

# The effects of humour on mature students' experience of/in higher education

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## Abstract

*The focus of this study is on mature students in a UK university, returning to higher education after a gap of many years, and the experiences and perceptions this demographic has of humour in Higher Education (HE). This interpretivist phenomenological study uses semi-structured interviews with mature students in a UK university and identifies areas the students focus on when discussing their perceptions of humour in higher education. Through the detailed analysis of the data collected, six themes were selected by the researcher as it appears that students clearly deem them important to their educational journey in HE. Primary focus of the students is on the enjoyable and fun teaching style, followed by the relaxed learning environment conducive to feelings of safety. Both of these enable the learning and understanding of the content (cognition) and encourage engagement with the tutor and the peer group. According to the results obtained through the semi-structured interviews, the students make it clear that they want: "more humour" and "more fun". Previous experiences of education (referred to as "traumas" by the participants) are revisited and students report their belief that they would have achieved much better GCSE results if humour was used in the classroom. Furthermore, the use of humour within the lectures in their current undertaking on the undergraduate level, is cited as a reason for potential progression beyond the current course of study, and onto the postgraduate level.*

*Keywords: humour, mature students, higher education, fun.*

## 1. Introduction

Mature students constitute 37% of all undergraduate students in UK universities, according to Huble and Bolton (2021) in their Briefing paper to the House of Commons. Tait et al. (2015) suggest that the world of education is changing rapidly and what constituted a "good teacher" a hundred years ago bears very little resemblance to the requirements of a "good teacher" today. Tait et al. (2015, p. 17) go a step further to claim that we are now firmly in a "pedagogic era of edutainment", in which students have an expectation of having an experience as well as an

education in the university. This prerequisite for learning to be fun, was essential for knowledge to be passed down the generations and ensure the survival of the species. Arguably, the oldest way of teaching is storytelling around the fire, when the elders or hunters, would tell exciting stories of danger, hunting, strategy, and planning, to younger generations for the purpose of passing on the survival skills.

Contemporary students have come to expect a “performance from their lecturers and tutors, particularly ones who wish to be regarded as good at what they do”. (Tait et al., 2015, p. 17) This requirement for learning to be fun is, however, not new at all. According to Gee (2005, p. 13), “learning is a deep human need” and as such it “is meant to be deeply pleasurable to human beings”. Learning being fun is an evolutionary requirement for preservation and survival. Learning is a natural process, but education is a social construct that seems to have morphed into a process that is no longer fit for purpose.

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the effects of humour on the students' experiences of/in Higher Education. It looks to answer the central research question of: Does humour affect the mature students' experiences of and in HE?

## **2. Literature review**

Humour or humor is a term derived from ancient Greece, as fluids in a human body, known as ‘humors’, that could be kept in a healthy balance using humoral medicine. At the core of it, humour is a cognitive experience that provides amusement and provokes laughter while in turn keeping us ‘healthily balanced’.

Powers (2015, p. 1) defines humour in educational setting as something that elicits laughter and argues that “it is not limited to jokes or humorous stories but can include props, puns, short stories, anecdotes, riddles, or cartoons”. It can be anything that creates a positive feeling in students and makes them smile and laugh. When people are asked what is important in their lives, they often mention humour (Provine 2000; Schoenewolf, 2015; Riggio, 2015). Provine (2000) found that when looking for life partners people often list ‘sense of humour’ high on their list of important traits. Although, philosophers have always been concerned about what is important in life, throughout history very little has been written about humour until 20<sup>th</sup> century. The term “humour” was not used in its current sense of funniness until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when the word humour appeared in an essay by Lord Shaftesbury: “An Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humor” in 1709. Prior to this, laughter was a by-product of a theatre genre; comedy. Since then, literature has started covering humour as a health benefit of lowering stress (Henman, 2001; Robinson, 1983; Berk, 1998), increasing productivity in the workplace (Thomas & Al-Maskati, 1997) and even being beneficial in early education for encouraging engagement (Cornett, 1986; Davies & Apter, 1980; Kher et al., 1999). However, the literature covering use of humour as a teaching / learning tool with a focus on mature students in Higher Education appears to be extremely scarce. In 2018, a quantitative study was carried out by Masek et al. (2018) in which 109 undergraduate students were asked to participate in a survey to assess the effects of humour on their learning. The results indicated that students perceived humour to have a positive effect on their studies in terms of increasing the interest for learning, listening and paying attention during sessions and enhancing their engagement with the topic taught. Although the paper mentions mature students, it is not clear if all 109 participants were mature or if the ages were mixed. In 2021, a mixed method study was conducted by Erdogdu & Cakiroglu (2021) that assessed 74 university students and concluded that humour has a positive impact on cognitive engagement with students, although these students studied exclusively online and the age of the students was not specified, so it is not clear if they were mature students. This study aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of humour in the classroom

