Chijioke Nwachukwu[1]
Horizons University France, and Regent College London

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PROMOTING INCLUSIVE LEARNING FOR STUDENTS FROM NON-TRADITIONAL EDUCATION BACKGROUNDS

Abstract: The article addresses the challenges faced by students with non-traditional educational pathways, including mature learners, first-generation university students, and working-class or ethnic minority students. It reflects on pedagogic strategies for inclusivity to facilitate their academic achievement. Based on theoretical frameworks such as Bourdieu's cultural capital, social identity and sense of belonging, and Bandura's self-efficacy, the study explores how structural and psychological barriers, such as imposter syndrome, affect the experiences of these groups. The study demonstrates that evidence-based institutional support, adaptable learning spaces, formative assessment, and culturally sensitive teaching can foster retention, motivation, and self-efficacy. By fostering a sense of belonging and validating heterogeneous experiences, inclusive pedagogy benefits non-traditional learners and the academic community. This research proposes an integrated model for teachers and institutions who want to create equitable and inclusive higher education environments that value and respect student diversity.

Keywords: Ethnic minority students, first-generation university students, inclusive teaching, mature learners, non-traditional students.

Introduction

Higher education institutions in most countries have witnessed a steady increase in non-traditional students attending universities over the last few decades. Students from non-traditional education backgrounds are mature students who have been away from studies for a significant period, first-degree higher education students, working-class students, and minority ethnic or socio-economically disadvantaged groups (Crosling et al., 2008; Devlin, 2017). In most Western higher-education contexts, "traditional" students are typically young people who enter higher education directly from secondary school and usually from majority groups, middle- or upper-class social backgrounds. This reflects a particular socio-cultural model of higher education that has historically privileged specific demographic groups often white, middle-class individuals from families who have accumulated cultural and educational capital (Reay, 2002). The concept of traditional student is reinforced by institutional rules and expectations in higher education, which were initially organised around the experiences of socially privileged groups (Tinto, 1993; Trow, 1973). Consequently, Higher education institutions tends to prefer students who come from families that already understand academic environments with ease, reinforcing patterns of access and success related to socio-economic status (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Unlike conventional students, most of them are not coming to university directly from school or have formal qualifications. The shift towards greater participation and diversity in higher education is a positive and desirable one. Yet, these students face persistent systemic challenges as they enter educational environments that are not designed with their realities or needs in mind. These challenges are academic, institutional, emotional, and cultural. Students identified lack of confidence as a significant hindrance, which manifest in form

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[1] cesogwa@yahoo.com;   ORCID ID: 0000-0002-7982-2810

of academic anxiety, hesitation in asking questions, or shyness in requesting assistance. Reay (2003) points out that lack of confidence is typically the outcome of unfamiliarity with the dominating cultural and social norms of university life. This mismatch between students' existing experiences and the expectations of higher education institutions can create disorientation and inadequacy. Imposter syndrome is a recurring phenomenon among students who sense that they do not belong in academic environments (Breeze et al., 2022). Non-traditional students may feel like "outsiders" when they are among students who appear more confident, more educated, or part of the university community. This affective burden, added to the pragmatic demands of study, work, and family commitments, places considerable numbers of non-traditional students clearly at risk. Thomas (2002) argues that institutional culture in the university promotes middle-class values and assumptions, including rules governing self-directed learning, taking part in scholarly debate, and relaxed networking. These are not explicitly articulated, and thus non-traditional students are expected to excel in academic learning and figure out the tacit codes of student life. Arguably, lack of access to role models, mentors, or culturally attuned support systems makes many of these students struggle to make a smooth transition into their educational settings. Consequently, they tend to view university as unfamiliar environment, further perpetuating cycles of marginalisation. Despite these challenges, non-traditional students bring a valuable asset in the form of lived experience, work ethic, and alternative perspectives that challenge mainstream discourse and enrich academic debate. Mature learners are characterised by high motivation, self-awareness, and experiential learning, which can positively influence classroom dynamics and academic success. Similarly, underrepresented students bring valuable perspectives on issues of race, class, gender, and social justice, all of which are important themes in current academic research. Therefore, institutions' admit students of non-traditional profiles and create infrastructures, pedagogies, and cultures that facilitate their full participation and success. This demands a shift toward inclusive pedagogy, culturally responsive curricula, and nurturing learning environments that validate students' experiences and identities. This study integrates theories of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), constructivist learning (Laurillard, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978), social identity and belonging (Tinto, 1993) to shed light into inclusive learning that values diversity and challenges systemic inequities. This study contributes to the literature on inclusive pedagogy by exploring the challenges and strategies for engaging students from non-traditional educational backgrounds. Employing a qualitative approach, the author demonstrates how non-traditional students navigate and redefine the challenges of university life, offering a critical analysis of current pedagogic and institutional practices. The study is timely and relevant with the increasing policy interest in widening participation and equity in higher education globally. With universities competing to respond to calls for inclusion and social justice, there is an urgent need for empirical data that highlights the challenges of non-traditional students and focuses on their strengths and survival strategies.

