

## Mature Students' Choice to Study a Foundation Year at Private Higher Education Institutions UK

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## **Abstract**

The primary purpose of this study was to find out why mature students are studying a Foundation Year (FY) in private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK.

In recent years, the UK government has been pursuing to increase the diversity of students in UK HEIs. One of the ways to provide access to mature students to HEIs is through FY. Most HEIs in the UK offer a foundation year, which has become the best choice for mature students.

This quantitative study aimed to answer research questions and test three hypotheses regarding mature students' choice to study a foundation year at a private HEI. The online survey was conducted using Google Forms to collect data from 750 mature students studying in three private HEIs in England. Data were quantitatively analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26. The questionnaire focused on reasons for choosing a Private HEI and studying a foundation year.

The findings showed that most students prefer to study at private HEIs because of friends and family recommendations and evening & weekend classes. The provision of evening and weekend classes is hardly available at public HEIs. In addition, Private HEIs have multiple intakes, a comparatively easy and fast admission process and friendly marketing & admission staff. The mature students' preference for the foundation year includes a straightforward enrollment procedure, an easy route to return to a degree programme, and no formal qualification required.

**Keywords:** Mature Students, Study Choice, Foundation Year, Private Higher Education

## 1 Mature Students

There is no official definition of a 'mature student' (UK Parliament, 2021). The contemporary literature on mature students proposes diverse definitions depending on the context and purpose of the research (Fragoso et al., 2013). The phrase 'mature student' refers to anyone attending HEI after some time out of full-time education (Qureshi et al., 2020). We will consider the definitions purely related to age – for example, defining mature students as above the age of 21 when entering HEI (Chapman, 2017). Generally, this will mean students who are over 21 years of age at the beginning of their undergraduate studies or over 25 years of age at the beginning of their postgraduate studies (UCAS, 2020) and up to pensionable age (NUS, 2012). McCune et al. (2010) define younger mature students as aged 21–30 and older mature students as 31 or over.

Many researchers have emphasised the need for a more comprehensive and inclusive definition. For example, O'Shea and Stone (2011) call for a definition that considers mature students' family commitments, employment status and past education.

Policymakers in the UK have been attempting to facilitate access to HE for mature students. For many years HEIs have made particular efforts to cater for mature students, with special entry procedures and alternative curriculum (Hirst, 1999) such as a Foundation Year (FY). Mature students are a heterogeneous group with a wide range of roles and responsibilities. Many of the participants in HE have multiple roles (Burton et al., 2011), such as academic study, employment and family responsibilities (McCune et al., 2010).

Concerning mature students, Osborne et al. (2004) suggest there are six categories of applicants to HE:

- 'traditional delayed students'- these have chosen to take time out from their education but re-enter through a traditional route;
- 'late starters' who have undergone a life-transforming event and require a new start-see also Lawton (2005);
- 'single parents';
- 'careerists' -people currently in employment;
- 'escapees' who are employed but want a different career pathway and
- 'personal growers' - those wanting to pursue education for its own sake.

## **2 UK Private Higher**

The demand for Higher Education (HE) worldwide is growing phenomenally (Qureshi & Sarwar, 2021). This is because HE promotes national economic development and enhances individual employment and income (McMahon, 2009). As a result, the societal and individual demand for HE.

Private higher education is increasingly essential, constitutes a significant player in the global HE landscape, and currently accounts for a third of global enrolment (Levy, 2018). Therefore, more than 30% of the global population of higher education students is enrolled in private higher education (Altbach et al., 2009; Levy, 2018). The growth of the private HE sector in the UK is affiliated with the broader processes of privatisation emerging in HE systems (Johnstone and Marcucci 2010) and is also part of a global trend (Middlehurst and Fielden, 2014).

An indicator of this growth in the UK is the number of private HEIs with degree-awarding powers, which increased from only one private university (University of Buckingham) in 1983 to more than ten in less than a decade (Qureshi and Sarwar, 2021).

1. Arden University,
2. Ashridge Business School,
3. BPP University,
4. Ifs University,
5. London Institute of Banking & Finance,
6. New College for the Humanities,
7. Regent's University,
8. The Richmond University,
9. The University of Law,
10. University College of Estate Management,
11. University College of Osteopathy,
12. University of Buckingham.

