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Peer Mentoring and Interaction Among Mature Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Using original qualitative data obtained through a series of online focus groups, and informed by a review of literature, this article examines peer mentoring and peer interaction amongst mature university students. A combination of students and recent alumni (n = 20), and student advisers (n = 10), from University College Dublin participated in the study. Inductive thematic analysis was applied to the data to generate three subthemes relating to the dominant peer-mentoring theme: the value of peer interaction, study groups as peer bonding, and resource implications for peer-mentoring schemes. Findings reveal that peer interaction and mentoring, including study groups, are highly valued by both mature students and student advisers. In conclusion, it is recommended that well-resourced peer-mentoring systems be developed and extended in higher-education institutions.

Keywords: mature students, university peer mentoring, peer interaction, study groups

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Globally, many older adults are now beginning, or returning, to higher education after spending years away from formal learning (Heirdsfield et al., 2008). In Ireland, mature students (defined as being 23 years of age or older) are increasingly accessing education at universities. Data reported by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) show that enrolment in higher education among 24 to 44 year olds has increased by more than 50% within the last ten years (O'Shea, 2021). In the 2020/21 academic year, 1,714 mature students (724 male and 985 female, along with five others whose gender was not stated) were enrolled at University College Dublin (UCD), 80 more than in the previous academic year (UCD, 2022), according to UCD institutional research/ Student Records Systems (SRS), facilitated by the HEA. This development prompted researchers from the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy, and Sports Science at UCD to lead a 9-month study focused on investigating the thoughts and concerns of mature students attending university. Mature students enrolled in a course (full- or part-time) at UCD, currently or within the previous three years, were eligible to take part.

Three mature students, also from the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy, and Sports Science, who assumed the role of student representatives for the duration of the study, supported the recruitment process by promoting the need for voluntary participants among their peers. Twenty mature students (18 part-time and two full-time) agreed to take part in the research and to provide data in focus-group interviews. Focus groups were also conducted with ten employed advisers, who work professionally with mature students at UCD, to gather their thoughts on the views and experiences shared by the mature students in their interviews. The research questions, directed to both students and advisers, related to bonding with fellow mature students, opinions on study groups, and the pros and cons of peer-mentoring programmes. From the outset, it was hoped that the study would validate existing research and uncover new findings on the university experiences of mature students.

Review of literature

A review of literature was undertaken to identify relevant research published in English from the late 1990s up until 2021 including studies conducted nationally and internationally. The following keywords were inputted in the Google Scholar™ search engine: mature students, part-time students, higher education, university, peer support, student support, student advising, third level, study groups, and education.

Mature Students in Higher Education

Mature students have multiple professional and domestic responsibilities when committing to higher education, with unique obstacles to overcome and specific educational needs (Panacci, 2015). They may struggle to adapt to university life and face several challenges in the process, notably time management and difficulties relating to completing assignments (Fook & Sidhu, 2015). Studies, including some conducted in Ireland, highlight the struggles involved for female mature students, in particular, who may be exposed to greater academic, financial, social, and psychological pressures than their younger classmates (Kearns, 2014; Leonard, 1999). Such struggles can prevent mature students from building independent peer relationships, which may lead them to spend excessive time on their own and compromise their university journey (Cherrstrom et al., 2018).

Other research indicates that mature students typically enjoy peer interaction and approach classroom activities with enthusiasm (Chyung, 2007). Online classes can hinder performance and commitment to studies, however, particularly when students are unfamiliar with online learning systems (Lai, 2018), though access to a supportive peer network can help to mitigate this challenge. Wissing et al. (2022) found from their study, involving 372 medical students with a median age of 20.4 years, that students perceived to be a part of large peer groups did not report feelings of dissatisfaction or loss of interest towards their education, despite adjustments to the standard learning environment. This finding, which highlights the benefits of collaborating with peers, may also have implications for those mature students who have to deal with the stresses of higher education, while coordinating external responsibilities such as caring for family members (Homer, 2022).

