

Behind the Grade. What Students Learn That Is Never Recorded: The Silent Curriculum: Identity, Emotion and the Reasons Students Stay

Professor Nick Papé, PhD and Abdur Raham, PhD

Abstract

This article explores forms of student learning in Higher Education that are often unseen, unmeasured and unrecorded. Focusing particularly on mature students, it argues that personal growth, emotional persistence and identity shifts play a central role in educational experience, yet remain largely invisible in curriculum design and institutional review. Drawing on original research, student testimony and relevant theory, the article examines how confidence, belonging and motivation emerge through relational and affective moments rather than formal instruction. It critiques performance-led systems that prioritise outcomes, arguing these often ignore the emotional labour students perform simply to stay engaged. The article proposes that curriculum be considered not only as a structure of content but as a site of human exchange where conversation, care and recognition support deeper learning. It does not call for reduced academic standards but for greater attentiveness to how students experience learning amid fear, failure or self-doubt. By highlighting emotion, relationship and identity, the article invites a broader definition of success: one that acknowledges not only what students know, but how they come to believe they can learn. It concludes with a call for new research into emotional presence and meaning-making in educational settings.

Key words

Mature students; higher education; affective learning; student voice; learner identity; curriculum design; academic self-concept; educational persistence; invisible learning; emotional engagement

Introduction

What do students learn that comes not from instruction but through experience? Often it happens quietly; it might be the decision to return after failure, a shift in self-worth when someone listens or a moment of silent determination no one sees. These are not written into unit handbooks and are not included in learning outcomes or discussed in staff meetings. Yet they matter. For many students, these moments are what allow learning to continue when pressure or doubt take hold. This article explores those aspects of learning that are harder to see or measure, it does not offer a model or solution, instead, it asks a central question; what do students learn that is never recorded?

Learning is often framed by formal structures of modules, outcomes and assessments. These features are designed to ensure consistency and support accountability, but they do not capture the whole experience. Alongside planned delivery sits another kind of learning, one that grows through memory, emotion and lived uncertainty. It includes rebuilding trust after educational harm or finding courage after silence. These are not usually tracked or credited, but they shape how learning feels and whether it continues. For many students, especially those studying alongside work, care or personal challenge, they matter more than grades.

The reflections shared here build on earlier research with mature students, their accounts show that meaning is often found not just in content but in how they feel about being in the

room. They speak of staying not because the content was engaging or the feedback useful, but because a tutor paused, listened or responded with warmth. These were not planned features of the course; they were moments of recognition. They showed that who the student is becomes part of how they learn; yet Higher Education still often works on the assumption that emotion sits outside the curriculum, that learning is purely cognitive and students arrive fully ready. This assumption is not just inaccurate; it is harmful. Many students carry earlier academic damage, some are first-generation learners, others are managing illness, loss or care and some have never been told that their thoughts matter. These realities are rarely named in teaching documents; yet they shape how students engage. Emotional presence is not a side concern but is often what allows academic focus to take root. Confidence, identity and the ability to trust in oneself are not outcomes in the formal sense; they are often the ground from which all other learning grows.

This article follows a structure that gives space to those quieter elements. It begins by examining how formal systems reward what is visible and measurable, often leaving personal meaning out of view. It then explores stories from students whose learning includes effort, silence and emotional persistence. Later sections discuss how growth in confidence and identity remains absent from most forms of assessment. The article ends by suggesting that curriculum might be seen not only as delivery but as conversation. This is not a call for less rigour; it is a call for attentiveness as when students are seen as people, not only performers, learning becomes more than progress, it becomes something students carry with them, quietly but with strength.

What Measured and what is Meaningful; A System in Tension

Higher Education presents itself as a system of structure, measurement and progress. From induction to graduation, the student journey is marked by units, deadlines, modules and points of assessment. Curriculum maps outline what is taught, learning outcomes declare what must be achieved, and performance frameworks set out how success will be judged. These features give an outline to academic experience and are often justified in the name of clarity, transparency and fairness. Yet beneath the surface of these measurable elements lies a quieter tension of what counts institutionally that is not always what matters to the learner.