In addition to above institutions, some private HEIs also offer degree programmes with foundation year with the partnership of British Universities.

1. Applied Business Academy
2. Bloomsbury Institute
3. Bournemouth University International College
4. British and Irish Modern Music (BIMM) Institute
5. Cardiff University International Study Centre

6. Durham University International Study Centre
7. Dyson Institute of Engineering and Technology
8. Elizabeth School of London
9. Global Banking School (GBS)
10. ICON College of Technology & Management
11. Inspire Education Group
12. International College Portsmouth
13. International Study Centre
14. INTO Group
15. Kaplan International College
16. London Brunel International College
17. London School of Commerce (LSC)
18. London School of Management Education (LSME)
19. London School of Science and Technology (LSST)
20. Markfield Institute of Higher Education (MIHE)
21. Mont Rose College (MRC)
22. Nelson College London (NCL)
23. Nottingham Trent International College (NTIC)
24. ONCAMPUS
25. Oxford Business College (OBC)
26. Pearson College
27. Regent's College London
28. S P Jain London School of Management
29. SAE Institute UK
30. Study Group
31. The Islamic College
32. The London College
33. The London Interdisciplinary School
34. The London School of Banking and Finance
35. The SMB Group
36. UK College of Business and Computing (UKCBC)
37. Waltham International College

HEI choice is based on student and institution perspectives; it is right to say that it is a two-way decision-making process, one dimension represents the student's choice to attend a specific HEI, and the other is the HEI choice of the student (Yu and Chen, 2022). Consequently, all HEIs, whether public or private, have rigorous admission processes to select the best students for their institutions. Therefore, this study only includes the student's perspective of HEI choice based on the expectations and how these are met.

With increasing competition in HE worldwide, the perspective of student choice of institutions has attracted more and more attention of the HEIs, especially the private HEIs, to provide more options of studies to students such as evening and weekend classes, multiple intakes and better customer service than their public HEIs competitors.

In addition, social media campaigns, marketing strategies, and various institutional aspects influence students' decisions (Šola & Zia, 2021, Delaney & Dharmapala, 2017; Wilkins, Shams, & Huisman, 2013).

### **3 Foundation Year**

Many UK higher education institutions, including private ones, offer the opportunity to study for a foundation year before entering the degree programme. However, foundation years are not mandatory for every degree course but most popular among mature students. There are several reasons for the popularity of foundation year for mature students. Nevertheless, first, we need to understand what foundation year is.

The Foundation Year of the university aims to prepare students to develop the academic skills and knowledge needed for progression into the first year of a traditional degree scheme (Wint, 2022) and ultimately succeed in higher education.

A *foundation year* is a one-year academic programme often referred to as year zero at Framework of Higher Education Qualifications level 3, designed for students to study before starting a degree. It is an extra year of study at the start of the degree that allows students who do not meet the entry requirements to study for a degree.

Thus, a foundation year gives access to a degree course, which we consider an entry-level 3 qualification. Therefore, we need to know the difference between a foundation year and a foundation degree.