Research Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative and literature review approach, exploring how inclusive pedagogical practice caters for the needs of students from non-traditional educational backgrounds. This approach is appropriate for understanding the complexity of students' lived experience and the socio-cultural nature of learning (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The initial strategy was to search Google scholar database for peer-reviewed articles that examine inclusive pedagogy and students from non traditional education backgrounds. The purposive sampling technique was employed for selecting relevant sources. Only studies conducted in higher education contexts in English, and offering empirical or conceptual insights into inclusive teaching practices. Boolean operator was used to search for keywords such as " student engagement" OR "matured students" OR "inclusive pedagogy". The search yielded a total of 38 documents. After removing 10 duplications, 8 non-journal articles, and 3 documents included in other journal titles, 17 documents were left. To inform the analysis, the author analysed 17 contemporary literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, education policy documentation, and practitioner-based

studies on non-traditional students, inclusive pedagogy, and student engagement. These documents were published between 2000 and 2024. The selection of the 2000–2024 time frame is methodologically significant. Inclusive learning and student engagement has evolved rapidly since 2000 from a mainly learning tool to a sustainable approach to teaching and learning. This methodological approach ensured thematic synthesis of key findings, common challenges and pedagogical strategies used to support students' engagement and success. This approach offers robust insights into how inclusive practices can be implemented in diverse educational environments.

