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EXAMINING SUPPORT FOR MATURE STUDENTS PROVIDED BY RUSSELL GROUP UNIVERSITIES: A MIXED APPROACH OF THEMATIC ANALYSIS USING SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF WEBSITES AND LITERATURE

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Summary

The volume of mature students has constituted over half of the student population in the UK higher education, reflecting the substantial growth in participation opportunities, however, it has not led to equal quality and outcomes of higher education for mature students. With much attention has been focused on obstacles mature students encountered and possible support to help them overcome, the reality of the support provided for mature students by HEIs in the UK remains under-researched. Aiming to fill the research gap and examine the support provision by Russell Group universities, this study conducted a mixed approach of thematic analysis using systematic reviews of websites and literature. Analysis of the data indicates that RGUs mainly support mature students in finance, social integration, caring responsibility (especially childcare), and academic skills, however, the mismatch between the support provision and mature students' needs exists, where the disadvantages of mature students aged 21-24 and mature part-time students in the eligibility criteria for financial support have been highlighted. The study culminates in the proposal that personal factors should also be taken into account in the pursuit of more productive policy changes to reduce structural inequalities. Contributions of the research lie in providing references for university leaders and policymakers in developing strategies to achieve a more inclusive environment for mature students and contributing to individual prosperity and overall economic productivity.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning	Page
UK	United Kingdom	1
OfS	Office for Students	1
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency	1
UCAS	University and Colleges Admissions Service	1
LSES	Low Socioeconomic Status	1
NUS	National Union of Students	1
HE	Higher Education	2
HEIs	Higher Educational Institutions	2
RGUs	Russell Group Universities	5
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics	8
WP	Widening Participation	9
US	United States	9
ICT	Information and Communication Technology	9
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019	9
RQ	Research Question	14
N	Number	16
TACT	Trustworthiness, Auditability, Credibility and Transferability	17
MSG	Mature Student Group	19
BERA	British Educational Research Association	26
STYC	Second-and Third-Year Contacts	31
STYM	Second-and Third-Year Mentors	31
CPD	continual professional development	41
MDUG	Mature Domestic Undergraduate	47

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter firstly explained the definitions of ‘mature student’ adopted in the UK and in this study, then introduced the research context, followed by an overall introduction to this study, and finally provided an outline of this thesis.

1.1 Definition

Definitions of ‘mature student’ were inconsistently in the UK. For Office for Students (OfS) (2022) and in *Definitions and Benchmark Factors* of HESA (online-a), it referred to students aged 21 and over on 31st August in the year of commencing their higher education programme, while for UCAS (2023b) and in *Definitions: Students* of HESA (online-b), it referred to undergraduates aged 21 and over, and/or postgraduates aged 25 and over when they started their studies. The latter, also broader, definition was adopted in this dissertation for the considerations of the research aim.

‘Mature student’ had also been referred to diversely in academia. Scholars described mature students as mature-age students (Delahunty and O'Shea, 2021), adult students/learners (O'Donnell and Tobbell, 2007; Wyatt, 2011; Busher *et al*, 2014), and students returning to education (Scott, 1980; Chesters and Watson, 2014; Black, 2022). The term ‘non-traditional students’ was usually used to define not only mature students, but also others from diverse non-traditional backgrounds, such as ethnic minority, low socioeconomic status (LSES), absence of standard qualifications for postsecondary education, and those with disability (Saddler and Sundin, 2020; Raaper *et al*, 2022; Gill, 2023). The joint research by MillionPlus and NUS (National Union of Students) showed that mature students were more likely to have disabilities, from ethnic minorities and disadvantaged backgrounds, and less likely to have conventional qualifications (MillionPlus and NUS, 2012), which could explain the interchangeability of the terms ‘mature student’ and ‘non-traditional student’ in some literature such as the research of

Dill and Henley (1998) and Wyatt (2011); It also explained the reasonability of referring some studies on non-traditional students into this research, such as the research of Christie *et al* (2018), as well as the importance of maintaining the awareness of the diversity and heterogeneity of the mature student population (Schuetze, 2014; Sutton, 2019) for inclusively exploring the potential barriers and availability of support for mature students.

1.2 Context

Due to the significant role of HE in social mobility and equity (David et al, 2010, cited in Gill, 2023), the UK government had been committed to expanding opportunities for students from all backgrounds to enter and participate in HE, and had made significant progress in terms of the number and diversity of student enrolled over the past decades (Gill, 2021), among which the growth of the mature student population was salient. The data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) showed continuing growth in the number of mature postgraduate enrolment in almost the recent two decades since 2014 and a sharp climb since 2019 (see Figure 1), which was probably attributed to the realigned labour market during the pandemic lockdown that motivated adults to return to higher education to pursue a higher qualification or a second degree (Office for Students (OfS), 2021a). In the 2021/22 academic year, the percentage of mature entrants reached 63% (see Figure 2), indicating that mature students have made up the majority of the student population in the UK HEIs.

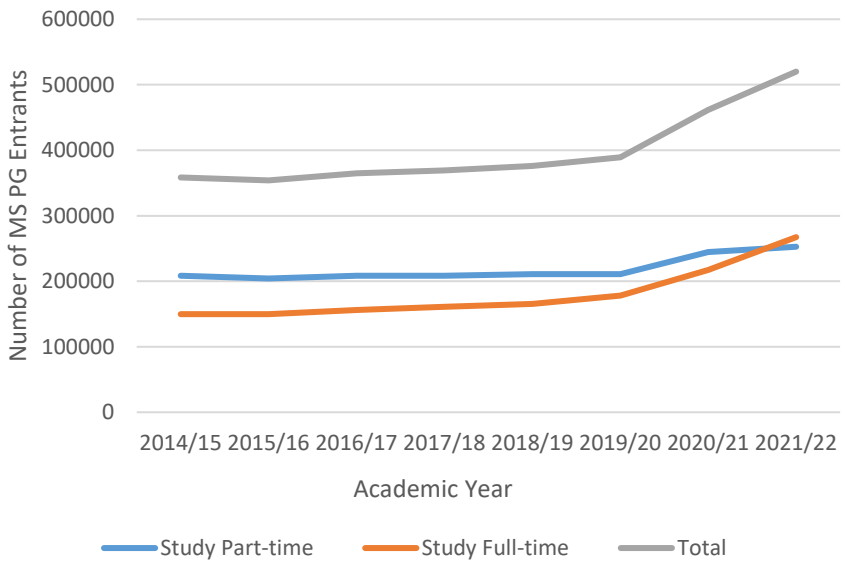

Figure 1 Numbers of Mature Postgraduate Entrants (UK-Domiciled and Non-UK-Domiciled) at UK HEIs from 2014/15-2021/22, Split by Modes of Study [according to HESA (2023)]

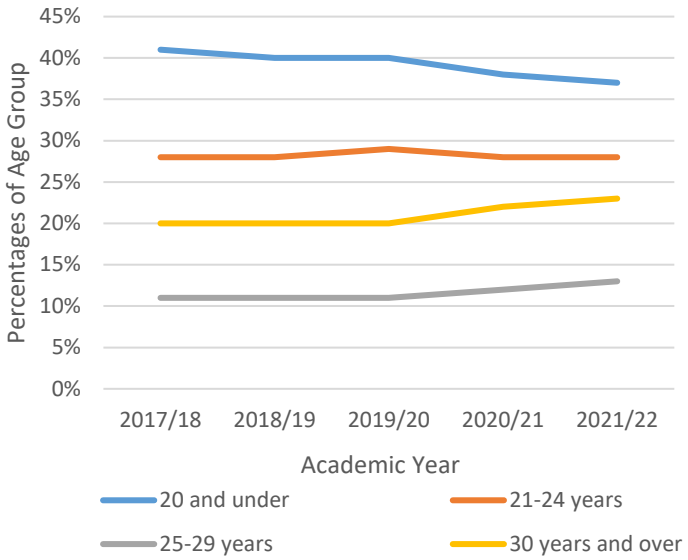

Figure 2 Percentage of HE Students' Enrolments (UK-Domiciled and Non-UK-Domiciled) at UK HEIs from 2017/18-2021/22, Split by Age [according to HESA (online-c)]

Despite the considerable volume of the mature student population, the increased educational opportunities have not necessarily led to 'equal access to equal types

of higher education or outcomes in the labour market' (2009: 4-5), as David (2009) argued in his review of a funded project investing the attempts to widen access and participation in post-secondary and higher education in England. Office for Students (OfS) (2020; 2021a) reported consistent findings that, compared with their young counterparts, mature students sustained lower rates in terms of retention, degree attainment, and enrolments at the top third of English HE providers. With regards to outcomes in the labour market, mature graduates were more likely clustered at the lower end of the graduate labour market (Purcell *et al*, 2007), such as caring and public sectors(Christie *et al*, 2018). Therefore, the inequalities persisted in HE and achievements, with the commitment of HEIs to facilitate social equity and social mobility for all remaining unfulfilled.

In this context, scholars' concerns about mature students have shifted from issues related to widening participation to improving mature students' retention (e.g. see Douglas, 2014), academic and employment success (e.g. see Merrill *et al*, 2020), and creating an inclusive environment for mature students (e.g. see Naylor and Mifsud, 2019 and Hope and Quinlan, 2021). Debates were mainly on the ideologies underpinning the approaches of supporting mature students, namely, the deficit ideology, which assumed the life experience and culture of mature students were deficiencies to be overcome and mature students, therefore, needed to make more efforts to catch up (e.g. see Butcher *et al*, 2020; Broadhead, 2020; Black, 2022), and the structural ideology, which recognised the structural inequalities and disparities for mature students and therefore the institutions needed to make changes to reduce the inequalities and barriers and create a more inclusive environment (e.g. see Farini and Scollan,2021; Hope and Quinlan, 2021). Although obstacles and solutions underpinned by either ideology had been profoundly discussed in academia, the reality of support provision for mature students in UK universities remains under-researched.

1.3 The Study

Aiming to examine the support for mature students provided by Russell Group universities, the study asked two specific questions: what is the availability of support offered by Russell Group universities for mature students? and furtherly, how do these supports specifically cater to the needs of mature students attending Russell Group universities?

The interest in the topic of support for mature students was initially driven by the researcher's personal experience. As a mature international student, the researcher was impressed by the prevalence of mature students in the University and ran into a female classmate bringing her young child into a class, which further aroused the researcher's curiosity about the support provision for mature students in elite universities. The sample was then narrowed to Russell Group universities (hereinafter referred to as RGUs), which are one of the existing 'mission groups' in UK higher education with 24 member universities all recognised as research-intensive, world-class, and comprehensive (Russell Group, online), for the considerations on the workloads within the scope of dissertation on the one hand and the methodological suitability on the other.

To answer the research questions, the study based on a scale of the twenty-four Russell Group member universities was conducted using a mixed approach of thematic analysis using a systematic review of websites and literature, along with a discussion on the available support provision in RGUs and the gaps between the provision of universities and needs of mature students. Findings showed that the universities mainly support mature students in terms of financial hardship, social integration and participation, caring responsibility (especially childcare), and development of academic skills; additionally, mature students aged 21 to 24 and mature part-time students were disadvantaged in the eligibility criteria of financial support. The findings of this study potentially provide a reference for university leaders and policymakers in developing strategies for a more inclusive

environment for mature students and all and contribute to individual prosperity and overall economic productivity.

1.4 Outline of The Thesis

Chapter 2 presented an extensive review of relevant literature. It first reviewed the literature on obstacles and difficulties faced by mature students in UK HEIs, then reviewed the literature on support for mature students and identified the debate and research gap. Finally, it introduced a mode of barriers and two theories that provided theoretical frameworks underpinning the research. Chapter 3 discussed the philosophical and methodological concerns, and introduced the research procedures with a thick description. Chapter 4 showed the findings of inductive and deductive thematic analysis respectively. Chapter 5 answered the research questions and presented an extended discussion. Chapter 6 reviewed the experience of conducting the research and identified methodological advantages and areas worthy of future research. Chapter 7 identified the academic and practical implications. Chapter 8 provided an overall conclusion.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter first reviewed the literature on obstacles encountered by mature students in UK HEIs, then reviewed the literature on support offered by UK HEIs for mature students and identified the debate and research gap. Finally, the theoretical underpinnings of the study were introduced.

