



# Toolkit For Impactful Lifelong Learning In The 21st Century

A support guide for the  
academic advising of mature  
and part-time students

Conor Buggy, Cheyenne Downey, Catherine Tormey,  
Eleni Theodoraki, Caitriona Cunningham  
College of Health and Agricultural Sciences  
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**Authors:** Conor Buggy, Cheyenne Downey, Catherine Tormey, Eleni Theodoraki, Caitriona Cunningham

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**Contact the Author(s):** [conor.buggy@ucd.ie](mailto:conor.buggy@ucd.ie)

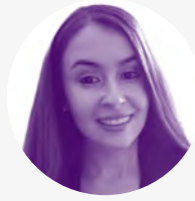
# Welcome



## About the Authors



**Dr Conor Buggy** (Associate Professor in Occupational and Environmental Studies) of the UCD School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science is Programme Director for the MSc in Occupational Safety and Health as well as being an Adjunct Lecturer at Trinity College Dublin (TCD). Conor has a significant interest in the impact higher education can have on adult learners and has been recognised for his work in this area through teaching awards at UCD. Conor's primary research interest lies in the impact education has on organisations to promote occupational behavioural change, research into emergency management and emergency response in occupational settings as well as research into the diversity, health, and wellbeing of the LGBTQI+ community in Ireland. As an openly queer scholarly community member, Conor has been widely involved in the implementation of Equality Diversity and Inclusion initiatives across his university community including supporting the ongoing development of inclusive curriculum design to support equity of potential in all learning. In 2020 he co-authored the following resource guide for higher education institutes - "Safeguarding, Supporting, and Supervising Gender Minority Students in Institutes of Higher Education".



**Ms Cheyenne Downey** (Research Assistant)

previously worked in the School of Medicine at UCD from August 2020 and later commenced a position in the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science in September 2021. Following her studies in Sociology from 2015-2018, she grew interested in social constructs and societal roles placed on adults and children. With key interests in childhood trauma, children's schooling experiences / pedagogy and children's wellbeing, Cheyenne received her Master of Science (MSc) in Children and Youth Studies from the School of Education at UCD in 2019. Her thesis on the topic of childhood trauma was awarded first-class honours, and her research was later published in the European Journal of Trauma and Dissociation in early 2022. Throughout her MSc, she studied the history of education and examined various dynamics of pedagogy and how education contributes to a child's development and welfare. The research she contributed to in this project has enabled her to further investigate the importance of education for mature and part-time learners, particularly for those who are parents and caregivers.



**Ms Catherine Tormey** (Senior Dignity and Respect Support Adviser) works in the UCD Dignity and Respect Support Service. Catherine is committed to contributing to the development of a culture of dignity and respect at

UCD where every person's contribution is respected and valued and they experience a sense of belonging. Prior to joining the UCD Dignity and Respect Support Service Catherine worked for five years as UCD Mature Students' Adviser in the UCD Access and Lifelong Learning Centre (ALL) where she provided personal and practical support to mature students throughout their learning journey. She was part of the team which embedded the University for All initiative, a whole-institutional approach to inclusion, in UCD. Catherine is particularly interested in external factors which impact the mature student's learning experience and has presented on her work both nationally and internationally.



**Prof Eleni Theodoraki** (Professor in Sports Management) is Head of Subject at UCD School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science. Prior to UCD she held lectureships at De Montfort University

1995-1996, Loughborough University 1996-2008 and an associate professorship at Edinburgh Napier University 2008-2020. In the last 27 years of her work in higher education she has supervised and co-supervised nine PhD students to completion and has a wide range of teaching expertise covering the subject areas of Sport Management, Research Methods, and Event Management. She has taught in English, Scottish and Irish universities face to face and via online teaching and learning. Her overseas teaching involved teaching in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. Her visiting posts involved teaching in French, Italian and Greek higher education institutions. Between 2010-2013 Eleni served as commissioner in the Commission for a Sustainable London 2012 where she was appointed by the then Mayor, now British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. Since 2013, she has acted as an academic expert to UNESCO and since 2018, expert to the European Commission.



**Dr Caitriona Cunningham** (Associate Professor in Physiotherapy) is an Associate Professor at UCD School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science. Her research focuses on musculoskeletal health, related health services and promotion of physical activity and exercise in health and disease. Her research has been widely published in international refereed journals and conferences with regular invited lectures and international research, editorial and health service consultancy roles. A former Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning at her school, she continues to promote excellence in teaching and education developments, leading on major curriculum enhancement projects. In 2015, she co founded the innovative UCD Physio Hub to facilitate the delivery of Physiotherapy-led exercise and health promotion programmes to a wider community and provide 'real world' learning and research opportunities. Caitriona is a longstanding member of UCD's Widening Participation Committee, is Chairperson of UCD's Widening Participation Outreach Coordinating Network and was appointed as a University for all Faculty partner in 2021. She has been a Mature Student Applications Committee member at her school for several years.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to initially thank the Higher Education Authority in partnership with University College Dublin for funding this project as well as their review team for their insightful feedback as the toolkit took shape.

We would like to extend our gratitude to our three student partners – Mr Barry Bessant, Mr Jerome White and Mr Shane Prendergast who gave their time and insights of their experiences as current mature students to the formation and direction of the project.

Without the significant input from existing mature and part-time students, alumni and the UCD Student Adviser team this project would not have come to fruition, so we extend our sincere gratitude to them for their time, their insights and their encouragement of our team for the development of this toolkit.

We are eternally grateful to our inspirational colleagues at UCD Access and Lifelong Learning - Dr Bairbre Fleming with her expertise and knowledge for the conceptualisation of this project and her exceptionally generous colleague Dr Lisa Padden for her invaluable advice and independent review of the toolkit, their insights have strengthened our work throughout.

Our graphic designer Eileen Dunne from Darling has done tremendous work creating a visually appealing and accessible document for us with her creative flair and innovation for which we are all blown away by.

Finally we would like to thank our Head of School Professor Catherine Blake, our College Principal Professor Cecily Kelleher and our College Vice-Principal for Teaching and Learning Dr Jonathan McNulty for their support of this project.



## Dedication

This toolkit is dedicated to all the academics, administrative and support staff that put their students first by striving every day to create a learning environment where all students can flourish and excel. It is not easy and it requires perseverance, patience, innovation, creativity and most importantly team work.

We see you, we see your efforts and we salute you all.

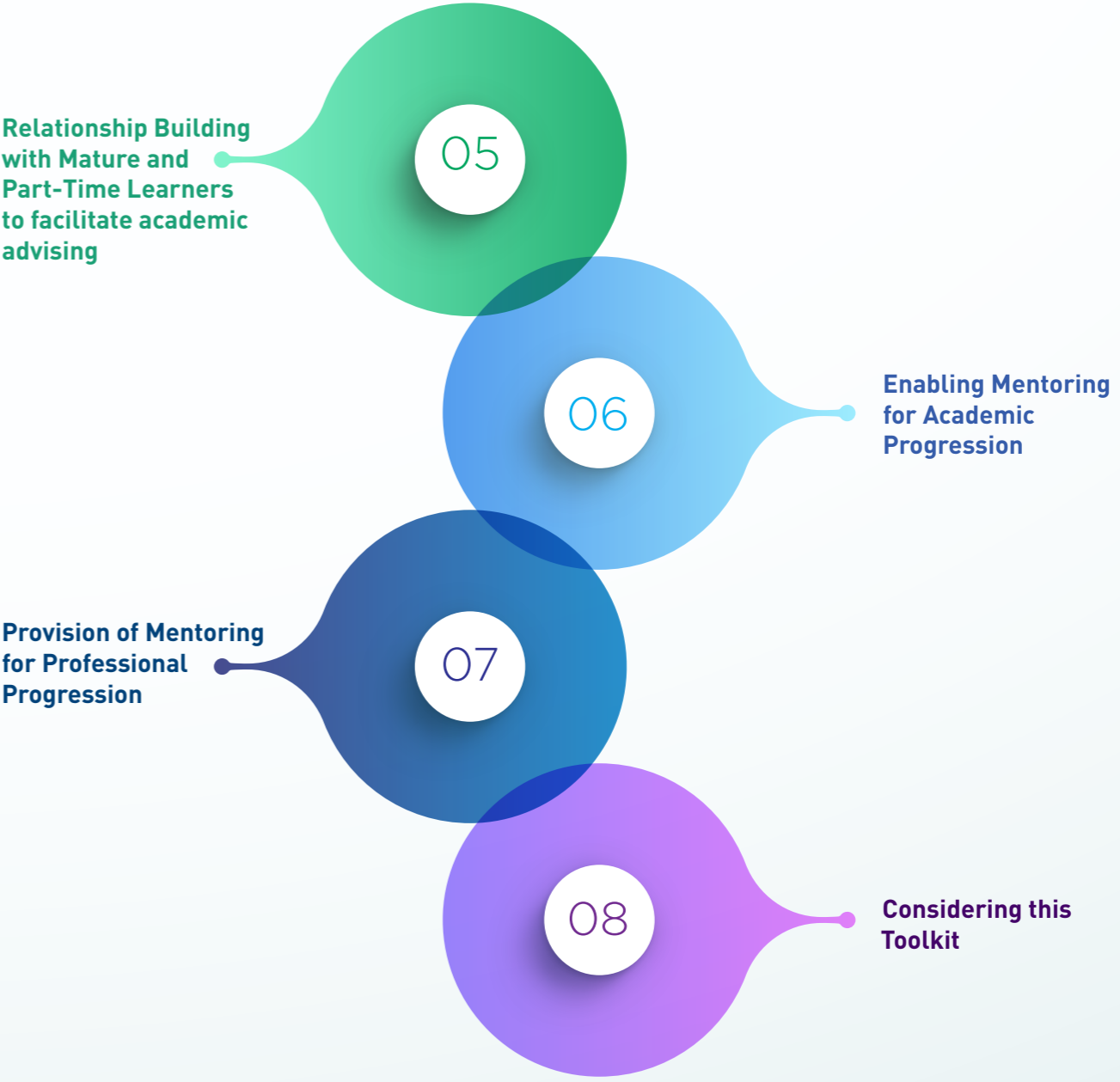
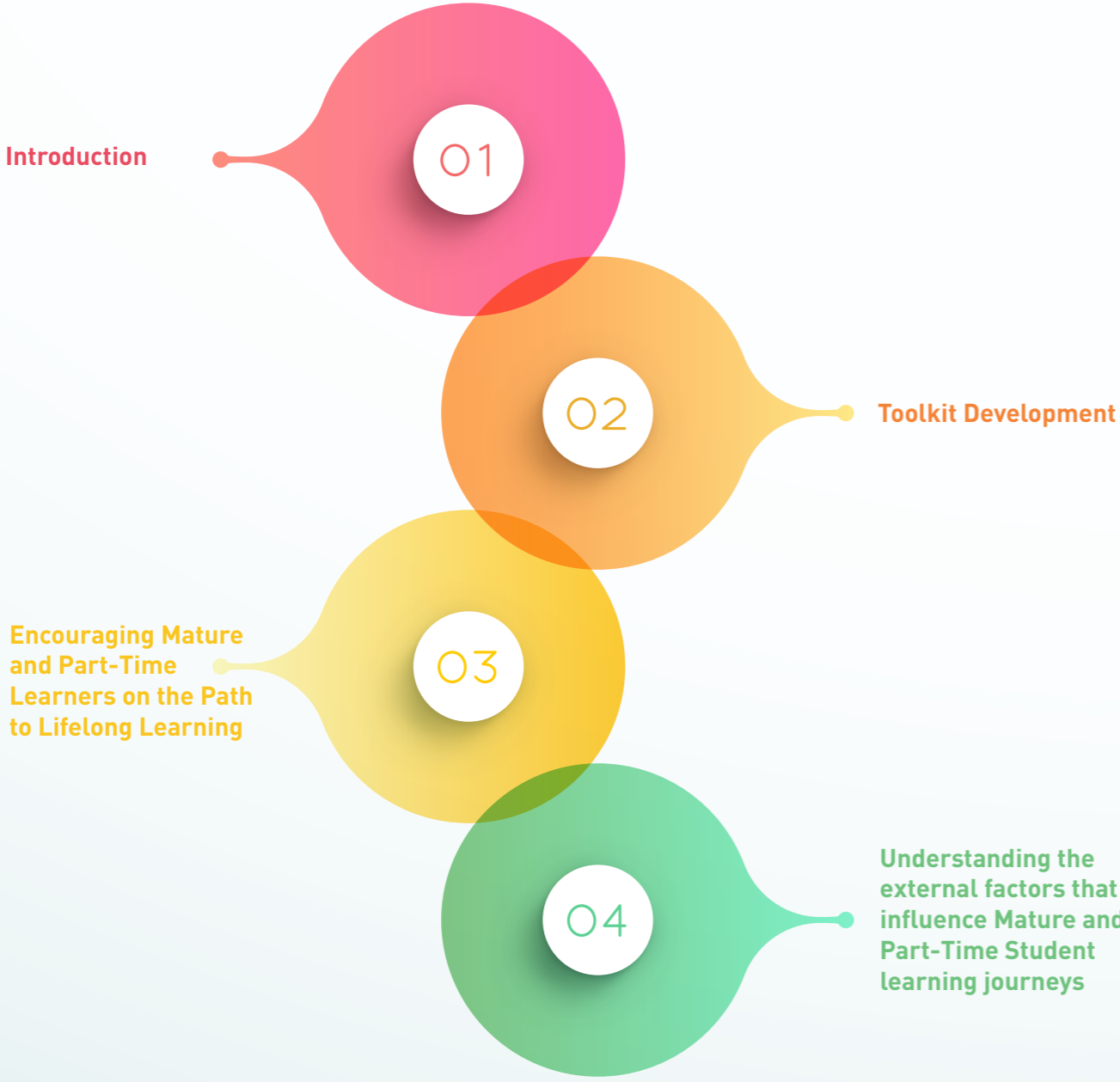


**“I do like the interaction, because I feel I learn from my peers. I learn a lot from being involved with people in the same situation as me.”**

**- Alum 5**



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# 01.



## Introduction

### 1.1

#### Why develop this toolkit?

Academic advising is not for the faint of heart, for many academics engaging in one-on-one settings with their students can be daunting, sometimes possibly intimidating and significantly time consuming. That's not to say that all academics feel that way about advising their students but all of us as academics at times can feel uneasy about guiding students in decisions they need to make about their future. We are conscious that we may not always understand the student's full personal circumstance and are cautious of giving advice which may not benefit the student in the way intended. This can be especially so when interacting with mature and part-time students who come to higher education with a wealth of their own lived experiences and often specific ideals and goals they wish to achieve on their learning journey. Mature and part-time students can be wonderful forces of nature in their own right and for many academics that teach and support them as well as their fellow students, interacting with them can often require foresight, fortitude and flexibility in order to maximise the significant positive potential they can bring to a classroom.

There are ways to make advising more open and accessible and often more efficient and impactful in the long run, especially for mature and part-time students who have come to higher education via different entry pathways to most students. Our team that is predominantly based in the UCD School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science (SPHPSS) has wide ranging expertise when it comes to enabling mature and part-time students to forge their educational path and advising them on their learning journey and we wanted to share some of how we engage with students with our colleagues so that other academics can benefit from our experiences (and the mistakes we made to get to this point).

Our team takes inspiration from our interactions with our universities Access and Lifelong Learning team and their strides forward in enhancing learning experiences through the adoption of the principles of Universal Design in Learning (UDL) (Kelly and Padden, 2018). The principles of UDL run throughout our toolkit and while it focuses on and was designed with mature and part-time students in mind, the insights we gained and the approach we present in the toolkit can inform academic advising to the benefit of all students and not just mature and part-time students.

While academic advising cannot fulfil all aspects of support for our students, it can go a long way to engaging them at the start of their learning journeys so that they can see the benefit of lifelong learning and maintaining links with their institutes as alumni.

## 1.2

### How can this toolkit support academic advising?

NACADA (National Academic Advising Association) the global community for academic advising presents a framework of three core competencies that academic advisors should build their roles around (Figure 1.1) in order for meaningful and impactful advising processes to take place between academics / tutors and their students. When considering this core competency framework our toolkit aims to provide support for achieving and sustaining competency in the RELATIONAL aspect of advising.

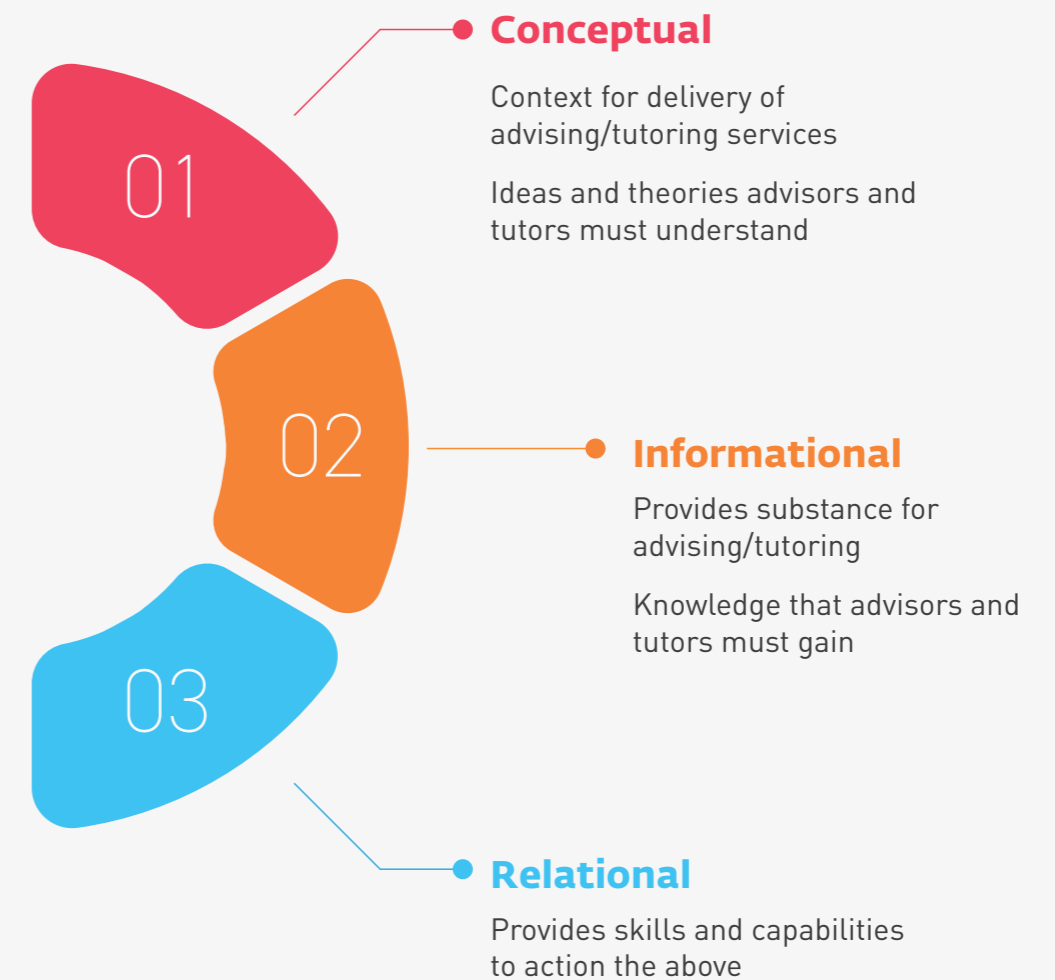


Figure 1.1 NACADA Core Competencies Framework

NACADA further defines the abilities required for the core competencies in the relational aspect (skills academic advisors must be capable of):

- Articulate a personal philosophy of academic advising;
- Create rapport with students and build academic advising relationships;
- Communicate in an inclusive and respectful manner;
- Plan and conduct successful advising interactions;
- Promote student understanding of the logic and purpose of the curriculum;
- Facilitate problem solving, decision-making, meaning-making, planning and goal setting; and
- Engage in ongoing assessment and development of self and the advising practice.

As you progress through the toolkit you will engage with research, resources and proposals which can aid you in your journey to achieve or reinforce these capabilities to support all students and not just mature and part-time students.

Our university has a working definition of academic advising as per Figure 1.2 which we needed to consider as we approached putting this toolkit together. The working definition was important to how we engaged with mature and part-time students and alumni on their perception of what academic advising is and how it could be used to help them on their learning journey.

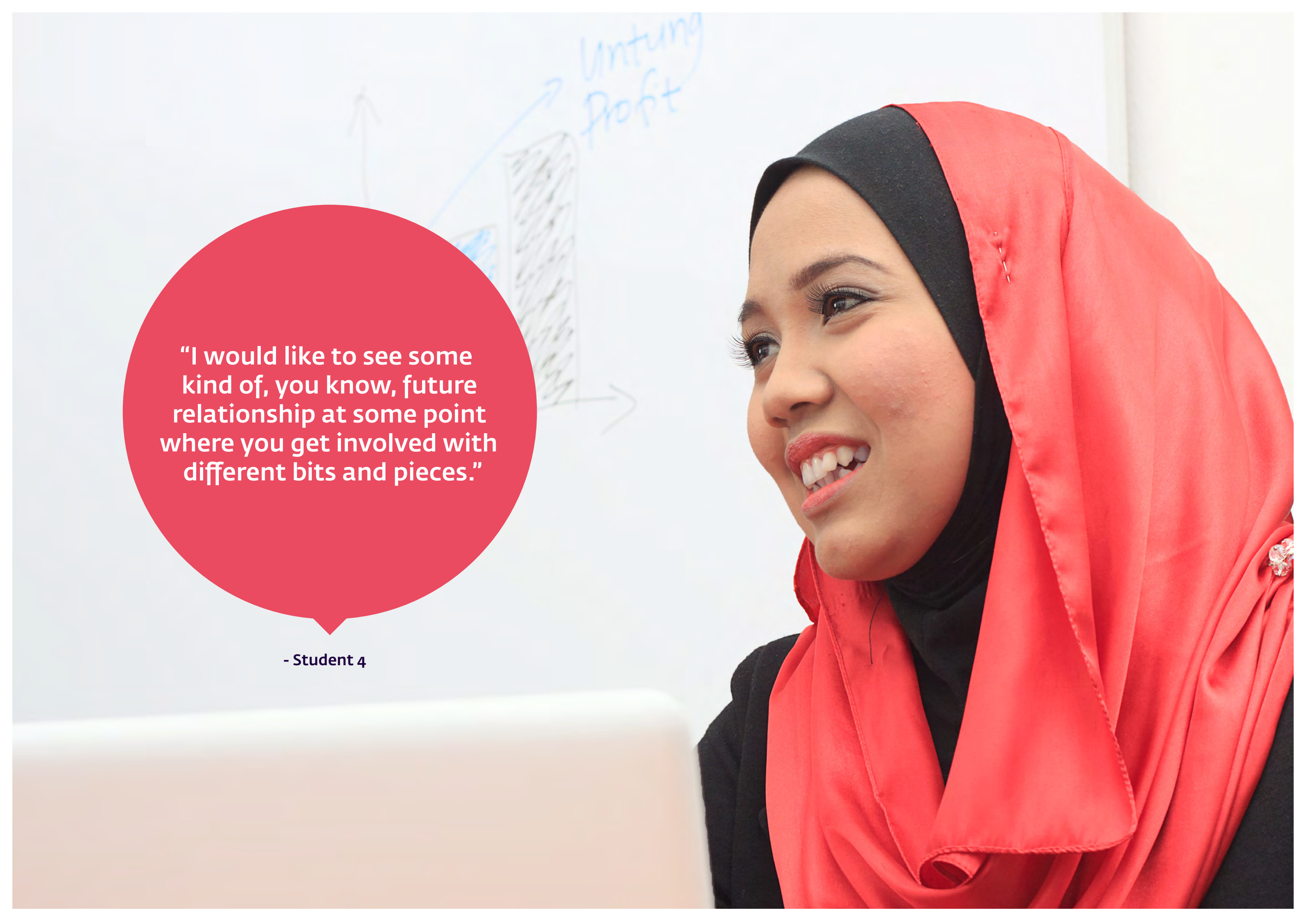
### UCD's Working Definition of Academic Advising (January 2022)

Academic advising is part of the educational experience, where students are supported by faculty in making appropriate choices from a wide range of opportunities towards achieving realistic academic and professional goals.

### Objectives of Academic Advising

-  To evaluate personal interests and abilities leading to the creation of realistic academic and professional goals;
-  To develop an educational plan that leads to the timely completion of educational goals;
-  To develop the critical thinking and independent decision-making skills to make and accept responsibility for academic decisions;
-  To understand the most appropriate choices to make in order to achieve goals (module or major choices, for example);
-  To know what the most appropriate research opportunities are to support educational and professional goals; and
-  To know what the most appropriate internship, study abroad and or co and extra-curricular opportunities are to support educational and professional goals.

Figure 1.2 UCD Working Definition and Objectives of Academic Advising (2022).



"I would like to see some kind of, you know, future relationship at some point where you get involved with different bits and pieces."

- Student 4

While this toolkit could not address all of the objectives, we developed a toolkit that would provide background information from existing research reinforced with input from our students and alumni (via focus groups). This then allowed us to gather potential resources and develop proposals for our fellow academics to use to fulfil the first objective while also enabling an environment where the other five objectives could also be fulfilled.

Primarily our toolkit is targeted at contributing robustly to the first objective listed in Figure 1.2. The toolkit focuses on mechanisms that enable us as academics to foster an open and welcoming educational environment where we can evaluate the personal interests and abilities of our mature and part-time students leading to the creation of their own academic and professional goals that are both realistic and achievable. Such an environment needs to be accepting of the diversity of the mature student cohort, as well as the multiple factors which may impact their learning journeys. Our team also needed to consider as we acknowledged that diversity, the potential intersectionality of this cohort as many mature and part-time students can have disabilities or can come from low-income backgrounds. Cognisance of those external factors and demonstration that we as academics are doing our best to acknowledge those external influences on how our mature and part-time students (indeed all our students) navigate their learning journey can foster relationship building with our student cohorts. Developing those relationships allows mature and part-time students to open up and avail of advice from their academics.

**To put it simply, we want this toolkit to help our fellow academics create an environment where their mature and part-time students can seek out advice and are comfortable to do so.**

## 1.3

### Toolkit Overview

This toolkit comprises seven chapters, with this Chapter 1 being the introduction.

- **Chapter 2** provides an overview of the methods used to develop this toolkit.
- **Chapter 3** considers how we can encourage mature and part-time students on the path to become lifelong learners.
- **Chapter 4** presents an overview of the external factors that can impact mature and part-time students' learning journeys that we as academics need to be aware of as we set out to advise them.
- **Chapter 5** discusses how to build relationships with mature and part-time students to allow for an environment where academic advising can embed.
- **Chapter 6** focuses on how to use mentoring regarding academic goals.
- **Chapter 7** elaborates further on how to use mentoring to allow mature and part-time students develop their professional goals.
- **Chapter 8** provides an overall consideration of this toolkit, its limitations and potential impacts as well as looking forward to the future of academic advising.



## 1.4 How to use this toolkit

The toolkit was developed based on existing research as well as project specific research with our existing and former students who have navigated higher education as mature and part-time students. The approach we took to the development of this toolkit is also grounded in our team's experience (collectively over fifty years of educational delivery experience) that includes years of assimilating research and literature as well as conducting our own teaching research while delivering and developing our own learning environments for our students.

The toolkit development team are cognisant of the competing demands on academics. As academics ourselves we must stress we know of all the pressures facing academics at this critical time in higher education. In no way is this toolkit to be considered in any way preachy, it was developed so it could act as a path to new ideas or different perspectives to enable academic advising with your mature and part-time students. It is based on our experiences of what can work with mature and part-time students to enable an environment where they feel welcome, valued, seen and heard so that they can feel comfortable to seek out advice from their academics. You are free to agree or disagree, use or ignore any of the material presented in the toolkit.

Some of the resources presented and the proposals put forward as mechanisms to support academic advising with this cohort of students can be used for all students as per the tenets of universal design, but we developed the toolkit with mature and part-time students in mind throughout. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 present the bulk of what you may find useful in developing your own mechanisms for academic advising. In each of those chapters the starting point is a set of self-evaluative questions you can use to check where you are right now with your support for mature and part-time students (each chapter Section 2).

Many of these questions were adapted from the UCD "Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions" already mentioned as one of our key inspirations (Kelly and Padden, 2018). There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, they are there to get you to think about what you have done, are doing and may do in the future to integrate academic advising into the learning experience of mature and part time learners. These questions are inspired by the existing research and data from our research participants.

Following these questions we present an overview of existing research (each chapter Section 3) followed by what our engagement with our students, alumni and student advisers brought forward in their consideration of what is important in advancing academic advising and its myriad forms (each chapter Section 4). Each chapter ends with a presentation of external resource links (each chapter Section 5) and our proposed actions for your consideration (each chapter Section 6).

**So the easiest way for you to use this toolkit is to self-evaluate your existing practice with reference to what the research says and then utilise the resources and proposals included where you identify how they may be of benefit to your students.**

A caveat from the team - some of the proposals presented do require partnerships with fellow academics in your discipline via a team approach and some would likely / also require resources or additional financial support to enable success. Such proposals would require negotiation and support from your school to enable their implementation which is beyond the remit of what this toolkit can achieve.

## 1.5 Chapter References

Kelly, A.M., & Padden, L. (2018). **Toolkit for Inclusive Higher Education Institutions: From Vision to Practice**. Dublin: UCD Access & Lifelong Learning.

# 02.



## Toolkit Development

### 2.1 Toolkit Inception and Proposal

The toolkit was originally conceived by the team as a mechanism to utilise universal design principles to improve learner experience for mature and part-time students. The team believes that the needs of mature and part-time students need to be considered as part of our universities overall drive towards universal design in learning (UDL). This toolkit is designed to align with this drive and allow academics to familiarise themselves with key issues facing mature and part-time students and potential solutions or ideas to face those challenges and improve the learner experience.

