

Mature Students' Experience

Authors and Responsibilities

Autumn Chawner - Media and Communications, Undergraduate

Focusing on timetabling and developing it to better suit mature students whilst forming a case study from Media and Communications department.

Olivia Owen - Politics Department, Undergraduate

Focusing on student retention and how we can better support Mature Students throughout their Goldsmiths experience.

Victor Perri Jimenez - Politics Department, Graduate

Focusing on the resources that the University provides to better study skills and how those resources can be more accessible.

Dayana Atanasova - English and Comparative Literature, Undergraduate

Investigating the accessibility of opportunities for personal and academic growth outside scheduled learning time for students with caring and other responsibilities: reporting a case study. Introduction and background.

Emma Champion - History Department, Undergraduate

Investigating whether Mature Students are getting the most out of their learning at Goldsmiths, and how we can make it a more enjoyable experience

Benjamin Buckley – Psychology Department, Undergraduate

Providing quantitative data, detailing methodology used and highlighting ambiguity over the definition of mature students.

Gwendolin Barnard - Education Department, Undergraduate

Investigating the reasons why mature students are more likely to drop out of University.

Calum Lynn – Music, Undergraduate

Focusing on university life, investigating to what extent mature students are excluded from the everyday university environment.

Introduction and Background

The reasons why DSCs suggested that an evaluation of the experience of mature students at Goldsmiths was worth undertaking were, first of all, a sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with different aspects of the experience of studying at Goldsmiths related by some mature students. It seemed that this frustration stemmed from a discrepancy between those students' expectations before they enrolled and the reality of their experience.

One student in particular said, 'we were told that a University degree is not just about what you're taught in lectures - it was about immersing yourself in University life; unfortunately, none of that has been accessible to me'. She said that the reason she chose Goldsmiths was the college's reputation as a good place for mature students; and it was the failure of the institution to live up to that reputation and fulfil the promise, which persuaded her to study at Goldsmiths, that was the source of her dissatisfaction.

The initial purpose of the investigation, therefore, was to see whether that disappointment was widely felt, and whether it was possible to identify common difficulties faced by students classed as 'mature'. Secondly, it was our intention to review to what extent efforts at increased participation, which are, rightly, always on the agenda for Goldsmiths, are being successful; what is being done and what could be done better to support mature students once they join Goldsmiths; and what is the role of the term 'mature student' in identifying or obscuring issues faced by students coming from non-traditional backgrounds.

Aims

- To evaluate the experience of students classed as 'mature'
- Identify different types of difficulties mature students face
- Identify particular needs mature students may have
- Suggest how Goldsmiths can better support mature students

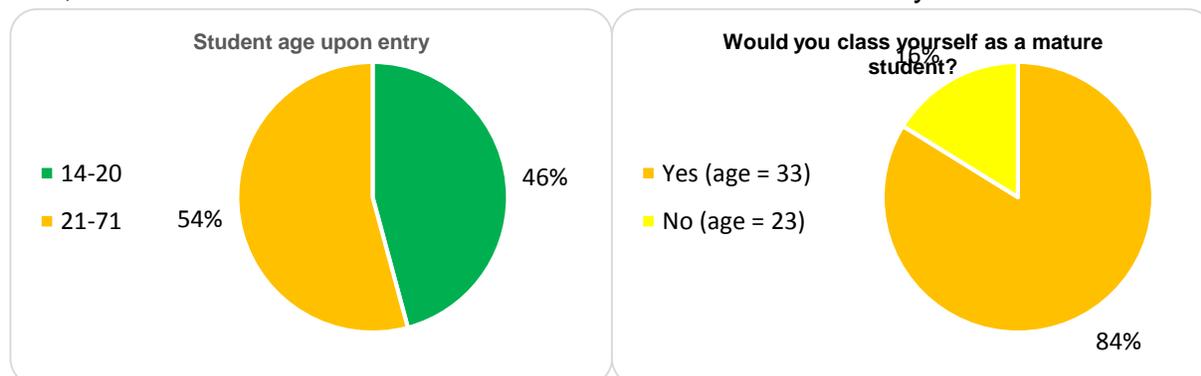
Methodology

Our report was primarily compiled with data gathered from the DSC Student Survey (n=286) and our own survey (n=68). Additional information was gathered from face-to-face meetings with the Associate Director for Student Services, exchanges with Marketing, Outreach and Recruitment, the Students' Union, members of staff from the departments of Politics and English and Comparative Literature, and our fellow students.

While our own survey has less respondents, we believe the trends it presents are representative of the wider student body because it shows the same pattern of results as the larger survey. As such, we argue that data presented at college, but not department, level should be considered as drawing from a single, large sample regardless of origin.

Mature students at Goldsmiths

Mature students at Goldsmiths are defined as those aged 21 and over at entry. A total of 4,126 mature students constitute 54% of the total student body.



However, 16% of mature students do not see themselves as such. We believe this to be a valuable insight as it reflects what we heard when speaking to students and staff: 'mature' isn't over 21. This is well represented by the average age those who do not identify as mature being 10 years younger than those who do. This suggests that a definition of mature as over 31 would be more salient to students.

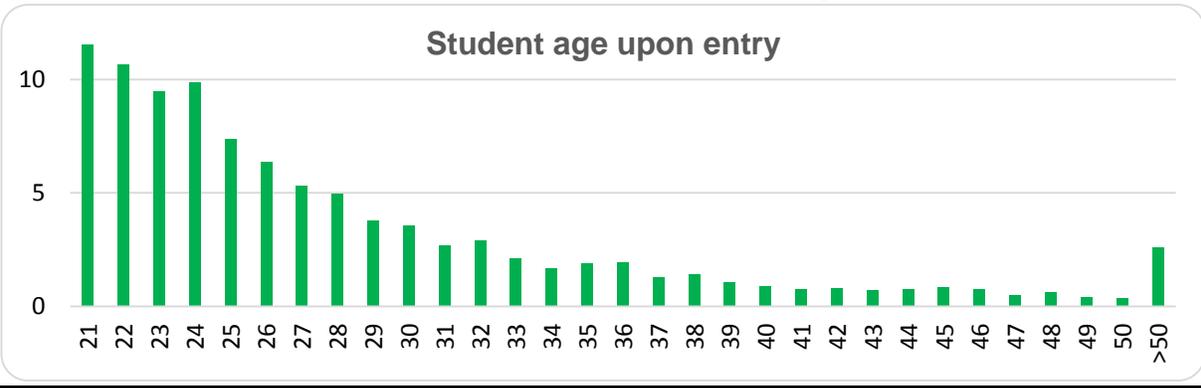
"I don't feel dissociated at all. I feel no different from any 18/19 in my year. In fact, most people don't even realise I am a mature student until I tell them." – age 26

"I don't feel dissociated and have taken part in some extracurricular clubs and classes. I just feel a bit older!" – age 26

In addition to an upward shift in the definition of mature, we believe college should consider sub-categories within it. Mature students range vastly, from 21 to 71 years: a single label is not appropriate, particularly as it seems there is somewhat of a negative connotation with the label. Qualitative data collected has highlighted that the definition needs to be both tighter and shifted upwards.