Curriculum is increasingly framed through outcomes, as every module must declare in advance what students will know or be able to do. These outcomes are then linked to forms of assessment, which themselves must be mapped against criteria to ensure consistency and comparability. On paper, this process appears tidy, but in practice it often invites a kind of instrumentalism, where learning is treated less as an enquiry and more as a task to be completed. Teaching shifts toward coverage and compliance; students may learn to aim not for meaning but for marks. This is not simply a product of poor teaching but a reflection of structural priorities that reward visibility and measurement over personal growth or reflection.

The logic behind these systems is not hard to understand. Institutions are held accountable for student outcomes, and league tables compare continuation, completion and progression rates. Courses are audited through external review processes that require evidence of consistency and quality. Within this climate, it becomes safer to show what can be counted than to describe what cannot. Yet many students experience learning not through these metrics but through emotional risk, small shifts in confidence and private acts of persistence. These are rarely named in curriculum documents, and they often disappear entirely from institutional review.

Recent studies highlight this gap, Bryson and Hand (2021) argue that a focus on outcomes narrows the space for students to explore identity or find personal meaning in their work. Cook-Sather and Felten (2021) propose that students often experience a disconnection between the formal language of assessment and their internal sense of progress. Zembylas (2020) adds that the emotional dimensions of learning are routinely silenced by systems that view them as irrelevant or unmanageable, and the result is a curriculum that may be technically sound but emotionally thin. This disconnection is particularly sharp for students who enter Higher Education with previous experience of exclusion or failure. Mature learners, students from minoritised groups or those juggling caring responsibilities often carry additional emotional weight; they may arrive already uncertain about whether they belong. When courses focus only on what is visible (attendance, submission, results) they risk missing the learning that is already taking place in silence evidenced by Dunne, *et al.* (2021) suggesting that inclusion requires more than access. It depends on whether students feel recognised in the spaces they enter. For that to happen, the curriculum must allow for meaning that is not only institutional but personal.

The tools used to shape and evaluate curriculum rarely make space for this kind of meaning. Curriculum mapping, for instance, often aims to ensure coherence and coverage across a programme, but coherence for whom and coverage of what? A map can show that learning outcomes are built across levels, or that assessment points are well spaced, but it cannot show whether a student feels safe enough to speak in a seminar, or whether a tutor's comment makes someone feel good about being seen. These moments do not fit easily into maps, but they may be the reason a student chooses to continue. Performance frameworks operate in a similar way; they track data on submission rates, student satisfaction and progression. They may flag areas of concern, but they cannot detect when a student's motivation begins to falter or when shame begins to replace curiosity. Kahu and Nelson (2021) argue that student engagement is not simply a matter of presence but is shaped by emotional connection, sense of purpose and perceived value. These factors are rarely captured in formal reviews; yet they shape every moment of the learning experience.

This is not a call to abandon structure. However, students deserve clarity about what they are being asked to do. Tutors need guidance to make assessment fair, without the current balance between what is measurable and what is meaningful remaining skewed. What is counted begins to determine what is valued, and what is visible becomes what is praised. The result is that a narrowing of what learning can be as motivation is reduced to completion, feedback becomes correction and reflection becomes optional, rather than essential. The problem is not simply one of method, but of attention. When systems are designed to reward evidence, they begin to ignore what cannot be easily proven. Meaning is often found in what slips past the checklist. Examples might be in a tutorial where a student speaks for the first time; in a decision to return after failure, or in the quiet pride of understanding something once feared. These moments resist performance measures, but they are where much of the learning lives.

