



Rewriting the Future Phase 4 Adult Learners: Report 2022

The needs of adult learners considering
progression onto or towards level 4 study
across Lancashire

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Introduction

This is the fourth phase of Rewriting the Future, and considers research undertaken in 2022. The key aim of the earlier phases of the research was to enable young people to consider specific enablers and barriers to their continued educational engagement. In phase 3 the objective was to develop understanding of barriers faced by marginalised groups of young people aged 11-19 and learn more about attitudes and experiences towards higher education (HE) and progression, including their social and cultural context. Alongside this work for FutureU in 2019-2020, Crook and Satchwell conducted research with school pupils to explore careers provision and create a student researcher model of evaluation with young people in schools in Blackpool (funded by LCC). That research provided further insight into young people's perspectives on their futures, while Crook and Larkins also conducted research with care experienced children, contributing to the NICE Guidelines [NG205] published 20th October 2021. The supporting evidence 'Creating our lives' [report](#) and animation, are relevant to all professionals working with care experienced children and young people and there are specific findings about supporting learning (pp 40-50).

Adult learners have historically been an underrepresented group in government policy. The focus has been on Widening Participation (WP) students in general, and whilst adult learners have sometimes been discussed in governmental policies, they have not been the main focus. WP students are often described as 'non-traditional' students; this label includes many other groups as well as mature learners, such as students from disadvantaged backgrounds, part-time undergraduate students, first generation students, ethnic minority students, refugees and asylum seekers, students from low-income backgrounds, care-leavers, vocational and work-based learners and disabled learners (HEFCE, 2000; Moore et al., 2013). Adult learners were mentioned in policies such as Dearing (1997); BIS (2011); Hubble and Bolton (2019), however focus on raising participation in HE directly following mandatory education has meant that barriers and enablers to engagement with HE for adult learners are less prioritised. The relevant research that is available suggests that lack of confidence and standard qualification routes may be barriers even though adult learners bring many transferable skills to education (for example, Chapman, 2017). Yet the predominant focus in policy has been to prioritise the financial support that is deemed to be essential for WP students to participate in post-compulsory education. This focus fails to address multi-contextual barriers at the heart of this research.

Phase 4 of Rewriting the Future explored the educational trajectories and aspirations of adult learners (aged 19 and above) attending level 2 and 3 courses in colleges in Lancashire, to develop an understanding of barriers encountered and what has helped these learners to engage and decide to progress from level 2 or 3 to level 4. Drawing on the themes identified in earlier phases, the research was designed to consider how students access knowledge about re-engaging with education and potential progression to HE, influential sources, structural and contextual issues, relationships, and perceptions. We invited four UCLan students who have experienced considerable barriers to education to share their experiences through interview, to use as a starting point for the research dialogue groups. Through sharing positive stories of engagement from adults who have navigated barriers affecting their educational engagement, the research encouraged other participants to share stories about their own lives and their progression in education.

Aims of this research

- to explore the educational trajectories and aspirations of adult learners in Lancashire;
- to develop an understanding of perceived barriers and challenges encountered;
- to consider how students access advice and support for re-engaging with and progressing to HE.

To achieve this, the study was designed to meet the following objectives:

- Develop four positive stories of adult learner engagement and progression to HE as prompts for dialogue.
- Conduct dialogue groups to explore questions related to the aims:
 - What are the perceived barriers for adult learners progressing into HE?
 - What are the enablers for adult learners progressing into HE?
 - What influences decision-making amongst adult learners about their educational trajectory?
 - What could be put in place to help adult learners engage with HE?
- Work with students to develop visual storylines of barriers and enablers to HE.
- Analyse the data to arrive at a set of findings and recommendations.

Limitations

Access was difficult to gain to all the colleges who had signed a partnership agreement with UCLan/FutureU although we emailed the named contacts supplied. Two of the colleges responded almost immediately. A third was accessed via a contact established by Crook. Difficulties were also encountered when distributing the survey.

We were unable to engage equal numbers of male and female students. There was a much greater representation of female students on the courses that the colleges provided access to. We note that more female than male mature students enrol on access to HE courses. In 2019/20, 43,420 students enrolled on these courses of which 75% were female and 55% of these were female adult learners (Access to HE, key statistics 2020/21). Ethnic diversity of participants was also limited. Further research is needed to understand factors influencing diversity and gender representation in adult learners.

Context

In 2019/20, 37% of undergraduates were considered to be mature students (Hubble and Bolton, 2021) with entry to HE by those aged 25 and over falling. A decline in the number of part-time courses available is suggested as a contributing factor (Butcher, 2020). The study thus sought to engage with students attending Access to HE courses and both part-time and full-time students in the process of attaining level 3 qualifications.

The idea that taking part in HE will lead to social mobility is central to the widening participation (WP) agenda. The Government White Paper (February 2022) suggests that every young person and adult should be able to access the high-level professional qualifications needed to secure rewarding well-paid jobs. There is also emphasis on

universities providing levelling up opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, there is very little attention to what might make a difference other than more widespread entitlement to loans to attend different types of educational settings. A lack of engagement with research and what a meaningful education for people with different backgrounds might require has been exacerbated by political turbulence at the time of writing this report in late 2022 in the United Kingdom (UK), including the rapid succession of three prime ministers, cost of living crisis and repercussions from the Covid19 pandemic. All these factors may have an impact on engagement in education by adult learners. The gap between the most advantaged and disadvantaged in the UK is widening and differences in participation and achievement between advantaged and disadvantaged students remain, despite the WP agenda. Class and the spatial and contextual dimensions are important in understanding students' narratives about what it means to move from one educational space to another (Bathmaker, 2021).

Indeed, the available research about adult learners suggests that they may experience a lack of confidence in their abilities (Christie et al., 2008), anxiety about juggling the multiple aspects of their life alongside studying (Mallman and Lee, 2016) and are acutely aware of the financial implications of engaging with education (Clayton, Crozier and Reay, 2009); they also may have a sense of 'imposter syndrome' at not fitting into the usual demographic of students (Chapman, 2017). Other areas of available evidence focus on how to retain adult learners (McKendry, Wright and Stevenson, 2014) and the motivating factors (from an adult learner perspective) for re-engagement (Taylor and House, 2010). However, what seems to be missing from current evidence is what helps adult learners re-engage with education. Adult learners, once re-engaged with education, bring a multitude of transferable skills to the classroom due to their prior life experience and often engage wholly with their education (Shanahan, 2000). They tend to re-engage with education to improve their career prospects or change career direction, but often educational engagement has greater positive impacts on their lives than they had previously envisaged (Dodding, 2018). Furthermore, older adult learners may not have had the opportunity to study beyond level 2 and although they would like to re-engage are discouraged by reliance on narrow entrance requirements of some courses (Black, 2021). Using creative and narrative methods, this research aimed to add further insight into this underdeveloped area of research.

In our previous report (2020/2021) we defined educational marginalisation as a failure to ensure the presence, participation, and achievement of learners (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 2006), and suggested that literature about marginalisation as a phenomenon experienced by specific communities or groups excluded by the processes inherent in engaging with higher education is scarce (Harrison and Atherton, 2021). Note that participation is often used to denote attendance at educational establishments, but this obscures its further meaning as an important aspect of social inclusion.

Harrison and Atherton's (2021) conceptual model, 'Dimensions of marginalisation' can also be applied to the participants in this current research. Harrison and Atherton identified four dimensions of marginalisation inherent when specific groups access higher education related to: society, systems, time/space, and relevance. Rather than placing the focus on marginalised groups, or the characteristics of individuals, this model suggests how context and structures are also relevant in producing barriers that reinforce or even enable marginalisation. In terms of the Re-writing the Future study, we have incorporated this

theory into the analysis framework which is intended to capture the broad spectrum of factors involved in marginalisation which also present barriers to learners' progression.