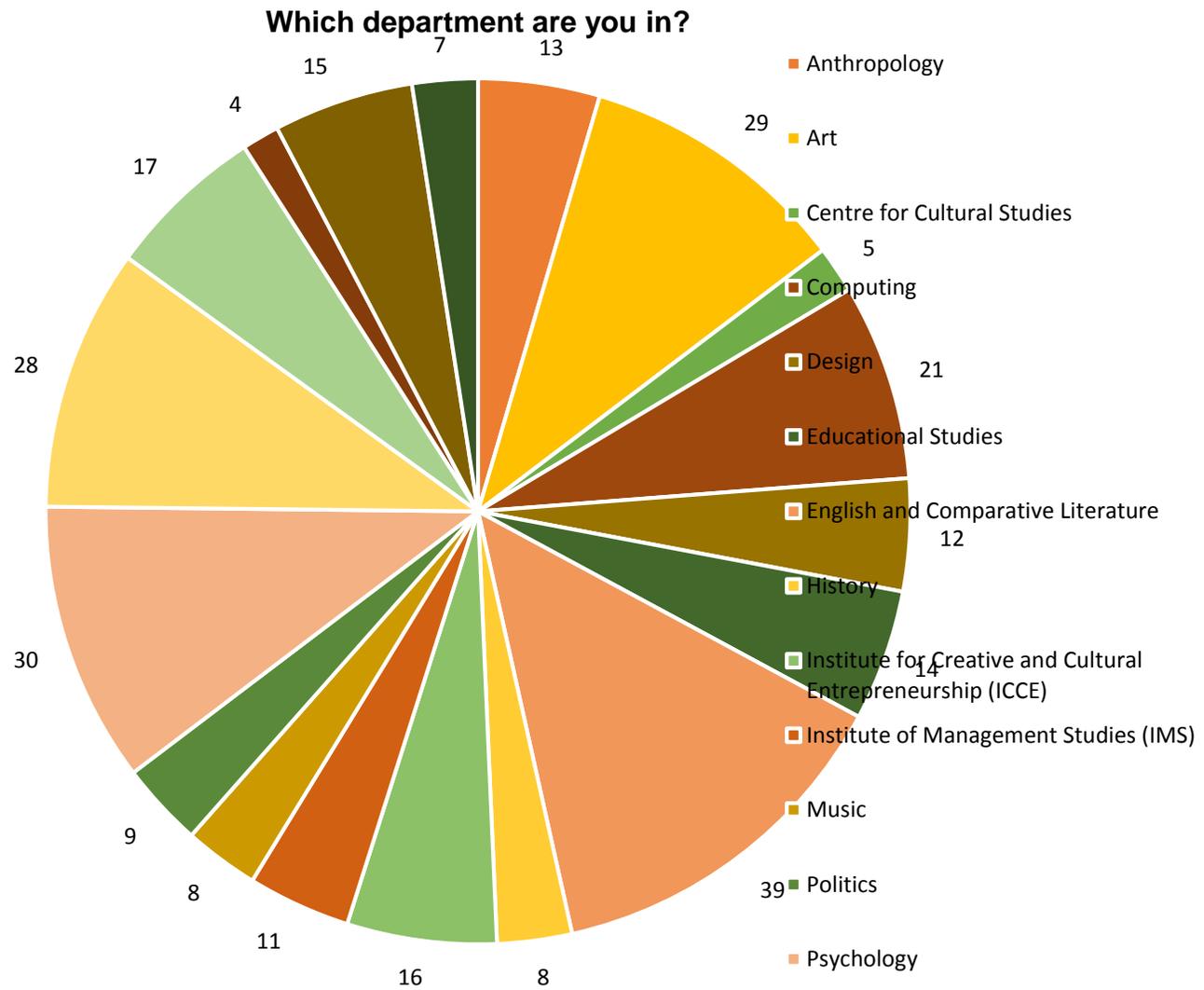
"I'm not THAT mature!" – age 27

"It should also be clearer what you mean by mature." – age unknown

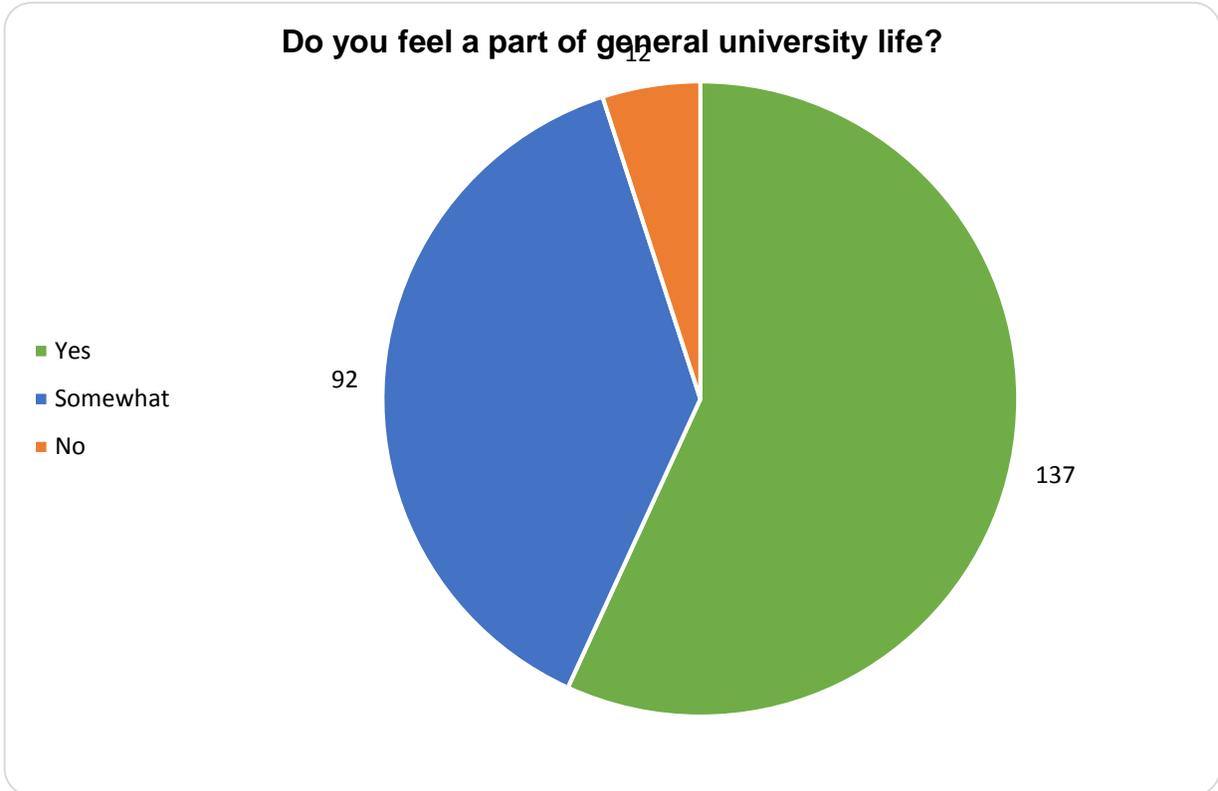


Mature students at Goldsmiths by department

(For use as reference when viewing data presented at department level.)



Dissociation from general university life



55.1% of respondents felt either fully or somewhat involved in university life. A further 16.8% felt neither involved or dissociated, with 28.1% of respondents feeling somewhat or very dissociated with university life.

Of those students who responded negatively, one of the biggest reasons they feel dissociated is due to not being able to find out information about when events are taking place. Some students commented that they often find out about events after they've taken place, and that information about upcoming events is not made clear.

Other complaints were about the timings of events- events earlier in the evening are inaccessible to those mature students who work during the day, but mature students with families find it difficult to attend events which happen later in the evening. One respondent suggested that more lunchtime events, both social events and talks, would be useful, and also events that they could bring their children to, or a "bring your child to school day".

Another criticism is that Goldsmiths lacks a clear mature student community, leaving mature students feeling isolated and unable to find other students of their age group. This is especially prevalent on courses in which the majority of students are not

mature. Respondents said that there aren't enough events specifically open to mature students, and there isn't enough guidance on how to meet other mature students. One respondent suggested that an email at the start of each term, exclusively to help mature students connect with each other.

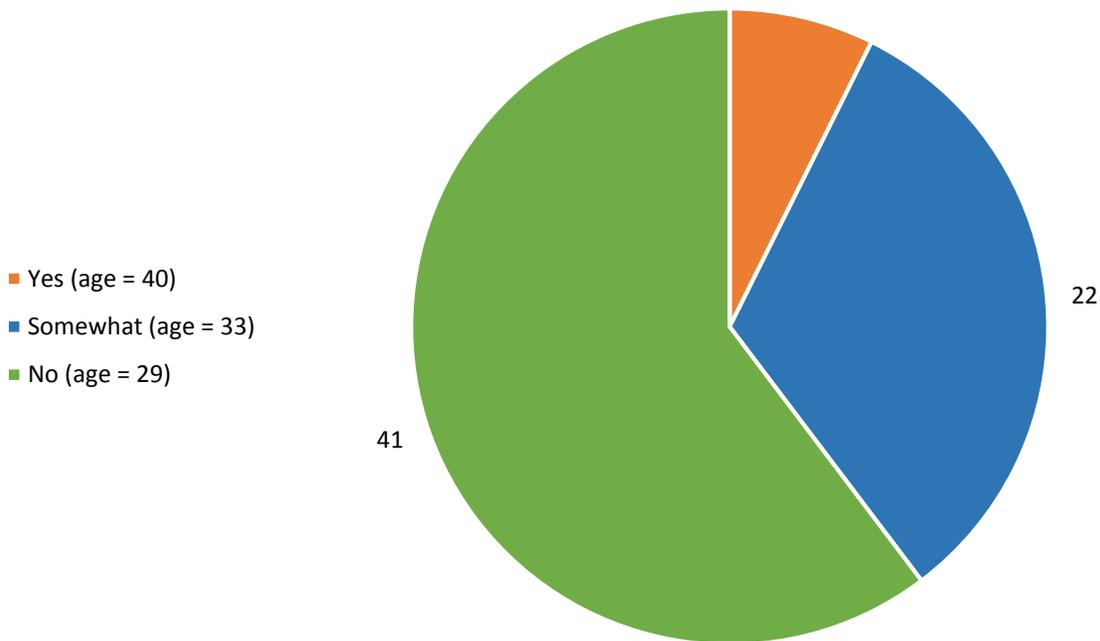