Advantages of Peer Mentoring

When examining what might cultivate resilience among mature students faced with the uncertainty of higher education, research indicates that being peer mentored improved student engagement, retention, and overall satisfaction (Carragher & McGaughey, 2016). In the early stages of a university course, peer mentors can help new entrants adapt to their programme expectations and become familiar with a university campus

and its environs (Aarnikoivu et al., 2020). As that journey progresses, such mentoring can facilitate the formation of friendships on campus – as being grouped with, and mentored by, others of similar age and/or social or professional background can establish mutual understanding (Page & Hanna, 2008). This is in contrast to hierarchical mentoring schemes, whereby a mentor and mentee differ in status, or where there may be a power differentiation (e.g., an academic/student relationship or a professional career mentor and a recent graduate) (Angelique et al., 2002; Collier, 2017).

The intensity of orientation in higher-education programmes can require a rapid start, and may result in new students becoming overwhelmed. Having a secure peer network, however, can support adjustment to the demands of a third-level environment (Brunton & Buckley, 2021). Moreover, it has been shown that, by establishing and maintaining contact with a peer mentor, classmates and university staff can improve retention rates and academic success (Campbell & Campbell, 1997) which can potentially be more impactful on a student's learning and educational triumphs than classroom teaching (Goodlad, 2013). Thus, friendship, in its myriad forms, arising from peer interactions, is a significant part of university life that can elevate motivation in the learning journey (Thalluri, 2016) and can assist students in comprehending class work and course materials (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019).

Consulting a mentor and knowing that help is available can make higher education and academic or personal issues less intimidating (Hadjioannou et al., 2007; Hall & Jaugietis, 2011). This may depend on the competency of mentors, and whether individual needs can be accommodated (Cree-Green et al., 2020), including those based on age and background. Volunteers who take on the role of mentor, if not already leaders, gain important opportunities to develop leadership qualities, as they are responsible for tackling challenges and coordinating activities, alongside guiding their mentees (Minor, 2007). While university mentorship schemes can be a valuable source of support to both students and mentors, successful implementation requires ongoing planning, coordination, communication, and financial support (Fishman, 2021). From a university-administration perspective, peer schemes that rely on volunteers have been identified as cost-effective measures since the need to hire external professionals to fill the role is reduced or eliminated (Dorgo et al., 2011). Such schemes may also involve less effort from university staff to implement in contrast to other interventions (Brindley, 2014; Rotar, 2022).

Study Groups as Peer Interaction

When regularly exposed to peer interaction, students may be inclined to form study groups. These can be especially relevant to the needs of mature students who are re-engaging with education after time away from formal learning, not only improving their academic performance but bolstering engagement with their programme (Pukkila, 2004). A well-formed study group generally consists of four to six members,

all of whom are invested in learning and behave responsibly towards one another, so that no individual student dominates or blocks discussions (Linn et al., 2013).

Forming a study group with peers allows students to connect to each other by sharing their learning journeys and developing cooperative learning mechanisms for existing and newly attained knowledge (Costley, 2021; Kirschner et al., 2009). Study groups with peers can also help students develop problem-solving skills (Linn et al., 2013; Swanson et al., 2019). Rybczynski and Schussler (2011), however, found that an increase in academic performance is not a guaranteed outcome of students studying together. Theobald et al. (2017) reported similar findings but added that students often feel content when studying with a peer. This is further shown by Zhu (2012) who reported that communicating with peers online (outside of the classroom) is favoured among students who appreciate working with others enrolled in their course as it can help them gain a better understanding of course content.

It is worth considering that some students may have a history of negative experiences when working as part of a group, which could tarnish their outlook on peer interaction. They may therefore eschew being part of a peer study group. To diffuse such feelings, academics could promote a positive outlook on peer interaction and provide guidance on organising study groups to avoid issues resurfacing (Forrest & Miller, 2003).

The study described in this article set out to gain insight into the attitudes and experiences of mature students regarding peer engagement. It was prompted by the growing numbers of mature students enrolled in university courses generally. The decision to undertake the study was also influenced by a review of the literature underlining the importance of peer interaction, particularly for older students; the relative scarcity of Irish-based research on this topic; and the fact that, in Ireland, organised peer mentoring is more or less limited to an initial orientation period in the first semester. Based on these considerations, study participants (students, alumni, and student advisers) were asked a range of pre-selected, mainly open-ended, questions to elicit their views on peer mentoring and engagement. The questions used to support discussion between the researchers and participants can be accessed here: https://zenodo.org/record/8013483.

