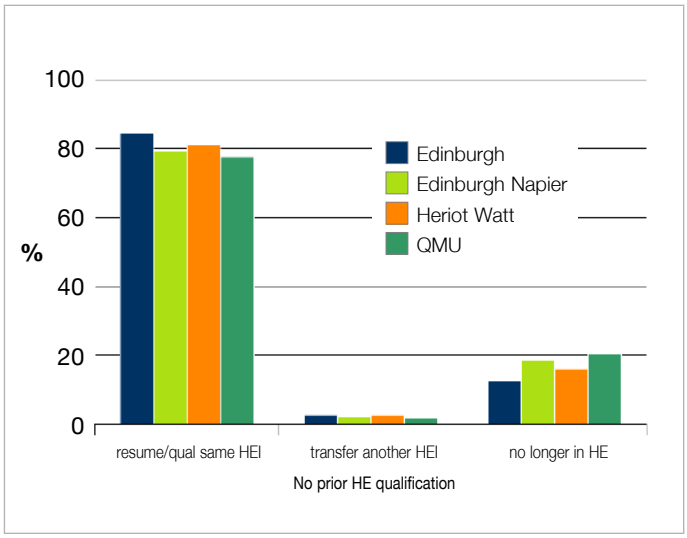
Figure 5 nicely illustrates the complex patterns of resumption and non-continuation within the Edinburgh institutions. Looking specifically at mature students who entered the universities of Edinburgh without a prior HE qualification (who are more likely to be SWAP students, although not exclusively), figure 6 below shows their HE trajectories by institution.

It shows that Edinburgh University is the most likely to retain such students and the least likely institution from which they would leave HE.

Queen Margaret University (QMU) has more noticeable levels of exit without qualification compared to the other Edinburgh universities and also lower rates of transfer to another HEI. This may reflect the nature of the professional courses offered at that institution, which may mean there is less transferability between subjects either within the university, or in terms of transferring to a similar subject at another of the universities within Edinburgh. It should be remembered that mature students are less likely to be geographically mobile than their younger peers, so their options regarding transferring to another institution may be curtailed, which may account for their reduced rates of transfer.

4 Patterns of retention among mature students (a comparative perspective)

Figure 6 Mature student non-continuation 2008/09, for those with no prior HE qualifications Edinburgh universities



Source: HESA performance Indicators in Higher Education, table T3c.

The aim of presenting patterns across the Edinburgh institutions is first to reinforce the point that there is indeed variability between institutions - the courses, the nature of delivery and perhaps the degree of transferability between courses. These kinds of institutional differences should be recognised more fully as an influence in retention (Christie et al 2004). Whilst the research may reveal some insight into the kinds of variations between institutions within the qualitative interviews and questionnaires, there will be no naming of institutions in these cases. This is because with such small numbers in the qualitative aspect of this research, any assertion cannot be taken as a representative view of the mature student experience therein. The situated experiences of students in each institution could only be understood as part of a larger study within that institution. Thus whilst this research shies away from naming institutions referred to by its participants, it will not shy away from naming those practices which impact (positively and negatively) on mature student experience and thus on patterns of retention.

It is also worth noting that different patterns of retention among the Edinburgh institutions are no indication that institutional policies are better or worse among them for mature students. As Christie et al (2004) emphasise, there are a complex mix of factors, such as geography, student familial support, domestic living arrangements, and type of course which may mean that certain institutions are more likely to receive students with greater pressures and vulnerabilities to withdrawal than other kinds of institutions. Their research found for example, that non-traditional students, particularly with lower entry qualifications are more likely to enrol on vocational courses, which are more likely to be in post-92 institutions and all of these factors are associated with higher attrition potential. However, living at home rather than on campus affected attrition in that such students found it more difficult to integrate into the social life of their institution. This occurred most in the out of town older university than it did in the centrally located new university. In this context rates of withdrawal across institutions are not an equivalent measure of their success at helping students to remain on course.

5 What is known about the mature student HE experience?

This section will provide an overview of what is known about mature HE students. It begins with quantitative and qualitative data which shows those factors deemed influential in mature student HE experiences. There is a dearth of research regarding mature student non-continuation, but what is available is presented here also. The section then progresses to examine whether gender is seen to have an impact on those HE journeys.

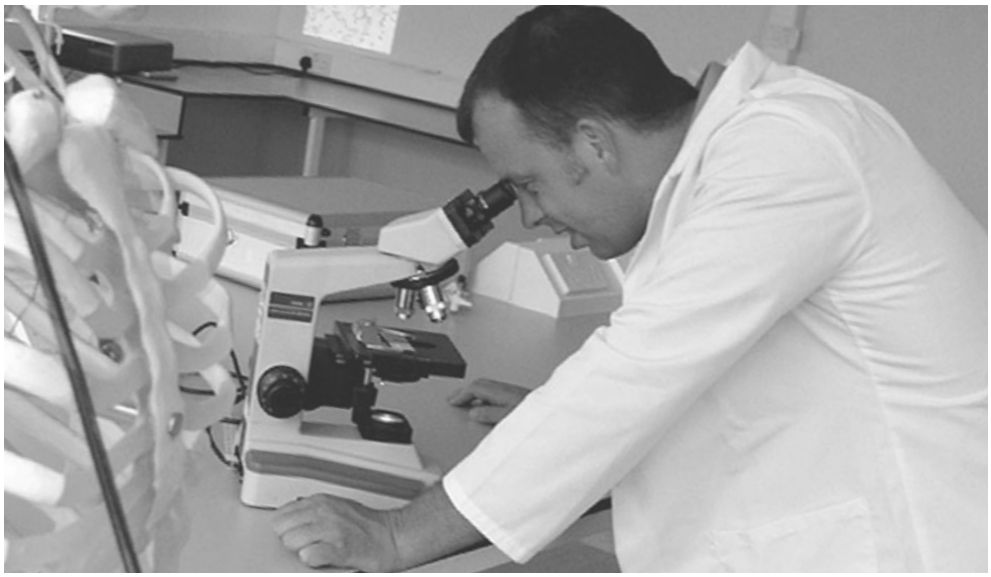
There is a significant body of in-depth qualitative research which captures the perceptions and experiences of various constituencies of under-represented groups in higher education. Mature students may be the focus of the research (e.g. Davies & Williams 2001, Marks et al 2004, Tett 2000) or part of a wider population of non-traditional students being studied (e.g. Reay et al 2001, 2009). Research by Osborne at al (2004) confirms earlier research which shows that for mature students, the decision to enter university is a complex balancing act of anticipated commitments, resources and requirements. For mature students, the costs of foregoing potential earnings in the short term and of getting into debt when the financial returns for that may be less significant than for other groups of traditional students, is a significant factor in decisions whether to enter and later whether to remain in HE. Choosing institutions and courses is also seen as a more complex process for mature students who are significantly more likely than their younger peers to have to choose strategically rather than simply on matters of academic preference. Thus mature students are shown to be more likely to study at those institutions and those subjects where transport links and the timetabling of classes enable them to meet their familial commitments (and also likely employment commitments) whilst being able to undertake their studies.

Mature students are also more likely to have had previously poor experiences of the formal education system and are thus more likely to enter HE with a fragile sense of themselves as successful learners (e.g. Tett 2000). The sense of fragility as a particular aspect of the HE endeavour for mature students is illustrated quite explicitly in research by Davies & Williams (2001). Their research showed how mature students who had decided to enter HE were involved in a continuous process of negotiating commitments (personal, financial, academic etc) throughout their studies and that the risks involved in meeting such demands meant their HE journeys were significantly more fraught than those experienced by younger students.

The sense of HE as a risky endeavour psychologically is highlighted in research by Lucey at al (2003) and Reay (2009). Their work reveals how some non-traditional students, particularly those from families with no prior university histories, experience various degrees of psychological trauma and adjustment as they undertake their HE. This is because the idea of attending a university, and/or the forms of knowledge which students encounter therein are sometimes seen as incongruent with the cultural norms of the family and communities into which the student was previously embedded. Their research showed how some students felt they were being seen as pretentious by others, and that some students felt a sense of guilt in that their own act of becoming educated positioned members of their own families and communities as less educated. A final dimension of the psycho-social domain of mature student HE experience revealed in qualitative research explains HE choice from a different angle than the predominantly practical concern highlighted earlier. Archer et al (2003) and Reay et al (2001) found that many students with no familial HE background chose to study at less prestigious universities as these were seen to be places where they were more likely to 'fit in' with the student body and that they were less likely to choose to study at older institutions where it was felt they would feel out of place.

5 What is known about the mature student HE experience?

Whilst much of the above has focussed on the negotiated and less than pleasurable aspects of mature student HE experience, it is important to recognise that within the body of research there is also much to show the positive aspects of mature students' university journeys. Mature student voices appearing within the literature cited above also talk about how their entry to higher education has led to increases in their confidence, and frequently there is a sense of pride at being able to be seen as a positive role model for their children and other family members. Mature students therein also talk about the value of finding new ways of understanding not only the wider issues in the world beyond their immediate experiences, but also of being able to understand their own experiences in light of that knowledge (see Tett 2000). Whilst mature students may occasionally talk about HE as improving their employment opportunities (e.g. Wilson 1997, Winterton 2007), this is not a particularly strong theme. Rather, a stronger feature of mature student narratives is the social aspect of their undertaking and the opportunity to learn from one another's experiences. Despite the positive aspects of HE appearing within the research literature, it is important to note this is generally within the wider context of highlighting the magnitude of mature students' endeavours to remain on course, and to highlight the additional risks and hurdles faced by mature students at every stage during their HE journeys.



Moving from qualitative research, detailed statistical analysis by Warhust et al (2009) illustrates the greater financial strains on mature students in Scotland compared to their younger peers. It shows that on average mature student debt (those aged 25 and over) is 4 times higher than that among younger students (16-24 years), and is 1.5 times higher than that accumulated by students aged 21-24. It revealed that students in full time HE with dependents have 3 times the level of debt than students without dependents. This is understandable given that mature students' likelihood of having familial responsibilities impacts on their ability to undertake paid work. However, earlier SWAP research (2008) revealed mature students with children and a full time course also negotiating paid employment in order meet their existing financial commitments.

5 What is known about the mature student HE experience?

5.1 Why do students leave early?

As illustrated above, research has shown that mature students (and/or other first generation entrants) are more likely to choose to study at local institutions and also to select subjects that fit in with existing (employment and/or caring) commitments. It has shown the financial constraints within which mature students make their HE choices and journeys. It seems plausible therefore that mature students are more likely to leave their studies early because they have made very constrained choices right from the beginning, rather than having the freedom to study what and where they want. However, Yorke's (2000) important study of student attrition found quite contrary evidence.