Respondents also claim that they lack a social network with which they can develop academically, as well as socially. This is a significant problem on courses which are mainly independent and don't contain any compulsory group work. As a positive example, the mature students in the department of Educational studies have their own PAL group to exchange academic issues/challenges they face.

Some respondents claimed that Welcome Week has an alienating effect on mature students, as they perceive it as being solely focussed on young people attending university straight from school. One respondent criticised Welcome Week as being about "fun and games", and designed to cater to young people, rather than it being reflective of the college-wide demographic. Another respondent suggested that the college should run a parallel Welcome Week for mature students, with a cross-departmental focus.

However, many respondents also commented that they felt included in university life, and the social circles on their course, despite their age.

Dissociation from academic life

Do you feel dissociated from academic life at the University?



Generally mature students have not felt dissociated from academic life, as Goldsmiths is known for encouraging independent learning, so everyone is in the same boat in that sense.

Mature students who “do not” feel dissociated from academic life are pleased with the University’s flexibility and its understanding that mature students might have families or other important commitments besides university. The VLE has improved greatly, so if working from home, most of the resources and information are present on the VLE for mature students to utilise for their studies. The graph shows that those who **do not** feel dissociated from academic life are largely students who are ages 29 and under. It has been mentioned by mature students who are of the ages 21-29 that they do not feel that “age” effects their interaction with the younger students, so much so that they feel isolated. In addition, with this age bracket having largely never thought of themselves as “mature students” shows that various academic events/talks and being involved in study groups with younger students has not been seen as a problem.

