

*Empowering Success: Strategies for Widening Participation Students Facing  
Personal Commitment Challenges*

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**Abstract**

This research offers an exploration into the challenges faced by the widening participation students with a specific emphasis on mature individuals. Widening participation in higher education has evolved beyond addressing socio-economic disparities to include individuals who, despite underachieving in school due to disadvantaged circumstances, can benefit from higher education. Existing research suggests that mature students often struggle with their innumerable challenges including time constraints, family responsibilities and financial pressures which can significantly impact their educational journey. This study employed a qualitative research design, to explore the multifaceted experience of student success for mature students in widening participation. This study collected data from nine students from a UK higher education institution focusing on widening participation. Data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews are analysed using thematic analysis. This study provides constructive perceptions of student success, indicating that success extends beyond traditional metrics of academic achievement. Academic success includes a personal conquest of different personal obstacles including family commitments, mental health and serious physical health conditions. It also identified that student success is perceived as a holistic and shared experience of students. This study not only contributes to the broader discourse of inclusive education, but also provides evidence-based strategies for universities to support the complex needs of mature widening participation students. The empirical findings of this study are set to transform institutional policies and practises, creating an atmosphere that catalyses the success of mature widening participation students in higher education.

Keywords: Student Success, Widening Participation, Mature Students, UK Higher Education

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## Background

The notion of ‘widening participation’ in UK higher education policy is aimed at increasing access to university education for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups (Whitty, Hayton, & Tang, 2015; Harman, 2017). This approach to policy has been a foundation of educational change, which is intending to further a more inclusive and diverse academic environment, particularly for those students originating from underprivileged and challenging social-economic circumstances. The historical context of this policy is embedded in the notion that higher education can be an influential instrument of social mobility, since specific demographics have been disproportionately omitted from this opportunity (Kromydas, 2017).

The UK government, along with higher education institutions, have mostly worked to remove obstacles to university access, such as socioeconomic circumstances, ethnicity, and educational difficulties. The widening participation agenda has progressed over the years, with the formation of the Office for Fair Access and the Higher Education Funding Council for England, before consolidating into the UK Research and Innovation and Office for Students (OfS) in 2018, endorsing funding programmes to back this cause (Gallardo, 2016; OfS, 2019).

Given the amount of investment into widening participation, measuring and understanding success is necessary for several reasons. Firstly, it lets policymakers and educators grasp the effectiveness of the approaches and strategies deployed in this area. With no measurement, it is difficult to gauge progress or classify areas that demand additional focus and improvement. Secondly, success metrics deliver accountability, guaranteeing that resources apportioned to widening participation are used efficiently and lead to demonstrable outcomes which can support progress in this area (Pickering, 2021). Thirdly, by appraising the impact of these policies, universities can enhance their approaches, adapting interventions to the needs of their student and local populations (Millward, 2023).

The metrics utilised to measure success in widening participation often incorporate the number of students from underrepresented backgrounds applying to and enrolling in higher education, their retention rates, and academic achievements (Harrison & Waller, 2017). Nevertheless, this range of measurement has expanded to contemplate longer-term outcomes, such as graduate employability and progression to postgraduate study. This wider perspective recognises that admission to university is just the first step in a journey of educational and professional development (Cheng et al., 2022).

The significance of measuring success in widening participation should not be exaggerated. It not only supports the attempts made but further emphasises the transformative ability of higher education in changing life trajectories (Simpson & Hope, 2024). As the UK grapples with the complexities of educational inequality, the purpose of measurement in driving the widening participation agenda forward continues to be necessary. It is through this rigorous method of appraisal and contemplation that universities can persist in breaking down barriers and construct an increasingly equitable environment for all learners.

The backdrop of UK higher education policy associated to widening participation is profoundly connected with the nation's obligation to social equity and is underwritten in the idea as education being a mechanism for change. The measurement of success is not simply a bureaucratic undertaking but a structural aspect of policy development and implementation. It guarantees that the principled ambition of widening participation converts into real-world

impact, permitting a varied range of students to achieve their academic and professional capability within the UK and beyond.