Methods

Ethical Approval

The study was granted ethical approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee at UCD. All participants (18 males and 12 females) were between the ages of 32 and 61 years when the study was conducted and could provide informed consent to participate in the research. Participants were advised that their names would be pseudonymised and their legitimate identity known to only two of the study personnel. They were also

informed that they could retract any information shared in the focus groups so that it could be excluded from analysis.

Participants

All volunteer participants were associated with UCD and with the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy, and Sports Science, apart from one, who was recruited from the School of Medicine.

Data were collected from six students (five males and one female), 14 alumni (ten males and four females), and ten student advisers (three males and seven females) who took part in online focus-group discussions with two researchers. The participants were recruited initially by the three students who had agreed to act as study representatives (and focus-group participants) through word of mouth, on the basis of referrals or snowball sampling (Ngwakongnwi et al., 2014). Purposive sampling, by way of poster and virtual online advertisements, was then used to reach potential participants who met the inclusion criteria (Kelly, 2010). The inclusion criteria identified were:

1. Mature students (individuals 23 years of age or older) registered in a full- or part-time course at UCD currently or within the previous three years
2. Employed student advisers at UCD.

The reason for including participants who had been registered as mature students in the three years prior to the study being conducted was to give relatively recent alumni an opportunity to provide feedback on their experiences and to voice their recommendations to improve the learning journey of future mature students. The decision to interview employed advisers, who are trained to work with mature students, was important from a data-quality perspective. Their inclusion meant that the views or claims of the student participants could be verified and/or further examined if disputed.

Data Collection

Eleven focus-group meetings and two semi-structured interviews were convened in November and December 2021. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, which limited in-person contact in UCD from 2020 to 2022, the meetings were conducted via Zoom™ for between one and two hours. Time slots spanning daytime, evening, and weekends were arranged to facilitate participants. All Zoom™ calls were digitally recorded to facilitate subsequent data analysis.

A structured focus-group protocol was designed to guide the discussions, with a range of questions and follow-up questions developed to enhance the conversational direction of each meeting. Questions on peer engagement related to the participants' views on peer relationships, study groups, and peer-mentoring programmes.

Nine focus-group meetings were conducted with small numbers of three or four students and/or alumni per meeting. As two alumni could not attend their scheduled focus group, two separate semi-structured interviews were held to accommodate their participation. The remaining two focus-group meetings were reserved for the student advisers. For availability reasons, eight advisers attended the first focus group, while only two attended the second. Two researchers attended all meetings, one of whom took notes while audio-video recording to produce 13 transcripts. Each transcript was subsequently reviewed by both researchers, cross-checked with the meeting notes, and finalised. All recordings were then deleted.

Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was conducted using Nvivo™. Data underwent two rounds of coding by the research team, which comprised of two associate professors, one full professor, one research assistant, and one senior dignity and respect support adviser. In the second stage of coding, meetings involving all five team members were held to examine the chosen codes and to finalise the subthemes. Finally, the Nvivo™ files were inspected again to select quotes from transcripts that could be considered sufficiently representative of the theme and subthemes identified during the analysis process.

Results

Analysis of the data obtained from students, alumni, and student advisers indicates that mature students enjoy interacting with those of similar age and shared interests. The exciting, yet challenging, experience of bonding with peers and mentors of similar social characteristics prompted a sense of relief and empowerment among the student participants, reminding them that they and their fellow mature students were embarking on a higher-education journey together. Academic advantages of peer interaction were expressed in terms of helping to kick-start motivation and awaken students to the significance of assignments and classroom expectations.

Findings relating to the theme of peer mentoring are discussed in terms of three subthemes: the value of peer interaction, study groups as peer bonding, and resource implications for peer-mentoring schemes. The discussion focuses on the advantages of peer interaction at university, the power of study groups, and the need for long-term resourcing when designing and implementing peer-mentoring programmes.

Subtheme 1: The Value of Peer Interaction

A key finding of this research is that mature students appreciate being able to engage with fellow classmates. Advocating for peer-interaction opportunities in their learning environment, the students who took part in the study acknowledged that connecting

with others had made their university experience both enjoyable and memorable and had enabled them to become familiar with the university campus and their course. For mature students who are returning to, or commencing, university for the first time, interacting with peers can be an emotional anchor to help them process their new trajectory.