The research drew on data from over two thousand questionnaire responses from across 6 UK institutions (including 4 universities) and a diverse range of students. Respondents were asked to indicate the level of influence of a variety of factors which may have influenced their decisions to leave. Yorke (2000) was able to conduct some comparative analysis across mature and young students and found that young students were far more likely to state they had chosen the wrong subject, were dissatisfied with their progress and with the level of difficulty of the course than mature students[11]. He proposed that some of the dissatisfaction derived from a lack of fit between younger students having just left the more structured learning environment of school/college and the autonomy they were confronted with in HE.

Whilst the data from Yorke (2000) covers a more diverse student group than this research, it is nonetheless worth noting how previous SWAP research (2008) found a similar disconcerting aspect of the move to autonomy in HE among former SWAP students in HE. In that research the independence and almost tacit knowledge required in HE came as quite a shock to mature students compared to the guidance, support and instruction they had previously received on their access courses.

The larger sample in Yorke's (2000) study documents trends (over a wider population than is relevant for our current purposes) but does not have the explanatory power of more qualitative enquiry. The hierarchical ordering of a list of factors that contribute to student attrition does not tell us about the ways in which these factors impact on the student experience. It also tells us little about the contexts in which these factors become important. Thus we have no understanding of how to act to reduce the impact of some of these things. Here is where the power of qualitative research is important. Seminal research by Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998) used more qualitative questionnaires and interviews as an alternative means of trying to understand why some students leave their studies early. They suggest that,

> *'… the causes of non-completion are best understood as a complex social process … the factors [involved] should not be regarded as a problem originating with the student but more as a result of the interaction between student and institution.'*
>
> Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998:316)

[11] The article does not report what where the primary factors cited by mature students.

5 What is known about the mature student HE experience?

This is the kind of position adopted in this current SWAP research. Ozga & Sukhnandan's (1998) UK research was a postal questionnaire and qualitative interviews conducted across three HEIs (a campus, a civic and a post-92 university) and it compared the responses of early leavers with responses collected from similar students who remained in HE.

Mature students who had left were found to differ in significant ways from their younger peers; they were found to have been better prepared for university and to have been more focussed on their studies. They were also found to have been more compatible with their institutions compared to the younger students who had left. Ozga & Sukhnandan, L(1998) thus found that mature and young students did not leave for the same reasons.

> *'Mature students did not leave because they could not cope with the demands of their courses, but because other responsibilities became paramount.'*
>
> Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998:327)

Whilst not including any mature students in their research, the work of Christie et al (2004) is included here for important reasons. Their retention study compared the HE experiences among students who had withdrawn early from their HE courses and those who were continuing into their 3rd and 4th years. Using two different kinds of Scottish university as cases, they drew on samples of students residing in advantaged areas as well as those residing in disadvantaged areas, to try to capture the complexity of the circumstances that lead to early withdrawal. It is this kind of analytical depth that makes their research insightful and which this research aims to replicate (albeit with a much smaller sample).

Rather than finding significant differences between the groups of early leavers and continuing students, Christie et al (2004) found common factors appeared in may interviews: poor choice (either of subject and/or of institution), limited social support networks and a lack of fit between the student and the institution. They also found that withdrawal was not usually attributable to a single over-riding factor. Rather they found that withdrawal was often the result of a series of interconnected factors (respondents cited on average 2.9 reasons for leaving) and that often there was a series of disruptive events in their lives which eventually lead to withdrawal. Their research ends by suggesting that systematic longitudinal empirical investigation is urgently needed in the field of student retention and withdrawal and that sentiment is wholeheartedly endorsed here. But for now, this current piece of small scale in depth qualitative analysis is offered as another drop of insight into a thoroughly under-researched area.

5.2 Does gender make a difference?

There is a body of work (e.g. Tett 2000, Leathwood 2006) examining the mature student experience which reveals that female students are likely to be less secure in their academic abilities, to be the ones most likely to have caring responsibilities, and in many cases to face some disdain from members of their own family/community for having 'pretentious' aspirations or for being seen to be neglecting their familial roles. Consistently, these factors are seen to place additional strain on mature women students relative to their male peers.

5 What is known about the mature student HE experience?

Research with mature male students suggest that men do not enter HE with some of the feelings of risk which are seen as more prevalent among female mature students. For example, research by Tett (2000) and Winterton (2007) confirm that men see any previous educational (school) failure not as a result of their lack of ability. They tend to assert their confidence in their abilities, and suggest that they did not previously do well in education because they were bored and/or chose to mess around. The resentment faced by some women returners (see Tett 2000) is also not a feature of men's return to HE. Nonetheless, men are found to face problems within HE that is associated with their gender. Research (e.g. Brittan & Blaxter 1999, Marks 2003) shows how men risk (consciously or subconsciously) a loss of masculine social power as a result of becoming a student rather than conforming to the expected role of breadwinner or worker. However, Winterton (2007) found that where men had been unemployed prior to university, becoming a student (particularly where it was an ancient university) was in fact an empowering act compared to being unemployed. Marks (2000) makes the point that for many women the decision to re-enter education is less likely to involve giving up a full-time job and is more likely to fit in with their existing roles as carers and/or part-time employees whereas for men any decision to re-enter education may entails a more significant rupture with their previous familial and employment roles.

In terms of HE practices there are conflicting findings about gendered patterns among mature students. Findings suggest that female students are more likely to ask for help compared to male students because men don't want to be seen as weak. However, there is also evidence (e.g. Leathwood 2006) that mature students generally don't want to be seen as needy and so do not go for help until a problem is perceived to be big enough to warrant calling on the tutor's time. But men have also been found to be more likely to seek help because they rationalise their actions, in terms of logically taking necessary steps in order to solve a problem, or as consumers in terms of their entitlement to assistance because they are paying for a service (Winterton 2007).

Whilst research with mature students shows some feeling 'out of place' as a minority presence in their institutions, particularly amongst women (e.g. Bowl 2003), research by Thomas (1990) which compared the experiences of men and women, found that men were more likely to see their minority presence in the HE environment as worthy of particular interest, as something that gives them a special presence.

Finally, there is some contention that at the policy level, the concept of the lifelong learner which is presented as the ideal within HE is in fact a gendered model. Many researchers (e.g. Leathwood 2006) suggests that it emphasises detachment and independence and promotes an individualistic view of the world. The assertion is that such traits are more likely to be amenable to men than women and thus women are inherently at a disadvantage in a HE arena that is being modelled on the unacknowledged male ideal of an independent learner. Leathwood (2006) summarises the position quite succinctly,

> *'The continual valorisation of independence, and the associated denigration of dependence, reinforce and re-construct gendered constructions of learning, the learner and the educator. It is no surprise that many students remain reluctant to ask for help or to attend additional 'special' classes that signify lack or deficiency.'*
>
> Leathwood, 2006:630

6 Research methodology and data

This is a mixed methods study; it uses quantitative data to explore wider patterns of HE retention among four previous cohorts of former SWAP students. It then employs in-depth qualitative interviews to a sample of these students, selecting from those who have completed or are in the final stages of completing their intended university studies, and also from those who have left their intended courses in the 2nd or 3rd year. Student attrition is greatest in the first year, and a focus on those who left after that peak period may present more complex understandings of why those decisions were taken. Those who leave in the later stages of HE are a particularly difficult to reach population and their inclusion in this research (at the expense of those who left in 1st year) is thus justified.

Tracking former SWAP students through university has proven to be particularly problematic. Questionnaires to former SWAP students and to their stated institutions, with follow up phone calls to institutions to clarify what they were currently doing or what routes they had taken, has eventually led to progression information for 174 former SWAP students being obtained[12]. Table 9 below shows how early-leaving is distributed across the four SWAP cohorts and at which stage of the students' post-SWAP university trajectories.

Table 9 Tracking data by SWAP cohort, 2004/05 - 2007/08

SWAP cohort	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	Total
Did not start	6	19	35	1	61
Left 1st yr	11	25	31	12	79
Left 2nd yr	8	6	2		16
Left 3rd yr	3				3
Left 4th yr	1				1
Deferred	1				1
Exit for reason with exit qualification		4	4		8
Left	1	3	1		5
Total	31	57	73	13	174

Email addresses were held for 115 former SWAP students who were known to have left before completing their university courses and questionnaires were emailed to all of them in two sweeps (May 2009 and Jan 2010). The questionnaire asked about the reasons for leaving, the nature of that decision, the availability of assistance and the impact on future educational endeavours of their HE experience so far. It was semi-structured to allow some streamlining of data (making it easier to identify patterns across a larger number of responses) and also provided spaces for respondents to construct more personal answers in order to access deeper insights into the processes and consequences of leaving university early. The questionnaire also asked for permission to be contacted in future, with the intention to select some respondents for telephone interview for further understanding.

[12] Credit goes to the SWAP administrator Tracey Kerr for her sustained efforts in such tasks.

6 Research methodology and data

The response rate of the questionnaires was deeply disappointing (n=13), but not altogether unexpected given that some email addresses would have been offered to SWAP up to six years earlier, and also offered at the outset of their SWAP courses. One presumes many of their lives would have undergone significant changes over the intervening period, and so moving to new email addresses is a lamentable outcome for this research. Over a third of those emails sent with questionnaires were returned for invalid email addresses, and just 8 were returned. This stands as testament to the difficulty of undertaking a retrospective tracking exercise among adult learners. Despite agreeing to be tracked, it is doubtful that former SWAP students felt the need to keep the organisation informed of changes of details in the fullness of time.

The low response rate meant that a subsequent sampling strategy was not employed, and anyone who had agreed to be interviewed by telephone on their questionnaire was subsequently interviewed. Telephone interviews took place during three extended periods of time (June 2009, April 2010, July 2010). In addition to email addresses 73 telephone numbers were held for former SWAP students, and whilst it was the intention at the outset to try to minimise the use of this kind of direct approach, given the response from the email requests telephone enquiries were employed to a much greater extent. The sampling strategy was employed here, so that priority was given to those leaving after the first year, and efforts were made to make sure there was a representation of men. 'Cold calling' is not undertaken lightly, by those with a heightened sense of ethical responsibility towards research participants. It would have been so much better if more questionnaires were returned with permission to then be contacted by phone. However, this was not possible. In the circumstances, the fact that respondents had given permission to be tracked by SWAP and my own heightened ethical sensibilities as a researcher, contacting former SWAP students by phone was undertaken.

This turned out to be a very time-consuming enterprise with many repeat attempts, messages left on answerphones and calls to expired numbers. Calls began during office hours and eventually outside of these as few people were picking up their phones in normal working hours. Whilst it is right to assume that people may not have picked up their phones because they may have been at work, contacting by telephone at evenings and weekends still feels like an intrusion despite the fact that the former SWAP students had given permission to be contacted. A further factor in people not responding to initial telephone calls may relate to the use of mobile phones.