Theoretical Foundation

Drawing on cultural capital theory, social identity and belonging theories, self-efficacy and motivation theories and constructivist learning theories, this article provides insights into the challenges faced by students from non-traditional educational backgrounds and pedagogical strategies to improve engagement and students' success. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital suggests that cultural capital is the knowledge, abilities, behaviours, and inclinations that individuals acquire through socialisation, which bestow privileges in a certain social environment. Traditional students from middle- or upper-class families tend to arrive at university already possessing cultural capital that is aligned with institutional expectations and norms, such as familiarity with academic discourse, argumentative forms, and networking. Non-traditional students, however, possess different forms of capital that are not necessarily or immediately recognised or valued in the academic contexts. This incongruence produces symbolic violence, whereby students are forced to feel excluded as their cultural resources are not valued or recognised (Reay, 2003). It is important to acknowledge this dynamic to develop inclusive pedagogies that recognise various forms of knowledge and enable students to navigate academic cultures with confidence. Closely aligned with cultural capital is the concept of social identity and belonging, which is central to student engagement and persistence. Tinto's (1993) seminal work on student retention emphasises the importance of social and academic integration into university life. Tinto (1993) argues that when students feel they belong to the academic community and have caring relationships with peers and faculty, they are more committed to the institution and their studies. However, non-traditional students often face challenges achieving this sense of belonging due to factors such as minority status, age, or conflicting life roles (e.g., family caregiving). Walton and Cohen (2007) believe that academic performance and psychological well-being can improve when students see themselves as members of the institution. This theoretical stance emphasises the need to create inclusive spaces where multiple identities are affirmed and students are socially engaged. Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy also contributes to the understanding of how non-traditional students navigate academic challenges. Self-efficacy is an individual's belief in their capacity to execute behaviours that are necessary to achieve set goals. Low self-efficacy due to students not being familiar with academic tradition can reduce motivation and engagement, particularly when confronted with difficult tasks or unfamiliar learning environments. Imposter syndrome, as defined by Breeze et al. (2022), can be seen as a manifestation of low self-efficacy, where students internalise a feeling of inadequacy despite evidence of capability. Pedagogical interventions that provide formative feedback, acknowledge small achievements, and scaffold learning experiences have the potential to enhance self-efficacy by creating a sense of control and mastery (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Teaching practices that foster incremental success and affirm student agency are thus vital in encouraging non-traditional learners. Constructivist learning theory emphasises the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through reflection and social interaction (Laurillard, 2012; Vygotsky, 1978;). Constructivism emphasises learning environments where students' cultural heritage and prior experiences are integrated into the curriculum to enable meaningful engagement and understanding at a deeper level. This approach aligns with culturally responsive teaching, linking academic material to students' daily lives and identities, enhancing relevance and motivation (Gay, 2010). The utilisation of peer interaction, interactive media, and adaptable support frameworks also illustrates constructivist ideals by

facilitating discussion, scaffolding learning, and offering flexibility for various requirements. Arguably, these theoretical frameworks provide a robust foundation for developing pedagogical practice and institutional policy that promote equity, inclusion, and academic success.

Why engagement matters

Providing dedicated support to students from non-traditional educational backgrounds such as mature learners, first-generation undergraduate students, working class or minority ethnic community students is beneficial to individual learners and the organisation. As higher education continues to expand, it is more crucial than ever to recognise and respond to the different needs of students whose pathways to the university are not from mainstream routes. Most of these students face multiple and intersecting barriers. However, when institutions do provide inclusive and supportive learning environments, the outcome can be transformative.

One of the impacts of such support is higher retention and academic success. Non-traditional students lead many lives simultaneously, for example, working, caregiving, and fulfilling community responsibilities. These competing pressures can create hard-to-maintain academic engagement. Yet, when institutions of higher education provide suitable academic support, flexible learning opportunities, and individualised mentorship, students can overcome these obstacles (Thomas, 2002). Support services that recognise their lived experiences, such as offering part-time routes, web-based resources, or evening office hours, can greatly enhance students' ability to continue with their studies. In this context, institutions improve the performance of individual students and institutional performance through completion and student satisfaction rates.

Equally important is the work performed by support in creating a sense of belonging and motivational involvement. A significant number of non-traditional students attend university environments where they are made to feel like outsiders. This could be due to language, level of academic preparedness, or cultural unfamiliarity with norms and expectations of the university. As suggested by Breeze et al. (2022) and Reay (2003), such students are typically confronted with imposter syndrome; the internalised feeling of not belonging or not being good enough. Inclusive classroom environments that support connection, affirmation, and co-learning, such as through peer mentoring initiatives, student clubs, or culturally responsive teaching, help to reduce such sentiments and promote long-term engagement.

Moreover, proactive support is essential in building mental resilience and self-confidence. Emotional stress endured by non-traditional students, particularly when compounded by financial hardship, family stress, or social isolation, can have a serious impact on mental well-being. Reay (2003) highlights how unfamiliarity with academic language and institutional culture can leave students feeling inadequate or marginalised. Universities that offer mental health interventions responsive to different needs of students, and opportunities to develop confidence through skills workshops or open academic support, facilitate resilience and self-efficacy.