as reported by mature undergraduate students in HE in an UK university. Kenny et al. (2011) classify mature age students as over 21 years of age and as a group, their pathways to study are many and varied (Egerton, 2001). Kenny et al. (2011) have found that mature age students (age 21-60) have generally experienced at least one job or career pathway during the time since leaving secondary school, and many have dependent children and major financial responsibilities (Byrne, 2005; Connell, 2003; Kantanis, 2002).

### **3. Methodology**

This study is an interpretivist phenomenological analysis of perceptions mature students have of the use of humour in HE and the perceived effect of humour to their learning journey. Semi structured interviews have been selected as the most suitable data collection method based on the interviewees and the data required. The method is an adaptation based on Cohen et al. (2001) structured vs unstructured interview methods. The data sought is a free expression of experiences and perceptions of the use of humour in the classroom in Higher Education. Semi structured interviews provide a forum for free-flowing, rich-data filled narratives better than structured interviews, whilst also providing enough structure to keep the interviews focused, unlike the unstructured option. These interviews are referred to as “Conversations” when communicating with the interviewees to counteract any negative pre-conceptions of the process of being interviewed. The demographic targeted must be considered as the participants in question are mature students who are returning to education after a long period of time, sometimes as many as 30 years, and most do not hold any formal qualifications. As such, the only experience of interviews these participants would have would be recruitment interviews which tend to be formal and stressful experiences.

All participants have signed an Applicant Agreement form prior to the commencement of interviews and have been given a copy of the signed agreement upon signing. This form provides an “informed consent” (Diener & Crandall, 1978) for the researcher to carry out the data collection and contains the details about the use of the collected data. The aims and objectives of the study are disclosed and participants’ right to withdraw themselves without an explanation at any point is reiterated.

Potential interviewees were initially approached by the researcher and asked for voluntary participation. No remuneration of any kind was promised or offered. Any expectations of potential gains were managed by explaining the aim of the study and the role of the participants in data collection. The benefit of participation was explained as the opportunity to inform the study by sharing own experiences, thoughts, emotions, perceptions, and any other personal views, that could enrich the existing understanding the researcher holds on the topic. Participation needed to be voluntary in every sense. Any other reason for participation could potentially influence the dynamic of the “conversation” and even taint the data collected.

Interviewees were selected at random from three classes delivering the same Leadership and Management programme in three different geographical locations in South Wales, UK. Total number of mature students in three locations combined, at the time of the call-for-participation, was 20. Three interviewees were invited to participate, and the interviews were arranged. The interviewees were; KL1P – female, mid 30s, out of education for 15 years, LN3O – female, early 40s, out of education for 25 years, MC2P – female, late 20s, out of education for 5 years. The alphanumeric codes were assigned based on the participants’ names (LN, KL, MC), order of interview (1- first, 2- second..), and the last letter signifies if the interview was conducted in person (P) or online (O).

