Abstract

Widening participation and lifelong learning have emerged as areas of keen debate in Higher Education. The rapid expansion of international students in UK HEIs has led universities across the UK to turn their attention towards ensuring that students have the necessary foundations to succeed in their educational endeavours. However, quite often students with multiple characteristics ('intersectionality') are marginalised. An example of such a group is mature international students, who may be overlooked and under-supported. Current literature indicates that both mature and international students do not fit in the traditional university culture with additional family, work, and financial pressures, often leading them to be further removed from the university community, resulting in a weaker sense of belonging. Whilst student belonging has become the focus of research in HEIs, limited research exists into the work being done to support the belonging of mature international students. Drawing upon primary and secondary data from across 44 UK HEIs, this study highlights the support offered to mature international students and gaps in support provision, highlighted by researchers and practitioners. Our results show that whilst a wide range of support exists to foster the belonging of mature or international students, this is largely aimed at one group rather than mature international students as a whole. The study highlights the importance of moving away from a deficit model and ensuring that HEIs focus on facilitating cultural inclusivity.

Keywords: belonging; mature students; international students; provision; widening participation

Introduction

Following the global COVID-19 pandemic, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and policy makers in the UK have shifted their focus and attention from investigating and addressing loneliness in students to exploring their sense of belonging and connectedness particularly for those identified in the widening participation strategy(HEPI, 2022).. This group, which includes mature and international students, is at a greater risk of developing feelings of isolation and exclusion and are known to struggle to integrate into the traditional university culture (Kahu, 2014). Challenges faced by mature students in relation to their identity at university and the need for international students to reconcile their cultural identity with the new university culture have been highlighted in several studies (see TASO, 2021; Swain, 2022). Within academia, the ideal, engaged student is seen to be someone who participates in the social and extra-curricular opportunities that university offers (Gregerson & Neilsen, 2023). For students who fall within these marginalised student groups (mature and international), the transition to university can be an emotionally challenging journey (Hamshire et al., 2015). However, it is difficult to make generalisations given that there is very limited research that examines the unique experiences of mature international students within HEIs in the UK. Research on the experiences of mature international students is necessary with the proportion of first-year non-UK student enrolments increasing in the age groups 25-29, and 30 years and above in 2021/22 (HESA, 2023). In 2020/2021, 95,000 mature (25 years or over) international students entered UK's Higher Education with 84% of these pursuing postgraduate studies (HESA, 2023).

Fostering a sense of belonging can be a crucial step in supporting students, particularly mature international students, transition or return to Higher Education (Meehan & Howells, 2019). Both academic and professional service teams are responsible for supporting students' connectedness to the university and addressing the challenges they face during their transition to academia. A recent report by WONKHE (2022) underscores the importance of inclusion and integration in building student belonging, and identifies connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy as the fundamental pillars for fostering belonging and inclusion. The report emphasises the crucial role peer networks play in building students' sense of belonging and connectedness with their institution and academic community. Moreover, the report highlights that the most impactful way universities can support a student's sense of belonging is by enabling and empowering them to be a part of the decision-making process.

The excessive reliance of HEIs on the deficit model is a hindrance to exploring the mechanism of social and psychological support for mature/international students. The deficit model in Higher Education refers to an approach that focuses on the perceived deficiencies or deficits of individuals or groups, often attributing their challenges or lack of success to personal shortcomings rather than considering systemic or contextual factors (Smit, 2012; Tewell, 2020). Universities must move away from a focus on the deficit model in order to support feelings of belonging in mature international students. This can be done by shifting the focus of support towards cultural inclusivity and aid students in forming communities (Leask & Carroll, 2011). HEIs need to consider the specific experiences of mature international students and provide tailored support to enhance their experience at university and foster a sense of belonging (Huang & Turner, 2018).

Building upon this premise of exploring systemic and contextual limitations to the success of marginalised students, this paper aims to explore the current provision in place at UK HEIs to support the belonging of mature international students who represent an intersectional sub-group often facing feelings of isolation and alienation. To evaluate the existing provisions and identify gaps, this study has adopted a qualitative research design. The initial stage involved the collection of secondary data from institution webpages to comprehend the current practices and initiatives fostering belonging among mature international students. Subsequently, an online qualitative survey was conducted with academics, researchers, practitioners and other key stakeholders, in the Student Engagement sector, to gain insights into their perceptions of current provisions and identify areas that require further attention. This research seeks to share best practices for supporting mature international students and recommend areas that warrant further attention within HEIs.

2. Existing literature

Students' sense of belonging has been conceptualised as perceived support, sense of connectedness and acceptance, mattering or feeling cared for, respected, valued, and important (Strayhorn, 2019). More recently, research has suggested that belonging in university students is encapsulated in connection, inclusion, support, and autonomy (see WONKHE, 2022). However, international and mature students may experience varying degrees of belonging due to their distinct demographic backgrounds. This section alludes to previous research which showcases the unique challenges faced by international and mature students in integrating into academic communities and developing a sense of belonging.

