# Exploring the Impact of the UEA Mature Students Network on Student Awareness, Belonging, and Engagement

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Context of this research

- UEA has set specific objectives for mature students in its Access and Participation Plan (APP). In the current period, we are working on reducing gaps on both offer-making and retention.

- UEA's student cohort is made up of 25% of mature students, and 27% commuter students. The proportions of students from these cohorts has been increasing since 2019/20.

- UEA's uses Pulse surveys to collect regular feedback from students, which have captured insight into mature students' thoughts, feelings and experiences during their studies.

Pulse takeover

Breaking down the broad definition of 'mature'

Understand how mature students want to engage

Investigate belonging and co-create provision with students
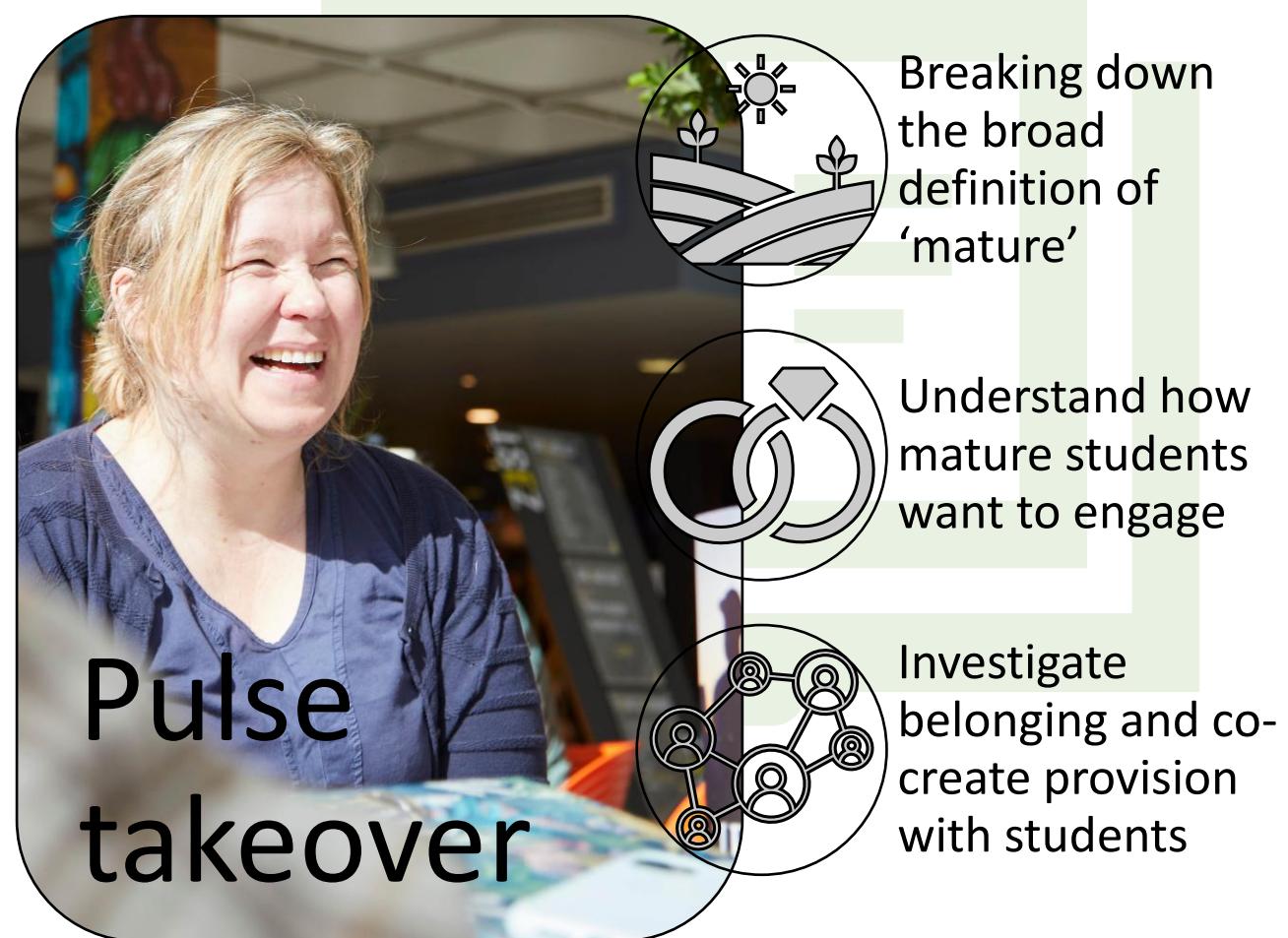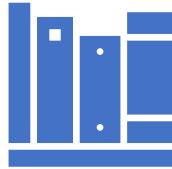
Inclusive methodology

Allows for:

- Greater emphasis on students as experts to greater equitable partnerships,

- Strengthens the voices of those who may be less likely to be heard or seen within the research and the data,

- Ensuring more meaningful engagement with the voices of those who may not always been given due regard to (Farenga, 2020).

- Creates opportunities to reflect on experiences and belonging at university, which can contribute to students' overall sense of belonging as a result (Gilani and Thomas, 2024)

Collage/art-based methods:

- Can support deeper and more uncovered experiences and awareness of lived experiences (Culshaw, 2019)

- Collage can be used alongside other methodologies to help strengthen and enrich the data collection (Derijke, 2024)

- Allows the unexpressed to be expressed (Roberts and Woods, 2018)

| Student Reflexive Diaries | Collage Activities | Focus Groups |

Co-creation with students

Students as partners, students as experts: methodologies that enable co-creation and participation between staff and students can support greater equity in the discussion around educational experiences (Farenga, 2020)

- Through methods such as collage, the participants become more active collaborators and contributors to the research (Morris and Paris, 2022)

- Brings about clearer articulations of challenges faced, and clearer recommendations about how to tackle them (Farenga, 2020)

Students as researchers:

- Student participants from the focus groups will be invited to review findings from the project to help shape the recommendations for practice.

- Project will build upon these successful models of student researchers in teaching and learning (Bovill et al., 2011) and consider how students can become change agents in the broader spheres of their university experience

Discussion

Drawing back to the context of this research, we have found that students often long for institutional belonging but can approach it as a desirable rather than essential part of the student experience (Sutton, 2019). Alongside studies, mature students are often juggling multiple responsibilities and feel a pressure to assimilate into HE (MillionPlus, 2019). We predict this will vary depending on the responsibilities and identities of the subgroups that exist within the broader 'mature student' definition.

Therefore, the methods applied in this study will aim to:

• Understand the role networks play in mature students' experiences of studying at UEA, and how they engage academically.

• Gain insight into how networks are formed and participated in, as well as how these are identified, defined and described by students.

• Consider whether mature students are accessing services, and whether existing networks impact engagement with available support (outside of peer-support).

• Understand what factors contribute to sense of belonging for mature students, and what extent participation in networks contribute to this.

Keep an eye out for publications and conferences – findings will be disseminated across the sector!
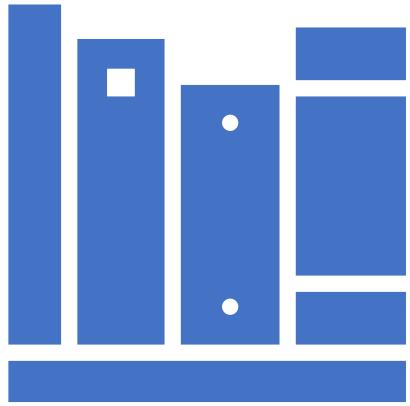
Questions welcome

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