

# MATURE-AGE STUDENT'S OPPORTUNITIES AS A MATTER OF SOCIAL INCLUSION IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

Digital revolution, pandemics, market-orientation, and massification in higher education, as well as globalization – a worldwide challenge in economics, politics, societal structures, and health systems – completely changes the “*age landscape*” in universities. Over the last 20 years, universities around the world have seen an increase in the number of non-traditional or mature-age students and are facing complex and challenging problems. In the literature these “non-traditional” in terms of age students are called mature-age students (by some scholars also second chancers, independent students, adult learners). Social inclusion is a highly complex concept, including variables such as class, ethnicity, gender, age, subject of study, location etc. In this article, we will focus specifically on the age of students as a variable of social inclusion. The article is motivated by the aim to find out what are the challenges faced by mature-age students in the context of social inclusion to ensure equal opportunities. Purposive sampling is being used, participants with “intensive” experience – 4 master-level students in the age from 40 to 49 from two Universities in Latvia and one University of United States of America. Individual, semi structured, in-depth interviews as a data collection method is being used. Narrative analysis has been chosen as an extension of the interpretive approach within the social sciences. The study concludes that the most significant group of challenges related to the age of students, both in Latvia and in the US, are socio-emotional challenges. Three out of four respondents have experienced emotions such as “feeling like old people, pressure, uncomfortable, rusty, behind”. The inclusion of mature-age students should be on the university agenda, alongside other social equity issues in higher education.

**Keywords:** *adult students, higher education, lifelong learning, mature-age students, non-traditional students, social inclusion.*

## Introduction

The rapid and increasing changes and instability in the economy, finances, demography and virtually every other sector, since the digital revolution, Covid-19, climate change are setting the world agenda, require new and unconventional solutions. Politicians and

business are looking in the direction of education, demanding change and reform. Since the end of the last century, lifelong learning has been talked about intensively and at all levels. This includes formal, non-formal and informal learning processes. Meanwhile, people have realized for some time that education once acquired may not be enough in life, and formal education institutions at higher education level are increasingly being filled by students who are long past their twenties. In the sources and literature these “non-traditional” in terms of age students are called mature-age students, second chancers, independent students, adult learners (Heagney & Benson, 2017). Justice & Dornan (2001) refer to traditional-age students as those aged 18–23, and nontraditional-age students as those aged 24–64, nevertheless age limits varies in different nations. Some authors pointed out the age threshold for mature students is 25 years (Šestanović & Siddiqui, 2021).

As noted by Richard James (James, 2012): “Nontraditional students (..) require more academic support and other forms of support once enrolled. But this is what is required if serious inroads are to be made into the present participation imbalances” (p. 102).

According to the Šestanović & Siddiqui (2021) there is no agreed definition of the term “mature student” in literature – a mature student is a complex and contested term used differently according to researchers’ specific objectives. The most common practice is using age as one of the distinguishing criteria, as well mature students being characterized as needing to overcome difficulties, and barriers when they transition to higher education. Sometimes students over the age of 21 are considered mature students, but the age limits vary in different nations. For example, in Portugal, it is 23 years old, and in Spain 25 (Fragoso et al., 2013), in the Irish context, a mature student is defined as being 24 years or more in the year of entry or re-entry to an approved course (Ryan et al., 2019). Some authors pointed out the age threshold for mature students is 25 years (Šestanović & Siddiqui, 2021). McCune and co-authors (2010) divided three age groups: “traditional” age students (those aged under 21 at the start of their course), younger “mature” students (aged 21–30) and older “mature” students (aged 31 or over) (McCune et al., 2010). Learners aged over 50 years are sometimes referred to as “Third Age” learners (Smith, n.d.). In the regard of this research, all the students interviewed were aged 40 and over.

David Watson (2012) argues that the social inclusion equation “is highly complex, with variables including class, ethnicity, gender, age, subject of study and location” (p.vii). In this article, we will focus specifically on the age of students as a variable of social inclusion.

There is evidence for increasing number of mature-age students around the globe. OECD data shows, that in 2020 nine per cent of all master level students of Latvian higher education system was in age 40 and over, which is increase in 2.2 per cent in comparison with 2010, furthermore the increase is more express in males’ students’ numbers (Table 1). In United States almost 1/5 of total master or equivalent level students are older than 40 years, nevertheless there is a small decline in 2020, which could be explain with pandemic influence, which is in line in findings in literature – during pandemics in some countries number of female student decrease as females are primary care person in families (Sorella, 2022).