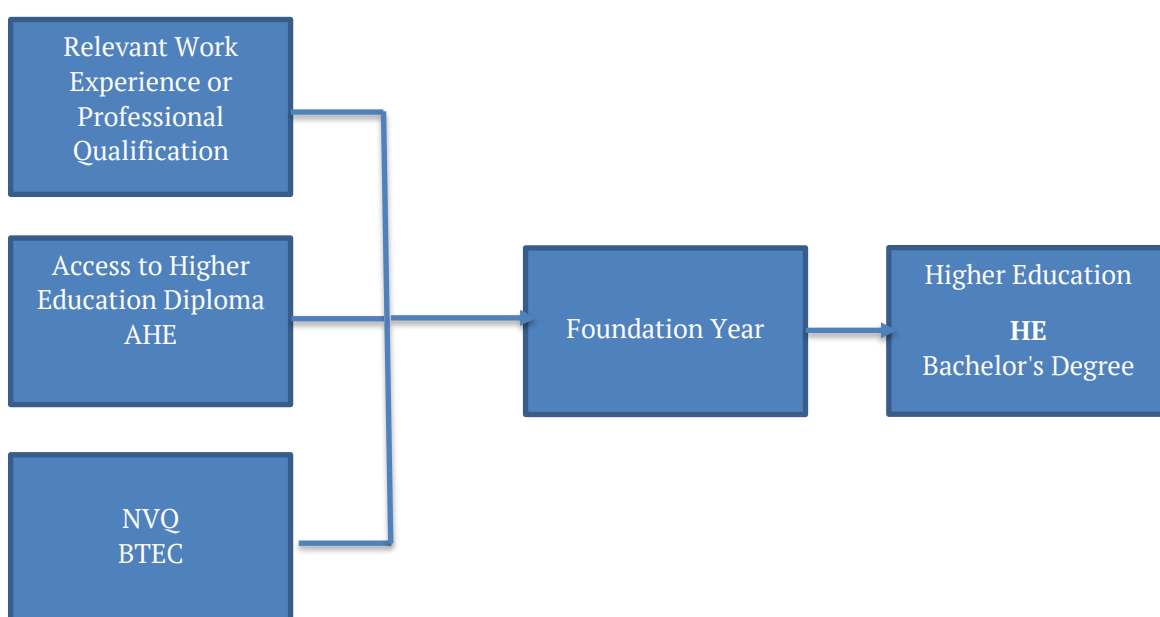
A foundation degree (Fd) is a standalone qualification of two years with 240 credits academic equivalent of two-thirds of a bachelor's degree, a Higher National Diploma (HND) and a Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) - at Level 5 of the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RFQ) (Higginbotham, 2021). Moreover, Fd is a flexible qualification that combines academic study with work-based learning and can be studied full-time, part-time or by distance learning (UCAS, 2023).

A foundation degree leads directly into the final year of a full undergraduate degree (Ooms et al., 2012; Pike & Harrison, 2011), whereas the foundation year is delivered as an additional year of Level 3 study (Black, 2021).

**Figure 1: Traditional Route to Higher Education**



**Figure 2: Non-traditional (Mature Students) Route to Higher Education**



Foundation year is an alternative route to accessing higher education for students, with non-Advanced level routes such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) and Access to Higher Education (AHE) courses and mature students with relevant work experience. Foundation year entry requirements vary from university to university. Some universities accept professional qualifications or relevant work experience. For example, see the entry requirements for BA (Hons) Global Business (Business Management) with Foundation Year at Global Banking School (GBS) for mature students:

*"If applicants aged 21+ do not meet the standard entry requirements, we take into consideration life/work skills which would make them suitable for undergraduate study with our Foundation programme" (GBS,2023)*



The foundation year is one kind of foundation programme that higher education institutions only offer, and it has been used to promote the "widening participation" (WP) agenda as part of social mobility and justice (Black,2021). FY is particularly for underrepresented groups, and availability is therefore believed to be driven by egalitarian motivations (Austen, Pickering, and Judge, 2020).

All higher HEIs require diversity to promote learning (David 2007). In order to promote WP, in the last decade, most UK HEIs, including the top institutions, have introduced Foundation Years for their undergraduate degrees to recruit a wider variety of students (Heron, Tenenbaum & Hatch, 2022). For example, Cambridge University's FY aimed at promoting socioeconomic groups' diversity (Kettley & Murphy, 2021). FY has been an effective way to WP not only to non-elite HEIs but also to the elite. Currently, 140 HEIs in England and Wales offer FYs, including 15 members of the highly-selective Russell Group, including Oxford, Durham, Warwick, Bristol and York (UCAS 2017). Russell Group universities often link FYs to their WP strategies by easing entry criteria, deploying disadvantage metrics in admissions and reducing tuition fees (Kettley & Murphy, 2021). As a result, the number of students entering integrated FY programmes almost trebled between 2012–2013 and 2017–2018 (Finlayson 2019). With enrollment numbers quadrupling over the past five years and more than 55,000 students choosing to enrol in FY courses in 2019–20, FYs have emerged as one of the contemporary success stories (Husbands, 2021). However, inequalities and exclusions still exist concerning entry institutions and programmes (Reimer & Thomsen, 2019).

Mature students' best choice is to study for a foundation year because most do not have the academic background; they need to progress directly to their preferred degree course. However, sometimes it is suggested to students who have not done well academically to enrol in a foundation year as a more effective way to get into the university.

According to Husbands, (2021), Foundation years serve a unique purpose in the HE system.