All of the student research participants provided insight into their personal lives, explaining that their careers have to be managed alongside domestic responsibilities, when pursuing higher education and that, from time to time, the stress is overwhelming:

> *It felt like the deck was stacked against you really to get through it* (Alum[1] 8).

> *It's tough to be honest with you* [interviewer]. *I won't lie, it's very tough in terms of time management* (Student 3).

Several found comfort in gaining support from classmates who shared similar circumstances and revealed that they prefer to communicate with other mature classmates, due to common interests, age, and generational similarities:

> *There's nothing like talking to your peers, because everybody's there for a reason* (Alum 3).

> *For peer support, it's second to absolutely none* (Alum 5).

> *Most of the people in college were either…I couldn't relate with at all because they were far too young, or they were just so quirky that I was like: "oh God, I'm so uncomfortable with this"* (Alum 4).

The benefits of interacting with younger peers were not entirely discounted, however:

> *The two degrees that I did… my study group again, the second one I wasn't the oldest in, but the first one I definitely was, and I learned as much from the younger students as I'd taught them. I'm very open to that, you know* (Alum 12).

Classmates were also viewed as friends to spend time with. The busy lives of students limited the time they could spend socialising beyond their academic and external commitments. Holding regular catch-ups and actively engaging with one another on course field trips helped to compensate for this:

> *We would have usually met as a group, you know. We would have socialised when we went to [County] for example, you know, sort of, bonded, if you like, in that way, you know. Because we were all working and we didn't have much time for socialising, that was a weekend away – that was my social life* (Student 4).

1 The less formal abbreviation 'alum' is used instead of 'alumnus' and 'alumna' to denote the singular of alumni.

The limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic on opportunities for peer interaction among university students is another key finding, and one that may extend beyond the experiences of mature students to all students, though is not within the scope of the present research. Student participants in this study recognised that a sense of community and connection to university life is more likely to be achieved through regular class attendance, whereas excessive reliance on online learning can diminish that sense of belonging:

> *I didn't really feel part of UCD. Being online and never having been to UCD other than, you know, we had that first introduction day; that was it. So, no, I didn't* (Student 1).

> *So, when we went online, due to COVID, and obviously nobody's fault or anything like that, it became so much more difficult* (Alum 5).

In comparison to attending virtual classes, students identified the advantage of being physically present on campus for building a peer-support network:

> *I think it's easier when you're on campus a lot and, like, I can think back to the times when I was in class groups, you know the year group...it was kind of easy to interact with, you'd meet different people who'd point you in the direction of different things* (Student 2).

Asking a classmate for help, without first having met in person, can be an uncomfortable experience. One student described feeling hesitant to reach out to her classmates, when in first year, as all classes were online due to COVID-19, and peer bonds were prevented from flourishing. This sense of awkwardness subsided the following year when lectures resumed on campus:

> *I wasn't able to because I didn't have that relationship, but this year I could just easily call her up or, you know, send her a message* (Student 3).

While the convenience of recorded e-lectures was appreciated, some mature students also flagged that this means of instruction may fail to hold students' attention since, compared to live-recorded or in-person classes, it offers more limited interaction opportunities:

> *Because for the recorded..., the possibility that a student would take it serious*[ly] *is very slim. Then, questions that may be asked when it's a live session, you understand me? There may not be an opportunity to ask such kinds of questions* (Alum 13).

To enhance relationship-building opportunities, and maintain flexibility in the learning journey, it was suggested that a hybrid-learning approach – a combination of in-person and online learning – might be ideal:

> *It has to be, from my perspective, has to be blended* (Alum 12).

Subtheme 2: Study Groups as Peer Bonding

Student research participants discussed their involvement in study groups while completing their course. Peer interaction proved paramount in overcoming personal and academic barriers and study groups, particularly, provided an intimate and confidential space for mature students to voice their concerns and challenges with fellow peers. One alum shared that in all of the third-level courses in which he had enrolled, he had routinely set up or joined class study groups to improve his educational resilience:

> *One of the things I did very early on, and I did it in the cert courses as well, is start a study group* (Alum 6).

When elaborating further, this alum explained that engagement with his peers allowed him and others to conveniently access effective support in an informal manner, without having to contact lecturers or tutors on a recurring basis. Overall, university life was easier for him when he knew a helping hand from peers was within reach:

> *We batted off each other and learned off each other* (Alum 6).