### 2.2 Project Development Timeline

The project received funding at the end of July 2021 for a nine-month project commencing in September 2021 and concluding at the end of May 2022.

# Project Development Timeline



## September 2021

The project underwent initial ideation. During this time initial reviews on various topics associated with the project's objectives were carried out in order to develop a broad overview of the key issues and challenges facing mature and part-time learners but also potential solutions and processes which could be utilised to meet them.



## October 2021

An in depth brainstorming session was held with the three student partners involved in this project. The student partners were also instrumental in assisting with recruitment of participants to the research focus groups which underpin the key themes identified in this toolkit. Ethical approval (low-risk) was granted by the UCD HREC.



## November & December 2021

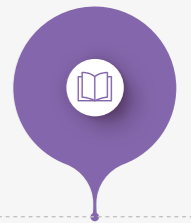
A series of focus groups took place with voluntary student participants and recent alumni from the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science where the project was based. Seven registered students and thirteen recent graduates took part. Focus groups were also facilitated with ten members of the UCD Student Adviser Team.

This was to ensure that the information coming from students and alumni could also be verified and considered further by the student advisers to whom mature and part-time students turn to when faced with significant challenges. The suite of eleven focus groups provided a wealth of information and rich insights from students, alumni and advisers on the key challenges and issues that mature and part-time students need academic support and advice on.



## January - April 2022

The researchers adopted an inductive thematic analysis approach with the transcripts using NVivo™ software commencing in January and completed by mid-February 2022, allowing for principal themes to emerge and be considered for inclusion in the toolkit. Between February and April 2022 the toolkit was drafted, reviewed independently, finalised and made ready for accessible online and print publication.



## May 2022

Finalisation by graphic design team ready for publication.

Figure 2.1 Project Timeline.

## 2.3 Literature Review Methodology

A narrative literature review was conducted on the topics of professional and academic mentoring for mature students, the development of leadership skills, lifelong learning among mature and part-time students, external factors influencing the learning journey, assessment strategies that compliment the learning process of mature students and the ways in which mature students benefit the classroom. All of which are relevant to this toolkit. An initial search determined the key factors impacting and influencing adult learners in higher education in general. These include domestic/care responsibilities, financial concerns, and career commitments. Following this initial search, the search strategy was to focus on key issues and challenges relevant to academic advising processes and student supports which promote an inclusive and engaging learning environment that can meet the challenges mature and part-time learners face.

At first, the inclusion criteria were refined to studies concerning the experiences of mature and part-time students in third level education. These were then reviewed and revised to establish whether they were suitable for the overall aim of the toolkit. As the study progressed the literature selection was focused further to address the input from students, alumni and advisers which arose from the focus groups which then became applicable for inclusion in the toolkit. While the most up to date and recent literature was utilised for the toolkit from the 21st century there were appropriate resources included from the late 20th century.

## 2.4 Focus Group Methodology

### 2.4.1 Study Design

This study fostered a qualitative approach to capture the perspectives and experiences of the mature and part-time students who took part in this research. The choice to employ a qualitative research method was because the researchers needed to hear from students and alumni an in-depth comprehension of their experiences in higher education by asking the “how” and “why” questions that cannot be analysed using statistical methods (Cleland, 2017). The questions developed for the focus groups arose from discussion with the team’s student partners and the academics on the team based on their collective experiences. The questions developed were critiqued by the whole team to ensure they were not leading or suggestive.

Ten online focus groups took place via ZOOM™. Researchers designed an interview protocol to guide the discussions with the aforementioned questions. The questions were structured in a way that allowed participants to share their reasons for choosing to study at UCD, how they perceive(d) their learning experience in and outside of the classroom, the external factors that influenced their learning journey and whether the support and teaching styles and advisory processes from their academics has persuaded them to embrace lifelong learning. The semi-structured focus group protocol around these themes also incorporated follow-up questions to support the natural flow of the conversations.

The focus groups (one to three participants per focus group) gave participants an opportunity to voice their ideas, experiences and concerns about their education as mature students. From this the team were able to analyse the data thematically and present ideas and recommendations for fellow academics to utilise if they so choose in their roles to improve future educational experiences for adult learners and to instil lifelong learning in current and future mature and part-time students at University College Dublin.

### 2.4.2 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval (low-risk) was granted by the UCD human research ethics committee (HREC) in October 2021. This study was deemed a 'low risk' study involving human participants (students, alumni and advisers) as participation was voluntary with each participant's identity de-identified and provided with a pseudonym for reporting purposes. The subject was also non-sensitive and focused on educational experiences.

### 2.4.3 Data Collection

Focus groups with student and alumni participants were initially planned and designed to take place in person on campus. However, due to national COVID-19 regulations and to accommodate the schedules of the participants they were moved to online with flexible time slots offered including weekday evenings and Saturday afternoons for the participants' convenience. Voluntary participants were provided with an information document containing details about the project in advance of the meetings, including the purpose of the project, the study's objectives and how their data would be used. All participants were encouraged to ask any questions via email if further clarification was needed.

Online focus groups were audio-visually recorded for analysis and informed verbal consent was obtained from all participants before the focus groups began. Each focus group lasted approximately 60-90 minutes with between one and three participants. All participants have the option to withdraw from the research at any time up to the point of future transcript deletion. Each ZOOM™ audio-video recording was then collated into a pseudonymised transcript which are stored in a secure, encrypted, GDPR compliant cloud storage service and can only be accessed by the principal investigator (Conor Buggy) and the research team to ensure that the participants' identities are protected. The recordings themselves were deleted in May 2022 once the transcription analysis was complete. The transcripts will be stored for a maximum of three years in the event that it is required to support the research findings that may be published after the project end date. The transcripts will then be deleted (estimated May 2025).

**“If I could connect with you,  
[academic] on a personal level,  
I’ll be maybe you know, likely to  
be more open to you know, engage  
more in the learning because I’ve  
gained that relationship and I’ve  
gained a connection with you”**

- Student 3



#### 2.4.4 Participants and recruitment process

The targeted population for this study was mature and part-time students or alumni over 23 years of age who were enrolled in either a full-time or part-time course at University College Dublin. Mature students (23 years and over who have never enrolled in higher education before) are a cohort focused on for expansion under the National Access Plan in order to widen participation in Irish higher education (Dept. of Further and Higher Education, 2021). Before the recruitment process began, a brainstorming session was held with the study's student partners. The purpose of the brainstorm meeting was to determine the most effective ways in which our target sample could be reached (effectively snowball sampling from word of mouth by the student partners and academics within the team). In addition, user-friendly posters with the aim of attracting mature and part-time students on campus (purposive sampling) were located in several buildings across the university associated with the School.

Ten time slots for focus group participation were offered to mature and part-time students / alumni who enquired about participating and in total twenty mature students / alumni volunteered to take part in the focus groups, four of whom were female and sixteen male. It is acknowledged that the gender disparity in participation is a limitation and is likely due to the majority of participants being students / alumni who completed male-dominated courses in the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science. Due to the project's short timeline, interested participants were included once they fitted the inclusion criteria, regardless of their gender - the goal was as many voices as possible to take part in the research. Focus groups took place from November to December 2021 via ZOOM™. All voluntary participants were assured of complete anonymity and that their identities would be anonymised with a pseudonym for inclusion in the toolkit.

In conjunction with the student focus groups, two focus groups with the UCD student advisers took place after the student / alumni focus groups as a mechanism to cross check / evaluate the key themes brought forward. In total ten student advisers participated in these focus groups, which comprised of seven females and three males.

#### 2.4.5 Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was conducted via Nvivo™ using a critical friends process through two rounds of coding. In the first stage, codes were selected based on re-surfacing data appearing in either all or most of the transcripts. Themes and subthemes were also proposed after the first round of codes but were not finalised until after a second round of coding subsequent to team meetings. During these meetings a critical friends' repetition process was utilised whereby themes and codes were challenged and rationalised before finalising and agreeing to the appropriate codes, themes and subthemes to summarise the study's findings. Subjective bias was avoided as much as possible and the findings were considered highly accurate and relevant to the project's aims.

In the next stage of the analysis process, Nvivo files were evaluated to select the most appropriate and impactful quotes in each theme/ subtheme in order to illustrate that the key themes presented in the toolkit were justified by student / alumni input and direction. Quotes were ranked from strongest to weakest. The strongest quotes were viewed as the key quotes to feature prominently in the toolkit with minor quotes identified to be grouped collectively for presentation.



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### 2.7 Chapter References

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### 2.5 Selecting the Resources for our Toolkit

Various resources were utilised to strengthen the toolkit and provide examples / guides for academics to utilise in order to address improvement of academic advising processes for mature and part-time students. Resources were extracted from a wide variety of higher education sources including the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) as well as HEIs from around the globe which have positive track records of engaging with mature and part-time students through universal design processes. The resources aim to provide academics with a wide variety of material to consider and potentially utilise as they evaluate how to best incorporate academic advising processes into their modules and programmes moving forward.

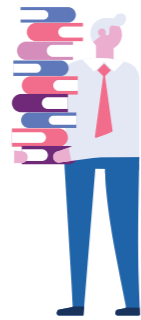
### 2.6 Proposed Processes and Initiatives for Academic Advising

Contained within Chapters 4 to 7 alongside the resources collected from national and international higher education a range of proposed processes and initiatives, designed with mature and part-time students in mind, are presented for consideration. These initiatives have been utilised successfully on a range of programmes within our school as well as in other schools, colleges and institutes of higher education that the team have knowledge of or have taken part in. They are designed to support mature and part-time students (and all students) by giving them opportunities to engage with their academics to seek advice on their academic as well as professional trajectories.

These initiatives are presented as mechanisms which could be utilised by academics to further develop relationships with mature and part-time students so that academic advising can become an integral part of their learning journeys with consequent potential to foster their lifelong learning. While they have been included with mature and part-time students in mind they all have the potential to be adopted under universal design initiatives to be beneficial for all students.



# 03.



## Encouraging Mature and Part-Time Learners on the Path to Lifelong Learning

In this chapter we provide a brief overview of the factors addressed in the literature and which arose in our focus groups which encourage lifelong learning in mature and part-time students and how the role of the academic in directing the education process and advising students can facilitate this. Many of the factors we mention in this chapter are included in following chapters for further and deeper consideration and while our focus is on mature and part-time students, the principles touched upon in this chapter can be applied universally to all students for the greater benefit of their learning journeys.

## 3.1 Using Andragogy to frame engagement with Mature and Part-Time Learners

### 3.1.1 Understanding the Importance of Andragogy

Andragogy refers to the learning practice of mature adult learners and the factors that contribute to their education (Beeson, 2018) as opposed to pedagogy which refers to the learning practice of children. Malcolm Knowles defines andragogy as the “art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1970). Knowles specifically addresses the fundamental characteristics of adult learners which separates their learning process to that of children’s. He outlines that unlike children, adults are self-governed and independent and have extensive life experience that contributes to their learning. Their decision to learn can be influenced by their social responsibilities and the expectations placed on them if they want to evolve within their societal roles. Substantially, mature learners can view education as a practice that will enable them to effectively deal with problematic situations throughout their life (Knowles, 1970). While there are many mechanisms to engage with students in order to advise them on their academic journeys, cognisance of andragogical methods that develop supportive learning environments is crucial to develop academic advising mechanisms for mature and part-time students.

Universal design frameworks encourage academics to be aware of the need for flexibility in teaching design and assessment to allow all of their students the potential to successfully complete their studies. Building in flexibility requires that curricula design, classroom structures, participation planning and assessment strategies be accomplished in ways that can accommodate a level of complaisance for all students (Chacko, 2018; Toomey et al., 2004). With classrooms becoming increasingly more diverse with mature and part-time students, international students and students from a variety of prior learning backgrounds, it is essential that learning environments

reflect that diversity and ensure all students have the capacity to flourish and excel (Higher Education Authority, 2021; UCD Widening Participation Committee, 2018/19).

Setting the expectations and objectives for learning from the outset is crucial when considering a variety of student types in a class. Mature and part-time students often require and ask for advanced knowledge of their modules so that they can build their learning into their lives efficiently. By accommodating those requests academics can not only benefit this cohort but also all other students on the module. Academics should be able to provide all students with detailed module descriptions to clearly show them why they are learning about the course topics and the ways in which they will be assessed and taught (Youde, 2018; Pratt, 1988). Whilst the teachers decide what topics are covered in their modules, how they teach and how much choice they offer has enormous impact on whether or not the students are receptive to the learning outcomes (Jarvis 2012) Essentially, mutual respect must be established between the mature adult student and the academic to give learners a comfortable space to think freely as intimidating environments will hinder one’s ability to absorb information (Gilbert, 2010).

More precisely, to instil a fondness for learning in mature and part-time learners it is paramount that academics treat them like adults and are considerate of their life experience when designing course content and assessment strategies (Knowles, 1990; Shi, 2017) and refrain from traditional secondary school teaching styles (Rachal, 2002). When teaching mature and part-time students, academics should contemplate fostering a co-designed curriculum as an invitation to co-create their learning process has the potential to build a sense of trust and cooperation between both the academic and the student (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018). This is essential when considering how best to meet the academic advising needs of all students and not just mature and part-time students.

### 3.1.2 Create an Interactive and Relatable Learning Process

Mature and part-time students may thrive when presented with a flexible and less refined syllabus. Hess (2008) supports the idea of student-teacher collaboration but only if students have actively demonstrated their ability to be self-directed and independent learners. This being the case, he disapproves of co-designing a syllabus with first-year students as he believes they are not yet competent to be autonomous learners. If students are serious about having input into their course syllabus, they must portray a mature attitude and be responsible towards their own learning (Fornaciari & Lund Dean, 2014). Unfortunately, regardless of co-designing a syllabus with students, reliability and engagement cannot be guaranteed for academics (Singham, 2005). However, mature and part-time students desire to be self-responsible and seek to apply their lived experiences to their learning, making them ideal counterparts in curriculum design (Mews, 2020). Therefore, academics should consider their inclusion in the design of the learning process and encourage them to plan, research and self-evaluate their academic progress if they want to improve their students' academic independence (Ukaigwe, 2014).

On that note, as opposed to pedagogy, educating adult learners should be less fixated on contextual teaching theory and more concerned with its practical learning facets to encourage classroom engagement and facilitate the development of skills that are relevant to their reality (Patterson & Pegg, 1999). Contextual teaching and learning involves making learning meaningful to students by connecting their learning to the real world and their experiences. It draws upon students' diverse skills, interests, experiences, and cultures and integrates these into what and how students learn and how they are assessed. Whereas childhood education revolves around ensuring children obtain specific learning outcomes through tasks that are selected and instructed by their teacher (Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000), as a process this is largely unsuitable for mature and part-time students. Therefore, to

avoid disengagement and tension in the classroom, academics could prioritise constructing an educational environment that grants mature and part-time students the freedom to set their own goals and learn knowledge in a way that not only incorporates their lived experiences but aligns with their personal expectations around education (Ceylan, 2018) while still in alignment to the specified learning objectives of the module or programme.



**“You would need to encourage their interweaving with the other pillars of the university outside of their programme and of university life outside of their programme...”**

- Adviser 6

### 3.1.3 Prioritise the needs of mature learners

When teaching mature and part-time students, academics should be cognisant that many within this cohort can have multiple responsibilities that impact their financial and emotional wellbeing (Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004), and that quite often mature and part-time students are likely to have a much wider range of external limitations on their study time in comparison to younger students. Thus, it is essential that the time they do have to study and engage with learning processes and their academics in higher education is meaningful (Post, 2010). However, it should be noted that as we have progressed through, and are emerging from the global COVID19 pandemic, and in the face of increasing intersectionality in under-represented student cohorts, it is essential to acknowledge that these financial and emotional constraints are now ever present for all students. Academics do need to be aware of these issues which are occurring with increasing frequency across their student body.

To some extent, mature and part-time students often prefer to see their enrollment in education as training to help them progress professionally and feel a sense of satisfaction when they have some input in attempting to meet these needs (Smith, 2017; Dalto, 2015).

It is imperative that academics provide mature and part-time students with clear, constructive and timely feedback on their course work to help them gradually improve and reach their goals (Sachdeva, 1996) in a way that allows them to feel that they belong in higher education. When offering feedback, it should be cognisant of allowing mature and part-time students to take realistic steps to improve their performance and achieve their desired results with encouragement (Sadler, 2010) while also helping to eliminate the “imposter syndrome” which many mature and part-time students can feel upon entering higher education. Likewise, critical yet constructive feedback is appreciated by mature and part-time students as it is recognised as suggestions

to help them enhance their academic capabilities (Watling et al., 2014) and reinforce their learning journey. When sharing feedback, Lefroy et al. (2015) recommends academics do the following:

- 1 Students are given a clear indication of their evolving skills;
- 2 Their competency to self-progress is recognised;
- 3 Challenge them to put a strategy in place to make further improvements; and
- 4 Propose any solutions on how they can best implement changes.

While this may seem a common sense approach to providing feedback to all students, mature and part-time students in particular benefit from this approach because they are often so invested in their studies the feedback is considered much more strategically in relation to their educational and often external professional goals. Assessment also allows the academics to gain insights into the mature and part-time learners individually so they can be in a better position to advise them on their academic journeys. By contributing in this way to the learning journey of mature and part-time students, academics have the capacity to gain insight into the distinct learning needs of not only mature and part-time learners but all types of students and be able to maintain a student-centred approach whilst establishing a balanced professional relationship (Pratt, 1993).

### 3.1.4 Remember that one size does not fit all

While we can consider mature and part-time students as a particular cohort, they are not uniform in any way. Understanding and factoring in that diversity by using an andragogical approach to developing learning environments can allow for that diversity to flourish into an inclusive learning environment where all students can achieve their highest potential. Illeris (2003) claims that some people commit to higher education in hope of improving their financial circumstances rather than to fulfil their personal aspirations. Although, this may be one factor for an adult's return or first-time enrolment in third level education, they may also seek to experience higher education due to missed opportunities earlier in life (Graham, 2015).

It is vital that academics comprehend that younger students and mature students can approach learning differently and enter into higher education for very different reasons (McCune, 2010). The Education for Employment Project (2007) found that educators must be attentive to different learning styles and the different ages in the classroom when teaching various cohorts of students. For example, mature students may not feel confident navigating technological systems in the same way younger students do and this can act as a barrier in their learning. Therefore, academics should strive to create suitable learning methods that do not isolate any learners' progress (Nelson et al., 2006).

The above brief foray into some of the concepts of andragogy makes clear that in order to teach mature and part-time students effectively, academics need to understand that they can approach their education from a wide range of lived experiences and social factors. As a result of this approach, academics should be prepared to facilitate mature and part-time students taking ownership over their learning. Ideally, academics would take into account the long-term goals mature and part-time students have for themselves and would do their best to help them achieve these by offering them feedback and encouraging them on their learning journey. Most importantly, academics in third level education should demonstrate flexible teaching styles that are respectful towards different ages and learning needs of a diversifying cohort as widening participation initiatives come to fruition. Ultimately initiatives designed to encourage and facilitate mature and part-time student learning can be applied universally for the collective benefit of all students.

## 3.2 Factors that encourage lifelong learning

The concept of lifelong learning emerged slowly from the 1990s; stemming from the introduction of the Open University in 1969 in the UK. The purpose of the initiative was to remove conventional boundaries surrounding learning to promote lifelong learning and educate students aged from 19 to 90 years old (Henkel, 2001). Coulter & Mandell (2012) found that top ranked universities do not pay close attention to non-traditional mature adult learners and younger students are commonly the main focus in these institutions (Kasworm, 2005). If universities desire to recruit more full-time and part-time mature learners, academics must equally recognise and validate their knowledge to increase their confidence and help them realise their potential to become lifelong learners (Toynton, 2005).

As we consider the best approaches to widening participation, it is essential we evaluate the practices that we incorporate into our learning environments in order to foster an inclusive learning experience for these cohorts of mature and part-time students. Many may never have had the chance to study in higher education or are returning to advance their careers or even adopt a new career and direction in life. As academics, we need to do our best to foster a positive and welcoming learning environment that also acknowledges the factors underpinning and influencing their entry into higher education.

### 3.2.1 Allowing mistakes as a way of encouraging personal development

We all make mistakes, but for many students the fear of failure or making a mistake takes on far greater importance than it should in their learning journeys. As academics being cognisant of the fear of failure especially in mature and part-time learners, many of whom may be experiencing higher education for the first time, is an aspect of our learning environments we need to pay heed to.

Besides the need for academic institutions to express the valuable presence of mature and part-time students in the classroom, academic staff should motivate mature and part-time students to be the drivers behind their own learning by distributing both formative assessments and feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The reason being, although mature and part-time students are highly motivated, they usually lack confidence in their academic competency and approach advanced education with fear and hesitation (McAnarney, 2015). Older adults could assume that experiencing university is no different to what they may have experienced in secondary school and if they attribute negative feelings towards their childhood learning experiences they imagine third-level to be the same (Scanlon, 2008). In light of this, lecturers and tutors should facilitate the reconstruction of adult learners' expectations by establishing that it is acceptable to make mistakes in the classroom and in assignments, as doing so will encourage them to sincerely reflect and learn from errors throughout their educational journey (Ferretti et al., 2019). Acknowledging the fact that imposter syndrome can be a common occurrence in mature and part-time students by talking about it collectively can alleviate many of those concerns these students have around failure. Implementing initiatives around this topic will eliminate their anxiety around being branded as a fraudulent student (Ramsey & Brown, 2018).

### 3.2.2 **Recognise the valuable qualities mature students bring to the classroom**

As a result of a mature student's life experience in comparison to that of a younger student, they are more likely to have a clear sense of direction and will choose to study a course that they are passionate about and is relevant to their life and career (Bitterman, 1985).

Needless to say, mature students should not be classified as beginner learners because their current skills are applicable to learning environments and their independence aids their academic pathway (Fairini & Scollan, 2019). Likewise, older cohorts are highly adaptable since they must manage their external priorities around their studies, such as parental/domestic responsibilities and professional work (Graham, 2015). Therefore, older adults could be seen as more emotionally resilient and advanced problem solvers due to their ability to successfully handle multiple circumstances that may interfere and overlap with their academic life (Gooding et al., 2011). Mature students need academic advising at key points in their academic careers and it is important for academics to understand how best to meet those needs and be able to respond proactively rather than reactively.

Integrating academic advising into learning processes from the outset will allow mature and part-time students to develop trust in those who ongoingly support them and thus they proceed more positively on their learning journey (Powers & Wartalski, 2021).

Third level mature and part-time students can be considered as courageous in part because they voluntarily enter into higher education without consecutive years of education like post-secondary school students. For the most part, mature and part-time students foster a high degree of bravery because they intentionally pursue higher education as a way of challenging themselves, re-shape their self-image and to build confidence towards their academic capabilities (Pearce, 2017). Their self-motivation and optimism to try something new, makes them a valuable asset to the classroom as it illustrates

their enthusiasm to learn in a way that is unknown to them. They have the capacity to support one another but also the younger students they interact with on their learning journeys also. When considering how best to incorporate support and academic advising into learning processes academics should consider courage and bravery as a way to connect with their mature and part-time students. Through that connection building relationships can be built to maximise the capacity of academic advising to support mature and part-time students.

Notwithstanding the above, mature and part-time students are often insightful and can energetically display a deep approach to their learning when they are required to merge new knowledge and old knowledge (Zeeger, 2001). It would be wise for academics to consider their teaching and assessment methods and if feasible refrain from traditional teaching styles when instructing mature students and instead capitalise on the energy and interactivity these students can bring to the classroom by introducing teaching methods that invite these students to fully engage with the learning process by bring their lived experiences into the classroom to benefit themselves as well as their fellow students. This approach can influence their desire to continue with their studies (Kuh, 2009b) and avoid a surface-level approach and boredom towards their classroom context (Leach, Neutze & Zepke, 2001) which benefits all students ultimately.



Some mature and part-time students who are parents, could come from families who never availed of higher education opportunities and hence become role models for their children by conveying their motivation to better themselves and by having a sense of purpose (Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite, & Godfrey, 2004). As examples to other younger students, mature and part-time students have the capacity to showcase a positive work-life-education balance and also the value of lifelong learning. While (most) mature and part-time students are not afraid of hard work (Montgomery, 2009) and clearly demonstrate that it is possible to attain a balance between achieving professional goals and personal life, academics should not take for granted that all mature and part-time students are achieving a work-life-education balance that is without pressure. Academics need to acknowledge that mature and part-time students have a wide range of social and economic factors that influence that balance. Academics need to actively demonstrate that support is within reach and that all students should be encouraged to avail of such institutional support mechanisms where and when they need it.

### 3.3 Creating a learning environment where lifelong learning can flourish

There is no one size fits all approach to designing your learning environment to foster lifelong learning in mature and part-time students. However, initiatives that are cognisant of the needs of this cohort can be used to engage and encourage all students. Here again the principles of universal design in learning can be used to develop learning environments that are more interactive and capitalising on the diverse nature of student bodies so that all students participating can benefit from robust and engaging teaching and learning processes both in their classroom activities and in their assessment strategies.

#### 3.3.1 Classroom Interaction for Mature Learners

In order for academics to build relationships with any of their students they must be cognisant that the first real interactions will be in the classroom. It is here that it is important to engage and encourage students in ways that allow them to express themselves as independent learners while also developing and fostering a connection with the academic and fellow students in the room. This is applicable to not only mature and part-time students, but all students.

While many academics may be reluctant to alter their teaching styles to reflect the presence of mature and part-time students in their classrooms, educating a student group that contains mature learners has the potential to bring in their lived experiences to benefit all students in the classroom as well as the academics in their midst. Roumell (2019) argues that academics are responsible for enabling group interaction in the class, the same way in which they are responsible for what and how they teach. Fostering an approach that allows mature and part-time learners to engage equally with all other students in the classroom will also facilitate the engagement with their peers in the class so a more positive learning environment can develop.

Mature and part-time students can often feel dissatisfied with more traditional didactic forms of teaching and prefer lectures that stimulate classroom interaction which enables them to feel fully immersed in their learning process (Merrill, 2010). They are not alone in this dissatisfaction, all students respond positively to more dynamic learning spaces. Given their level of maturity and lived experiences, mature and part-time students can oftentimes flourish when they are involved in classroom activities with their academics and fellow classmates because they find group activities such as problem or phenomena based learning engaging to more didactic or instructional lecturing strategies (Lucardie, 2014).

As with all students, when mature and part-time students feel that their knowledge is valued and validated in a classroom they become immersed in their learning (Toynton, 2005). Their relationship with their institute of higher education has the capacity to become much more positive and stronger which in turn means they are more likely to stay connected with their institution upon completion of their initial studies.

### 3.3.2 A variety of assessment styles and learning materials to encourage critical thinking

Mature and part-time students bring a wealth of knowledge, experience and often passion to the classroom. In order for academic professionals to promote lifelong learners, mature and part-time students need to be given some freedom and flexibility in their assessment in order to resonate with their personal goals in alignment with the desired learning outcomes (Sambell, McDowell & Brown, 1997). Offering flexibility and choice across assessment can guide mature and part-time learners to become critical thinkers, which will give them more confidence and control over their education (Hay, Tan & Whaites, 2010) while also reflecting the input of their lived experiences into their learning journeys. In this process academics can engage with these students, learning about their experiences and passions so that they in turn can advise the students on how their assessment can be a significant part of their learning journey.

While it may not be possible to allow for choice in all forms of assessment, even one or two pieces per trimester can make the difference in allowing mature and part-time students to feel that they can bring their lived experiences into their course work and be valued for it. This can make a difference for mature and part-time students that may often have specific academic or professional goals already established that they bring with them into their programmes and if they can centre their assessment around topics most relevant to their goals, as long as they are aligned with the specified learning objectives, they are more likely to stay engaged with their programme (Horstmanshof & Zimitat, 2007).

Academic courses commonly foster summative measures such as end of term exams to determine the quality of a student's academic performance (Terry et al., 2017), but formative assessment styles are important for the retention of information (Wood, 2007). Permitting mature and part-time students to engage with assessment that not only empowers them to think freely but also to bring in their capacity as active problem-solvers (O'Neil & McMahon, 2005) will positively shape (or re-shape) their perception of third-level education and encourage them to complete their work with enthusiasm and originality (Hay, Tan & Whaites, 2010).

### 3.4 A Framework to Support Academic Advising of Mature and Part-Time Learners

When considering wide ranging factors that need to be addressed in order to develop mechanisms offering academic support and advice to mature and part-time students it is important to focus on processes that have the greatest capacity and potential to guide these students on their learning journey. Based on the literature and the core findings of the focus groups conducted as part of the development of this toolkit, the following themes are put forward as our proposed conceptual framework to develop academic advising processes specifically for mature and part-time students. This framework does however have the capacity to be utilised for all students even though it was created with mature and part-time students in mind.



Figure 3.1 Proposed Framework to Support Academic Advising for Mature and Part-Time Students.

Each of these themes offers a scaffolding to permit the development of academic advising processes for mature and part-time students. This toolkit addresses these key themes by bringing together research from the literature and the student, alumni and student adviser input from the focus groups that took place for this project. While the framework could incorporate many more processes such as assessment strategies, peer mentoring processes, variety in classroom activities, the scope of this toolkit is to address factors from an academic advising perspective. The team considers that these specific themes have the greatest capacity to enable academic advising for mature and part-time students moving forward.

As you progress through the next four chapters of the toolkit you will see how these themes have been integrated and allow for overlap and cognisance of one another. Each chapter presents an overview of key research across these themes including data/findings from the focus groups in this project. Self evaluation questions are also incorporated so that academics can consider their own existing activities and what may align with academic advising processes across these themes. Example actions / processes / procedures and wide ranging international resources are also made available in each chapter for academics to consider for the future refinement or development of academic advising processes in their modules / programmes.



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### 3.5

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# 04.