- provide a route to success for students who would otherwise not access opportunities;
- disproportionately meet the needs of students from more disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds;
- represent quality and value for students, taxpayers and employers;
- ensure a greater likelihood of progression and complements other access routes including through FE; and
- help provide the skills needed to deliver sustainable recovery and regional prosperity in a post-COVID economy.

(Husbands, 2021)



## 4 Methods

We inevitably attempt to answer a research question or test the hypothesis in quantitative research. One method of evaluating the research question is via a process called hypothesis testing. Quantitative research is the process of collecting and analysing numerical data. It can be used to find patterns and averages, make predictions, causal test relationships, and generalise results to broader populations. Quantitative research's primary goal, according to Saunders et al. (2009), is to quantify data, measure the construct of each variable, compare answers, and emphasise correlation. As we are testing the single hypothesis, the quantitative research was found suitable for achieving the study's objectives and testing the single hypothesis.

### 4.1 Aims and Objectives

The study was aimed to find out why mature students are studying a foundation year in private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK.

- *To test the association between age, gender and classes schedule.*
- *To determine students' reasons for choosing Private HEI and studying foundation year.*

### 4.2 Research Questions

1. Why do mature students consider Private Higher Education Institutions?
2. What are the reasons for studying a foundation year?

### 4.3 Null Hypotheses

**Ho1.** *There will be no significant association between students' age and gender.*

**Ho2.** *There will be no significant association between students' gender and classes schedule.*

**Ho3.** *There will be no significant association between students' age and classes schedule.*

#### **4.4 Sampling and Sample Size**

We aimed to study the choice of study among mature students at Private HEI. Sampling and sample size are critical issues in quantitative research, which strive to make statistically based generalisations from the study results to the broader world. Therefore, it is essential that both the sampling method and the sample size are appropriate, such that the results are representative and that the statistics can discern associations or differences within the results of a study.

Creswell (2008) defines *the research population* as "the large set of people having similar characteristics". This research study's population was mature students studying in private higher education institutions in the UK. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) define a research sample as "the part of the research population that is broken down in a small section for the given study but which can be generalised to the total population". The research sample of this study was selected through the convenience sampling technique. As Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) define, convenience sampling is the sampling technique that helps approach the respondents within reach of a researcher. As the researchers are associated with the institutions, it was convenient for them to approach respondents easily.

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

A quantitative analysis was carried out on 750 mature students. The data was collected via online mode, and along with some demographic information, mature students were asked about reasons for choosing a Private HEI and reasons for studying a foundation year.

Data analysis is the most crucial part of any research. Data analysis summarises collected data. Quantitative research was used to analyse the data using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version was used to perform non-parametric statistical analysis including descriptive statistics such as percentage, frequency, and chi-square test. To conveniently analyse and comprehend the data, a graphical representation of the data was created. A preliminary analysis showed that there were no missing data, the data was not skewed and that the values were spread near zero. Therefore, cleaning of data was not required. In our data, all variables were measured on a nominal scale. There were two categories in gender, five categories for age groups and three categories of class schedule.

#### 4.6 Research Ethics

The researcher should respect the privacy, autonomy and dignity of individual participants and follow the guidelines and values of research (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018). Therefore, the participants were assured that their information would be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. The literature was cited correctly, with all proper references to work done by researchers.

### 5 Results And Interpretation

A quantitative analysis of 750 mature students was carried out regarding their reasons for selecting a private HEI and their motivations for enrolling in a foundation year, along with some demographic data.

**Table1. Descriptive Statistics: Demographics (N=750)**

Variables (Categorical)	Mean	Standard Error	Variance	Standard Deviation	Skewness
<i>Gender</i>	1.49	0.018	0.250	0.500	0.053
<i>Age</i>	2.17	0.033	0.824	0.908	0.634
<i>Class Schedule</i>	1.57	0.025	0.462	0.680	0.788

The descriptive statistics showed that age had a higher variance and standard deviation from the rest categorical variables under study. This shows some dispersion in the data, but we will assess that later on using a chi-square test of association to make significant conclusions. Moreover, it is pretty apparent that our data is less skewed as all the values are spread around the mean (Table 1).