His decision to create a study group persuaded his fellow classmates to interact with one another more often and they too began studying together to alleviate academic pressures:

> *Again, a study group that we formed started off with just three people, we ended up with more than half the class by the end, we had eleven at different stages involved in or out* (Alum 6).

Engaging with peers via social media was deemed crucial to maintaining a high-quality study group. The use of social-media platforms was instrumental in formulating and stabilising study groups because it allowed mature students to stay connected with their peers outside of class hours for the duration of their academic journey. When the student (and alumni) research participants were asked for advice to incoming mature students, many recommended setting up a class group on a widely-accessible messaging platform such as WhatsApp™. This was seen as an effortless and convenient way to keep in touch with peers:

> *The WhatsApp group is a lifesaver* (Alum 4).
>
> *If there's anything that I could bestow upon any following years is set up a WhatsApp group as quickly as you can* (Alum 7).

Subtheme 3: Resource Implications for Peer-Mentoring

Student participants flagged that they occasionally need support to build peer relationships. On a practical note, they recommended that information disclosed to students during orientation week needs to be provided gradually over the first semester as students can struggle to digest large volumes of information over a one- or two-week period and would prefer to receive information and instructions in smaller doses:

> *Is it better all at once, or in chunks? I think in chunks is definitely preferable for me, anyway. Where it's like steps along the way* (Student 2).

Student advisers confirmed that peer-mentoring schemes are currently not ongoing for students at the university but are available only at the start of the first semester. Moreover, it seems there are no plans to design or develop a peer-mentoring scheme to support students throughout their academic journey:

> *So, I sit on the orientation committee, it comes up year on year. I think we haven't found a way to make it happen consistently* (Adviser 1).

If universities want to develop a peer-mentoring scheme, the advisers stressed that adequate funding and staffing are necessary. The advisers themselves were agreed on the need for an established peer-mentoring scheme (for example, they recognised the potential of such schemes to meet some of the social needs of busy mature students) but were not convinced that promoting it by word of mouth would guarantee the attention and resources required to implement it:

> *So, peer mentoring, I'm totally in favour of it and in terms of getting it done, I would say that the university needs a dedicated resource for peer mentoring, that's the short answer* (Adviser 3).

> *I'd be very much in favour of it, but I think it needs a dedicated resource* (Adviser 4).

Alumni and student participants advised that assigning suitable mentors to long-term mentoring schemes warrants careful planning. There was a general belief that, given the value placed on peer support, many mature students would avail of a peer-mentoring service and would be willing to take up a peer-mentoring role. It was considered important that candidates would possess the appropriate qualities to prevent such interventions from collapsing:

> *As* [another alum] *said, you'd want to be careful who you pick* (Alum 10).

> *I wouldn't have the patience, you know so that's what I was saying, it's very important you get that dynamic right* (Alum 12).

The particular circumstances of part-time students were mentioned by student advisers, one of whom noted that universities are arguably more attentive to full-time

students. The needs of part-time students could be considered in the context of a formal peer-mentoring scheme but the adviser in question was not aware of any such scheme for part-time students, a gap that needs to be addressed:

> *Now there isn't, to the best of my knowledge, unless it's run at school level, there isn't any peer-mentoring programme for part-time students in the university* (Adviser 8).

Although part-time students may have no desire to immerse themselves in various social situations due to their multiple responsibilities, brief social events could have a positive impact on their wellbeing, the advisers proposed:

> *The part-time people, they might be very happy with some effort or some activities, but, it being very… you know, maybe like limited [to] just like one night out or one coffee break on your day in and it's doable for the commitment they have to their studies and how they're juggling so many things* (Adviser 9).

Discussion

This qualitative study sought to understand how mature students in one university in Ireland experience higher education, paying particular attention to peer relationships. The data reveal that mature students must balance various aspects of their personal, social, and academic lives, which they report as frequently overwhelming. Findings also indicate that peer mentoring and peer interaction can ease the chaos of their workload. Simply being able to connect with classmates through study groups, outside of classroom hours via group chats on a messaging platform like WhatsApp™ and through peer-mentoring programmes, allowed mature students to adapt to higher education. Online learning (through a hybrid approach) was not heavily criticised by participants, though some flagged difficulties in obtaining a sense of belonging to the university and amongst their peers.