International students' sense of belonging

The student body within HEIs in the UK is becoming increasingly diverse; in the academic year 2021-2022 Higher Education Statistics Agency UK (2022) reported that at least 22% of the UK student population comprised international students. Given that international students make up such a significant portion of the student body in the UK, understanding their social-emotional wellbeing, including their sense of belonging and connectedness, is key to ensuring overall academic progress and wellbeing (Zhang et al., 2022).

Research shows that international students encounter a number of social, psychological and practical challenges when they begin their studies in the UK. These challenges include stress of adapting to a new environment, loneliness, language barriers, geographical distance from familial support systems, and cultural and social differences (Furnham, 2004; Pearce, 2015; Khojastehrad & Sattarova, 2015). The negative emotions experienced by international students (see Redfern, 2016), are linked to both social (e.g., difficulties in interacting with local and other overseas students) and academic factors (e.g., challenges in completing academic tasks). Research shows that many of the challenges home students face are compounded by cultural variance as an international student (Crabtree, 2023). For instance, international students are more likely than home students to doubt their academic abilities, strugglewith their academic assignments, lack enjoyment of their course/study programme, and experience social isolation, homesickness, and support

needs (Mullins et al. 1995). In addition, while foreign students are able to form friendships and academic networks within their cultural communities, many have difficulty bonding with domestic students. This can limit their access to support both inside and outside the university and diminish access to culturally specific knowledge, both of which have a detrimental impact on adjustment outcomes (Furnham, 2004; ;).

Studies suggest that connectedness and belonging are key components of psychological and emotional wellbeing of international students (e.g., Gu & Maley, 2008; Zhang et al., 2022). In order to tackle socio-emotional problems that international students face, universities need to focus on developing and establishing a sense of belonging, not necessarily by developing specific activities, but rather through providing a space for identity and community building (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).. Particularly, it is argued that first-year students who are supported feel personally validated, better able to cope with the university experience, and attain higher.(DeBerard et al., 2004;). Contrary to this, scholars argue that support is multi-dimensional, and more explanation is needed on what constitutes effective support for students (Green, 2019; Kahu & Nelson, 2018, Kahu & Picton, 2020). Nonetheless, it is thought that support consists of four main components including emotional, practical, informational, and social companionship, which is leisurely spending time with others (Ramsay et al., 2007). While universities are generally attuned to providing informational and practical support, there needs to be more work done for the provision of emotional and social support (i.e., developing feelings of connectedness and belonging) (Ramsay et al., 2007). Crabtree (2023) also highlights the need for HEIs staff to be trained in inter-cultural awarenessin order to understand some of the barriers to engagement and belonging.

Mature students' sense of belonging

An increasing number of university students in UK HEIs are now aged twenty-five years or over and are categorised as ‘mature’. There has been an increase of 21.9% in mature students in 2021/22 compared to 2019/20 (HESA,2023). Mature students are diverse with regard to their differing lifestyles, personal circumstances, age, motivations to study, and the positive externalities that they gain from their university experience (Waller, 2006). Mature students in the UK generally tend to study in newer institutions, formerly known as ‘post-92’ or former polytechnics, and some more specialised technical institutions (Swain & Hammond, 2011). This group of students has been identified as having lower course completion and higher attrition rates (Kahu et al., 2013). Mature students’ experiences in universities may be impacted by practical and emotional barriers, skills and learning styles, and social interaction. The higher turnover rates associated with this group may be explained by their other commitments, financial obligations, emotional concerns along with gender role expectations, particularly for females who must find the balance between their family or caregiving responsibilities and education (Christie et al., 2005; White, 2008). Equally, financial stress due to study costs and missed income while studying are highlighted as barriers for mature students((Shah and Cheng, 2019).

As such, there needs to be a better understanding of mature international students’ experiences and engagement at university (Kahu et al., 2013). Student engagement is multifaceted and a critical lens in examining student experiences as it leads to a broad variety of student outcomes (Trowler & Trowler, 2010). It has been shown that mature students' engagement levels are different from other groups of students

(Pearce, 2017). Research has identified that mature students are both satisfied and highly engaged in their studies (Krause et al., 2005). This stems from an intrinsic desire to learn and develop rather than seeking purely a means to an end (Pearce, 2017). Nonetheless, while mature students perform well at university, they also appear to have limited interaction with academics and other students, and feel excluded from the on-campus social life and atmosphere and informal social networks within (Kahu et al., 2013; Pearce, 2017). This results in a limited sense of belonging, limited participation, and information exchange which is often seen in informal networks (Christie et al., 2005).

Aside from the practical difficulties for mature students who enter university at a later stage in life, they also often fail to engage due to feelings of alienation, anxiety, and fear of failure stemming from negative perceptions of themselves as learners (Stone, 2008; Mallman & Lee, 2017; Pearce, 2017). Mature students may also feel isolated as university culture is traditionally ageist and not fit for satisfying the demands of their age group (; Kahu et al., 2013; Mallman & Lee, 2014; Simi & Matusitz., 2016). Furthermore, longer gapsin the educational environment may impact mature student's skill and knowledge levels compared to younger students, leading to lower confidence, achievent, perseverance and levels of engagement (Pearce, 2017).