**Table 1** Master or equivalent level students aged 40+ in Latvia and United States

% of students/ Year	2010		2020	
	Latvia	United States	Latvia	United States
40 + of total	6.5%	19.1%	8.7%	18.8%
of male	3.7%	16.3%	6.8%	16.7%
of female	7.9%	20.8%	10%	20%

Source: OESCD (<https://www.oecd.org/>)

On the other hand, studies from the last century already show that more and more non-traditional-age students are entering higher education (Richardson & King, 1998) since the mid-1970s. Such data leads one to wonder why universities have not targeted the mature age group as students with different needs, even 50 years later. It is stressed that mature students are “more diverse than younger students in their motivations, needs, expectations and experiences of higher education” (Richardson & King, 1998, 66) and that one should beware of treating them as a single homogeneous group.

In Surrey, South-East of England, a pedagogical innovation project, the “Transitional Programme”, was implemented which aimed to address the problem that mature-age students deciding to re-enter education, were at risk of being deprived of hope and harmed in their trust in education (Farini, Scollan, 2021). The authors analyze the role of educational leadership in higher education to restore hope and trust to mature-age students and reveal these categories as essential factors for decision-making and social inclusion in complex, unfamiliar and therefore uncertain environments.

As noted by number of authors (Chapman, 2013; Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017; Saddler & Sundin, 2019; Šestanovic & Siddiqui, 2021) mature-age students face different types of challenges once enrolled, which higher education institutions shall not ignore. Therefore, the aim of this research is to find out how mature-age students experience the study process from an equal opportunity’s perspective, comparing the situation in Latvia and the United States. The framework within which we intend to study mature-age students in the formal education system, is social inclusion. We will use the United Nations definition to conceptualize this concept: “Social inclusion is the process by which efforts are made to ensure equal opportunities – that everyone, regardless of their background, can achieve their full potential in life. Such efforts include policies and actions that promote equal access to (public) services as well as enable citizen’s participation in the decision-making processes that affect their lives” (United Nations , n.d.) (*authors underlining*). To summarize the above, the research question of this paper is: what are the challenges faced by mature-age students in the context of social inclusion to ensure equal opportunities.

## Methodology

Narrative analysis as an extension of the interpretive approach within the social sciences is being used. Referring to John Dewey’s work on the deep interconnection between experience, education and life, some narrative scholars argue that narrative

**Table 2** The social profile of the research participants

	<b>Respondent 1</b>	<b>Respondent 2</b>	<b>Respondent 3</b>	<b>Respondent 4</b>
<b>Age</b>	49	41	45	40
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Female	Male	Female
<b>Marital status</b>	Married	Married	Single	Single
<b>Nationality</b>	Latvian	Latvian	American	American
<b>University</b>	University of Latvia, Latvia	Liepaja University, Latvia	University of Buffalo, NY, US	University of Buffalo, NY, US
<b>Year of the current studies</b>	1	1	1	3
<b>Study program</b>	Management psychology	Writing studies	English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	Sustainable Engineering
<b>Years since last acad. studies</b>	19	17	5	7
<b>Working status</b>	working	working	not working	not working

methodology is particularly suited to educational research: “In the most general sense, when one asks what it means to study education, the answer is to study experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 154).

Narrative analysis is characterized by its methodological nature as focusing on how people experience their lives, how people talk about their lives (Case & Light, 2011; Esin, et al., 2014). Narrative analysis using interviews as a method of data extraction assumes a constructionist approach (knowledge and reality are constructed in conversations with others), so the position of both the interviewee and the interviewer is important in the construction of knowledge. It is noted that the aim of narrative analysis is to understand as fully as possible the constructive elements of story. “Narrative researchers who take a constructionist approach pay attention to the ‘positioning’ of two kinds of subjects – the tellers and the listeners, their personal, social, cultural and political worlds, and how these worlds come together and interact within the narrative process” (Esin, et al., 2014, p.205). Given authors own experience as a mature-age student, we found this aspect essential in the choice of methodology, as it allows us to take the position of an active researcher in the research process.

For the data collection purposive sampling is being used, to collect data from mature age students ( $n = 4$ ) on the master level in the age of 40 to 49. Two of respondents are from different universities in Latvia (Liepaja University and University of Latvia, both female) and two respondents from one university in the United States (University at Buffalo, New York, the male and the female). The social profile of the participants is shown in Table 2.

During the time period of January 2023 four semi structured individual interviews were conducted and recorded, using online communication platform Microsoft Teams. To find out mature-age student’s opportunities in higher education, each interview was started with an open-ended question: what are the challenges you face as a mature-age student in the context of social inclusion? Before the interview the concepts of “mature-age students” and “social inclusion” were conceptualized for the respondents.