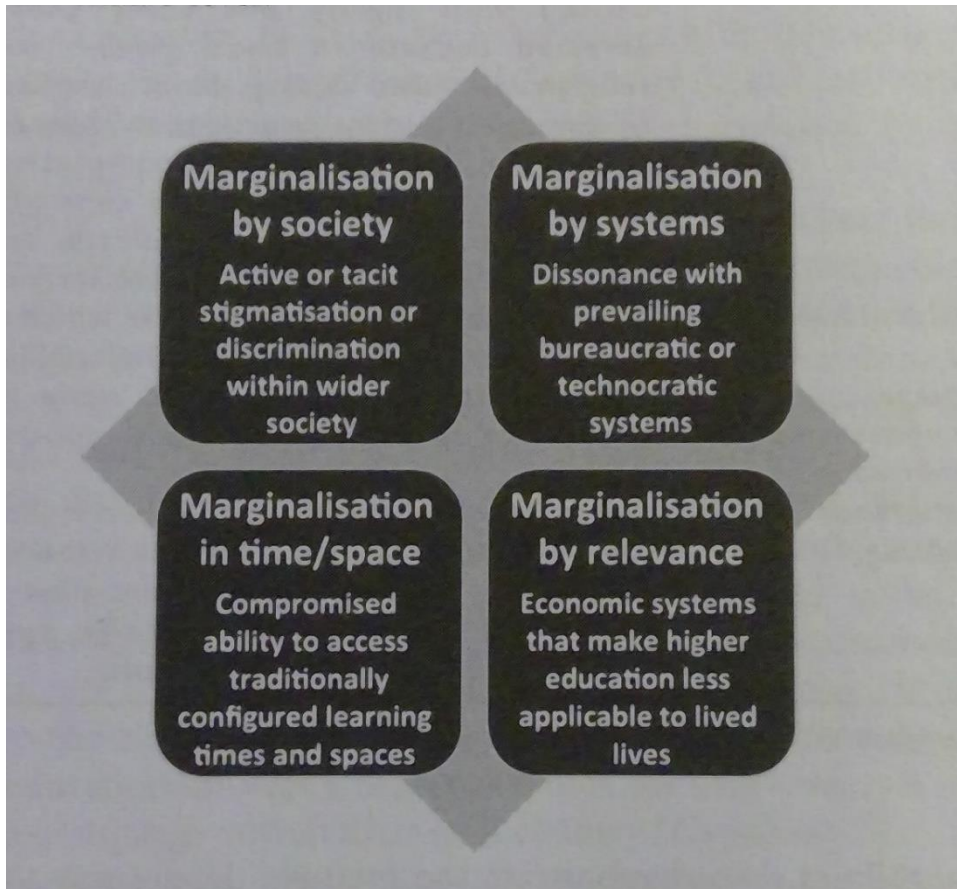


Figure 1. Dimensions of Marginalisation (Harrison and Atherton, 2021)

Methods

Data Collection Methods

The data collection was a three-stage approach.

Stage 1

In stage 1, four mature students currently attending UCLan were interviewed about their educational experiences and the decisions they had made. The intention was to capture the broad contexts experienced by Lancashire students on a variety of courses who are known to have faced complex challenges including being care leavers, experiencing homelessness, SEND, being a parent; they had previously expressed an interest in wanting to share, with prospective students, their positive experiences of engagement and how they had overcome challenges. Interviews lasted approximately an hour, following an interview protocol (See Appendix 1). The interviews were transcribed by a third party and then analysed and developed into extended I-Poems by the researchers, to create a resource to facilitate dialogue during the focus group (Stage 2 of data collection) sessions in the

targeted Lancashire colleges. I poems are a form of data analysis extracted from The Listening Guide developed by Gilligan (1993) and enable the foregrounding of the participants' individual educational experiences. It is a 'qualitative, relational, voice-centred feminist methodology primarily used in the analysis of interview data' (Woodcock, 2005: p.49) and presents a powerful interpretation of participants' experiences, emotionally engaging the reader or audience with these experiences (Koelsch, 2015). As with many research approaches, researchers often make adaptations in their application of methods and the Listening Guide is no exception. Gilligan's initial development of the Listening Guide involved extracting phrases consisting of the I plus the verb (e.g. I love, I want, I don't know etc.). However, there have been several studies in which an extended version of the I poem has been used; longer sections of text are used in order to make the poems more accessible (e.g., Mauthner and Doucet, 1998; Balan, 2005; Edwards and Weller, 2012). For this study we decided to develop extended versions of I poems to provide a meaningful insight into the participant's personal educational journey.

Stage 2

Stage 2 was designed to provoke discussion amongst students about what has enabled them to return to and engage in education and progress towards HE study, using the I poems as prompts. Participatory approaches strengthen people's awareness of their own abilities and resources for change, enabling researchers and participants to work together in identifying sociological problems and what makes a difference (Hall, 1981). Participatory research seeks to shift the centre from which knowledge is generated, in this case, to the lived experience of adult learners themselves. Whilst the approach for this phase was limited by time available in the college day to explore such learning, the study was presented to students as part of an ongoing project to understand educational journeys from different perspectives.

Our initial intention was to work with eight groups of students (approximately 60-80 in total) studying at Further Education (FE) colleges in Lancashire. However, some colleges did not respond to the request to participate in spite of numerous attempts to contact them. Data collection, in the form of dialogue groups (See Appendix 3), was consequently undertaken in three Lancashire colleges identified as providing courses at levels 2 and 3; with two groups of students in two of the colleges and one group in the other. All colleges recruited to the study were partner colleges of UCLan. A total of 31 students consented to take part in the focus group stage of the research. Although the total number of expected participants was not reached, the data generated from those who did take part was rich and provided an in-depth insight into the experience of students of disengaging and then re-engaging with education. By the end of the fifth focus group, no new themes were extracted from the data collected so data saturation was achieved.

Initially, during the focus groups, the I-Poems were used to generate dialogue to identify the barriers and enablers to the student participants' education. Student participants were encouraged to choose a selection of the I poems that they felt they identified with in some way and then were asked to comment or make notes on the I poems about the feelings/sentiments they involved and whether the information contained in the I poem resonated or not with their own educational experiences.

Following the I poem activity the student participants were then asked to create their own storylines of their educational journeys to date (a technique we used in an earlier Rewriting the Future phase). The aim of this was to identify what challenges got in the way of their educational journeys and what helped them to keep going. Students were also asked to include information about their age and their highest qualification prior to enrolling on their present course to get some idea of the general age range and qualifications of the participants in this stage of the research.

Stage 3

Following a first level of analysis of the data collected in Stages one and two, an anonymous online survey (using Qualtrics) was developed. This investigated to what extent a wider cohort of students' views resonated with the themes being generated through the qualitative research. We included elements identified in an existing FutureU survey in order to continue to feed into the evaluative priorities of the service. However, we also noted that in the existing survey, many of the criteria used to gauge students' views about progression were assumed to be structural (e.g., finance) and did not place due consideration on elements identified in the first phases of the Rewriting the Future research, or wider research available on this topic; for example, the people and experiences that provided influential sources, students' perceptions of self and by others, relationships, opportunities for knowledge exchange and wider contextual issues. The new survey we developed asks students what the barriers and enablers were to their continued education, including pivotal moments. It draws examples from the themes developed in the analysis framework to provide a choice of responses. The survey consists of 15 questions (see Appendix 4). We aimed to recruit 100 students attending the colleges which took part in the project and two other partner colleges whose contact information had been provided by Future U. The link to the survey was distributed to adult learners via the main contacts at the colleges and they decided how to share the link. The colleges reported that most students had either completed their studies or were busy completing final assessments during the summer term 2022 (during which time we had only 3 respondents). Therefore, we arranged to postpone this stage until the Autumn Term 2022 (details below). The survey produced both quantitative and qualitative data.

Recruitment

For stage one of this research, Crook and Dodding approached four students they knew who had completed or were about to complete their studies at UCLan. These students provided informed consent to take part in the research. All four discussed their educational journeys including the barriers met and support received.

For stage two, the colleges targeted for recruitment were all partner colleges of UCLan who had signed an agreement to collaborate with Future U. Invitations to take part were sent to contacts identified by FutureU. Three of the colleges agreed to recruit students, providing verbal information and the information sheets approved by the ethics committee. Two of the three colleges recruited two groups of students on different courses and the third one recruited one group. We attempted to contact two further colleges by emails sent out over an eight-week period, but these did not respond.