## Understanding the external factors that influence Mature and Part-Time Student learning journeys

### 4.1 Introduction

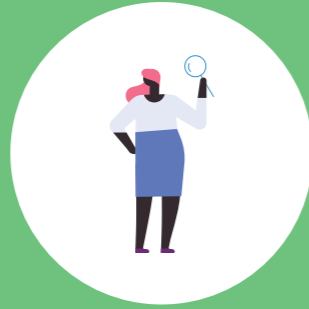
This chapter outlines some of the external factors that inevitably influence the learning journey of mature and part-time students based on the findings gathered from the focus groups held with participating mature and part-time students and alumni.

For academics using this toolkit there are a set of self-assessment questions to consider in order to self-reflect and assess the level of understanding they have towards the external factors that impact the learning experience of mature and part-timers. A brief overview of existing literature is included followed by a detailed insight into the findings that emerged from this study relating to external factors that can have an impact on how mature and part-time students progress in their studies.

In order to engage in further improvement, there are several online resources that academics can use to guide them in this area as well as proposals for academics to consider when attending to this aspect of learning journey development.



## Academic Self-Assessment



4.2

As academics we strive for excellence in our teaching to ensure that our students have a learning experience formed to the best of our abilities but we all need to self-reflect and evaluate ourselves and the actions we take around our learning processes. The following questions are designed for academics to reflect on their practices that may be of particular importance to mature and part-time student learning journeys. There are no right or wrong answers but they should provoke you to think about your educational practices from a perspective that would enable enhancement of mature and part-time student experience in higher education. These questions are based on and inspired by the wider literature and the findings of our research that focus on commencement in higher education, support and assessment. You can consider the following either as an academic responsible for a whole programme or stage of a programme or as a module coordinator.

They are not exhaustive and many may not be relevant directly to you but you can use them as a guide to consider how to improve the educational experience you are the driving force of. These questions can also provide context as you review the overview of existing research (Section 4.3) and the research undertaken for this project (Section 4.4). If you want to jump straight to ideas and action please proceed to Sections 4.5 and 4.6 which outline potential resources and proposals you could utilise to advance your own strategies and support while engaging mature and part-time students.

## Programme Director

- 1. Does your Programme have entry pathways for mature and part-time students?
- 2. Does your programme have the capacity to be conducted in a self-paced fashion for mature and part-time students, and are there options to complete stages independently?
- 3. Do you disseminate information about available student support services to mature and part-time students at the outset of your programme?
- 4. Do you engage with your module coordinators to ensure a consistent style and usage of the virtual learning environment to facilitate ease of access by mature and part-time students?
- 5. Do you ensure a variety of assessment types across your programme by engaging with your module coordinators to diversify assessment strategies?
- 6. Do you map the assessment across all modules on your programme to determine weighting, value and burden across the trimester? i.e. assessment strategies are aligned across a programme and student workload is taken into account when planning deadlines across the trimester?
- 7. Do you liaise with your module coordinators to reconsider the requirement to complete hand-written timed exams so that they can be eliminated where possible in order to facilitate mature and part-time students who may find it difficult to schedule attendance at an exam centre?

## Module Coordinator

- 1. Does your module assessment strategy allow mature and part-time students to bring in their lived experiences into demonstrating achievement of learning outcomes?
- 2. Do you use formative and summative assessment so that mature and part-time students can receive feedback on their learning as they progress through the module?
- 3. In your modules do students have the opportunity to complete continuous assessment, avoiding the 100% terminal exam? If you deliver lectures outside of usual business hours, such as weekends, do you consider the impact on students who have commitments, such as childcare, eldercare, or employment, are considered and do you make alternative arrangements?
- 4. Do you provide both detailed critical and supportive feedback so that students can see the areas they need to improve upon while also reinforcing what they did well?
- 5. Does your assessment strategy encourage students to learn from and support each other, creating a collaborative educational environment where mature and part-time learners can bring forth their experiential learning to benefit all students?
- 6. Do you provide feedback in a timely fashion (ideally within four weeks as per our university regulations) and do your students have an opportunity to discuss feedback one-to-one with you?
- 7. Does your module foster a community of learners in the classroom through group work, and group assessments and is material provided for study groups who wish to meet outside of class time?

## What the Research Says



# 4.3

Previous research shows that mature learners perceive higher education differently than younger learners as many mature and part-time students were not given the opportunity to attend university post secondary school and were instead expected to work to meet financial and domestic needs (Servant-Miklos, Dewar & Bøgelund, 2021). Others may not have attended during their youth for various reasons and feel that returning to education at a mature age allows them to complete an unfinished part of their life that gives them a sense of purpose (Graham, 2015). On the other hand, mature and part-time students often associate negative emotions with formal education as many have had negative schooling experiences and wrestle with the idea of returning to a classroom environment (Aontas, 2016). For mature learners who battled with learning difficulties / disabilities during their childhood education, many may have left secondary school early, potentially minimising their academic skills and potential while also

overall hindering how they perceive advanced education (UNESCO, 2019; Díez-Palomar, 2021). Despite the initial fear of attending university, mature learners are filled with motivation once they seize the opportunity (Swain & Hammond, 2011). Unfortunately, they often live very busy lifestyles/have many competing demands on their time and suffer restrictions in their day-to-day lives due to external factors impacting their education, such as career commitments, childcare responsibilities and other personal matters (Karmelita, 2020). For this reason, authorising flexibility towards course design could induce mature students to enrol in a course, especially ones consisting of online and/or blended learning options (Snow Andrade & Alden-Rivers, 2019).

Whilst many young undergraduate students believe that socialising outside of the classroom is a natural part of university culture (Adams et al., 2017), not all mature learners are interested in this being a central aspect of their educational experience, given that they often must manage their external obligations around their studies; which can pose a significant challenge (Mallman & Lee, 2016; Phillips, 1986). Stone and O'Shea (2013) found that mature students saw leisure activities as something they must give up if they want to implement time for work, university and family. Consequently, enrolling in a third-level course is a major undertaking for mature learners and will lead them to review the household's income / job stability, the age of their child(ren) if applicable and if they have a partner/ spouse, what pressure their spouse / partner can face without their full-time support. In contrast to traditional younger students arriving to university directly after a secondary education, many mature and part-time students carry the weight of family requirements, financial burdens, exam preparation, assignment completion alongside other matters (Fleming & Murphy, 1997). Any free time that they have will be spent completing their assignments and compulsory reading materials which will reduce the amount of hours they spend with their family or socialising with peers (Fragoso et al., 2013).

However, Reay, Ball & David (2002) revealed that mature and part-time students can sometimes regard their time at the library as their leisure time as they do not have large quantities of time to socialise or engage in self-care.

While mature and part-time students are willing to put extensive effort into their work, if they consistently do this, they can burnout and hinder their academic performance in the long run. Therefore, to assist mature and part-time students in coping with their studies alongside their external responsibilities, academics are advised to authorise greater flexibility across their programmes to help them gain more control over all of their commitments (Bartlett et al., 2021). A common way to introduce flexibility into courses dominated by mature adult learners is to hold evening or weekend classes and to incorporate a blended learning approach. This will reduce the number of hours they spend on campus and therefore make their schedules more manageable (Ho & Lim, 2020). While this may not always be feasible due to the fact that most educational programmes in higher education operate during business hours Monday to Friday, accommodating evening or weekend classes may be the only secure way some mature learners can partake in formal education since part-time routes give them the ability to still earn an income (Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004). Academics who are normally familiar with teaching young undergraduate students might need to undergo training to develop skills on how to understand the needs of mature learners as this will generate feelings of compassion overtime and in turn help them become better academics (Shea et al., 2016). Such training could focus on equality, diversity and inclusion in higher education, unconscious bias awareness as well as how to manage dignity and respect in a dynamic learning environment.

## What Our Research Says



# 4.4

### 4.4.1

#### Treat them as adults

##### Past Learning Experiences

Our findings indicated that mature learners do not want to enter into higher education and be treated like secondary school leavers. The participants stressed that academics should consider the maturity of the mature-aged audience when teaching them and realise that they observe and react to what their lecturers bring to the classroom:

“No one wants to go to college and be treated like they were in secondary school or primary school, you know.”

- ALUM 4

“Obviously, if somebody comes in, with a poor attitude they need to remember it’s not teenagers they’re talking to, they’re talking to grownups.”

- ALUM 6

In particular, many participants in our study had negative schooling experiences which fractured their perception of third level education. A lot of mature learners recalled that how they were treated in secondary school and the teaching styles they were exposed to, did not help them identify their academic strengths and led them to believe that they were not capable of pursuing advanced education:

“I think it brings us back to school, when we were there many, many years ago. Back to primary school, back to secondary school. Whereby, you’re put into a bracket of either you’re very intelligent or you’re not.”

- ALUM 5

“I couldn’t stand school and if it wasn’t for sports I would have left it if I could, if the parents would have let me and I hated it.”

- ALUM 10

“Often mature students’ education experience when they were younger has been poor and very negative.”

- ADVISER 8

## Relationship building with mature learners

However, upon entering university as mature and part-time students, our research showed that mature learners expect their academics to treat them appropriately as they have valuable life experience that can benefit the learning environment. Although, some mature learners may have never experienced university before or have been absent from formal education for an extensive period of time, they see their life knowledge as a valuable asset to their learning journey and feel that academics should not undermine this:

“I’m 61 and I’ve lived quite a varied life and in 61 years I’ve done a lot.”

- STUDENT 1

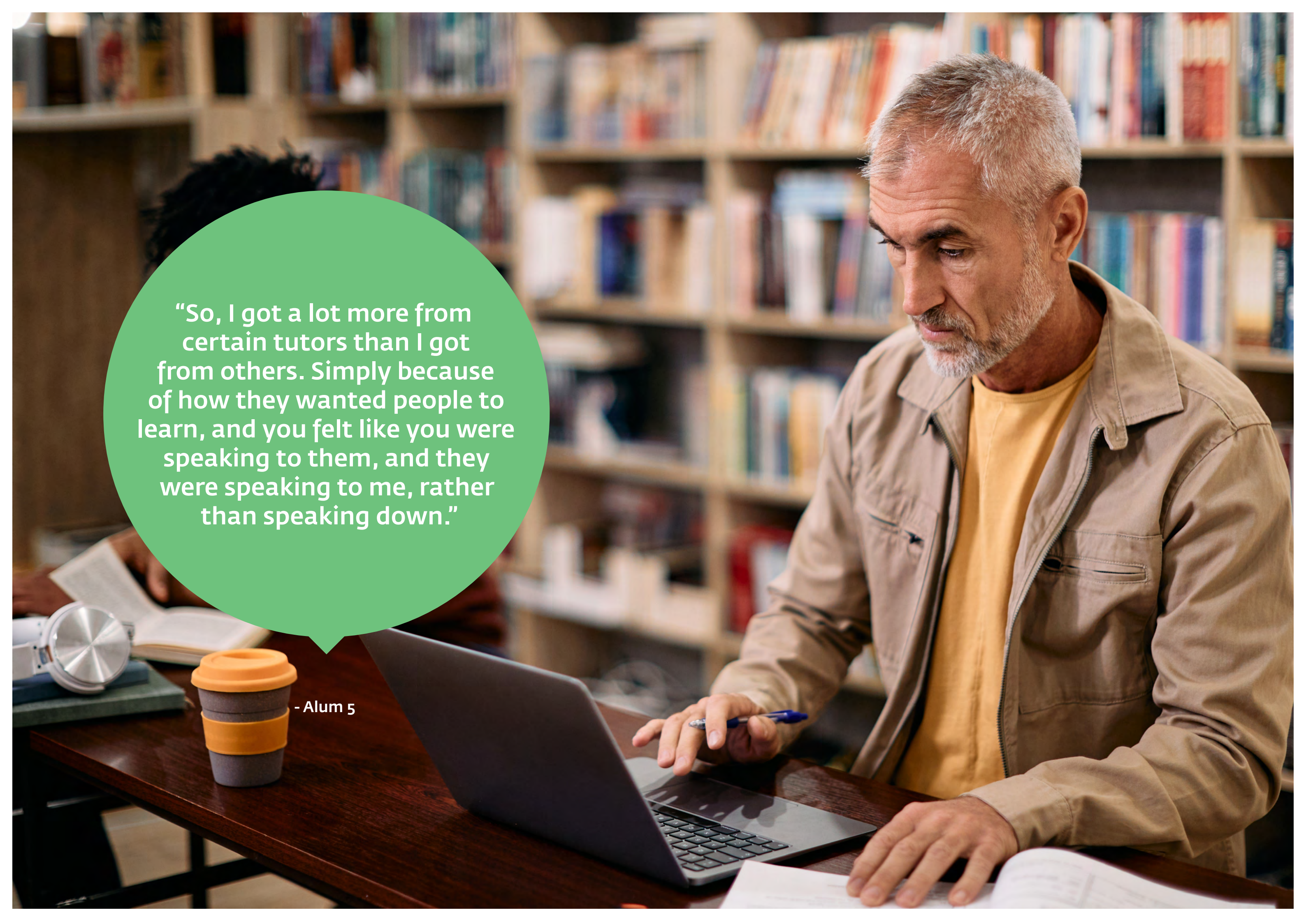
“A 30-year-old person is bringing in hopefully 10 years of life experience post-school, right. You can’t undervalue that in any shape or form”

- ALUM 1

Mature students seek a respectful relationship with their academics and believe that developing a rapport with their lecturers and tutors will greatly impact their decision to become lifelong learners. The findings indicated that the manner in which lecturers address their students, shapes their educational experiences and determines whether they will find university pleasurable. Alumni reported that they valued the professional connection they had with their lecturers and appreciated how approachable and kind they were during their time at UCD:

“So, I got a lot more from certain tutors than I got from others. Simply because of how they wanted people to learn, and you felt like you were speaking to them, and they were speaking to me, rather than speaking down.”

- ALUM 5



“So, I got a lot more from certain tutors than I got from others. Simply because of how they wanted people to learn, and you felt like you were speaking to them, and they were speaking to me, rather than speaking down.”

- Alum 5

“I found the teachers in UCD, and I don’t know whether it was just me or not, but I’ve got a really good rapport still with all the professors from there”

- ALUM 12

Nevertheless, one participant reflected on a negative encounter with his lecturer and another emphasised that mature learners are less likely to tolerate mistreatment and will turn their back on the institution if the experience proves distasteful, especially if they are in the early stages of becoming oriented with higher education:

“If you’ve had experiences, you’ll just walk away like.”

- ALUM 9

“If anybody said anything like you know she would stop the class. It was like going back into... into infants’ class or something where you’re told to sit down and be a good boy or girl now, and I’ll wait until you’re ready before I do it and that didn’t help.”

- ALUM 10

The student advisers who took part in our research noted that while most academics are polite to their students, all staff should make a collective effort to ensure that higher education is enjoyable for students:

“So many of the academics are fantastic, like absolutely go beyond what their call of duty is, and really what happens is there might be one that just taints it all for everybody and students get really upset.”

- ADVISER 5

## Compassion towards mature learners

Our study participants also emphasised the importance of having compassion and understanding towards mature and part-time students. Many mature learners choose to attend university for specific reasons but can find it to be a daunting and uncomfortable experience. To ease the transition, academics need to remember that mature learners rely on faculty and their peers to help them adjust to their new surroundings. The data revealed that if there is a power imbalance between academic staff and students, the class will become disconnected from their programme and feel resentful after they graduate. In saying that, students do not expect their lecturers to be their friends but would appreciate if mutual respect exists between students and staff to ensure that the institution is welcoming to all that attend:

“When there is a better understanding of yes, we might have 20 people in the class, but we’ve got 20 individuals. So, that means that the one way of teaching isn’t going to work for everyone.”

- ALUM 6

“I mean try to come to their level, because they’re learning at an advanced age.”

- ALUM 13

“I think our experience of any institution comes down to the people in it.”

- ADVISER 9

#### 4.4.2 They have already determined the path they want to take (that's why they're here)

##### Intrinsic motivation among mature and part-time students

As indicated in the previous section, mature students come to university to achieve a personal goal. Even if they were absent from education for years, they expect the money they're spending and the sacrifices they're making to complete their selected course to be worthwhile. Furthermore, contrary to younger students, mature learners invest in education to either upskill in their career or for their own personal development, so their decision making processes to enrol in a course are likely to have been a well-thought out and rigorous process, including financial planning. They want academics to realise that they take their studies seriously:

“Now, I know that [work organisation] paid for me to be there, but I still gave up a day's work. So, I was down a day's pay.”

- ALUM 4

“It's not that they got the correct points in the leaving cert and well done to everybody who does that. We've chosen to come back.”

- ALUM 6

“Also mature students, as in students who apply via the mature pathway tend to be students who've arrived at a decision to come to university after a lot of thought, after a lot of planning, after a lot of sacrifices.”

- ADVISER 8

It should be noted however that some mature and part-time students can underestimate the workload and the commitment involved with so many competing demands on their time. On that note, alumni in our study that didn't attend university in earlier years for a variety of reasons (including financial concerns / socio-economic backgrounds) also indicated that those prior influencing reasons continued to influence their self-perception of themselves as learners. Some endured personal setbacks, whereas others described how advanced education was not a normal or expected part of their upbringing. Therefore, attaining a third level qualification can feel like a major milestone regardless of age and can play a role in shaping one's self-identity:

“I didn't go to university until I went to UCD when I was 30, I wasn't that fortunate.”

- ALUM 1

“I kind of decided, I could either be a single mother and do nothing and live on social welfare for the rest of my life or I could actually change how I went about it.”

- ALUM 4



As a result of having no higher education, many participants felt they were unable to get promoted in the workplace despite having the practical skills to tackle advanced labour/duties. Our study conveyed that although participants had years of work experience they felt that in order to progress they needed qualifications to demonstrate their professional competency. That being said, academics do need to consider that mature students are often very career focused and that many would not enrol in a programme if they did not believe it would support their career ambitions:

**“Almost everybody in class is probably at a point in their career where they’re looking at changing careers or getting/looking for promotion or whatever it is.”**

- STUDENT 4

**“I realised that those around me that were progressing had qualifications. Had their you know, at the very minimum, that they had their undergraduate degree and had something to start as a base level. So, that was two kind of driving forces there.”**

- ALUM 6

**“I felt to be promoted, you needed qualifications. Now, while I had a computer course, I felt it wasn’t enough.”**

- ALUM 11

## Supporting mature learners

While some mature and part-time students return to education for the pleasure of learning and often at a much later stage in life (e.g. returning to university during retirement to fulfil a particular learning passion), given their numerous responsibilities, most mature and part-time students that are focusing on career aspirations and professional goals can face severe time restrictions and require support from their academics to cope with this. Our study brought forth considerations from our participants indicating that mature learners cannot afford to attend university if it does not have the potential to benefit them financially in the long run. Participants flagged that they feel they do not experience university the same way that they consider younger students do and whilst some younger students can drop-out of a college programme / module and register for another one if desired (subject to their socio-economic situation), many mature learners would find it difficult to re-do the college experience in such a fashion if it did not work out for them the first time, something academics should be mindful of:

**“We as adult learners only get one shot at a programme to succeed. There’s no replays, “aw sure I’ll fail it all the way and I’ll go back and do it again” I don’t think so! It’s too much hard work.”**

- ALUM 11

**“I think mature students and part time students have totally different motivations.”**

- ADVISER 2

**“I mean I’m generalising but mature students tend to come to university, their motivation to be here is different.”**

- ADVISER 8

Similarly, mature and part-time students found that although they might be confident in outlining their long-term goals, they admitted that it can be a challenge navigating the correct path to take and claimed that academics need to interact with them as adults to help them select a course that aligns with their educational and professional aspirations:

“I can’t go off and do it on my own, what I can achieve in a programme like this.”

- STUDENT 4

“I think academics really need to guide people on the course that they pick. That is vital.”

- ALUM 12



Figure 4.1 Participant quotes on the need for flexibility for mature and part-time students.

Moreover, since mature and part-time students enter into third level education for personal reasons and inevitably balance multiple obligations, they have limited time for socialisation and favour interaction with those in their programme. The student advisers enforced that mature learners are eminently fixated on achieving the educational goals, that they appear disinterested in engaging in extracurricular activities:

“I don’t think they need all the frills; I think they’re really just about I just want to learn.”

- ADVISER 5

“They don’t very often have the time or the space or the luxury to be able to engage with those other aspects of the university experience.”

- ADVISER 8

“I suppose something I’m struck by is, sometimes mature students take a view that, given their other life commitments, very often they have family and all that, commuting and everything. They’re not interested in the fun or social aspects, you might say of student life as much.”

- ADVISER 9

#### 4.4.3 The core factors that influence their (mature and part-time students) time in higher education

Our study indicated a wide range of factors that can have an impact on how mature and part-time students manage their time while navigating their learning journey. While some can be influenced by how an educational programme is run, many are completely external to the university but still need to be considered by academics as they advance their practices within academic advising.

##### Becoming a role model for the family

As touched on in section 4.3.2, some mature and part-time students were not given the chance to attend university post secondary school. Mature and part-time students in our study viewed enrolling in a university course as a luxury, not a necessity and showed a clear appreciation for their learning journey:

“I’m one of these people that believe you never stop learning, so I love the process of learning.”

- STUDENT 1

Being a student in an advanced third level course can also be an honourable experience for mature students and it is a label they can use to encourage their children (if applicable) to pursue higher education in the future. Two alumni in our study, talked about being role models for their sons in hope that they would study more after school and consider applying for a university course after they finish(ed) their secondary education:

“My son was doing studies as well, so I thought I would be a good career model for him as well, like he would see me studying and he would study.”

- ALUM 3

“And do you know what? The biggest thing now is that my 17-year-old son is talking to me about which college to go to, and it's UCD by the way.”

- ALUM 4

On that note, alum 4 felt that her attitude towards education positively shifted when she became a mature student. She explained that she was pregnant in her final years at secondary school and although she came from a loving family, pursuing higher education after completing secondary education was not discussed nor expected; however, that does not mean such opportunities cannot be accessed in later years as an adult. Irrespective of one's social status or personal circumstances, education is for everyone. Alum 4's time in higher education has allowed her to help her son realise that he too can attend university and succeed and she is grateful that he is having conversations with her about education and future careers, conversations that she never had with her family growing up:

“The fact that we are having that conversation, that I didn't have, that the generations before me in my family didn't have, is... like he came from a teenage single mam's household. He is statistically doomed to fail.”

- ALUM 4

As of this, she declared that higher education is life-changing and that mature students will directly benefit from their course in some way, if they are willing to commit to it:

“I can't tell you how much it changed my life.”

- ALUM 4

“You'll get what you give. You'll get back from UCD, what you give to it. So, the more you give, the more you'll get back.... And it'll be the best thing you ever do.”

- ALUM 4

## A desire to learn and build a better life for themselves

Whilst career goals have shown to be a common factor for the mature and part-time students in our study to enrol in higher education, a number of participants also see higher education as a way to self-improve. Indeed, participants in our study initially showed fear and hesitation when entering or reentering education but there was also a clear sense of bravery and determination to step into the unknown and try something new, even if that meant starting from scratch:

“You know I've had the grá [love] for learning as it is, and I always had an ambition to learn and in relation to a new section or a new industry, if I had to learn it, I'd be of the opinion of starting off at the bottom.”

- ALUM 7

Participants also saw education as a way of getting the most out of life. One participant immersed himself in a third-level course to give him a sense of achievement when he obtained his qualification. He explained that he had no interest in a career change as he already built a stable career, but was dedicated to learning for his own satisfaction as he is set to retire in the coming years:

“I've just started my own business. I'm looking to retirement, not to enhance my career. So, I'm just trying to set up a retirement package for myself, so I wouldn't be sort of interested in anything else.”

- STUDENT 1

One alum revealed that although he attended university to meet his professional goals, it gave him a chance to grow as an individual. He declared that education is a gateway into a better life for mature students, with broader and positive opportunities. To which he confirmed:

**“I’m walking, living proof of that”**  
- ALUM 5

He concluded that all mature learners share the same vision; they want to become better people and that access to third level education makes this feasible:

**“We’re all trying to achieve and better ourselves to be something or somebody”**  
- ALUM 5

#### 4.4.4

#### The supports they use and do not use

When questioned about their use of support services on campus, many participants felt they did not need to avail of the facilities because they had the support from their workplace and/or family members. During our focus groups, participants admitted that they were aware of the support services provided by the university but did not avail of them frequently:

**“I’m conscious that there are other services available, and I just maybe haven’t had the same need as others to access them. The writing skills one, yes, I’ve availed of that.”**  
- STUDENT 4

**“My wife has done some post-grad courses as well, so she understands”**  
- ALUM 8

Importantly, some participants were hesitant to engage with certain support services because they feared that they would be judged as adults for using college facilities that are wrongly perceived to be aimed at younger students. Similarly, mature learners may feel they will damage their reputation if they ask for help:

**“I’m reluctant to go and ask for help, like I’m reluctant to go to the doctor, I’m reluctant to do everything.”**  
- STUDENT 1

**“This support is kind of mostly for people coming out of leaving cert and stuff like. So, I think that was why I was a bit reluctant to actually initially seek for help”**  
- STUDENT 3

However, it was reinforced that mature and part-time students should not feel ashamed to use the support services on campus because they are available to all students attending the university and are not intentionally targeted towards any particular cohort of students:

“I don’t feel bad, and I don’t think people will judge me if I use those supports because that’s what they’re there for, you know.”

- ALUM 3

Therefore, in order to promote support service engagement among mature and part-time students, the student advisers encourage academics to inform mature learners of the services that are readily available to them, either by word of mouth in the classroom or by adding a powerpoint slide into their presentations to help students understand that support is around them on their learning journey. It is also important to recognise that in advertising such services, photographs of students demonstrating the demographic diversity of our student cohort (age, gender, ethnicity, disability etc) can go a long way in encouraging all students to access such services when they can see likenesses of themselves in the advertising of those services:

“I find the academics actually in our place great at getting the mature students to come to me and the mature students really listen to the academics, and they do come.”

- ADVISER 7

“If you’re standing in front of them saying there’s money there if you want to go for it, I’ll help you to access it if you’re eligible or the counselling service is just across the way.”

- ADVISER 9

“I’m a big believer in advertisements. So, definitely like the more you can push for it, it’s always going to work, you know.”

- ADVISER 10

#### 4.4.5

#### Assessment Flexibility

##### Assessment preferences of mature learners

Our research elaborated on the preference for a range of both formative and summative assessment strategies rather than just summative end of term pieces of work or examinations for mature and part-time learners. Focus group participants expressed a dislike for end of semester exams as they do not accommodate their busy lifestyles given the amount of study time they require. Participants also reported that they do not believe they are a valid way to assess their knowledge and experience. For many students, exams tend to be tedious yet stressful and time-consuming to prepare for, but unfortunately the participants in this research have emphasised that as mature learners they are sometimes left with no choice but to revise at the last minute as their external circumstances, including their work commitments can cause disruptions to their study plans:

“I’m not that person, naturally. I normally put my work in as I go but what happens when you’re a mature student, because you’re working you have to cram in when you can.”

- ALUM 4

“Learning takes a backseat very quickly and when kids have to be brought to school and you’re supposed to be gone to Dublin two hours ago, and you know all these things come to the fore very quickly.”

- ALUM 5

“I generally have a lot of other things going on.”

- ALUM 9

As previously mentioned, our research participants believe that completing exams at the end of their modules does not effectively measure or evaluate their knowledge as mature learners nor the way they apply that knowledge in the real world. It emerged from the focus groups that mature and part-time students crave assessment strategies that correspond with their career demands and that they can connect with professionally if possible. Otherwise they cannot guarantee that they have the appropriate knowledge and skills for their current job or future job opportunities:

“As long as it’s applicable to how you use those skills in the workplace, I think it’s most important.”

- STUDENT 2

“Sitting in a classroom, handed a sheet of paper, like in the RDS and saying: “Away you go there, best of luck.” Like it’s just a horrific way of trying to determine whether somebody is competent in the area.”

- ALUM 5

A significant emphasis was placed on group and practical assessment styles for mature and part-time students as their professional roles are typically people-centred and allows for the incorporation of their real-life experiences. The research indicated that participants were eager to be involved in active classroom participation and became apathetic when lecturers were didactic and did not lead an interactive classroom:

“I found that some of the assignments were good because they could go into your own work workplace and your own work experience. I didn’t find enough of the lectures allowed for that interaction.”

- STUDENT 1

“Although it was rare, there were a few lecturers that were just scripted and read from a template with no interaction and they, few as they were, made the process boring and uninteresting.”

- ALUM 2

“I hate it, but I think group work is great because it does teach you what you need to know and how to deal with people.”

- ALUM 4



Figure 4.2 Participant quotes on relatable assignments for mature learners

Despite initial obstacles, some participants explained that they could feel themselves gradually improve as they undertook each assignment and received feedback which allowed for the restoration of their self-belief. Similarly, other participants found that they began enjoying their written assignments, especially when it allowed for self-reflection on their learning experiences. While some academics may not realise that their assessment strategies can have a positive impact on a mature and part-time students learning journey, our participants indicated that an assessment strategy that is cognisant of their lived experiences has a positive impact on their self-esteem and confidence as they feel both valued and seen by their academics. Our research illustrates that mature and part-time students are grateful that they can have opportunities to demonstrate their academic strengths through interactive activities and continuous assessment methods:

“So, I like continuous assessment, I personally like essays, but it doesn't really matter. I think, as long as it's manageable continuous assessment throughout, you get the best reflection of how well the person is engaging with the course.”

- STUDENT 2

“When I went for my Masters, like I could reference, and I was good at referencing and I was good at researching...”

- ALUM 4

“The fact that you're trying to change the way assessments are done and things like that, I think is hugely important and beneficial and I think it will help a lot of people moving forward.”