Specific strategies for widening participation in UK universities incorporate a breadth of proposals aimed at tackling inequalities in higher education entry and attainment. These strategies are multifaceted, indicating the complex characteristics of barriers faced by understated groups. Clements, Davies and Mountford-Zimdars (2021) recognise one significant approach is the growth in outreach programmes, which involve universities connecting with schools and communities to raise aspirations and offer information about higher education opportunities. Outreach activities can present in many ways, such as campus visits, workshops, mentorship schemes, and enhanced induction programmes, all constructed to demystify university life and study. Another approach is the provision of financial support, which aims to lessen the economic barriers that may discourage prospective students from lower-income backgrounds engaging. Universities can also use circumstantial admissions policies and procedures, where a student's background and circumstances are considered during the application process. This can mean amending entry requirements for students who have faced substantial educational or personal challenges.

Support does not end at admission; retention and success are significant elements of widening participation and the developing an effective student journey. Universities can provide a selection of support services, such as academic tutoring, mental health counselling, wellbeing support and career and employment advice, adapted to the needs of students from diverse backgrounds (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023). Moreover, there is an emphasis on the progression of students into employment or further study, with programmes to improve employability and support networking prospects. As noted by Hayton and Bengry-Howell (2017), the application of data and evidence to inform practice in this area is a further strategic consideration, safeguarding that interventions are effectively measured, and resources are directed to where they can have the most notable impact. Collective efforts between higher education institutions and diverse stakeholders, such as local authorities and third-sector organisations, are also important in establishing a consistent and reassuring environment for students. Moreover, universities are encouraged to promote equality and diversity within their institutional culture, which incorporates training staff on inclusivity and unconscious bias, as well as encouraging a curriculum that reflects a diverse array of perspectives (Jongbloed, Enders, & Salerno, 2008; Hubble, S. & Connell-Smith, 2018; Chima & Onyebuchi, 2024).

These strategies are not static; they alter in response to continuing research, the varying requirements of society and governmental ambition. Universities are progressively implementing a complete student lifecycle approach, acknowledging that widening participation is a constant process that reaches beyond initial access concerns to incorporate a full student experience.

Approaches to widening participation strategies in the UK need to be far-reaching, clearly defined yet dynamic, adopting a multi-stage approach to understanding the student journey from pre-entry to success. Understanding the full meaning of what success looks like for widening participation students is key to defining how institutions can adapt and support this growing student population.

## **Method**

In our study, we applied the tradition of qualitative research (Tomaszewski, Zarestky, & Gonzalez, 2020; Given, 2021; Copley, 2023) to understand what academic success means to our wider participation students at UWTSD Birmingham Campus. We conducted nine semi-structured interviews with participants who met our eligibility criteria being: students who have completed at least two terms, maintained a minimum attendance rate of 70%, and passed all their modules. This selection process ensured that the participants had sufficient experience and engagement with the campus milieu and academic prerequisites.

The qualitative interviews were undertaken to extract rich, detailed information from the participants, letting them express their thoughts and feelings in their own words. Each interview was recorded with the consent of the participants, ensuring accurate capture of the students' responses for subsequent analysis.

The subsequent data collection, we undertook a thematic analysis approach to the interview transcripts. This included a rigorous process of coding the data to identify patterns and themes that emerged from the participants' narratives (Saunders et al., 2023). Our analysis was iterative, moving between the dataset and the developing themes to guarantee a comprehensive understanding of the data.

Drawing on Clarke and Braun (2016) approach to thematic analysis, this methodology delivered a robust framework for exploring the complexities of widening participation student experiences in higher education. The approach to thematic analysis allowed us to draw meaningful insights into the students' academic journeys, underlining the factors that contribute to their success and recognising the challenges they face. The findings from this study are expected to inform strategies for enhancing student support and engagement at UWTSD Birmingham Campus and beyond.