The mature students who feel “somewhat” dissociated from academic life do so because they usually cannot attend academic talks/events that the university holds because they are in the evening and by this time the students aren’t able to attend

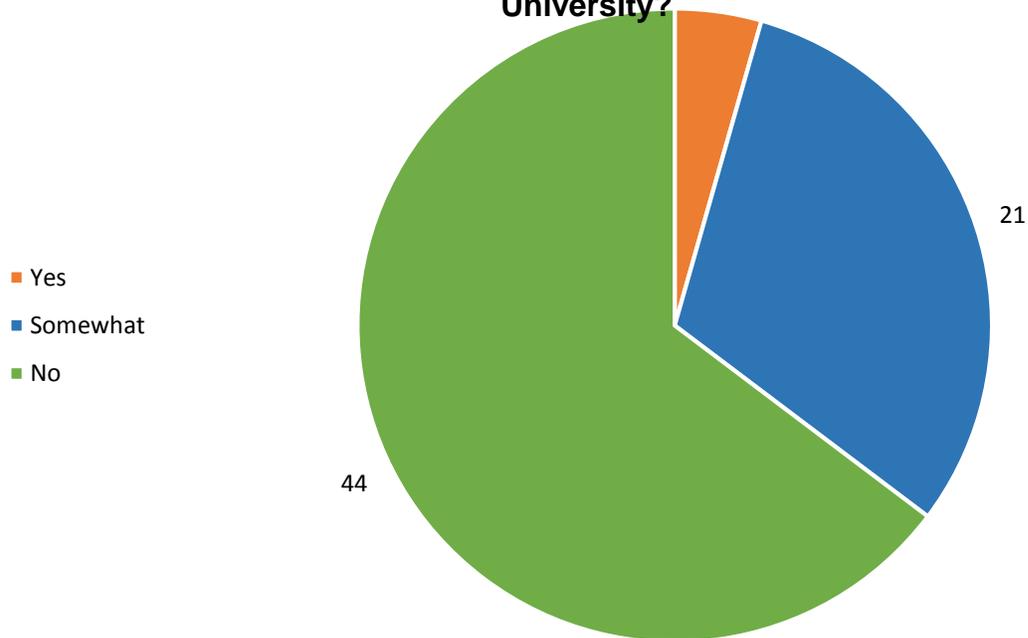
due to family or other commitments. Therefore, it would be great if when departments are arranging talks or events that some of them could be in the day time such as during lunch time.

However, the best way for one's own academic learning to thrive is to have a community of students who are studying the same course and therefore can share ideas and thoughts. The mature students who feel "somewhat" and "completely" dissociated from academic life do so because they feel that a lot of their peers are much younger than them and thus feel as though the younger students do not want to interact with them during lectures or seminars. There seems to be a certain amount of "ageism" prevalent so that the mature students cannot get as much out of their academic learning as they would want to in regards to interacting with other students on their course. Therefore, there needs to be greater effort from tutors to get their students to really interact with one another, possibly making sure to always mixing up groups when students are involved in group work during seminars. Furthermore, as some tutors teach more than one module, maybe they could be aware of who are the mature students and get them in contact with the other mature students from a different module they teach, so as to build a community of mature students within that department.

It is noticeable that those students who feel somewhat and very dissociated from academic life are age 30+. Therefore, departments need to be more aware that they cater to students of an older age. This means making sure that they are fully integrated within the seminar groups and do not appear ostracised, serving to their needs such as making sure academic talks/ events are occasionally at a time which better suits them, be more accessible to the older mature students, and be prepared to offer them "refresher" sessions on academic essay writing. Furthermore, it is important that these mature students who do feel "isolated" from their younger peers are all put into contact with one another, as they may feel more comfortable and find that they can arrange study groups with one another. If the departments could also take into account that some of the mature students have children, and if child-friendly events/talks could possibly be arranged on occasion.

Dissociation from extracurricular activities

Do you feel dissociated from extra-curricular activities at the University?



The majority of respondents to our survey indicated that they did not feel dissociated from extracurricular activities. A third were “somewhat” dissociated and a small number indicated that they did feel dissociated. The average ages of the respondents were respectively 32, 30 and 31, indicating that age is not the driving factor in this case. One student for example commented:

“There are activities for all to enjoy that are not age restricted but I just don't feel part of campus life.” – age 33

Another respondent said:

“I don't feel dissociated and have taken part in some extracurricular clubs and classes. I just feel a bit older!” – age 26

The majority of students who felt dissociated or somewhat dissociated from extracurricular activities indicated the timing of those events and activities to be the principle obstacle:

“As the classes for my course are all in the evening, we tend to feel like a separate entity from the rest of the college. As such, no one really meets anyone outside of the course, and societies and events tend to pass us by.” - age 33

Case Study

In order to provide a more nuanced picture of the reasons behind the dissociation some mature students feel at Goldsmiths, we propose looking at one case study.

The student in question is over thirty and a single parent. They are a full time student in their final year of studies and have rated their experience as 6 out of 10, explaining that to be because they have enjoyed the course content, but have not benefited from anything else the University has to offer because they have found it to be inaccessible to them. They do not feel that the age gap between them and their fellow students is preventing them from engaging with extracurricular activities, but rather the times when those are scheduled.