Only one question was asked by the researcher: What can you tell me about your experiences and perceptions (thoughts, feelings) of humour in the higher education? After the

question was posed, the participants freely explored a range of topics and shared as much as they were comfortable to share. Probing questions were asked after a natural flow of sharing dried up and a further prompt was needed. The sub-questions used after the initial flow of information slowed down were shaped as non-leading, purely exploratory prompts, such as: “Can you tell me more about that session?”, “Can you give me more details about that time?”, “What were your thoughts on that?”. They were designed to encourage participants to reveal more details, without changing the direction of the narrative.

Prior to the detailed analysis by the researcher, the transcripts were first analysed using software (seo.ai) that identifies the frequency of a particular word used. The purpose of this was to ensure that the topic explored has indeed been addressed, but also to help with the coding of themes.

Through the analysis of the interview transcripts, six major themes were selected as the relevant ones for further analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2020). These themes were deemed appropriate by the researcher as they are recurring in all interviews and relevant to the research question.

#### 4. Results and discussion

The initial analysis involved running the transcriptions of the conversations through software (seo.ai) that identifies how often a particular word appears in the text, also known as “the word density”. Connective words such as: *like, about, and, so, if, then...* were ignored in order to distil to the more impactful words used. Only the top, most often appearing ten words were sought, and the results were not surprising, given the topic of the conversations (please see the tables 1, 2 and 3 below).

The top two most used words suggest that mature students in higher education want: interviewee 1; “more humour”, interviewee 2; “more humour”, interviewee 3; “more fun”.

Table 1. Top ten keywords – interviewee 1 Table 2. Top ten keywords – interviewee 2

Keyword Density x1 x2 x3		Keyword Density x1 x2 x3	
more	19 (3%)	more	29 (4%)
humour	15 (2%)	humour	21 (3%)
feel	14 (2%)	funny	15 (2%)
remember	12 (2%)	learning	11 (2%)
classroom	11 (2%)	mature	9 (1%)
learning	11 (2%)	feel	9 (1%)
different	10 (2%)	education	8 (1%)
mundane	7 (1%)	better	8 (1%)
fun	7 (1%)	enjoy	8 (1%)
laughter	6 (1%)	stories	7 (1%)
LN30		KL1P	

Table 3. Top ten keywords – interviewee 3

Keyword	Count	Percentage
more	19	4%
fun	17	3%
humour	15	3%
education	11	2%
different	11	2%
learning	8	2%
sense	6	1%
funny	6	1%
lectures	6	1%
remember	6	1%

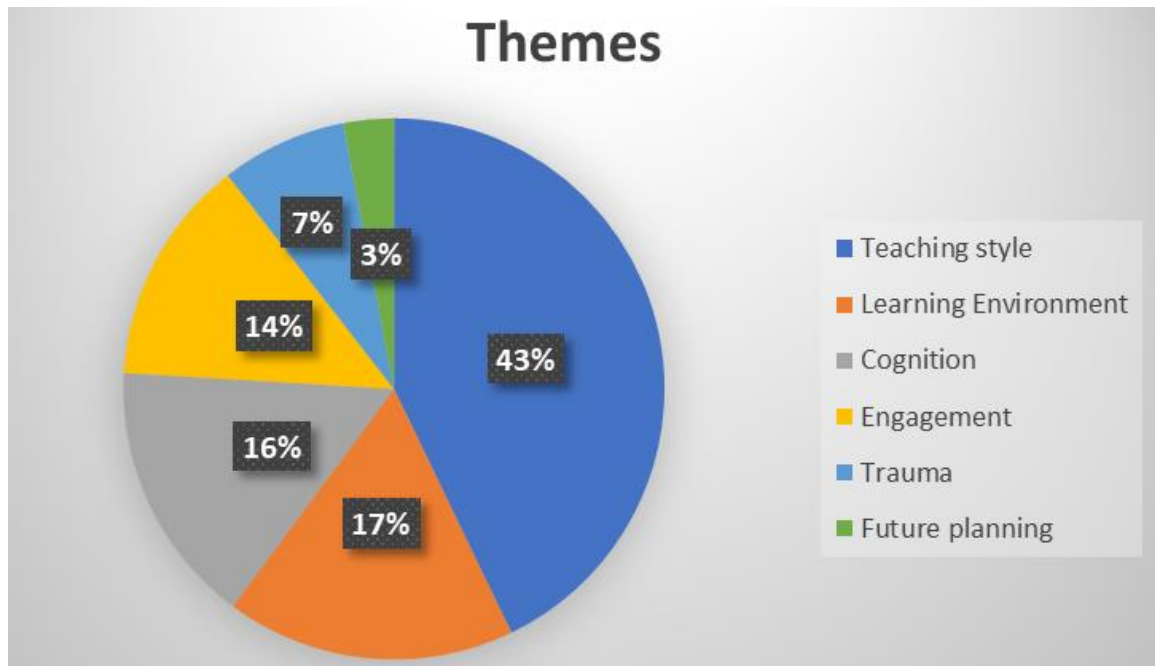
Transcribed conversations were coded to identify recurring topics. Initially identified individual topics were then re-grouped to form recurring themes. Recurring themes were grouped into;