. Research has highlighted the significant relationship between mature students' sense of belonging and their learning arguing that a combination of support in academic and social spheres is transformative and necessary (Christie et al., 2005; Stone, 2008). Wider scholarship (e.g., Hordósy & Clark, 2018; Hunter et al., 2010; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). emphasises that extra-curricular engagement and activity participation at university is essential for students to become fully integrated into the campus community, and it also improves tenacity.However, some of these activities may be less appealing for mature students to participate due to their conflicting demands (Crabtree, 2023).

It has been argued that universities need to work on introducing welcome and transition events that are inclusive and appropriate for different student demographics, such as mature students, in order to foster a sense of belonging (Erb & Drysdale, 2017)... As Han & Rideout (2022)mention, interest in the course content is one of the key motivations for study for mature students. As such, a student's sense of belonging and learning are interlinked and play a critical role in mature student performance and persistence in Higher Education (Erb & Drysdale, 2017). While this area of research merits further investigation, it seems prudent that universities understand further mature students' strengths and particular needs, while also providing more possibilities for them to create collaborative partnerships with other students of similar backgrounds (Kahu et al., 2013).

Mature international students' sense of belonging

Empirical studies focused on the intersection of experiences of mature international students in UK HEIs and the provision in place to support while studying are limited. However, the few studies that have been conducted on this student population shed light on the challenges faced by mature international students during their transition to a new country and the process of enculturation to new social norms (Davies & Dunk, 2015). Mature international students' transitions can be an emotional journey as they manage both academic and social transformation at a time of significant change

(Hamshire et al., 2015). To address these challenges and promote belonging among mature international students, HEIs need to consider a range of strategies and support mechanisms. This study aims to explore the current provisions and initiatives in place at UK HEIs to support the belonging of mature international students. By examining the existing practices and identifying potential gaps, the study seeks to provide insights for enhancing the support offered to this specific student population.

3. Methods

Study design and research questions

The study adopted a qualitative research design to explore existing university-based provisions for mature international students. The study aimed to map existing university-based support that assists mature international students in developing a sense of belonging. In addition, it aimed to identify gaps in the support provision based on the experiences of key stakeholders (including researchers and practitioners). The study utilised both primary and secondary data from across UK HEIs to answer the research questions as follows:

RQ1: What kind of support is detailed on institutional webpages to help mature international students build belonging?

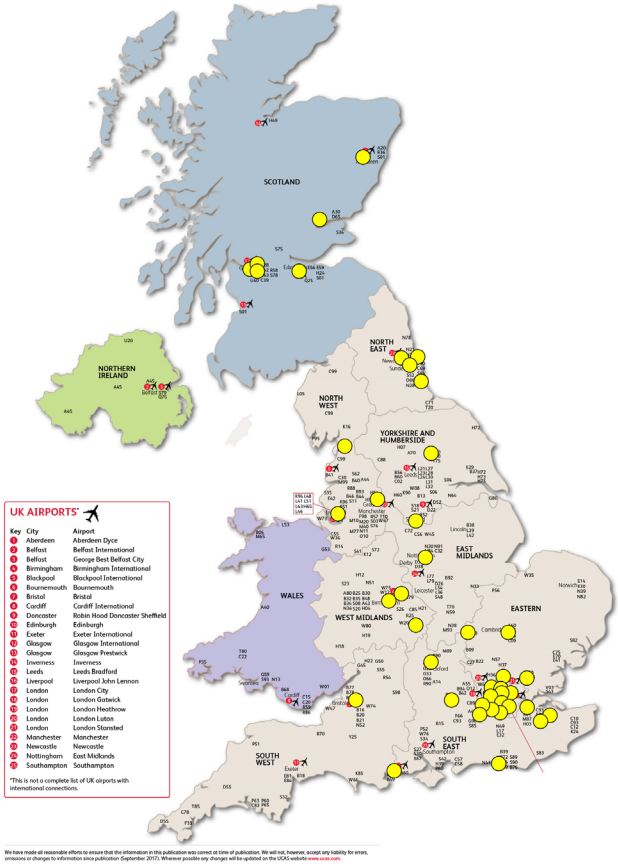
RQ2: What are practitioners and researchers' experiences and perceptions of the support provisions in place for mature international students?

Stage 1: Secondary Website Data

In order to effectively map existing support provisions for mature international students, the present study examined website content for 44 universities. The universities were divided into 4 regional areas: Scotland and North England, Midlands, Southwest England, Southeast England and London. Given that international students accounted for 22% of the total student population in the UK during the academic year 2020/21 (see HESA, 2023), the present study only included universities that had at least an average of 22% international students. This percentage of international students was selected to ensure consistency across the sample and ensure that the universities examined had an average or above average number of international students. For confidentiality and anonymity reasons, the names of the institutions have not been included, however the geographical distribution of the institutions can be seen in figure 1. These secondary sources were used to provide the wider context and to triangulate the findings arising from the survey targeting stakeholders' opinions as discussed below.

Figure 1

List of Universities included in stage 1



Stage 2: Survey Study

Sample: The sample of the second phase of the study comprised 42 participants. The participants worked at universities across the UK; these included universities in North England (8), Midlands (10), Southwest England (12), South East England and London(12). The participants worked across a range of academic and professional services roles and at different departments and faculties (see table 1 for details).