2.1 Focusing on Obstacles

Obstacles faced by mature students in the UK have been extensively examined and well documented in the previous literature. Focused problematical areas mainly embodied in financial hardship (Creedon, 2015), social isolation (Muñoz-Chereau and Timmis, 2019; Sutton, 2019), time balancing between study

and external responsibilities (Mannay *et al*, 2017; Mannay and Ward, 2022) which were often unseen and underestimated ((Homer, 2022), academic unpreparedness (Black, 2022), fear and other negative emotions (Ratajczak, 2014), and potential risks (Reay, 2003; Tett, 2004). Financial hardship has been relatively less discussed over the recent decade, probably attributed to the introduction of a tuition fee cap of £9000 by the English government in 2012 (Callender and Thomson, 2018), which potentially shut the door of HEIs for the most of those living in poverty.

Mature students' HE utilizable outcomes, namely, graduate employability, have been another concern of scholars. Mature graduates were primarily considered disadvantaged in labour market. They were found clustered at the lower end of the graduate labour market (Purcell *et al*, 2007; Christie *et al*, 2018), geographically immobile (Crew and Märtins, 2023), suffering potential ageism from employers (Woodley and Wilson, 2002; Purcell *et al*, 2007; Woodfield, 2011; 2012), more likely to obtain non-graduate level jobs (Purcell *et al*, 2007) and less likely to engage in 'better quality' jobs (Purcell *et al*, 2007: 65). Contrary to the dominant discourse, Woodfield (2011; 2012) found that mature graduates were more likely to secure paid and graduate-level employment and achieve a better salary than their young counterparts.

These contrasting arguments may stem from, on the one hand, different research methodologies: Woodfield (2011; 2012) compared the statistics data of mature graduates to that of their young peers, while others focused merely on mature student groups (e.g. Redmond, 2006; Christie *et al*, 2018; Crew and Märtins, 2023) and their narratives collected through interviews (e.g. Christie *et al*, 2018; Crew and Märtins, 2023); On the other, different definitions of employment success: Woodfield (2011; 2012) included full-time, part-time and self-employment in the criterion of successful employment, while others failed to explicitly define it (e.g. David, 2009; Christie *et al*, 2018; Crew and Märtins, 2023) or suggested it as full-time employment throughout the dominant discourse in the research (e.g.

Purcell *et al*, 2007). In addition, although both Purcell *et al* (2007) and Woodfield (2011) adopted quantitative approaches, the datasets they employed might have a fundamental difference in the survey design in terms of, for example, age, which was the age of graduation in the paper of Purcell *et al* (2007), while the age of entry in Woodfield's (2011).

2.2 Supporting Mature Students

Simply portraying these difficulties was far from enough, as Mannay *et al* (2017) and Mannay and Ward (2022) argued, it was crucial for HEIs to create a more inclusive environment for mature non-traditional students, with the debate lying in the employment of deficit ideology or structural ideology to support mature students.

A deficit model of education, as Farini and Scollan (2021) noted, is:

> …the matrix to produce knowledge on non-traditional applicants, for instance, their need to catch up or make good, the need to reform themselves, the very idea that they are defined by their condition of need.
>
> (Farini and Scollan, 2021: 724)

Deficit approaches were evident in the literature that emphasised the transition and transformation of mature students. For example, developing growth mindsets and girt of mature students was argued by Jones and McConnell (2022) as efficient strategy to counter challenges they might face such as academic pressure, potential structural inequalities, discrimination and stereotypes related to their ages; Preparatory study designed to improve the mathematical literacy of mature students was demonstrated by Butcher *et al* (2020) beneficial in reducing the amount of stress and anxiety and facilitating academic literacy, confidence and self-efficacy in STEM subjects; Pedagogical transformation in widening participation (WP) courses was suggested by Black (2022) in order to better

prepare all mature students with equity qualifications for a constructivist style of learning which was prevalent in higher education; Collaboration between teachers in HEIs and practitioners in WP programme was suggested a triple-win strategy by Broadhead (2020), helping practitioners to be reflexive on their professional identities, HE teachers to understand more deeply the issues mature students faced in their transition to HE life, and mature students to be better prepared for HE learning in self-confidence and self-efficacy.

The deficit model of education was criticised by US researcher Tewell (2020) as an over-simplified explanation for educational disparities and perpetuating inequalities for its requirements on students to adapt to the existing injustice system instead of questioning it or requiring 'significant changes or sacrifices on the part of privileged classes' (2021: 147), shifting the responsibility to tackle educational disparities and creating transformation on the least powered, marginalised students.

Structural ideology has been recently suggested as an alternative to deficit educational ideology. It acknowledged the inequalities embedded within the educational system and the relationships between structural inequalities and disparities of education outcomes (Tewell, 2020), and drew attention to what institutions could do to create a more inclusive environment for all students, and thus shift the responsibility for change and transformation from individuals (e.g. Butcher *et al*, 2020; Jones and McConnell, 2022) or bridge programmes (e.g. Butcher *et al*, 2020; Broadhead, 2020; Black, 2022), as Australian scholars Naylor and Mifsud (2019) argued, to 'all actors within the institution' (2019: 1).

One of the main themes in the literature related to reducing structural inequalities in the UK HE was integrating information and communication technology (ICT) into pedagogy and university life. Homer (2022) explored the online learning experiences of mature students at the University of Warwick during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that, although the online learning was

challenging for mature students with childcare responsibilities as all children were home during the lockdown, it benefited those with needs of commuting and balancing time between different responsibilities. The benefit of ICT integration has also been shown in enhancing peer engagement and developing a sense of belonging (Abbas *et al*, 2022), as well as the practice of mature students' agency and expansion of social interaction (Muñoz-Chereau and Timmis, 2019). Although mature students tended to use digital technologies less frequently (Staddon, 2020) and in more restricted ways, such as interacting with a particular peer group (Muñoz-Chereau and Timmis, 2019), they were demonstrated active users (Muñoz-Chereau and Timmis, 2019) and retained almost the same attitudes with their young peers towards the usage of technologies (Staddon, 2020).

Developing on-campus communities geared for mature students as initiatives supplementary to the existing social space and culture was another focus on reducing mature students' isolation from the perspective of structural ideology. For example, the Coffee Club, as Mannay and Ward (2022) showed in their study, was a productive informal space complementary to the traditional Freshers' events and hall-and-night-out social activities, which were often critiqued as inaccessible for mature students due to failure in taking mature students' time inflexibility and dislikes of the drinking culture into account (Sutton, 2019), in terms of developing new friendship and building supportive network on campus, reducing amount of stress from academic, as well as their retention in higher education.

Some innovative forms of HE practices aiming at improving mature students synthesized educational experience have also been discussed in the literature. For instance, Hope and Quinlan (2021) explored the mature students' experience in a satellite campus of a UK HEIs and demonstrated that the cultural and social capital (a concept of Bourdieu returned to in section 2.3.2) of those assumed underprivileged in the deficit support model could be supportive and beneficial to

mature students in a more inclusive and equitable institutional environment. Alternative to the traditional bridge programme, a transition programme designed to generate positive changes through valuing and enabling mature students' existing skills and knowledge from previous work or educational experience and combining them with academic skills in universities was explored by Farini and Scollan (2021), which was demonstrated supporting mature students transiting to an unfamiliar world.

The attitudes of UK HEIs towards mature students have been critiqued as pathologizing, tolerating, rather than prizing since the early 2000s (see Woodley and Wilson, 2002; Reay, 2003; Tett, 2004; Redmond, 2006; Marshall, 2016). The literature revealed that obstacles faced by mature students and solutions to help mature students overcome them had been profoundly explored from the perspective of either deficit or structural ideology, however, the reality of support provision for mature students in UK universities remains under-researched.

This study aimed to examine the support provided by Russell Group universities for mature students and was expected to fill the gap in examining the current status quo of UK HEIs' support for mature students.

2.3 Theoretical Underpinning

In the study, Cross's (1981) mode of learning barriers was employed as the framework for systematically examining the mature students' hardship in the HE experience, and Bourdieu's capital theory for understanding and analysing the difficulties identified above, followed by an introduction of Naylor and Mifsud's (2019) internal structural inequality as the framework for examining the support provision offered by Russell Group universities for mature students.

2.3.1 Cross's Model of Learning Barriers

The learning barriers mode of Cross (1981) was initially conceptualized from the obstacles encountered by adults when they attempted to return to education and

has subsequently been employed in other research focusing on the challenges encountered by adult learners at further educations colleges and foundation programmes (Burton *et al*, 2011; Karmelita, 2020). Cross (1981) categorised barriers to participation into situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers, which was summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary Table of Learning Barriers in Cross's (1981) Model

Category	Definition	Example
Situational barriers	Barriers associated with one's life situation at a particular time.	Lack of time due to work and family commitments
Institutional barriers	Educational practices and procedures preventing adult's participation in HE activities	Inflexible timetabling
Dispositional barriers	Negative attitudes and perceptions about the learning ability of oneself	Lack of confidence and self-efficacy

2.3.2 Bourdieu's Capital Theory

Bourdieu's theories of *cultural capital*, *habitus* and *field* have been dominantly adopted in analysing and understanding mature students' postsecondary educational experience, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds such as middle class and other low socioeconomic status (e.g. Redmond, 2006; Roberts, 2011; Stagman, 2011; Black, 2022), and post-degree trajectories (e.g. Merrill *et al*, 2020; Wong and Hoskins, 2022). *Cultural capital* is the 'familiarity with [valued] cultural forms' (Smith, 2020: n. p.), or more precisely, with the 'legitimate knowledge' in a society (Jenkins, 1992: chapter 4, as quoted by Smith, 2020), and may be institutionalised into educational qualifications and can be converted into a *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1986). Habitus is the mechanism by which a person generates strategies to cope with unforeseeable and changing situations; it is constituted of the common 'internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action' to his/her group or class members (Bourdieu and Nice, 1977: 86) and

determines his/her dispositions to act within *fields,* a conception of the social space in which interactions between the person and environments and conversions between different forms of capitals take place (Smith, 2020).

Bourdieu's cultural capital theory has been criticised for normalising the culture of the White middle class and marginalising other cultures (Yosso, 2005), as his notion of cultural capital refers to 'an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills and abilities that are *valued* by the privileged groups in society' rather than something 'only inherited or possessed' by the middle and upper class (Yosso, 2005: 76) and therefore been criticised as the theoretical basis for the deficit support model for mature students (Tewell, 2020). However, Naylor and Mifsud (2019) argued that the concept was often misused in education practice when 'cultural resources or academic capacity' were pursued 'rather than cultural capital' (2019: 10). Thus, Bourdieu's capital theory still provides a theoretical perspective for understanding the differences and obstacles in the higher educational experience of mature students.

2.3.3 Internal Structural Inequality Framework

Internal structural inequality was used to frame the examination of the provision of support by RGUs for mature students. The structural inequality approach has been adopted in the examination of inequalities created by structure in the opportunities for different groups of people to participate in higher education (Archer and Leathwood, 2005; Humphrey, 2006), wherein the structure referred to institutions and their conscious and unconscious norms and rules (Giddens, 2004). Naylor and Mifsud (2019; 2020) identified three types of structural inequality in HE, including vertical inequalities (unequal opportunities to access HE), horizontal inequalities (unequal opportunities to access prestigious universities or certain majors), and internal inequalities (unequal opportunities within the university). Based on theoretical discussions and reflexivity, they further developed the internal inequalities framework within which six areas

where ‘internal inequalities might arise or be reduced’ were identified, including staff, students, curriculum, administration, campus life, and physical environment (details see Naylor and Mifsud, 2019: 17-19). They assessed how the Australian HEIs considered and responded to the structural barriers faced by mature students within the theoretical framework of internal structural inequalities and identified it as a productive approach for institutions, however, similar research in the UK context was still blank.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Aim and Research Questions

The study was to examine the support for mature students offered by Russell Group universities, aiming to answer the following specific questions:

RQ1. What is the availability of support offered by Russell Group universities for mature students?