If Higher Education is to remain a place where people can grow, then its systems must allow for forms of growth that resist easy classification. That does not mean removing expectations or softening standards, it does mean remembering that what students bring and what they carry away are not always the same things that institutions measure. Cook-Sather and Felten (2021) propose that teaching can act as partnership, where tutors and students both remain open to learning. This requires a shift in attention, not toward perfection, but toward presence. There is a structural tension between what is measured and what matters and poses the

question if institutions measure performance but students remember presence, then what kind of curriculum are we building? If meaning is made in moments that systems overlook, then perhaps our maps are incomplete or misdrawn. The challenge is not to reject measurement, but to recognise its limits and make deliberate space for the kinds of learning that remain unseen yet influence how students grow, persist and find meaning in their studies.

Literature Review

There is substantial writing on curriculum structure, student engagement and teaching strategies in Higher Education. Yet relatively little of it explores how students actually experience learning. Personal meaning-making, emotional uncertainty and the effort required to persist through doubt are often absent from formal curriculum design or quality frameworks.

Learning Outcomes and Institutional Metrics

Curriculum structures in Higher Education are heavily shaped by performance indicators and quality assurance processes. These systems aim to promote consistency and accountability but tend to define learning by what can be tracked. Biggs and Tang (2011) remain widely cited for work on constructive alignment; yet the focus on mapping outcomes can limit attention to less visible forms of understanding. Torrence (2021) argues that outcome-based teaching reinforces a model of education where students perform the right answers rather than explore ideas. Similarly, Neves and Hewitt (2020) posit that satisfaction metrics tell us very little about student development or emotional engagement, and the same perspective advocated by Bryson and Hand (2021) suggest that performance-focused delivery narrows the meaning of success and makes little room for students' identities within the curriculum.

Student Voice and Personal Meaning

The phrase '*student voice*' is now widely used in HEI marketing and quality strategies, but its meaning varies. Cook-Sather (2006) and Bovill (2020) have championed student involvement in design and delivery, and co-creation has grown in both theory and practice. However, much of this work has been absorbed into systems that measure engagement as compliance rather than shared ownership. Dunne, *et al.* (2021) examine examples of staff–student partnership and find that consultation often follows institutional scripts informing that students were invited to comment on delivery or structure, but not on the emotional labour of study or what success personally meant. Healey, *et al.* (2020) reach similar conclusions, noting that partnership is often framed through policy goals. College research reports that mature students frequently found these mechanisms unhelpful as their learning is often shaped by identity, history and private struggle, which are difficult to express within standard feedback processes. The emotional reality of their experience sits outside institutional expectations.

Emotion, Belonging and Confidence

There is growing recognition that emotion shapes learning in powerful ways. Zembylas (2020) describes the emotional silence that surrounds HEI study, with students and tutors often discouraged from speaking about discomfort or difficulty. Thomas, *et al.* (2021) found that belonging is a significant factor in retention, especially in the early stages of study. Recent articles accepted for publication contribute directly to this theme, Papé, *et al.* (2025) explore tutor behaviours valued by mature students and find that consistency, warmth and encouragement matter more than technique. In a related study the authors propose that confidence grows not only from achievement but also from moments of being seen and acknowledged (Perry and Gunn, 2025). These findings echo the work of Devis-Rozental, *et al.* (2017), who studied socio-emotional intelligence in first-year students, that indicated

emotional learning emerges quietly through relationships and persistence. Curriculum documents rarely acknowledge this; yet it is central to how students decide to stay, speak or succeed.

Psychological Models and Lived Experience

Educational psychology has provided many of the terms now used to describe student development. Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory and Zimmerman's (2002) work on self-regulation, remain widely applied. These models offer useful ways to think about motivation and strategy, but they are often used without much regard for context or lived experience. Trigwell (2012) adds that teachers' emotional engagement with teaching influences their pedagogical choices, which in turn helps shape the emotional tone of a classroom. Simons and Baeten (2022) propose that engagement varies with personal history, family demands and emotional safety. The College's own research contributes directly to this area, exploring mature students' reasons for staying in Higher Education, highlighting that emotional persistence was often motivated by deep personal need, especially the wish to change one's story, to return to education with pride or to re-establish self-belief after earlier failure.