Calling mobile phones from my work/office phone would result in the number being specified as withheld or unidentified on the receiving mobile phone. I suspect some respondents may not have taken such calls because of this. Calling from a mobile did produce more results, and there were 2 responses to text messages that were left as a final resort. In total, numbers were called up to 5 times at various times of the day and week. If after this time there was no response, texts and voicemails were left for mobile numbers and voicemail messages where landlines had that facility. This resulted in 15 telephone interviews which followed a similar schedule to the email questionnaire for those who had left university (n = 10), but differed slightly for those who had completed or were in the final years of their degree programmes (n = 5). Most interviews were audio-recorded and most lasted between thirty and forty minutes, although two lasted almost an hour.

7 Research findings

This section is presented in two halves. The first half (7.1) attends to the findings from those former SWAP East students who left their course of HE study before their original completion date. It first examines tracking data to ascertain if there are any noteworthy trends from what has been collected so far (7.1.1) and then presents the qualitative interview findings from those non-continuation students who participated in interviews (7.1.2). These have been organised to reflect i. the reasons for withdrawal, ii. the nature of the decision, and iii. the consequence of the decision.

The second half (7.2) of this section presents findings from those former SWAP students who have completed or are in the final stages of completing their degrees are presented. These findings have been organised to reflect the personal factors (7.2.1) and the institutional factors (7.2.2) that impacted on their HE trajectories. As will be evident, the separation of these two domains is not unproblematic; they are often intricately entwined. Nonetheless, some separation is necessary as a means of organising the findings.

7.1 Former SWAP students who left HE early

7.1.1 Tracking data

Tracking data has been compiled from questionnaires posted to former students and their destination HEIs, with follow up phone calls to institutions over the course of the research[13]. It shows that women are over-represented among those former SWAP students who are known to have withdrawn from university courses, relative to their presence on SWAP courses. Since 2004 women consistently make up around 70% of the SWAP intake (SWAP 2008) but figures for this research show that women make up 75% of those known to have left HE before completion of their intended studies. *Does this mean that female SWAP students are more likely to withdraw than male SWAP students?* It is not possible to ascertain this on the evidence collected so far, unfortunately. The numbers on which this 'pattern' is based can not be seen as representative of the SWAP intakes over the years being researched here, and the fact that they cannot be systematically collated is to the detriment of really important insight. The apparent anomaly could simply reflect the fact that more women responded to the request for information, which is not inconceivable. Figure 7 below shows which subject areas those former SWAP students who are known have withdrawn were studying before they left. It shows greater numbers of withdrawals among Humanities & Social Science courses; 43% of all known withdrawals from these cohorts were studying in this field. The next highest rate of attrition occurs within the Nursing & Allied subjects; 27% of all known withdrawals occurred here. Education accounts for 13% of known withdrawals, with 'Other' subjects, Natural Science and Business making up the remainder.

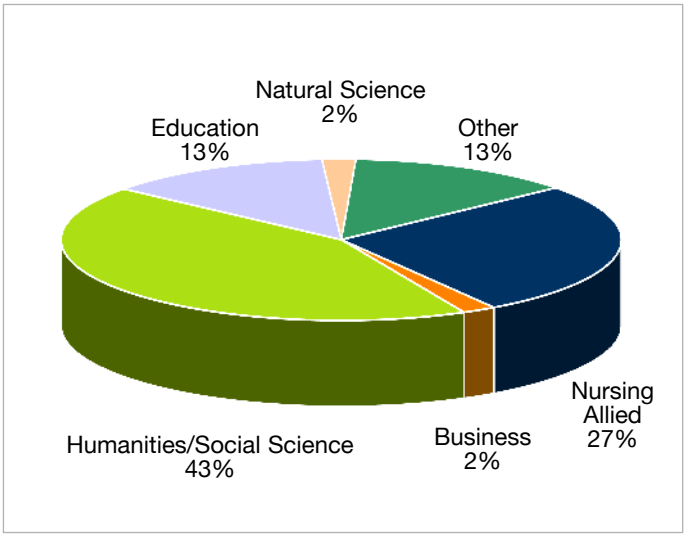
Whilst one must be cautious given the small numbers of known withdrawals in this study and the nature in which this information has been collected, it is worth highlighting how certain subjects are over or under-represented amongst those who leave early, compared to their presence as destinations for post-SWAP students. For example, 43% of SWAP students head for subjects within the Nursing/Allied field (SWAP 2008) whereas this research indicates that 27% of early leavers were studying such subjects. Conversely, the Humanities/Social Sciences are pursued by 37% of SWAP students (SWAP 2008), but data for this research indicate that 43% of known early leavers were studying in that arena. Thus the patterns of study among those known to have left university early do not correspond to patterns of subject study among former SWAP co-horts. It may be worth investigating in the future whether there really is a relatively higher attrition rate among

[13] All of this work was undertaken by the SWAP administrator Tracey Kerr and not by the author.

7 Research findings

Humanities/Social Sciences relative to the proportions of SWAP students who choose that area for their university studies, and also whether providers of Health and Allied subjects really are more successful at retaining mature SWAP students relative to any other subject group.

Figure 7 Known withdrawals by subject area, SWAP cohorts 2004/05. 2005/06, 2006/07



Tracking data also revealed a range of reasons why students left their university places early (although the majority of 'known withdrawals' were in fact for unknown reasons). The reasons cited are given below; ranging from the most frequently cited at the top to the least cited reasons at the bottom.

- Ill health
- Competing family commitments
- Financial reasons
- Asked to withdraw
- Had a baby
- Personal reasons
- Lack of support
- Not what was expected
- Didn't like university
- Didn't like the subject

Whilst some participants' questionnaires produced more than one reason for leaving, this was far from the multiple answers found in Christie et al's (2004) research. Most of the data above was gleaned from institutional responses which only documented a single reason (if any reason was documented at all). Future research ought to access multiple reasons for leaving in more sophisticated ways to try to draw out connections between various disruptive aspects of students' university experiences. It may also be worth noting that no-one stated that the course was too difficult as a reason for their non-continuation. This may reflect what Osborne et al (2004) suggest is students' reluctance to admit such failings and instead highlight other factors that influenced their withdrawal. Yet it may be that students genuinely did not leave because of academic obstacles.

It may be heartening to see that not liking their university or their subject, or not having their expectations met are low on the list of cited reasons, which may suggest that SWAP may have been good at guiding students into appropriate ways[14]. Indeed finances, ill health and the balancing of study/family commitments as the most cited reasons for leaving may have, at least *prima face*, little to connect to inadequacies in SWAP provision. Nonetheless, that is only *prima face* evidence and thus needs further interrogation. For example, to what extent is ill health about mental well-being and to what extent in these and other circumstances could SWAP have played an even greater preparatory role?

[14] See SWAP (2008) for research that looked more explicitly at how useful SWAP provision had been for progression to HE.

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7.1.2 Interview findings

Interviews with early leavers probed i. the reasons for withdrawal, ii. the nature of the decision to leave, and also asked participants to reflect on iii. the consequences of their decision to leave. The following section presents the findings in that order.

i. The reasons for withdrawal

The reasons for withdrawal were occasionally one dimensional, but more often there were combinations of factors which over time compounded existing situations. This section has separated factors into those that may be primarily located in the respondents' personal domain and those factors which may be seen primarily as residing within the institutional domain. As might be expected, the issues that impact on mature student withdrawal do not reside quite so clearly in one domain or the other; matters tend to span both areas particularly as issues progress. Nonetheless, for organisational reasons the factors in mature student withdrawal have been separated. Matters within the personal domain have been categorised as:

- unexpected events,
- financial pressures,
- levels of interest,
- levels of integration,
- levels of stress.

In terms of institutional processes, the following kinds of issues emerged as important:

- a lack of understanding,
- inflexible support mechanisms,
- placement,
- difficult course arrangements.

The personal domain

- **Unexpected events** In some cases the decision to leave university was based purely on unexpected events in respondents' personal lives (family relocation, illness) where the dedication to the family simply over-rode any contemplation of the possibilities of trying to rework the family/work/study relationship. One respondent told of an unavoidable decision to leave her course because her family had to relocate elsewhere in the UK for her husband's employment. She finished her year and left with an exit qualification and had nothing but praise for her university. Staff had suggested continuing or transferring to another institution at her new location but the participant rejected this possibility given the implications of moving their children and getting them settled in their new environment. Another female respondent also spoke about the impossibility of continuing, which was connected to a quite dramatic health issue within a close family member. In both of these cases there is little the institutions could have done to prevent either exit.

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'I am first and foremost a mother. [My son] needed me.'

In two interviews formerly stable relationships had been lost during the course of study which had both practical and emotional implications for the students. One might suggest that the emotional impact of collapsing relationships can impact just as much on younger students as it may on mature students. Perhaps, although in each case spoken of in this research, both relationships were long term commitments. What is clear is that the additional dynamic faced by mature students in this study because of the unexpected absence of the other person created severe disruptions in their capacities to balance their university and familial commitments. For both participants that lost partner had been central to the way they had organised their familial commitments in order to study. Without them they faced very challenging circumstances in which to continue.

'Its so difficult fitting it all in, and you've got no support. He used to be able to pick her up from school sometimes, fill in when I wasn't there. But you're just juggling constantly and you can't …I can't do it all … You've just got no-one to help you.'

'So now my Dad had this job and he couldn't [look after them] any more. I don't blame him. He should work, but I had relied on him so much.'

- **Financial pressures** These appeared quite often among contributory factors to withdrawal. Two questionnaire responses gave only financial reasons for leaving. One simply said 'Cash. Simple as that' whilst another male student wrote more expansively about his family's financial troubles. He complained that his family had been unable to obtain certain welfare benefits whilst he was a student and was annoyed to discover that had he separated from his wife she would then have been entitled to the benefit in question. It seems he needed to be absent, rather than present and wageless in order for his family to obtain some financial assistance. Another male respondent told of the impossibility of his partner being able to maintain the family on her income alone, and of how they knew he would need to financially contribute during his studies. For the first year he was able to provide sufficient financial contribution by working at weekends and during the holidays, but he told how the working practices of placements (which were a significant element of his course) meant it became increasingly difficult to combine all of his commitments; employment, placement, study and family.

There was however an example of a former student who did not experience financial concerns during her time at university. She told how all her childcare costs had been met with a grant from a benevolent fund, and was grateful that this was at least one aspect of her life that was unproblematic. The student was appreciative of SWAP staff who, before she started university, had informed her of all of the kinds of grants that were available and helped her to make applications. Her story is a useful reminder that not all students are uniformly disadvantaged; they experience different combinations of pressure.