Table 1

An overview of participants roles and departmental affiliations

Department/Faculty/Services
Doctoral college
Learning and Teaching Services
Professional Service (e.g., career)
Academic departments and faculties (e.g., Business, Public Health)

Roles/Positions
Researchers
Lecturers
Professional Staff (e.g., developer, consultant)

Instrument: To answer the second research question of the study, an online survey was developed using Qualtrics. The survey explored the experiences of researchers and practitioners in UK HEIs. The survey consisted of demographic questions and seven questions that inquired about the participants' current involvement in Higher Education, perceptions of supporting mature international students, effective practices, potential challenges, and expectations to better support mature international students' sense of belonging.

Procedure and Analysis: Ethical approval was sought from the relevant institutional committee prior to commencing the study. During the first phase, researchers used the relevant university websites to extract information on current University provisions to support mature and international students from institutional 'Access and Participation Plans'..

The qualitative survey was sent out to all RAISE (Researching, Advancing & Inspiring Student Engagement https://www.raise-network.com/) network members via email and shared on LinkedIn for participants to engage. Written informed consent was sought from the participants who were given three weeks to complete the survey. One reminder/follow up email was sent out to the participants. Their qualitative responses were exported to an Excel sheet and analysed.

The data for this study was analysed using descriptive analysis and principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). Thematic analysis was selected as an appropriate method due to its flexibility and because it provides researchers with a robust and accessible method for data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). A descriptive version of thematic analysis was employed; this allowed researchers to categorise the rich descriptions into meaningful themes, while not attempting to develop theoretical explanations or interpretations. The analysis for both the secondary data and primary data comprised of six key stages: familiarisation of the data, coding the data into descriptive and analytical codes, generating themes by clustering the codes into meaningful patterns, reviewing these patterns to ensure relevance to the research questions, defining and naming the themes, and finally writing up the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022).

4. Results

In order to address the research questions of the study, the results were divided into two sections: mapping existing support provisions for mature international students and staff experiences of supporting mature international students.

Mapping existing support provisions for mature international students

The study mapped existing support for students using three key search terms 'international students', 'mature students', and 'belonging'. The website analysis indicated that while most universities offered some sort of support for mature students, international students, and students' sense of belonging, the least amount of the support was geared towards developing students' sense of belonging (see figure 3).

Looking at the percentage of support offered, table 2 indicates that at least 57% of mature students and 59% of international students were offered some sort of support through their universities. Contrastingly, offering support to build a sense of belonging was only observed in 36% of the universities in the sample.

Only two institutions were found to have specific provision for mature international students.

Table 2

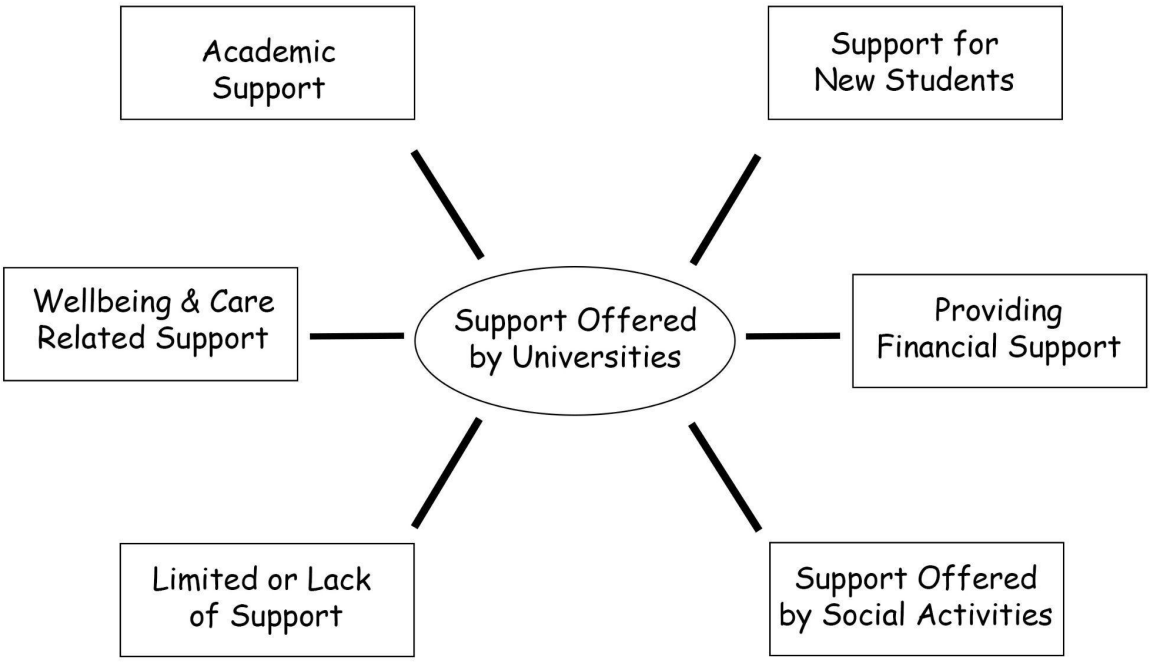
Support provisions for students (N = 42)

Support Offered	Mature Students (%)	International Students (%)	Students sense of belonging (%)
Some Support offered	57	59	36
No support offered	43	41	64