RQ2. How do these supports specifically cater to the needs of mature students attending Russell Group universities?

To answer RQ 1, an inductive thematic analysis was carried out by systematically reviewing the websites of RGUs. And for responding to RQ 2, where the specific hardship of MS should be identified to evaluate the matchability, a deductive review of existing literature was carried out under the framework of Cross’s (1981) model of barriers to learning.

3.2 Theoretical Perspectives and Methodology

The identification of a proper paradigm is essential for the choice of research methods, which can be achieved by examining the fundamental assumptions at the level of ontology, epistemology, and methodology, as Burrell and Morgan (2016) and Coe (2021) suggested. The paradigm here refers to shared understandings of the world within a social research community (Kuhn, 1962), including coherent

perspectives on different aspects of research. Framing the study in a suitable paradigm overarchingly clarifies the beliefs, assumptions, values and principles of the researcher (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This study was in line with the constructivist ontology and believed that reality was closely related to specific context and culture, and thus the social reality uncovered in this study was not generic to other cultures and societies. Accordingly, the researcher believed that the reality of inclusive supports offered by RGUs for their mature students could be revealed through the interpretation of the textual data published on their official websites and that knowledge was constructed in this process. Therefore, this study was located in the interpretivist paradigm.

The methodological approach of this study was *Big Q qualitative research*. It refers to the research which collects and analyses non-number data through qualitative techniques within the framework of qualitative paradigms (Braun and Clarke, 2013), contrasted with Kidder and Fine's (1987) concept of *small q qualitative research* that might be conducted within quantitative paradigms. The exploration of the research aim required intensive involvement and interpretation from the researcher, whose prior experience or knowledge, and concerns on mature students inevitably affected the research process and outcomes. However, the impacts were considered positive and contributing to the knowledge construction, a point consistent with the valuing on subjectivity and reflexivity within the *Big Q qualitative research* (Braun and Clarke, 2013). From the above understanding, *Big Q qualitative research* was the most suitable methodological approach for this study.

3.3 Sampling

The sample of this study was the Russell Group universities, which was determined by the researcher's personal experiences and RGUs' positioning in the UK HE system. As a mature international student at one of RGUs, the researcher's interest in the inclusion for mature students was initially driven by the impression

of the prevalence of mature students in the UK context, the study aim had preliminarily been set to explore the inclusive support for mature students in UK HEIs; the sample was furtherly narrowed to RGUs due to the considerations on the workloads within the scope of dissertation.

RGUs are one of the existing UK HE 'mission groups', the alliance or mission of universities with common goals, visions, or characteristics, with 24 member universities whose history lengths range from fifty years to nearly a thousand years, and all of them are recognised as research-intensive, world-class and comprehensive universities (Russell Group, online). The sample size (N=24) was consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2013) proposed sample size (N=10-100 for secondary data; 2013: 50). Although Russell Group claimed to represent 24 'leading' UK universities, in his cluster analysis of publicly accessible data of UK universities, Boliver (2015) noted that the majority of the RGUs (22 out of 24, with the remaining two were Oxford and Cambridge) clustered together with the majority of all the other Old universities (17 out of 30) as middle tier HEIs. This high, though not completely, homogeneity of the sample to much extent facilitated the generation of themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Clustering with non-Russell Group universities enabled the potential to apply findings obtained in RGUs with other HEIs with similar settings, which was in line with the proposal by Braun and Clarke (2013) and Daniel (2019) of transferability as one of the criteria for good quality of qualitative research.

3.4 Procedures of Website Review

Inductive thematic analysis was employed in the systematic review of websites. This approach was informed by the research aim to explore supports for mature students in RGUs, which was a bottom-up exploration and strongly driven by the data set (Patton, 1990). What is noteworthy here is the reminder of Braun and Clarke (2006) that the undertaking of analysis was inevitably impacted by the researcher's experience, knowledge, and preconception, and 'data are not coded

in an epistemological vacuum' (2006: 84). Qualitative research has always been controversial in academia, and it has been criticised as unclear and unauthentic by scientists who in favour of quantitative approaches (Labuschagne, 2003), while its findings were characterised as 'anecdotalism, unsystematic, and inconsistency' and its results as 'implausibility' (Daniel, 2019: 101). The criteria for quantitative research are indeed inappropriate for assessing the quality of qualitative studies (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Daniel, 2019; Labuschagne, 2003), however, criteria for conducting good quality qualitative research to achieve rigour do exist (Daniel, 2018, 2019; El Hussein et al., 2015; Forero et al., 2018). The procedure of this study followed the six-phrase thematic analysis model of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022), and additional steps, which referred to Daniel's (2019) TACT framework (Trustworthiness, Auditability, Credibility and Transferability), were taken throughout the research process to ensure the methodological rigour of the analysis.

3.4.1 Data Collection

The employed strategy of data collection was a systematic reviewing of the official websites of RGUs. The list of member universities was accessible on the Russell Group official homepage with hyperlinks to an introduction webpage of the corresponding university. As pre-existing texts publicly available on websites were recognised as secondary sources of data (Braun, 2016) and information could be extracted through the analysis of the original content of texts (Glaser and Laudel, 2011), the target textual data were manually identified and downloaded (or copy-and-pasted).

Before formally collecting data, a list of keywords for the internet search on the homepage was identified, the process of which was influenced by the researcher's individual experience and perspectives and developed through a pilot search conducted before the formal research. Specifically, and for example, one of the researcher's concerns was the support for mature students with young children.

Although student carers or students with family are not necessarily mature students, the exploration of inclusion for mature students cannot be comprehensive without including them in data collection. However, when 'mature student' was searched in the search bar of the home website of a randomly selected university, for example, the University of Cambridge, a webpage for supporting mature students was identified and hyperlinks to supports for 'student parents' were found in the same webpage, while the same search process on Cardiff University pointed to a webpage solely for mature students, so an additional search using 'student parent' as keywords were followed to include all possible support provision for mature students. A similar case was found in the pilot search of students with other caring responsibilities. Synonyms were also identified during this process and complemented and adjusted in the formal process of collecting data. For example, mature students were also referred to as 'adult learners' in University of Edinburgh (University of Edinburgh, 2023b); students responsible to take care of others were usually categorised into 'student parents', who had the responsibility to look after their young children under 18 years old, and 'student carers', who free cared for an adult dependant or a friend suffering from illness or disability, mental health status, or drug addiction (University of Southampton, Online). Therefore, the keywords for internet search included three categories of 'mature students', 'student parents' and 'student carers' for the study aim, as shown in Table 2:

Table 2 Keywords List for the Website Review

Keywords list for the website review	
mature students	adult students, adult learners
student parents	childcare, nursery
student carers	caregiver, student carers, adult dependant, caring responsibility

Formal data collection was conducted after the keywords list was initially

identified. The principles guiding this process were purposefulness and inclusivity (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Specifically, given that the research purpose was to explore support provision for mature students, the researcher filtered out policies, guidance and advice, and excluded academic articles, books and news in the recommendations that pop up under the corresponding keywords. Additionally, to ensure the comprehensiveness of the coding and themes generated subsequently, the former categories of recommendations were included in the dataset as many as possible. For instance, when ‘mature students’ was searched using the search bar on the homepage of Durham University, 1687 recommendations popped up, none of which was considered university-level provision; only a post of a department (Department of Anthropology) titled ‘Mature Student Group (MSG)’ provided guidance for new mature students, and the researcher included it in the dataset and noted it for the next steps of data analysis. The cautiousness of the possibility that the same keywords used on websites of different universities might referred to diverse information than intended had been maintained by the researcher throughout the collecting process. For example, the webpage of University of Sheffield titled ‘mature students’ offered information on routes for adults to return to HE, namely, it was for mature applicants rather than current mature students. Text which was recommended on websites but judged by the researcher as irrelevant information to the study aim was excluded from the data collection.

A spreadsheet in Excel recording the results and notes of the 24 RGUs was kept to ensure the rigour of this systematic review process. It was constantly revisited and updated when new results of keyword searches emerged.

3.4.2 Data Analysis

This study followed the thematic analysis procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which started from familiarisation with data and organically developed through coding, identifying themes, revising and refining themes,

conceptualising themes, and ended in producing research results (procedure details see Table 3). Given that the study aimed to explore the provision of support for mature students in RGUs rather than testing hypotheses, coding and themes were developed inductively.

Measures were taken to ensure the research quality. Firstly, and as suggested by Miles (2019), repeatedly reading through the content in depth and breadth and including all potential data items in the coding procedure were used to guarantee the comprehensiveness and complexity of coding. Furtherly, two approaches were employed for data validation to ensure the authenticity of the representation of the preliminary codes and themes to the corresponding meaning evident in raw data. One was bringing the initial themes which were generated from the data extracts back into the context of the full data set; the other was triangulating the themes by using a hybrid inquiry approach proposed by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), where codes and themes were generated through induction and then the data was examined against the codes and themes in the opposite way. Data validation in qualitative research through raw data and triangulation has been proposed in a wealth of existing literature, such as the research of Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013; 2022), Braun (2016) and Daniel (2019). Jonsen and Jehn (2009) found that mixed methods could be used as triangulation to validate findings in thematic analysis. The employment of an inductive and deductive hybrid approach to verify preliminary codes and themes was consistent with the thematic analysis of posts on TikTok by Herrick *et al* (2021).

Table 3 Description of Inductive Thematic Analysis Procedures Used for Support for Mature Students in Russell Group Universities

Thematic analysis phrases	Description
Phrase 1: Familiarising with the data	The researcher repeatedly read through the entire data set and familiarised herself with the whole content both in depth and breadth. Notes were taken of where analytical interest was generated and initial ideas about the data content.
Phrase 2: Coding	An initial list of codes was generated by identifying basic characteristics of the data within the context of the research question: What is the availability of support offered by Russell Group universities for mature students? All data was then given full and equal attention and coded within certain code. Extracts of coded data were collated in separate computer files. Table 4 shows an example of coded data extracts.
Phrase 3: Identifying initial themes	Themes were identified based on frequently emerged patterns; sub-themes were identified under each theme but could not be homogenized. All codes were then categorised into potential themes, and the corresponding coded data extracts were assembled within the relevant identified themes. An initial thematic map was formed through the analysis of relations between themes and sub-themes by the researcher, as shown in Figure 3.
Phrase 4: Reviewing and refining themes	Firstly, themes and sub-themes were reviewed at the level of coded data extracts. The researcher focused on evaluating and reworking the coherence within each potential theme and the identifiability between themes. A candidate thematic map was formed, as shown in Figure 4. Secondly, candidate themes were reviewed through the entire data set. The researcher examined more surroundings of the data extracts and tested whether the candidate themes could accurately represent the corresponding meaning evident in the whole data set. Additional data that had been missed in the earlier coding phrase was coded and collated to each

	theme.
Phrase 5: Defining and naming themes	The researcher more explicitly described and named the themes and sub-themes, and then selected data extracts representing each theme and sub-theme. The entire data set was re-read twice to help the researcher examine if the selected extracts were the most representative of each theme. A final refined thematic map was formed (see Figure 5)
Phrase 6: Writing up the report	The researcher intentionally provided thick descriptions of the data collection and analysis approaches, and the choices made during the research process, which was to meet the requirements for equal emphasis on the research process and findings in qualitative research (Cohen *et al*, 2018) and transferability which enabled the findings of this study appliable to other similar settings (Daniel, 2019). Direct quotations in the interpretation of findings and explicit description of approaches to validate the preliminary codes and themes were used to enhance the credibility of the research. Given that all data was publicly accessible and intended to be informative to whoever concerns, and no personal information of the creator or creators could be identified within the data set, the names of universities were not deliberately omitted or hidden from the report.