Mature Students and the Question of Identity

Work on widening access has begun to show that identity matters in education. Mature and non-traditional students, particularly, often experience a conflict between institutional assumptions and their own reasons for study. Hodge, *et al.* (2020) explore identity work in returning learners and suggest that education often requires them to renegotiate their self-perception. Uddin, *et al.* (2024) reported that mature students frequently describe their learning as personal rather than professional. Many were motivated by long-held goals, rather than by credentials. In a companion piece, Papé *et al.* (2025c) examine pedagogical preferences and find that trust and care are more important to students than delivery methods or resources. These findings are also reflected in the international collection *Exploring Widening Access for Mature Age Students* (Eds. Baker *et al.*, 2026), which includes Chapter 9, authored by Papé and Hasan, based on case study research. Students speak not only about academic challenges but also about how education reshapes their sense of identity. Some describe study as a return to self, rather than a move forward.

Taken together, these works suggest that education is not just a series of outcomes but a human process and is built from memory, effort, support and risk. The current literature shows some awareness of this, but more attention is still needed to the emotional and reflective dimensions of learning, especially for students whose experiences are rarely seen or heard.

Methodology

The research presented in this article drew on a mixed-method approach designed to illuminate dimensions of student experience that resist traditional measurement. To explore the emotional, relational and identity-based aspects of learning, three primary strategies were employed; a comprehensive review of academic literature via electronic platforms, a targeted student survey and direct correspondence with senior academic and administrative figures involved in course design and delivery.

To establish a scholarly foundation, a structured search was conducted using academic databases including EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and SAGE Journals. The focus was placed on peer-reviewed material concerning curriculum design, student voice, mature learners and the emotional dimensions of learning in Higher Education. Additional sources were drawn from

Scopus and Google Scholar to widen access to cross-disciplinary perspectives. This literature served not only to contextualise emerging themes but also to highlight gaps between institutional priorities and the lived experience of students. Particular attention was paid to papers that examined the relationship between identity, belonging and persistence within educational settings.

In parallel, a digital survey was disseminated to a cohort of students enrolled at different stages of business and health programmes across three campuses. The sample included first-year entrants, continuing students and finalists, in order to capture varied reflections on belonging, motivation and emotional presence during study. Questions were a mixture of open and closed formats, allowing both measurable patterns and personal narratives to emerge. Participation was voluntary and anonymised, with all responses stored securely and in accordance with data protection guidelines. The student voice was not viewed as supplementary to the research but integral to its development. The purpose was not to seek consensus but to allow for the complexity and range of responses to remain visible.

To gain a wider institutional view, a series of correspondences were undertaken with senior staff, respondents were asked to reflect on how emotional experience is accounted for in course design, the extent to which student identity is considered in pedagogical planning and what role they believe informal learning moments play in retention and progression. The responses were not analysed for statistical frequency but considered thematically alongside student comments and literature findings. Where appropriate, selected quotations were incorporated into the discussion sections of the article.

These combined methods allowed for the triangulation of data without reducing complexity to categorical claims. While statistical generalisation was not the aim, the range and depth of testimony from both students and senior staff allowed for a careful reading of what might be missing from standard curriculum review processes. The methodology acknowledges from the outset that not all learning can be itemised or tracked. Instead, it seeks to pay attention to the emotional and relational layers of education that remain under-represented in policy documents, despite being central to whether students persist, engage and ultimately succeed.

Stories Students Carry; Learning Moments that Escape the Record

The most significant learning moments for students are often the least visible. They take place between deadlines, in moments of quiet self-reflection, or in the decision to return after a setback. These experiences do not appear on transcripts, evaluation forms or learning dashboards; yet they carry more weight than any module descriptor could capture. For many students, particularly those studying later in life or amidst competing demands, these moments are where learning begins, deepens or is held onto.