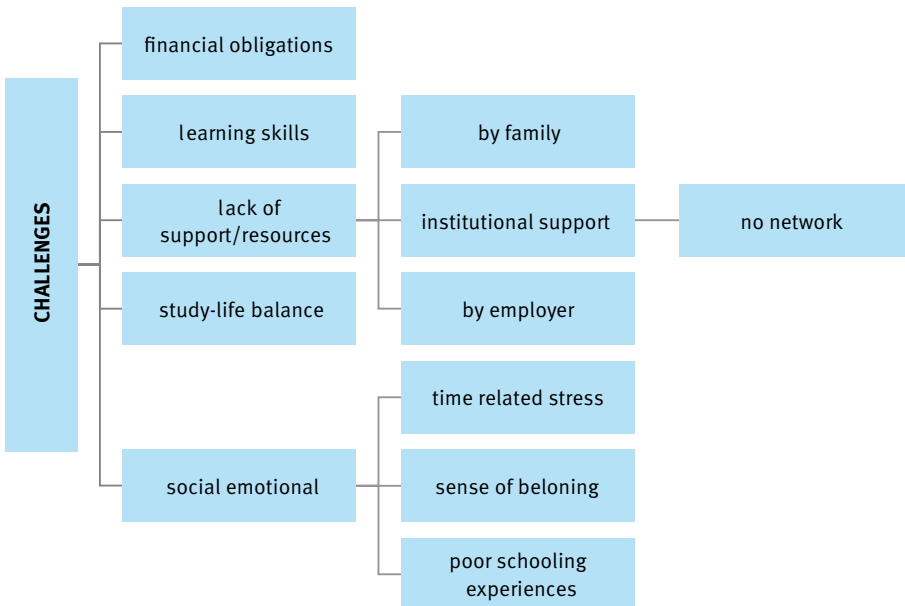
## Results

Previous studies have tended to show that there are several types of challenges and barriers faced by mature age students. We clustered the findings of authors (Chapman, 2013; Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017; Saddler & Sundin, 2019; Šestanovic & Siddiqui, 2021) into the five main groups of challenges – financial obligations, challenges caused by a lack of learning skills, lack of support, difficulties to balance work and life and as well social emotional challenges during the studies (Figure 1).

Šestanović & Siddiqui (2021) mentioned financial obligations (associated with education and family responsibilities) as the most concerning issue for many students. The analysis of the interviews in our research only partially confirmed this finding, with one respondent mentioning that he would have to look for a job in the next semester, but that this would be difficult due to the heavy study load. Both Latvian respondents, unlike the US respondents, work alongside their studies and even saw the advantages of studying at this age precisely because of the financial stability they have gained due to their age:

*“This is probably even a better and easier time than when I first studied, because I had [young] children then. (...) Also financially. It’s much easier for me to pay now than it was then. (...) We were young, it was nineties. This is the time when the children have left the family and you are financially stable enough.*

(Respondent 1)



**Figure 1** Challenges faced by mature-age students

Note. Based on Chapman, 2013; Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov, 2017; Saddler & Sundin, 2019; Šestanovic & Siddiqui, 2021.

*“I am in the budget, but I could also pay. It wouldn’t be a problem for me. Well, I was ready to pay.. for studies.”* (Respondent 2)

*“I took out some student loans but mostly out of pocket. I don’t have scholarships or grants for this.”* (Respondent 4)

However, we have to consider the significant difference in tuition fees between Latvian and US universities.

Pozdnyakova & Pozdnyakov (2017) in their article emphasize feeling of anxiety, concerns regarding the education process and learning results in adult learners, loss of learning skills, lack of experience in distance or remote education, financial costs of education, lack of support by the family or by the employer, sense of hopelessness and irrelevance of their education. Owing to their already busy lives, mature students often experience barriers to returning to education that are not encountered by traditional, younger students; most students had no formal tools to manage part-time work, study and social activities; instead, students would focus on either work or study leading to time pressures and time-related stress (Šestanović & Siddiqui, 2021). Mature students can struggle to access much-needed resources, support, essential services and flexible study options like library or support office working hours also extra-curricular activities are often where the mature student misses out. In general, study environment is more constructed for traditional students.