With regards to the stage three survey, which was developed using Qualtrics (online survey tool), a link was sent out to the known contacts at five colleges which have an agreement

with Future U. Educators suggested that Autumn term would be a better time to run the survey as many students had already completed their studies or were sitting exams in summer 2022. We agreed to this request and contacted colleges again in late September 2022. The email asked the contacts to distribute the link to any students within the targeted demographic. The email also contained participant information for students to read. Despite repeated requests to colleges to ask if they could distribute the link to groups of students to complete, the survey was finally closed on 21st November with 11 responses.

Participants

The study engaged with students attending Access to HE courses and both part-time and full-time students in the process of attaining level 3 qualifications. They were aged from 20 to 47 years. The time since these students had last accessed education ranged from 1 to 30 years. Participants were attending the following courses in the academic year 2021-2022:

College	Course
College 1	Access to HE Diploma Allied Health Professionals Level 3
College 1	Health and Social Care Level 2 Extended Diploma
College 2	Access to Higher Education Diploma Health and Social Care/ Nursing and Midwifery
College 2	Access to Higher Education: Social Sciences Level 3
College 3	Access to HE Diploma (Land-based Science)

Ethical considerations

Rewriting the Future Phase 4 was approved by UCLan BAHSS ethics Committee on 17th February 2022. Prior to becoming a participant in the research, the adult learners were provided with a participant information sheet which contextualised the research and provided details about data usage and withdrawal. A fieldwork risk assessment was completed. The learners were then able to decide whether they wished to take part. For both stage one (interviews with UCLan students) and stage two (participatory events with adult learners at partner colleges) consent forms were distributed and had to be signed prior to participation. The survey for stage three contained the study information and consent sheet which had to be completed to continue with the questions.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by a transcription contractor, who has worked with personal and sensitive data for UCLan on several projects.

Written consent was provided by all participants in stage one and two before the data collection activities and we provided additional information (examples of how the data might be used) at the beginning of the sessions and opportunity to ask questions. Ongoing consent was checked when we switched on audio recorders and by asking individuals if we could photograph their responses, for example, their educational journey storylines (See Appendix 5).

All data collected during stages one and two was anonymised, stored securely on UCLan's OneDrive and only Crook and Dodding had access to raw data. Names were not requested on the survey. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any point, but their data could only be withdrawn up to the point it was anonymised.

All data were kept on the UCLan network in accordance with UCLan's GDPR compliant Data Protection Policy <https://www.uclan.ac.uk/assets/policies/data-protection.pdf>. Personal data (consent forms) will be destroyed within 5 years of the completion of the project or when they are no longer needed in accordance with UCLan guidance. UCLanData will be used for long-term secure storage of anonymised data. This will be for a minimum period of 10 years.

Analysis framework

The initial interviews with four students were, as detailed above, developed into extended I poems to prompt discussion during the second stage of the research). Eleven I poems were developed (See examples in Appendix 2). We used this first level of analysis to consider the suitability of the analysis table developed in Phases 1-3 (shown below).

Table 1: Themes from Phases 1, 2 and 3

Elements that affect engagement and progression (either negatively or positively)	Factors identified in Phases 1, 2 and 3
Perceptions of young people (by self and others)	identity, personal qualities, talents, disability, gender, mental health
Relationships with others	friendships, peers, social networks, family, teachers, other significant people
Influential sources	adults who listen, adults who have made a difference, older siblings, role models, media (e.g. TV documentaries, dramas or social media), careers advisors
Structural/contextual issues	finance, balance, place, culture, curriculum, non-curricular opportunities
Knowledge and understanding	opportunities for talking, access to information/knowledge, alternative trajectories

Similar elements were identified in the extended I poems, for example relationships with others, but the factors extended to include for example, being a parent, which interconnected with ideas about identity, people who are influential sources, and broader structural and contextual issues. This section of an extended I poem illustrates:

'I moved out of my mum's house into my nanna's house and that was supposed to be for two weeks just to make sure she was alright.'

'I've been there ever since, the level of independence that I'd always craved but across the road now is my mum, my stepdad, my sister and my brother.'

There were also elements that had not been discussed previously in the work with younger people. Thematic analysis enables identification of the factors and emergent elements and we proceeded with a plan to undertake three levels of analysis with the data collected from dialogue groups. The first level was to assign codes and categorise data into main themes (factors perceived by participants as barriers or enablers for adult learners progressing into HE, and as influences in their decision-making about their educational trajectories).

Two researchers worked independently on this task and then met to compare findings. Where there were disputes, these were discussed, and agreement reached. At this level, differences between the data from adults and that from children involved in the first three phases were identified. We also used this level of analysis to develop the survey, and in effect test whether such a tool would effectively draw out data in these categories from a broader sample.

The second level of analysis was to identify the elements that are important to put in place to help adult learners engage with HE. Participants shared a broad range of structural and contextual detail when drawing their education storylines (see appendix 3). The factors that were distinctive for the adult learners were about how others perceive them and about how

they perceive themselves. Factors relating to employment and experience were more pronounced with adult learners than younger people. Whilst for children and young people, availability of work experience or paid employment has become increasingly limited in recent years (see Satchwell, Crook and Dodding, 2022), the experience of having been employed was an important element for adult learners. A further element that also arose as highly important was the impact of change on their lives from considering or making the decision to return to study.

The third level of analysis was to consider the interconnections between the different elements. All analysis can create a reduction in the complexity of the data collected and can distort the meaning when presented as a linear process or as isolated examples as we have done below. There are clear relational elements to the data in this research, hence a visual model of the relationships is under development to disseminate the findings discussed below. All three researchers were involved in this stage to scrutinise the examples and ensure the analysis framework and model reflected the data.

Table two shows the new elements and factors emerging from this phase 4 research:

Table 2: Themes from Phases 1, 2, 3 and 4

Elements that are enablers or barriers to continued progression in education	Factors identified in Phases 1, 2, 3 and also identified in this new Phase 4	Additional Factors identified by adult learners in Phase 4
Perceptions by others	identity, personal qualities, talents, disability, gender, mental health	support, societal/cultural attitudes, labelling, othering
Perceptions of self	identity, personal qualities, talents, disability, gender, mental health	transformation, achievements, as a role model, as a parent, pivotal moments, self-confidence, potential, ambition, motivation, as capable of change, as capable student
Relationships	friendships, peers, social networks, family, specific teachers, teachers, other significant people	health professionals, children, peers, (continuity, resilience)
Influential sources	people who listen, people who have made a difference, older siblings, role models, media (e.g. TV documentaries, dramas or	academic support

	social media), careers advisors	
Structural/contextual influences	impact of financial situation, curriculum, non-curricular opportunities	admission structures, work-life balance, study-life balance, neighbourhood, cultural/community belonging, parenting expectations, carer expectations, gendered expectations, progression/transitions structures, policy, sense of achievement, standardisation, living arrangements
Knowledge and understanding	opportunities for talking, access to information/knowledge, alternative trajectories	academic support/knowledge sharing, about transitions
Employment & experience		capability, finance, skills, experience, alternative trajectories, motivations, sense of achievement
Impact of change		on family financial situation and opportunities, on recognition (treated like a child), on time spent with children, on family life, on university experience, on independence, on caring responsibilities, on personal finance, on self-confidence, on mental and emotional health, on upskilling

Although similar factors to Phase 3 were identified, column three in the table shows new themes which were distinct from research undertaken with the school age participants in the previous phases. Some factor labels (for example, ‘people who listen’ rather than ‘adults who listen’) have been changed to better reflect the wider demographic of participants involved in all the phases of this research. The findings section below centres on the data we have found that is different for adult learners in relation to other participants in previous phases.

Findings

These are presented within each element as detailed in table 2. We then provide a section on the level 3 relational analysis regarding the interconnectedness of dimensions.

1. Perceptions by others

Perceptions by others is a theme that has been inherent throughout previous phases of the research but with adult learners, it became clear that there were different nuances. For example: one participant suggested that although she was perhaps lacking confidence in her own abilities, an important point was to prove to other people she was capable:

'I doubt myself, but I like proving people wrong.'