One mature student, returning to study after over twenty years spent raising children, described the feeling of her mind having '*gone to sleep*' and how the act of study had begun to '*wake it again*'. No assignment reflected this change, nor did any tutor see the nightly effort of opening her laptop while others slept. She simply repeated '*I have to study. I have to just study*'. That phrase stayed with the researcher not because of its content, but because of its quiet expression of commitment, endurance and repair. It was a sentence shaped more by personal history than pedagogy, but it told a story of return. Another student wrote, following a long period of loneliness, '*Now I have friends. We go to the cinema, the park together.*' This reflection would never feature in a progression report, yet it speaks directly to the foundations of educational persistence. Confidence does not always emerge through academic

performance, but through feeling seen and accepted. For this student, friendship did not supplement learning, it made it possible. As Hooks (1994) and Thomas (2012) argue, belonging is not an optional extra to education but often its enabling condition.

Not all emotional experiences are affirming. One student described how a change of tutor mid-course unsettled her more than expected. She recognised in her response a familiar pattern – the wish to please someone new, echoing earlier family dynamics. This response was not a failure of the curriculum but a reminder of how classroom relationships can awaken older emotional scripts. The student wrote of being *'caught off guard'*, recognising that something had been learned – not about the subject, but about herself. It was a moment of personal insight with no formal place in the module but one that reshaped her self-awareness. As Illeris (2018) notes, deep learning often carries emotional disruption; it resists design and emerges unexpectedly.

These experiences resemble what Mezirow (2000) describes as 'disorienting dilemmas': emotionally charged events that challenge the learner's previous assumptions. They are not interruptions to learning but part of its process. For some, these moments do not feel disruptive but hopeful. One student wrote *'I can make myself something'*, while another spoke of wanting to *'change the status quo in my own life.'* These are not goals drawn from institutional rubrics. They are statements of intent that reflect internal transformation rather than achievement that signal belief in the possibility of change – a belief often more formative than any content mastered. However, these expressions also hint at discomfort. They reveal the friction between individual aspiration and institutional language. Students are often aware that their goals do not fit official definitions of success. The language of transformation, development and personal meaning sits uneasily alongside standardised outcomes or assessment criteria. This is not because those criteria are inherently flawed, but because they cannot hold what many students actually value, i.e. the reconstitution of belief and the possibility of self-renewal (Brookfield, 2017; Mezirow, 2000).

Many of these moments occur in solitude. No tutor hears the inner negotiation after failure, the quiet decision to try again, or the fear that resurfaces during submission week. No policy captures the relief of being understood or the silent pride of speaking in class for the first time. Yet these are not marginal moments. They are the conditions under which formal learning can happen. They are formative because they reshape the learner's self-concept. As Cousin (2009) argues, the most powerful elements of education often resist quantification. They are not easily codified or extracted. Attempts to formalise them can diminish their meaning. Rather than seek to evidence these moments, Cousin suggests education must *'hold space'* for them. This does not require special provision or therapeutic practice, but attention. It asks tutors and institutions to be aware that real learning often begins in silence, far from the mechanisms designed to capture it.

These stories also suggest a need to reconsider what counts as success. For some students, particularly mature learners, success is measured not by the attainment of outcomes but by the rebuilding of confidence. One student described joining a study group for the first time and noted that *'spending time together in study is a fun time.'* The phrase is simple, yet it conveys something profound: the shift from isolation to inclusion, from self-doubt to participation. These moments, though small, are pivotal. They are part of what Thomas (2012) identifies as the return of belonging. The theories of Deci and Ryan (2000) help to explain why these relational experiences matter. Their work on self-determination suggests that autonomy, competence

and relatedness are essential for motivation. Of these, relatedness, the experience of being recognised and connected, is often the most fragile in educational settings, yet the most powerful in sustaining effort. Zimmerman (2002) similarly emphasises that self-regulation depends not only on skills but on a student's capacity to manage doubt, assess progress and stay engaged in uncertainty. These are emotional acts, not merely cognitive ones.