Besides the challenges described by number of authors above, we also found a new category, which we named – challenges related to curriculum. This category emerged from the analysis of respondents’ interviews and is related to the content (like coding, physics, math) requirements (like homework’s, English skills) and form (like discussions, independent work) of the study program:

*“I certainly can’t speak in a foreign language and write good papers in a foreign language, but for understanding is enough. Maybe I will need someone to help me write an English summary (...)”* (Respondent 1)

*“I also think (...) in discussions and independent work I was a bit scared before I started studying and so on... of course there are subjects that I feel..., but it purely depends on the subject where other course mates are more knowledgeable”* (Respondent 1)

*“(..) classes like calculus and physics. They kind of had the advantage of having that knowledge fresh in their minds, so it was easier for them to do well in those classes.”* (Respondent 4)

*“(..) with like computer coding and just excel and things like that. I do feel a bit behind in that regard.”* (Respondent 4)

*“But the fear, it was just (...) whether I would be able to find the time, whether it wouldn’t be too difficult. Would I be able to cope with all the writing? Actually, I had also thought beforehand that I wouldn’t do any more academic studies, but rather some courses, seminars, where there was no homework.”* (Respondent 1)

Study-life balance for mature students has been one of the most challenging issues in higher education and lack of support from family or employers escalates it even more. Šestanović & Siddiqui mentioned that “making the transition to college or university often entails sacrifices in other areas of life – social activities, family time and free leisure time, while studying only had a minor impact on job performance. Thus, while students are likely to sacrifice all other areas of life, job security takes priority, even during study time” (Šestanović & Siddiqui, 2021, p.114).

The results of our study confirmed study-life balance as significant challenge. One of the respondents mentioned weekends as challenge for studying and another one – an inequality she sees as a lack of free time because of duties connected to her family life:

*“(..) Well, I also thought for a very long time whether to go (...) to study and that was the one where I was most scared of the fact that there was [lectures] every Saturday, Sunday, Friday and then I thought – no, not to enjoy a single Friday, Saturday in my life for two years. Well, like no, it’s too crazy”* (Respondent 1)

*“The library is open until 6 or some days until 7, so for me it’s a challenge to manage time (...) I have kids and I have other things and then I think oh my God, how unequal I am with them [younger students]... and then sometimes I feel bad about it (...) I really feel the difference.”* (Respondent 2)

Both US respondents are single, with no kids, non-working, which probably explains, why the topic of study-life balance did not appear in their interviews.

In contrast to conclusion of Šestanović & Siddiqui (2021) who identify financial obligations as the main group of challenges, analyses of interviews with respondents in this study show that mature-age students are most affected by **socio-emotional** challenges. As well, several interview episodes confirmed age as a cause of these challenges. These include – feeling like old people among young students, feeling pressure to make wrong decision with the choice of study program, or just feel uncomfortable about the reaction of younger students:

*“(..)just being an old man when I end up finishing this degree and like applying to jobs and just being kind of (...) to be starting something new”* (Respondent 3)

*“I feel pressure because of my age that I only have so many chances and that I don’t want to waste time by making the wrong choice and have to again make another change in the future”* (Respondent 3)

*“(..)I said I’m in my 40s (...)I didn’t give an exact number. The other guy was the youngest of the three of us. He looked like when you see one of those cartoons where you know the cat or the dog, like their eyes are bulging out of their head and his head spins around. He got like a little closer to the camera and his face was contorting, and I was like, oh my God!”* (Respondent 3)

*“(..) those feelings, how you feel as a student (...) it was really hard for me to get into all of that. Well, not that I had resistance, but it has been almost 20 years [after studies] (...). I also calculated when I was studying for the last time and then I realized that I’m quite old already”* (Respondent 2)

In addition to the above, emotional factors such as feeling rusty, behind, having trouble making friends came up in the interviews:

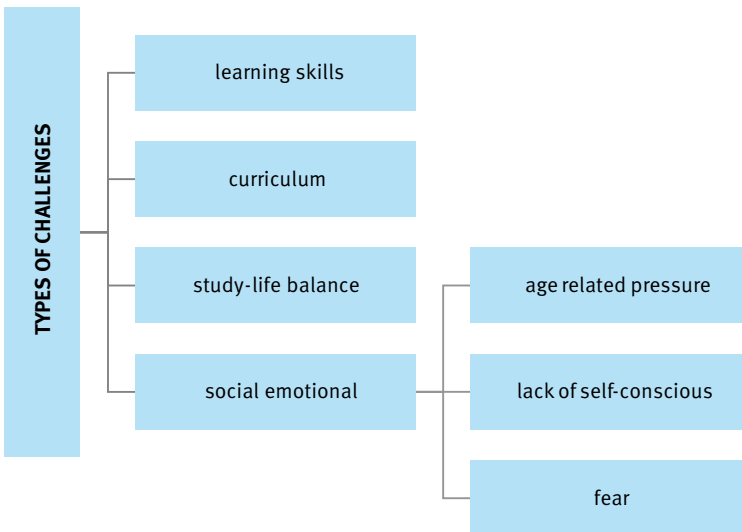
*“(..)I feel a huge difference in it due to age and not even age, but probably some social obligations or status [due to] acquired with age. The difference is huge.”*  
(Respondent 2)