To further investigate the different types and levels of support available to mature international students, in particular regarding developing a sense of belonging, qualitative analysis was carried out. During the analysis six core themes were identified. These themes have been presented in figure 2 and discussed below:

Figure 2

Support offered to mature/international students



***Support for new students*:** The most common and prevalent type of support identified via the web analysis was the support universities offered to new students. Universities offer a wide array of informational support to incoming students which includes visa and immigration related information, accommodation support, information about life in the UK and mental wellbeing support. While such support is readily available on most university websites, it appears to be generic in nature and not geared towards providing specialised support for mature international students (or even just mature students). Moreover, while advice about life in the UK is provided it is mostly practical advicerelated to everyday activities (e.g. opening a bank account or obtaining accommodation) and does not directly advise students on how to socially assimilate within their "social" setting.

***Academic support*:** The universities included in the study appeared to provide a wide array of services aimed at supporting students with their transition into academia and with their academic goals. The analysis indicated that universities place strong emphasis on enhancing academic skills in students, increasing English language proficiency, and adapting to the UK educational system. This theme points towards the strong focus UK universities have on preparing students academically. While no dedicated support appeared to be available for mature international students, a number of universities did mention exploring alternative modes of delivery and adapting existing teaching practices to allow mature students to thrive academically.

Providing financial support: Another area where student advice seemed to be available across a higher number of universities was in the form of financial support. This included monetary advice, grants and scholarships. The analysis showed that while some universities offer dedicated student finance support for mature students and

international students, the actual financial support for students that identify as mature international students is limited and is not sufficient for their specific needs.

***Wellbeing and care related support*:** All universities in the study offered wellbeing and care support for international and mature students. This support ranges from pastoral,, psychological care to physical wellbeing. Universities across the UK run a number of programmes that require students to engage in group activities (e.g., Friday Yoga, BeActive classes, postgraduate coffee and cake) or seek individualised support (counselling drop-in session). However, it is important to acknowledge that there is little public information on the uptake of such support in mature international students, making it difficult to judge how effective it is.

Support offered via social activities: Most non-academic support offered by universities to mature international students is often delegated to the Students' Union. Students' Unions for the relevant universities appeared to offer socialisation opportunities and spaces for students to engage with each other and network in an effort to adjust to their university life. However, while Students' Unions do provide mature international students with a space to socialise and engage with their interests, the activities and events may not be scheduled to cater to the varying needs of mature international students (e.g., there may be conflicts with parenting/carer responsibilities).

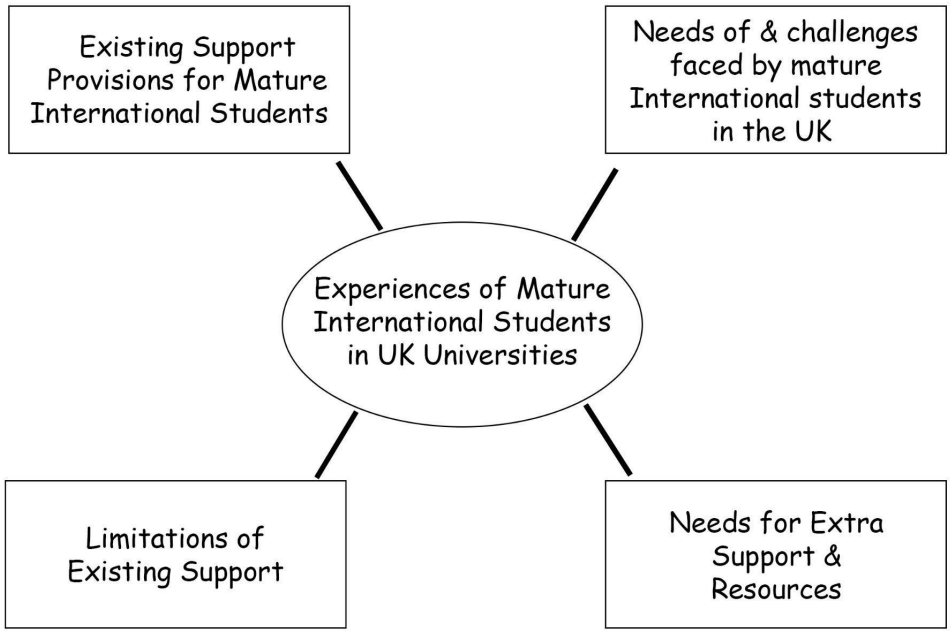
***Limited or Lack of Support*:** The final theme for the data discusses the lack of specified provision for mature students (including mature international students). While universities do attempt to provide academic and practical support for mature and international students, there is limited support that addresses the challenges mature international students have reported facing. In particular, the website analysis revealed that apart from twoUK institutions, universities did not specifically outline support for mature international students, rather support offered for international students and in some cases mature students.

Staff experiences of supporting mature international students

In order to develop a more in-depth understanding of the support offered to mature international students, a qualitative survey was conducted with 42 staff members working in various UK university roles and departments . The analysis of the data led to the generation of four main themes. These themes are highlighted in figure 3.