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics: Frequencies and Percentages (N=750)**

Variables	Gender		Age (in years)					Classes Schedule		
	Male	Female	21-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	>60	Traditional Weekday Class	Weekend Class	Evening Class
<b>Frequency</b>	385	365	182	322	201	30	15	405	264	405
<b>Percentage</b>	51.3	48.7	24.3	42.9	26.8	4.0	2.0	54.0	35.2	54.0

Male participants provided responses in more significant numbers (51.3%) than female participants (48.7%) in our study (Table 2). Moreover, the cohort of the maximum students was discovered to be between the ages of 30-39 years (42.9%), which is a certain sign of mature students, and 54.0 percent of students were categorised as being in the group attending regular weekday classes. The lowest number of mature students were found to be attending weekend classes (35.2%). These results could be quite misconstruing as the total for all categorical groups is different. Later in this section, we fixed this issue through crosstabulation (Table 4).

**Table 3. Chi Square Test**

Categorical Variables (5x2, 2x3 and 5x3tables)	Chi Square Test $\chi^2$ value	Symmetric Measures		
		Asymptotic Significance	Crammer's V	Contingency Coefficient
<i>Age*Gender (5x2)</i>	2.452	0.653	0.057	0.057
<i>Gender*Classes Schedule (2x3)</i>	0.801	0.670	0.033	0.670
<i>Age* Classes Schedule (5x3)</i>	101.236	0.00	0.260	0.345

The chi-square test of association showed a positive and significant association between age and classes schedule. This rejects our null hypothesis **Ho3**, viz., *that there will be no significant association between students' age and class schedule*. The strength of the association between these two nominal variables (Age\*Classes schedule) was low to moderate as suggested by Crammer's V value, which is less than 0.50 (Table 3). Our results were insignificant for the other two combinations (Age\*Gender and Gender\*Classes Schedule). Therefore, we intended to calculate further the row percentage for age and class schedule (Table4) to gain more insights about the data. The insignificant results accept our null hypotheses **Ho1** and **Ho2** viz., *'There will be no significant association between students' age and gender'* and *'There will be no significant association between students' gender and classes schedule'* respectively.

We found exciting results from row percentage crosstabulation of age and classes schedule. Two groups of students aged between 21-29 years (74.7%) and 30-39 years (59.3%) were found to be attending traditional weekday classes. On the other hand, the majority of students in the three age groups 40-49 years, 50-59 years and 60 years and above were found to be attending weekend classes. Furthermore, if we consider the evening classes, our data showed that most students attending evening classes belonged to the age group 50-59 years (20.0%). This finding indicates that as age increases, mature students prefer less classes over the week as they have more responsibilities and/or challenges, for instance, family, job and other reasons.

**Table 4. Age\* Classes Schedule (5x3 Table) Crosstabulation**

Age	Traditional Weekday Class	Weekend Class	Evening Class	Total
<b>21- 29</b>	74.7%	17.0%	8.2%	100.0%
<b>30 - 39</b>	59.3%	28.3%	12.4%	100.0%
<b>40 - 49</b>	32.8%	58.2%	9.0%	100.0%
<b>50- 59</b>	23.3%	56.7%	20.0%	100.0%
<b>60 and above</b>	33.3%	53.3%	13.3%	100.0%
<b>Total</b>	54.0%	35.2%	10.8%	100.0%

The non-parametric test of association for 5x2 and 2x3 tables obtained insignificant results (see Table 3). However, we calculated the crosstabulation to find more insights. For Age\*Gender (5x2) crosstabulation, results showed that mature male students were more in percentage than mature female students in the age groups 21-29, 50-59 and 60 years and above. However, for the age group 40-49, it was found that females were more in number (51.2%) than their male counterparts (48.8%), and both genders (50.0%) were equal in the ratio in the age group 30-39 years. On the other hand, Gender\*Class schedule (2x3) crosstabulation results showed that the majority of mature students attending traditional weekday classes were males (55.6%), whereas the majority of mature students attending weekend classes were females (36.4%). The results of the evening classes were negligible as less students attended evening classes; therefore, it is not required to report them.

We also aimed to study students' reasons for choosing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and a foundation year (Figures 3 and 4). For that, we asked participants to rate their responses for several reasons. The results showed that the foremost reason for most students (84.3%) selecting HEIs is multiple intakes in a year, followed by friends and family recommendations. On the other hand, the reasons for preferring HEIs, such as less tough admission criteria than public HEI and friendly admission staff, were rated by less percentage of students.