- a) Teaching style – including enjoyable, fun, stories, debates, discussions, games, humour, laughing,
- b) Learning Environment - which encompasses mentions such as relaxed, relationships, respect,
- c) Cognition - which encompasses learning, remembering, and understanding,
- d) Engagement - which includes mentions of attendance, active student engagement, feeling of being “brought in”, doing things together,
- e) Trauma – mentions of traumatic experiences suffered in high school (also referred to as comprehensive school or “comp”), feelings of bullying by the teachers and pupils alike, apprehension at the prospect of joining education again, and finally a surprising emergence of
- f) Future planning – including thinking beyond the current educational undertaking.

Only one question was asked; “What can you tell me about your experiences and perceptions (thoughts, feelings) of humour in the higher education?” The “trauma” aspect emerged organically during the conversations and based on how strongly the interviewees felt about their negative experiences in education prior to joining the HE, the “future planning” aspect was not expected.

The clear references to different topics that were repeatedly mentioned within the interviews are shown below in Table 4.

Table 4. Recurring themes in the interviews



#### 4a. Teaching style

Out of all the mentions, the majority focused on the style of teaching. As mature students, returning to education after many years, the students clearly appreciate the style of teaching over other aspects of classroom-based lectures.

*“So, coming in at this age, I think having a bit of humour in it has made it easier. It made it just feel normal, in a way”.* MC2P

*“Me, coming in that first day to today, my view has completely flipped. Because I was terrified, thinking it was going to be strict....and it’s not. Its enjoyable and I enjoy coming in.”* KL1P

*“I enjoy it. ...I enjoy the humour, I enjoy the way everyone in here is laughing, everyone joins in, and everyone has their own little stories to share. Yes, I’m happy.”* KL1P

Students’ expectations of the classroom seem to have been exceeded by utilising a friendly and relaxed approach by the lecturer. They all reported feelings of fear and apprehension at the prospect of attending any type of education again, but seemed pleasantly surprised that it is very different from the “school” as they remember it. One mature student who initially expressed a wish to be assigned to a different geographical location, expressed her appreciation: *“Yeah, I’m not leaving your class.... you made it feel like a little family, a little home, a little safe haven, as soon as we walk through that door”* LN30.

A teaching style that utilises humour is perceived as respectful and “normal” by the students.

*“I think having a bit of humour in it has made it easier. It made it just feel normal, in a way”.* MC2P

*“By bringing it (humour) into the learning environment, it enables relationships to be built and respect, then, to be given both ways.”* KL1P

They report feeling respected by being allowed to have a laugh and engage with the narrative as they are being treated as equals. Berk (2003) points out that humour can be used for a dual purpose within the classroom; to promote a positive lecturer – student relationship and engaged learning by the students.