An interviewee discussed how mental health problems, lack of self-confidence and self-belief had prevented her from re-engaging with education for decades prior to re-engaging with a foundation course at a local college. Halfway through her undergraduate study she had successfully gained a summer student internship at UCLan and was shocked at the belief shown in her by her internship supervisor:

'so, I remember speaking to the supervisor, at my internship and she were like well have you thought about doing a PhD?'

This belief in her academic abilities by a supportive supervisor contrasted with the perception of the participant's mother:

'I think she just keeps saying to me you're getting a bit big for your boots you, and I'm just like no I'm not Mum, I'm just really trying to do the best that I can do.'

Perceptions by others were important at peer level too. One participant suggested that her tutors' and other students' perceptions of her as being lazy and lacking motivation were important to dispel:

'it's like you don't want to be that person that's asking for extensions and you don't want to seem like, like you almost feel lazy, like the procrastination and having no motivation, it makes you feel lazy and you don't want other people to think that, like especially when you care about what other people think, it's really hard to come in and say can I have an extension and they'd just be like why, why have you not done it? Again, it's like that, like being back at school, well why have you not done it?'

While also considering how she has changed, this participant acknowledges other people's perceptions of the change in her mattered too:

'It's a very, very big change and I think it's taken me quite a long time for everything to sink in what's happened, yeah, a lot of people say to me now like we don't recognise you anymore and I just think well I'm still the same person, I'm just a stronger version of the person that you knew ten years ago'

A number of the participants stated how they felt that they were not 'good enough' because of other people's views about their academic capabilities. Often, they expressed how this affected their own perceptions of themselves and what they could achieve. Bullying, teachers' attitudes, time away from education due to ill health or bereavement were all mentioned as barriers to progression. For example, one student told us how their 'confidence had been knocked by teachers telling them that they would not pass [their GCSEs]'. These 'perceptions of others' had a negative effect on them, preventing or discouraging some participants from further engaging in education until later in life. Yet this was often in direct conflict with the encouragement students found elsewhere, for example from parents or friends. These mixed messages are expressed in this example:

'I was like bullied at school but then I passed my GCSEs. I was always told I wasn't good enough and then I went and passed them all. I think it was like my mother as well. Like my mum and dad, think it was more than just mum, like always wanted the best for me, so I pushed myself for them.'

2. Perceptions of self

How students act and perceive themselves in response to adversity and interactions with others was linked to both the decision to participate in education and progression. The factors echo those found in earlier phases of Rewriting the Future, but note how as an adult learner, the impacts of lack of self-confidence can still have an effect after re-engaging in education in later years:

'I got bullied at school, struggled with my early years all the way through school. Lost my confidence and I constantly think I am not good enough. When I do the work, I produce some good work. If I don't understand I give up straight away. Think I am not good enough for Uni. '

'I chose uni options that do not require high points because I did not believe in myself '

Self-confidence and self-belief were identified as key factors in this element of the data by students and were discussed by the majority of learners during the interviews and dialogue groups. This resonates with previous research (Chapman, 2017).

Often a pivotal moment or experience had played a part in the participants' re-engagement with education. Participants discussed their experience of caring for someone, described people who had been inspirational, or a life changing experience (such as breaking up with a partner or a close family member dying) and how these experiences or moments in their lives had prompted them to consider giving up or re-engagement with education.

'It was my final year; it was my GCSE's but in the run up to that my mum died so I didn't care at all what I got for my GCSE's and I wasn't interested in going back to school. But I did alright with my jobs, I learned new skills that I didn't get in my education. But now I need the education side to do a degree, so I am doing it now, resitting GCSEs.'

'A bit of a way of story but I'll tell you very quickly, a family friend's son, who was only two, he died a week before Christmas of leukaemia and

she'd, she'd put the story on Instagram and we'd followed the story throughout the, throughout the months, so reading, she was really in detail with it, so I kept up with this story and then he died Christmas week and then that just like made my decision that I wanted to be a children's nurse, that's what made my final decision.'

Three students mentioned how the Covid pandemic was also a pivotal moment for re-engagement in that it made them reassess their lives and work out what they really wanted in terms of education and a potential career. For example:

'Yeah, like don't want to be just in a [rut]. I used to do graphic design and then I fell out of love with that, so I just got a standard nine to five job that paid my mortgage and that was it and then I got stuck in a rut and then because of Covid it broke that rut a little bit and I thought do I really want to be doing this until I'm seventy-two?'

Another important factor specific to adult learners is that part of the reason for engaging with education is for some participants was that they wished to become an 'academic role model' for their children:

'I feel like giving up at times, but I won't as I have come this far, and I want my daughter and son to be proud and show them it can be done'

However, becoming a role model for their children was often in conflict with their role as mother, father, wife, husband, partner etc. This juxtaposition of the adult learners' roles is discussed in the theme of 'Impact of Change' later in this report.

Reasons provided for re-engagement with education also included wanting a 'proper' career, a change in direction, 'to prove to themselves that they could do this.'

3. Relationships

The relationships element is multi-faceted with regards to the demographic of the present study. Families, friendship and peer networks are crucial for supporting the students to success. There were many examples in the data:

'We have really good relationship, we're all very different people but we have a very good relationship where we can support each other.'

'Respect, I think mutual respect, erm, amongst peers, tutors, there is, we've got a really good class, it's a joy to come in every week and see people and hear what they've been up to and learn a lot from tutors as well.'

'My partner's made it possible for me to come back into education like he's, you know, rejigged his work and that to, you know, because he knows I'm really, what's that word?'

Sometimes support provided by family meant that there was an additional level of responsibility to being successful:

'I know [what] I wanted to do and I rung my sister and I went round and we sorted it all out together, so we rung [name] College and then we rung my unis but now because she's got, helped me get here, I feel if I fail at this I'm going to let her down, so like, it's like, yeah, I've got that on my back now, even though she says it doesn't matter'

However, there was evidence that family relationships could sometimes hinder students' engagement with education or how positively they felt about change:

'Like kind of baseline really for, for what is a good, is a good wage nowadays so I will still have to work, there's no way that I could live off, I mean I haven't been told what, what I'm going to get yet but I am, I am worried, and that might make a decision that I won't be able to carry on, it might be, at the end of the day I've got two young children and they're my priority, got a mortgage. '

'That's not to say I don't work but, erm, I'm, I'm like, I'm in a different position than you but I feel guilty that I am going to be not working for, or not working when I could be earning more, I could be earning more by not being a care worker at this moment in time but because I've stepped away, I left the job to change but erm.'

Establishing a group identity with course members was also helpful as this provided continuity, with students wanting to remain, and also study support:

'Like meeting new people and friends on starting college is quite a big support because I think we've all got quite similar backgrounds and we are all heading in the same direction really, so I think that helps.'

'If one of us is struggling with an assignment we can help each other as a group'

Participants suggested that this would be something they would try to do at university too:

'It's just finding that trust in certain people and once you've got that you feel a lot more relaxed, and you can help each other out'

4. Influential Sources

As with earlier phases of the Rewriting the Future research, influential sources (different types of people and media) were important to the participants. For adult learners, a further factor 'academic support' emerged. Participants valued the encouragement they received from these members of staff. One interviewee stated how academic support enabled her to progress from Foundation to honours degree:

'I know, I was so fortunate and again I'm still in touch with two of the teachers down at Burnley because they're always saying like how you getting on, what's going on? ... I sent them an email the other day about the transfer, and they were like yay and then they're like not that we ever doubted you, it were like really? Just seems to be me that doubts myself. '

Participants suggested that essential to academic success, during re-engagement with education, was the support received from specific college tutors. This included academic and pastoral advice as well as signposting to other people who could help (e.g. finance department or inclusive support).

In one college, students discussed that support was also in the form of tutors discussing their own journeys through education to their present situation and they valued hearing about challenges tutors had faced and how they overcame them. This, for the students, highlighted that educational journeys tend to be as individual as each person.

The choice of level 2 or 3 course could also provide valuable information for participants. For example being accepted on a health and social care course led one participant to apply for a job and learn more about different routes available. And a land-based science enabled level 3 study of Biology important for one individual's route, whilst also was a route into veterinary nursing for another. However, not all tutors provided help and advice about the possible options.