*“I’m very rusty as a student (..) I’ve forgotten how... what it is to be a student.”*  
(Respondent 3)

*“Feeling behind in life (..) some of those younger students were already in their third year or about to graduate, and I had just started.”*  
(Respondent 4)

*“I really have trouble making friends because I’m kind of outgoing in general, but the maturity level is definitely different between the younger friends that I made and myself.”*  
(Respondent 4)

Based on the interview data, some new, very significant aspects can be added to the social-emotional group of challenges – like age related pressure, fear and lack of self-conscious (Figure 2). The choice in favour of engaging in higher education at a mature age may also be based on the nature of emotions at the time of choice and the ability to overcome the fearful emotions mentioned by respondents. Bad emotions cause anxiety, which, in turn, interferes with learning- if learners feel unsafe and anxious, they are not likely to be able to focus attention on academics (Woolfolk, 2021). For adult students, this can lead to a loss of interest in their studies.



**Figure 2** Challenges faced by mature-age students (updated)



Patricia A. Gouthro (2019) argues, that within the field of adult education, there have been multiple debates in recent decades about the need to consider individual learning experiences and issues of inclusion and diversity. Given that adults are participants in higher education, this debate also applies to the higher education sector.

Summarising the interview data, the respondent's quote illustrates the importance of didactics in adult pedagogy:

*"I just feel like an adult that has come to (..) classroom and it's just like learning new stuff"* (Respondent 4)

This quote focuses on the pedagogical process in higher education institutions. Although pedagogical science in Latvia distinguishes between adult education (Nacionālā enciklopēdija, 02.27.2022; in Latvian *pieaugušo izglītība*) and university pedagogy (Nacionālā enciklopēdija, 04.07.2022; in Latvian *augstskolas pedagoģija*), classifying both as sub-disciplines of pedagogical science, the authors of this article have observed in their experience that didactics, or the theory of teaching and learning, is used little or not at all in the teaching process at universities. The poor didactic skills of university teachers and their negative impact on the quality of higher education are also confirmed by Cathy N. Davidson (2022) in her evaluation of the higher education system in the United States. There is a strong case for higher education institutions to seriously rethink the system of training academics. They should not only be experts and/or researchers in their field, but also familiar with adult teaching and learning theories and methods.

## Conclusions

The analysis of the interviews suggests that mature-age students face challenges in the context of social inclusion, and that the nature of these challenges is similar in Latvia and the United States. The only significant difference between the two countries and in the context of the previous studies summarized in this paper is in the challenge category "financial obligations". In particular, respondents from Latvian universities do not see their financial situation as a potential obstacle to their studies but, on the contrary, as an advantage gained in maturity along with financial stability. However, it is important to stress that the Latvian interviewees, unlike those in the United States, are working students. US' respondents justified their dedication to studying solely on the basis of a heavy study load, although interviews with Latvian respondents also indicated difficulties in combining studies with work because of the study load.

The most significant group of challenges related to the age of students is socio-emotional challenges. Three out of four respondents have experienced emotions such as "feeling like old people, pressure, uncomfortable, rusty, behind". These emotions respectively trigger strong feelings such as fear and lack of self-consciousness, which in turn can lead to dropping out of studies or choosing not to engage in higher education at all at a mature age.

The general mood of mature-age students during their studies can be described as "feeling like an adult". This is a strong and at the same time natural state of feeling for

people at a mature age, which universities should consider when planning the content and organization of study courses. These feelings are based both on the previous experience of a mature person, on adult life and all its elements, including work and family life, but also on the lack of experience of the life and study process of a modern student, if studies are resumed after a long break or for the first time at a mature age, especially in Latvia, where the study process has continued to change in the 30 years since Latvia regained its independence.

Since lifelong learning has become a necessity, higher education around the world also needs to be made more accessible to all age groups. As emotions are present in any learning process, universities must help to make them a facilitator of movement towards learning by targeting inclusion strategies to reduce negative emotions associated with the learning process and to bring students of all ages closer together.

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