As a result of this research, an assumption can be made that humour can be used as a social and learning stimulant within the classroom, by making the atmosphere lighter and encouraging discussions and interactions. By making humour and laughter acceptable and encouraged, the fear of admitting ignorance and/or asking, what the students might feel is, a silly question, is removed and the apprehension levels are lowered thus encouraging a free flow of discussions. Once this level of freedom is achieved, the discussion serves a dual purpose: students feel respected and “heard” by being allowed to share own stories, but it also means that they learn from each other as the workplace examples and experiences are shared. Students offer stories from their own workplaces relevant to the teaching session and discuss what could have been done differently.

#### **4b. Learning environment**

The environment seemed to play a very important role in providing a “safe” place for mature students (Kosiczky and Mullen, 2013). This is an important aspect of learning; people cannot relax and be creative if they are feeling apprehensive. Creating a safe environment where it is acceptable to ask any questions, share any thoughts and put forward any ideas is paramount to encouraging creativity. As the participants report being made to feel “stupid” by previous school, it is even more important to introduce an environment that encourages the exploration of own creativity and interest.

*“(humour) frees me up to be able to be myself. And when I’m myself, I’m better at learning. I’m better at everything”.* KL1P

Humour has been connected with increased motivation and attention in the learning environment (Berk, 2002), and Davenport (2015) also recognised humour as a powerful psychological tool that enhances mental health by reducing stress and tension in the learning environment.

*“Laughter always makes somebody feel more relaxed and to enjoy something.”* LN3O

Lei et al. (2010) echo this sentiment by arguing that humour serves a social purpose of enhancing social rapport between lecturer and students, encouraging social cohesion within the learning environment and promoting trust building. One explanation for this is the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance (Galloway & Cropley, 2001). The two cognitions, for example: “I feel apprehensive” and “This is amusing” are contradictory making them difficult to exist at the same time. Seeing the funny side of a scary situation would make it difficult to also feel apprehensive and it would enhance the feeling of being in control. As a result, feeling that we are in control of the scary situation, makes it no longer scary.

#### **4c. Cognition**

Cognition was a clear theme that came through during the conversations. A clear connection between adding humour to the process of learning and the learning itself has been repeatedly highlighted.

*“I tend to remember more from the lessons about what we had a laugh about than what we’ve just gone over.... I tend to learn a lot more from the funny moments.”* KL1P

Students comment on humour aiding the creation of memories. Berk (2003) also found that students retain more information from humorous lectures and class discussions.

*“...when you are enjoying something, it makes stuff stick in your brain better than it would if someone was just going through the slides and not having humour...” LN3O.*

*“I feel when I’m relaxed and I’m enjoying, it makes you take the information in more than when somebody is just speaking to you...” LN3O.*

*“So, with positivity and humour being brought into the classroom, I find it helps me to learn more.” LN3O*

During one of the conversations, it transpires that humour does not only aid understanding and creation of memories in the classroom, during the lectures but also encourages independent learning away from the university:

*“...it instantly puts me in the good mood, and it makes me want to look into it further so because I’m happy in that moment, I’m excited then to go further into that subject....” KL1P*

Humour in the lecture can prompt students to investigate further and be more critical as well as enhance confidence to problem solve. (Lei et al., 2010)

Mature students, perhaps more so than the younger ones, seem to be very aware of their desired goals and the direction they want to pursue in their careers. A speculation can be made that this is the reason that the actual content of the lectures, was not mentioned at all. The topic itself, was chosen at the point of enrolment.

#### **4d. Engagement**

Engagement is the first requirement of a successful lecture. Davies and Arrend (2013,pp.78-79) came up with some useful rules for conducting a successful teaching session, with the Rule No 1 being: “Whatever it takes, get their attention. Students won’t learn much of anything from a presentation unless they are inspired to pay attention to it. “ John Cleese and Sir Anthony Jay founded a company in 1972 dedicated to learning through fun, called “Video Arts” based on a belief that: *“People learn very little when they’re bored, and nothing when they’re asleep”.*

Students report enjoying the humour aspect of the lectures and feel it aids engagement with the material.