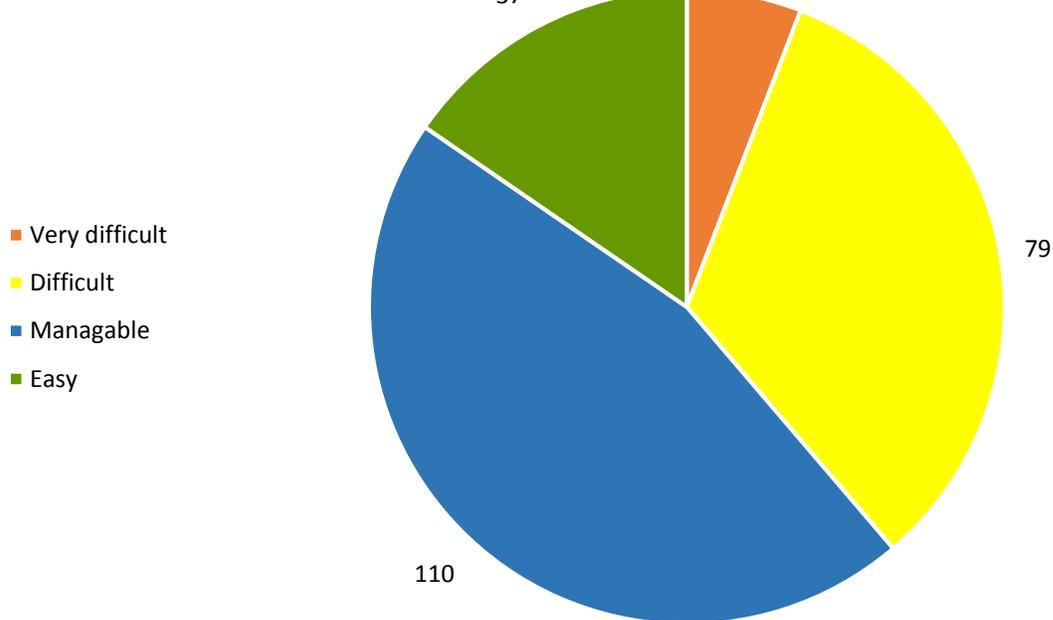
They do not identify finances as a main obstacle. They praise the financial support Goldsmiths makes available to mature students, although they mention that this could be promoted better. They have also highlighted that the requirement to hire Ofsted registered childminders in order to take advantage of the childcare grant raises difficulties. This student in particular has struggled to find an Ofsted registered childminder who is willing to take responsibility about giving their child the medication they need to take regularly. For those reasons, the student has not been able to take advantage of academic and social opportunities scheduled after the end of the average school day.

As a potential solution, they have suggested the optimisation of the use of technology in order to make extracurricular activities and academic talks more accessible to students who are unable to be physically present. They have also praised as good practice the Students' Union's offer to reimburse childcare expenses students may have incurred while attending a recent SU event.

Another important point the student has raised is that the Goldsmiths Masters Bursaries are limited to people under the age of 30. In the student's words, this is 'discrimination, which contradicts Goldsmiths' founding principle of addressing social mobility'. The student argues that the impact of increasing educational opportunities for mature students and improving the effort to retain them in education is both direct and indirect, as it impacts both the student and potentially their children.

Timetabling

How difficult is it managing the extra commitments you have as a mature student?



Although just under half of the respondents felt that they were able to manage their extra commitments alongside their studies there was still quite a substantial amount of respondents who indicated that they found it 'difficult' to manage their extra commitments. This is a problem that could easily ruin an individuals learning or overall student experience if they feel like they constantly have to juggle between their job and classes.

One respondent from the survey quoted:

'As a part-time student who is also in work, it is really essential that I can have the days I need to be in University available as soon as possible before I start the term. As I'm sure you can understand, finding a permanent fixed contract job where they are willing to be flexible around my studying is a hard thing to find so me turning around at the last minute to say that I need an extra day off work now is not good for me or for them. Having classes as much as possible on one day, instead of 2 hours one day and 2 hours another, would really benefit students such as myself.' (age 23)

Students feel that their departments can lack in organisation skills when it comes to sending out timetables and schedules. Some departments will know exactly what days

they will be in months before the term starts and some will only find out 3 weeks beforehand. This is especially the case for new courses or modules.

Departments should be more aware of the dangers of sending out timetables and schedules later than expected. By giving all students their timetables well in advance, such as a month before their respective term starts, students are able to sort out and organise their extra commitments way in advance whether it's work arrangements, childcare or various other events.

When looking into the Media and Communication department I researched a specific case study in the allocation of seminar times. The students in this department would usually have a lecture and then be allocated a seminar time, which is either straight after the lecture or 1, 2 or 3 hours after it.

Students feel that the seminar times should be more flexible with the departments giving the students the opportunity to change their seminar group in the case of an emergency or clash. E.g. the student has a reasonable reason that they cannot make that time, this reason could be justified by bringing in a work rota or such.

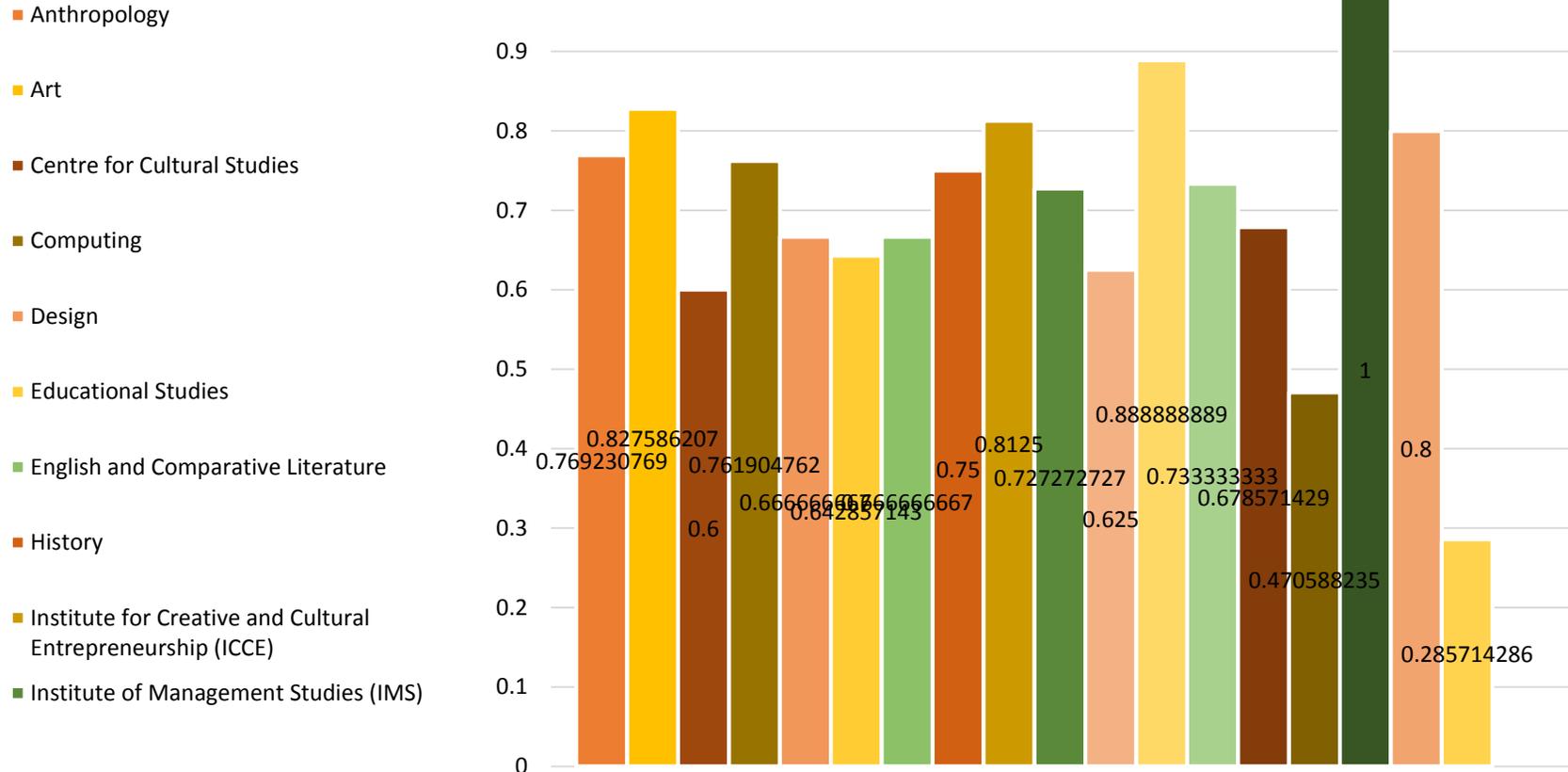
Students also want easier access to their course handbooks and outlines, which should be uploaded to the VLE prior to the start of term. These handbooks contain modules, essay hand in dates and course timeframes and could be easily distribution via email or online. Sometimes, students have to wait until their first lecture/seminar of the time to receive a copy of their course handbook that gives students a shorter period to sort out work arrangements to fit around the essay deadlines.