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- **Levels of interest** One respondent attributed her reason for leaving to herself alone; she had simply lost all interest in the course she was on and there was nothing the university staff could have done to rekindle it. During the interview this former student told how she had enrolled on a particular Access to Nursing course with the intention of specialising in one particular area. But post-access she had to progress to a different nursing specialism in university because the one she originally enrolled for had since been withdrawn. However, whilst the student generously located the reason for her subsequent withdrawal as her own lack of interest, the fact that this occurred because she was enrolled on an alternative course which was unsuited to her interests means the issue should be regarded as an institutional rather than personal issue. It is presented in this section of the report because the student believed it to be a personal problem.

- **Levels of integration** There was a general sense that mature students and younger students didn't mix; respondents would sometimes refer to young students as silly or stupid, or comment on their levels of commitment etc, but no-one offered it as a strong factor in why they left. Nonetheless, lack of integration was a feature in some interviews and in some cases this was related to familial commitments.

> *'The majority on my course were 17 or18, so - very, kind of different. And I had a child so I couldn't socialise in the same way. Even you know, meeting up for a coffee is quite difficult when you've got a child'.*
>
> *'I had no involvement with extra-curricular activities. I only just had time to be a student!'*

Feelings of a lack of integration was an important factor cited in one questionnaire where a respondent wrote of 'cliques on the course' and of feeling they were 'looked down on' by other students.

During one interview levels of integration was positively noted although this was with respect to feeling a valued part of the classroom by the tutors rather than the degree of integration with the rest of the student body. This student relayed how she felt her presence validated by tutors welcoming her opinions to the class. She spoke

> *'Well, I have had lots of experience and I know [the tutors] have their views and mine might be different but no, I think they handled it well. I mean, I was older than some of them.'*

- **Levels of stress** There is one respondent who was more expansive about the increasing levels of stress he was experiencing as his course progressed and also about how that stress impacted on himself and his family. He relayed the way in which the stresses caused by trying to negotiate a placement with non-family friendly hours, as well as trying to maintain the academic standards he needed to at university, as well as trying to take an equal role in the care of his family (his wife was a professional who also had a demanding job and unconventional hours of work) eventually became too much for him. He left into his third year. He spoke of the moment of realisation;

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'the stress it was, unbelievable …. And there I was on a course where I am supposed to be help families resolve their issues and promote family well-being. And I was coming home from uni and shouting at my kids and taking things out on everybody. What a hypocrite.'

A female student also spoke of the way in which stress levels became unmanageable over the course of her studies and ultimately ill health from stress was cited as the main reason she left her course in 2nd year. She explained,

'Being a full-time mum with three kids and doing the course too …I had practical support at home, but , emotionally it was hard. I was doing this and I still felt responsible for everything at home.'

Institutional processes

- **Lack of understanding** There were a number of aspects of this in the interviews, but at the heart lay a conviction that tutors and/or institutions were not fully cognisant of the particularities of mature students. For some respondents being treated no differently to the rest of the young student body made them feel like they were being treated like children whilst others highlighted how a 'one size fits all' approach to impacted negatively in their capacities to continue their studies.

In terms of sensing they were being treated like children some interviewees relayed a very clear sense of how they believed some university tutors and some placement staff were condescending to them. The quotes below relate to staff in those arenas, respectively.

'We were treated like children … like we could not be trusted to do anything for ourselves. We were on a professional course! Since I've been on [a new applied programme] and I can see just how bad that was.'

'I think it's because I look really young for my age as well but, you'd have thought she was talking to some silly schoolgirl. I mean, my God I've got kids! And I tried to just ignore it but, I shouldn't be spoken to like that.'

In the first instance the former student spoke of being frustrated that there was no recognition of varying degrees of independence or motivation by many staff at the university she attended. This denigration and lack of recognition, combined with her growing dissatisfaction at a supposedly professional course that she saw as disorganised and thus as unprofessional eventually led to her withdrawal.

In terms of being treated like a traditional student, a few respondents were critical of the assumption that mature students had the same kinds of resources as their younger peers. The examples below relate to having equivalent stocks of both time and knowledge. In the first example a student who was struggling to catch up with a failed assessment told of the assumptions that in the near future she could find additional time in her already busy life to undertake the re-assessment essay. She complained,

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'But it's the culture you see. They expect that you all have 10 hours per day just to study. Not with a young child you don't!'

And a student who left during his second year noted how long it took him to realise the wider politics of writing 'acceptable' essays which he suggests younger students already knew when they entered university. He noted,

'You've got the younger students and they're sort of still on this treadmill, from school, they know how to do it, [how to] listen to the lectures, write notes, produce an essay. They know to put their tutors' knowledge into their essays but I did not know that. I went at it a completely different way.'

There were a number of occasions where respondents spoke about not receiving the kind of help they were wanting and of their sense that the kind of help that was offered simply illustrated that tutors did not truly appreciate the kind of stresses they were under. After the dissolution of her marriage and the practical and emotional turmoil of trying to navigate her way through the remainder of the year, one former student went to see two tutors to ask for some time to allow her to re-configure her arrangements. The former student spoke of needing some 'breathing space' rather than a formal arrangement. As she shows below, the formal arrangement simply added to her existing stress levels rather than helping to alleviate it.

'[The tutors] were quite firm. I was offered extensions on the essays. But that wasn't enough. I tried to explain and they said I should just hand them in, fail and then I could re-submit later. But that means I would have been handing in work that was rubbish. I don't want to hand in something rubbish. But with extensions, well, that's now double the workload isn't it, so the pressure just escalates.'

Two respondents told how they felt there was inadequate recognition of the severity of their situation as they drew ever closer to withdrawing from their studies. Both talk about consulting with university staff about the ways they were feeling.

'I had mentioned it to some of my tutors. But I don't think they really realised just how bad it was getting. It was sort of 'come on, hang in there, you've almost made it'

'I told my tutor but he was very … he told me to try to get through it. I can see why. The university needs [the placement organisation]. If they complain, the placement organisation may just pull out, and then what will happen? So he was stuck as much as I was , really.'

'I went to see my tutor. I really wasn't happy on the course. The placement was horrific. He didn't really take me seriously. He jus sort of said, 'oh its OK everyone get depressed at the end of their second year' You'll feel better in third year.'

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Both students left early into their third years.

- **Inflexible support arrangements** Whilst some students told of receiving help with an emerging issue from staff within their universities, in some cases this was seen as inadequate. Some former students spoke of domestic interruptions (illness among family members, husband losing job) where, because of their nature, they felt a move to part-time study would enable them to continue. This did happen in one case (although the student left a year into the part-time course). In another case the student was told that he could not study his current course part time but could transfer to a similar course at the same institution which would operate for part-time students. However, as the part-time course would not lead to the professional certification that his current course led to, for him the part-time route was not therefore really comparable. Eventually this student left his full time (certificated) course.

A partial but ultimately unsatisfactory response was also articulated by another former SWAP student, who spoke of culminating events in her life which she felt she could manage with the support of counselling. She had found counselling useful in the past. In a wider context of expressing gratitude at the amount of help that was on offer at her institution, the fact that the counselling was limited to a six week course impacted on her ability to cope in the longer term. She says,

> *'I was offered counselling and it did help. But they can't offer it long term and they even said that that is what I needed. To get that I would either need to pay for private provision, or I would have to go to my GP. I have had bad experiences with that in the past. So, it just stopped…and my mental health began to suffer. I was really unwell … I needed help to deal with all the stress.'*

In another case the respondent also relayed a sense that the institutional response to her difficulties was inadequate.

> *'And now [with him gone] I had no childcare. I don't think they really understood what it was that I wanted. A few extra days [to hand in] would have helped. I just needed some space. More time … to organise things.'*

In one interview a former student told of an insurmountable obstacle to her university continuation that she still feels completely indefensible. She told how the diagnosis of additional support needs that she brought with her from her pre-entry college to university was not recognised by the new institution. After having to pay a fee to be re-tested, and the new test not confirming her original diagnosis, the student received none of the additional help she was expecting on her course. She told of failing most of her submissions as her first year progressed and of her struggles to have her learning difficulties recognised. Staff from her FE institution also intervened but ultimately their actions came to nothing. She withdrew from the course and told how her self-esteem had been severely dented. During the interview it was clearly articulated that this former student felt she was dealt with shamefully by the university; that her integrity was questioned and she felt she was being perceived as a liar. She also relays,

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'They said that perhaps their university had higher expectations than others and that I may have been better applying somewhere else. Effectively, they were telling me I was stupid.'

- **Placement** There was some entrenched dissatisfaction with certain placement practices among some respondents. Two students spoke of inhospitable shift patterns and rotas which made fulfilling their placement and looking after their families incredibly difficult. One placement experience in particular seemed heavily implicated in pushing a promising third year student into leaving.

'They had me coming in at weekends and I even worked nights. I am not supposed to work nights, but basically they used me as cover. I should not have been doing that on placement. It's in the regulations. But what can you do? I couldn't say 'no', could I? I needed to pass my placement.'

Later he recalled,

'I was supposed to have time to study and write up my notes as well as times for a break. I got nothing. We were too busy to sit down, so I started falling behind in my university work.'

Another similarly dissatisfied respondent who spoke of having to work 12 hour shifts whilst she had a young child, also spoke of hostility towards students within the placement organisation. Whilst a particular member of the placement organisation was singled out as providing a very challenging environment in which to learn her professional practice, the former student spoke of a de-motivating culture more widely, where students in this arena were generally poorly received by their placement organisation.

'They could be really horrible, the midwives especially. And some of the others were really cliquey.'

'I actually feel I was bullied into staying on my placement. Things were really wrong and I was being used as an additional member of staff. But my placement tutor was just trying to get me to take it, not rock the boat.'

Another aspect of dissatisfaction with placement was an incompatibility between the practice of the university and the practice of the placement environment where students gain their professional practice. Three respondents highlighted how knowledge from one area was sometimes problematic in the other.

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'The [placement] staff don't realise that laws have changed, that some of the things they do, really can't be done now. But you can't say anything. And it's widespread. Other people from my course saw the same kind of thing on their placements too.'

'I think if you spoke up they saw you as challenging them. But, sometimes their knowledge was old. They'd learnt it a long time ago. We'd learnt different things at uni and we should have been able to talk about it. But no, I think we were a real inconvenience to them.'

Another former student also spoke about another aspect of the university/placement disjuncture, which led to her sense that the university course was not an adequate preparation for a career in teaching. For example,

'… it was, so, theoretical, academic not professional. When I went to placement I had no idea how to even do the lesson plans. They should have taught me how to do that. It was expected. Not professional.'