Figure 3

Staff experiences of supporting mature international students at UK HEIs



***Needs of and challenges faced by mature international students in the UK*:** The theme highlights the unique needs and challenges that mature international students present to Higher Education providers. Participants highlighted how mature students are unique in that they are more likely to have caring responsibilities and be the main financial support for their families. As one participant notes…

"*Students all have complex needs as individuals, but generally the older the person is, the more likely they will have caring responsibilities (in whatever form that may be), may be the main financial support and maybe the main responsibility for upholding or furthering their family's responsibilities"* (Doctoral College Representative, Midlands-based University).

Given this, mature students (including mature international students) may feel the need to prove themselves and be reluctant to seek help or support when needed. As one participant explains

"They [mature international students] feel they are old enough to know how to do everything, so they do not ask for help" (Director of Doctoral Research in Engineering, Midlands-based University).

Additionally, mature students quite often go through a phase of re-familiarisation with academic systems, standards, relationships, and expectations, alongside being tasked with having to learn and adopt new technologies and systems. For example, an academic in a London University suggests:

"Mature students probably need more IT and technology support"

Another Academic emphasises the challenges faced by mature international students working in unfamiliar settings, while restarting university after long periods of absence:

"Significant gaps between mature students' experiences with HE can mean they require additional support to refamiliarize with academic systems, standards, relationships and expectations. Often, they are also trepidatious about resuming studies and can feel uncomfortable about working in what might be a very different setting and different way than they might be used to" (Academic, South-East based University).

During this phase of refamiliarization is it imperative that they receive tailored advice and support, which, as perceived by the participants, is not always available. The quotation below is indicative of this need and shortcoming in provision.

"*Lots of messaging, activities and focus is aimed at the UK 18-21 year old. Mature international students need different advice - many have had careers prior to their studies so the messaging isn't right for them"* (Careers Consultant, London-based University).

Addressing these needs and challenges is key to the development of an inclusive and supportive environment that fosters a sense of belonging and community for mature international students. Moreover, fostering belonging empowers these students to pursue and achieve their educational and professional goals. In many cases returning to education as a mature student can indicate a desire for personal growth and development and without the right resources this can be difficult to attain.

Existing support provisions for mature international studentsParticipants highlighted a number of support services and practices that universities currently offer for mature international students. These include scholarships and grants, study/reading groups, library and technical support, events and community teams, departmental societies and career support services. Universities quite often hold international online Open Days which showcases a range of support available for international students. Moreover, universities quite often offer social and academic support for research students through a wide range of post-graduate research networks.. Reiterating the above, a member of staff from a midlands-based university working with postgraduate students highlighted:

"I can only speak about PGRs since this is my area. We have a Parents Juggle network group, run by PGR parents for parents; we have further networks which support the individual such as the Global South network, Network for Ethnic Minority PGRs, Network for Women researchers; all organised and run by the PGRS themselves. The library has a community team and space and often runs cultural events for PGRs. I think we may have housing on campus, not not 100% certain about that. The Doctoral College is discussing the further support for International PGRS regarding family, childcare, socialisation etc. There are specific scholarships, which hold events for all holders to get together".

Similarly, another participant notes:

"Post-graduate study groups, school/faculty level activities, social and informal meet up occasions, central services support (e.g, for writing, referencing, IT and library services etc), specific extra-curricular support groups for mature students" (Academic, South-East based University)

A Careers Consultant from a London-based University further pinpoints:

"We are just starting out on this journey. Two staff in Careers with an international specialism. A wider academic and student support working group to develop institution-wide initiatives/approaches. Working closely with the Students' Union to identify opportunities to engage international students (e.g. International cafe, international events like African day earlier this week)"

Participants reiterated that while a range of provision and practices exist to support mature international students' sense of belonging, universities need to explore additional support avenues, and enhance and integrate existing support within their institution to make them accessible and efficient. An academic from a Southeast based University puts it this way:

"*Certainly, universities and at the school level, more work needs to be done to provide both the social/informal aspects of support to help students maintain a good study/work/life balance. However, beyond this, as mature students may be some distance from their last education experience, some form of centralised academic training (particularly in terms of research methods, practices, and philosophy, alongside consistent support for academic writing, would be highly beneficial"*

***Limitations of existing support*:** The participants highlighted a number of limitations of the existing support available to mature international students. Mature students, due to their other family or work-related commitments may face challenges in fully participatingin the provided provisions. Moreover, staff members discussed how existing support for mature international students may be seen as *'tokenistic*', superficial or merely symbolic, reducing its overall impact. The sentiment below illustrates these points:

"Lots going on but lots more to do. Effective in pockets but as we are still trying things out everything needs to be on a wider scale" (Careers Consultant, London-based University)

In line with these points, universities need to be cautious about communicating information relating to resources and support services effectively to mature students, particularly because the potentially limited time they spend at university and copious amounts of information can be overwhelming.