- ALUM 5



Lastly, memory concerns were briefly flagged by some participants and the confidence of mature and part-time learners can be fragile as they tend to worry about the quality of their academic performance in comparison to other students, particularly when memorising course material is required. For this reason, academics should consider implementing assessment strategies that do not solely depend on memorisation:

“It’s not so easy as a mature student. Your memory isn’t as good”

- STUDENT 4

“They’re often concerned about they’re not able to cover the material and memorise stuff like they used to when they were younger.”

- ADVISER 5

“Maybe they’re a bit rusty or you know they’ve been out of education for a long time, they don’t feel quite on the same maybe level of the other students”

- ADVISER 10



## Available Resources to Utilise

### 4.5

For resources focused on academic advising and becoming a more innovative and intuitive teacher the following resources are a good starting point:

- Academic Advising Handbook - Nacada: [https://nacada.ksu.edu/portals/0/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/Example\\_Univ\\_Handbook.pdf](https://nacada.ksu.edu/portals/0/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/Example_Univ_Handbook.pdf)
- What does it take to be a teaching hero? Exploring students’ perceptions and experiences of impactful, transformative teaching in Irish Higher Education - National Teaching and Learning Forum: <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/NF-2015-What-Does-it-Take-to-be-a-Teaching-Hero-Exploring-students-perceptions-and-experiences-of-impactful-transformative-teaching-in-Irish-Higher-Education.pdf>
- Discovery Learning Programme - Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (École polytechnique fédérale de Lausanne): <https://www.epfl.ch/education/educational-initiatives/discovery-learning-program-2/>
- How People Learn II; Learners, Contexts and Cultures - National Academies of Science Engineering and Medicine: <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/24783/how-people-learn-ii-learners-contexts-and-cultures>
- Improving Students’ Learning With Effective Learning Techniques: Promising Directions From Cognitive and Educational Psychology - Dunlosky et al., 2013: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23484712.pdf>

- What makes for effective adult learning - Wisconsin Union: <https://union.wisc.edu/assets/Uploads/Events-Activities/Wheelhouse-Studios/MiniCourses-EffectiveLearning.pdf>

The following resources focus on developing and designing creative assessment strategies which will help you rethink how you assess your students:

- Expanding our Understanding of Assessment and Feedback in Irish Higher Education - National Teaching and Learning Forum: <https://hub.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/95.-NF-2017-Expanding-our-Understanding-of-Assessment-and-Feedback-in-Irish-Higher-Education.pdf>
- Guide to the Assessment Design Decisions Framework - Carlow Institute of Technology: [https://tlu.cit.ie/contentFiles/files/Guide\\_to\\_the\\_Assessment\\_Design\\_Decisions\\_Framework.pdf](https://tlu.cit.ie/contentFiles/files/Guide_to_the_Assessment_Design_Decisions_Framework.pdf)
- Assessment and Feedback Strategies - UCD Teaching and Learning: <http://www.ucd.ie/teaching/resources/programmedesignassessment/assessmentandfeedbackstrategies/>
- Assessment 2020: Seven propositions for assessment reform in higher education - University of Technology Sydney: [https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/Assessment-2020\\_propositions\\_final.pdf](https://www.uts.edu.au/sites/default/files/Assessment-2020_propositions_final.pdf)

These resources will help reframe or energise the way you think about feedback:

- How to give constructive feedback to students: staff to students - UCD Teaching and Learning: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HB5HpEgcg-w&list=PLBrKYeYjnkNL6H2FjA8IOgPFhH0RGXb7j>
- Six approaches to technology enhanced feedback - UCD Teaching and Learning: [https://www.ucd.ie/teaching/t4media/technology\\_enhanced\\_feedback.pdf](https://www.ucd.ie/teaching/t4media/technology_enhanced_feedback.pdf)
- Turning a traditional teaching setting into a feedback-rich environment - Arturo Gonzales (UCD School of Civil Engineering): <https://educationaltechnologyjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s41239-018-0114-1>



## Proposals for Your Consideration

### 4.6

The proposals presented here are for you to reflect upon and utilise as necessary to enable you move forward with developing engaging teaching and assessment activities for all your students. They were developed with mature and part-time students in mind but they are equally applicable to all students. As you progress through each proposal you can reflect on if it would work with your student cohort and what is your objective for using it, then what is the most appropriate way to put it into your teaching practice and finally what you would consider the impact you would like to see as a result of initiating the change.

#### 4.6.1

##### **Making life just a little easier - understanding the challenges mature learners face**

Mature and part-time learners stressed that academics could make their life easier by understanding that there will be setbacks in their educational journey. Recurring concerns from the focus groups suggests that mature learners are dedicated to their learning but occasionally struggle to prevent external sources from distracting them. Participants made it clear that they do not expect their lecturers or faculty to know everything going on in their lives but expressed the importance of leaving the door open for mature and part-time learners to confide in them if need be:

“I don’t think they need to know, but I don’t think it’s any harm if they do, and if the students are willing to share.”

- ALUM 3

“The class don’t expect every single lecturer to do a one-hour introduction where you slip around and get all 20 people to introduce yourselves.”

- ALUM 6

In saying that, our focus groups showed that whilst mature learners do not expect their lecturers to know everything about them, they do request that academics understand that their learning journey can endure obstacles frequently due to their commitments outside of the classroom. Some participants voiced their concerns about the possibility of their academics believing that they’re not putting enough time into their work when in reality they might be feeling overwhelmed from juggling different aspects of their life:

“We have our problems and it’s not as black and white as you haven’t done your work, you know.”

- STUDENT 1

“They may be working full-time, they may have a family of four or five kids. There was one lady in our course that actually had a baby in the middle of it, and she was on maternity while doing her work, which is amazing.”

- ALUM 7

In light of this, when considering extenuating circumstances, being flexible and understanding with mature and part-time students with their personal circumstances is essential.

“Some students have very complicated situations that are very difficult to put into words for extenuating circumstances or to “prove” for extenuating circumstances.”

- ADVISER 7

“They struggled a little bit within the extenuating circumstances policy because it’s not the type of thing which automatically falls within the scope of the policy, there has to be some sort of negotiation around that.”

- ADVISER 8

#### 4.6.2 Timetabling

Many mature and part-time students can benefit from advance viewing of their timetables so that they can adapt and modify their lives around their learning. Many participants in our focus groups appreciate that while timetables may change at short notice, even having a draft timetable including the location and hours a month in advance of the trimester beginning is enough for them to be able to adapt. They do not need detail, they just need to know when and where they need to be each day as much in advance as possible so they can arrange their work and family lives around their studies.

Consider circulating an advanced draft timetable with room number, building and times for your module a month in advance. While this can be difficult for many to achieve with room allocation changes and timing changes, adding in a caveat that the timetable is draft and subject to change indicates to the students that there are also factors beyond your control too and you are also subject to uncertainty at times as you aim to deliver a positive learning experience.

#### 4.6.3 Ongoing Orientation

Orientation processes can be daunting for all students regardless of whether they are from a distinct cohort or not. For mature and part-time students, orientation can be overwhelming as they begin the adjustment process of coming to higher education while balancing their social and often professional commitments. The quantity of information on their new institutes can be significant and for many students they do not have time to absorb all of the information and all of the resources that are potentially available.

Using your Virtual Learning Environment to provide an area that includes information on all of the available resources and systems that new students can use is an invaluable way for students to be able to refer back to and find information. Such an area can be retained from year to year in a core module.

Similarly as new students adjust and settle into their new learning environment having some reminder sessions included as part of their lectures can trigger the memories from their orientation week on resources and services that are available. Weeks 4 to 6 in their first term are ideal times to build in an hour or two of contact time that focuses on support services - these can be optional tutorials they can attend but it would also give them time to meet their academics in a less formal setting. These less formal sessions can lead to students building a rapport with their academics who are taking time to get to know their concerns and stressors while also demonstrating the support mechanisms available to mature and part-time students as they begin their learning journeys. This is very important in terms of academic advising so that mature and part-time students can feel comfortable in seeking out guidance and advice from their academics. Further information on relationship building can be found in Chapter 5.

#### 4.6.4 Assessment Timing

Similarly knowing in advance when assessment is due allows students to plan their time appropriately. Many participants indicated that there were particular points in the trimester when they were overloaded with multiple forms of assessment in multiple modules and they questioned whether academics talk to each other when planning out assessment strategies. If you are a Programme Director it would be helpful to bring all of your module coordinators together to map out all the modules in a programme and negotiate when assessment is to be submitted across the trimester to avoid overloading students at certain points in the trimester. This does require negotiation and flexibility between academics to ensure that their learning objectives and outcomes are met along with aligning with their timetables. This process can be undertaken annually during curriculum review processes. An example module assessment mapping matrix is included for you to consider.

Module Name	Introduction to Anatomy	Fundamentals of Human Physiology	Introduction to Biochemistry	Introduction to Pharmacology
Module Code	XXX10001	XXX10002	XXX10003	XXX1004
Module Coordinator	Dr. Joe Bloggs	Dr. Jane Bloggs	Prof. Joe Smith	Prof. Jane Smith
Credits	5 ECTS	10 ECTS	5 ECTS	7.5 ECTS
Week				
1				
2				
3	Essay 1000 words (20%)			
4				Presentation (15%)
5		In Class Exam (25%)		
6			Assignment 2000 words (30%)	
7				
8				
9		In Class Exam (25%)		
10				
11				
12				Group Assignment (35%)
Study Week	Learning Portfolio 4,000 words (80%)			
Exam Week 1			2 Hour Exam (70%)	
Exam Week 2		Report 5,000 words (50%)		1 Hour MCQ Exam (50%)
Remediation Strategy	End of Trimester 3 Hour Examination	Resit Assignment	End of Trimester 2 Hour Examination	Resit Assignment

Figure 4.3 A proposed programme level trimester assessment map 100

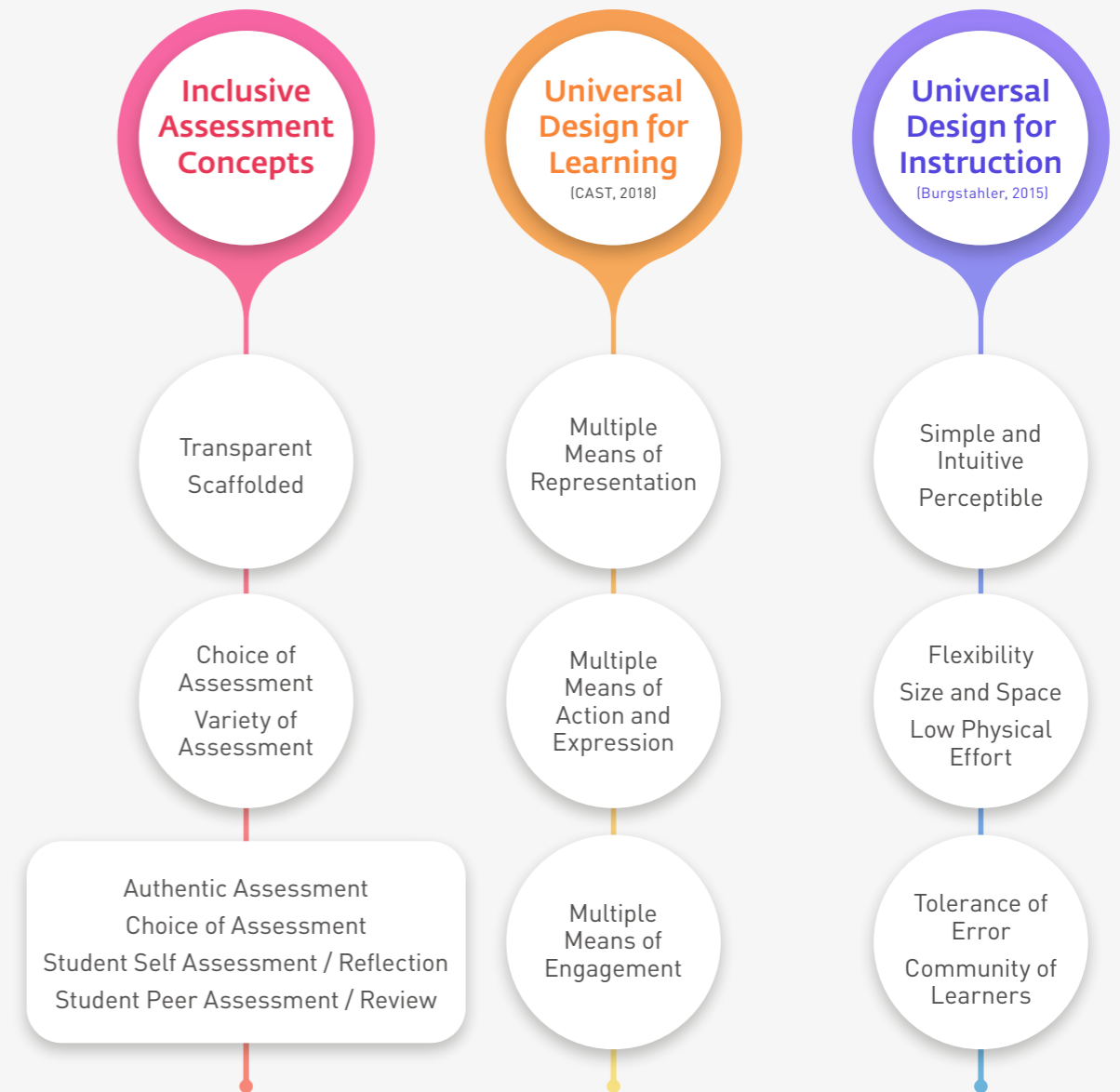
Mature and part-time students also like certainty, changing assessment strategies or not fully knowing what the assessment will be prior to commencing a module can be daunting. Consequently consider being as specific in your module descriptors as possible when stating the assignment type, size, how much it is worth and when it is due to facilitate student planning.

#### 4.6.5 Assessment Strategies

Considering a variety of assessment types allows for flexibility in how all students can express the achievement of their learning outcomes. While many subjects may require terminal examinations, bringing in minor formative assessments early in a module allows for students to receive feedback on their progress and direction for their learning over the remainder of a module. Bringing in a wider variety of assessment types allows students that may use different learning modes to be able to demonstrate their newly acquired knowledge from the module - presentations or video assignments plays to audio-visual learners strengths, learning portfolios allow for greater self-reflection and pacing of a learning journey across a module instead of the pressure of a terminal examination.

Allowing students to decide on how they can demonstrate their learning outcomes offers an element of co-design to a module also which can permit students to play to their strengths. Offering such flexibility also indicates that the academics are acknowledging the learning modes and pressures that mature and part-time students are facing which can then contribute to the students elevating their trust of the academic to consider and be cognisant of their needs as a distinct cohort. Figure 4.3 (adapted from UCD ALL Inclusive Assessment & Feedback Universal Design Case Studies from IADT and UCD - Padden et al., 2019) demonstrates the guiding principles of inclusive assessment as part of the approaches to universal design for learning and instruction.

UCD Teaching and Learning and UCD Access and Lifelong Learning has a wealth of guidance and strategies on how to diversify assessment strategies to make for more robust mechanisms to assess learning outcomes. Further relevant links have been provided in the previous Section 4.5.



**Figure 4.4 The relationship between universal design in learning and instruction approaches with inclusive assessment concepts (adapted from Padden et al., 2019).**



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### 4.7

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# 05.



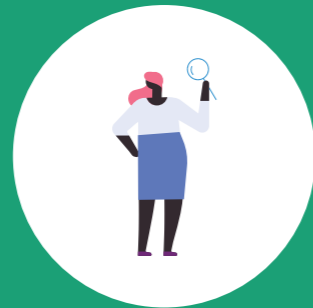
## Relationship Building with Mature and Part- Time Learners to facilitate academic advising

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter considers how the development of a relationship between academics and their mature and part-time students can facilitate academic advising for this cohort. In this chapter the findings of our research are shared relating to what mature and part-time students consider important in developing professional relationships with their academics and how such relationships can contribute to the overall quality of their university experience.

The chapter considers the existing literature and presents a range of resources academics can potentially use to advance the practices they use to foster positive educational relationships with all of their students, not just mature and part-time students. Sample mechanisms are also presented which could be used by academics to foster a learning environment where academic advising becomes the norm as students progress through their studies.

## Academic Self-Assessment



5.2

Academics will often strive for excellence in our teaching to ensure that our students have a learning experience formed to the best of our abilities but we all need to self-reflect and evaluate ourselves and the actions we take around our learning processes. The following questions are designed for academics to reflect on their authenticity as teachers and how they can use that to develop relationships with their students which would allow for academic advising to flourish as part of mature and part-time student learning journeys. There are no right or wrong answers but they should provoke you to think about how you teach and relate to your students. These questions are based on work by our colleagues in UCD Access and Lifelong Learning (Kelly and Padden, 2018), the wider literature (Section 5.3) and the findings of our research that focus on authenticity, communication and relationship building (Section 5.4).

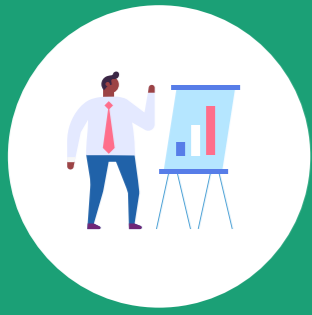
You can consider the self-assessment questions either as an academic responsible for a whole programme or stage of a programme or as a module coordinator. They are not exhaustive and many may not be relevant directly to you but you can use them as a guide to consider how to improve the educational experience you are the driving force of. Sections 5.5 and 5.6 outline potential resources and proposals you could utilise to advance your own strategies and supports to build relationships with your students. Again, while this chapter was developed with mature and part-time students in mind, by aligning with the principles of universal design in learning (UDL) the resources and proposals in this chapter can be used to benefit all students on their respective learning journeys.

## Programme Director

- Do you explain at the outset of your programme the critical times across the programme where students will need to make informed decisions about their choices in order to maximise their personal academic objectives?
- Do your programme orientation activities explain to students about the different types of learning they will experience across the whole programme?
- Do you explain to your students how to communicate with you and give them expectations about how and when you will respond?
- Do you hold open sessions with your students when they can drop into you either in person or online to discuss issues they are facing while on your programme?
- Do you communicate your office hours to your students?

## Module Coordinator

- Do you have the capacity in your module for students to avail of opportunities to be partners in their learning and have input in directing teaching content, assessment, and other processes?
- Does your module incorporate problem and / or phenomena based learning to allow mature and part-time learners bring in their lived experiences into the classroom for the benefit of all students and academics engaged in the learning process?
- Do your teaching materials follow guidelines for accessible documents (e.g. good colour contrast, sans-serif font, minimum size 24pt. for presentations, minimum size 12 for printed materials)?  
Are you an authentic lecturer? i.e. do you bring your lived experiences into the classroom to share with your students so they can see you as a real person and connect with you.
- Do you have a communication protocol for your module so that students can know how to communicate academic queries versus personal issues and how you will respond appropriately?
- When considering your module reading list do you take into consideration cost, availability, and accessibility. As much material as possible is provided in a free of charge accessible digital format?
- Do students on your module have the opportunity to meet with teaching staff one-to-one, either at advertised office hours or at dedicated "module clinics". Do you encourage students to engage in these processes?



## What the Research Says

### 5.3

Relationship building is an important aspect of education for students and academics alike as wellbeing can significantly improve if the relationship between the student and the academic is comfortable (Kahu & Picton, 2019). Research shows that a student's decision to complete further studies (and often in the same institute) is often based on the experience they have with their lecturers ((Tellhed, Bäckström, & Björklund, 2016) and whether they were positive or negative. Regardless of the value students place on their student-teacher relationships, some academics are engulfed in their comfort zone and have no desire to modify their teaching styles to foster a more relatable approach which would allow for academic advising to flourish particularly with mature and part-time students (Åkerlind, 2003).

Many academics are likely to be ignorant of the extent students can be impacted by those who teach them. Dunne (2019) found that participants in her study frequently mentioned how academics positively influenced their learning. In the same way, academics who possess an unapproachable demeanour will prevent their students from seeking their guidance whereas academics who treat mature and part-time students with collegiality persuade these students to feel welcome and appreciated in interacting with their academics (Topham, 2015). Correspondingly, taking the time to build a rapport with students can improve attendance rates and contribute to academic success (Conti, 1985).

Learning should be a fluid process that enables creativity, interaction and new revelations (Huang, 2002). Traditionally, educational institutions failed to acknowledge the importance of relationship building with

mature learners as classroom structures primarily consisted of didactic teaching styles whereby the lecturer firmly controlled the learning and did not attempt to integrate input from students (Markel, 1999). Needless to say, students who desire a relationship with their academics do not want them to behave in a facetious manner. They desire a compassionate and professional bond that is built on fairness and support to promote a sense of security for all students. Students in a recent qualitative study stated: "A good teacher is kind and firm, but not too firm" (Thornberg et al., 2020), implying that a balance between an authoritative teaching style and an inclusive teaching style must be established.

Academics who personify a kind and positive attitude naturally improve student engagement as they are receptive to the friendly atmosphere in the classroom (Roorda et al., 2017). On the contrary, academics who passively dismiss the needs of learners and possess thoughtless and rigid characteristics are perceived to be poor teachers which can stir feelings of hostility within students (Bergmark & Alerby, 2008). In particular, mature learners do not expect to have a formal relationship with their academics as they are more assertive communicators than younger students and believe the relationships they have with their teachers should resemble relationships with their peers (Lynch & Bishop-Clark, 1994). The rationale for this potentially is that mature students appreciate lecturers who are sensitive to their individual needs and worries in higher education and who do their best to refrain from stereotyping (Ross-Gordon, 2003), especially, given that many older adult learners initially struggle with a lack of confidence upon entering higher education because they have not been exposed to formal education like traditional students (Macdonald & Stratta, 1998).

Furthermore, academics who choose to develop a professional relationship with adult students may help ease their transition to formal education. One way to help build authentic relationships in the classroom is to normalise the sharing of personal experiences, if students are willing and comfortable to do so. Although sharing

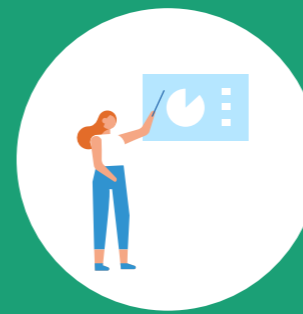
personal narratives exhibits vulnerability it also instils trust in fellow classmates and the educator, as the purpose is to inform others of personal ordeals that should not be subject to debate or judgement (Clark & Rossiter, 2006). Likewise, a classroom that incorporates storytelling can create a co-designed teaching environment as students become actively involved in the classroom and a variety of stories may also resonate with other students and lead to “reflective conversations” among each other and thus constitute a warm and open environment (Crow & Smith, 2005).

Moreover, mature and part-time learners want consistent communication with their professors. Students can partially evaluate their lecturer’s teaching style and relationship with them based on how promptly and effectively they respond to their emails (Sheer & Fung, 2007). It is also important that academics do not overlook the technological barriers that mature students face when utilising digital resources as many mature students are unfamiliar with such systems because their second-level educational experiences did not include the use of electronic devices (Vaportzis, Clausen & Gow, 2017). Orientation activities that specifically include sessions on utilising virtual learning environments are welcomed by mature learners who lack confidence in using technological systems as this will guide them (and other students who use online platforms) to become familiar with the e-learning environment when applicable (Garivaldis, 2022; Roddy et al., 2017; Cho, 2012). Consistency in teaching styles is also crucial for mature learners because students tend to grow accustomed to the initial teaching styles they are exposed to per module and dislike being exposed to changes as it disrupts their routine and leaves them unsettled when trying to adapt to alternative approaches (Money & Coughlan, 2016). Therefore, to eliminate the risk of confusion, academics should consider fostering teaching styles that complement the learning style of students (Lubawy, 2003).

The role of orientation programmes in higher education should not be abandoned when supporting mature and part-time learners. If module coordinators and programme directors decide to facilitate orientation programmes they should specifically feature explicit details about the relevant course, goal-setting sessions, and student-teacher relationship building exercises to contribute to the success of mature students (Petty & Thomas, 2014). This intervention will equally permit academics to offer mature and part-time students advice on time management, note-taking, study methods and assignment writing (Ciplef, 2015), which may alleviate existing doubts they have regarding their academic abilities (Fragoso et al., 2013). It is also considered that orientation programmes prepare mature students for computer usage and to educate them on how to correctly avail of IT systems as Tones et al. (2009) found that mature students and those from low socio-economic backgrounds struggle in this area. Likewise, blended learning options in today’s world enables mature learners to involve themselves in higher education (Yuan & Powell, 2013) but investing in technological devices and resources remains costly (Kromydas, 2017). Another common issue regarding the learning of adult students is they are not equipped for higher education in the same way younger students are and this is frequently misjudged by higher education institutions. Traditionally, orientation programmes are structured to last from one day to one week and tend to be targeted at individuals transitioning from second level to third level education (Brown University, 2014), thus requiring formal adjustments to include the needs of mature and part-time learners who may not be on campus for the full period orientation activities are scheduled for.

To summarise, prior research from the literature has illustrated the desire mature and part-time students have to build a relationship with their academics. Academics who attempt to construct a professional relationship with mature students can make a positive contribution to their learning journey and help them adapt to higher education. Consistency in communication does not go unnoticed by mature students either and many have a tendency to evaluate the performance of their academics based on how swiftly they respond to their emails, which is not an optimal way to judge how an academic performs as a teacher and adviser. Focusing on what they may consider to be a poor communication style can lead to many mature and part-time students disengaging from their academics without realising the significant pressures these academics face with obligations in their institutes stretching well beyond their students. This lack of understanding should be addressed as part of setting expectations with mature and part-time students when they commence their studies.

Setting expectations and having conversations about workload and effort should form an integral part of initial orientation sessions. However, orientation activities can often be very crowded in the first week of university, so orientation events that exceed one week and are extended into the first trimester are particularly welcomed by mature and part-time students. An extended range of orientation activities allows for a longer bedding in time with the support of their academics and institute ancillary learning services to introduce them to the university systems and to offer mature learners advice on how to successfully complete their course while maintaining a healthy wellbeing.



## What Our Research Says

### 5.4 Authentic Teaching – Being Real

#### 5.4.1 A classroom that links to the real world

Participants in our research valued academics that fostered an authentic approach to teaching and learning in the classroom because they felt more connected to their academics when they exposed themselves as real people to their students in the classroom. Students and alumni in our study made it very clear that they felt a strong sense of belonging in the classroom when their academics made the effort to create an environment that is linked to the real world; through themselves as individuals that are also on a learning journey i.e. their academics do not know everything but are also there to learn at the same time as guide their students. Many mature and part-time students and alumni in our research reported that they felt classrooms became more alive and engaging when being taught by academics who shared personal experiences or views whilst teaching as it built a profound connection to the context of the lecture:

“Just sometimes you get lectures from guest lecturers and things where they tell anecdotes about their work experiences and stuff, and it’s always very, very interesting. It’s very insightful, it’s not like ‘textbook’ and it’s very valuable.”

- STUDENT 2

“I will enjoy the lecture more if I feel I have a kind of a personal connection, even if it’s just anecdotes...”

- ALUM 3

No participants in our research levelled any criticism at lecturers who were personable and authentic in their teaching style. Students and alumni felt that receiving personal monologues enhanced their learning process because it helped them relate to their lecturer on a humane level. This was especially relevant when addressing the concepts of failure and imposter syndrome that many mature and part-time students carry with them during their studies. Having academics that could also talk about their failures permits students to open up about their fears of failure and allows them to connect with their “imperfect” academics. In this regard the connections students have with their academics could be a significant impactful determinant in the quality of their educational experience:

**“If I didn’t make a connection with my professors, I would have kept that big chip that I had on my shoulder coming in and carried it round the rest of my life going, well I did try it, but I was right.”**

- ALUM 4

**“Dropping back on your own experiences and the different tutors dropping back on their own experiences did help, did put more of a human face on people.”**

- ALUM 10

Participants in our research also admitted that some courses require academics to be authentic when engaging with older students, especially if the programmes are associated with specific employment opportunities and professions. One participant explained that his lecturers have no option but to share real-life stories and examples in the classroom because the course is people-centred and is dependent on personal narratives, whilst others rely on realistic examples to strengthen their workplace knowledge:

**“I remember those, and I try and bring them into then my job, my work or when I’m doing training, I can tell anecdotes.”**

- ALUM 3

**“The course I’m doing at the moment, they all have to be Barristers; you can’t teach the course unless you are and you have experience of court. Sure, that’s vital, if they don’t tell you what they’re doing every day, you’ll never learn from them.”**

- ALUM 12

### **A healthy balance of what is shared in the classroom**

Although participants in our research preferred it when their lecturers brought real-life examples and shared their personal experiences as part of the learning process, participants also stressed that academics should not feel forced to repeatedly disclose personal information to students as part of their teaching styles. They acknowledged that academics also must have a level of privacy so as not to over expose themselves in the classroom for their own sake. Instead, our participating mature learners indicated that academics should at least initially focus on dissolving feelings of tension or formality to create a relaxed and approachable atmosphere. This type of learning environment thus has the capacity to positively influence teacher - student relationships so that academic advising processes could flourish:

**“Wouldn’t like that you’d have to put people under pressure to have to be more authentic in their lecturing approach, I think the main thing that matters is that their students are learning from them...”**

- STUDENT 2

**“There should be an organic connection”**

- STUDENT 3

In saying that, participants believe there should be an equal give and take bond between academics and students. Mature and part-time students value classroom interaction and our research found that they are not hesitant in sharing their own lived experiences with their fellow classmates, if it benefits their learning journey both individually and collectively as a class on a journey together:

“It’s great just even talking about everybody’s experience. About how they’re learning, how they apply it at work, if they apply it at work, what their hopes and dreams are. So, you know I learn from other people, or I tell them about my experiences, and they might learn from me...”

- ALUM 3

“I’m okay to share. I’ve no issue sharing because I think it benefits people because I certainly benefit from other people sharing their experiences, so I think it’s good.”

- ALUM 5



Figure 5.1 Participant quotes on authentic teaching in higher education.