- **Difficult course arrangements** Issues around staggered timetabling were raised in a number of interviews. For those with family commitments, with limited time and/or financial resources, having lectures dispersed across a whole week leaving many gaps in the course of a day presented problems.

'I had to come in from Fife just for a one hour lecture. All that time and money for one hour. They should try to keep all the lectures into a few days, not spread them across the week.'

Two participants complained that many forms of publicly available childcare would not care for children for a few hours, but for whole or half days that had to be paid for. The costs and mechanics of travel and childcare proved to be stressful for attendance for a single lesson in the day, although no-one talked of missing lessons because of this. However the costs and practical stresses of such institutional arrangements were among the factors cited as contributing to student withdrawal.

ii. The nature of the decision

It is clear from both questionnaire and interview data that students had been struggling on with their courses for a long time before eventually deciding to leave. In many cases difficulties had been accumulating over time and at the point at which help was sought from the institution, the situation was pretty desperate. Most had discussed it with other family members (spouse/partner), friends on the course and for a few, tutors at university. What emerges is that tutors were often the last port of call.

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'I had got to the stage where I was ready to walk away. Something had to give; either my course or my marriage. I could have just left them both … My wife supported my decision fully. If I didn't leave the course, then I think she probably would have left me.'

'By the time I went to see the tutor the decision was made. To be fair, there was nothing they could have said that would have helped me to stay.'

Some respondents did not know that they had a tutor or equivalent person who they could go to for pastoral care. In one case, this was the process of leaving,

'I didn't know there was anyone I could go to. I just stopped going and after a while, I called them to let them know I had left.'

In many cases respondents described scenarios where the help offered by tutors/institutions was in their opinion, inadequate. Two instances relate to different institutions but the responses of the tutors when the students confided in them that they wanted to leave, were strikingly similar. In each instance the tutors accepted the decision and instructed the student to submit confirmation in writing.

'I mean I don't know what I expected. I'm not saying I wanted her to beg me to stay or anything. But, it was 'well OK you've made up your mind. Here's what you do next.'

'She just said, ' yes I think it's for the best. I think you have been falling more and more behind'. And that was that.'

It is important to remember that there were examples of good practice also, of students talking to their personal tutors and of these staff members being as accommodating as they possibly could be, in the respondents' opinion. An example of extremely good practice emerged in one interview with a female student who found out she was pregnant just a few months into her first year of a social work degree. She spoke of her guilt at taking up a place that could have gone to someone else and there is a sense that she expected the staff to be somewhat less than happy about it also. In her words,

'I just felt guilty. After I'd got a place on that course. And I hadn't been there very long. But they couldn't have been more helpful. The course convenor sat me in her office and spent ages telling me what options I had and let me know that they would do to support me if I continued. I was given some time off to think about what I wanted to do. In the end I decided I would complete the year. They rearranged some of the trips I was supposed to do because I was quite sick at the beginning. They said they would reserve a place for me for up to two years if I needed it. They were very very accommodating.'

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However, such instances were mostly in response to an episodic crisis - the discovery of being pregnant, of having to move house, of leaving for reasons of a sudden family crisis etc. The narratives which make up most of this section tell more of a story of problems accumulating, and of recourse to tutors happening towards the latter stages of that process. There are fewer instances of talks with tutors leading to what the respondents saw as satisfactory outcomes. It may be that the process of accumulating problems acts to mask the extent of what the issue has become; incremental changes are less noticeable than a sudden emergency. Perhaps this is indicative of the fact that participants are telling me these narratives since they have left and so it is only the events that have become important post-hoc that are being recounted. The minor details have been lost, perhaps. Nonetheless, two students commented that they would have liked more experienced students to talk to when they began encountering their difficulties. This was because of their sense of the formality of approaching tutors, and in one case, sympathy with tutors who seemed very pressed for time. One explained that such a resource would be useful,

> *' … you know, when it's not bad enough to find your tutor, but you wouldn't mind a bit of informal advice. To know that other people had gone through this. What they had done.'*

iii. The consequences of the decision

None of the interviewees subsequently regretted their decision to leave university early. This may reflect the fact that for many, their familial and personal well-being was suffering as they struggled to stay on their course. As the accounts above have illustrated, they spoke of low self-esteem in many ways;

- Of not being able to handle the emotional pressure or their diverse workloads
- Of guilt for the impact of their studies on their families
- Of being made to feel like a cheat and liar regarding their previously identified additional support need
- Of being treated like an unruly or incompetent child on their placement
- Of being treated like an inconvenience in their universities

A few respondents specifically mentioned their self-esteem or confidence having returned at this point in their lives and others had also reflected on how they simply could not have carried on in the circumstances they were in at that time. What is noteworthy is that everyone interviewed stated their intention to return to education at some point. Two respondents had already done so at the time of interview. This includes one former student who was critical of the teacher training course that she withdrew from at the start of the second year. At interview she was in the 2nd year of a different professional degree programme, and that more recent HE experience had provided a means of comparison and had reinforced her belief that the organisation and ethos of her former institution was as poor as she believed it to be at the time of leaving. However she also reflects,

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'I am older now. I have a family. I know that teaching just wasn't for me. I love doing social policy. This is my ideal profession.'

The above quote is useful in reminding policy makers at all levels that sometimes it should be recognised that leaving university early might be the right thing to do. It should not be wholeheartedly construed as a negative event, or a wasteful or wasted opportunity. The sentiment appeared elsewhere in the interviews. The respondent who left a nursing course because the route she wanted had been withdrawn, subsequently found work within the original sector she desired. She believes the access course and the time she had spent at university on the other nursing route before she withdrew, was what enabled her to secure the work she wanted. She now feels a degree would not have been appropriate, because she has witnessed the type of role she would have had, and says she prefers the one she currently has. The social worker who left when he realised the impact his stress was having on his family since found a job within the field, using the contacts he had made during his university placements, and the exit qualification he left with in his third year. He too relays a similar story of present success and contentment founded on the education he had undertaken to that point.

7.2 Former SWAP students who completed or remained in HE

It is important to also see the HE experiences of former SWAP students who are close to, or who have succeeded in, completing their university degrees. It is important in its own right, understanding the forces that helped and hindered them along those journeys will help to improve provision for future cohorts. It is also important to enhancing an understanding of the nature of non-progression; are the difficulties encountered by those who chose to leave their university studies unique to those that left, or do other students encounter similar issues? If so, how have they managed to negotiate them? Of the participants who responded (3 questionnaires, 5 telephone interviews) no-one relayed an unproblematic progression through their higher education. In common with the students who left early, those who were completing/completed also relayed a diverse range of incidents and factors that impacted on their progression through university. In common with the organisation of the findings from the students who left early, this section will also demarcate events into those attributable primarily to personal factors and those that are mainly attributable to institutional factors. There are two aspects of institutional factors that emerged as important in the interviews, i. support mechanisms and, ii. lack of fit. It is worth re-iterating that all these demarcations are merely a way of organising the presentation of findings. In many cases the demarcation is blurred as personal and institutional demands and responses impacted on one another.

7.2.1 Personal factors

Completing/completed students also talked of their struggles to negotiate the demands of familial responsibilities and quite a few recognised their good fortune in having a close family support network which proved invaluable for their continuation.

'Oh they've been wonderful. My husband and my parents. You see, I should have gone to university after school, but I didn't, so they are just so thankful that I went back … My husband has a degree - in a different subject [to mine], but he was my proof reader. And my Mum is a university lecturer so if I wanted, I could always bounce ideas off her.'

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'I wouldn't have been able to do this without my parents.'

The kinds of support referred to were more likely to be practical rather than the academic support in the first example, and parental provision of (one presumes free) but certainly regular childcare was a factor in these students' narratives. One female student told how her husband used to take his holidays from work to look after their children when she had particularly important deadlines to meet. But out-with these particularly demanding times, they had devised a family routine that enabled her to maintain her university studies.

> *I used to have [the children] during the week and most weekends he would have them and I would spend that time in the university library. We really haven't spent that much time together as a family.'*

Another female student who is close to completing a medical degree relayed her belief that she would not have been able to cope with what she described as 'an extremely full on course' without the constant presence of both parents to provide childcare during her studies. She also spoke of a sense of guilt in that still, her studies infringed on the time she spend with her children.

> *'Even with the help that my parents provided during the days, you feel guilty sometimes at putting them to bed a bit earlier because 'mummy's got to study.'*

Another female student felt lucky that she had not experienced childcare problems on her course. Primarily this was because she could afford to pay for the provision she required. Nonetheless, she went on to tell how in her 3rd year of study she had actually changed the school her child was attending in order to make it possible for her to take up placement.

> *'I was really lucky. I had made a few contacts through my placements so when a place came up [at this school], I was able to take it. And my daughter really liked it there too. So , yes, I was really lucky. It worked out really well.'*

Whilst the above narratives illustrate arrangements being put in place (and seemingly maintained) during their studies, there were also examples amongst participants of unplanned familial crises which almost derailed their studies. Two students told of episodes of parental illness (which in one case led sadly to parental bereavement). One male student spoke about his mother's unexpected hospitalisation, made more stressful because his mother was the primary carer for his father. He suddenly had to cope with travelling to and from hospital for one parent, tending to his other parent at their home, and maintaining his own home and university studies. Eventually he moved in with his parents, which brought some financial respite as he was struggling with this aspect of student experience for some time during their recuperation. He relayed how close he came to relinquishing his university studies,

> *'I don't mind telling you, at one point I really could have walked away. But then I thought no. I knew I would come back if I did. Not at my age. I decided to stick with it.'*

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Having a degree of financial security was mentioned by respondents who were in cohabiting relationships, for example,

> *'I'd worked for years so we had savings. My husband has a good job and we have a small mortgage so, financially, it wasn't a worry.*

> *'At my age, there's no mortgage to pay. My wife has her own income, so with the student loan, we could manage.'*

Some recognised how lucky they were not to be undertaking their studies with the financial risks that they saw among others. Others talked of adapting their lifestyle according to their income. Most respondents had taken out student loans. No-one spoke of having paid employment as they neared completion (although two respondents had worked at the outset of their degrees). Whist there was no mention among those who left early of contemplation or applications for 'crisis loans' this was a feature among those who stayed. Two students had (successfully) applied for such assistance. However that is not to say that seeking financial help was undertaken readily. One student who obtained a crisis loan stated that it had taken him almost a year to eventually apply for it. Another had taken one in year 2 and although he felt he again needed financial assistance in his 3rd year, he did not apply because,

> *'it feels like it's charity'*

One student had spoken of her determination not to take paid employment during her studies, deciding that her time had to be spent studying if she was to complete her demanding professional course. Another student had decided on another kind of abstinence in order to complete their course. Asked about her domestic situation she replied,

> *'It would have been impossible to be in a relationship whilst I was studying. There is simply no time.'*

From three students who participated in this research then, there was a strong sense that completion required no additional activities other than studying and family. One reflected on other mature students she had known at the outset,

> *'Some people make the mistake, they see the timetable and they think,' well I can still work' … especially single mums, they're like 'Oh, that's OK. I could do 2 days [paid] work.' You can't do this and do a job too.'*

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7.2.2 Institutional factors

i. Support mechanisms

There were examples where respondents praised the way in which staff had responded to some problems they had encountered during their studies. The man who almost left during a sustained period of stress when he was looking after his parents praised his tutors for their actions. He had mentioned to individual tutors his suddenly changed domestic circumstances as soon as it became apparent it would impact on his capacities to study and to contribute as actively in classes as he had done previously. He spoke of being an active contributor in class discussions and mentioned how his tutors managed to 'take him out of the loop' in class discussions, not asking for his opinions directly, taking pressure off him to contribute formally in presentations and informally in class discussions. He believes this was done sensitively.