Table 4 Examples of Coded Data Abstracts

Abstracts of Data	Codes
Our … course helps mature students prepare for undergraduate study...	Academic preparation
Mingles are an opportunity to meet with other mature students, Mature Student Advocates and Student Inclusion Officer (Mature Students) …	New friendship; Network;
The … Blackboard group includes useful information on starting at [the] University such as …	Access to information; ICT
The Mature Students, Parents and Carers Network is affiliated with the Students' Union (SU). … a range of events and activities … to meet other mature students …	Network; New friendship

Note: The abstracts of data were quoted from University of Bristol (Online-a; Online-c)

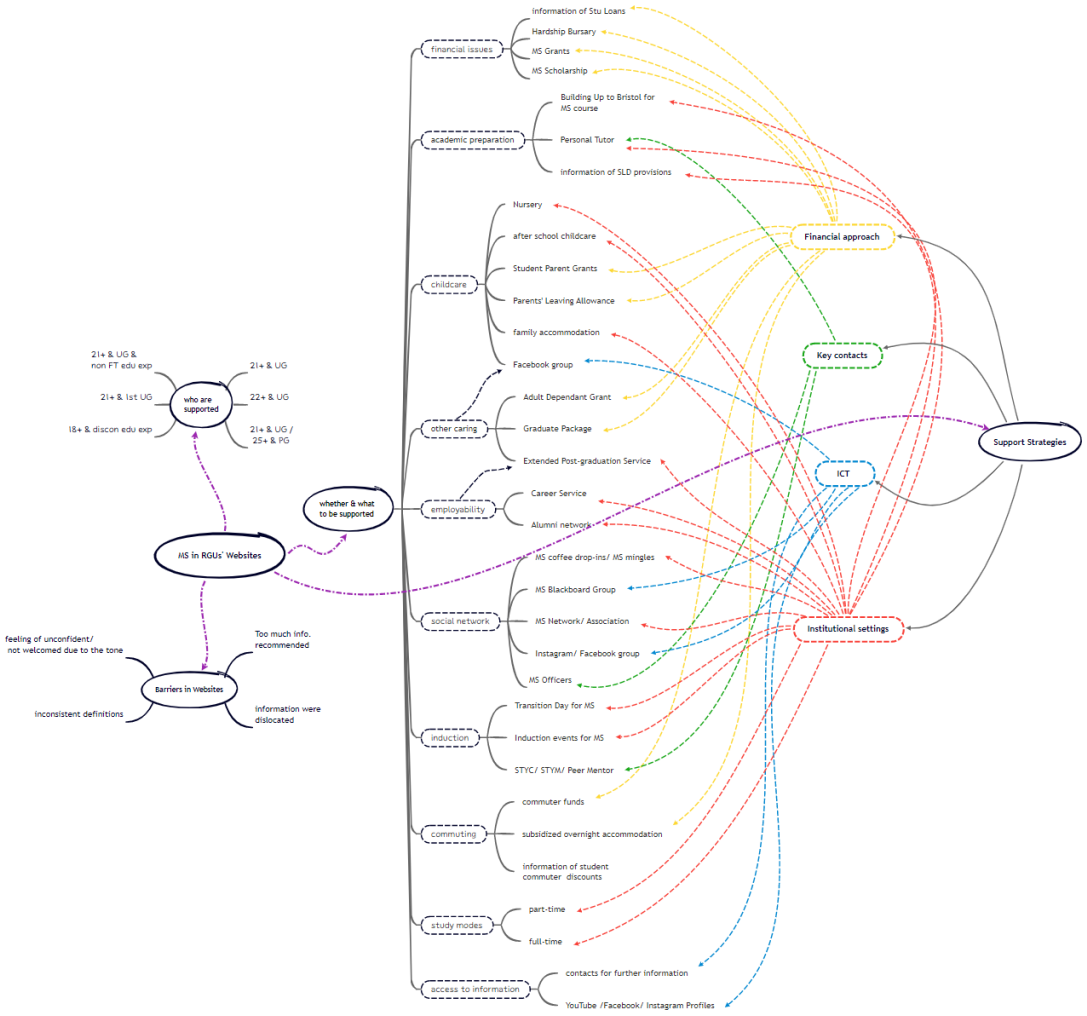

Figure 3 The Initial Mapping of Patterns Across RGUs' Websites Related to Mature Students

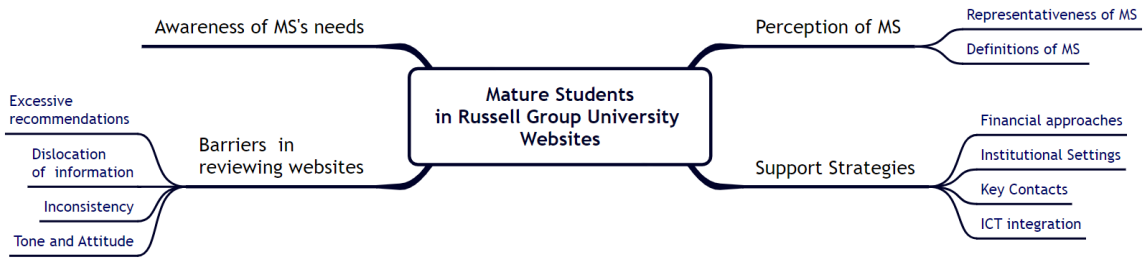

Figure 4 The Candidate Thematic Map of RGUs' Websites Related to Mature Students

3.5 Procedures of Systematic Literature Review

The procedures of systematic literature review for identifying obstacles encountered by mature students were started with searching for relevant literature published from 2000 to 2023, then selecting these conducted in the background of degree level study in the UK and extracting data in concerned aspects, and finally sorting them into the three categories of Cross's model of learning barriers.

3.5.1 Literature Searches

The search initially included the terms 'mature students' and 'barriers or challenges' as shown in Table 5 and was conducted in the search engines Library Search and Google Scholar, with a search period of the recent five years (from 2018 to 2023). However, the search results were too broad for this study, including research on mature students at universities out of the UK, Widen Participation Programmes and Foundation Colleges, and when the target was narrowed to mature students who were in their degree study in UK universities, the five-year duration was not sufficient for a comprehensive review of the challenges faced by mature students. The search strategy was therefore modified, with search keywords narrowed to Mature students, UK, and University, and the time range for

searching extended to a duration of 2000 to 2023. Manual searching of relevant references from previous studies was also conducted. The search criteria were refined through an iterative process and the final version sees Table 5.

Table 5 Search Criteria Used in Library Search and Google Scholar from 2000 until May 2023

Search Criteria Used in Library Search and Google Scholar from 2000 until May 2023
“Mature students” AND (Barriers OR Challenges)
“Mature students” AND UK AND University
“Mature students” AND UK AND (“Higher Education” OR HE)
(“Mature students” OR “Mature graduates”) AND (Employability OR Employment) AND UK

Note: Boolean operator used in the search.

3.5.2 Study Selection

Studies covering mature students’ experience in transition, retention and success at UK universities were included in the analysis, which was determined by the interpretivist paradigm and aim of this study. The researcher included the studies which focused on mature students’ higher educational experience under the context of any UK country, namely England, Scotland, Wales, and North Ireland, regardless of their methodological design. Generally, studies of mature students’ experience in non-degree study programmes such as widening participation programmes and the bridge or foundation courses were excluded, however, judgement was made on an individual basis, for example, the study of Farini and Scollan (2021) on the transition programme which was designed for those who had been enrolled in degree study to be better prepared academically for the formal study were included. Additionally, only studies published in the English language were included due to the prescription of the dissertation.

It is reasonable to assume that the commitment of HEIs to support the

development of mature students should include a successful transition to post-HE destinations such as employment, and identifying these barriers and difficulties is fundamental for constructing systems that support mature comprehensively. Therefore, studies on mature graduates were also included in the selection.

3.5.3 Data Extraction

All articles were initially screened by reading titles and abstracts, and then the entire text was reviewed to extract data in aspects of data sources/participants, countries, research methods, descriptions of specific hardship, theoretical frameworks (if any), and interventions (if any). A spreadsheet in Excel was used to record and update progress.

3.5.4 Data Analysis

The extracted data was sorted out into the three categories of Cross's model of learning barriers. Notably, isolation was frequently referred to about mature students' experience in HE but, to the researcher's knowledge, had not been mentioned in the previous study on the experience of adult progressing into higher education. Considering isolation as associated with the situation of mature students at the particular time in HE, the researcher sorted it into the category of situational difficulty.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted under the guidance of the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* ((British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018).

Informed consent, ethical approval, and confidentiality were not sought due to the following considerations. Firstly, the publicly accessible official university websites were regarded as the public domain, and the textual data, such as news,

announcement, policy documentation and guides posted on their official websites, were written with the expectation that they would be available for public use or accountability, therefore, informed consent from creators was not perceived as necessary (BERA, 2018; Eysenbach and Till, 2001). The consideration was consistent with previous research, for example, the in-depth review by Cilliers and Viljoen (2021) of the published literature from both printed publications and internet-based platforms, and the thematic analysis of posts on the social media TikTok by Herrick *et al* (2021). Additionally, ethical approval was not sought as no interactions with people were required in this study. Finally, little personal information could be identified in the sampled textual data, and correspondingly, this report has not contained any identifying information of the creator, which ensured privacy.

4. FINDINGS

This chapter first presented the themes generated from reviewing the RGUs' websites, then portrayed the difficulties faced by mature students in UK HE within the framework of Cross's model.

4.1 Themes in Provision of Support

Four themes related to mature students were generated in reviewing the websites of RGUs, including (1) Perception of mature students, i.e. how the RGUs perceived their mature student population, (2) Awareness of mature students' needs, i.e. to what extent the RGUs were aware of their mature students' needs, (3) Strategies for supporting mature students, i.e. common patterns of the RGUs' support provision for their mature students, and (4) Barriers in RGUs' websites, i.e. barriers for the researcher (and potential mature applicants or students) to access to desired information when reviewing university websites. Followed were the descriptions of themes and the corresponding sub-themes (if any).

4.1.1 Perception of mature students

The theme ‘Perception of mature students’ included two subthemes: ‘Representativeness’ and ‘Who’.

Representativeness of mature students varied across the RGUs (N=24). More than half of RGUs (N=14) had an explicit reference to ‘mature student’ and identified as representative of mature students. Six of RGUs were identified as less representative as ‘mature students’ were only mentioned in a department/school/college of the corresponding universities (N=3), or the webpages for widening participation of students and mature applicants rather than mature students currently at universities (N=3). The universities without any reference to ‘mature students’ throughout were identified as under representativeness (N=4).

The answers of RGUs to ‘Who’ a mature student was (N=19) were diverse (see Table 6), excluding those universities under representative (N=4) and one of those less representative (N=1) for it had no definition for ‘mature students’ when referred to. While ages on entry, degree levels and educational experience before entry were all used to frame the definitions of mature students, undergraduate degree level was the most prevalent criteria (N=18), followed by the entry age of 21 (N=18) despite the disagreement on whether including it (aged 21 and over, N=13) or excluding it (aged over 21, N=5). Criteria of educational experience (N=4) implied one of these universities’ understandings of mature students as having a break between secondary and higher education or without any engagement in higher education before entry.