## 5.4.2 Orientation to a New Learning Environment

Orientation at the start of their learning journeys is as crucial to mature and part-time students as it is to more traditional younger students arriving in from secondary education - if not more so. As many mature and part-time students experience higher education for the first time, orientation activities and an introduction to how higher education institutions work is essential. The participants in our research indicated a level of 'being overwhelmed' at the start of their orientation especially given their need to balance the external social, economic and professional factors impacting their time in higher education:

“I do remember our orientation, you know, there was a lot of information thrown at us at once.”

- STUDENT 3

“I think it can be daunting. UCD is a big organisation, and it can be daunting you know, because you go into the machine of UCD no matter what programme you entered, to a certain extent, but you know, I find that yes, it's a lot. It's a lot at the beginning...”

- STUDENT 4

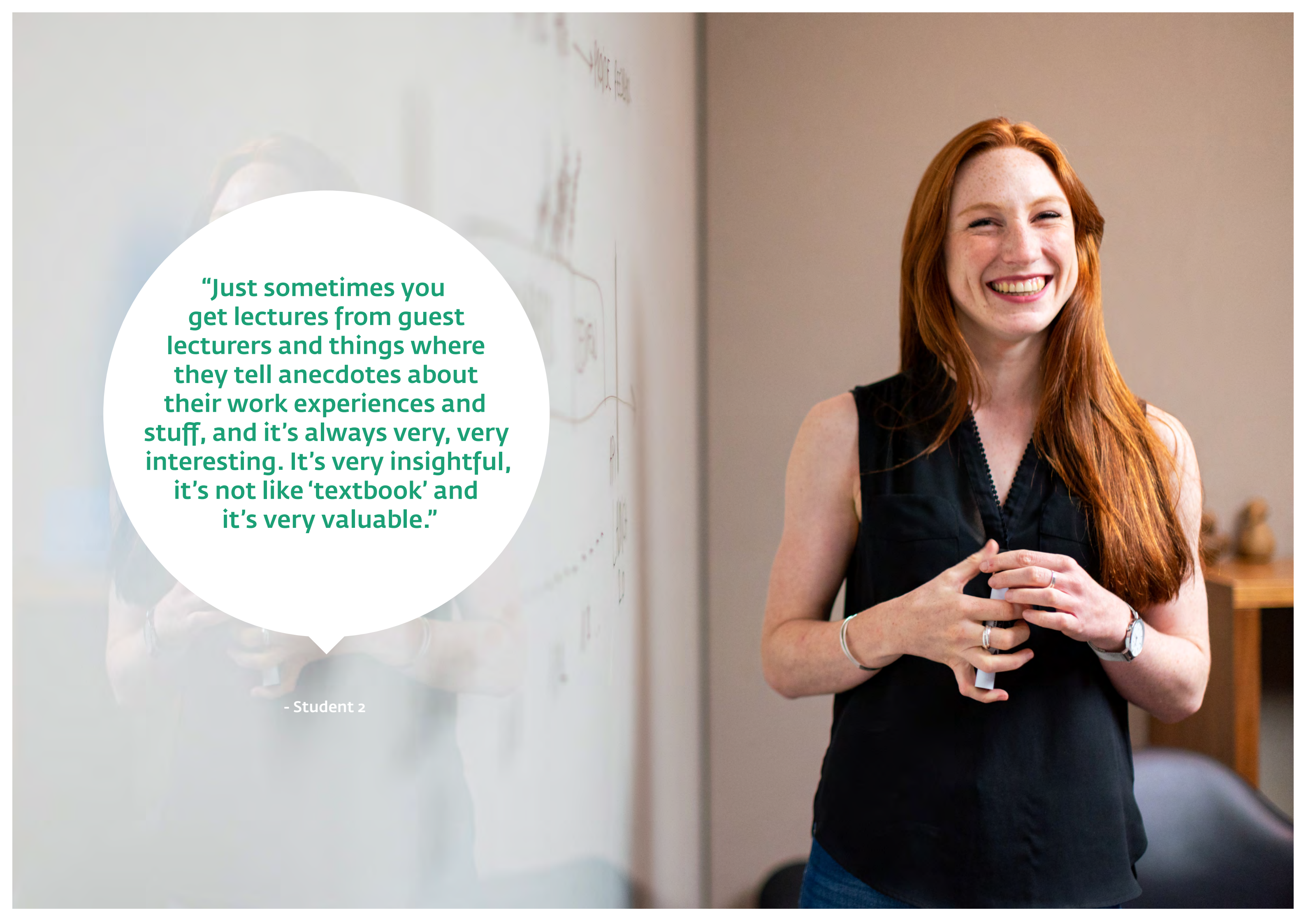
To combat information overload for mature and part-time students, participants in this study suggested that essential information is provided gradually in the early stages of the first trimester as this could help students feel less bombarded while they slowly adjust to their new surroundings:

“I think in chunks is definitely preferable for me anyway, where it's like steps along the way.”

- STUDENT 2

“Bite-sized chunks would be better than in one go, or even like some kind of a reminder every now and again, like maybe even 10 minutes at the start of every lecture for the first few weeks or something.”

- ALUM 3

A young woman with long, wavy red hair is smiling broadly. She is wearing a black sleeveless top and a watch on her left wrist. She is standing in front of a whiteboard that has some diagrams and text on it. The background is slightly blurred, showing a classroom or lecture hall setting.

**“Just sometimes you get lectures from guest lecturers and things where they tell anecdotes about their work experiences and stuff, and it’s always very, very interesting. It’s very insightful, it’s not like ‘textbook’ and it’s very valuable.”**

- Student 2

The findings illustrated that mature and part-time students in particular may benefit significantly from ongoing orientation in their first year of college. Since many mature and part-time students may be entering into higher education for the first time they require comprehensive support to ameliorate this transition which younger students may not need as much as they transition with relative immediacy from secondary to higher education. The data inferred that there is a lack of clarity provided in the first year at university for mature students, which can result in them failing to comprehend the required standards of higher education. One alum revealed that his second year of his programme was noticeably better than his first year as by that stage he academically progressed and began to understand the dynamics of his course to successfully meet its requirements:

**“It started to make sense a lot more and I started to realise what I needed to concentrate on as opposed to, maybe I don’t need to read those 10 books...”**

- ALUM 5

The student advisers in the study showcased their awareness of the demand for extended orientation and admitted that student feedback regularly proposes the idea of holding orientation for longer periods of time when the academic year commences:

**“The orientation as an ongoing or extended orientation, that is a topic that just comes up continuously year on year.”**

- ADVISER 1

However, to operate a successful extended orientation programme, the advisers explained that it would either need to run at programme level and be organised within each discipline by course directors or an external facility solely responsible for arranging orientation events would need to be set up on campus and would rely on consistent funding:

**“In terms of an extended orientation, that I think these things need to happen within the modules and not just outside.”**

- ADVISER 7

Justifiably, if mature students are to benefit from extended orientation programmes they would need to have the opportunity to interact with those they could relate to and develop a connection with. Our study highlighted that mature and part-time students take orientation seriously, they are vigilant of those around them and are highly sensitive to the information they are presented with. This implies that if they are assigned a mentor that cannot accommodate their academic needs or that they can relate to, they may remove themselves from orientation activities. Which one student adviser shared that she had witnessed a full-time mature student who:

**“Didn’t really want to be in her mentor group because it was all 18/19 year olds, didn’t feel that she wants to kind of continue linking in with those students.”**

- ADVISER 2

Despite this challenge, this mature student reasoned with her mentor and informed her that she was no longer interested in meeting up with the mentor group as she would prefer to interact with individuals in a similar age bracket to her:

**“She wasn’t going to continue kind of meeting up with them but has joined the mature student society as kind of a way to meet other mature students.”**

- ADVISER 2

This student's decision to act on her own initiative further illustrates the value mature students see in meeting with other students on the same journey as them. Participants verified that mature learners would interact with other mature students without hesitation, especially those in the year ahead of them as it could succour their learning:

**“If the support and the service was there, I think a lot of adult learners would definitely take the opportunity to talk to, you know somebody who is a second-year...”**

- STUDENT 3

One alum shared that he took direct action to connect with other mature students in his course, but again an interest in interacting with those at a much more advanced level was highlighted:

**“I've done it myself, I've gone and sought out the year ahead, and I'm very, very good friends with the year ahead of me...”**

- ALUM 12

Participants also admitted that they would have enjoyed engaging with UCD alumni rather than younger mentors in an orientation system as they could relate to them more, especially if they work in the same employment sector(s) as them:

**“Like not too many do the diploma from farming backgrounds, you know, but I wouldn't mind talking to alumni.”**

- ALUM 9

Alum 1 made clear that orientation committees evolve when they receive proper investment, which in his opinion boils down to recruiting a “competent mentor” fitted to the job criteria:

**“It's not ‘keep an eye on them’, it's a structured programme of mentoring.”**

- ALUM 1

He also clarified that appropriate candidates will honour the position. They will feel intrinsically motivated to fulfil the role and not only be swayed by financial gain:

**“Mentorship is the highest game, but it has the highest risk if the wrong people are selected and that's why money has to be careful, that it's not the driver for the mentor.”**

- ALUM 1

As a result of previous feedback, student advisers have tried to adhere to the desires of mature and part-time learners when involved in orientation programmes. They recognise that older students should be ideally grouped together to help them feel comfortable within their social circle and perhaps this is something the programme coordinators and module directors should consider if they decide to operate an extended orientation programme:

**“Mature students would rather be mentored by mature students and I sort of maintained that.”**

- ADVISER 8

**“I've heard from some of the matures that they wanted to be with other matures like that... that's what they want.”**

- ADVISER 9

### 5.4.3 Consistency in Communication

Communication practices were a significant discussion point for participants in our research who voiced their concerns about not receiving regular or consistent contact from their academics and they felt that this was a barrier to relationship building. The findings do indicate that most of our participants recognise a reasonable level of understanding of the hectic schedules academic staff have, which may cause them to struggle to communicate with students occasionally. However, our participants felt that they are entitled to a response from their lecturers if they email them outside of the classroom. Mature and part-time students feel that even if they cannot answer their query effectively, it is not professional to ignore students and that an acknowledgement would go a long way to alleviate their concerns:

“So, if I have a question, I know I can email that person, and I will expect an answer. Now if the person doesn’t have the answer, I would expect them to say: “I don’t know that answer [name], that’s a very good question, but I’ll come back to you.”

- ALUM 11

“I think a big complaint I get from students is that they emailed the academics, and they get nothing back.”

- ADVISER 9

Our research also uncovered that how the Virtual Learning Environment is used is also a contentious issue. It was felt by many of our participants that without a consistent approach to how the VLE is used for learning and for communication that the students spend a lot of time unnecessarily wading through the VLE to find material in some modules whereas in other modules it is much simpler to navigate.

This is entirely subjective to how each individual academic utilises the VLE. But many participants said that at least if each programme had a consistent approach to how the VLE was to be laid out and utilised for communications it would go a long way to making their learning journey a little simpler. The expectations of our participants was that all academics have the same level of proficiency with the VLE when in reality they need to be educated that every academic uses the VLE at their own comfort level and experience.

When discussing consistency in communication with the student advisers, adviser 1 stated that: **“They’re not used to the academic system.”** This implies that academics should try to stick to a pre-set online format to enable mature students to easily locate the materials they need. In support of this, the oldest participant who took part in this study, showed clear frustration when he could not smoothly find the information he was looking for on the VLE:

**“That is very frustrating, like going to find things in Brightspace, in one course it’s there and in another course, it’s somewhere else.”**

- STUDENT 1

When conversing with the student advisers, they proposed that mature students are more straightforward in verbalising the issues they have around attempting to reach out to their academics. The advisers implied that communication between academics and students has come up as a recurring problem for students, leading support staff to believe that this could be a common concern for many students across the university, but not all students are confident enough to report it in the same manner that mature and part-time students do:

**“I think it highlights a problem in the wider University of the way that some staff are communicating with students in general, and I think 18 or 19 year olds may just put up with it.”**

- ADVISER 7

The importance of individual face to face opportunities to discuss their aspirations and learning journeys with their academics also arose as being crucial for mature and part-time students. Building such individual face to face time into communication strategies should be an integral consideration for academic advising processes for these students and is explored in further detail in Chapter 6.

#### 5.4.4 Acknowledging them as a cohort with distinct needs

Recognising that mature and part-time students are a distinct cohort with social and economic factors influencing their learning journey is an essential part of achieving goals for widening participation. Similarly, equality, diversity and inclusion should be integral facets of how we develop our teaching and learning. Recognising this particular cohort’s distinct learning needs while also integrating them as much as possible into learning environments can support the diversification of student bodies and make our classrooms more inclusive, which is to the benefit of all learners. Student advisers affirmed that mature students want to be recognised as individuals with unique learning needs:

**“We were asked by a mature student to recognise that they are different and they would like to meet people who share life stage, common ground, and same issues.”**

- ADVISER 7

The pressures some mature and part-time learners face in their personal lives ineluctably complicates their educational journey. The student advisers who took part in this study already shared that third-level is a huge undertaking for all students, but mature learners especially have a large volume of responsibilities that potentially separates them from younger students. Mature students do not enter higher education as it is the next expected step on an educational journey shared by their peers; rather they often make a concerted effort to step off their current path with the ambition of improving their and their families' social and economic position. By stepping off this path they understand that they will make short term sacrifices in terms of finance or caring responsibilities and for the most part they work to put reasonable plans in place to offset these challenges and ensure they can dedicate sufficient time to their studies. However, in spite of often careful planning, the nature of managing differing responsibilities is that when one plan is scuppered it can have a knock on effect on other arrangements and result in the student being under pressure to meet academic commitments. One student adviser explained that mature students who visit him do so because they have a number of conflicting obligations, that academics should not override:

**“It would be a lot to do with the complexity of their personal lives, meeting the requirements of their study.”**

- ADVISER 3

We are not claiming that mature and part-time learners should be given special privileges given their external circumstances but it is important that academics understand that their road to and throughout their education is not always smooth and that mature and part-time learners are as susceptible to hindrances in their personal and academic lives as all students can be. Here again we must consider how adopting a UDL Framework that can benefit all students will have significant benefits for mature and part-time students. One of the advisers reflected on a situation whereby a mature student with a small child struggled to

meet her course requirements due to regular school closures during the pandemic, which the UCD extenuating circumstances policy unfortunately does not cover:

**“A single parent trying to look after a small child, manage coursework and manage multiple school closures is hugely complex for that particular individual and I imagine they had company on campus with other mature students who are in the same boat.”**

- ADVISER 4

#### 5.4.5 Setting boundaries

Given that adequate communication between students and academic staff needs to be prioritised, it is necessary that appropriate boundaries are put in place to ensure effective and reasonable communication is guaranteed. One participant (very unrealistically) was adamant that academics stay connected to students via their mobile phone because they could be more likely to dismiss incoming emails:

**“I think it's just that people want the easy access of a phone, quicker than anything else.”**

- ALUM 7

This is a significant assertion to make but it stresses the importance for delineating boundaries and setting expectations of the learning journey from the outset of a programme. Although this is not an appropriate form of ongoing communication, the study highlighted that mature and part-time students have no intention of being intrusive on academics's lives but alum 7 stresses the frustration that learners feel when academics do not respond to their emails. They reflected on an incident whereby students in their class emailed their lecturer several times for support on their course work and getting a response was very delayed:

**“An assignment was given by a facilitator, and they may have not been in until four weeks later, or the week before the assignment was due, that would have been their next lecture. “So, basically the students were emailing, and they were trying to get the information.”**

- ALUM 7

Despite this, the majority of participants in our research conveyed their awareness that academics have their own personal challenges and they have the right to be contacted in a sensible fashion. Equally, students and alumni in this study respect that lecturers cannot be at their beck and call whenever they need their guidance:

**“When we say accessibility, I think it has to be realistic to be respectful to the professors.”**

- ALUM 1

**“I think you can't expect academics to be a concierge service, where you know as soon as you have a question you email. They're not available 24/7.”**

- STUDENT 4

Thus, it appeared evident that mature learners recognise the need for boundaries in communication, but they simply want to know that help is available for them if they need it at different points in their learning journey, rather than be ignored altogether:

**“I mean I can think of, in the past like when lecturers would have times for their office, where students could drop in and stuff.”**

- STUDENT 2

**“Be very open and available to answer the questions.”**

- ALUM 11

Student advisers mirrored what the students and alumni shared and argued that students and lecturers need to know how to properly interact with each other so that boundaries are achieved and realistic expectations are met. The advisers hinted that how one articulates is crucial and to maintain solid boundaries, students should know how to write a formal email to their lecturers as this will avoid misunderstandings in emails:

**“The keyword for me is always ‘boundaries’, actually.”**

- ADVISER 9

**“It's an important skill in life to learn how to send a professional email and the student will need to learn how to do that”**

- ADVISER 10



To also encourage smooth communication across the institute, the student advisers promoted the idea of implementing a communication protocol across all school disciplines. Authorising this will create a greater sense of structure in how things operate from a communication perspective:

**“We did try to ask that all lecturers did exactly as you have, produce a communication protocol because students had an incredible challenge, because lecturer A put everything on the front page of Brightspace, lecturer B emailed, lecturer C didn’t read emails and that would be a classic kind of thing.”**

- ADVISER 1

When considering relationship building with mature and part-time students, setting those initial boundaries allows for the setting of expectations and with consistent communication processes there is an opportunity for a structured approach to academic advising particularly at key points on their learning journey when academic choices / decisions may need to be made by the student to forge their path in alignment with their academic and career aspirations.



## Available Resources to Utilise

For resources focused on how to develop your educational relationships with your mature and part-time students through recognising their learning modes the following resources are a good starting point:

- Creating a Personal Philosophy of Academic Advising - Freitag: <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Personal-philosophy-of-academic-advising.aspx>
- Voices from the Field: Advisement Philosophy - Dyer: <https://nacada.ksu.edu/portals/0/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/documents/Personal-Philosophy-VFF.pdf>
- Your Advising Philosophy: Built from the Group Up Workshop and Worksheet - Graves, Neuber and Davis:
  - Workshop: <https://mediasite.k-state.edu/mediasite/Play/518463b430c14e6eae31c4c02447f0501d>
  - Worksheet: <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Portals/0/CandIGDivision/Advising%20Philosophy%20Fillable%20Form.pdf?ver=2020-05-08-132249-203>
  - Additional Resources: <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Portals/0/CandIGDivision/Advising%20Philosophy%20Additional%20Resources.pdf?ver=2020-05-08-132249-233>

- Advising is More Than a Yes/No Business: How to Establish Rapport and Trust with Your Students - Ohrablo (Abraham S. Fischler School of Education Nova Southeastern University): <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Advising-is-More-Than-a-Yes-No-Business-How-to-Establish-Rapport-and-Trust-with-Your-Students.aspx>
- On Becoming a Learner: The Concept of Learning Identity - Kolb and Kolb (Case Western Reserve University): [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275714187\\_On\\_becoming\\_a\\_learner\\_The\\_concept\\_of\\_learning\\_identity](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275714187_On_becoming_a_learner_The_concept_of_learning_identity)
- Reflecting on Your Motivation Profile - The University of Newcastle Australia: [https://www.newcastle.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/211846/Motivation-profile.pdf](https://www.newcastle.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/211846/Motivation-profile.pdf)
- How do my Students Study? An Analysis of Students' of Educational Disciplines Favorite Learning Styles According to VARK Classification - Klement (Palacký University Olomouc - Faculty of Education): <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042814032364?via%3Dihub>
- Adapting adult learning theory to support innovative, advanced, online learning - WVMD Model - Yarbrough (West Texas A&M University): <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1194405.pdf>
- Adult learning theories: implications for online instruction - Arghode, Brieger and McLean (Gannon University): <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/EJTD-02-2017-0014/full/html>
- Cliplef, L. (2015). Mature Students in Community College: Two Supports To Improve Student Success. BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1230718.pdf>

For resources on streamlining and managing your communications with your students the following resources are a good place to start:

- Communicating with Students Tip Sheet - The University of Newcastle Australia: [https://www.newcastle.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/83802/Communicating-with-students.pdf](https://www.newcastle.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/83802/Communicating-with-students.pdf)
- Five Tips to Creating a More Engaging Online Course for Adult Learners - Crockford (California University of Pennsylvania): <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/online-education/online-student-engagement/five-tips-to-creating-a-more-engaging-online-course-for-adult-learners/>
- Effective Online Discussion Guide - The University of Newcastle Australia: [https://www.newcastle.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/211859/Discussions-Effective-online-discussion.pdf](https://www.newcastle.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/211859/Discussions-Effective-online-discussion.pdf)
- Engaging Adult Learners - Learning and Teaching Office, Ryerson University: <https://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/learning-teaching/teaching-resources/teach-a-course/engaging-adult-learners.pdf>

For resources to develop your authenticity as a teacher in order to engage with mature and part-time students the following resources can kick start your innovation and creativity:

- Six Paths to More Authentic Teaching - Weimar (Faculty Focus): <https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/faculty-development/six-paths-to-more-authentic-teaching/>
- Authentic teaching techniques - Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership: <https://www.aitsl.edu.au/tools-resources/resource/authentic-teaching-techniques-illustration-of-practice>

- Authentic Learning Resources - University of New Hampshire: <https://www.unh.edu/teaching-learning-resource-hub/teaching-learning/authentic-learning>
- Characteristics of Adult Learners - Malamed (The Learning Coach): <https://thelearningcoach.com/learning/characteristics-of-adult-learners/>
- What Mature Age Students need from online higher education - Payne (Swinburne University): <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/what-mature-age-students-need-online-higher-education>
- How to Develop Your Creativity - Hokanson (E-Learning Coach): <https://thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/56/>
- Investment Theory of Creativity - Sternberg (Cornell University): <http://www.robertjsternberg.com/investment-theory-of-creativity>
- The Idea Relay Technique - The Learning Coach: <https://thelearningcoach.com/download/28210/>
- The Influences of Emotion on Learning and Memory - Tyng et al: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01454/full>
- Andragogy's Transition Into The Future: Meta-Analysis of Andragogy and Its Search for a Measurable Instrument - Taylor and Kroth: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ891073.pdf>



## Proposals for Your Consideration

### 5.6

The following proposals are for you to consider as mechanisms which may support your relationship building with mature and part-time students as well as your more traditional younger students. Trying them out and pushing yourself out of your own comfort zone can be a learning mechanism in itself for you that may or may not be successful but taking risks in our roles as academics can pay dividends for you as well as your students.

As you progress through each proposal you can reflect on if it would work with your student cohort and what is your objective for using it, then what is the most appropriate way to put it into your teaching practice and finally what you would consider the impact you would like to see as a result of initiating the change.

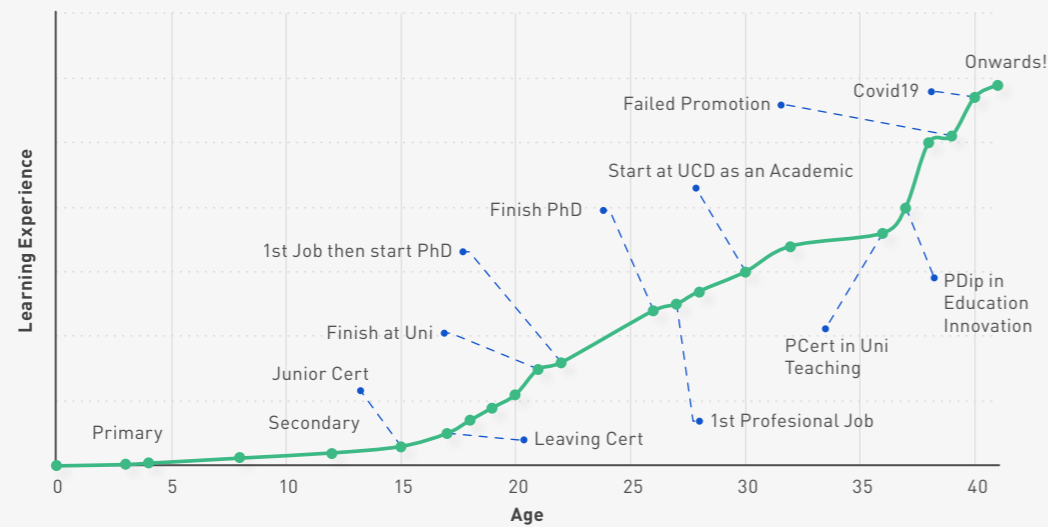
#### 5.6.1

#### Demonstrating Your Own Learning Journey

One process which can be accomplished relatively easily and during orientation activities as a mechanism for your students to get to know you is to demonstrate your own learning journey and what brought you to your current point in your academic journey. This can be achieved as a one way or two way process.

As a one way process you can illustrate your own journey and highlight key milestones, achievements and / or stagnation or unsuccessful periods to demonstrate your academic trajectory. This can be presented visually and supplemented with a narrative from you in a session during orientation. This enables your students to see who you are and what you have achieved to get where you are today and importantly why you are their teacher and guide on their learning journey.

## My Learning Journey



**Figure 5.2 Example Learning Journey over forty years.**

As a two-way process you can present your own learning journey and then ask your students to demonstrate theirs visually in the same manner in a class exercise. This allows them to demonstrate to you and their peers the trajectory of their learning over their lifetimes which builds in self-reflection. This could be integrated into an assignment too which would allow you to get to know your students in more detail which will then facilitate you in preparing for academic advising processes for your students. An example assignment is presented below.

**Assignment Type:** Study Plan and Learning Journey

**Assignment Size:** 1,500 Words

**Instructions:** In this assignment you are to prepare a study plan that reflects your learning journey to date and how you plan for the forthcoming year as a student. In this module you will learn about the following key skills to be a successful student:

- Time Management;
- Note taking;
- Research Skills; and
- Academic Writing (including referencing).

For this assignment you should reflect on these skills and research the relationship between these study skills and academic performance. You will be required to make a study plan in the form of an academic essay where you acknowledge your current skills and demonstrate how you plan to build on those skills to improve how you will study for this programme.

You are encouraged to construct a mind map demonstrating how your skills are interrelated but also the social factors around you which influence those skills. You may also wish to include a summary of your learning trajectory over your life to date to explain how you accrued those skills.

The 1500-word essay you build around those two tasks should be based on your reflection on your learning journey to date but also to include research on learning and education as an adult learner and how the above skills are necessary for success in a university programme. You should conclude your essay with your realistic study plan for the forthcoming year and include how you are incorporating your work, your family, your social life and your studies together in an integrated fashion that is workable.

When working on this assignment you should be aware that there are **TWO** distinct tasks here. You are asked first to reflect on your own skills, what you have learned and secondly what you will need to develop within your programme. You are also asked to do some academic research, read some sources that focus on education and adult learning (journal articles, book chapters etc.) and integrate them into your narrative.

## 5.6.2 Showcase your mistakes and failures

In a similar fashion to demonstrating your own learning journey as an academic, showcasing your own failures and mistakes that have occurred across your career not only humanises you in the eyes of your students but it can also demonstrate how you overcame failure to achieve your aspirations. For many students, holding their academics in high esteem or on a proverbial pedestal can lead to a level of unrealistic expectations of perfection in their academics. This can in fact reinforce mature and part-time students' fear of failure and imposter syndrome tendencies.

If you can demonstrate your mistakes and failures across your career and indicate what you learned and how you felt from them, your mature and part-time students (and likely all your students) are more likely to be able to reflect on their mistakes and failures openly which will allow for greater trust in relationship building with them. If mature and part-time students can see that imperfection in their academics when those same academics engage with them to advise them on their learning journey it can also acknowledge that academics do not have all the answers and they themselves have taken unintended turns or had stumbled in achieving their career goals.

In particular if an academic can showcase their failures while also incorporating their key learnings from those failures, their students too can then self-reflect on their own failings and hopefully consider the lessons learned.

# Failures and Successes 2017 - 2020



Figure 5.3 Mapping Failure and Success to demonstrate the reality of academic life.

### 5.6.3 Explain your academic decision-making process

This may seem quite logical and intuitive to many academics but for many students if the rationale behind how or why a module is constructed, taught and assessed in the way it is is not explained appropriately, it may lead to a lack of transparency that can confuse students. In particular mature and part-time students often consider they want value for money from their education so they need reassurance that the way modules and programmes are designed are done so for particular reasons so they can achieve their fullest potential.

In particular demonstrating how the content of the module alongside how the module is assessed and aligns with specific learning objectives to achieve learning outcomes is crucial to build a level of trust with this cohort. Setting learning outcomes for particular pieces of assessment and how they link to the overall learning outcomes of the module allows students to monitor their own progress in achieving learning outcomes and gives them insight into how modules and assessment is constructed to achieve those outcomes.

## Module Themes



Figure 5.4 an example visualisation of how you can link your modules themes with lecture sequence and assessment strategy.

#### 5.6.4 Engage them through a variety of learning modes (VARK Model)

Mature and part-time students are just like every other student in that each individually has their own preferred mode of learning - yet many do not realise as they enter higher education what that mode may actually be. During orientation activities and at the outset of their studies it would be beneficial to demonstrate to this particular cohort what the various modes of learning are and how they can play to their strengths once they recognise their preferred learning modes.