Another important source of influence was the workplace. A health care assistant described how she had learned about different types of social care through being employed. Life experiences too could be influential, such as learning about the work involved in treating cancer or through caring for relatives.

Sometimes there were missed opportunities for educators and employers to share information, for example when a youth opportunities programme came to an end or when a student took an interest in a subject. Not knowing what to do next or what sorts of work are available had been a feature for most of the participants.

5. Structural and Contextual Influences

This phase of the research highlighted the multiple structural and contextual influences that the participants often had to overcome before and during re-engagement with education. Participants expressed mixed feelings about their mandatory education. There were sometimes suggestions that teachers had 'given up' on them. Students discussed how unrecognised learning disabilities and schools' responses to bullying were inadequate, so this had previously led them to disengage.

Participants talked extensively about the 'work-life balance' and the 'study-life balance' they had to achieve to continue engagement with education. Some students had to juggle employment, family responsibilities, and studying which was described as being 'exhausting' and 'I feel like I am on autopilot.'

However, some participants suggested that although stressful, re-engagement with education was offering them the chance to achieve professional fulfilment. Included in the Phase 4 table are terms such as 'parenting expectations', 'carer expectations' and 'gendered expectations'. These all relate to students' discussions about certain roles which are frequently normalised in the UK.

One participant described how 'My kid's nursery are always ringing me constantly every day.' She felt that although she was in education she was still expected to be caring for her child. Teaching staff's responses to the difficulties faced often placed responsibility on the

learner to separate learning from life, rather than acknowledging competing expectations. One student's response to this was *'We are not academic machines.'*

Students were clearly spending time thinking about these issues:

'Feeling guilty and wanting to spend time with children'

'I've got two children, erm, and I do, I do think that what I do impacts them, so like time management, as you say, with assignments and things and having that time at home, that's not then coming away from my children'

'We have to do all this at night when they go to bed, where other people could say like oh, I'm going to do it on Saturday and Sunday, all day'

Caring responsibilities sometimes involved other family members too. One participant whose parents fostered children discussed this:

'I don't have children but my mum like fosters so I have to help her out with the children, like the kids and stuff and then my dad's, he's the main foster carer at home, they are both quite ill, they've got a lot of health conditions but, yeah, so I'm, that's why I'm staying at home. Yeah, and I help out a lot so it's like I can't really just drop them and like see you later, I'm going but no, I wouldn't, I wouldn't do that anyway.'

Some female participants were concerned by their position as dependent when attending education due to maintenance loans being calculated on their partner or spouse's income (in England):

'I felt like I wasn't bringing anything to the table financially ... I hate having to, and I don't do it often but I, I hate having to say to my husband oh can you pay for this? I hate that, so it'd be nice to, not saying you're going to earn a fortune because they're not but it'd be nice to be able to say well I'm paying for us to go away this weekend, do you know what I mean? I feel very guilty, my husband supports me.'

Finance was a concern for all adult learners, but this also included the impact on family (see next section). This was a problem whilst at college doing level 3 courses too. Not all courses that are full time have the number of taught hours to qualify for financial support and students were not clear about what they would be able to access in HE.

'Finances are one of the reasons why I haven't applied sooner '

'Worried about the financial implications of going to uni'

'Single parent so will be a struggle '

'I had to sit down for a while and go through the bills after I had been made redundant and decide whether I could come to college and whether I could physically afford to live off what I would be on. Because at the end of

the day if it wasn't me who put food on the table there wouldn't be any because I'm supporting myself and the children. Yes that's quite a big thing.'

Participants also highlighted that sometimes student finance does not consider individual students' financial status irrespective of their domestic arrangements:

'... I think there's this kind of stigma that if you have a husband that's able to support you through university - I can categorically tell you now that my husband would not be able to support our household financially.'

Procedures for accessing and applying to level 3 and HE were considered difficult to navigate. The participants suggested that there was an assumption by educational establishments that prospective students would have the skills to navigate sources of information such as websites and student finance even though these were not always very accessible.

'I had to really look for like how do I access what I want to do? And it, like given that I didn't have enough UCAS points and things like that I, and so because I was really determined, obviously I sorted out and I've done it all, I think it could probably be a bit more like out there for people to think oh well actually I can just do that, if I want to do that, it's not that bad, I can do a year and then I can get on to the course.'

Some colleges supported students in writing their university applications by providing a proofreading service or one-to-one tutorials to go through the application, which participants found helpful. However, not all students knew about services available in their college or tutors who would help them. Individual support was especially important where there appeared to be barriers to access, such as needing particular qualifications:

'And like when you're trying to get on to the Access Course you've got to have certain requirements, but it doesn't state that like you could do, like I know there's someone in this class that's doing Maths alongside, so obviously it all sort of interlinking into one but other people might think well actually I can't go on it because I've not got my Maths and then that's like considering that you could do it alongside,... there's just different ways to access it, I think it could put people off, especially as an adult learner.'

Most of the participants had or were applying to local universities to study, bound by the need to be near home for parenting or caring duties or to be able to continue with their current employment whilst studying. This did not appear to be a concern to students possibly due to the range and choice of options available in the area. One interviewee did suggest that this can present problems of students not engaging in university social life.

6. Knowledge and understanding

It is acknowledged in the literature that adult learners may experience a lack of confidence in their abilities as well as suffering from 'imposter syndrome' prior to and during engagement with HE (Chapman, 2017). The data also reflected this. These responses were closely aligned with a lack of knowledge and understanding of how to access academic

support and HE systems and also fears about transition into HE. One participant described where they believed this originated:

'I got bullied at school, struggled with my early years all the way through school. Lost my confidence and I constantly think I am not good enough. When I do the work, I produce some good work. If I don't understand I give up straight away. Think I am not good enough for Uni.'

Another suggested in response:

'I think it's your mindset. You've got to make your mindset into you can do it rather than you can't but then you still have hiccups and have your bad days, you just have to find a way round it, don't you really.'

This type of peer support was acknowledged as helpful to some students when re-engaging with education. Students often explained that it was their peers that helped them continue to engage with the course and it was sometimes through getting together as a group or with individuals to share knowledge which helped:

'If one of us is struggling with an assignment we can help each other as a group'

Knowledge sharing between peers helped participants navigate processes involved in applying to university:

'This has definitely helped my UCLan application support, like for each other as well, hasn't it? Do you know like going through the process of making personal statements? Like, especially supporting each other for interviews and things, if someone's had theirs first, they like oh they might ask this and I can come and, yeah.'

Students acknowledged that the academic support received when re-engaging with education made a huge difference to their experience:

'...things have changed a lot, massively since, I was last in education, erm, thirty years ago it was basically you could either do it or you couldn't, there was no support like there is now and it's taken me nine months or so to actually realise that it, it's a very different world now, erm, with all the support and I, it, I've, I'm still struggling to get my head round like there is all this help there for you'

Specific help for applications was valued: one student suggested that if she had not had this while completing her personal statement, she would not have been invited to any university interviews. Participants also acknowledged that they grew in confidence in relation to asking for support during their time at college, but they do need encouragement to do this:

'[I] feel more resilient now being in education for 3ish years. Now know how and where to access support and realise it's ok to need help'

However, some found the possibility of transition into university life quite daunting, even considering they would be better placed within a college-based higher education setting:

'got offered a place yesterday, yeah, providing I get my UCAS points obviously but because I, I was, as well I was, wanted to go to Wigan, which was a bit more like a college setting, erm, because I always felt a bit intimidated by the big universities. But as time has gone on I've felt a bit more confident, it still scares me, don't get me wrong but I, I've decided I want to go to UCLan now ...because at the beginning of the course it was like there's no way I want to go to a big university, I just, I wouldn't fit in but we'll see.'

The impact of having a local university to attend where students know there are many mature learners should not be underestimated and some students were aware that UCLan is ranked 6th in the country for the most learners over the age of 25.

7. Employment and experience

Most learners had to do paid work as well as their studies in college and believed this would continue in university. Employment circumstances that enable flexibility and employers who are supportive of their studies are important in enabling re-engagement with education:

'They give me set hours at work to enable me to come here.'