Furthermore, inclusive academic cultures help foster active engagement in learning. If students feel respected, valued, and recognised for their contribution, they are more likely to come to seminars, participate in group work, and think critically about course materials. Thomas (2002) notes that student participation is linked to perceptions of identity and belonging within the institution. Creating learning spaces that value diverse perspectives, through inclusive pedagogies, open dialogue, and respectful classroom environments, empowers students to become owners of their learning and active members of the academic community. Nonetheless, supporting non-traditional students encourages individual success, enriches the broader university culture and upholds the ideals of equity, inclusion, and academic excellence.

Strategies for Working with Students from Non-Traditional Educational Backgrounds

Formative feedback is a useful tool in a teacher's arsenal when used to recognise improvement and celebrate small successes. For students who enter university with limited formal qualifications or disrupted educational histories, feedback has the potential to confirm either their membership in the academic community or their worst fears. Reay (2003) recognises that mature, working-class women in higher education question their academic abilities, and small setbacks lead to overwhelming self-doubt. Feedback must go beyond correcting mistakes and be a confidence-enhancing process. Carless and Boud (2018) contend that effective feedback must allow students to fill performance gaps and assist them in developing "feedback literacy" so that students learn to decipher, internalise, and act upon advice. When instructors use formative feedback to highlight effort, improvement, and strategic thinking, they affirm the student's capacity for development, allowing them to see themselves as legitimate members of the academic community.

The second pedagogical strategy for engaging non-traditional student success is peer collaboration. First-generation university students experience feelings of disconnection, not just socially but also academically. Collaborative learning models such as peer review, group projects, and discussion forums create feelings of shared endeavour and makes students realise they are not alone in their struggles. Thomas (2002) speaks of the concept of "institutional habitus," whereby the dominant cultural capital of a university can inadvertently marginalise those who lack it. By enabling students to work with peers, educators create spaces where new academic norms can be negotiated rather than imposed. Furthermore, peer learning can be employed to demystify academic expectations, with students learning more readily from others who have overcome the same challenges. Social learning environments foster a sense of belonging and belongingness, which are ultimate measures of student success and retention (Thomas, 2002).

Interactive polls, forums, shared whiteboards, and quiz software can make learning more interactive and participatory. Such tools enable students to participate based on their learning style and confidence. Laurillard (2012) contends that technology, when properly designed, can facilitate more active engagement and enable students to make more connections with teaching materials. For students who are shy about speaking in front of a group or who are still building academic confidence, anonymous polling or online discussion forums provide a lower-risk environment within which to formulate ideas. In online and blended spaces, they also help to counteract the lack of physical presence by maintaining a sense of community and dialogue.

Third, employing inclusive teaching by incorporating relatable and culturally relevant examples can be of significant importance. Arday et al. (2021) posit that inclusive pedagogy must move from superficial diversity to the social and cultural backgrounds of students in a meaningful way. When students see their communities, histories, and perspectives mirrored in the curriculum, then they will be more inclined to engage with the content at a deep and meaningful level. For instance, an adult learner who is also managing childcare will more easily identify with a case study that addresses time management or life change. Incorporating authentic, diverse examples in lectures and assignments can legitimise students' experiences and challenge the implicit curriculum that rewards middle-class, white, and traditionally academic knowledge.

Fourth, students with work and care commitments are often not in a position to access traditional forms of academic support, such as in-office hours or in-person workshops. As such, flexible support such as recorded lectures, online drop-in sessions, and asynchronous feedback can help bridge this gap. Bamber and Tett (2000) note that institutional flexibility, which addresses the complexity of the lives of non-traditional students, benefits these students. Offering more than one channel of support, e.g., digital resources, email consultation, and weekend hours, enables these students to seek support on their own terms. Flexibility also communicates respect and trust, affirming that students can control their learning if provided with choices that are within their reach.