## **Findings**

This study aimed to identify how widening participation students perceived success in higher education using semi-structured interviews. From the analysis, we received a different outcome than expected as we learned that the student's success is unique. We decided to embrace the unique perspective to keep the definition of success open. By valuing their perspectives, we allowed for a broader understanding of student success that represents each person's unique experiences and development as a student. Our study associated the unique experiences into 4 themes. They are:

- Success as a personal conquest
- Success as academic achievement
- Success as a holistic experience
- Success as a shared experience

### **Success as a Personal Conquest**

A few students equated success with overcoming personal obstacles. For them, making an effort to get up in the morning and making their way to the university itself is a victory for them. Students struggling with their mental health, family commitments or serious health problems like cancer etc described their daily journey as 'success'. Their stories highlight the resilience and determination to navigate higher education in the face of adversity. This



perspective highlights a different dimension of success – one that is deeply personal and often invisible to others.

*P2: “Academic success is going to that uni for three years, despite all the personal challenges including my serious physical health conditions and giving your life to that university for when you're in university.”*

Moreover, personal growth and self-efficacy emerged as a key factor for student success. Students frequently mentioned gaining confidence as an indicator of success.

*P3: “I think it’s my confidence as well, the fact that I literally started with no confidence, and the fact that I actually stepped foot into uni was my first stepping stone, and now I know I can do it, but it’s the self-belief, that strives me.”*

Another student affirms personal growth through their academic journey as success.

*P6: “What academic success is, that achieving what you aimed for, and making sure that you created an example of yourself as a role model for students to follow and to look up to you.”*

Students with substantial family commitments view success as balancing their academic and personal life is in itself a success for them. One student undergoing cancer treatment defined success as the ability to continue to attend studies while undergoing treatment. For that student, it is the resilience and determination to continue studies in the face of overwhelming personal challenges is all about success.

Therefore, this theme suggests that academic success is very personalised at the individual level extending beyond academic accomplishments.

### **Success as Academic Achievement**

Academic performance also remained an important determinant of success among the participants. Students who performed well determined higher grades and awards as an indicator of their success.

*P1: “Academic success, it’s where the mark you get, it tells you how much you’ve understood about the subject, the feedback you get from lecturers tells you your success rate or where you stand, the discussions, it tells you you’re understanding your contribution, it tells you you’re understanding... I used the grades, to be honest, the grades to measure the success. But I know some people would say 40%, as long as you get your pass, yes, fair play, but as I said, we’re aiming for the higher grades.”*

Gaining an award for the highest marks gave the student confidence to learn more and the student perceived this as a success indicator.

*P3: “I can’t believe it’s actually me that’s getting the award, and I think that’s down to the fact that I’ve never had confidence in myself. But it proved to me that I can do it, so to me that’s my academic success.”*

Therefore, this theme suggests that success is perceived as tangible outcomes such as grades or awards, that validate their hard work and intellectual capabilities.

### **Success as a Holistic Experience**

A holistic view of success emerged from the data incorporating academic, social, personal and career dimensions. Some students highlighted the importance of balancing academic commitments, social connections, personal challenges and work to succeed. Success is perceived as an integration of these aspects.

*P5: "So we have the other commitments and then we have the academics as well. So academia and university, personal life, social life, work life etc so managing everything and then achieving something which I wanted to, so I got some confidence and then I got motivated. So I felt like, "Now I can do something. This is a big success for me."*

Another student perceives success as fully engaging in personal, academic and extra-curricular activities and applying it in real-world situations.