Table 6 Definitions of Mature Students employed by Russell Group universities

Definitions of Mature Students on RGUs' Websites			
Undergraduates not entering university straight from secondary school at the age of 18	N=1	Undergraduates aged 21 and over on entry and all postgraduates	N=1
Students aged 21 and over on entry who are studying their first undergraduate degree	N=1	Undergraduates aged 21 and over who have not been in full-time education for more than 3 years[1]	N=1
Undergraduates aged 21 and over on entry	N=10	Undergraduates aged over 21 on entry	N=4
Undergraduates aged over 21 or postgraduates aged over 25	N=1		

4.1.2 Awareness of Mature Students' Needs

In what aspects RGUs acknowledge that mature students potentially need support indicated RGUs' awareness of mature students' needs. Less and under-representative universities were excluded from generating this theme. The inclusive criteria for this theme were that there were support or advice, reminders on RGUs' websites in the particular aspect related to mature students. Eight concerns on mature students were identified, as shown in Table 7: (1) Financial hardship, (2) Social integration and engagement into university life and peer activities, (3) Academic and study skills development, (4) Needs to access further information on individual situations, (5) Childcare and other caring

[1] The notion used by The College of Social Sciences of the University of Glasgow. In the University of Edinburgh, students aged over 21 on entry are referred to as Mature Students, while those having had a break for three years or longer in their formal education before returning are referred to as adult returners.

responsibilities, (6) Requirements of flexible options on study modes, (7) Issues related to career orientation and graduate employability, and (8) Commuting of non-residential students.

Table 7 Aspects of Needs for Mature Students Identified in RGUs' Websites

Aspects of Needs for Mature Students Identified in RGUs' Websites			
Finance	N=11	Social integration and engagement	N=11
Academic skills	N=9	Accesses to relevant information	N=7
Parenting and Caring Responsibilities	N=6	Study modes	N=4
Career and employability	N=4	Commuting	N=3

4.1.3 Strategies for Supporting Mature Students

RGUs' strategies for supporting mature students varied across the content or specific initiatives, however, four common patterns as sub-themes were identified from the provision of supporting their current mature students: (a) Financial approaches, which aimed to help mature students overcome financial hardships related to various personal situations; (b) Institutional settings, whose improvement and innovation were in pursue of a more inclusive environment for mature students with diverse needs; (c) Key contacts, which were established to provide continuous and personalised guidance for mature students, and (d) ICT integration into the mature student networks/ communities and policy statements to enable mature students to develop social networks and facilitate

communication and information dissemination. Examples of initiatives across RGUs under each sub-theme were shown in Table 8.

Table 8 Strategies of RGUs for Supporting Mature Students and Examples

Strategies of RGUs for Supporting Mature Students		
Financial Approaches	N=11	e. g. Commuting Funds, University Scholarships, Childcare Grants/ Bursary, Adult Dependant's Grant, Carers' Bursary, Parents' Leaving Allowance, Accommodation Subsidies, and Graduation Package.
Institutional Settings	N=11	e. g. Extending the provision of employment service to graduates up to 3 years; Campus Nursery and after-school childcare; Flexible options of study modes; Overnight accommodation; Mature Students Network/ Association; Mature students' Induction Events; Coffee Drop-ins/ Mature Student Mingles; Supporting facilities (e. g. common room, small kitchen, shower space, lockers, etc), Exclusive Colleges for mature students.
Key Contacts	N=9	e. g. Mature Student Officer(s) in Student Union/ Association; Academic Personal Tutor/ Supervisor for research students; Peer Mentor; Second-and Third-Year Contacts (STYC); Second-and Third-Year Mentor (STYM), Contact person for further information.
ICT Integration	N=9	e. g. Profile of Mature Students Network/ Association in social medias (i. e. Facebook, n=4; Instagram, n=2; Twitter, n=1); Virtual Community (i. e. Blackboard Learn, n=1; Facebook, n=3); Digital files (i. e. Podcasts, n=2; You Tube videos, n=1)

4.1.4 Barriers on Websites

Barriers to accessing the target information relevant to mature students were identified inductively and reflexively when the researcher reviewed the RGUs' websites. Sub-themes within the identified barriers included: Excessive recommendations, Dislocation of information, Inconsistency, and Tone and

attitude.

The sub-theme Excessive recommendations referred to a large amount of information that was less relevant or irrelevant to search keywords recommended on some university websites. For instance, when the researcher searched for the keyword ‘mature student’ in the search bar at the upper right corner of the University of Glasgow homepage, 27851 results were recommended, and only a link to ‘Mature Student Association’, which was not the researcher initially desired information yet, was found in the first thirty recommendations.

Examples of the sub-theme Dislocation of information were found on the websites of University of Manchester, which posted information on policies supporting students with children on StaffNet, and on the websites of Newcastle University, which posted the instructions for mature applicants on procedures for applying a degree level study under the heading Mature Students on the webpage designed to provide information for current students.

A typical instance of the sub-theme Inconsistency was that diverse definitions of mature students were found within the websites of University of York; mature students were referred to as ‘students who are 21 and over when they start their course’ on one webpage (University of York, Online-b), while ‘undergraduate student[s] who hasn’t come to university aged 18 straight from school or college’ on another (University of York, Online-a).

The attitude of universities towards mature students could be conveyed through the use of words and tone on their websites, among which some impressed the researcher negatively. For example, the most conspicuous suggestion for mature students was ‘becoming a truly independent learner-the responsibility for [their] […] learning will lie on [their own] […] shoulders’ to adjust to university life (University of Edinburgh, 2023b:n. p.), where the mature students were presumed

less independent learners and responsible to make changes; and ‘surviving and thriving’ (University of Warwick, 2021: n. p.), the term used to describe the imminent university life of mature students, set a scene in which mature students face challenges.

Filtering target information that might be dislocated into irrelevant categories from the excessive recommendations was a time-consuming and exhausting task, especially when these recommendations were not sorted according to their relevance to the keyword, or when the webpage did not have filtering options. Together with the confusion about inconsistent content and decreased confidence to overcome the challenges, the websites created obstacles for the researcher and potential others who might have the same concerns and should be considered as a new ‘pressure point’ (Naylor and Mifsud, 2019: 17) where internal structural inequalities potentially to be generated or reduced, a point not to be discussed extendedly due to the limited scope of this dissertation.

Overall, four themes related to mature students were generated in reviewing the websites of RGUs, as shown in the four ellipses of Figure 5: (1) Perception of mature students, (2) Awareness of mature students’ needs, (3) Strategies for supporting mature students, and (4) Barriers in RGUs’ websites. Within the theme (1) Perception of mature students, the sub-themes: (a) Representativeness of mature students and (b) Who: Definitions of mature students in RGUs were included. The theme (3) Strategies for supporting mature students was also broken down into four sub-themes: (a) Financial approaches, (b) Institutional settings, (c) Key contacts, and (d) ICT integration; the theme (4) Barriers in websites was split into four sub-themes: (a) Excessive recommendations, (b) Dislocation of information, (c) Inconsistency, and (d) Tone and attitude.

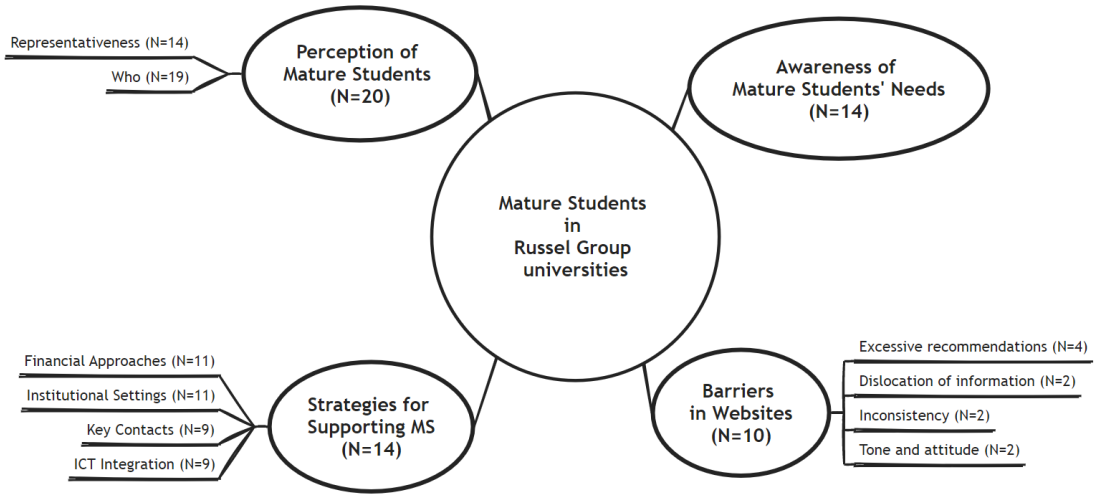

Figure 5 Themes Identified Across RGUs' Websites

4.2 Portraying Obstacles

Difficulties faced by mature students in transition, retention, and success in higher educational experience have been identified in the systematic review of previous literature. They were classified under Cross's (1981) model of barriers for adults to learning, which had been initially used to examine those obstacles preventing potential adult learners from eventually being engaged in HE, however, was hypothesized applicable for examining challenges and difficulties of currently mature students based on the logic that barriers did not disappear automatically upon entering university.

4.2.1 Situational Difficulties

Situational difficulties were those related to one's life circumstances at a particular time, including financial hardship (lack of money), time poverty (lack of time), and isolation (lack of social connections). The classification of isolation into the situational aspect of Cross's model was proposed for the first time in this study.

Financial hardship was more likely faced by mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds (MillionPlus and NUS, 2012). Some of them lived with a regular income below the poverty line (Tett, 2004), financial burden was therefore the obstacle throughout their university/college lives and extended to their early employment after graduation (Purcell *et al*, 2007). Muñoz-Chereau and Timmis (2019) suggested younger mature students aged between 21 and 30 were more likely to encounter financial issues.

Time poverty was more likely faced by mature students with external responsibilities alongside their student identity, such as jobs, taking care of young children or other dependents and domestic responsibilities usually encounter with the time poverty in studying (Reay, 2003). They were caught in a constant balance between the competing worlds of the university and family, or/and workplace (Reay, 2003; Redmond, 2006; Roberts, 2011; Broadhead, 2018; Muñoz-Chereau and Timmis, 2019; Sutton, 2019; Mannay and Ward, 2022). For example, the protagonist in Broadhead's (2018) narrative inquiry expressed the tension between her course and job that she had to reduce the time allotted to study when she had to work an extra half day to pay for tuition. A similar choice between study and family responsibilities was made when diverting time and energy away from pre-existing family commitments might place mature students at risk, such as the breakdown in their relationship with their spouse or partner (Baxter and Britton, 2001) and increased behavioural problems of their children at school (Tett, 2004).

Social isolation has been demonstrated a significant difficulty for mature students in recent studies, such as Mannay *et al* (2017), Sutton (2019), and Mannay and Ward (2022). Although isolation was a prevalent problem for all new students in post-secondary education (Peel, 2000), in his longitudinal study on full-time undergraduates of diverse ages at a university in England, Sutton (2019) noted

that contrary to their younger peers who could quickly develop a new social network after fresher week and induction activities, mature undergraduates were more likely to consistently feel isolated and disconnected from the social network at the university. Furtherly, older mature students (over 30 years old) had more difficulties in developing a sense of belonging than the younger between 21-30 years old (Muñoz-Chereau and Timmis, 2019).

Two sources of isolation for mature students were identified from the literature. One rooted in the balancing act between their new identity as students and other commitments (Tett, 2004; Redmond, 2006), such as the balance between a 'good student' and a 'good parent' (Mannay and Ward, 2022), which are inevitably at the expense of 'any sort of social life' (Reay, 2003: 308). It was evident in Redmond's (2006) research, where few of the studied 30 mature students were involved in extracurricular activities and other non-academic aspects of college life, and their interactions with peers were significantly limited, impairing the sense of belonging and led to isolation. The other arises from the exclusion and marginalization of mature students, especially those working-class and female, by the dominant discourse of, as Read *et al* (2003) noted, 'young, white, middle-class and male' students (2003: 274), and campus culture constructed on it (Read *et al*, 2003; Tett, 2004). This was consistent with Sutton's (2019) findings that isolation could be a coping strategy for effective time management or the result of exclusion and marginalisation by their conventional-age peers and the cultural environment and staff's attitudes within the institution.