Supporting non-traditional students requires a responsive and holistic approach that is sensitive to the intersections of identity, background, and life experience. Institutions must shift from deficit-based models to asset-based models that acknowledge students' resilience, life experience, and diverse perspectives. Teaching methods such as formative feedback, peer learning, culturally responsive teaching, flexible support, and interactive technologies are not discrete methods but part of an ecosystem of inclusive learning that is interconnected. With carefulness and thoughtfulness, they are capable of improving retention, enhancing academic success, supporting mental well-being, and enabling a genuine sense of belonging.

Figure 1 indicates the conceptual framework/model showing inclusive pedagogical support for non-traditional students in higher education. This framework/model demonstrates the path through which universities and lecturers can understand, support and motivate students from non-traditional backgrounds. The model comprises four interrelated dimensions: student context, theoretical foundations, pedagogical responses, and intended outcomes. At its foundation, the model identifies the diverse and complex student contexts which affect student engagement. Non-traditional students include mature students who are returning to education after several years, while working or with caring commitments. Most are first-generation university students who lack the advantage of family familiarity with the academic system. These overlapping identities create a range of challenges for these students. To better understand and address these challenges, the model draws from a range of theoretical foundations. Informing these insights, the model proposes a set of inclusive pedagogical practices/strategies intended to support non-traditional students. The potential outcomes of employing such strategies are significant. The author argues that this model offers a comprehensive and actionable plan for teachers and institutions committed to improving the outcomes of non-traditional students.

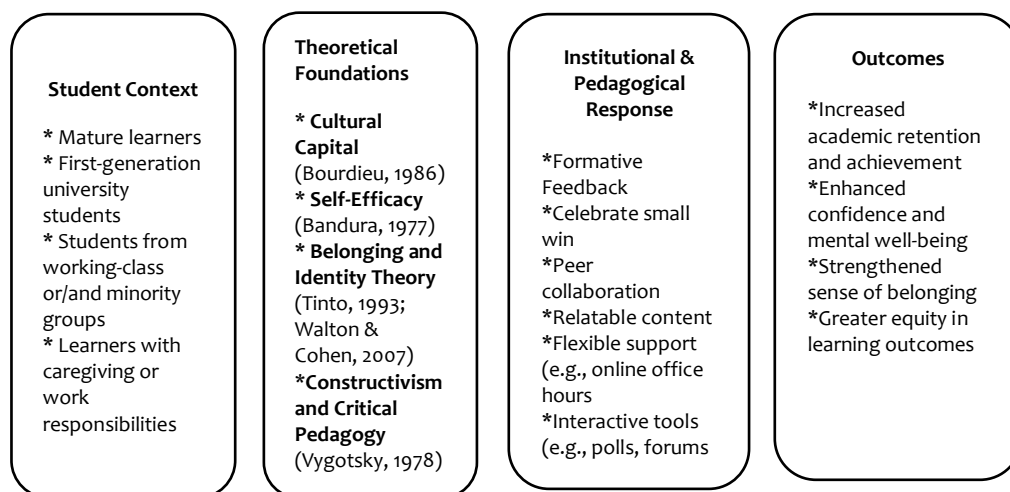| Student Context	Theoretical Foundations	Institutional & Pedagogical Response	Outcomes
* Mature learners * First-generation university students * Students from working-class or/and minority groups * Learners with caregiving or work responsibilities	*** Cultural Capital** (Bourdieu, 1986) *** Self-Efficacy** (Bandura, 1977) *** Belonging and Identity Theory** (Tinto, 1993; Walton & Cohen, 2007) ***Constructivism and Critical Pedagogy** (Vygotsky, 1978)	*Formative Feedback *Celebrate small win *Peer collaboration *Relatable content *Flexible support (e.g., online office hours *Interactive tools (e.g., polls, forums	*Increased academic retention and achievement *Enhanced confidence and mental well-being *Strengthened sense of belonging *Greater equity in learning outcomes

Figure 1. Proposed conceptual framework showing inclusive pedagogical support for non-traditional students in higher education. Source: (Author, 2025)