Despite their importance, most course designs make little room for these emotional and relational dimensions. Performance metrics track attendance, submission and satisfaction, but not the daily effort of continuing. Marks may record achievement but not what it took to reach that point. As Beard, *et al.* (2007) have shown, emotional labour in higher education is often invisible but essential. It is the work students do to stay composed, to ask for help, to try again after silence. For tutors, emotional labour involves noticing, responding and offering presence even when there is no procedural reason to do so. It is the human work of education that holds the rest in place. These accounts show that learning does not only take place in formal instruction. It lives in small, often unnoticed exchanges. One student, reflecting on her return after years away, said simply '*I am trying to become a better person.*' Another described study as '*something that will personally make me happy.*' These comments do not fit the language of module descriptors, but they speak directly to the purpose of education. They suggest that, for many students, study is not a transaction but a search for identity, for connection, for a sense of what is possible.

Academic standards should remain high, with clear expectations and fair assessments. However, students are more than their results. When they share their motivations and challenges, educators see that learning is an active process which students pursue, despite fear or fatigue, that warrants recognition. As Biesta (2010) argues, education should not be reduced to qualification and socialisation alone. It must also include subjectification, the process by which individuals become agents of their own learning and lives. The stories students carry are evidence of this process; they are not add-ons to the curriculum but reflections of its real effects. When students stay after failing, when they try again after silence, when they find friendship in a seminar, these moments reshape who they believe they are. It is not always teachable or testable, but it lasts. If educators can learn to notice and to honour it subjectification without capturing it, then education becomes not only a system but a relationship, not only an outcome but a human act.

What Can't Be Marked; The Limits of Formal Recognition

Higher education systems prioritise what can be recorded as learning outcomes are mapped, teaching delivery aligned and assessment regimes standardised. These frameworks help bring order and comparability, serving institutional and regulatory expectations (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Biesta, 2010), but what these systems measure does not always reflect the learning students value most. Students do describe education as a process that reshapes how they see themselves, not just what they know. Ecclestone (2007) highlights how adult learners experience identity shifts through learning, often navigating tensions between personal agency and institutional structures. Students often describe study not as the pursuit of a grade, but as a step towards personal change. '*I wish to become a better person,*' one student writes. Another describes study as '*something that will personally make me happy.*' These are not abstract sentiments; they are grounded expressions of purpose, they do not feature in module handbooks, nor are they easily measured against institutional benchmarks; they reflect the emotional and ethical substance of student persistence (Papé *et al.*, 2025). In practice, confidence rarely emerges from assessment scores alone. It grows through relational

moments, being acknowledged, being invited, being heard. One student describes the comfort of being included in a study group; another says plainly '*Spending time together in study is a fun time.*' These small encounters convey more than sociability, they communicate belonging which give students reasons to remain even when the formal structures of education feel distant or overwhelming (Thomas, 2012; Hooks, 1994).

These student reflections are not isolated anecdotes. Rather, they mirror longstanding research in educational psychology, informing Deci and Ryan (2000), through their self-determination theory, to emphasise that human motivation depends on the fulfilment of three psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness. When students experience a sense of connection and recognition within learning environments, their intrinsic motivation strengthens; conversely, when they feel unseen or excluded, their confidence erodes and disengagement often follows. Zimmerman (2002) further contributes to this understanding by demonstrating that academic persistence cannot be reduced to cognitive strategy alone but instead depends on emotional resilience, i.e. the learner's capacity to self-monitor, set meaningful goals and sustain motivation in the face of difficulty.