Parents experienced difficulties with childcare but flexible working patterns and opportunities to catch up on missed lessons were not readily available. Neither were digital recordings of sessions.

'One thing that throws people off is because we all have children and if they are unwell, we have to take the time out and that impacts on your attendance, but you can't really do anything about it which is frustrating'

However, some tutors offered sessions where students who had not been able to attend the original sessions could catch up:

'Sometimes we do have sessions that are spare so we can catch up on assignments, so we do have the time sometimes, so we don't fall too far behind'

The financial impact of re-engaging with education was discussed by the majority of students. One student stated:

'I think a lot of people might have actually dropped out this course due to the financial implications'

Finances were often discussed in relation to employment and maintaining government payments to support them and their family:

'...I'm a single mum, on my own, I've got a mortgage so I don't really get, do you know, the help, the financial help, like I'm working part-time but I've got to be really careful with my hours because if I earn too much they'll take my Universal Credit off me, erm, yeah, just juggling the financial side of things and coming here two days a week, it's difficult, worth it but it's difficult.'

While another discussed how student finance did not take into account students living on their own and the financial implications for them of re-engagement with education:

'Right, it just, it's the one that says I mean financially it's been very difficult; I genuinely do not think they give any consideration to adults that live on their own, I don't think anyone's specifically relating to that line but then financially it's been difficult is a worry for a lot of people, probably one reason why some of us haven't done it before.'

However, future financial stability was important to some of the participants. Re-engagement with education meant that there might be short-term financial hardship but long-term gains:

'I think my son, he's only six but that's my motivation, on a Wednesday and a Thursday I drop him off at morning club and it, even though sometimes I can't be bothered coming to college, let's be fair, I can't, I think I'm going to do this course and go to uni, get financially stable and I'll never have to put you in morning or after school club again and I'll have that freedom'

8. Impact of change

This new element captures the considerable impact of a decision to return to education and then to HE for adult learners. Adults are often described as independent and more able to take action in their lives than younger people. And yet this can distract from the real lives and relationships that students of any age experience and that have appeared in the data of all phases of Rewriting the Future. Being a student has a major impact on family life and this has an impact on how students perceive themselves and how others perceive them:

'But then you've still got to keep up with, with what you're doing, and it does impact your family life and I think it's, sometimes it's hard, I do get the mum guilt. That I'm not putting them first and I'm putting, being selfish and putting myself first, if that makes sense.'

Adult learners especially may have to make difficult choices about HE progression:

'Feel I have got responsibilities – have to make choices. I got an offer from a top university that at 18 would have been my no.1 choice but I can't go.'

'This is my fear. It's the one thing that's putting me off the financial side, will I be able to cope, will I be able to live. My family, will I be able to support them and do my education too?'

The financial impact on single people can be difficult too:

'I was really struggling because my benefits got stopped, which was fine, I wasn't bothered but it was like well I'm in rent arrears now and what you get, student finance wise, isn't quite enough to live on...I haven't got that person to rely on...'

Participants identified many barriers to educational engagement including previous illness, undiagnosed learning disability, English as a second language, bereavement, relationship

breakdown and not being able to access the courses that they wanted to do. The impact of these circumstances was lasting. However, this may also have contributed to the strength that students demonstrated in returning to education and keeping going and this strength should be considered a potential enabler when treated respectfully.

There were some very positive examples given by participants about the impact of returning to education, many of which appear on the storylines compiled in Appendix 5. These include applying and being successful at securing part-time employment, being recognised as having achieved well, sometimes for the first time in their lives, sense of achievement, learning new things, support and social connection, and other people - especially their children - being proud of their achievements.

9. Results from Pilot Survey

A link to the Qualtrics survey (see Appendix 4) was sent to the designated contacts at the five colleges in June and in September 2022. In summer this was problematic due to most students having either completed their studies or currently sitting exams. In September, the staff gave the link to new cohorts who were not aware of the project or its potential impact. The survey would benefit from a coordinated effort by the FutureU outreach staff to involve adult students. The low response rate for the survey does mean that the results cannot be generalised. However, if it was re-distributed as detailed earlier, then the results could add further knowledge about the barriers to and support required by adult learners.

Successful approaches in education tend to be in mid-term periods with information about the project addressed to potential participants by a teacher who knows them well. Time in class to review and discuss the results and plans to act on change by the commissioners are also helpful for students to engage meaningfully.

The results do provide promising indications that the survey may be useful for further evaluation if delivered appropriately. Eleven students completed the survey from Preston College, Runshaw College and UCLan who were attending access to HE courses. Their time since last finishing school or college was between 3 and 28 years. Two students had A levels. One had fewer than 5 GCSEs. The main reasons given for returning were for career change or development. Two students for each indicated that children, improved income, learning something new, and other pivotal moments were factors.

Covid was mentioned in two open responses although the small sample means we cannot generalise from this.

'I was struggling with my mental health and had just lost a close friend to mental health. During the covid-19 lockdown I decided that I needed to find myself and do something proactive.'

'Wanted to do for 6 years. COVID gave me the opportunity and children growing up, going to work.'

Of the potential reasons for not continuing with education listed, two suggested disappointing exam results were a factor and one that there was a lack of advice as to what to study next. Five chose 'other' and gave free responses:

'Academically minded and clever, just decided being cool was more important at the time'

'Mental Health issues and Covid delayed my decision to return'

'Struggles with mental health'

'I wasn't sure what I wanted to study at university, so I took some years out and worked. It made me realise the career I wanted and then after having my daughter I was motivated more than ever to go and get the job I wanted.'

'Went to college, but husband proposed on 18th birthday so earning was prioritised.'

Adult students had support from other people about advice on courses, career plans, explaining how to apply to college or university, support with finances and childcare.

In terms of how students saw themselves as capable when they first left school or college, they all considered themselves to be average, good or excellent, except one. They all considered themselves average or above at learning. As successful, only one considered themselves excellent whilst the rest chose average. For clear direction all chose average or lower. Doing well was average or above. When asked the same questions now they were back in college, students chose good or excellent responses for all other than one student who chose average for being successful, clear direction and doing well.

When asked how valuable relationships have been to progressing in education (partner, family, parents, friendships, teachers, social networks, peers) all students rated these as moderately important, very important or extremely important. Free answers included:

'The teachers and other people in my class have been amazing and supportive'

'my children, saying they are proud of me'

In terms of importance of factors helping you to progress in education, people who listen and role models were extremely important or very important in all cases except one who chose moderately important for people who listen. Media, social media, careers and employer were more varied.

When asked 'how important were the following for you to engage with education:' information/advice days were ranked at moderately important or higher, knowledgeable tutors as very important or higher, and place where you study and content of the course, both as very important or higher. Extra activities organised at a college/university gave a broad set of responses. The ethos of the college/university was moderately important or higher.

In terms of how education continuing in education impacts on life, extremely was chosen by half of the respondents for impact on family time and other caring responsibilities. Personal finance was moderately or above. Becoming financially dependent on another person varied from not at all to very, as did being treated like you are less capable. Two responses were given to the open question 'does continuing in education impact anything else?'

'It has massively impacted my mental health with having to work full time as well as going to college.'

'Time is the biggest thing affecting housework, no of hours, exercise routine, friends and family. Lack of sleep through trying to juggle everything.'

Participants were also invited to share responses to 'Is there anything else that could be helpful for you to progress in your education?':

'More clarity on assignment content, ie: what should be covered, clear direction in what the essays should demonstrate'

'more mental health understanding and support'

'Not really I have found starting out as a foundation student has been super beneficial!'

'Financial support'

'help with IT skills'

When asked what has been the biggest impact of re-starting you education, replies were:

'I didn't realise I'd make a group of friends and that we'd be so compatible and supportive'

'Now I have lots of other commitments like work and arranging childcare and making sure I have an equal balance of everything which can sometimes be a bit overwhelming.'

'Wanting to become someone who I can be proud of self-belief and finally feeling proud'

'My health has suffered due to lack of time to exercise and the housework getting behind.'