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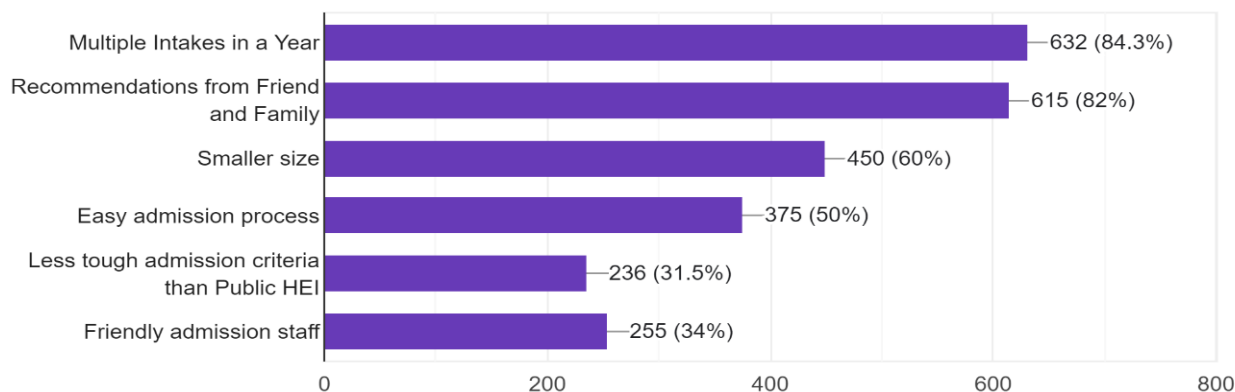


Figure 3. Students' reasons for choosing HEIs

Most students' foremost reason for choosing a foundation year (76.8%) was the easy enrolment process followed by the best option for mature students and time to get back on studies after a break (Figure 4). According to these findings, the foundation year is the most favourable option for mature students because of the easy enrollment process and is viewed as the ideal choice for mature students who decide to return to academic institutions after a long break. More than 50% of mature students chose a foundation year, according to our findings, because academic classes are combined with the English language and study skills. Additionally, there are no formal prerequisites for the foundation year.

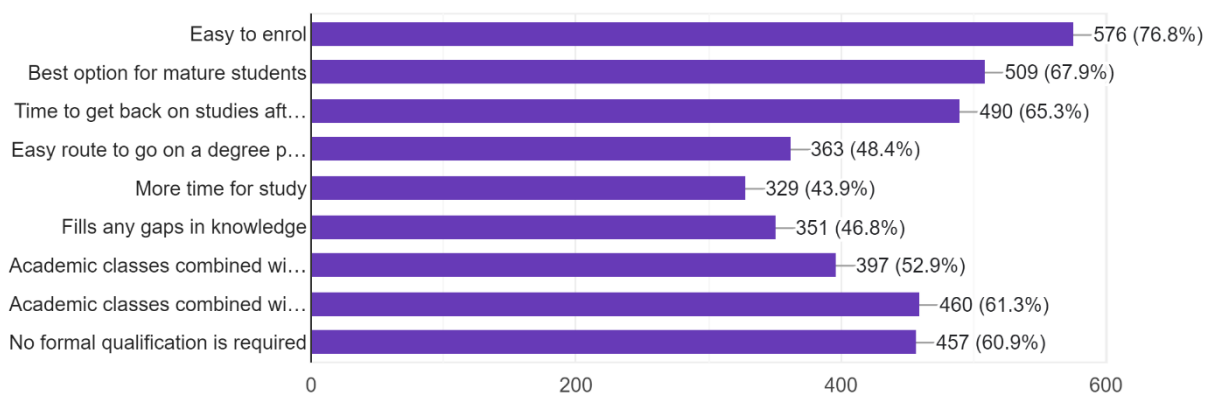


Figure 4. Students' reasons for choosing a Foundation Year

## 6 Discussion

The objectives of our study were two-fold. Firstly, we aimed to study the association between age, gender and classes schedule. Our findings showed a low to a moderate yet significant relationship between age of mature students and classes schedule.