A female student who had to look after her ill father told how she was offered a number of different options with respect to an impending placement which she needed to take as part of her course. The placement could have been deferred either until later in the year or, if this was more appropriate, until the following year. The fact that deferment until later in the year meant the placement would take place prior to end of year exams, meant that she decided to defer for a whole year.

> *'I couldn't have that. Not so close to the exams. I can do without the pressure.'*

Pressure of exams, particularly when students were already coping with additional pressure from sudden domestic crises had an even greater impact on the subsequent course of action for the male student who told of moving in with his parents as they recovered from illness. Despite the (informal) adjustments cited above that his tutors had instigated for him, he nonetheless failed some units for that semester. He had the option of re-sitting exams to pass those units and progress to a joint honours course, or else accepting the fails and progressing to a single honours course instead. He 'chose' to progress to the single honours. He explained,

> *'I had always intended to take the joint honours - I love both subjects. But, no, I was in no state to take exams. I don't like them anyway so …a single subject is still OK, but I would have preferred the joint honours. '*

Generally speaking many students spoke of positive relationships with their teaching staff, with two suggesting that they are more appreciative of their presence and are willing to offer more support. One student who took a year out of their degree told how one member of staff (who was not her guidance or support tutor) had kept in touch over the course of the year. She was very grateful for this level of involvement which was seen to be out-with that person's responsibilities. However, there was one dissenting voice among the respondents.

> *'In uni, all the people bugged me. Well, not the kids... but the tutors. Well, I've got a chip on my shoulder anyway. I had a bad education when I was young. But there should be passion. But lots of tutors, it was clear that they were doing it for the money, they were not passionate about it, you know.'*

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Learning support staff came in for particular praise, and this example illustrates the ways in which institutional practices and the personal interrelate. One man who was diagnosed late in his course with particular additional support needs, told how he had been struggling throughout his course to be recognised as a student that did indeed need additional support. Having twice been tested for dyslexia (at college and also at university) and found on both occasions not to have the condition, the respondent told how his frustration built up during his first two years until he forcefully demanded that he was tested again. He had discovered that the person who had conducted his university test was a trainee and demanded a new test conducted by someone with more experience. This was granted, with the understanding he paid the fee if the test proved negative. He explained,

> *'I've always had problems with writing. Years ago I went to see a doctor because I wanted to know what's wrong with me. I am not stupid ... I always knew there was something wrong with me...When I went to see my learning tutor I was at my wits end. Honestly. I was ready to become violent. I just wanted to know what's wrong with me.'*

The new test identified that he did indeed have a learning problem (dsygraphia) and from that point on the respondent told of the university's efforts to assist him, with computer packages and help from learning support staff. It must have taken an astonishing level of commitment for this student to progress so far in his degree with this disorder undiagnosed. During his interview he relayed how long it took him to complete his university work and relayed the number of strategies he had devised in order to do so.

> *'It used to take me days, literally days to write a few paragraphs. But that's how I spent my time. It just took me so much longer to produce the same as everyone else. But I am a very determined person, when I put my mind to it.'*

This former student also made an insightful comment about the aspect of the learning support he received that mattered most to him. When his needs were eventually diagnosed he was already into his third year and had been devising ways of studying despite his impairment.

> *'by the time I was given help, the technology, well it would have taken me so long to learn how to use it, that I probably would have finished by then. But the learning support staff, they really tried to help. But, actually, what was the best thing about it was that they cared.'*

The element of determination in the face of adversity in this participant's story was reflected elsewhere. Other students spoke of testing times and in three cases their commitment to their studies was made explicit. For example,

> *'I had waited for this for a long time. If it hadn't been something I was really really determined to finish, I would have given up lots of times.'*

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However, one student also commented on what she thought was evidence of a lack of commitment to the university trajectory among some of the people who had progressed to university from their SWAP access course.

> *'I think, in some cases, people were, kind of led, well encouraged, but well, I'm not sure they were that committed. I was the only one who went on visits to other universities. They just chose one and some [of them] didn't even bother to go on a visit to that one. What does that say about them? I'm not blaming them. I just think, perhaps they should have been space for them to stop and really think if that was really what they wanted to do. Well, that's my opinion.*

ii. Lack of fit

Other elements evidenced in the stories of those who did not progress and those who did or were near completion relates to a sense of disjuncture between the university environment and the outside world, and/or between the university and themselves. Regarding a sense of disjuncture with the outside world; just as non-continuing students had spoken about incompatibilities between the kinds of knowledge at university and that on their placement, so one person here spoke of a similar kind of tension. In this instance it was not about a disjuncture between the realm of work and university, but between university and 'the real world'.

> *'The course was way too academic. The tutors would talk and like, not realise that we didn't speak like that. Now I'm in the real world I can see that even more. Its like a division between geeks on the one hand and Joe Bloggs. And I slipped into that kind of language too. I suppose I had become institutionalised.'*

This was an isolated voice regarding this kind of disjuncture, but there were more voices who spoke about not feeling they, as mature students, were truly part of the institutional or social fabric of the university. This could be felt in quite subtle ways, but mostly it related to the visibility of mature students as a legitimate part of the student body. For example, some students spoke about the colonisation of associational aspects of university life by younger students, although there was no suggestion that this was deliberately intended. Rather it was relayed that there was little serious contemplation about this aspect of university life for mature students. Thus,

> *'There is definitely ageism in universities. Just look at BUSA. Most things are aimed at those under 30.'*
>
> *'The mature students have started hanging out at the [coffee shop] on campus. You're not going to go to the [student] union are you? It's for the youngsters.'*

Even having a mature students association was seen as an inadequate resource for mature student needs, as it was experienced in some universities. One respondent,

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who had for a time been involved in the voluntary running of a mature student association was adamant that such an important provision should be regarded as a society. For him, the centrality of its role in providing some forms of recognition and support for mature students means it should be regarded as an 'association', an organisation that is funded and supported by the university. No-one else spoke of being systematically involved in these kinds of societies where they existed although there was some awareness that there had been occasional activities. One former student thought their institution had instigated a families day, although knew no more than that. Another knew that their institution had an elected mature student representative, and whilst there had been someone in post the previous year, currently there was no-one. For her, the problem was that,

> *'It's voluntary, and it is just a representative, not a society.'*

One university ran a six week programme of events for mature students. One participant started to attend but found it to be formal.

> *'It was more like a weekly lecture. There was a lot of drop out over the weeks.*

A telling incident of mature student invisibility was recounted by one respondent. He remembered a particular time when various campaigning events were taking place at public areas on campus in order to elect student representatives to the student union. He noted how none of the candidates or campaigners ever approached him. Yet he thought that his casual dress and rucksack would mean he could be identified as a student rather than being mistaken for a member of faculty. This incident sticks in his memory as indicative of the legitimacy of his presence on campus, although he also reasons that younger students may have mistaken him for a post-graduate student.

Yet there were also other views regarding mature student integration. One respondent suggested that part of the problem was that mature students themselves were often not taking steps to mix with the younger students. She told of mature students' tendency to only select seminar groups that contained a contingent of other mature students. She told of her own decision not to follow this pattern. Another respondent suggested integration might be subject specific rather than age related. He was on an IT course and reflecting on the degree of socialisation amongst his peers, suggested that

> *'IT people are not known as the most sociable! Your stereotypical geeks.' [said amiably]*

A female respondent had completed a course with very few mature students in the department. However, her sense of isolation was relayed primarily because she had taken a year out to have a baby, and had come back to complete her final year amongst people she barely knew, and all of her previous co-hort had since completed and thus left.

8 Discussion and concluding remarks

It is evident from the research that decisions to leave university before completing the intended course of study are not taken lightly and the former SWAP students in this research have documented their complex struggles to overcome the demands of university study and other aspects of their lives. The struggles are documented in the lives of those who left early and also among those who have completed or are near completion. Thus there is no clear demarcation in the university experiences of mature students between those that left and those that remained; both groups talk of facing challenging circumstances at some points in their university careers. Whilst it may be productive to look for any aspects of the university experience that may be 'unique' to one or other group, any findings in this respect are likely to be a reflection of the small sample upon which this research is built. Rather, more insight is to be gained from looking at the commonalities between completed, continuing and withdrawn former SWAP students to try to untangle how similar problems became insurmountable for some students whilst negotiable to others.

The only 'uniqueness' found among those students who did not continue was that some of them chose to prioritise another aspect of their life over their university undertaking - familial relocation or medical attention - and such students had no intention of trying to continue. But these were relatively rare cases, and the more dominant pattern was of decisions to leave being made reluctantly in the face of accumulating problems. What many accounts in this research have shown is a picture of circularity; personal crises were not felt to have been effectively responded to by the institution and in the other direction inappropriate institutional processes were seen to have then created personal crises. However, it is worth pausing to remember that the accounts relayed here present just one side of the story. For example, when former students talk of being 'treated like children', we have no way of knowing whether staff were being inadvertently condescending, or whether such students needed greater levels of instruction than they themselves realised. Similarly, we do not know whether the remedial actions the students wanted from their institutions in times of need were appropriate. We do not even know whether the primary issue to be resolved was the one relayed by the students here; staff may have perceived the problems differently. Therefore making assertions about the inflexibility or inefficacy of university processes may be unfair in some cases.

Nonetheless, there are indeed commonalities among the former students who have taken part in this research, and aspects of their narratives provide powerful insight into the more challenging aspects of their HE experience that must be heard. The next section (8.1) will discuss the influence of these factors among those who continued and those who did not, in order to contemplate their significance for retention.

Specific areas to emerge include:

i. negotiating personal/institutional demands,

ii. negotiating resources: time, money, determination,

iii. institutional integration,

iv. gender.