#### Types of Learning Styles

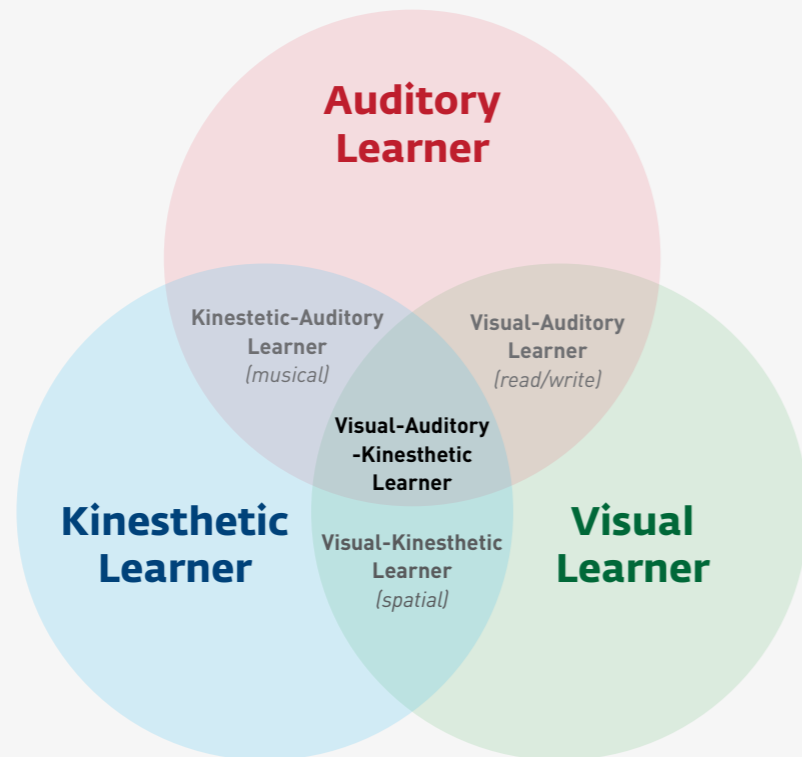


Figure 5.5 Introduction to Learning Styles through the VARK Model.

Introducing students to the VARK model can accomplish this. The most widely accepted model of learning styles is called the VARK model, which stands for visual, aural/auditory, reading/writing, and kinesthetic.

In brief:

- **V**isual (spatial) learners learn best by seeing;
- **A**uditory (aural) learners learn best by hearing;
- **R**eading/writing learners learn best by reading and writing; and
- **K**inesthetic (physical) learners learn best by moving and doing.

It is important for us as academics to understand how our students learn, but it's even more important for our students to understand how they, themselves learn and recognise their strengths and weaknesses. By understanding their own process of learning and thinking, they can be more efficient in studying and learning will progress to a deeper and more reflective level.

Another theory that takes into account some additional learning styles is called Memletics. This theory utilises the fundamentals of the VARK model as a base layer and adds in additional categories. Memletics includes visual, auditory, and kinesthetic that is seen in the VARK model, and also adds in the following types of learners:

- Verbal learners who learn best by speaking;
- Logical (mathematical) learners who learn best by using logic and reasoning (these learners are typically mathematically inclined);
- Social (interpersonal) learners who learn best in groups; and
- Solitary (intrapersonal) learners who learn best alone.

Within memletics, there is a lot of overlap between learning styles due to the nature of the categories. Take, for example, two solitary learners. They both learn best in solitary situations, but one learns best by using logic while the other learns best by seeing.

Once your students can identify their strengths and weaknesses in their learning modes / identity they will be more open to the variety of teaching and learning styles you deploy in your modules. They will also recognise that you as an academic recognise their own individuality as learners and that you do not treat them with homogeneity. This allows for greater trust to be built so that they can turn to you as their academic when they need advice at critical points in their learning journey in higher education.

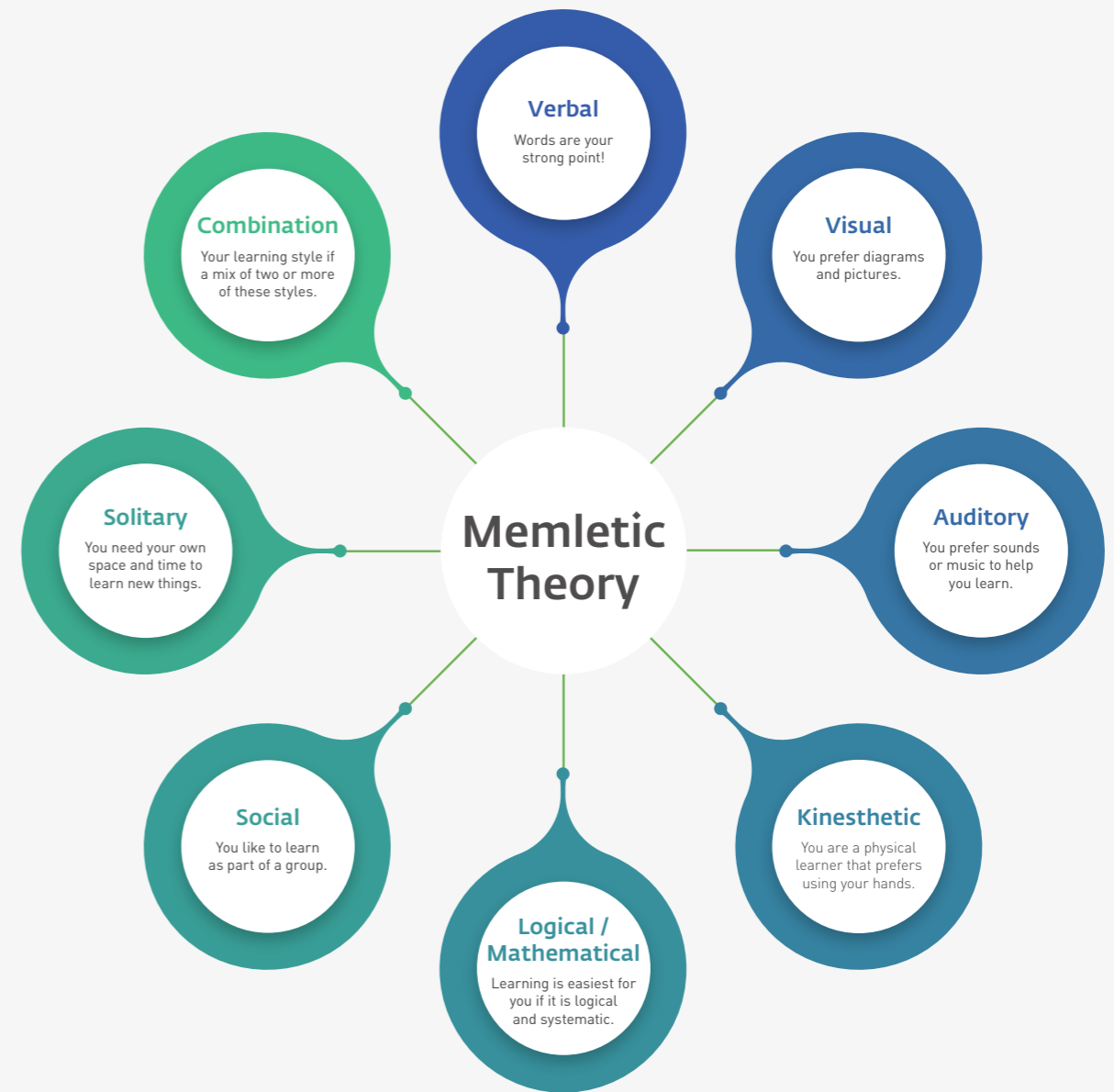


Figure 5.6 Memletic Theory - Modes of Learning.



### 5.6.5 Developing a Communication Protocol

Establishing a communication protocol can set expectations from the outset of a module. If you as an academic can commit to developing a protocol that works for you and your module while also cognisant of the need for consistency in communication with your students it enables more efficient and transparent communication. For mature and part-time students this is particularly essential but also professional and what they may be used to when dealing with their careers. A communication protocol like the one presented here indicates to the students the best way to talk about particular aspects of their learning on your module from an academic perspective while also giving the opportunity to discuss more personal issues in a way that they now know is the most efficient method for you as an academic.

In this way a protocol like this sets your boundaries as an academic, when you will be available and how and when you will respond so that your students' expectations of communication can be met in a realistic and regular manner.

Please ensure that you utilise the correct method for academic and personal communication in this module.

#### Academic Communication - Brightspace

For all academic queries and communications please utilise the discussion forum and the threads that have been created in there:

- If you have a general academic query regarding the module please add it to the General Thread;
- If you have an academic query regarding the assessment strategy please add it to the relevant assignment thread;

- All academic queries should be shared with the class as that way the whole class can receive the benefit from the response from the Module Coordinator;
- The Module Coordinator accesses the Brightspace Discussion Forum on Tuesday and Thursday mornings and responds to queries then;
- Do not put personal information on Brightspace;
- If you are utilising the Email function within Brightspace please ensure that you are emailing the correct audience and not the entire module list which included academic staff and administrative staff; and
- Be respectful of participants in the conversations that take place in the Discussion Forum as they are monitored by the Module Coordinator.

#### Personal Communication - Email

If you have a non-academic query or information that you wish to relay to the Module Coordinator please contact them directly via email and specify which Module you are emailing in relation to. The Module Coordinator responds to email on Tuesdays and Thursdays only. If considered necessary the Module Coordinator may respond via a telephone call so please add your phone number if you think a call is necessary to discuss your query. If you consider it as an urgent query that cannot be responded to at the specified times, please contact your Programme Administrator at your convenience.

Please do not send academic queries via email – they will not be responded to and will instead be added to the Discussion Forum and replied to there instead.

#### Meeting Requests

If you require a meeting with the Module Coordinator please note that meetings can take place only on Tuesdays and Fridays between 0900 and 1800 and an appointment by email must be made in advance. The Module Coordinator is happy to meet with any student either in person or on ZOOM no matter what their learning needs are or if they have a personal issue they wish to discuss in person rather than on email.



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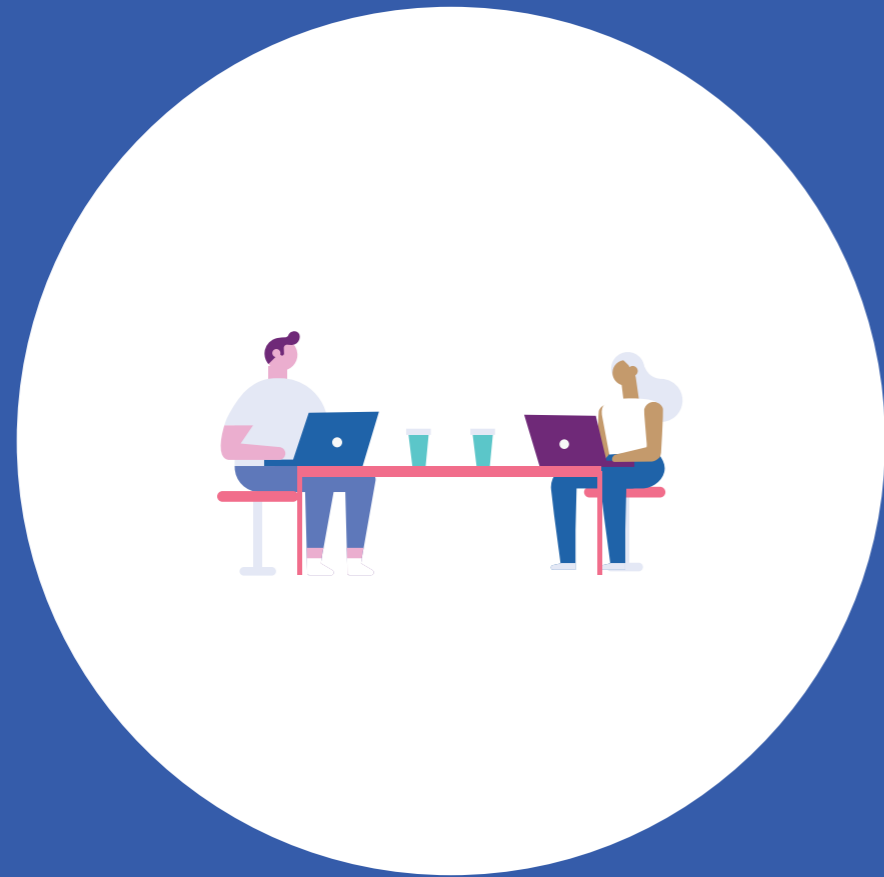
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# 06.



## Enabling Mentoring for Academic Progression

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates the significance of academics using mentoring initiatives as part of their academic advising processes to help mature and part-time students progress in their academic career. To guide any academics who want to familiarise themselves with regards to mentoring for academic progression a variety of self-assessment questions are offered at the start of this chapter. These are then followed by a synopsis of previous research and a discussion of the findings that emerged on this topic generated from our research focus groups.

For additional advice, online resources are also incorporated for ease of access alongside proposals for those seeking to develop their own academic career focused mentoring initiatives. While this chapter was also constructed based on input from mature and part-time students and alumni and with them at the forefront of our considerations, all of the resources and proposals presented can be applicable to all students.

## Academic Self-Assessment



6.2

As academics, one of our principal aims as we develop our learning environments is to enable our students to have a learning experience where they feel supported and engaged. However, there is a wide level of variety in how academics support and engage their students and we all need to self-reflect and evaluate ourselves in relation to how we will deliver those support processes collectively, and importantly for academic advising - individually. The following questions are designed for academics to reflect on their capacity as teachers to guide and mentor their mature and part-time students as they traverse their academic life in higher education. There are no right or wrong answers but they should provoke you to think about whether you should incorporate mentorship and guidance into your learning processes so that your students have your support when they need it. These questions are based on wider literature and the findings of our research that focus on mentorship and individual support.

While they were developed with mature and part-time students at the forefront of our considerations for academic advising they can be utilised for all student cohorts.

You can consider the self-assessment questions either as an academic responsible for a whole programme or stage of a programme or as a module coordinator. They are not exhaustive and many may not be relevant directly to you but you can use them as a guide to consider how to improve the educational experience you are the driving force of. You can also use them to frame your experience against what is reviewed from the literature in Section 6.3 and from our research in Section 6.4. Sections 6.5 and 6.6 outline potential resources and proposals you could utilise to advance your own strategies for mentoring and engaging mature and part-time students.

## Programme Director

- 1 ? Do you offer one - on - one time with your mature and part-time students to advise on their academic goals and objectives?
- 2 ? Do you use any form of self-reflective assessment (such as autoethnography) to better understand your mature and part-time students goals and aspirations for their academic career?
- 3 ? Does your programme have a formal mentoring scheme where mature and part-time learners can avail of mentoring from you or other academics in your discipline?
- 4 ? Have you ever considered incorporating a mentoring module into your programme to ensure that students will avail of mentorship as part of their programme objectives?

## Module Coordinator

- 1 ? Does your module allow for you to engage with your students on a one to one basis to hear them, their concerns and their goals for their learning on your module?
- 2 ? Does your module assessment allow for any form of self-reflective process where your students can consider their learning journey on your module and bring their lived experiences and perspectives into play so you can get to know your students more?
- 3 ? Are you available to your students to advise them on the choices they may need to make in your module e.g. a self-directed assessment?



## What the Research Says

### 6.3

**“Academic mentoring is actually a model of education and counselling where a mentor expresses knowledge, provides support, and offers guidance to a mentee on academic (career goals, achievements) as well as non-academic (personal problems, identity issues) issues.”**

-ASLIER, 2020, PP.69-70

Mentorship has the capacity to fulfil many facets of academic advising for mature and part-time students as it is a process they can readily engage with and bring their lived experiences into play. Mentoring can wrongly be mistaken for advising, however unlike advising, mentoring should prioritise forming a long-term relationship that is not merely restricted to sharing information in the way that advising is (Galbraith, 2003). In a sense mentoring is an evolved form of advising because mentoring focuses on building a long-term relationship through the sharing of experiential knowledge in hope of improving the learning career, whereas advising is restricted to providing solutions and ideas for a specific reason, which a mentee can either accept or reject (Marcdante & Simpson, 2018). An ideal mentoring relationship between academic faculty and students would mean that the academic not only helps students to meet the requirements of their course to obtain a successful career but guides them even after they graduate (McLaughlin, 2010).

To appropriately mentor and advise mature learners in higher education, academics need to start by understanding the distinct nature of their learning journey (Karmelita, 2020). Mature students in particular prefer to be surrounded by academics who empower them to be independent learners (Busher, James & Piela, 2015). Therefore,

gentle guidance and assistance from academics can adequately shape a self-directed learner (Loeng, 2020). Overall, academics who mentor mature adults are teaching them that there are multiple options available to them once they conquer their personal challenges (Taylor & Hamdy, 2013). For a better understanding of how academics can effectively mentor their students, Moses (1989) offers a definition of what makes a good mentor and ultimately a good mentoring programme:

**“Ideally, a professor takes an undergraduate or graduate student under his or her wing, helps the student set goals and develop skills, and facilitates the student’s successful entry into academic and professional lives.... Good mentoring programs provide the opportunity for both faculty and staff to share their expertise and insights with students either on a short- or long-term basis...”**

- PP.10

Furthermore, Willis (2021) reported that students achieve academic success with educators who dedicated some time to building an authentic connection with their students. Similarly, mature learners perceived academic mentors to be role models, with participants in Willis’ study praising the nature of having an honest and genuine relationship with their mentor as it made the learning process more pleasant.

From a learning journey standpoint, academics need to grasp that how they influence and interact with their students cannot be overlooked. Kember and Gow’s (1994) research highlighted that academics initially told students what to do and expected them to automatically listen, whereas they later changed this approach to one that was more focused on acting as a ‘guide’ for students in order to have a greater impact on their students’ learning journeys.

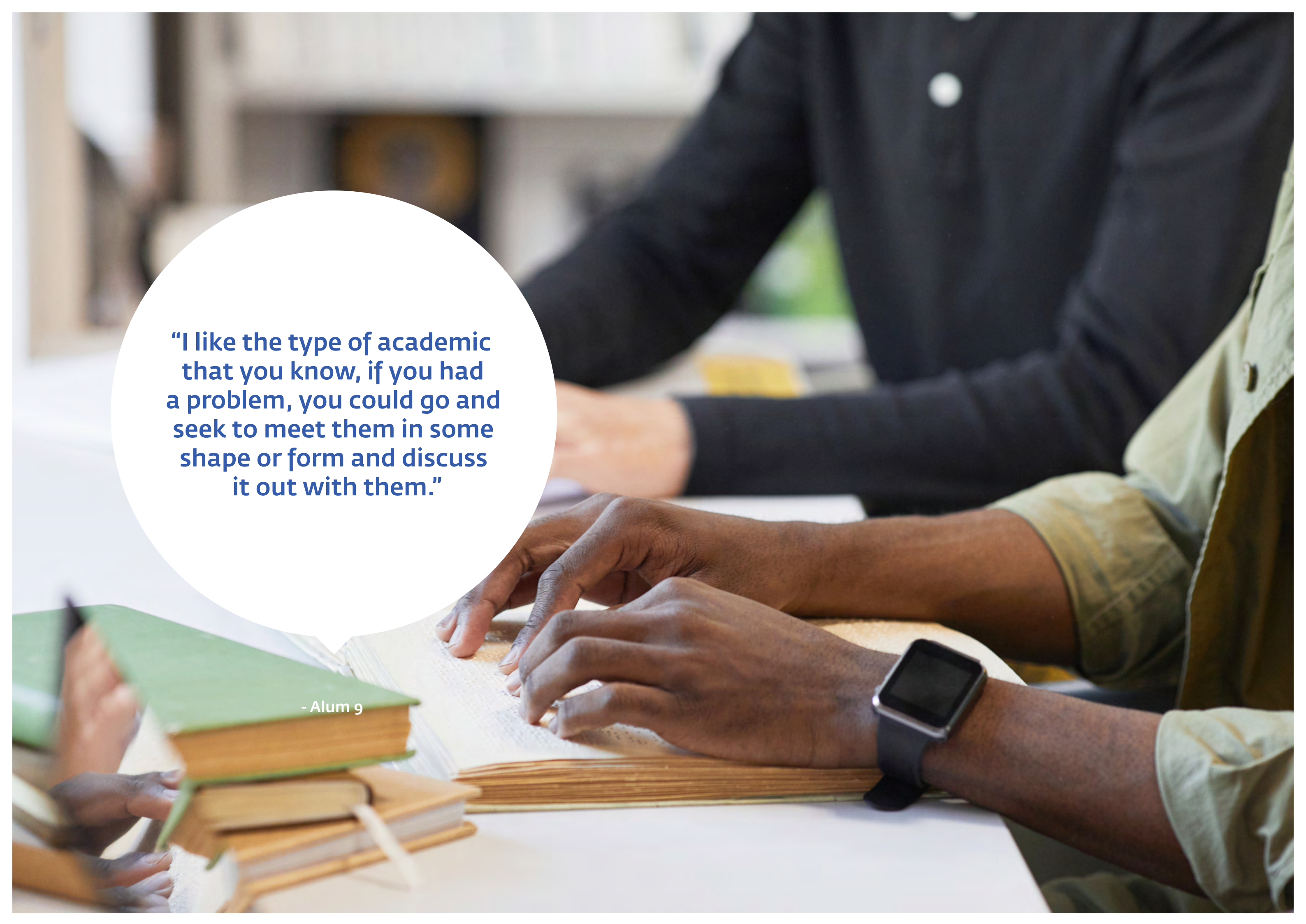
Moreover, mature and part-time students in particular require support in developing time management skills as this will prevent the onset of chronic stress (Misra & McKean, 2000) that can emerge as a result of their commitment to numerous responsibilities (Blaxter & Tight, 1994). One way that academics could help their students to become better time managers is to have them list all the things that they spend their time on and ask them to keep a time log for a short-time. When this is complete, request for them to review it using a variety of self-assessment questions, and therefore they can measure the amount of time they are spending on different aspects of their life (Partin, 1987).

In order for mentorship to become an integral process within academic advising, students themselves have indicated that the personality traits of academics in terms of relatability and authenticity are paramount in conjunction with their efforts to bond with their students (Castles, 2004). In particular, students need to be able to see themselves reflected in the demography of their academics - gender identity, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, disability - all play a role in how a diverse student cohort can connect with their academics. Mature students who believe they have support from their academics while studying at third-level, feel less overwhelmed with personal difficulties (Ramsay, Jones & Barker, 2007). However, mature students do not want to be shamed or to feel ashamed when they are in need of support which is why an ongoing mentorship process may be a more suitable mechanism for them to seek advice. On their learning journeys, as mentioned previously, fear and imposter syndrome can be ever present for mature and part-time students and coupled with feelings of being ashamed to seek support, it can become overwhelming to this particular cohort of students. Unfortunately that shame can be an overriding factor as they attempt to fit in to higher education as they perceive themselves as dumb in front of other younger students or believe that they don't belong in a university environment (Potter-Efron & Potter-Efron, 1999). Episodes of shame in an educational environment can be detrimental to the learning process as it

encourages students to self-isolate and refrain from seeking help when it is needed most (Brookfield, 2011; Walker, 2017). Fear and shame can be the very antithesis of how successful a learning journey can be for mature and part-time students. Mentorship either formal or informal that is built in as scaffolding within their learning journey can combat those negative emotions, allowing for them to succeed with their goals.

In summary, the literature highlights that if academics want to mentor their mature students, they should start by attending to their educational needs. Mature-aged learners dislike instructive teaching styles and prefer to work professionally with their academics. The literature illustrates the significance of authenticity and compassion as mature students feel that academics who present a genuine demeanour allow for the formation of a professional relationship and in turn make the learning journey more enjoyable. It has also been suggested that there is a need for ongoing mentorship when teaching mature and part-time students, as they can require customised support when adjusting to higher education. However, mature learners fear being singled out in front of their peers if in need of additional support, which may cause them to avoid reaching out to academic faculty. Hence implementing academic mentoring into third-level programmes may reduce feelings of shame among mature and part-time students and help empower them on their learning journey.





**“I like the type of academic that you know, if you had a problem, you could go and seek to meet them in some shape or form and discuss it out with them.”**

- Alum 9



## What Our Research Says

### 6.4 What Our Research Says

#### 6.4.1 Why mentoring matters to mature and part-time learners

##### Mature learners appreciate the academics who are available for them

Mature and part-time students remember the academics who make an effort to connect with them. UCD alumni who participated in our research opened up about the times they felt overwhelmed with their busy schedules and the demands they faced as mature adults in formal education. Alum 5 recalled a small gathering that his lecturers organised to allow the students to relax and bond with one another over mince pies and coffee before the Christmas break. He admitted to us that the class: *“talked about it for months afterwards.”* Which indicated that this seemingly small gesture played a role in shaping how the class of mature learners would see their learning experience within their programme and with their academics:

“That day, I think that day kind of set the tone for where we were as people and for yourselves as educators, and for us obviously as learners.”

- ALUM 5

Evidently, mature and part-time students are attuned to the attention given to them throughout their studies and mentoring is a gateway for their educational support needs to be met. For mature learners mentors are staff who can clarify any queries they have, offer them

education reinforcement or lend them a listening ear. They do not expect academics to solve their problems but to instead promote a sense of reassurance in circumstances that may engender uncertainty. One of the study’s participants explained the responsibilities he thinks a mentor should embody more as a sounding board:

“it’s just another opinion or another take on things, or you know somebody who can even just reinforce what you might already know...”

- STUDENT 4

Students and alumni also stressed that supporting mature learners should not be neglected in higher education. Most participants were visibly cautious of the academic complexity that their programmes entail(ed) and in order for students to successfully complete their studies, they feel input is required from module coordinators and programme directors to enable greater discussion and guidance as they navigate their programmes. Essentially, participants proposed that mature students and academics must equally contribute to the learning journey in order for it to be meaningful and successful:

“There’s no one-person ship here. There’s no one-person island, you know.”

- ALUM 6

To elaborate further, alum 6 argued that institutes of higher education are partially responsible in making sure that mature and part-time students have the appropriate resources to be able to overcome any challenges they face. Mentoring is important to mature adults because their learning process can encompass fragility when their external commitments interfere. Hence, academic support and guidance is imperative to prevent a breakdown on their learning journey. Academics are capable of consolidating those learning journeys if they supply consistent mentoring and guidance that is seen as a proactive resource to facilitate this:

**“I reckon time management is the toughest thing, so making life easier is just making sure that there could not be a snag on the UCD side from a time management perspective but giving us all of the ammunition or tools that we would need to be able to know about time management.”**

- ALUM 6

Overall, our research showed that mature and part-time students prefer academics who are not isolated from the student community. If academics behave as mentors they inform their students that they are both available and approachable to give academic advice:

**“I like the type of academic that you know, if you had a problem, you could go and seek to meet them in some shape or form and discuss it out with them.”**

- ALUM 9

### **Mature and part-time students need support too**

Various components of our research revealed that academics can occasionally assume that mature learners do not need extra support, solely because they have greater lived experiences than the more traditional cohort of students. A handful of alumni recalled that as students their lecturers/tutors relied on them to initiate classroom discussions, especially if the younger students were quieter in the classroom:

**“A lot of the tutors kind of gravitate toward you, I think.”**

- ALUM 12

The reason for this could be that academics possibly expect more from mature and part-time students given their life knowledge. One participant reminisced of his time as a young undergraduate student a few years before he returned to higher education as a mature student.

He confessed that having mature students in the class felt intimidating because they were perceived to be more exposed to the real world, which meant that their assignments could reflect this and perhaps be of better quality:

**“You’d almost be fearful, you know, fearful of their experience over you when it comes to assignment work. Like they could be putting out fantastic assignments, because they have the experience.”**

- ALUM 7

Certainly, there seems to be a positive standard placed on mature learners, but it could somewhat prevent them from communicating with their academics when personal difficulties arise as they feel others will deem them unsuitable for asking for support. After all shouldn’t an adult with many years of worldly experiences under their belt just be able to get on with it? One alum reported that she initially felt like she was an outsider in her course during her studies but she had kept these thoughts to herself as she scanned the room:

**“I remember being like... looking around in group work thinking, I was like the weakest in the group.”**

- ALUM 4

It is recommended that mature and part-time students thoroughly evaluate their personal circumstances before enrolling in a university course. Our research showed that mature students understand the severity of participating in higher education and acknowledge that they must take ownership of their learning while exercising self-discipline if they want to successfully complete their studies. A number of participants were conscious that as mature adults they cannot dismiss the importance of their academic workload and expect to bypass any penalties from their academics:

**“Ultimately at the end of the day, we are all adults, we’ve chosen to do this; this academic course. We know the conditions; we know if we’re late with assignments there’s consequences.”**

- ALUM 3

**“Maybe you have to be kind of a little bit single-minded and you’ve got to go off and do the work for yourself, you know.”**

- ALUM 9

However, a minority of participants revealed that they skipped lectures to attend professional obligations or to tackle additional priorities. Undoubtedly, mature and part-time students are entitled to make their own decisions regarding their education but from an academic perspective it is questionable as to why they enrol in advanced education if they cannot fully commit to the required investment in time. One participant confessed that as a student she registered for a springboard course (at another educational institution) in addition to her studies at UCD, but chose to attend only one out of two classes a week at the institution:

**“Now the course is on Friday and Saturday, but I just didn’t rock in on a Friday...”**

- ALUM 4

Two alumni shared that as former students at UCD, they both started and submitted their course work a short time before the assignment deadline(s) and currently do this in courses they are enrolled in at other institutions. Although, as UCD students they presented their work before the specified deadline(s), they disclosed that members of their class also commenced and completed their assignments hours before the deadline despite being given weeks in advance to work on them:

**“In our study group, we just had bets to see who could get in at 11:59pm.”**

- ALUM 10

**“I’ve an assignment due Thursday, I’m starting it tomorrow [laughs].”** - ALUM 12

Arguably, this indicates that some mature students may enter into higher education without a clear understanding of the intensity and high standards of third-level courses. To resolve this, it should be clear in marketing materials of the expectations of time commitments, which would hopefully encourage potential students to properly assess whether they have the capacity to appropriately commit to a full-time or part-time course before registering.