Older the students, less classes scheduled in a week and vice-versa. This result rejects our null hypothesis  $H_03$ , viz., *that there will be no significant association between students' age and class schedule.*

Private HEIs have different modes of education delivery (Class Schedule/Timetable) that assist mature students in overcoming barriers to participation in higher education. These modes of education delivery are traditional (Monday to Friday-daytime class schedule), weekdays evenings and weekends classes. Most public HEIs have only a traditional mode of education delivery, that is, Monday to Friday daytime. As most mature students work and have other family commitments; as a result, preference for private HEIs becomes top compared to public HEIs.

A substantial issue for mature students is altering the demands of their studies with all the other "grown up" responsibilities that traditional students are probably not yet concerned with. Mature students frequently have to deal with the difficulties of their families, spouses, jobs, and other obligations, and they may find it difficult to find time for classes, studying, and assignment writing. Hence require a work-life balance to achieve academic success.

Secondly, we intended to determine students' reasons for choosing Private HEI and studying a foundation year. Our research revealed that higher education institutions accept several students each year multiple times and that friends and family can also recommend candidates for admittance.

Public HEIs usually have one or two intakes in a year, and their admission procedures are lengthy and slow. Therefore, the situation in public HEIs is not competitive with Private HEIs. For example, Arden University finalises admission within a couple of weeks, while London School of Commerce (LSC) has six (6) intakes per year (February, April, June, August, October and November), and their admission procedures are fast and quick. Private HEIs in the UK have a minimum of three intakes and a maximum of six per year.



Not only all private HEIs use a student recruitment strategy of "Refer a Friend" to recruit students, but also public HEIs. Most respondents (82%) confirmed that they study at private HEI because of recommendations from friends and family. Therefore, satisfied mature students most likely recommend their institute to others (Friends and Family members).

These factors are the main reasons that influence mature students' decisions to pursue higher education. Our results do not support past research on traditional students, which suggests a match between the amount of information presented in the prospectuses and students' personal goals for study to be the foremost reason for students' choice of higher education courses (Breen, 2003). Past studies found that mature students' motivations for attending college were different (McCune et al., 2010). Some research evidence has shown that mature students often participate in higher education learning due to their broad knowledge, life experiences and intrinsic motivation to pursue their studies (Hounsell, 2005; Richardson, 2005).

The two main factors influencing students' decision to enrol in a foundation year are the simple enrollment process and the belief that it is the best option available to them. Other significant reasons found are that English language and study skills are blended with academic classes, and although the foundation year has no formal qualifications required, more than 50% of students favoured it. Foundation year is seen as a good option for mature students as it brings a variety of applicable talents from various aspects of their lives to their education. Mature students are more likely to have had more diversified learning experiences, which has shaped their interactions with higher education. They are also more likely to have work and family responsibilities, which may have shaped their motivations for studying in certain ways (Gallacher et al., 2002).

Some respondents (34%) found admission staff friendly. The speed and precision with which HEIs respond to students significantly matter (Gamage et al., 2008). HEIs need to be quick and fast to their enquiries and friendly in their behaviour. Students also observe the attitude and behaviour of the service provider; it should be positive and friendly as it matters to students (Abdullah, 2006; Gibbs and Kuling, 2017). Many previous studies have empirically proved that HE administrative services significantly influence student satisfaction (Gamage et al., 2008; Mavondo & Zaman, 2000).

## **7 Conclusion**

Private HEIs have more intakes in a year than public HEIs. Most public higher institutes usually have one or two intakes in a year. One of the reasons to consider a private HEI is the multiple intakes in a year.

There are hardly any studies linked to multiple intakes and students' decision-making. For example, Maringe and Carter's study (2007) discuss a faster and speedy admission process, but they do not consider the number of intakes and its influence on students' decision-making.

Private HEIs provide various educational delivery options, including standard (Monday through Friday, during the day), weekdays evenings and weekend classes. The majority of public HEIs only offer typical daytime classes Monday through Friday. Therefore, the preference for private HEIs over public HEIs rises as a result of the fact that the majority of mature students work and have other family obligations.

It was clear from the data analyses' results that a critical factor in the admission application process was the expected probability of quick admission process. The perceived fast admission and successful outcome was the vital catalyst that led mature students to look for study foundation year's opportunities at private HEIs.

## **8 Limitations**

A possible limitation of this study can be seen in its focus on private higher education. A replication of the study in a public higher education context would be helpful to establish whether our findings would hold even for this sector. This is a limitation as well as a promising research area to include both sectors to be addressed in the future concerning mature students' preference to enrol on FYs.

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