*P9: "Reading books is not learning, unless you apply and implement whatever you have studied. So, for me, academic success is in this field, I go, and then I apply everything. By then, I will learn more than by reading the books, because, you know, the especially few things we did and then we forget, to be honest with you, unless we use them in our life."*

Therefore, this theme suggests that students perceive success as a holistic experience that includes academic achievements, social connections you build, personal life balance and applying your learning to work and real-world scenarios. Success is not confined to the classroom or measured by grades, it is a balance between academic responsibilities, work, and the sense of wellbeing you receive with all your interactions at the University.

### **Success as a Shared Experience**

The narratives from a few students highlighted success as a shared experience. One student shared that the ultimate symbol of success is walking across the stage at the graduation with family watching it online from abroad.

*P6: "the things is that walking on the stage, as a graduate, that was one thing that made me feel that I have done it. And I'm going to go back in the emotions again, because I was on video call with my mum and my sister. They were back home in Pakistan and I could see my sister jumping with joy and crying her eyes out and she was like that 'it wasn't just an achievement for yourself, it was an achievement for all of us."*

Another student highlighted that success is a shared achievement of my commitment and my children's motivation.

*P3: "But the support that my children have given me, it's been wicked. It was my son that was pushing me, my older son that was pushing me to do a master's, without their motivation I wouldn't be able to succeed. They are part of this success."*

Therefore, this theme suggests that success is not just a personal accomplishment but a collective journey, where the contributions from others especially family members play a crucial role in helping students achieve success. Participants also described significant milestones such as graduation as a success indicator, but the moments are perceived as a collective celebration reflecting the contributions and support from family members.

The findings of this study reveal that success is a complex and deeply personal concept, extending far beyond the traditional academic metrics of grades. Success is not only defined by high grades but also as a personal conquest of overcoming adversities and pursuing education. The students also acknowledge success as a holistic experience, especially for the widening participation students where they try to balance personal, professional, academic and social life. Finally, success can also be viewed as a shared experience by our students where a collaborative working with them and their families who have supported them along the way to achieve their goals.

### **Implications to Practice**

The findings of this study challenge the traditional view that student success solely depends on academic achievement, enrolment and retention numbers (Harrison & Waller, 2017). Instead, this study shows that success is a very complex construct and is very personal depending on the student's circumstances, goals and broader contextual factors. These findings have significant implications for higher education institutions.

Higher education institutions specifically with a widening participation agenda should recognise the personal challenges that many students face including family commitments, mental and physical health issues. A comprehensive support mechanism should be in place to support students facing the above challenges. This support mechanism will enable students to overcome the challenges resulting in higher retention and success rates. This is consistent with previous literature outlining that universities should provide a selection of services to meet the diverse needs of the students (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023).

As this study indicated success constitutes beyond grades and awards and therefore recognising consistent effort, improvement over time and the application of knowledge in a practical context should be implemented. This will motivate students when they have achieved grades and other personal growth. This is consistent with Cheng et al. (2022) highlighting that a wider perspective should be adopted in acknowledging student success. Finally, creating and fostering a supportive and inclusive campus environment is crucial for creating a sense of belonging in students where their success is celebrated collectively. This could involve organising events that recognise not only academic achievements but also personal milestones and contributions to the campus community.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides valuable insights into the multifaceted perceptions of student success, indicating that success extends beyond traditional metrics of academic achievement. Academic success includes a personal conquest of different atrocities and holistic and shared experiences of students. The findings imply that higher education institutions should take a more comprehensive approach to student support, recognising the diverse issues and ambitions that form part of the student journey. By providing a supportive environment that

values both academic and personal growth, universities can meet the needs of their diverse student populations.

However, this study has some limitations that should be acknowledged here. The findings of this study are based on a sample size of nine semi-structured interviews. Due to this sample size, the perspectives of a broader student population may not be fully captured. The qualitative nature of the study also limits the generalisability of the results as the insights gained are context-specific to widening participation and may not apply to traditional settings. Future studies should be conducted in a larger sample size and in multiple contexts to gain a deeper understanding of student success. Despite these limitations, this study contributes to a unique and deeper understanding of how students perceive success in widening participation institutions.

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