Study Contributions

This article adds to the inclusive pedagogy and higher education participation literature by synthesising relevant studies and shedding light on pedagogical interventions that are most effective in fostering student motivation and engagement. The study adds to the global debate on education equity and inclusion, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). The study supports SDG 4, ensuring quality education, inclusive and

equitable learning opportunities for all. By exploring non-traditional students and proposing inclusive pedagogy, this study offers practical solutions to making higher education more accessible, responsive, and equitable. The study recognises educational disadvantage as a gendered issue and promotes pedagogies (for instance, flexible learning and personalised support) that respond to structural challenges, contributing to SDG 5. This study supports SDG 10 by outlining systemic and institutional barriers disproportionately affecting working-class students, ethnic minority, or first-generation university students. By highlighting institutional culture, identity, and self-efficacy, this research provides valuable insights into how to reduce social, cultural, and academic gaps in higher education institutions. This study indirectly responds to SDG 8 by proposing strategies that support student retention and academic achievement for non-traditional learners. Higher education supports social mobility and access to decent jobs. Assisting diverse learners contributes to developing a competent and resilient workforce, especially among historically underrepresented groups.

Conclusion

This paper outlined how pedagogies such as formative feedback, peer learning, culturally responsive learning materials, flexible support systems, and interactive technology can support higher education's non-traditional learners. These learners, generally experiences structural disadvantage, lack of confidence in their academic competence, and unfamiliarity with higher education culture, require pedagogies that ensure they feel they belong, are engaged, and in control. By identifying pedagogical choices that have the potential to reduce barriers and encourage participation, this research contributes to the growing debate on democratising tertiary education and making it more inclusive, responsive, and socially equitable. Finally, building inclusive learning spaces not only serves non-traditional students but also the broader academic community by creating richer and more varied spaces of knowledge-making.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

While this paper provides a theoretically grounded and practice-oriented model for supporting non-traditional learners, some limitations need to be recognised. The study is conceptually in focus and does not draw upon empirical evidence derived from classroom-based research or student surveys. Thus, the likely efficacy of the suggested intervention has been inferred from the literature, rather than having been piloted within specific institutional contexts. Second, the loose definition of "non-traditional students" may be concealing differences within this group, such as by age, ethnicity, migration background, or type of caregiving responsibility. A more nuanced breakdown may capture the particular pedagogical requirements and experiences of these subgroups. Future research could build on this study in several meaningful ways.

First, empirical evidence such as classroom-based action research, case studies, or longitudinal studies is required to assess the impact of focused inclusive teaching interventions on student outcomes (e.g. retention, engagement, achievement). Second, student voice research, particularly of mature learners or first-generation students, may extend our understanding of how pedagogic practice is experienced and interpreted. Third, comparative studies across institutions, departments, or modes of delivery (for example, online vs. face-to-face) would assist in determining the impact of context on the effectiveness of inclusive pedagogy. Further studies on how perceptions of faculty members, university policies, and resources influence the adoption of inclusive pedagogy would yield valuable information regarding systemic reforms to guarantee the sustainability of equity-minded teaching practices in higher education. Future research could apply findings by conducting interviews, focus groups, or action research within the classroom to explore how inclusive pedagogies are implemented by non-traditional learners (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

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Biographical notes:

Chijioke Nwachukwu (1977) has a PhD in the field of Business Management and Economics. He is a professor of Human Resource Management and Strategy at Horizons University France. Professor Nwachukwu possesses an exceptional academic pedigree, with numerous peer-reviewed publications in reputable international journals and a proven record of impactful research in areas such as strategic human resource management, organisational behaviour, and talent development. He graduated from the Faculty of Business and Economics of Mendel University in Brno Czech Republic, where he obtained his PhD degree. All the relevant information regarding her scientific work and publications available at:
https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=6ojzywEAAAAJ&hl=en&oi=ao