"*Communication of resources and support services at key moments in mature students' course of studies. The varied and flexible timetables that students now have can often mean they have limited time on campus and may be completing their studies alongside many other demands on their time. Often students are bombarded with a lot of information and do not always know the best courses of action to take, or when might be the best time to access particular services" (Manager, Midlands-based University).*

Finally, the social and political climate (including potentially experiencing racism) around the globe can pose significant challenges for mature international students, particularly if they are concerned with their families as well as their own welfare and wellbeing. As our participants highlight below:

"It's not enough, it's going to take time, Britain is an intolerant racist society especially at the moment, and I know of people who either haven't come to GB because of it, or have left in the middle of studies because of it" (Doctoral College Representative, Midlands-based University)

"It's a start, but it is the research culture, not just at [name of University] but nationally which devalues PGRs, especially those from overseas, lacks understanding that what may seem a distant world event to colleagues is of local concern to PGRs since it may be where their family are, and they know that it can be days before they can get back to the country/ not have communication at all" (Director of Postgraduate Research, Midlands-based University).

***Need for extra support and resources*:** Study participants alluded to theneed for universities to develop specialised support for mature international students that are in line with their needs and the challenges they experience. First and foremost, respondents highlighted that universities need to make mature international students feel included and valued as a part of the larger student body. There is a need to promote the sense of belonging through activities and initiatives that cater to the needs and interests of this group such as by facilitating their engagement with support networks or small groups.

Finally, the participants pointed out the need to gather more empirical evidence about the experience and needs of mature international students, and train staff to acknowledge and respond to these needs, so that the support offered can be tailored accordingly. As pointed out by one participant, there is a need for:

"Greater insight to be gathered around mature international students to know how best to support them" (Student Engagement Manager, Midlands-based University)

A Career Consultant at a London University comments:

"*We need to be sharing successes (and failures) and sharing new ideas. We've set up an informal small group for this already"*

Universities need to encourage and where necessary facilitate such developments to help international mature students with transition and retention in Higher Education.

5. Discussion

The results of the study highlight a plethora of support offered by universities to help international and mature students acclimatise to and successfully navigate their education journey in the UK. This is in line with existing research and literature that shows that HEI across the UK have invested a great number of resources in supporting international students, and in some cases mature students (Warren 2002). However, while there appears to be a wide range of support offered to international/mature students, it is largely aimed at either international students or mature students (see Alharbi & Smith, 2019; McKay et al., 2016) and is targeted towards ensuring that they achieve academic success (see Gopalan et al., 2019).

By categorising existing provisions offered by universities, the study highlighted the gaps in existing support. Results showed that support was offered to new students, and primarily focused on informational resources and practical advice related to everyday activities and their academic life. However, research indicates that while such resources can appear to be providing crucial support, they may not be particularly relevant to mature international students who face additional challenges in terms of integrating into the social setting of the university (see Hamshire et al., 2015).

Furthermore, adding to existing literature the study found that most universities offer some support for international/mature students' academic life, such as study skills sessions, financial support (Foster et al., 2020; Holliman et al., 2022), however the exact nature of support varied across institutions (Vasileiou et al., 2012). While some universities do attempt to cater to the physical and time management related challenges that are associated with being a mature international student (e.g., offering evening classes), this remains limited (Du et al., 2023). Despite the need to develop more avenues of support, it must be acknowledged that the existing support provisions are critical, not only because they help mature international students navigate academia but also because some students have been known to derive their sense of belonging through academic channels (e.g., getting higher grades) (Han & Rideout, 2022).

In terms of wellbeing and care support, the results showed that universities have a diverse range of approaches. In line with existing research, the study showed that most institutions offer mental health support for their students (including mature international students), while some go a step ahead and try to buffer against the culture shock (through instructional resources such as pamphlets, videos, newsletters etc.) that international students often experience when studying in the UK (Wawera & McCamley, 2019). However, literature indicates that this support can often be inadequate due to the excessive strain on resources (Samuel & Kamenetsky, 2022). More importantly, such avenues of support may not effectively address the social assimilation needs of mature international students (Lee & Jung, 2018), hindering the development of their sense of belonging and in turn impacting their mental health and wellbeing (Priestley et al., 2021).

Finally, regarding the role of Students' Unions and societies in social belonging, the study found that universities generally lack specific events and societies for mature international students (Shah et al., 2014). Some universities have been seen offering targeted welcome events and parent friendly activities, however these are often scheduled at times inconvenient for students with caring responsibilities to attend (Araujo et al., 2014). The lack of specific events and societies for mature international students can perpetuate feelings of isolation and exclusion in students who may already feel like outsiders due to their age and cultural differences. This can have negative implications for their mental health, well-being, and overall university experience (Burdett & Crossman, 2012).

Overall, the study highlights the need for more holistic and inclusive support for international and mature students. As discussed above, international students need more than the provision of social activities to build and harness their sense of belonging. To develop and foster a community and feelings of belonging, international mature students need a space – both physical and social – where they can be themselves (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). More importantly, support for international

students should move away from deficit models and focus on cultural inclusivity (Sharp et al., 2021). Universities should also consider the specific needs of mature international students and provide tailored support to enhance their experience and sense of belonging (Huang & Turner, 2018). The findings suggest that universities should strive to create an inclusive environment that supports academic success and wellbeing of all students, keeping in view the challenges they experience (Hayden et al., 2016; Chilvers, 2016).