Our findings mirror those of Panacci (2015), who also emphasised that mature students balance numerous responsibilities when attending university. Likewise, Cherrstrom et al. (2018) reported that building peer relationships as a mature student can be difficult when attempting to dedicate attention to their education and other life areas. As shown in our research, however, and supported by Cree-Green et al., (2020), Goodlad (2013), Page and Hanna (2008), and Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019), university life became pleasurable for mature students when they developed friendships with classmates of similar age and shared social characteristics. Though age may not have featured much in this study, being mentioned by only one adviser and one alum, it could be an important consideration for universities that intend to operate long-term peer-mentoring programmes. Our findings on study groups concur with those of Swanson et al. (2019) who also elucidated the positives associated with being part

of a study group that brings personal satisfaction to its members while facilitating discussion about course materials.

Some participants were in favour of a "blended" learning approach (online and in-person), supporting Homer's (2022) claim that mature students would benefit most from a hybrid-learning approach as it enables them to pay heed to their education and personal lives. Others, however, perceived the online element to be a barrier to peer bonding. Nevertheless, study participants appreciated the use of digital apps, such as WhatsApp™, a finding also reported by Zhu (2012).

Study Limitations

The research team made every effort to recruit as many voluntary participants as possible who met the inclusion criteria irrespective of course enrolment. It was recognised, from the outset, that a study of this nature should ideally include mature student participants from a range of courses to reflect a broader range of college experiences. Given the study's short timeframe (nine months due to funding-body constraints), however, all of the study participants, except one, were based in the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy, and Sports Science. Since course numbers in this school tend to be relatively small compared to other schools, routine adoption of interactive teaching styles is possible with increased scope for peer interaction. It is not unreasonable to assume, therefore, that this particular course feature, which may be absent in larger undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, may have had some influence on the perspectives of the participants in the study and subsequently on the results reported.

Another possible limitation of the study is that all of the focus groups were convened online due to COVID-19 restrictions across the university. To the researchers' knowledge, the quality of the data was not impacted, though interviews were subjected to occasional minor environmental and technical disruptions that would not arise in a private in-person setting (e.g., doorbells ringing, participants' children crying, loss of internet connection) that slightly delayed the interview(s). Although the decision to hold focus groups online was determined by national COVID-19 guidelines, and was convenient for researchers and participants, it is suggested that face-to-face interviews would be conducted in any future research to complement existing data. More generally, it may be interesting to compare the responses of participants using face-to-face and online interviews across multiple studies to ascertain any systematic differences in the data gathered that might be linked to these methodologies.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is recommended that future research should assess the significance of peer engagement for a more diverse representation of the university student body. This

study highlights the perceived value of peer mentoring and interaction among mature students, but may not reflect the needs of, or views held by, their younger counterparts. Further investigation into the importance of study groups for students is recommended, along with the potential for developing a "study-group set-up protocol". This could help to identify characteristics of a successful study group, taking account of students' varying expectations and learning needs. In terms of setting up and implementing long-term peer-mentoring programmes, attention needs to focus on how this could be accommodated, whilst considering the financial and staffing challenges identified in this study. A need for further exploration of the role expectations of employed advisers is also indicated, to learn from their understanding of what is involved when working closely with both mature and younger students. Finally, it may be noted that finding recent literature on mature students in higher education proved to be a challenge, with potentially limiting implications for similar studies. While some information was available for 2021/22, most of the literature sourced was published prior to 2018. Since this study highlights the distinct and different needs of mature students, the importance of including the experiences of this particular group in further third-level research and planning is underlined. The identification of mature students within the university student body is therefore recommended, in respect of both data collection and data analysis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, peer mentoring and peer interaction are highly regarded by mature students, a finding that is consistent with the existing research literature on this topic. The mature students who took part in this study appreciated engaging with others who could relate to their personal circumstances and experiences, and they acknowledged the contribution such interaction had made to their education. Study groups were deemed beneficial in helping students not only to connect socially with their peers but also to facilitate their adjustment to university, so that they were better able to overcome any course-related challenges presented to them. Both mature students and advisers are in favour of long-term peer-mentoring programmes, which, they affirmed, will have staffing implications and require logistical and financial planning.

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