## 6.4.2 The value of one-on-one time with an academic

As addressed in chapter 3 and 4, mature learners may suffer from a lack of confidence in their academic abilities. To combat episodes of doubt or fear of failure, our research participants felt that academics should propose one-on-one sessions with students to help them move past any personal obstacles they have. Mature learners may typically enjoy one-on-one sessions with their academics but some students may also be reluctant to request help, even if their lecturers or tutors can visibly see they need it. In saying that, participants in this study were not oblivious to the academic difficulties that could confront them, but alumni stated that lecturers need to know how to respectfully speak to mature students about their academic weaknesses. Primarily because they can feel humiliated if their peers know they are having a one-on-one conversation with their lecturer:

**“You’ve got to come up with a strategy so you’re not embarrassing them, they’re not failing the course and stuff like that. And normally if you get them inside, get them aside and have a chat with them, they will open up and tell you what’s wrong and you try and come around it, so.”**

- ALUM 10

Alum 5 insinuated that lecturers could set up an: *“appointment system”* whereby the lecturer invites students to sign up for individual one hour time slots with them to go over anything in the course that they may be struggling with. As mentioned above, academics need to be sensitive to the worry mature and part-time students have if they choose to avail of a one-on-one session. As of this, It is best that such meetings are confidential and fully exclude the presence of other students to allow students to feel comfortable sharing their challenges:

**“So, if I feel I want to talk to you about: ‘Aw, I’m not understanding this, [lecturer’s name] but I feel like a bit of a tool in front of everybody.’ I need to be able to say that in confidence to you.”**

- ALUM 5

On another note, if academics are interested in offering students one-on-one sessions, it is reasonable to set up a booking system to make sure that they are not wasting their own time by creating a service that cannot guarantee regular use:

**“I think that’s what you should do, is have the availability there, yes, once a month with the eight to nine time slots but tell people to register.”**

- ALUM 6

The idea of one-on-one sessions for mature and part-time students was a collective positive mechanism proposed by the participants in this study. Alumni said that they would have loved to take the opportunity to attend one-on-one support sessions from their lecturers when they were students at the university as it could have aided academic improvement. However, online one-on-one sessions were found to be more convenient for mature learners due to their conflicting responsibilities, something academics should consider if they wish to include these sessions as part of their module design:

**“If it was something that was available for us, like you know I definitely would appreciate meeting up with you once a month, maybe via zoom...”**

- STUDENT 3

**“Not that I don’t love face-to-face but having to go out to UCD just to meet you for 15 minutes or something. If I can do it from home on a zoom call, happy days.”** - ALUM 3

### 6.4.3 Building mentorship into a programme

Disregarding a mature learner's inclination to be a self-directed and often solitary learner, one-on-one advisory sessions with their academics could be a starting point for the implementation of mentorship into an academic programme. The students and alumni that took part in our focus groups revealed that customised support sessions could be key in assuring mature learners get the most out of their learning journey. Mature learners in our study revealed that their personal academic setbacks drove them to states of panic and disappointment in themselves yet their learning challenges also birthed their self-realisation that they need to pursue one-on-one academic support to preempt escalation of issues:

“There was some modules that you know, I got the grades back and I wasn't really extremely happy. I'm like okay, maybe I actually do need to talk to somebody and you know, seek kind of more expertise and advice on this.”

- STUDENT 3

“I think in one of my early assignments, I wrote a statement that was blatantly wrong and didn't reference it and I remember getting a D and I remember thinking: “Oh my God, like I should...I should just quit.”

- ALUM 4

Research from our focus groups further illustrated that it is fundamental for academics to offer students unique support when they experience turmoil on their learning journey and to know how much the students value their academic support and advice at those times. Alum 4 acknowledged that if her tutor at that time did not intervene when they witnessed her poor performance, she may not have overcome her disappointment after receiving an unwanted grade:

“The tutor pulled me aside and she said: “Look, even if you say something that is, you know a bit off the wall, just find someone else a bit off the wall that will back that up and once you've done that, you can't be wrong.”

- ALUM 4

As briefly mentioned in the previous section, academics should be cognisant of the way they speak to mature learners when addressing their need for additional assistance. When building mentorship into a programme, participants in this study emphasised that using the word *'support'* when suggesting extra guidance could offend mature-aged individuals as they may feel they are being unintentionally patronised. Therefore, it is essential that academics who choose to build mentorship into their programme, remind mature and part-time students that one-on-one sessions with their lecturers are purely mentorship resources that are available for all learners, regardless of their educational strengths and weaknesses. This way an effort can be made to reduce feelings of shame or stigma if mature and part-time students avail of one-on-one consultations with their academics:

“I think the word *'support'* maybe might be the wrong word for it, mentoring might sound better...”

- ALUM 3

As much as mentorship is a positive attribution to course disciplines, one-on-one mentoring with an academic would require ongoing monitoring as communication between students and faculty should exist within reasonable limits. Participants portrayed caution towards the possibility that students can over expect from their academics if they are given excessive guidance:

“If you give them an inch they'll tend to take a mile.”

- ALUM 8

As a result, although one-on-one sessions are a valuable addition to the learning process of mature learners, it would be imprudent to provide such rigorous support in an uncontrolled manner as this could steer mature and part-time learners away from their own leadership traits/could disempower students. Alum in this study were conscious of this and suggested that academics should grant support appropriately to ensure students continue to accentuate their own abilities without demanding too much from their academics:

“Somewhere in the middle, somewhere in the middle. I think an academic should be open to more engagement, but at the same time, I think you know you can’t push it at the same time.”

- ALUM 10



## Available Resources to Utilise

### 6.5

For resources that focus on developing an autoethnographic process to learn more about your students learning journeys please consider the following:

- Adult Educators' Guide to Designing Instructor Mentoring, *PRO-NET*, 2000 <https://www.calpro-online.org/pubs/mentoring%20guide.pdf>
- Constructing narratives in later life: Autoethnography beyond the academy - Golding and Foley (Federation University Australia): <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1164157.pdf>
- Autoethnography as a Way to Foster Critical Thinking Skills for Academicians in Adult and Higher Education: A Queer (Asian) CritAcademicians in Adult and Higher Education: A Queer (Asian) Crit Perspective and ExamplePerspective and Example - Misawa: <https://newprairiepress.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3326&context=aerc>
- A History of Autoethnographic Enquiry - Douglass and Carless: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315427812.ch2>
- Transformative Autoethnography: An Examination of Cultural Identity and its Implications for Learners - Sykes: <https://shareok.org/bitstream/handle/11244/25204/10.1177.1045159513510147.pdf?sequence=1>
- Essentials of Autoethnography - American Psychological Association: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mp2g89DbCj4>

If you are considering the development of a mentorship scheme the following resources can be utilised:

- Designing a Mentoring Scheme - University of Sussex: <https://www.sussex.ac.uk/organisational-development/mentoring/guidance-for-coordinators/designing-a-mentoring-scheme>
- Start a Mentoring Programme - Alberta Mentorship Partnership: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahiN4pbl4D0>
- How to be a great mentor - Ortiz: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3q8kEn\\_nsg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3q8kEn_nsg)
- How to build a successful mentoring programme - Mentor: [https://www.mentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Full\\_Toolkit.pdf](https://www.mentoring.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Full_Toolkit.pdf)
- How to start a mentoring programme, a step by step guide - Guider: <https://www.guider-ai.com/blog/how-to-start-a-mentoring-program>
- Creating a Mentor Programme - The Society for Human Resources Management: <https://www.shrm.org/membership/student-resources/pages/mentorprogram.aspx>
- Building a Mentoring Programme for First-Generation College Students - Hurwitz (University of Massachusetts Lowell): <https://www.salesforce.org/blog/building-a-mentoring-program-for-first-generation-college-students/>



## Proposals for Your Consideration

### 6.6

As you progress through each proposal you can reflect on if it would work with your student cohort and what is your objective for using it, then what is the most appropriate way to put it into your teaching practice and finally what you would consider the impact you would like to see as a result of initiating the change.

These proposals are based on initiatives undertaken by some of the team as part of their programmes / modules in their school and further afield as adjunct academics or alumni from other institutes of higher education where they act as professional mentors themselves and are familiar with the processes. All of these proposals have been utilised by mature and part-time students as well as younger students.

#### 6.6.1

##### Using Autoethnography to develop an understanding of their goals

In order for academics to fully understand what brings a mature and part-time student to their programme / module or class their wide variety of experiences as individuals needs to be explored (Custer, 2014). Autoethnography as a style of autobiographical reflection allows us to explore our own unique life experiences retrospectively with a focus on our individual relationships to social and cultural institutions. Autoethnography allows us to examine our lives in cognisance of how and why we think, act, and feel as we do. The autoethnographic process invites us to reflect upon and revise our lived experiences, making conscious decisions about who we are and how we want to be and be perceived. This form of self evaluative research can be considered optimistic in a way that it allows students to ultimately to share their stories as survivors of the journeys they are living (Jones et al., 2013).



As academics, it can make sense for us to get to know our students through a piece of work that they can develop, possibly as an assignment, that will give you access to their thought processes, emotions and experiences that bring them to return to education. This process can then be used as a foundation of sharing experiences that can enable you as an academic to advise them on their goals and aspirations armed with the knowledge of what they have been through to get to university. It should be acknowledged that autoethnography can be inherently painful and triggering especially when sharing the process with others (Raab, 2013). This is why if an academic chooses to use an autoethnographic process to get to know their students they must be compassionate, empathetic and kind to the students that have shared their experiences.

Autoethnography at the beginning of an academic advising process would be an ideal way to learn about your students and could be built into a modules assessment strategy so that they must engage with the process and get something out of it other than providing you with a narrative of their journey. Figure 6.1 demonstrated a potential sequence of questions that could be asked to direct the auto ethnography process.

# Questions and prompts

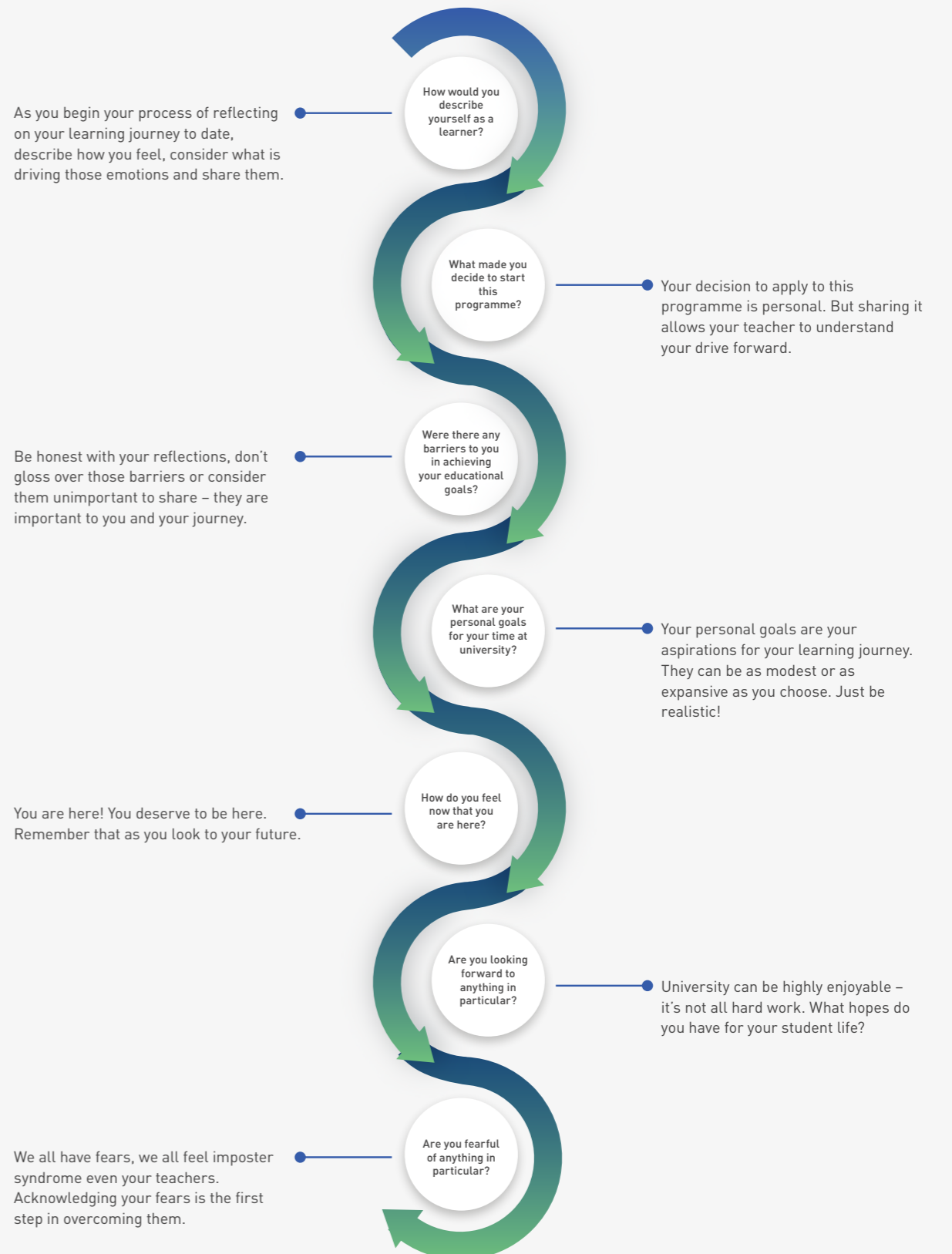


Figure 6.1 Example Autoethnography questions and prompts.

## 6.6.2 Designing a Module for Discipline Mentorship

While many academics may not have the luxury of designing a bespoke module just for mentoring purposes, it could be something to consider at a programme level that could be developed for the start of a programme. In this way students are introduced to the concept that their academics are there to advise and mentor on their academic journey as well as their teachers. An elective module could be a way for students to begin this process and become comfortable with the idea of seeking advice and mentorship from their academics as they progress through their programme to completion.

The following module could be developed for any discipline but tailored to that discipline by the academics involved in the programme - any such module will depend entirely on the class size as well as the availability of academics specific to that discipline to take part in the mentorship process.

Introduction to Mentorship in Our Discipline - Trimester 1			
5 ECTS		Pass / Fail	UCD Level 1
Week	Topic	Assessment Type	Assessment Value
1	What is Mentoring?		
2	Introduction to Autoethnography		
3	Mapping Your Learning Journey		
4	Recognising Your Own Learning Strengths and Weaknesses	Student Autoethnography on their learning journey to date (2,000 words max)	40%
5	Individual Versus Group Learning		
6	Panel Discussion with Discipline Final Year Students - their experiences over their programme		
7	Planning Your Academic Goals		
8	Planning your Career Goals		
9	Panel Discussion with Discipline Academics - how they achieved their academic and career goals	Draft Student Learning Goals for their Programme (1,000 words max)	20%
10	Individual Student Mentor Meetings		
11	Individual Student Mentor Meetings		
12	Individual Student Mentor Meetings		
End of Trimester		Finalised Learning Goals for their Programme (2,000 words max)	40%

Figure 6.2 Proposed Mentorship Module Framework.

In this type of module you can use a range of the resources or proposals already presented in this and previous chapters to develop a module to suit your needs as you begin the process of engaging with your students to establish academic advising processes as the norm within your discipline. As this module would be developed as a discipline specific elective module with a Pass / Fail for assessment, only students that wish to opt in and are open to the idea of mentorship would sign up initially. However, if the module became a success it is likely to attract larger numbers from within your discipline. It would be ideally placed as a Trimester 1 Year 1 module so that students can use it to familiarise themselves with their discipline team as well as their own learning modes as they enter higher education.

This type of module cannot be achieved by one individual academic, it would need to have multiple academics from within the discipline to provide support and agree to take on the individual mentoring meetings so that the module coordinator does not carry the whole burden. Each academic involved would need to evaluate the assessment pieces specifically for the students that they would have the individual mentoring meetings with so that they can fully understand and begin to advise the student on their academic goals and how to achieve them. By having more than one academic involved it also demonstrates to the students the cohesiveness of the discipline team and how the discipline as a whole considers supporting their students on their learning journeys.

This type of module at the outset of a programme has the potential to allow students to become accustomed to the concept of academic advising and how it can benefit them during their time as a student. It is a significant undertaking to develop a new module but if it is developed from an overarching discipline perspective with multiple academics involved it has the potential to be a significant mechanism to advise students at the outset of their academic journey.

### 6.6.3 A formal Mentoring Plan across a Programme

Advising students across their programme from start to finish, which could be anything from one to five or even six years depending on the discipline, can be a daunting undertaking for any academic, especially given the cycle of the academic year and the resulting pressures we all face balancing teaching, administration and research. However a structured approach involving a whole discipline academic team may be a means to achieve a robust mentoring / advising initiative that spans a programme.

The example considered here would allow a team of academics to share the workload and be paired with individual students for the duration of their programme. Each academic would meet their mentees three times per year for about an hour each time. At the start of the academic year the first meeting would be to discuss their goals for the year ahead and offer advice on how to achieve them, a mid-year check in session at the start of the second trimester to listen to their mentees progress and offer advice on any issues they may be having and then an end-of-year check in at the end of the second trimester to reflect on whether the mentee had achieved their goals and to plant seeds for over the summer for their consideration and return. Over the course of the programme the academic and the mentee would be paired for the duration and would be able to develop a rapport and understanding with each other. Such a relationship could lead to the establishment of a future research partnership that could arise upon completion of the programme.

The significant caveat with this is that such a scheme would require a team of academics to take part and they would need to commit themselves for the duration of the programme to their mentees.

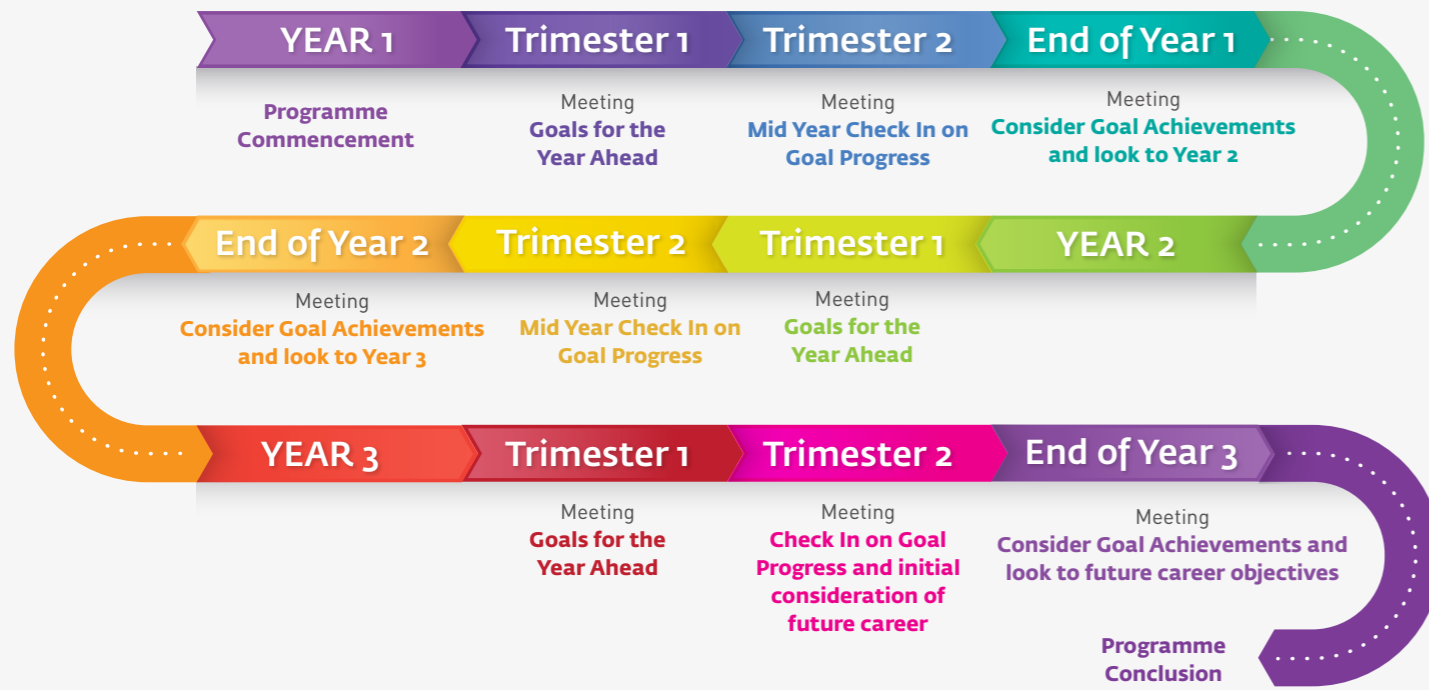


Figure 6.3 A Three-Year Programme Mentorship Scheme.

#### 6.6.4

#### The Power of “Drop-Ins”

While office hours are important, many mature and in particular part-time students often do not have time while on campus to visit their academics for advice. This is largely due to their external familial, social and professional commitments limiting their time. Offering an out of hours online “drop-in” can make all the difference.

Making a commitment to be available at critical points during a module or programme in an online format such as a scheduled ZOOM™ meeting in the evening or at the weekend (subject to your own hours and commitments) can mean the world to mature and part-time students even if they never avail of the service. It indicates to them that you are cognisant of their busy lives and doing your best to accommodate them.

It could be as simple as having an open ZOOM™ call on one Monday evening per month between 7 and 9pm that they can pop into to ask questions or seek advice or to offer a limited schedule of ZOOM™ calls that they can book a slot in with you to discuss their educational goals for your module or programme. Giving that level of flexibility demonstrates your commitment to them with an understanding of their needs. These online drop-ins can be incorporated into the contact time for your modules also.

Week	Contact Time	Format
1	Lecture 2 Hours Tuesday 10:00 - 12:00	In Person Room XXX Building XXX
2	Lecture 2 Hours Tuesday 10:00 - 12:00	In Person Room XXX Building XXX
3	ZOOM Drop In (Open) Monday 19:00 - 21:00	Online (ZOOM details provided in VLE)
4	Lecture 2 Hours Tuesday 1000 - 1200	In Person Room XXX Building XXX
5	Lecture 2 Hours Tuesday 10:00 - 12:00	In Person Room XXX Building XXX
6	Lecture 2 Hours Tuesday 10:00 - 12:00	In Person Room XXX Building XXX
7	ZOOM Drop in (Book 15 minute slot) Monday 19:00 - 21:00	Online (ZOOM details provided if you book a slot)
8	Lecture 2 Hours Tuesday 10:00 - 12:00	In Person Room XXX Building XXX
9	Lecture 2 Hours Tuesday 1000 - 1200	In Person Room XXX Building XXX
10	Lecture 2 Hours Tuesday 10:00 - 12:00	In Person Room XXX Building XXX
11	ZOOM Drop in (Book 15 minute slot) Monday 19:00 - 21:00	Online (ZOOM details provided if you book a slot)
12	Lecture 2 Hours Tuesday 10:00 - 12:00	In Person Room XXX Building XXX
Study Week	ZOOM Drop In (Open) Monday 19:00 - 21:00	Online (ZOOM details provided in VLE)

**Figure 6.4 Incorporating Optional Drop In Sessions into your module contact time.**



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### 6.7

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# 07.



## Provision of Mentoring for Professional Progression

### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on how professional and peer mentoring of mature and part-time learners can enable their leadership potential to leverage their future careers. In considering the findings from our focus groups with the wider literature that addresses the importance of academics providing / facilitating mentoring for mature learners, this chapter puts forward proposals for developing advising processes through mentoring initiatives that are led by the academics from a career development perspective.

The chapter begins by presenting a number of self-assessment questions for module coordinators and programme directors to use in order to reflect on their current mechanisms that can embed professional mentoring or networking. The chapter then proceeds to acknowledge previous research published on this topic and then features research that emerged from our focus groups concerning the importance of mentoring amongst mature and part-time students.

For further support, a range of online resources are listed alongside proposals for academics to consider if they plan on implementing a professional mentoring system. While this chapter was developed with input from mature and part-time students and alumni, the resources and proposals presented to support this facet of academic advising can also be applied to your wider student cohort.

## Academic Self-Assessment



7.2

In order to consider what actions you could take as an academic to enable professional or peer mentoring which could enable career progression and development in mature and part-time students, the following self-assessment questions can be utilised to reflect on where you are at present. You can reflect upon these questions in relation to the existing literature and research from this study that follows. If you plan to engage in mentoring directed at career development Sections 7.5 and 7.6 outline potential resources and proposals you could utilise to advance your own strategies for the professional mentoring of mature and part-time students as part of your academic advising initiatives.

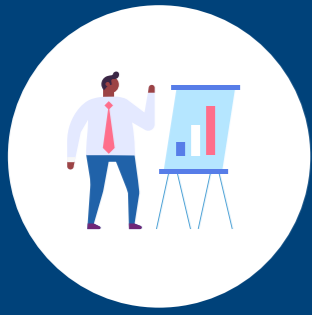
## Programme Director

- Does your programme have access to an institution level mentoring programme for mature and part-time learners?
- Does your programme have a discipline specific mentoring scheme where mature and part-time learners can avail of mentoring from other mature and part-time learners in order to facilitate professional networking?
- Do you invite alumni to meet with your students to engage them from a future career perspective as well as to relay their academic journey to existing students?
- Does your programme engage with industry / research in order to facilitate professional mentorship with existing students?

## Module Coordinator

- Does your module allow for peer learning processes so that mature and part-time learners with professional careers can become mentors to other students?
- Does your module engage in group activities where mature and part-time learners can bring their lived professional experiences to bear for their peers to learn from?





## What the Research Says

### 7.3

As emphasised in previous chapters, mature and part-time students are committed to achieving their career goals and return to or commence higher education to help them do this (Woodbyrne & Yung, 1998). Higher education institutions have a significant level of responsibility for guiding all students to achieve employment after their studies (Tomlinson, 2012) and should aim to provide career-development learning to ensure all students get the most out of their education as a factor in their future careers (Jackson & Edgar, 2019). Many aspects of career development during a student's time in higher education can influence their career potential but mentorship (especially peer mentoring) promotes "social and professional networking" (Koutsoukos & Sipitanou, 2020, pp.7799), a mechanism that can open doors for many students as they finalise their studies. Professional mentorship can be a partnership built on collaboration initiated in higher education if a programme of education can incorporate a process whereby their students interact with working professionals (O'Neil & Marsick, 2009).

Undoubtedly, mature and part-time students are responsible for their own career development and need to take action if they want to progress and make inroads in their chosen career, but academics should be able to help them make the right choices and facilitate interaction with discipline professionals to ensure this. In order for academics to successfully facilitate career progression among mature and part-time students, they need to consider techniques and systems that stimulate career development ideas. Enabling a professional mentorship scheme is one of the most simple yet effective ways in promoting academic success among mature learners.

It is linked to professional achievements, personal development, improvements in productivity and builds leadership skills (Darwin, 2000).

For mature and part-time students professional mentoring can be achieved via two routes: interaction with professionals / alumni in their discipline; and / or peer networking with fellow mature and part-time students already engaged in the discipline. While peer mentoring in third level education strives to create a sense of belonging amongst students and boost feelings of satisfaction towards university life (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016) it also has significant potential for mature and part-time students to use it as an opportunity to network with other professionals in their discipline that are also navigating student life while maintaining their careers. Universities could prioritise the development of peer mentoring programmes, which include training to become a mentor as a mechanism for new mature and part-time students to engage with their fellow mature learners that have already established their place and routine at university as they navigate supporting their family and professional life alongside their studies (Glaser, Halpin & Haller, 2006). Under some circumstances, students may not be worried about the academic side of higher education but rather their ability to adapt to university culture and form friendships on campus. Andrews & Clark (2011) found that peer mentoring helps new students settle into university, make friends and understand the academic demands of their course and in turn improve retention rates. By facilitating the development of peer mentoring programmes for mature and part-time students, academics create a comfortable and confidential environment that entices these students to network with one another and explore what it means to be a student as they commence their learning journeys (Cree-Green et al., 2020).

Problem-based learning is an engaging teaching approach for all students as they are encouraged by their academic(s) to engage in tasks that require problem-solving with the support of their classmates (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021). Such engagement prioritises teamwork and this interaction (when consistent) with a wider student cohort can positively shape a mature student's academic identity (Filade et al., 2019). Implementing mentoring programmes could help students to foster leadership tendencies as those who become mentors at university level could be compelled to fill leadership positions in their professional career (Hastings et al., 2015). As well as that, mature students who are comfortable in a university setting could also help new mature students adapt to university life and ultimately ease their transition into third level as they are given the opportunity to engage with a fellow mature learner. Connecting to a peer mentor, especially in the first year of university significantly impacts social and academic wellbeing (Fox et al., 2010).

Leveraging peer interaction processes can allow for the development of an informal peer mentoring process between mature and part-time students which can be advantageous as they consider their careers moving forward either in tandem with their learning journey or after their studies have been completed (Sanchez et al., 2016). If academics start by implementing a variety of peer-group activities in the classroom, mature learners are given the space to mentor one another. Students benefit from consulting their peers on classwork and tasks that are group-based and are supervised by their lecturer (Linton, Farmer & Peterson, 2014). Consistent interaction between peers, mentors and academic staff also improves the confidence levels of students as it builds on their educational identity (Bennet, 2009). Employers also favour individuals who can demonstrate that they are capable of working as part of a team, another reason why peer interaction can be of advantage to mature and part-time students in terms of professional progression (Graduate Careers Australia, 2010; Burke, 2011).

Academics themselves may also benefit from setting up a mentoring scheme for mature learners as some academics may not feel they are in a position to directly provide mature students with sufficient career advice (Winters, 2012). To resolve this issue, academic faculty would need formal training in how to conduct dialogues with their students around career development (Draaisma, Meijers & Kuijpers, 2018). Alternatively, if academics feel uncomfortable to offer professional career advice, they could use video-testimonials to collect feedback from alumni who have completed the course and share them with current students and interested parties. Students often prefer video feedback over traditional written feedback, due to the level of information provided and the ability to recognise social cues (Mahoney, Macfarlane & Ajjawi, 2019).