*“I love the fact that there's humour, there's smile and there's laugh and there's debating.” LN3O*

*“If I was just talked at, I wouldn't learn, I would just zone out, whereas if something is made enjoyable with adding humour into it ...a more enjoyable experience, which then wants you coming back for more.*

*So, I come back for more because I enjoy the feeling, I have from being in the learning environment for the three hours, six hours, whatever it is.” KL1P*

Brent (2005), Hodgson (2005), and Jones (2007) have all discussed the added value of a delivery style by the lecturer that causes the enthusiasm of the lecturer to spark the interest and the enthusiasm for the topic, with the students. Effective teachers are often described by their students as being “enthusiastic”, and those teachers who utilise humour within their sessions tend to be rated highly (Lowman, 1994).



Laughter is a natural mood enhancer and people are drawn to people who are laughing. It encourages engagement and attention. Provine (2001, p. 129) suggests that laughter is a “most direct communication between people”, a “brain-to-brain” in something he calls a “limbic lock”. This involuntary reaction to an external stimulus that involves highly complex neural systems and produces laughter is what brings people closer. This explains why laughter comes to us easier if we are in the company of people we trust and feel comfortable with, friends, peers and colleagues.

#### **4e. Trauma**

The question posed to the participants did not invite any mention of trauma, the offerings of it emerged organically. Although the research interest is not focused on educational or childhood trauma, the researcher chose not to redirect the conversations but to let the narrative take a natural direction. In doing so, the participants disclosed that trauma experienced in the high school was the reason they did not attempt education again for many years in fear of repeating the experience.

*“I hated it. It took me until 40 to come to uni. That’s how much it traumatised me.” LN30*

*“...so that massively knocked my confidence. So, when I left school, I felt like I was stupid.” LN30*

*“You were made to feel if you didn’t get what people were speaking about or you didn’t understand, you were made to feel that you were stupid.” LN30*

*“I remember standing there thinking I don’t want to be here anymore. This is the trauma I went through in school” LN30.*

*“I just wouldn’t be interested, not one bit. Because that’s how I felt at school. It would take me straight back there...because that’s how I used to feel.” KL1P*

Students who reported their belief that they would have achieved much better GCSE results if humour was used in the classroom, are achieving passmarks and higher in all submitted work, in the current study. Although these students are achieving passmarks during the current academic undertaking, no direct connection is attributed to humour in isolation. This is a belief of these students interviewed and it is reported as such.

The accounts of previous trauma were emotional and seemed very much alive in research participants’ minds even at the present time, years later. The decision these students made to give education another try was attributed to the referrals from their friends, who have attempted the HE and liked it. The word spread that there is a course that teaches locally and its nothing like the high school. These referrals had to come from people who experienced same traumas during childhood, often even gone to the same schools, and can therefore be trusted. Being given the opportunity to continue their education in a different setting without “trauma” and “bullying” was sufficient to convince some of them to attempt it again.

Humour has a track record of being used as a tool to help deal with mental traumas. It facilitates mental health by supplying a coping mechanism for life’s negative experiences. According to Galloway et al. (2001), the effects of humour are both biological, by activating the immune system, but also psychological by providing a release of tension, expression of grievances and strengthening of the self-image. This suggests a possibility of using humour as a form of therapy in itself, or to facilitate a faster recovery by acting as a buffer between us and the trauma: “Things can’t be all that bad if you can still laugh at them” (Galloway et al., 2001, p. 2).

Humour has also been interpreted as a social corrective; by making fun of something, it is defined as not normal in the social context. Healing begins when students start tentatively recollecting their own trauma at school, feeling isolated in that experience, only for someone else to join in with: *...that's nothing, one of my teachers used to hang the kids out of the window by their ankles*" KL1P...and then someone else offers their own experience which is more horrible than the previous one. Within minutes, it becomes a competition of who can recall a worse memory in a funnier way. This type of collective healing can only happen if the students feel safe and comfortable sharing their horror stories.