4.2.2 Institutional Difficulties

Institutional difficulties were identified as those arising from all settings, practices and procedures in HEIs that excluded or discouraged mature students from being fully engaged in academic or extracurricular activities for the aim of

this study. Issues related to pedagogy and curriculum, assessment, accessibility to university services and staff were identified under this heading.

Difficulties related to pedagogy and curriculum arose from the mismatch between the needs and offers. Firstly, what mature students expected from HE was incongruent with what was provided in HEIs. For instance, the pedagogical differences between access courses and degree studies, which, as noted by Black (2022), were often teacher-centred and oriented with a definitive study scheme for the former while more learner-centred and self-directed for the latter. When mature students from widening participation programmes progressed onto higher education, they were more likely to expect to be taught and pushed forward rather than to study independently (Roberts, 2011). It was in line with the findings of Laming *et al* (2019) that some mature students in their study group possessed unrealistic expectations about university life and study. Roberts (2011) explained that such incongruence stemmed from the fact that mature students, especially those who were the first in family to enter high education, lacked the knowledge of what to be expected as undergraduate students due to limited familial support to gain relevant cultural and social capital.

Secondly, some curricula were designed underestimating diverse layers of backgrounds and extra responsibilities of mature students. Evidence could be found in some optional modules which were primarily designed and geared towards young traditional students to develop graduate attributes, and the requirement by some degrees of a long-term placement (unsalaried) for an internship which was indeed unrealistic for those with financial hardship (Wong and Hoskins, 2022). Finally, course timetabling often failed to negotiate with the available time for mature students. For example, lectures distributed across weekdays and the huge breaks between lectures were out of favour of mature students who had to balance their time between study and work or childcare

responsibilities (Mannay and Ward, 2022).

Difficulties related to academic assessment included three aspects. First, struggles to meet the attendance requirements were more likely to be encountered by mature students with external commitments (Twigg-Flesner, 2018; Laming *et al*, 2019), which arose from the difficulties of taking time off from work, limited public transportation after work, and failure in the arrangement of after-school care for their children (Laming *et al*, 2019). Second, the presentation of assessment material was mainly designed for young traditional students. Mature students, particularly those who had little experience of formal education or insufficient time allotted on campus, were more likely to find it difficult to understand, for example, criteria for volume and quality of work (Broadhead, 2018). Third, some situations which were uncommon to young traditional students, such as a stomach ache or fever of their young child which prevented them from school or day nursery (Twigg-Flesner, 2018), were not officially recognized as mitigating circumstances or reasonable extension requests.

Limited accessibility to university services was another institutional barrier identified from the systematic review and embodied in inflexible service schedules and non-geared content for mature students. In respect of schedule inflexibility, the opening hours of university facilities (e. g. library, print workshops, IT helpdesk), office hours of tutors and other faculty, and timetable of courses and activities were primarily based on the assumption that most, if not all, of students studied full-time and without work or domestic responsibilities (Tett, 2004) and inconvenient for mature students who were more likely suffering time poverty (Reay, 2003); delays in the course material uploads and course information updates on online platforms, such as Moodle, could also be challenging for mature students who needed to plan schedules well in advance (Broadhead, 2018). In terms of service content, mature students in the focused

groups of Sutton (2019) and Mannay and Ward (2022) reported frustration with fresher's week events, such as going out drinking, which were primarily considered more catering for their younger peers, and in the study of Crew and Märtins (2023), the content of employment service was reported by mature students as unhelpful and useless, especially for those with prior work experience.

Finally, issues related to staff mainly embodied in the disconnection between, such as their tutors, and mature students (Muñoz-Chereau and Timmis, 2019), the sense of exclusion by the discourse or attitudes of lecturers in class (Mannay and Ward, 2022), and inefficient communication (Broadhead, 2018), which might stem from the lack of understanding in mature students' hardship and transition experience (Creedon, 2015), and as Broadhead (2018) noted, easily frustrate and discourage them from persisting.

4.2.3 Dispositional Difficulties

Dispositional difficulties were those negative attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner. Identified negative dispositions of mature students mainly distributed in fear/anxiety (Reay, 2002; Twigg-Flesner, 2018), unconfidence/uncertainty (Broadhead, 2018; Laming *et al*, 2019), and the sense of shame/inferiority (Reay, 1996; 1997; Baxter and Britton, 2001; Reay, 2002).

Three aspects of negative dispositions were concerned in this study: academic, socialisation, and employability. Academic and social failure have been concerned as two sources of fear in the study of Ratajczak (2014) on student transition to higher educational life, and furtherly suggested applicable to mature students' HE experience by Twigg-Flesner (2018). Additionally, fear of employment failure was reported in the research of Woodfield (2012) on mature students and graduates. Given that better employment was one of the most prevalent inspirations of

mature-age students' decision to return to education, as shown in the investigation by Redmond (2006) where 42/67 of the participants were motivated by 'career goals' and '[better] earning potential'(Redmond, 2006: 124), as well as in the research of Laming *et al* (2019) where 'many' of the participants were motivated by 'a better job' (2019: 36), emotional issues related to employability were included into dispositional difficulties in this study.

Similar patterns related to academic ability, inter-personality and employability were identified in the unconfident emotions. For instance, the female part-time mature participant in Broadhead' (2018) narrative inquiry expressed feelings of unsure, 'uncertain' and 'unconfident' in her design work of course assignment (2018: n.p.), and all 20 mature participants in the study of Hope and Quinlan (2021) experienced a lack of confidence and academic self-efficacy; 'lack of confidence' in 'making new friends' were also reported by older mature students (aged 40 and over) in the study of Laming *et al* (2019: 108); '[Comparatively] little confidence' in the potential to enhance employability was shown among mature students (Woodfield, 2012: 93). Followed were depictions of the stems of dispositional difficulties concerning academic, socialisation, and employability.

Fear, anxiety and unconfidence related to academic ability and potential academic failure arose from the earlier schooling experience which were often negative, failed, and fragmented and linked academic experience with failure and inferiority (Reay, 2002). It was consistent with the inference of Laming *et al* (2019) that confidence in academic ability was almost entirely dependent on personal circumstances and previous educational experience.

Negative dispositions associated with social activities linked to the sense of dislocation generated in the process of upward class mobility which had been promoted by returning to education (Reay, 1997). On one hand, they felt shamed

or inferior for their lower hierarchical status when they interacted with the HE environment and their new middle-class peers (Reay, 1996; 2002).On the other, they felt anxious and guilty about getting rid of old working-class habitus (Reay, 1997; Baxter and Britton, 2001), a notion of Bourdieu and Nice (1977) referring to the common dispositions to his/her group or class members of how to interact with the environment and cope with unforeseeable and ever-changing situations. Additionally, guilty about being seen as superior and privileged over their former classness was also reported in Redmond's (2006) study, wherein participants indicated that they would rather say 'college' when they actually intended to refer to 'university' because they did not 'want to blow […] [their] own trumpet' and intentionally played themselves down when they were 'with people who […] [were] not from that [university] environment' (2006: 125).

Worries and lack of confidence in employability related to the primary discourse of disadvantages in mature graduates and ageism. Such disadvantages embodied in a cluster of mature graduates at the lower end of the graduate labour market (Purcell *et al*, 2007; Christie *et al*, 2018), geographical immobility (Crew and Märtins, 2023), more likelihood of obtaining non-graduate level jobs (Purcell *et al*, 2007), lower proportions of engagement in 'better quality' jobs which indicated the low level of salary, continual professional development (CPD) and other indicators of job satisfaction (Purcell *et al*, 2007: 65), and suffering of potential ageism from employers (Woodley and Wilson, 2002; Purcell *et al*, 2007; Woodfield, 2011; 2012). Although, contrasting with the dominant discourse on the employability of mature graduates, the quantitative data of Woodfield (2011; 2012) found that mature graduates were more likely to secure paid and graduate-level employment, as well as to achieve a better salary than their young counterparts, misperceptions about their employment prospects were prevalently maintained among the mature participants in Woodfield's (2012) qualitative

analysis, which indicated that most of the mature students were unaware of their potential advantages in the graduate labour market and suffered continuing stress from employability.

In summary, difficulties faced by mature students in higher educational experience in the UK context were sorted out within the framework of Cross's (1981) learning barrier model. The hypothesis of the applicability of the model, which arose at the beginning of this chapter, was thus verified. Findings of the systematic literature review were summarised in the following Figure 6:

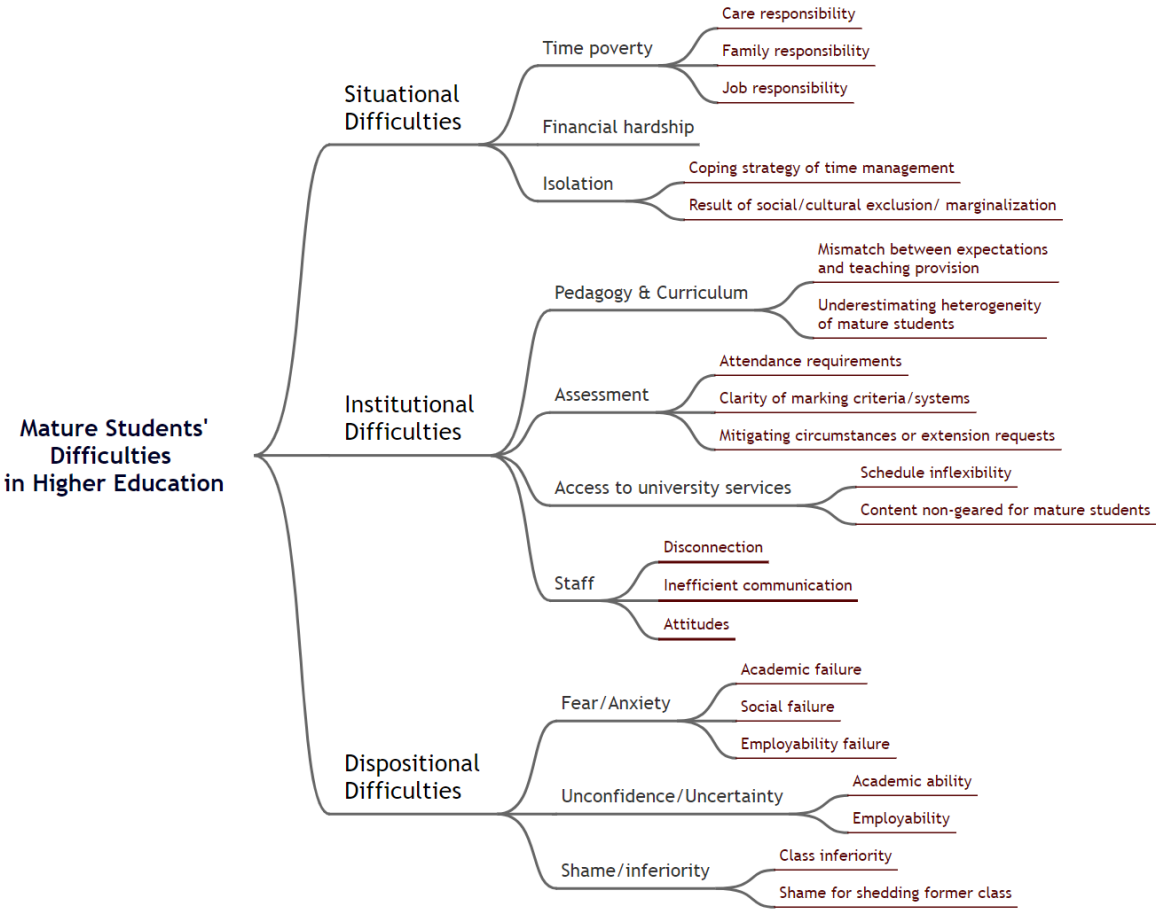

Figure 6 A Summary of Difficulties of Mature Students Identified Systematic Review of Literature Using Cross's Mode of Barriers

5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter first analysed the available support provision of RGUs, and then discussed the matchability between the provision and the needs of mature students, responding to the research questions in sections 5.1 and 5.2 respectively. Finally, an extended discussion was presented.