Although, this should not mean that the timetables are only distributed online or onto the VLE as this may not be accessible to all students, as some don't have easy access to the internet.

A solution to students, especially mature students, missing out on lectures due to having difficulty of managing their extra commitments could be encouraging all lecturers to record the lectures and upload them onto the VLE page. This practice already takes place in one of the modules in the Media and Communications department and is heavily praised. Students find the recorded lectures extremely useful and helpful when they can't attend a lecture or when they are revising later on.

Making the most of a mature student's learning experience at Goldsmiths

Proportion of students¹ enjoying the learning experience at Goldsmiths by department.



When looking into the overall enjoyment of the learning experience at Goldsmiths, there are a few factors which need to be re-evaluated. Firstly, there has been a call for better organisation in the departments with regards to reading lists and assessment information. Those mature students who have been out of education for more than 2 years are unhappy that the reading lists only come out a couple weeks before university starts - they would like more time so that they can read more and have a clearer idea of what the course will entail. Furthermore, the enjoyment of some mature student's

learning experience has been disrupted by their uncertainty of how they will be assessed. For example, one mature student has been out of academic education for 20 years and therefore does not know what is expected of them when their work is being assessed.

It has been said that more effort needs to be made to prepare students better to get the most out their lectures and seminars, this includes: beneficial study and research techniques, better tutor support system and for tutors to encourage more seminar participation. Interaction with other students learning the same material has proven at times largely indispensable, however there is a real lack of student engagement with the material, so at times the seminars are unproductive.

Lack of communication between staff and students has been called “appalling”. The tutors need to be aware that for some mature students, they are not as computer-skilled as the younger students, and so it would be nice if there was IT refresher classes especially for mature students.

Many mature students’ have felt their learning experience has been hindered by the fact they do not feel part of the Goldsmiths community. They feel dissociated from the younger students on their course, and that there are few opportunities to meet people during the courses as they are very independent. Some mature students who have contact with the younger students feel as if their habits, approaches, and priorities diverge from theirs, to the extent that they benefit little from their fellow peers.

Needs to be a greater focus and effort on mature students when informing about various events, societies, study skills, as many feel that they are left in the dark.

However, some mature students have praised their departments, which in turn has led them to enjoy their learning experience at Goldsmiths:

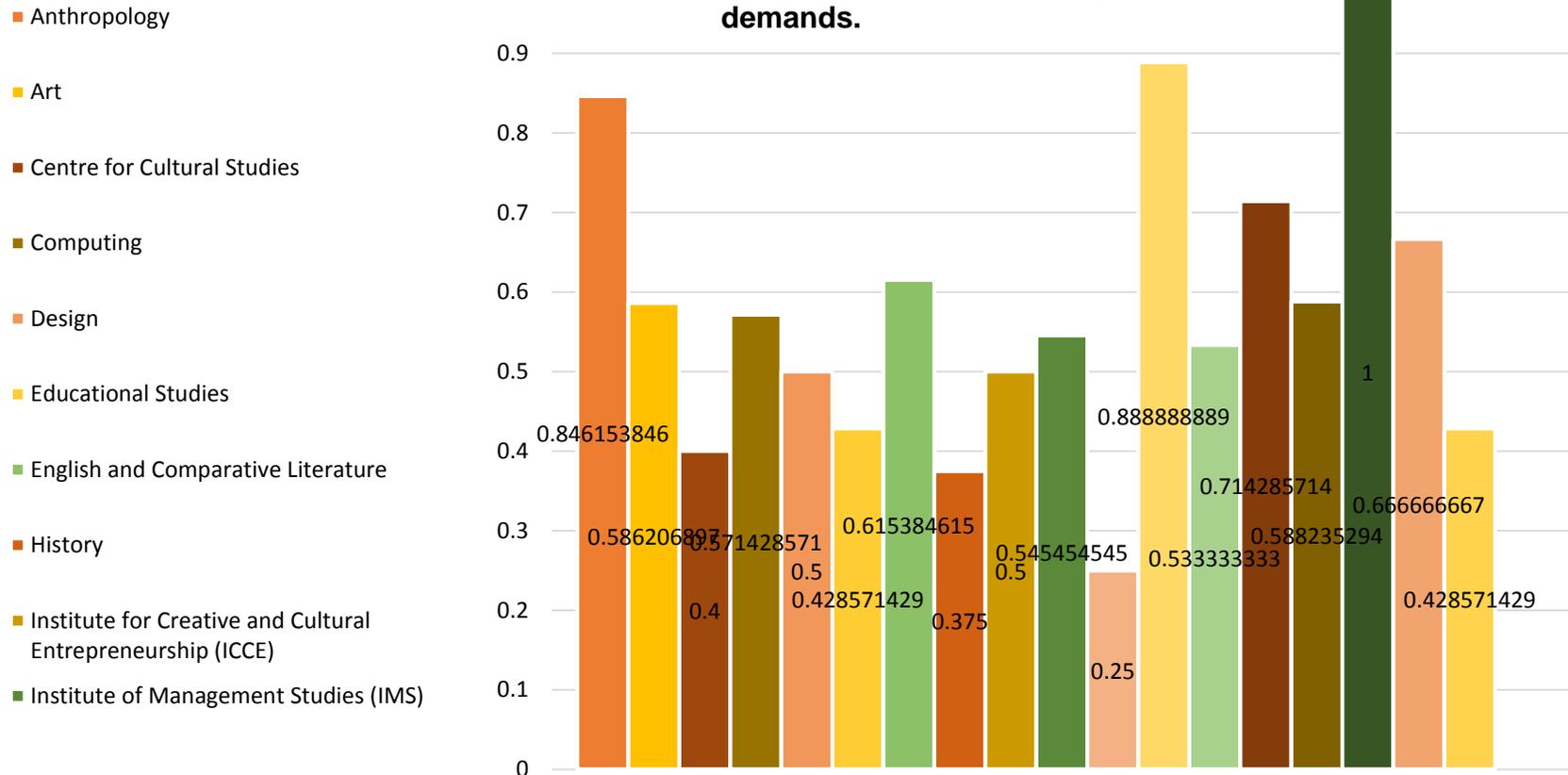
- Departments have created conditions for mature students (usually who have a family) that maximise their enjoyment and chance of success whilst studying their course.
- Some of the departments really try and engage all of their students during the seminars, such as giving them all 5 minute presentations, or group presentations so that they are all involved in discussions, rather it being just 2 or 3 people talking.
- Some tutors devote a seminar to inform the students about the exams they will take and give the students guidelines on the best way to format an answer. (Although more of this is needed across the departments)