Finally (8.2) the benefits of adopting a different kind of perspective for researching retention will draw the discussion to a close.

8 Discussion and concluding remarks

8.1 The factors influencing retention

As will be evident from the presentation of findings, there is no sense in which some factors were unique to those students who left their university studies early. Many students experienced episodes and processes which were in tension with how they negotiated their commitments to and outwith their studies. The following discussion will try to tease out the significance of key factors for mature student progression.

i. Negotiating personal/institutional demands

Tensions between these two spheres were evident in many narratives. The dissolution of key relationships was more significant among those who left, sacrifice emerged as a feature stated among those who continued and intrusion was managed more or less successfully among continuing and non-continuing students.

- **The dissolution of important intimate relationships** This emerged as a very significant factor in withdrawal. The loss of the practical support provided by that relationship (such as help with childcare etc) as well as the emotional effects of losing a close partner were seen not to have been fully acknowledged by tutors and staff at the HEIs. Amongst those who completed or are near to doing so, there is no example of a key source of support being lost or withdrawn during their studies. Indeed, what is more evident in the accounts of those who remained on course was a recognition of how lucky they were to have had sustained essential support from their immediate and extended family whilst undertaking their studies. For those with dependent children, parents and partners who took over childcare arrangements so that students could spend more time on their studies appear more strongly among the narratives of those who completed. That does not mean that such arrangements were entirely satisfactory.

- **Sacrifice** Family time and intimate relationships were recognised as being a necessary sacrifice for those determined to complete; whether that was putting the children to bed early in order to study, forgoing the possibility of romantic relationships or of spending less time together as a family in order to study. These examples illustrate that those who completed also faced dilemmas along the way. But why should sacrifice emerge more strongly in the narratives of those who continued? Surely the HE journeys of those who left also involved them sacrificing family time (etc.) along the way? It could be that those who continued had more of an opportunity to let something go - family time, romantic commitments, the need for paid employment - than those who did not continue. There was much less of a sense of the strong support networks within the narratives of those who left compared to those who continued and there was a greater sense that they were struggling with more multiple demands; for example, they were students as well as supporting their children and partners, often with contingent support networks and in the face of financial pressures also. Few of the continuing students seemed to have such multiply complex and sustained pressures and most had some kind of alleviation of at least one of the key areas of concern (i.e. they were financially stable, or they had secure childcare, or they did not have responsibility for dependents). To suggest this is not to diminish the struggles faced by those students who did continue or complete, but even from such a small sample in this research, there is a suggestion that those who leave are probably those who are most multiply disadvantaged amongst the mature student population.

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- **Intrusion** Familial commitments unexpectedly intruding into university time was a common feature among those who left and also those who remained, and institutional responses to this were significant in facilitating continued HE journeys. Amongst those who left there was a sense that staff did not fully comprehend the implications of their domestic commitments for their immediate academic situation. There was also a sense that the formal solutions offered may have contributed to pressure rather than alleviated it. Amongst those who continued or completed there were examples of more informal ways in which university staff helped them to remain on course; by informally releasing them from the pressure to contribute to class activities, or by informally keeping in touch during a student's year out. However, it is important to note that even amongst those students who continued, formal responses to difficult times were not 100% satisfactory - sacrificing a joint honours degree or deferring for a year to avoid additional exam pressures - show how even apparently 'successful' HE journeys are not inherently positive.

ii. Negotiating resources

Issues with continuing to study with limited financial resources, and/or with competing demands on study time were common among many in this research. Talk of determination (which may be regarded as a resource) only appeared in the narratives of students who continued.

- **Money** The need to provide financially for their families whilst studying was evident among some who left, but was not a feature of the narratives of those who remained. It is surprising to note that no-one who completed or is continuing their course spoke of paid employment at the latter end of their studies. Some spoke of paid employment in the first two years, which was given up in light of competing family and university demands into the 3rd year. It is suggested that this may be unrepresentative of the wider SWAP cohort (see SWAP 2008) and may reflect the limited numbers within the sample for this research. It is certainly something which warrants further investigation in future research. Nonetheless, that is not to say that those who completed or continued did not also face financial pressures. Two continuing students told of having to take crisis loans and at times of extreme hardship. No-one spoke of taking crisis loans among those who did not continue, although this may simply reflect the possibility that they were more determined to relay other aspects of their experience. It should not be forgotten that one student who did not continue spoke of her relative lack of financial concerns. So again this highlights the complex differences between students who may or may not continue. Nonetheless, and despite the small sample here, stronger support networks, financial stability in some cases and lack of dependents were more evident features among those completing/completed students.

- **Time** University time intruding into the domestic domain was also a common occurrence in the narratives of both early leavers and those who remained. This was particularly the case on courses where placement was a requirement. In this regard there is a clear difference (but only across a limited sample) where incompatible placement demands contributed significantly to students' leaving their studies. Of the two completed students who had placements on their courses, both had resources (financial and familial) to be able to negotiate what may have otherwise been more substantial competing demands. One had full-time free care for her children and the other student had that and also the

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financial resources to pay for adequate after school provision. Amongst those who left, two spoke of the organisational stresses of university placements (such as non-standard working patterns) which impacted on childcare and also took away the employment schedule of one student whose household could not be maintained without his financial contribution.

- **Determination** This specifically seemed to emerge as an additional resource in the university stories of those who continued. Why was it so explicit there but not in the narratives of those who left? The stories of those who left certainly showed high levels of determination although the participants themselves did not verbalise it. This probably reflects the fact that the completed/completing students were reflecting on what made their journeys successful rather than suggesting that continuing students needed additional reserves of determination in order to complete their studies. However, suggestions about a lack of determination or commitment among some former SWAP students is an important finding, albeit something that is the opinion of just one former student. This participant's belief that some former SWAP students were too easily led onto courses and had made too little investment in those decisions is duly noted. Whilst no such evidence emerged from this research it should be recognised that no 1st year leavers are included here.

iii. Institutional integration

Lack of integration with the incumbent student population was also a source of dis-satisfaction among continuing and non-continuing respondents alike. It was perhaps slightly stronger in the narratives of those that continued/completed which may be understood in a number of ways. Because they had been in universities longer, the dynamics of segregation may have become ever more apparent. Also, the non-continuing students may have cited other aspects of their university experiences as having a more significant impact. Thus rather than being a major reason for university withdrawal, integration may play a smaller part in mature students' satisfaction with their journeys. Nonetheless, given that mature student non-continuation is generally a cumulative process, for those with greater amounts of familial and financial security, then lack of integration is unlikely to be the straw that breaks the camels back, whereas for those struggling to remain in university due to other factors, then it may indeed be so.

iv. Gender

This research shows both men and women struggling and succeeding in higher education and for reasons that are not clearly demarcated by their sex. However, given the size of the sample one would not really expect a gender pattern to be discernable. Nonetheless, how do the narratives here relate to other research about gendered participation in HE? Is there evidence that men are more likely to seek help due to a greater sense of entitlement? Both students who sought crisis loans are male, and of the two students with disputed support needs diagnoses, it is the male student who presented his actions as bordering on violent in order to be heard. However, the men who took crisis loans hardly did so with any sense of entitlement; both spoke of their avoidance of doing so. The research also showed men with very immediate commitments to parents and families, and women who told of sacrificing family time in order to study. Thus there is contradictory evidence of the ways in which gender might impact on mature students' journeys through university.

8 Discussion and concluding remarks

It would be more helpful to look at wider support networks rather than gender per se. These support networks may have a gendered dimension to them, but that can only be suggestive at this stage. Women in this research talk of the financial resources of their husbands as relieving some of the pressures that others faced in university. But there are examples in here of women being more likely to pick up the care deficit in their families - in terms of them taking primary responsibility for their children (where they are in two parent arrangements) whilst they study and also in terms of them looking after their husband (where he works full time). This suggests that the women's studies in such situations are not seen as a full time commitment. There is no glimpse of male students in similar relationships with their employed wives in this study and research with mature male students (Winterton 2007) indicates that men are more likely to reproduce 'traditional' working practices when they return to HE. It would be good to be able to compare such arrangements, and again this warrants other research.

The research included a male student who became the primary carer for his aging parents and this also could suggest there are aspects of gender and the capacities for HE to be further explored. In this very small sample we have seen here two men who do not conform to the male breadwinner ideal which research suggests (e.g. McGivney 2004, Marks 2000) is a barrier to male HE participation. Given that earlier SWAP research (2008) found a greater number of men claiming to have responsibilities for dependent older adults rather than women, and that in this very small sample one such man appeared, this is another tantalising glimpse into the possible gendered dimensions of mature student experience that further research may elaborate on.

8.2 Conclusion: Adopting a different perspective

Ultimately, this research shows the impossibility of many mature students maintaining a clear boundary between university studies and family commitments, and so future research on retention and non-continuation needs to encompass both domains. That which focuses on institutional mechanisms only will gain a partial sense of the HE experiences of mature students. To understand and possibly improve the retention of mature students HE institutions and policy makers need insight into the realm of the personal, that which lies beyond the campus, which this research shows as central to a better understanding of mature student progression. The research validates the position adopted by seminal research on retention (e.g. Christie et al (2004), Ozga & Sukhnandan (1998)) that retention must be understood as a process of interactions between universities, their representatives and individual students. It is unhelpful to think about what mature students may lack when they enter HE and what steps universities must take to provide them with the required resources or skills. Rather, as this research has shown, mature students negotiate their ways through HEIs in the context of demanding personal circumstances within and outside of those institutions. Looking at the experiences of those who continued and those who did not has also proven insightful, showing how mature students draw on differential resources and also meet differential kinds of obstacles that are not clearly demarcated according to progression/non-progression trajectories (c.f. Christie et al 2004). This complexity needs to be captured and qualitative studies are best placed to do this.

8 Discussion and concluding remarks

This research has also sought to highlight a different perspective in terms of how to understand non-continuation. Following other research (see RANLHE 2009) narratives here have shown that non-continuation should not be regarded as inherently negative It is important to highlight that even amongst those who did not continue in their intended studies, there was an explicit appreciation of the higher education they had experienced. Even in those cases where students suffered emotional trauma as a direct consequence of their university endeavour, they have not been put off the idea of returning to education in the future. The research has shown that many students loved their subjects and where this was leading to a professional career path, this has subsequently been pursued without acquiring the degree. In some cases, the exit qualification proved invaluable. This is a positive finding (in a sense) that even an educational pathway which was not pursued to completion seems to have produced positive outcomes for many of those in this research; respondents spoke of the friendships, skills, knowledge and increases in confidence that have attended their university engagement. It is encouraging that most stated their intention to return to education in the future.