5.1 Available Support for Mature Students

Generally, the RGUs primarily provided support for undergraduate mature students (N=19), only a few (N=2) also supported postgraduate mature students; the available support, in descending order of prevalence, included the aspects of financial issues, social networking, caring responsibilities, academic skill development, flexible study modes, career and employability, and commuting of non-residential students.

Specifically, and firstly, financial support for mature students could be distinguished according to the source of funds and whether repayment was required. For example, student loans came from the government and needed to be repaid after graduation; others such as mature student scholarships, grants, bursaries, allowances, and subsidies were non-repayable and funded by either universities or external organisations, for example, Uversity, which is a registered charity awarding scholarships to mature students in HE (Uversity, Online). Mature students needed to meet the eligibility criteria to obtain the corresponding funding, which usually required applicants to be UK home students studying their first undergraduate degree full-time and aged 25 and above (see English universities such as University of Bristol, University of York, University of Liverpool, University of Southampton, and University of Oxford; Cardiff University) or aged 23 and over (see Queen's University Belfast). 1 to 1 consultation with a Student Adviser to acquire advice on optimal financial support based on personal

situations or be signposted to other services was available in some universities (e. g. University of York, Queen's University Belfast).

Secondly, multiple approaches were available for mature students to build campus social networks. RGUs usually established Mature Students' Officers (N=7) to represent the views and interests of mature students, Mature Student Network/ Association (N=5) to help those who wished to develop and facilitate social networks with other mature students, and peer mentors or similar key contacts (N=5) to offer peer support and information to new mature students and help them transition and integrate into university life. Virtual communities (N=4) and on-campus regular events (N=3), such as the weekly Coffee drop-ins at University of York, were also popular patterns, with the latter considered by Mannay and Ward (2022) as efficient opportunities for mature students to exchange information and experience, meet new peers, and develop new social networks.

Thirdly, more than half of RGUs supported students in terms of parenting and other caring responsibilities, with the provision for childcare more holistic than the latter. Although only 6 universities were identified as aware of the possibility of mature students taking care of others (see Table 7), as they had posted hyperlinks to available support for students with childcare and other caring responsibilities on the webpages for mature students, 13 universities (including the above six) had dedicated websites that provided support information for students with caring responsibilities and considered in this study as supportive for mature students in the aspects of parenting responsibilities (N=12) and other caring responsibilities (N=7). The childcare support had diverse forms such as campus nurseries (N=12), after-school childcare (N=6), family accommodation (N=5), and childcare grants/ bursaries (N=9), while other caring responsibilities were primarily supported through financial approaches (N=6).

Fourthly, support for the development of academic skills was another significant provision for mature students. Nine universities offered mature students access to improve their learning and academic skills, and most of their arrangement for developing academic skill service was for all current students regardless of ages or other personal characters (N=8) and one course, namely *Building Up to Bristol for Mature Students,* was exclusive for mature students (University of Bristol, Online-a). Personal Academic Tutor was the additional available support source in some universities (N=5).

The rest three types of support, although available, were fewer provided by RGUs. Only three universities explicitly stated their support for part-time and commuting students, while the University of Oxford precisely stated that all the undergraduate courses at Oxford required full-time study and students must reside in Oxford during term time (University of Oxford, Online). In addition, support for career and employability was referred to in the websites of four universities, with one of them specifically targeting mature students.

In short, and answering the research question RQ 1, support for mature students offered by RGUs was mainly distributed on four aspects: financial issues, social integration and participation, caring responsibility (especially childcare), and academic skills. Meanwhile, their attitude towards part-time study was vague, with the vast majority not stating a stance and one university stating rejection on part-time and day studies; a few universities had explicit words on available flexible options of study mode which, however, were restricted into limited majors. Additionally, RGUs' career and employability services specifically for mature students were generally limited.

However, as a reminder, awareness of the possible failure of the information published on websites in comprehensive reflection on the university policies and

the gap between policy and practice should be always maintained to avoid misinterpretations of the findings and conclusions of the study.

5.2 Match the Provision and Needs

The findings of the website review indicated that the RGUs have done a lot to support mature students from the perspective of institutional settings and reducing isolation, as shown in Table 8. However, when considering the difficulties faced by mature students (as shown in Figure 6) and the previous discussion in section 5.1, gaps were found between the support provision and mature students' needs, especially, in aspects of finance and time poverty.

5.2.1 Disparities in Eligibility Criteria: ages and financial support

Financial issues have been relatively less discussed in academia in the past two decades. However, hardship related to financial situations was identified as a major challenge for mature students in this study, and disparities existed in the availability of financial support for mature students of different ages.

The recent literature on mature students' experiences in HE has paid less attention to financial issues, possibly due to the prevalent conception that loans, grants and bursaries were available for all domestic students, consistent with the suggestion in the survey by Burton *et al* (2011) on learning barriers on a scale of 84 mature students in Wales, where financial issues were not identified as a significant barrier. However, HESA statistics of the numbers of mature UK-domiciled undergraduate entrants at UK HEIs showed a dramatic drop since 2012 (shown in Figure 7) when the English government introduced a tuition fee cap of £9000 (Callender and Thomson, 2018), which implied that financial affordability profoundly influenced adults' decision to return to HE. Furtherly, financial hardship was reported as a main reason for mature students dropping out of universities (UCAS, 2023a). Therefore, the researcher reasonably argued that

financial issues remained a significant concern for mature students in the UK context and should be included in universities' support for mature students to fulfil their commitments to social equity.

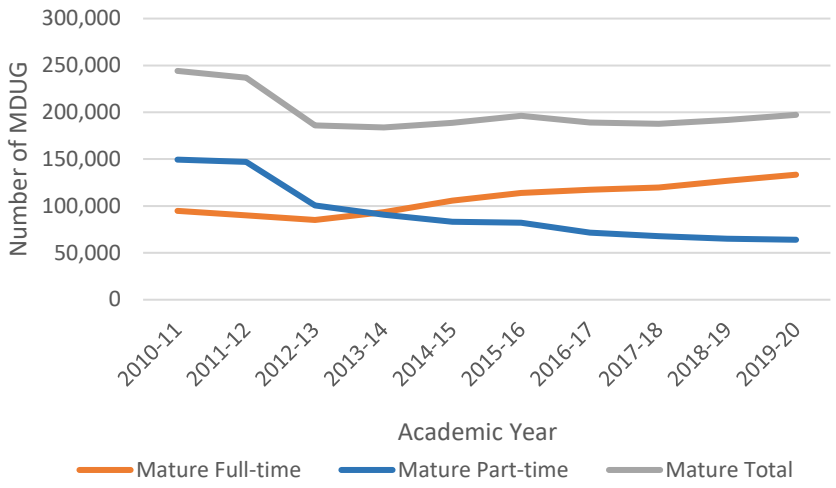

Figure 7 Enrolment of Mature Domestic Undergraduate (MDUG) at UK HEIs in 2010/11-2019/20, Split by Modes of Study [according to data of Office for Students (OfS) (2022)]

As described in the previous section (5.1), multiple forms and sources of financial support were accessible for eligible mature students, and the age requirements in the eligibility criteria were generally 25 years old and above (23 and over in Queen's University Belfast) as the household income assessment of adult students under 25 would include earnings from their parents or guardians rather than the student's own financial circumstances (University of Bristol, Online-b), which was consistent with the rules of UK government with details as well as exception criteria could be seen in the websites of GOV.UK (Online-b). However, in the UK, more than half of mature undergraduate students were aged between 21 and 24 (UCAS, 2023b), and they would potentially be excluded from eligibility. Additionally, the study of Muñoz-Chereau and Timmis (2019) found that younger mature students aged from 21 to 30 were more likely to experience financial

difficulties. Therefore, the disparities between eligibility criteria for mature students aged 21 to 24 (or aged 21 to 22 in Queen's University Belfast) and those aged over 25 (or over 23 in Queen's University Belfast) would probably lead to those who in most need failing to obtain financial support.

5.2.2 Part-time Study in Lack of Support

Part-time study of mature students was found to lack support, which was evident in neglect of the government, limited places for mature part-time applicants, and ineligibility for most of the financial support.

Lifelong education and adult learning had been increasingly emphasised in economic and higher educational policy (Hope and Quinlan, 2021). With the demographic structure shifting towards an aging population, the labour market also encountered the same challenges related to aging (Cristea *et al*, 2020), therefore, up-skilling of the existing workforce potentially contributed more to the economic productivity and innovation (Callender and Thomson, 2018). However, as Callender and Thomson (2018) noted in their report on the part-time study in England, the emphasis of the government documents related to lifelong and adult learning primarily leaned to the 'new younger labour market entrants', rather than the existing workforce (2018: 53). The need for adults with pre-existing job responsibility to return to HE has not been fully supported under the policy framework.

Tensions were also found between the demands of mature students for part-time study modes and the limited part-time places provided by universities. Mature students were often caught in the balance between studying and job or caring responsibilities (UCAS, 2023c). The results of the systematic literature review also suggested mature students usually had multiple external responsibilities outside of the university, including job, parenting, taking care of others, and domestic

responsibilities, which required be constantly balanced with their learning responsibility (Broadhead, 2018; Muñoz-Chereau and Timmis, 2019; Sutton, 2019; Mannay and Ward, 2022) and therefore held mature students in time poverty (Reay, 2003). The part-time study provided students for whom full-time study was impractical due to their external responsibilities a route to personal prosperity regardless of their socio-economic background (Callender and Thomson, 2018). However, the findings of the thematic review of websites have shown that RGUs' attitude towards part-time modes was vague, with restrained support (if any) or opposition, as discussed in section 5.1.

The reasons for the vague attitude were complicated. It might be influenced by the discourse of government documents, wherein the role of part-time higher education in the national industrial strategy seemed limited (Callender and Thomson, 2018). Underestimation by RGUs of the complexity of mature students' external commitments, which was embodied in RGUs' support for these external responsibilities mainly focusing on childcare arrangement (N=12) and other caring responsibilities (N=7), was also possible attribution. In addition, part-time study was one of the major risks of not completing degrees (Naylor and Mifsud, 2019), and the risks for older students were demonstrated much higher than their younger peers (Callender and Thomson, 2018), which possibly influenced the university strategy of student recruitment.

Mature part-time students were more likely to encounter financial hardship than their full-time peers, moreover, their ineligibility in obtaining most financial support exacerbated this situation. On the one hand, although the total number of mature student entrants has significantly decreased since the tuition cap was issued in 2012, compared to the concomitant continuous decline in the number of mature part-time entrants, that of mature full-time entrants sooner recovered and has shown a moderate but continuing growth since 2013/14 academic year, as

shown in Figure 7. It indicated that costs and financial burden were significant factors influencing mature students' decision of study modes, as mature part-time undergraduate students often had more financial demands due to their dependants and other caring responsibilities (Creedon, 2015), more likelihood of coming from disadvantaged backgrounds compared to full-timers (Callender and Thomson, 2018), and they might need to allocate more time to work to pay for their tuition fees (Muñoz-Chereau and Timmis, 2019; Broadhead, 2020),

On the other, mature part-time students were disadvantaged to meet the eligibility criteria for financial support. Although part-time undergraduate students with a course intensity of 25% or more of an equivalent full-time course were entitled to apply for Tuition Fee Loan and Maintenance Loan for living costs (GOV.UK, Online-a), the percentage of part-time undergraduate students eligible for a Loan was much lower in RGUs than in Birkbeck and FE colleges (see Table 9), as Callender and Thomson (2018) shown in their report, which suggested part-time undergraduate students in RGUs suffering more demands for other routes to financial support. However, other financial support such as scholarships, grants, bursaries and allowances generally required applicants to be full-time students (N=7).