Solutions

- Make seminars a more interactive and dynamic atmosphere, as a mature student has commented: “I believe that seminars are pointless and lectures should be compulsory and it should be a two hour lecture”
- Some academic events to be during the daytime rather than the evening, as mature students find it is more difficult to attend these events in the evenings, if they have families or other commitments. More lunch time talks/events and opportunities to bring children to certain events, and have a “bring your child to school day” where children can be brought into the lectures.
- More “re-introduction” and “catch up” classes, focusing on improving essay writing skills, and I.T. skills, with many mature students wanting a session of essay writing help **specifically** for mature students who have been out of education for a while. Maybe start up optional short courses for all years, in academic writing?
- Better organisation and an earlier display of the reading lists and assessment information before the start of the academic year
- Tutors need to encourage their students more to engage with one another, regardless of their age – as some of the mature students have experienced ageism in their classes, been said to feel “isolated” and “excluded”
- More practical help is needed, such as more communication between student and tutor. Mature students are asking for a session at the beginning of the academic year, in which the students get to properly meet their tutors on a one-to-one basis, so that the tutors become fully aware of who they are teaching (whether they have a family to look after or other external commitments) and how that student can get the most out of the course.

Study skills: accessibility and quality

Proportion of students¹ who feel Goldsmiths provides the study skills their course demands.



Most students feel that the University provides enough study skills, there is however a large degree of variance between departments (the limited sample size should be considered in the case of some departments – see earlier graph). Understandably, students feel they would benefit if the University provided more study skills sessions. Some of them also expressed feeling Goldsmiths' administration is a bit disorganized, because it is not quick enough in resolving critical issues that can help student's access to study skills and other resources needed.

While there exists demand for college to provide help with general study skills, departments should also be receptive to supporting mature students with course specific skills:

“I find Goldsmiths a fantastic environment to be in for learning. I would however, like to see more study skills events, specific to music, such as ear training and not just essay writing” – age 25

A trend identified is that students seem to be unaware of the resources college provides, with some put off exploring the VLE as it can be a bit difficult to understand at times. This suggests that a number of students represented by empty space in the graph above feel Goldsmiths does not provide the skills their course demands because they simply do not know about learning resources. This lack of awareness may be more acute in older students as they are more likely to be dissociated from fellow students that their younger counterparts:

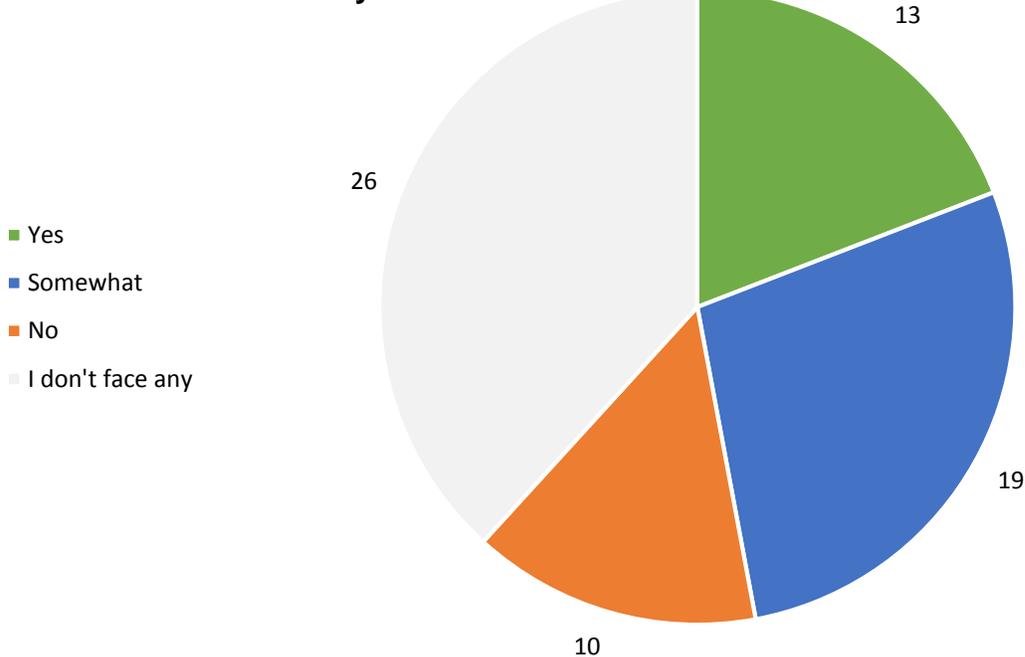
“Essay writing skills course on the VLE are exceptionally useful and well put together however finding it was an accident and essay writing support has been hard to come by.” – age 43

As such, a simple solution is an increased effort to promote learning resources that college provides. This would be best achieved by working with individual departments, learning centres such as the library, and through student representatives. Using college spaces in an exciting way could also increase awareness. Another way to help resolve this issue could be assigning students to tutors as soon as they enrol, email them *directly* who their advisor/ tutor is, that way they can refer to them if they have a question about the program, or classes. The 40% in the graph above represents the amount of students who know about study skills, however, I believe that if the study skills were more advertised, that percentage would be higher:

“My department's sessions are useful but I don't get the impression there is much beyond that.” – age 33

Supporting mature students with the additional challenges they face

...does enough to support you with the additional challenges you face as a mature student?