Another aspect of having a positive experience in the current educational setting is that these students are having a new experience which can change their attitudes towards education. This change in attitude can have a knock-on effect on their entire belief system about education and what it can be like. As mature students who have families, these changes can have further effects on the advice given to their children regarding post-comp education.

#### 4f. Future planning

After freely offering recounts of traumatic experiences sustained in the prior education, future planning themes emerged in two ways: #1 - participants suggested planning future educational journey for themselves but also ; #2 - gave their suggestions for the future of the higher education in general.

#1 - Mature students who report experiencing trauma in prior education through what they perceived to be bullying by peers and teachers have not only found courage to try again by enrolling an undergraduate course with a university but are now also feeling that postgraduate is not beyond reach.

*"Whereas now, I am excited to get to the end and see where I can go from there. "*KL1P

*"You know, because it was when I heard about the course and then thought about signing up. I didn't really think about what I was then going to do after it was over. Okay, I'm doing this now and just do it. Now I'm like, okay, well when this is done, then what? "*MC2P

A question of what caused this change in attitude presented itself during the conversations; adult learners expect a relaxed environment in which they can learn but also be treated with respect, as adults.

*"So, learning as an adult is very daunting, very daunting. Because I felt like I couldn't do it. But the fact that it's more relaxed, you are able to have a giggle and a joke and even when it comes to serious things, it's easier because you've got that sense of, I don't know how to explain it and you feel relaxed in the environment because of how you felt with, say, with yourself, you bring humour into it which makes me feel more relaxed and comfortable to be myself. "*KL1P

*"I think having a laugh in our lectures, it does keep things exciting, you keep things fresh, it keeps your mind active, I think. I enjoy the discussions in class. And I think a lot of others do as well. "*MC2P

#2 – Suggestions for how to make higher education a lot more accessible for mature students who are returning to education after many years, emerged as a continuation of differences between high school and university experiences comparison.

It is becoming clear that mature students do not want the formal education to be "formal".

*“I think it’s too formalised. And that’s what puts people off. Cause that’s what put me off. You look at it and you see all these students, the younger ones, the older ones, and they all look so serious.” KL1P*

*“And you instantly think that you are going to go in and your tutor and your classmates, and they are all going to be serious, and that makes it even more terrifying.*

*Whereas if it was a lot more friendly from the offset, I think you’d get a lot more people taking that step.” KL1P*

*“I think, if humour was implemented from the beginning, from where it all starts, I think a lot more people would go for it.*

*So, I do think it should be a bigger part of the academic cycle.” KL1P*

*“I think a lot more teachers would benefit from adopting a little humour in their lessons. Definitely.” KL1P*

*“So, bringing us into it, let’s do this as a class. Let me bring you in. It’s a different style of learning and I believe that this style should be incorporated into all our schools because one box does not fit all, and I hated school.” LN3O*

A novel way of teaching is required if the higher education is to attract mature students back into education. Mature students who have family and work commitments, also tend to have a more acute idea of value-for-money concept. They do not seem to find a serious traditional teaching style a good value for their money.

*“Yeah so, I expected serious and formal, but I think it’s a lot better and a lot more, value for money. It’s worth it for me because of the way that you teach. I would think twice if it was someone who just read the script you do this, do this...of you go. I think I would find it harder as I would think, I’m getting myself into debt for this.” KL1P*