To corroborate this information, this study also examined university staff perceptions of the challenges mature international students experience and the support provisions designed and available to them. The study highlighted that mature international students often must refamiliarize themselves with the education system and learn new university processes and systems, particularly when faced with being out of the education system for many years (TASO, 2021). In this study, participants highlighted the need for these students to adapt to new technologies and systems when starting university. Unfortunately, these students are often reluctant to ask for help and therefore need more practical and emotional support when starting university (Ramsay et al. 2007). This study also reiterates much of the research in the sector, which demonstrates that mature students have complex needs, such as caring and financial responsibilities, which affects their ability to engage fully in the academic and social aspects of university, andtheir belonging (Christie et al., 2005; White, 2008).

Currently in UK HEIs, International Open Days are referenced as one way universities are building the belonging of mature international students prior to their transition to university. Provisions to support the belonging of international students at the earliest opportunity are important to overcome feelings of stress, anxiety and loneliness in learning experienced due to difficulties in interacting with local students and adjusting to academia in a new country (Redfern, 2016). Events run by the university and Students' Union are also mentioned as opportunities for students to form community groups within their first term at university. However, our findings did not show any examples of events or activities during transition specifically to support students intersecting both the international and mature student groups. This reiterates the findings from Erb and Drysdale (2017) suggesting that more work needs to be done by universities to organise welcome and transition events that are inclusive and foster a sense of belonging for mature international students.

Existing support to build the belonging of mature and/or international students in UK HEIs whilst at university is often in the form of study and social groups, including PGR and union groups. Peer networks are beneficial for developing a mature international students' sense of belonging as they allow students to benefit from skill sharing but also the social opportunities of university (WONKHE, 2022). These findings highlight the need for university staff to play a key role in facilitating avenues for mature international students to build communities and support groups to improve the way they connect with other students. Support in the academic and social spheres is necessary (Christie et al., 2005; Stone, 2008). A few participants highlighted that working with Students' Unions is an effective way to bridge the gap and support students in forming their own student communities. These findings reflect previous research into the benefits of extra-curricular activity to enable students to become fully integrated into university **(**Hordósy & Clark, 2018; Hunter et al., 2010; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009**).** However, our findings demonstrate that many of the social and academic

events and activities offered in UK HEIs are for mature or international students, as opposed to a group for those which intersect both groups.

Whilst provision of support appears to be in place at UK HEIs for mature and/or international students, the method of communication for this support needs to be re-considered. Some participants alluded to students being bombarded by information from their university, leading to uncertainties around accessing support. Other participants highlighted that activities for students at university often focus on the 18-21 year old student population, rather than students who may have had careers prior to academic studies. Our research findings suggest that whilst many participants were able to recall existing provisions for mature students, few were able to discuss current support for mature international students. The study has contributed important knowledge on how mature international students' sense of belonging are portrayed, supported and fostered. At the same time, the findings reported in this paper challenge all stakeholders in UK HEIs to recognise the complexity of student experiences and the supporting provisions.

6. Limitations and Implications

Given the scope, size and timeframe of the project, we are aware of the potential limitations of the study. For example, the results reported are limited to what the websites showed, or participants shared; there may be other channels that provide support that were not identified in the study. Whilst we looked at universities with over 22% international students, we did not break this down in terms of the percentage of mature students.

Moreover, there is not a widely accepted definition of mature international students in this study, which we hope to explore and discuss in future publications. As reflected in our review and subsequently in participants' responses, the focus and understanding of mature international students is mainly about PGRs. However, since the widening participation imperatives have expanded, mature international students may engage in a variety of courses both at an undergraduate and postgraduate level. Wider future explorations could contribute to a fuller understanding towards mature international student's sense of belonging, in particular, discussions around the framing of mature international students and relevant supporting provisions would be beneficial.

Nevertheless, the qualitative findings related to both webpages and key university' stakeholders perspectives can still provide valuable accounts and suggestions of aspects for universities and Students' Unions to explore in greater depth. HEIs play an important role in facilitating social and study groups for mature international students, and specialised support for mature international students as a distinct group of students should be considered, planned and communicated throughout a student's academic journey. Additionally, it is necessary to re-consider the methods of communicating support, events, groups, and activities to mature international students. For example, it is suggested that more pre-degree programme provision (academic and social) should be considered, as some universities are already doing to integrate mature international students into the university and acclimatise them to academic and cultural changes. It is suggested that institutions need to provide key stakeholders (e.g., academics, researchers, professional staff, etc) who are involved

in supporting mature international students with the development, support, and time necessary to offer the level and complexity of support that students need.

7. Conclusion

In summary, this study highlighted a gap in support provisions for mature international students in UK Higher Education Institutions. The study not only emphasises the challenges faced by these students, such as balancing academic work with caring responsibilities and adapting to new educational systems, it also highlights how existing offers of support may be perceived as insufficient or overwhelming. The findings underscore the need for tailored and inclusive support that goes beyond academic support, focusing on social integration and community-building. University staff play a crucial role in creating such an environment and therefore need training and resources to better address the unique needs of mature international students. Finally, the paper calls for UK HEIs to enhance their support provisions to foster a greater sense of belonging and well-being for mature international students. Collaboration among universities, staff, Students' Unions, and stakeholders is essential to improve the educational experience of this diverse group of students.

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