Feeling excluded from University life is a common feeling for mature students. In consequence, this means there is a lack of interaction with those learning the same material.

Students feel like their departments can better prepare those who have been out of education for a significant length of time to benefit from lectures and seminars - study technique, seminar participation and secondly, make the tutor support system work better.

'Initially during my Masters, I was unaware of any support apart from my personal tutor. I feel Goldsmiths needs to do more for mature students, though I realise the term "mature student" will cover people from their mid-twenties, with recent relevant academic experience, to people like me, in their sixties, for whom university first time round is a distant and not very relevant memory.' – Age 63

Student retention is affected by the University's lack of distinction between those "mature students" in their mid-twenties, with recent relevant academic experience, to others, in their sixties, for whom university first time round is a distant and not very relevant memory.

Extra support financially is crucial to support the demographic we researched. Mature students tended to have more commitments or arrive at the institution with financial constraints/debts. In consequence, this means that the students have less valuable time to focus on coursework which puts further strains on their wellbeing at University. Students who support family members (e.g. single mothers) and are disengaged from University life as all social events tend to be in the evenings, have been forced to withdraw from their studies. Without additional support to pay fees, travel and other expenses incurred, it is unlikely that they will be able to return to their studies.

"It has been impossible for me as a single mother to attend any events (social or academic) as these are all in the evening. Financial support has been minimal, despite a small bursary I am currently withdrawn from studies as I am unable to pay fees, travel and other expenses incurred. I hope to be able to return next year, but am not entirely confident that I will be able to do so. Whilst individual lecturers have been sympathetic to the constraints on my time etc, I find the structure of learning and student life to be very much geared toward younger people with no dependants, with little flexibility toward individuals in other circumstances." Age unknown

The average age for our study was 30, 32, 33, 30, so it is clear that age is not the driving factor in how mature students are supported during their experience at Goldsmiths. With that considered, we've outlined some best practice suggestions as it is their individual responsibilities and experience that affects them the most. Firstly a recognition of how the learning experience is largely directed towards students coming from traditional backgrounds without dependents. A simple solution would be an endeavour to bridge the gap between those out of education for significant time/with dependents and those readily prepared for university studies by monitoring the enrolment process. This would be achieved by recognising that the communication system during enrolment could be tailored to inform those with varying needs of the services on offer. Secondly, offering refresher/catch up classes for an honourable duration of time to significantly support those with varying needs. This would save valuable time for those who are particularly restricted with how much time they can allocate to their studies.

Retaining Mature Students:

When it comes to the reasons for dropping out, the results have shown that first and foremost mature students are more likely to have more commitments outside of university such as work and family; making it harder to cope with the workload and to socialise with students.

As it has already been mentioned one major factor is timetabling. It was mentioned by one student that their department tries to keep the days they have to come in to class to a minimum to 2-3 days/week, which makes it easier for them to manage other commitments:

'It will never be easy to combine family and study but thanks to the department for creating conditions that will maximise the chance of success of this, e.g study over 2-3 days only'

Some departments such as Educational Studies have in the past made sure that reading week coincides with half-term so that childcare arrangements are facilitated.

Another point that has been mentioned numerous times was the financial strain and the lack of bursaries that are directed at mature students' needs and situations. One student suggested that help regarding finances, especially debts would be extremely appreciated:

'As a mature student coming to Goldsmiths I started off already with debt already, unlike most undergraduates which means that I have had to work extra hard to ensure I stay on top of things financially and educationally. More information regarding financial assistance, bursaries available and help in dealing with debt would have been beneficial.'

One student we talked to already had a student loan and was not able to access funding for their second undergraduate. They had to drop out in the middle of the first year as the financial burden was too big. Unfortunately they could not obtain a second student loan as they already one. Even though this is due to the fact of the Student Loan Company's policies, it is still suggested to think about more funding opportunities for students from non-traditional backgrounds. Their expertise and experience – be it professional or academic – should be seen as an asset to the student community and could benefit the learning and teaching experience around Goldsmiths. As already said, the age limitation of the Master bursaries excludes many students over the age of 30 of pursuing their studies.

Conclusion and table of recommendations

Firstly, we argue that the older mature students should be the focus of college efforts to support mature students. Our findings show that the older the student the more dissociated from academic life they feel. Furthermore, given the perception of 'mature' is approximately 10 years older than the strict definition, we suggest that a new, working definition is considered. Ideally, an appreciation of the large range in the age of mature students should be factored in to all decisions related to supporting them.

Another important factor that appears to contribute greatly to a given student's ability to feel included and fully benefit from the University experience is the presence of other significant commitments, such as caring and employment responsibilities. However, given that our focus was more general, we suggest that it is worth investigating the experience of those students further.

List of recommendations

1. Work with the Students' Union to establish multiple mature student societies, each loosely advertised as catering for specific age range. A single society would likely a large proportion of all mature students as there is no consensus on what 'mature' is.
2. Work towards establishing Mature Students and Student Parents Officers as full-time sabbatical roles in the SU for greater consistency of representation each year.
3. Work with the various Departments so that "refresher" and "catch up" classes which cater to the mature students who have been out of academic education for a number of years.
4. Work with the I.T. services so that they could introduce "I.T. skills" sessions, to cater for the mature students who are not confident on how to use computer software and the internet.
5. Work with departments, learning centres, student representatives to promote learning resources the college does provide, particularly when departments do not. Furthermore, come up with engaging and novel ways of increasing awareness to students who do not know they exist, including via channels not yet employed.
6. Focus efforts on recruiting a mature student PAL for each department where possible, to help mature students establish a community and a support network when they join Goldsmiths.