A teaching style deemed suitable by mature students with financial obligations, seems to be a deciding factor in their choice of education. Mature students make it clear that they expect to be treated as adults, with respect. They welcome the relaxed atmosphere and enjoy a social aspect of the learning environment. They enjoy getting involved with the narrative by adding their own examples and discussing their own experiences within the frame of the topic taught, and feel that this encourages engagement. As mature students, they do not appreciate being treated as children and spoken at, they expect a conversation and an experience as well as education. And, with their lives being busy with families and work, they want to have fun while learning. Mature students still only count for a minority in terms of student numbers in UK Higher Education. However, it would not be prudent to think that these mature students who form 37% of all undergraduates in the UK (Huble and Bolton, 2021), operate in isolation from the other 63%. Often, these mature students are the parents of “the majority” of the student body in UK. Moreover, parents’ advice, suggestions and guidance can be sufficient to change the expectations of the younger students as well.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to establish if humour used in the classroom has any effect (positive or negative) on the learning journey of mature students in HE. The interviews aimed to gather thoughts and perceptions of the mature students who agreed to participate in the study.

Mature students want to be treated with respect and spoken to like equals. They do not want to repeat the experience of being in school and spoken at.

Involvement and engagement are highly attributed to a relaxed learning environment and a teaching style that allows for fun. As mature students have a more defined concept of what constitutes “value for money”, they are not interested in paying for the privilege of being treated like children. Previous experiences of school have traumatised these students to a point where any formal education was perceived as something to be avoided, if at all possible.

This perception pushed them into a working environment as young adults, in which they were trained to do the job required and no more. It is only years later, sometimes as many as 30 years later, that their careers have reached a stage in which they could not secure the next promotion without a formal qualification. A handful were brave enough to attempt it again and it was their positive experience of higher education that has changed their attitudes and prompted them to recommend the programme to friends and family. These referrals by the trusted circle of people have resulted in an opportunity to change the attitude of mature students, towards higher education. This effort to entice students back into education combined with efforts to provide a more enjoyable experience in accessible locations has been driving the efforts of this particular programme for the last decade.

This is, however, not only applicable to one programme. Across the higher education sector, the efforts to attract students to the modern university and provide a better value-for-money for the students who, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are seen as consumers (Tait et al., 2015), have been driving a change in the approach of educational professionals towards students.

Efforts to attract students to HE is combined with a constant battle for attention with every electronic distraction available to contemporary students. This ongoing effort to engage them during the lectures has resulted in higher education evolving into, a hybrid between education and entertainment, that is widely referred to as “edutainment”.

Learning being fun is an evolutionary requirement for human preservation and survival. According to Gee (2005, p. 13), “learning is a deep human need” and as such it “is meant to be deeply pleasurable to human beings.” Learning is a natural need, but education as a social construct meant to satisfy that natural need seems to have morphed into a process that is no longer fit for purpose. The essential requirement for it to be fun in order to be effective, has been lost.

This micro study highlights the positive effect of humour on learning in the HE, as perceived and reported by the mature students interviewed. The limitations of this study were numerous; the time constraints and availability of participants as mature students with family and work commitments, prevented a larger number of interviews. All participants involved in this study attend the same undergraduate programme in the same university and as such, limit the study. A further study with a larger number of mature students, potentially enrolled on different undergraduate courses or even attending different universities, would expand the current knowledge base.

According to Shea (2024) Higher education in UK is currently facing serious challenges due to post-Brexit drop in international student numbers, the increase in tuition fees expected in 2025, reduced government funding, rapid digital transformation and student recruitment and retention.

The future impact of this and future studies on the topic could perhaps, in some small way, address the student retention aspect. Treating the students as paying customers could cause a shift in the attitude of educators and educational institutions and force them to focus inwards, to the issue that can be addressed in-house. Focusing on the current student body and ensuring that they have a memorable, enjoyable and successful learning journey could potentially encourage the current undergraduates to continue to the postgraduate studies, thus keeping them in HE for longer, but also affect the future recruitment by changing the attitude of mature students towards

HE. As mentioned earlier, although only 37% of all undergraduates in UK are mature students, they cannot be viewed in isolation from the other 63% of younger students. Mature students are often parents of the future potential students and, parental influence can be a key factor in whether young students progress into the HE.

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