9 Recommendations

In most research, the job of constructing future recommendations is left to the researcher. However as part of the interviews, participants reflected on what institutions and policy-makers could do to prevent future early leavers on such courses. As a researcher, I have had to add little to these reflections, and I believe the recommendations for what needs to happen in the future are given added authenticity because they come from those who have experienced the difficulties of progressing through universities as mature students.

- The need for clarification of roles, particularly among support staff and those on placement is a strong finding in this research. Students need to know who to go to when things go wrong. In some cases, they need to know that there are people to go to when things start to concern them. Even in examples where there were clear lines of responsibility these were seen to have been compromised by the need for good relations between the university and the placement organisation. The ways in which placements add to the blurring of responsibilities towards mature students found here mirrors earlier work (SWAP 2008) where other students recalled similar tensions on placement. This needs investigating as a matter of urgency.

- The provision of mentors, peer mentors or some kind of intermediate level of informal assistance was mentioned as a useful way in which early problems may be resolved. Given the way in which small problems tend to spiral into more significant problems if left unattended, then investment here should reap future benefits. The need for this kind of provision was also highlighted implicitly in all those accounts where struggling students did not seek help (for whatever reason) from university staff.

- The extension of counselling services also emerged as a possible mechanism for further support. It was good to see students making use of existing provision, but given the levels and diverse roots of anxiety that was present in many respondents interviews, and the fact that only one respondent appears to have used this kind of provision, institutions should examine what kind of counselling or similar support services are made available. It is evident from this research that having someone to talk to, perhaps more informally, perhaps outside of academic relationships, at certain times of the academic year and/or in places outside of the academy may be a useful preventative step. It may be useful to think of ways in which pastoral care may be embedded in the usual academic processes (e.g. in tutorial/seminars where mature students are more active in reflecting on their experiences), so that students' concerns can arise more organically as they continue in their studies.

9 Recommendations

- Just as counselling or support should be repositioned to make them more user-friendly for mature students, crisis loans also need re-thinking. There is evidence in this research that crisis loans may be needed sooner and more frequently by those with responsibilities for others. There is evidence that they were avoided, or reluctantly taken only at a point of deeper crisis. It may be significant that it is the people who remain or completed who spoke of taking crisis loans. It is not suggested that crisis loans enabled them to remain whereas others left partly because they did not draw on these facilities. The observation merely strengthens the case, if it is needed, for further work to be conducted to understand the dynamics of retention and attrition.

- Flexibility is also a theme that respondents have called for. Whilst there were instances of provision being made in the event of crises/disruptions in the lives of mature students, it is suggested that the provision is based on a model of the independent (i.e. younger) learner, and that the knock-on effects of disruption for mature students (such as the length of time required to catch up in light of existing familial commitments) should be more fully recognised. It is suggested that this particular issue warrants further research. The threat of exams at times of crisis or immediately thereafter have led two students down paths that they would otherwise not have chosen (a single rather than joint honours programme, re-sitting a year) and inadequate/inflexible institutional responses to personal crises were significant in the non-continuation of some respondents in this research. The point about institutional responses to personal crises illustrates how universities operate with an implicit model of the independent learner which certainly excludes the experiences of women (see Leathwood 2006) but also mature students generally.

- There is also a suggestion that pre-entry provision should be reflected upon to ensure that students are not being unduly persuaded to embark on trajectories they are not fully committed to. It is easy to see how Access course students may get caught up in the processes of applying to universities from within the context of their supported access environment. Given that earlier research (SWAP 2008) revealed a degree of dissonance between SWAP students' expectations of university and what they then encountered, perhaps a degree of introspection and one may argue 'realism[15]' should be introduced into later SWAP provision to try to make sure that students are indeed making more fully informed HE choices.

- Instances of a perceived incompatibility between academia and the real world have evidently caused distress among respondents here. This may relate to how the rules and expectations of academia are more likely to be implicit as opposed to explicitly communicated, and this is seen to disadvantage mature students who are less likely to have familial histories of Higher Education. Where courses involve placements for professional practice, the nature of the differences between the academic and the professional arena should be made more explicit. It may be that on investigating such matters institutions may find a wider gap has developed between the two domains than should be necessary. However, where legitimate differences exist, and they do, communicating these to students may help to minimise the extent of disillusionment that is evident in this research when students perceive an incompatibility between academic and professional forms of knowledge.

[15] In terms of what the actual experience of university may be like; which includes (from SWAP 2008) different kinds of assessment, levels of autonomy and self-directed learning, the differing expectations of lecturers etc.

9 Recommendations

- The case for a mature students' society has been made by a number of participants in this research. The lack of this facility has both practical and psychological consequences for mature students. Practically, it is felt that they lack a sustained system of representation and support and psychologically speaking, a mature students' society may add to their sense of being a legitimate and valued part of the HE constituency. Thus a mature students' society may take on a co-ordinating role of the mentoring system previously suggested. It needs to be cognisant of the way in which those with familial commitments may be able to use and contribute to the organisation. The key emphasis from this research is that these societies (or a dispersed national society) should not be voluntary organisations; they should be institutionally recognised, supported and consulted on issues to do with mature students' experience. Perhaps, given the need for tracking of mature students and the inadequate systems highlighted earlier, this kind of association could also be research active.

The final comment is made entirely from the researchers vantage and relates to the practicalities of tracking mature and particularly former SWAP students through their university trajectories. Given the importance of retention, it seems essential that national level processes are put in place which make it easier to identify patterns of participation and non-continuation among mature students (as well as other important constituencies of students). The present system of different identification numbers between the SQA, UCAS and individual HEIs makes the systematic tracking of students through their educational careers impossible. There needs to be some form of continuity in this recording process so that different data sets are able to speak to each other and a longitudinal pattern of student participation can be constructed. Ultimately one might hope for a unified national identification system but it may be possible to work within the variety of established systems to provide a workable solution.

However, a more personal/intimate system of tracking would also be useful; regular contact with mature students at various points during their studies would enable a more complex picture of mature student progression through HE to develop, as well as presenting the opportunity to 'flag up' any emerging concerns that students are experiencing. As this research shows, students who leave their studies before completion rarely do so spontaneously. There is generally a cumulative build up of factors and qualitative tracking would be able to throw light on such processes. Yet currently there is a lack of in-depth qualitative research on the issue of mature student non-continuation. Whilst it is possible to develop useful and ultimately generalisable research insight through the accumulation of many, smaller pieces of qualitative research (as has been demonstrated in the field of access studies) a more substantial investment in a programme of longitudinal research would be invaluable here, which could track the HE journeys of various constituencies of 'non-traditional' students. Qualitative understandings are needed to contextualise the statistical patterns of progression and retention and to orientate policy makers in this arena.

Ultimately, this small scale study has shown the complexity of HE participation that is not evident in the quantitative data and in light of such revelations, it seems appropriate to reiterate the sentiment that, given the competing demands that mature students negotiate at various stages through their university trajectories, a continuation rate of 86% perhaps ought to be regarded as something quite remarkable.

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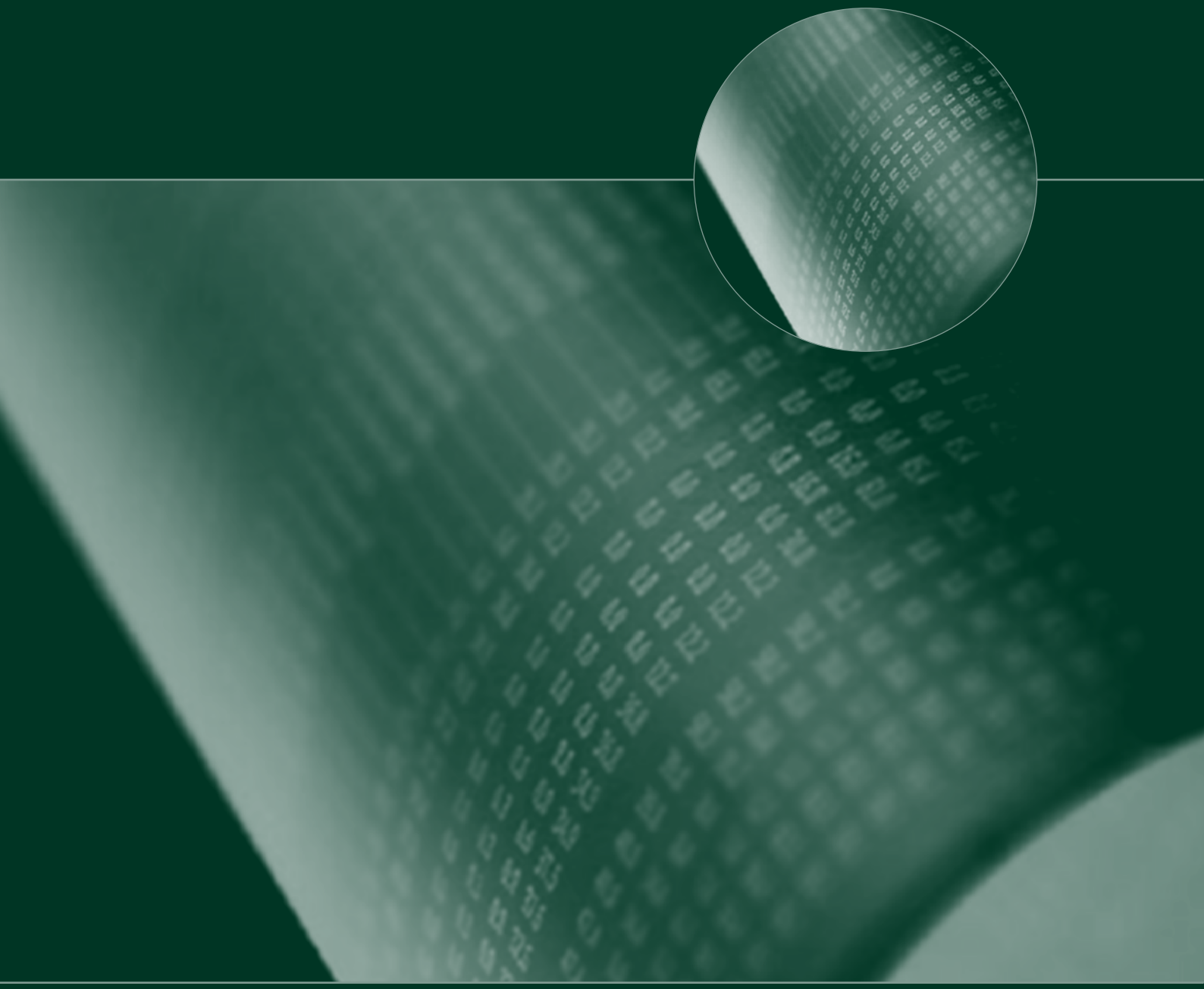

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