Interconnecting Dimensions

Rewriting the Future has evidenced the importance of not just individual learners but the people they interact with at every step of their education, inside and outside academic environments, in shaping learners' decision making, opportunities and actions. These are the people and interactions involved in enabling learners' self-determination. The relationships they experience, and the ways people see them are interconnected with their perceptions of self and in terms of education engagement, whether participants viewed themselves as capable learners, as able to achieve, as confident, and able to ask for help.

Four further elements can be described as external influencers: Employment and Experience, Knowledge and Understanding, Influential Sources and Impact of Change. For example, as we have shown, work experience and knowledge gained in a workplace, the impact of change of moving out of employment into education and the sources of influence

in this process, connect with how learners regard their own capabilities or their sense of what they want to achieve in the future. Just as the children in our earlier studies were either encouraged to progress or led to believe that they did not have the aptitude, the adults in this phase had experienced both negative and positive support for their progression due to labelling around ability, SEND, or background that came directly from the educational system they were trying to navigate.

However, what has also emerged is that there appears to be a mediating layer between these two spheres: the factors that we have described as contextual and structural. We suggest that by conceiving of this as a mediating layer rather than as a separate element is helpful because it more clearly brings in to view how education systems are in symbiosis with dominant societal ideology and resulting marginalisation.



Figure 2. Interconnecting Dimensions

Harrison and Atherton's (2021) four dimensions of marginalisation relate to: society, systems, time/space, and relevance. These are useful in demonstrating the mediating layer, which in effect has the power to render the external elements as positively or negatively affecting the relationships, perspectives of other people and perspectives of learners which this layer surrounds. In terms of adult learners, all four dimensions can be applied to their situation. Beginning with **marginalisation by systems**, participants told us that college and university systems (for example, admissions, eligibility for support) can be bewildering particularly as there is the assumption that students are familiar with the internet for completing relevant forms and applications. Some adult learners suggested that they could not even turn on a computer prior to enrolling on their college course, thus marginalising and disadvantaging them from the outset, and reinforcing the message that they are 'outsiders' who do not belong in the higher education system.

Whilst Harrison and Atherton apply **marginalisation by society** to specific communities which can be somewhat helpful in that this can reinforce distinctions of difference, adult learners as a 'community' are also marginalised in terms of the need for institutions to

engender a sense of belonging and trust. Where students felt that educators and fellow students took time to get to know them and understand their backgrounds and capabilities, they felt a sense of belonging and inclusion that for many had been missing in their earlier experiences of education. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of marginalisation by society is the evidence that the participants provided about the impact of education engagement for parents. This includes the difficulties experienced by single parents and the dominant UK positioning of students with partners or spouses and their children as part of a household unit rather than as individuals in terms of financial support.

Some students felt that they were treated like children in college, and this appeared to be linked to courses operating in ways which reminded them of school; for example, strict timetables and bells, being taught at and told off when they misunderstood tasks and did not complete these effectively. These traditional teacher-child interactions and classroom spaces can be considered **marginalisation by time/space**. Where HEIs were aware of the needs of adult learners they had taken some steps away from traditional course delivery to a more flexible model, supporting students to catch up with work and to develop their academic interests, even when they may be time poor, more restricted in hours, and subject to unpredictable events (for example, child illness, requirement to work extra).

Marginalisation by relevance is complex when applied to adult learners. It may be suggested in some circumstances that engagement with HE is not relevant for some adult learners but for others engagement may provide a route for change. Yet the choice to access education was not simply driven by output (e.g. a qualification) but included meeting other participatory needs; for example to build on and develop the capacities learners already possess, to associate with others, to develop an interest, be a role model, or just to learn something new.

Conclusions

This phase of Rewriting the Future has reminded the researchers of the need for educational research to strive beyond simple linear interventions that target only one or two of the numerous factors influencing learner engagement described in the data. Practical changes that can most easily be addressed to support adult learners re-engaging with education and progressing to HE in four of the elements (Employment and Experience, Knowledge and Understanding, Influential Sources, and Impact of Change) will only be successful if attention is also given to the Structural and Contextual element.

Education is and always will be about change. Students in the research suggested that information and support with Employment and Experience, Knowledge and Understanding, Influential Sources and Impact of Change enables them to progress in education, whereas lack of information and support creates barriers and challenges. Whether students have access to this support and how they then perceive their selves, how others perceive them, and the relationships involved, are mediated by contexts and structures. These include societal and system influences at the heart of marginalisation, which can make the difference between whether students are encouraged or discouraged from engaging and progressing toward HE. Greater awareness of these complex influences by students and by those involved in education at every level is needed for better understanding and support for students to successfully embrace change.

Hebding and Glick (1987) suggest that the labelling of an individual as 'different' can potentially shape a distorted self-perception; in turn educators, parents and peers may alter their expectations of the labelled person, potentially in a detrimental way. This may further reinforce the label assigned to the individual affecting future interactions or, in educational terms, a label may affect further participation, as people do not willingly subject themselves to situations where they may feel they are labelled or judged (Dodding, 2018). McGrew and Evans (2003) and Rosenthal (2002) suggest that a self-fulfilling prophecy may only result if a person assimilates the label placed upon them into their self-conceptualisation, potentially resulting in expectations of reduced performance and lowered self-esteem. Participants in this study had often undergone negative educational experiences prior to their re-engagement with education, due to marginalisation. However, adult learners are not passive in their education. They have told us that when relationships are favourable and other people encourage their studies by recognising their capabilities and strengths; they also find the confidence to act for themselves and both seek and engage with opportunities.

Based on this understanding of interconnecting dimensions, for people concerned with raising opportunities for adult learners in HE we make the following recommendations.

Recommendations

- Further develop the pilot survey as part of a suite of evaluative tools to ensure that the broader elements involved in students' engagement and progression are more widely monitored.
- Colleges and universities should make access routes into higher education more explicit with information, support and guidance for potential students more widely accessible. Suitable outlets for information to reach adults not currently in education should be explored.
- All interventions should acknowledge the multitude of barriers that may prevent students from re-engaging and progressing in education.
- Practitioners and educators must be more aware of the complexity of marginalisation involved in contexts and structures and how these mediate relationships and perceptions of learners.
- Interventions and further research and evaluation should focus on the whole picture of the student rather than merely one aspect.
- The benefits of employment and work experience (beyond finance) for all students requires further research.
- Adult learners benefit from opportunities to build trusting relationships with their fellow students and regard each other as a source of social and academic support, shaping knowledge and understanding. This should be encouraged.
- Employers and family members are viewed as influential sources and further exploration of how this resource can be developed in and out of educational institutions should be explored.
- Impact of change on the lives of adult learners must be considered more appropriately, for example through the finance available, the ways that colleges and HEI's can support parents and families, and work-life-education balance.

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Appendix 1

Interview Schedule for Students who have engaged with higher education

Preamble:

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. I really appreciate the time you are willing to contribute to share your experiences with me.

The interview/ focus group is based on more open-ended questions exploring your educational journey and plans for the future. You've seen the participant information sheet, but I wondered if you had any further questions for me before we begin?

I would like to record the interview/ focus group using audio recording (video recording if on Microsoft Teams) and I might possibly make some hand-written notes in order to capture some of your more detailed responses, but please bear in mind that the information is confidential, you will not be identified in the analysis of the information collected and pseudonyms will be used when reporting the research.

Section one: About you

Q. Can you tell me the story of your journey through education up to this point?

Q. What have been the challenges that you have encountered when pursuing your education?

Q. What has helped with your education?

Possible prompts

- What did you do before you decided to study at University?
- What were your qualifications prior to beginning this HE course?
- What factors made you decide not to engage with HE following compulsory education?
- Why have you decided that now is the right time to study at University?
- What are your reasons for studying now?

Section two: Support provided

Q. Can you tell me where you accessed information about continuing/ re-starting your education?

Possible prompts

- Did anybody support you in this decision?
- What sort of relationships helped with your educational story?
- What were the influential sources in your journey? Who and what helped?
- Do you think there is any other support that might have helped you?



Appendix 2

Example I poems from student data

I poem 1

I'm dyslexic
I struggled a lot at primary school
I got told I were dyslexic
I don't remember going and seeing anyone
I just got told you're dyslexic
I just know that I struggled
I just used to sit there thinking what, what am I doing?
I used to go to like special classes for a short time
I got integrated back into just the normal sort of classrooms
I'd be sitting there with my hand up, trying to learn, couldn't
I didn't get it
I literally give up
I was not bothered about doing any work
I wasn't bothered about school
I hated going
I got bullied as well
I'm not saying I didn't do any work at all
I must have done something, you know

I poem 3

I couldn't move away.