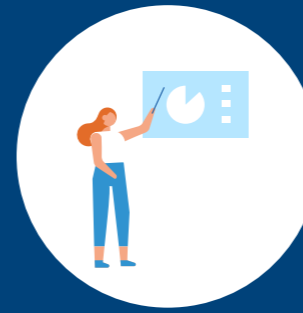
Academics who enable mentoring systems with their disciplines encourage mature learners to tap into their leadership qualities and potential. Arendale and Hane (2016) proposed that individuals who opt into mentoring at university level could feel persuaded to attain future leadership positions or seek employment in the education sector at a later life stage. This may be linked to the notion that acting as a leader in one area can have a knock-on-effect and lead students to apply their leadership tendencies to other facets of their life (Kjellström, Stålné, & Törnblom, 2020). On the other hand, mature students who volunteer to mentor fellow mature students may choose to do so not only to strengthen their leadership skills but because they know they have the capacity to help other mature learners realise that they are not alone on their learning journey (Grills, 2008). Doing so will only lead to a positive outcome as the mentees' confidence increases due to receiving such support and the mentor will feel satisfied in being able to contribute to this (Carden, 1990). As of this, academics are advised to enable mentoring within their programmes as mature students who are familiar with third-level education could successfully help new mature students to navigate their way around campus and link them towards useful resources (Holt & Fifer, 2018).

Likewise, mature students may well act as competent leaders as historically, a peer mentor is defined as an older and knowledgeable individual (Kram, 1988).

In summary, the research literature highlights that higher education institutions have a level of responsibility to guide students towards career opportunities and would ideally provide career advice to facilitate career progression. However, the research also acknowledges that it is a student's responsibility to enable professional success as academics can only guide their course of action, not choose it for them. Teaching styles that include career-development thinking could motivate mature students to progress professionally if they can see their academics perceive this to be an important element within their learning journey.

Interaction with peers and alumni from within the same discipline may also enhance career development as peer networking allows mature students to engage with working professionals who potentially share the same career interests / goals. Universities could consider prioritising the development of peer mentoring programmes that includes discipline specific mentoring as this could help new mature students to settle into university through interaction with more advanced students that are on a similar path.

Furthermore, it can be argued that when professional mentoring schemes involving alumni are set up it can benefit academics who may not feel comfortable offering career advice to their students. In addition, providing career-development training for academic staff could give academics the skills to properly conduct conversations with students regarding career professional development.



## What Our Research Says

### 7.4

#### What Our Research Says

As we considered the discussions we had with our mature and part-time students and alumni, the term peer mentor used by them did not necessarily mean a fellow student but rather could also be an external professional/alumni who may act as a discipline peer that has already gone through higher education and can offer insights and advice on how to leverage education into advancing career goals. So for this chapter we refer to these individuals as professional peer mentors i.e. either a student or alumni from within the same discipline that can become a mentor.

#### 7.4.1

##### Why professional peer-mentoring matters to mature and part-time learners

###### Mature learners flourish from peer interaction

A key step academics could take to aid professional progression for mature and part-time students is to facilitate and supervise a peer mentoring scheme within their programmes. All students and alumni in our study commended peer interaction and recommended that academics create opportunities that permit peer engagement with fellow mature and part-time students. Similarly, it was advised that academics encourage students to build relationships with those around them as it could potentially simplify their academic path:

“Literally that one thing, encourage the study group.” - ALUM 6

**“I found that the peer-to-peer informal learning from a colleague or learning from a counterpart works an awful lot better than learning from a lecturer because sometimes you might be a bit fearful of the lecturer that they might come out and say to you, no you’re completely wrong.”**

- ALUM 7

Cognately, all the student advisers who were a part of this research advocated that peer mentoring is anything but a mediocre addition to the mature adult learning journey. Irrespective of how much an academic willingly supports their students in achieving their academic goals, the advisers attested that the best tool students could receive from their academics is access to a peer mentor because having people in the same situation as them is incomparable:

**“For part time students, when I meet them, they’re just incredibly busy people that are running around doing all kinds of things and they associate very much with their academics and their peers on the programme.”**

- ADVISER 1

**“I am a fan of peer mentoring, I’m in favour of peer mentoring, probably in all of its guises, and I think that all the research kind of points to the fact that peer support is the most effective support.”**

- ADVISER 3

### **The emergence of leadership skills**

Whilst participants in our research supported the idea of academics enabling a consistent mentoring programme, it was outlined in the focus groups that this is currently not possible to implement successfully without the involvement and engagement of student volunteers. When participants were questioned on whether they as mature students and alumni would contribute to the creation/

development of a mentoring scheme within their course, many showed a clear willingness to participate if such an intervention required their support:

**“I’ve gained from everybody I’ve interacted with along the way, and I think it’s just natural to offer something back if possible. So, I would.”**

- STUDENT 4

**“I would be more than happy. More than happy to do that.”**

- ALUM 13

Some of the participants added that they would want to volunteer as a mentor to those in the early stages of their course because they currently lead a mentoring or leadership position in their professional careers, making them feel confident enough to step forward to help others in higher education:

**“So, I’m assistant chair of our cpd committee and I’m chair of the mentoring committee. So, it’s something I do. So, I probably would have put my hand up. I didn’t think about it at the time.”**

- ALUM 8

Nonetheless, external factors appeared as a barrier for some mature and part-time students which influenced their decision to reject the offer (if presented) to volunteer as a mentor on the grounds that their external commitments need their attention. One alum confessed that as a mature student she would not have had the capacity to be of service but assured that the task would be attractive to alumni, something academics could even consider organising as a way of keeping past students connected to the university:

**“I think I would have said: “no, I have enough on, I won’t” but I guarantee you’ll get people when they’ve finished.”**

- ALUM 4

Disparities were indicated when discussing the issue of recruitment into a peer mentoring scheme with student advisers. Some communicated that they have previously struggled to recruit mature peer mentors whereas others received too many applications:

**“So, in my years when I recruit, I find myself tapping a mature student. So, I’m not sure if it’s a perception again that this is for the younger ones or whatever, but they would have had an older mentor.”**

- ADVISER 1

**“It became a problem actually when I had too many. Now there’s a higher percentage of mature students on that program, on the [course code] than there would be on other programmes across the university anyway.”**

- ADVISER 8

If there is an imbalance of peer mentors numbers in a course, one student adviser clarified that this could easily be resolved by academics assigning students to a mentor in another course that is identical to the one they are officially registered in. This way, no student will miss out on a chance to engage with a mentor on a recurring basis:

**“You know, if there aren’t many in one particular area that those students wouldn’t be disadvantaged by that and they’d still get the opportunity to take part in some sort of mentoring, if not within their own course maybe in kind of combination of related courses.”**

- ADVISER 4

This being said, academics might need to provide an incentive to entice mature students to volunteer as peer mentors. One alum stated that the advertisement for mentors would need to vividly appeal to mature and part-time learners if they are being asked to add to their list of responsibilities, otherwise they will reject the opportunity:

**“Like my opinion would be unless it’s a structured way in which to do it, they’ll not do it. Maybe if it’s linked in with some credits or something like that.”** - ALUM 7

### **Respecting the assigned duties and responsibilities of university staff**

Our research further elaborated that for many academics they do not have the time to actively mentor and advise their students and that requesting them to do so may be overstressing their allocated duties. In some cases, student advisers had to mentor students which can also stretch the remit of their roles. Feelings of defeat were expressed by advisers and they explained that if academics wish to operate a peer mentoring system, the university would need to warrant regular funding and adequately resource the initiative by employing trained staff members specifically for mentoring programmes:

**“Peer mentoring though, can I just, if I can make one point: wonderful programme and I’ve given it my best shot, but we are very aware as student advisers across the board, that it needs more investment and it needs more dedicated workers.”**

- ADVISER 9

**“We know it’s very successful and the students love it but there’s so much potential there and so much more that could be done.”**

- ADVISER 10

## 7.4.2 The value of academic advising on discipline progression

Receiving academic support could be the catalyst for instilling lifelong learning in mature and part-time students. Mature learners in our study indicated their fondness for learning and were reluctant to terminate their learning journey after completing their course. Once participants earned their qualification, many felt compelled to go further because they enjoyed their time at university and felt that their lecturers supported them as they immersed themselves in the world of education:

**“I mean look specifically because of the way I was taught in UCD, has a huge impact on whether I wanted to or not wanted to move forward with learning. I don't want to move forward, right now, because I'm tired, I've had a couple years of learning and things like that, and here in [work company] as well, but going forward in my life, yes, I absolutely want to go back to learning and I think how I was educated in UCD is absolutely 80 or 90 percent of me feeling that way.”**

- ALUM 5

Our study also showed that mature and part-time students respect and trust the professional advice that their academics give them. Participants measured their ability to progress academically based on the feedback they received from their lecturers and how well they performed in their course. Therefore, if academics directly encourage mature learners to continue advancing their education, they take it as a sign that their lecturer(s) believes in both their academic and professional abilities. One participant outlined how she went on to complete a master's degree after it was recommended to her by a former guest lecturer and discipline professional leader whose opinion she valued:

**“I went and I did my masters and I smashed it. I got like a first-class masters.”**

- ALUM 4

Certainly mature learners credit the professional feedback and suggestions presented to them by academics, but many also depend on it, especially those who have minimal higher education experience. Our study found that mature and part-time students can feel unsure of where to go or what step to take next in their academic career. One participant confessed that he struggled to secure employment after his course and claimed this may have been linked to studying the wrong course and failure to obtain the necessary qualifications for his desired career. Professional advice from academics or alumni could eliminate confusion and help mature and part-time student gain a clearer understanding of the path best suited for their professional and educational goals:

**“Just ensure that people realise the opportunities are there to consider lifelong learning.”**

- ALUM 2

**“I read a statistic somewhere along the way that told me that mature students fail to find employment after doing their degrees and their masters and all that. And I have to say, I struggled! I really struggled to get a job. I wanted to work in development and I couldn't get a job in it.”**

- ALUM 12

Reflecting on his experience, Alum 12 explained that as a lifelong learner he needs academics who help him “refocus” throughout his studies rather than provide “reassurance.” For some mature and part-time students, their end goal becomes temporarily clouded and academics may need to restore balance for them through appropriate advising when this occurs. Mature and part-time student want someone who can specify:

**“This is what you need to do, this is the next step forward and then also developing your career path, that's so important...”**

- ALUM 12

Taking into account that not all academics feel comfortable providing career advice to mature learners, to support academics who may not be as familiar with all potential graduate careers with an additional mechanism/approach available, one alternative they could offer to support mature and part-time students is to publish video-testimonials promoting courses before mature and part-time students officially enrol in them. This way these students can make informed decisions as to whether a course matches their educational aspirations and if it is well-fitted to the requirements of their ideal profession:

**“Definitely Testimonials! people who had been in there before. That helps if you can see a student who has been in and you’re seeing that direct quote, you know, ‘I was here, this is why I came here.’”** - ALUM 6

### 7.4.3

#### External professional interaction through their programmes

As mature and part-time students adjust to higher education, professional interaction outside of the classroom may mitigate this transition. It emerged from our focus groups that mature learners are open to the idea of interacting with their academics and would have appreciated having greater opportunity to gain more professional advice from their lecturers regarding their careers. However, mature and part-time students will not initiate contact with their lecturer if they do not feel like they are being invited to come forward. One alum shared that he had one lecturer who taught a very interesting module but did not feel they welcomed questions or feedback beyond the classroom:

**“You got the feeling not that they didn’t want to be there, they were doing their job. I would not take that away from that person, alright. Bloody interesting course but you know, I didn’t get the feeling that if I had made contact with them afterwards, it would have been any great kind of an answer you know.”**

- ALUM 6

Certainly mature and part-time students desire a professional relationship with their academics, but the research uncovered that a rapport with students is built through gradual yet consistent interaction in the classroom before it is built outside of it. Mature students who have not experienced formal education since secondary school may have misconceptions about how professional academics behave in educational settings and immediately assume they are unapproachable. A key way of ensuring that students encounter that sense of connection to their course discipline and can converse with academic staff is by simply greeting them:

“If your lecturer’s walking up the hall, and they say hello to you, you feel like the most special person in the world because out of all these 2000 people, they’ve just said hello to you, and they know your face, they remember you...”

- ALUM 4

Our research also supports that the feedback students receive from their lecturers and tutors is long-lasting and continues to impact them even after they graduate from their programme. Alum 11 declared that students are responsible for their own learning trajectory and cannot solely rely on the input of their academic mentor. She stated:

“The student has to do all the work. The mentor will guide them.”

- ALUM 11

Nevertheless, she emphasised that when students make an effort to apply the academic guidance they receive to their working lives they will gain from it in the same way that she has:

“I can honestly say it, and I still do say it, they trained me well... excellent.”

- ALUM 11



## Available Resources to Utilise

### 7.5

If you are interested in developing your mentorship and advising processes to incorporate career aspirations for your mature and part-time students as well as the rest of your wider student cohort, the following resources are available for your consideration:

- Faculty Advisor Perspectives of Academic Advising - Hart-Baldrige (NACADA Journal): <https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-18-25>
- The 3-1 Process: A Career- Advising Framework - Gordon (NACADA Journal): <https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-19-202>
- Advising Adult Learners During the Transition to College - Karmelita (NACADA Journal): <https://doi.org/10.12930/NACADA-18-30>
- Developing A Faculty Mentoring Program: An Experiment - Kramer and White (NACADA Journal): <https://nacada.ksu.edu/Portals/0/Clearinghouse/documents/Developing%20a%20Faculty%20Mentoring%20Program%20an%20Experiement.pdf>
- Getting Started with Mentoring - Cambridge International Education Teaching and Learning Team: <https://www.cambridge-community.org.uk/professional-development/gswment/index.html#Back-to-top-TAujj73zzo>



- Best Practices for Advising and Mentoring - Brown University Graduate School: [https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/sites/brown.edu/academics/gradschool/files/uploads/2017%20Best%20Practices%20in%20Advising%20and%20Mentoring%20BrownGrad\\_0.pdf](https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/sites/brown.edu/academics/gradschool/files/uploads/2017%20Best%20Practices%20in%20Advising%20and%20Mentoring%20BrownGrad_0.pdf)
- Case Studies on Advising and Mentoring - Brown University Graduate School: <https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/sites/brown.edu/academics/gradschool/files/uploads/Case%20Studies%20For%20Mentoring%2010-20-2017.pdf>
- Mature Mentor Resource: Telling Your Story - Mitchell: <https://www.collegeaware.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/mature-mentor-plan2.pdf>
- Peer Instruction for Adult Learning - Mazur (Harvard University): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9orbxoRofI>

If you are considering incorporating an alumni to student mentoring programme to facilitate career mentorship the following resources are useful:

- Career Mentoring Programme - University College Dublin: <https://www.ucd.ie/careers/students/exploreyourcareeroptions/careermentoringprogramme/>
- Alumni-To-Student Mentoring Guide - Trinity College Dublin: <https://www.tcd.ie/alumni/assets/pdf/alumni-to-student-mentoring-how-to-guide.pdf>
- Mentoring Reference Guide - Dublin City University: [https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/2021-08/2020\\_21-dcu-mentoring-programme-quick-guide.pdf](https://www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/2021-08/2020_21-dcu-mentoring-programme-quick-guide.pdf)

- Alumni Mentorship Handbook - University College Cork: [https://alumni.ucc.ie/s/1901/images/gid2/editor\\_documents/mentorship\\_handbook\\_2021\\_1\\_.pdf?gid=2&pgid=61](https://alumni.ucc.ie/s/1901/images/gid2/editor_documents/mentorship_handbook_2021_1_.pdf?gid=2&pgid=61)
- How to start a mentoring programme - CHRONUS: <https://chronus.com/how-to-start-a-mentoring-program>
- Skills For Successful Mentoring: Competencies of Outstanding Mentors and Mentees - Phillips-Jones (University of Delaware): [https://my.lerner.udel.edu/wp-content/uploads/Skills\\_for\\_Sucessful\\_Mentoring.pdf](https://my.lerner.udel.edu/wp-content/uploads/Skills_for_Sucessful_Mentoring.pdf)



**“I am a fan of peer mentoring, I’m in favour of peer mentoring, probably in all of its guises, and I think that all the research kind of points to the fact that peer support is the most effective support.”**

**- Adviser 3**



## Proposals for Your Consideration

### 7.6

As you progress through each proposal you can reflect on if it would work with your student cohort and what is your objective for using it, then consider what is the most appropriate way to put it into your teaching practice and finally what you would hope the impact that could result from initiating the proposal.

These proposals are based on initiatives undertaken by some of the team as part of their programmes / modules in their school and further afield as adjunct academics or alumni from other institutes of higher education where they act as professional mentors themselves and are familiar with the processes. All of these proposals have been utilised by mature and part-time students as well as younger students.

#### 7.6.1

##### **Career Planning through Academic Advising**

While most traditional students that are undertaking their education full time and may never have had a career, the consideration of career goals are likely to only cross the trajectory of their learning journey as they approach the later stages of their programmes. However, for mature and part-time students that either had or still do have a career they are forging, career goals are likely to be an ever present focus that directly relates to their personal learning goals. It is therefore plausible that mature and part-time students may seek the advice and guidance of their academics as they make decisions about their future careers at an early stage in their studies.

In a similar fashion to the mentorship processes featured in Chapter 6, academic advising that focuses on graduate career objectives that is also cognisant of lifelong learning for your discipline could be incorporated into a formal mentoring programme. The final stages of a mentoring programme could offer an opportunity for academics to hold one-on-one meetings with students that wish to avail themselves of a meeting to discuss their career aspirations and options. Research / academia could be a viable career option for many mature and part-time students if such career choices are fully explained and rationalised in relation to their own strengths and interests.

Another option academics could make available is to have some optional seminars on career development (bringing in personnel from your institute's careers office would be beneficial to students opting into these seminars) and choices moving forward that could demonstrate the types of extra continuous professional development students can avail of to continuously upskill in their career. These could be CPD programmes that already exist in your university that need to be advertised to soon-to-be alumni as being available and beneficial to them in the long run for their careers. Such CPD programmes also demonstrate to students that their institute is mindful of their long term careers and maintaining links with their alma mater.

## 7.6.2 Designing a Professional Discipline Specific Mentorship Scheme

The first step in developing a professional mentorship scheme is to recruit your discipline alumni that are willing to offer their time to a student on an individual basis for career advice. You may, depending on your programme, have an actively engaged alumni network or you may need to liaise with your institute's alumni office to recruit alumni. Without an engaged alumni network willing to give back to their alma mater it isn't fully possible to develop such a scheme as the academics already involved in the programme are unlikely to be able to devote additional time to career advising on top of their existing academic advising processes.

Alumni should be advised that this is an opportunity to develop personally and professionally by establishing a supportive mentoring relationship with a soon-to-be graduate. It is also a way for alumni to "give back" to their programmes specifically. Mature and part-time students can benefit enormously from the exchange of ideas with alumni that have been through the programme in the same manner they have who can share their wealth of experience both academically and professionally. It is important that for mature and part-time students that opt in to such a programme are paired with an alum that also navigated their time at the institution as a mature or part-time student so that they can understand and empathise with one another.

It is essential to provide a briefing session to the students that enrol on such a professional peer mentoring programme so that they can get the most out of the process. A briefing session could involve support from your institutes careers office and should include:

- Tips on making the most of their mentoring relationship;
- Advice on setting expectations of what a mentoring role is and is not (i.e. your mentor is not there to give you a job);

- How to arrange the schedule of mentor meeting; and
- What information to provide your mentor with in advance.

For the alumni agreeing to mentor, they should also be provided with briefing documentation outlining what the expectations of such a role are and what is also not expected of them so that they can ensure their own boundaries are being catered for. Alumni that agree to mentor should be capable of demonstrating the five core skills proposed in Figure 7.1 in their arsenal (Phillips-Jones, 2003).



Figure 7.1 Proposing Five Core Skills for Professional Mentors

Professional mentors should:

- Be capable of guiding a mentee to prepare themselves to advance their career in your discipline;
- Agree to an established set of mentor guidelines that you prepare for your programme;
- Attend a Mentoring Launch Event and meet with potential student mentees;
- Only provide mentoring over a specific agreed period of time e.g. three one-hour meetings over a six-month period; and
- To inform you as the mentorship programme manager if there are any issues with communicating with their mentee.

Mature and part-time students should be encouraged to self-reflect on the mentoring process and offer feedback on it at the end of mentoring programme evaluation. This is so that you can determine if the advice and guidance they received from their mentors has succeeded in helping focus these students on their career goals and development post education.

### 7.6.3

#### Enabling informal peer networking

If a formal professional peer mentorship scheme is too intensive for you to develop, a more informal mechanism can be undertaken instead. Peer networking can be a great way for your mature and part-time students to meet one another outside of the classroom and engage in discussion and connection building with their discipline peers. It can also be an opportunity for mature and part-time students to meet with alumni who have been through your programme already and are progressing their career goals.

While not strictly an academic advising process, academics that can facilitate such connection making and discourse are enabling their mature and part-time students (and their other students) to develop professional networks that can assist them in achieving their career objectives. In order to allow these connections and relationships to build informally and naturally the process does not require a significant amount of effort or structure, there just needs to be a focus to bring groups together. One process which can work is to hold a lunchtime or evening seminar (one or two per trimester) that all students from all years on your programme are invited to attend as well as your programme alumni. An interesting talk, seminar or workshop on a relevant important topic in your discipline (often viewed as a continuous professional development event by alumni) will be the draw to bring people together, having refreshments (which do require a budget) and time and space afterwards to allow for mingling and networking presents the opportunity for existing mature and part-time students to meet with their counterparts in other years on their programme as well as alumni that have been through it. Evening events may not be suitable for mature and part-time students that may have limited time on campus, but breakfast and lunchtime events can be appealing as an alternative time to host an event.

A particular draw can be a panel discussion or one-on-one “fireside chat” with an alumnus (hopefully prestigious alumni that have gone on to achieve impactful careers) that is willing to share and discuss their learning journey as a mature or part-time student and how it shaped their career and lifelong learning. Such an event often proves to be a significant learning experience for existing students as they can see how their education has the potential to be transformative. If you as an academic can lead such a panel session or individual interview in a relaxed format that will allow existing students to engage with the speaker(s) it can be both inspirational to your students and give your alumni an opportunity to engage with their former programme and new students in a way that can be beneficial for all involved.

#### 7.6.4 Work Shadowing

If a mature or part-time student expresses an interest in pursuing a career in research or academia it would be kind to offer them an insight into your work as an academic. While many academics may be cynical about showing or explaining to their mature and part-time students the reality of what working in academia entails, most mature and part-time students, given their lived experiences and careers to date, would likely appreciate the candour and opportunity. Work shadowing is a way to demonstrate this. It does not need to be a formal scheme and it could be with a graduate research student or postdoctoral researcher instead of an academic, it could be mentioned to a class during a career focused session as being available on an ad hoc basis should any student express an interest.

Invite the student to participate in a number of your activities over a short period of time - bring them along to your classes, bring them to your research meetings (subject to ethics and confidentiality), show them the basics of the administrative work you undertake and talk about the service you provide to your institute as part of your career. This sort of activity will need to be cognisant of confidentiality as well as GDPR and you would also need to inform your colleagues and students as to why you have a mature student shadowing you for a number of days. But it could lead to that student further developing their learning journey with you and your institute if they can see what the reality of academia is.



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# 08.



## Considering this Toolkit

### 8.1 Our Inspiration

At the heart of this toolkit is a set of self-assessment questions enabling you to evaluate and reflect on how you advise and support your students while also presenting research, resources and ideas for you to invigorate or reinforce your teaching and learning processes to be more cognisant of the needs of mature and part-time students.

While this toolkit focuses on advising and supporting mature and part-time students and was designed with them in mind, all the proposals and resources presented in the preceding chapters are applicable to all students through the principles of universal design in learning (UDL). As a team we are inspired by many colleagues within our university and further afield in higher education that utilise UDL to enhance student learning processes and foster learning environments where all students can flourish and excel regardless of their background. We are also inspired by the many mature and part-time students we teach and that we have listened to as we prepared this toolkit. The students and alumni that participated in the research underpinning the development of this toolkit have enriched it and grounded it immeasurably.

When considering the processes of academic advising our team was cognisant of UDL in our research as well as the compilation of proposals and resources we have put forward for your consideration. The approaches that we are putting forward while being beneficial for mature and part-time students in particular would also benefit all students through provision of flexibility, multiple means of engagement and offering choice throughout their learning journeys. Recommending one way to advise or teach mature and part-time students specifically may seem like too much extra work to those teaching modules/programmes with a diverse population but the applicability of this work is that it can universally benefit all students. We thought about UDL from the perspective of mature and part-time students as we brought the toolkit together but any of the initiatives and resources presented can be utilised by any academic for any cohort of students.

If we all develop our learning resources and teaching styles with the principles of UDL in mind we can create enhanced learning environments that work for all students regardless of their age, gender identity, disability, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality or student socio-economic status and the many roles they all have in their lives.

## 8.2 Limitations

We have had to make generalisations and valued judgements about mature and part-time students as we developed this toolkit. These generalisations and judgements were made based on our collective experience as academics and advisers with over fifty years of higher education experience between us, alongside the findings from our focus groups and the literature we reviewed. We recognise that not all mature and part-time students will find their learning journeys enhanced by the proposals and resources presented in this toolkit but the potential for this toolkit to enhance academic advising practices for mature and part-time students in particular, and all students in general is there for any academic that wishes to utilise it.

While the toolkit was formed with significant input from focus groups with mature and part-time students and alumni from the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy and Sports Science, we did not recruit students from other schools due to the strict time limit of this nine-month project. This does give a significant limitation in that it would have benefited from more student and alumni input from a wider variety of disciplines. That said, our school has a diverse student cohort and is multi and interdisciplinary in nature. It can be considered a good microcosm with potential representativeness of a larger multi and inter disciplinary institution.

Moving forward, it would be appropriate that as academics hopefully utilise some of the proposals presented here, in order for impact to be evaluated, that they first survey or meet with their own students in advance - asking them what sort of support or advice they may need. Then when tailoring proposals to your specific cohort of students you can ask for feedback on the changes in order to measure their impact.

### 8.3 Measuring the Impact of your Academic Advising

It is important to remember that academic advising centres on the development and implementation of academic plans that evolve as the student and academic progress through their relationship. Inherently the focus is long-term across the duration of a module / programme with lifelong learning as an additional goal. It should not be considered a transactional process where problems students encounter are resolved on an ad hoc basis - problem solving does not lend itself to the development of an advising relationship between students and their academics. When academics and students work together in an advisory capacity to plan potentially impactful learning journeys, whereby the students are guided in their decision making processes so they can understand potential impacts of their decisions it is imperative that they receive timely feedback on the outcomes of their planning in order to improve and advance. Consequently, any issues which arise can be possibilities when dealt with in real time, as opposed to afterwards when the issue may become a problem or a lost opportunity.

In order to ascertain if any of the proposals or ideas you utilise from this toolkit are having an impact on your student cohort (in particular your mature and part-time students) prior to any initiation of a learning process change you should consider surveying or having a focus group with your students. In that way you can determine what their true needs are – you may have in mind to work on building relationships to foster academic advising, whereas your students may prefer a more specific mentoring scheme. By talking and discussing with your students in advance any changes you make will be more meaningful to them as they will see it as an opportunity to engage in the development of their education with you.

Once you have initiated a change, it would also be prudent to check in with your students as it progressed for the first time to measure the initial impact it may be having. Once the first iteration of your changes is complete, having a feedback process with the students is important. This may take the form of an informal survey or a discussion group at the end of the trimester where the feedback will be invaluable for you to determine any impact your changes have made as well as any refinements you may need moving forward.



**Figure 8.1 Consult, develop, deploy and refine your changes with input from your students.**

**"Just be kind and be empathetic."**

- Adviser 10

## 8.4 Looking Forward

Academic advising has the capacity to build relationships between students and their academics and their institutions if developed in ways that are cognisant of the diversity of students. Forthcoming academic advising strategies and approaches will need to be cognisant of this diversity and the challenges faced by unique student cohorts like mature and part-time students or students with disabilities, and especially students living with intersectionality on their learning journey. Further research is needed across all disciplines in higher education to determine what mature and part-time students really need from their academics in order to succeed educationally as well as professionally. One potential avenue of research is to develop a new ecological framework that considers all of the psychosocial and socio-economic factors that have an influence on mature and part-time students' learning journeys. Such an ecological framework could frame the micro, meso and macro factors influencing their learning journeys against the principles of academic advising to determine where, when and how the most influential academic advising processes could be utilised to enhance their learning journeys.

While not within the remit of this toolkit, the development of such an ecological framework could be a significant advancement in understanding what are the best supports and processes mature and part-time students need from their academics as they progress through their studies and onto their professional careers as loyal and enthusiastic alumni.

## 8.5 The Last Word....

We could exhort you to be imaginative, creative and innovative, to be an authentic teacher, sharing real life examples and experiences with your students..... but we know from our own experiences that even doing all that we can sometimes have little impact on some student learning journeys. Such exhortations would also be patronising to diligent educators and advisers. We can only say to try and keep trying each day as the hallmark of a good educator that strives to give their students the best educational experience possible. Try the resources in the toolkit and hopefully some will work for you and your students. It is also important to remember that in order for academic advising to succeed, investment in supporting creativity, innovation and teamwork is required.

We also know that many of us are overworked, stretched thin and often feel despondent about the efforts we make in our teaching going unrecognised. So, our last word in the toolkit is KINDNESS.

Be KIND to Yourself and be KIND, welcoming and inclusive to all your students. It makes for a much better learning experience for all involved.

Just be KIND.

The background features a dark blue gradient with numerous thin, curved lines. On the left side, there is a dense cluster of blue and green lines that curve inward. On the right side, there is a cluster of red and pink lines that curve outward. The overall effect is a sense of dynamic movement and depth.

**Just be kind**



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# Toolkit For Impactful Lifelong Learning In The 21st Century

A support guide for the academic advising of mature and part-time students

Conor Buggy, Cheyenne Downey, Catherine Tormey, Eleni Theodoraki,  
Caitriona Cunningham  
College of Health and Agricultural Sciences  
University College Dublin