Table 9 Percentages of England Domestic Part-time Undergraduate Eligible for a Loan

	2012	2015
Birkbeck	54%	65%
FE colleges	89%	92%
Russell Group	10%	12%

Note: The table was quoted from Callender and Thomson (2018)

Briefly summarizing 5.2.1 and 5.2.2, and answering RQ 2, disparities in eligible requirements of financial support concerning mature student ages and study

modes, as well as the neglect in government documents and limited places, indicated that gaps and mismatch between the provision of support and needs of mature students, resulting in the potential that those in the most demands failed in obtaining the corresponding support.

5.3 Extended Discussion

This section further clarified the relationship between Naylor and Mifsud's (2019) two broad areas of factors, i.e. personal and structural factors, and three categories of difficulties identified using Cross's model, i.e. situational, dispositional and institutional difficulties, and argued that personal factors should also be taken into account in improvement and innovation of educational practice from the perspective of reducing structural inequalities.

Firstly, the obstacles were interwoven with each other. Naylor and Mifsud (2019; 2020) divided the factors impacting the educational outcomes of students into structural factors that referred to the difficulties encountered in the administrative and support departments of the university, or campus norms which failed to support certain group/groups of students, and personal factors which related to one's specific situation and mental condition (2019: 19). Although quite similar in definitions, the relationship between structural factors and institutional difficulties, as well as personal factors and situational and dispositional difficulties was not exactly one-to-one. For example, isolation, identified as a kind of situational difficulty, was one of the challenges in cutting off the two sets of factors, or rather, one of the knots where the structural and personal factors were interwoven. The findings (see 4.2.1) showed that isolation of mature students could arise from the demand for effective time management, and/or the exclusion and marginalisation by the dominant discourse and institutional culture, indicating isolation could stem from either personal or structural factors. Other

knots connecting the factors could also be found in financial hardship and time poverty, as shown in Figure 8. Empirical evidence of the interweaving could be found in the research of Creedon (2015) on the impact of financial burdens on the academic and social integration of mature students in Irland, where financial hardship was shown significantly affect their concentration on the study, attendance rates and mental health condition (i.e. stress and anxiety), and indirectly contributing to a state of isolation.

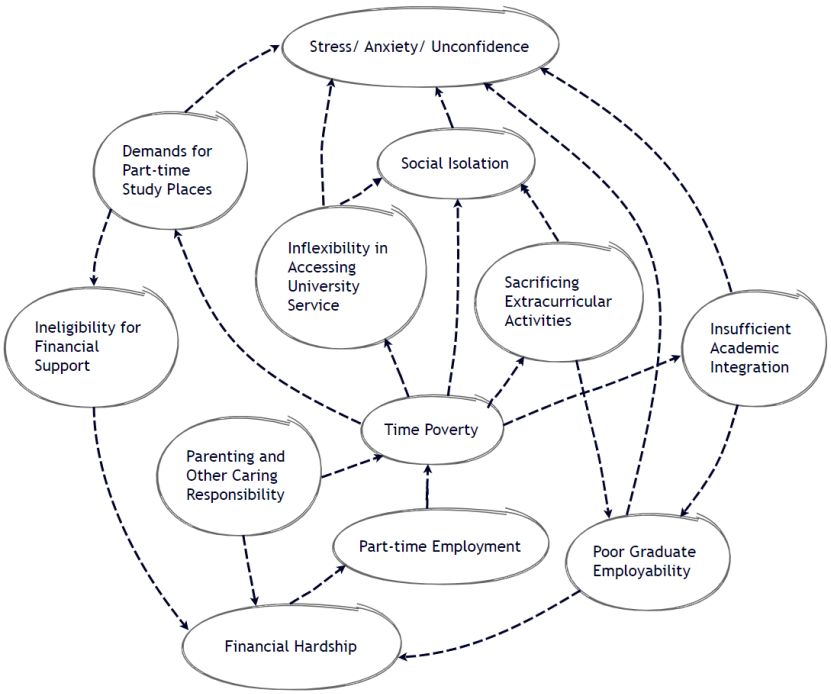

Figure 8 Interweaving Between Diverse Difficulties of Mature Students

Bourdieu's capital theories could help to better understand the interweaving of diverse obstacles. The formal/informal rules of universities (the *fields*) were developed based on the prevalent tacit assumption, as suggested in the studies of Roberts (2011), Dumangane (2016), Twigg-Flesner (2018) and Mannay and Ward (2022), that all students were conventional-entry, young, residential, middle-class, and full-time. By contrast, mature students were more likely to

come from low socio-economic status (LSES) background (MillionPlus and NUS, 2012), their financial constraints (the limited *economic capital*) and social relationships (the *social capital*) produced the *habitus* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) which had been conditioned in a quite different environment with the university. The mis-adaptation of old *habitus* to the university environment would further bring about the feeling of disconnection or isolation (Dumenden and English, 2013), like 'fish out of water' (*ibid*: 1080).

Secondly, risks arose if personal factors were overlooked. Naylor and Mifsud (2020) claimed the advantage of the structural inequality framework in separating out the constraints outside of and within the institutions to avoid possible waste of resources. Although, validation or refutation of the claim was not pursued in this study as it fell outside of the scope of this dissertation, however, the potential risks of overlooking external constraints (e.g. financial problems) were raised by the researcher. If the interweaving of diverse obstacles, as well as the individual factors especially these 'knots', were not fully taken into account in educational practices, as shown in the results of analysis and discussion in previous sub-sections (5.2.1 and 5.2.2), mismatches between the support provided by HEIs and the demands of mature students would be created and discourage those most in need, HEIs therefore hardly to fulfil their commitment to social equity.

In conclusion, personal factors, especially those knots that connect various obstacles, should also be take into account in pursuit of more productive policy changes to reduce internal structural inequalities.

6. REFLECTION

Naylor and Mifsud (2019) identified six major aspects to evaluate the culture of HEIs within the internal inequality framework, including *staff*, *students*, *curriculum, administration, campus life*, and *physical environments*. In this study,

the data primarily extracted from the RGUs websites generated relatively sufficient details for *administration* and *campus* life and less for *staff*, *students*, *curriculum* and *physical environments*.

The objectivity and comprehensiveness of information about institutional *administration* were shown one of the methodological advantages in this study due to the prevalence of online service delivery in HEIs. In responding to most of Naylor and Mifsud's trigger questions for reflexive practice (details see Naylor and Mifsud, 2019: 20), the themes and sub-themes conceptualised from the website review provided references in the following aspects of administrative concerns, as shown in Table 10.

Table 10 Themes/Sub-themes Responding to Trigger Questions for Reflexive Practice Related to Administration

Trigger Questions for Reflexive Practice	**Responding themes/sub-themes**
How well do RGUs identify mature student personal difficulties?	Awareness of Mature Students' Needs
How well do RGUs respond to mature student personal difficulties?	Strategies for Supporting Mature Students
What support is offered to mature students to navigate the administration in RGUs?	Institutional Settings
What has been done to make administrative procedures understandable and flexible?	ICT integration; Barriers on Websites
How well do the RGUs accommodate part-time study?	Institutional Settings; Financial Approaches

Note: the trigger questions adapted from Naylor and Mifsud (2019) for the research purpose

Details about *campus life* in RGUs were much accessible from reviewing the university websites. Given that part of the intended function of university official

websites was to play an active role in student recruitment, not only the informational comprehensiveness but also the possibility of exaggeration and embellishment of the reality were generated. The theme *Strategies for Supporting Mature Students* to some extent responded to the trigger questions related to *campus life* in the aspects such as accommodation options, available extracurricular activities, and supporting and representative networks (see Naylor and Mifsud, 2019: 20). However, mixed qualitative and quantitative research based on surveys and interviews is needed to gain a holistic picture of the equity in mature students' participation in campus life.

Relative fewer details of the data on *Staff*, *Students*, *Curriculum* and *Physical Environments* were extracted from the websites, which might be attributed to the possibility of published information on websites failing to comprehensively reflect university policies.

Despite less sufficiency for an in-depth overall evaluation, the data provided preliminary ideas about the patterns of support provision by RGUs in associated areas and fulfilled the demands of this study to answer the research questions. For example, the preparatory course exclusive for mature students to 'gain confidence and develop […] [their] understanding of academic language and culture' (University of Bristol, Online-a) showed that the university's curriculum was based on a deficit model, or the 'primarily capacity building' approach proposed by Naylor and Mifsud (2019: 19). Another example, some university facilities such as common room and small kitchens with microwaves and kettles, showers and lockers embodied the 'primarily structural enabling' approach (details see Naylor and Mifsud, 2019: 22-23) to support mature commuting students.

It is important to note here that the evaluation of which support model was better

or which university was more inclusive for mature students was not sought in this research. However, it provided the feasibility of conducting mixed research based on the website review and case study to examine the support provision in a particular university within the framework of internal structural inequalities, which is worthy of future research.

7. IMPLICATION

Academically, this study has filled the research gap in the reality of support provision for mature students in UK HEIs, verified the applicability of Cross's Model of learning barriers in examining mature students' obstacles in higher education experience, suggested the possibility of websites as a new 'pressure point' generating or reducing the internal structural inequalities, and proposed that personal factors should also be take into account in pursuit of more productive policy changes. The study provides a reference for future research.

Practically, the gaps identified in this study between the support provision by RGUs and the needs of mature students provided references to university leaders in developing strategies to achieve a more inclusive environment for mature students, and further, for all, which would contribute to adults' motivation to return to education and mature students' retention as well as achievement in HE, and thus, from the perspective of the market, maintain and facilitate the vitality of labour market and contribute to overall economic development.

8. CONCLUSION

The thesis has first briefly introduced the context and the study, then identified the research gap and theoretical underpinnings by reviewing the existing literature, followed by the research methodology justified with rationale. In the subsequent two chapters, it has then presented the research findings, answered the research questions, and conducted an extended discussion. The experience of

conducting the research has been reflected in Chapter 6, pointing out areas worthy of future research. Finally, implications have been identified in Chapter 7.

This mixed approach of thematic analysis using systematic review of RGUs websites and the literature on obstacles mature students encountered published from 2000 to 2023 in the UK context generated four themes regarding with the support provided by RGUs for mature students, and sorted mature students' difficulties into the three categories of Cross's learning barriers model.

Findings indicated that the age of 21 on entry and undergraduate degree level study were the most prevalent criteria adopted in RGUs to frame the definition of mature students, and financial issues, academic skills, and social integration and engagement were the top three concerns of RGUs on mature students, while financial support, improving institutional settings, establishing key contacts and ICT integration were the common patterns of strategies RGUs tending to employ to tackle the above concerned issues. In addition, barriers on RGUs' websites have been identified inductively and reflexively and university websites were suggested as new point generating or reducing institutional barriers and inequalities.

Research questions have been responded to subsequently. Answering RQ 1, RGUs' support for mature students was mainly distributed in aspects of finance, social integration, caring responsibility (especially childcare), and academic skills, whilst the support with regard to part-time study mode, commuting, and employability was limited. For RQ 2, the researcher noted the mismatch between the support provided by RGUs and the needs of mature students, highlighting the disparities in the availability of financial support for mature students of different ages and study modes. Mature students aged 21-24 and mature part-time students were argued as disadvantaged in the eligibility criteria for financial support.

Finally, the proposal that personal factors should also be taken into account in educational innovation in pursuit of reducing structural inequalities arose based on findings and conclusions of this study.

Throughout the entire research process, the researcher was fully responsible for the data collection, coding, analysis, and producing the report of study outcomes, which might be considered a limitation. To address the potential limitation and ensure rigour, procedures such as repeated reading through the content in depth and breadth, raw data and triangulation validation, and a thick description of the research process have been employed.

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