I couldn't even try and attempt to get into Cambridge or Oxford, how dare I even consider going up to Newcastle?

I had to make sure that I was at home looking after my nanna, making sure that she was okay so close after my grandad's death

I can stay at home. UCLan's the only university I can go to.

I'm doing childcare at the minute, is there a childcare course? I put one application in, all my eggs in one basket and hoped that I'd get on to the CSF course, thankfully I did.

I'd loved to have felt like I could move away.

I moved out of my mum's house into my nanna's house and that was supposed to be for two weeks just to make sure she was alright.

I've been there ever since, the level of independence that I'd always craved but across the road now is my mum, my stepdad, my sister and my brother.

I now sit here with my little brother who's just about to leave college and I've essentially told him that he's not allowed to go to UCLan unless he moves into halls.

I regret not getting the full experience of university.

I experienced university as a commuting student, even though I live five minutes down the road.

I never had - you live on your own, you live with your mates, you live in accommodation, the party lifestyle as a first-year student.

I missed out.

I Poem 5

I went to get my Maths and English GCSE as a, as a mature student

I went to college to do like my level ones and twos

I did have to do a little bit of written work

I'd never ever written an essay in my life

You kind of question yourself a lot thinking like can I do it?
I remember the first essay I had to write
I was sat there
I felt so overwhelmed
I'm thinking oh my god, like what on earth?
I kind of got the research
I got a sixty-five for that essay
But I didn't
My husband had helped me a lot with it, I didn't
I still felt overwhelmed with it
I was like I'm doing it, regardless of what mark I get
As long as I get a forty or above
As long as I pass it
As long as I pass it I'll be fine
I can learn from it, you know
I did the next one on my own
I got like a fifty-two for it
But for me I was like just absolutely like oh my god, I've not
I've not failed it, that's amazing
I just kept working on it and learning from the comment, trying to learn

I poem 6

I was in the flow.

I was in the flow of education.

I felt actually you can do this you don't need to worry about like being able to achieve.

I knew that support was there, that level of actually there's a relationship here between the students and the staff, and the team. They bounce off each other and help everybody, going beyond what would be expected of them.

I don't have to worry.

I just need to turn round to somebody and say I need some help here, I'm struggling a bit, and it was there.

I mean don't get me wrong, the struggles maybe carried on and the tough times that also didn't stop.

I sometimes look in the mirror and I think Jesus Christ, you've no resilience and then other times

I sit back and I think look at what you've achieved, you've got a huge amount of resilience, like massively.

I Poem 7

I suppose doing well in something, you know, is a big thing

I've never dealt well with criticism

I do take onboard certain things, you know

I take that well, but not criticism

I never dealt very well with that whereas some people get spurred

I mean one of my teachers once told me that I'd never achieve anything in life

I mean I know it's a long time ago

I used to get, teachers that just didn't seem to like me at all

I think 'you're there to support'

I did have one teacher, she was lovely.

I don't know, just, I felt good and alright in her class

I did like my hairdressing at college

I enjoyed the subject that I were doing

I felt like because I enjoyed it I could give it my all

I did my NVQ
I did not like the Maths GCSE at all
I hated every second of that, hated
I cannot do Maths in the slightest
My English I enjoyed doing it
I enjoyed the subject, so I think that helps

I Poem 9

I just saw an advertisement on Facebook about adult courses.
I just really wanted to do it.
I just didn't know whether I could get to the classes.
I was there, the very first desk you saw was the UCLan desk and Beth was always sat there
I'd be like Beth what do I do? And she'd be like calm down, we'll figure it out.
I don't really have, the people around me, they're not able to give me the information that I needed.
I mean I have a few aunties that are actually quite educated, one's a nurse, one's an accountant but I don't really, you know, like don't see them very often.
I had to go down to university and ask but the information that was available there was a lot of it.
I got quite confident in the end and if I didn't know something I'd just go and find it.

I Poem 8

I was earning my money from my hairdressing but it's cash in hand
I felt like I wasn't bringing anything to the table financially
I mean I do everything, like literally, in the house
I felt like I wasn't
I don't know what the right word is I'm looking for
I don't want to say equal because it's not particularly about being equal
I'm not particularly bothered about earning as much money as my husband
I just wanted to feel, I suppose independent
I am bringing something into the home

I felt like I wasn't bringing anything in financially
I felt bored in many ways
I was always like wanting to just do more
I had some days where I were content and like just everything were fine
If I'd had a busy week with hairdressing
I felt empowered I suppose
Do you know what I mean?
I felt good about myself
I felt like, yeah, I've got my, all my jobs done
I've brought money in this week
I've done good
On quieter weeks I used to get down about it
I just needed something
I just thought, you know, if anything ever happens to my husband
I'm left, like whether it'd be a dramatic death or like he left me or whatever
I wanted to be able to make sure I could support myself

I Poem 10

I mean financially it's been really difficult.

I genuinely do not think they give any consideration to adults that live on their own.

I was really struggling because my benefits got stopped, which was fine, I wasn't bothered but it was like well I'm in rent arrears now and what you get student finance wise it isn't quite enough to live on.

I have this argument with my PhD friends now because they'd be like oh it's so difficult, I've got to go to work for four hours and it's like really, four hours, a week?

I will do that at least three times a day but they don't understand that they've got a husband that's going to work and that husband or partner will look after them.

If I don't put food on my table and if I don't pay my rent there's nobody, there's nobody behind me to help me, you know.

I did have to sit down for quite a long time and go through what my monthly bills were, what I can afford to live on, how many hours can I get away with working, but liveable hours, do you know what I mean, without being, having no money?

I've got a prescription charge that I have to pay every month because I, I do take tablets for my mental health so, but that's a monthly outgoing for me that might not be for other people.

I've been lucky I've got quite a bit of work through university.

Appendix 3

Dialogue Group Schedule

Preamble:

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research. I really appreciate the time you are willing to contribute to share your experiences of education with me. You've seen the participant information sheet, but I wondered if you had any further questions for me before we begin?

I would like to record the interview/ focus group using audio recording (video recording if on Microsoft Teams) and I might possibly make some hand-written notes in order to capture some of your more detailed responses, but please bear in mind that the information is confidential, you will not be identified in the analysis of the information collected and pseudonyms will be used when reporting the research.

Part one of focus group

This focus group includes more open-ended questions exploring your educational journey and plans for the future. Initially, we would like to distribute some poems created from data collected from some **adult learners** who have already engaged with higher education and who have discussed their whole educational journey with us. They highlight some of the barriers they have overcome and where they have accessed support. I would like you to read these and discuss anything that you think is significant about them with the group.

Discussion will follow

Part two of focus group

Each of the participants will take a postcard provided by the researcher and will write down their aspirations. They do not need to necessarily share these with the group; they are merely a reminder for themselves. Then the participants will be provided with paper and pens to visually create their educational journey showing decisions made, barriers overcome, and support encountered. Once this is completed, the hope is that the participants will share aspects of their visual representation with the rest of the group.

Questions to instigate discussion will follow if needed (draft questions if required below)

Section one: About you

Q. Can you tell me the story of your journey through education up to this point?

Q. What have been the challenges that you have encountered when pursuing your education?

Q. What have been the enablers that you have encountered when pursuing your education?

Possible prompts

- What did you do before you decided to re-engage with education?
- What were your qualifications prior to beginning this course?

- What factors made you decide not to engage with HE following compulsory education?
- Why have you decided that now is the right time to study again?
- What are your reasons for studying now?

Section two: Support provided

Q. Can you tell me where you accessed information about continuing/ re-starting your education?

Possible prompts

- Did anybody support you in this decision?
- Do you think there is any other support that might have helped you?

Appendix 4

Qualtrics Survey



Qualtrics Pilot Survey RtF Phase 4.pdf

Appendix 5

Compilation of examples of students' educational journey responses



Journeys compilation.pdf