Yet emotional resilience does not exist independently of institutional conditions, as it is not a fixed personality trait but a relational and contextual process. When educational systems reward only visible performance or measurable achievement, they risk obscuring the affective and emotional labour that underpins student persistence. This labour, often unacknowledged and unmeasured, manifests in multiple forms, from the effort required to re-engage with study following prior failure, to the courage it takes to speak in class despite fear of judgement. For mature learners, or those managing complex life responsibilities, the mere act of arriving to class or submitting work on time may reflect a deeply personal and often invisible commitment. Tutors, too, participate in this emotional economy evidenced by Hochschild (1983) who introduces the concept of emotional labour as the work individuals perform to manage feeling within professional roles. In educational settings, this includes subtle but meaningful acts to offer assurance, such as demonstrating patience with anxious learners, or staying behind after sessions to listen. Beard, *et al.* (2007) note that such behaviours are not embedded within formal job descriptions or workload models; yet they frequently make the difference between a student continuing or quietly withdrawing. These forms of care are not incidental to learning; they sustain it.

Nevertheless, curriculum design remains closely tied to completion metrics and performance targets; assessments prioritise product over process, correctness over reflection and standardisation over adaptation (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Torrance, 2021). Yet student accounts repeatedly express a desire not for leniency, but for acknowledgement. What many seek is recognition that their lived experience, particularly the emotional cost of learning, forms part of what they bring to their study. They do not necessarily request adjustment to standards, but rather visibility within them. As one student expresses, '*I have to study. I have to just study*', describing solitary late-night work once her children are asleep. Her statement carries little academic flourish yet conveys a depth of emotional resolve that escapes formal appraisal. Other narratives speak to the social dimensions of learning. One student reflects on a newly found sense of inclusion after beginning the course: '*Now I have friends. We go to the cinema, the park together.*' This expression does not align with course outcomes, but it reveals something essential about why education matters. For many, learning becomes possible only when they experience connection and safety. The sense of belonging described here is not incidental; it is often the precondition for sustained engagement. As Hooks (1994) and Thomas

(2012) argue, belonging is not a peripheral benefit of education, it is fundamental to it.

At times, learning also arises from discomfort and disruption. A student recalls how a tutor change prompted old patterns of seeking approval to resurface, leading to personal insight about how her past relationships shaped her academic behaviours. The curriculum did not intend this response; yet it catalysed a form of internal reflection no less important than mastering content. This echoes Illeris (2018) and Mezirow (2000), who suggest that significant learning often follows emotional disturbance or '*disorienting dilemmas*'. These moments, while difficult, frequently mark the beginning of genuine transformation.

Crucially, such experiences are not anomalies. They characterise the learning journeys of many: particularly, mature students whose educational paths are impacted by earlier interruptions or academic trauma. Yet these moments of becoming, of self-realisation and emotional growth, find no natural home in formal learning outcomes. They resist codification and cannot be marked. Biesta (2010) refers to this process as 'subjectification' describing the emergence of the learner as an ethical, reflective individual. It is distinct from learning conceived as the acquisition of skills or integration into institutional norms. For many, especially those returning to education after a long absence, subjectification is not a supplementary benefit but the very reason for study. One student writes simply, '*I can make myself something.*' Another offers the ambition, '*I want to change the status quo in my own life.*' These statements, modest in language but expansive in intent, do not appear in programme specifications or module guides. Yet they articulate the purpose of education for those who experience it as a means of personal renewal. They are not rhetorical flourishes but genuine declarations of change-in-process.

However, institutional systems often fail to register this kind of change. Performance dashboards track marks, attendance and retention, but not the gradual rebuilding of confidence or the quiet perseverance that follows a previous failure. Kahu and Nelson (2021) argue that student engagement is as much emotional and cognitive as it is behavioural. Students remain engaged when they feel their work matters—when it holds personal as well as institutional meaning. To acknowledge the emotional dimensions of learning is not to weaken educational standards. On the contrary, it adds complexity and relevance to how we understand academic achievement. It moves the question from '*what did the student produce?*' to '*what did the student overcome, endure or discover?*' This reframing requires educators to see students not only as recipients of content but as individuals negotiating memory, identity, aspiration and fear. It also calls for attentiveness to those moments when students persist, reflect or re-engage, not because a course design required it, but because something within them remained committed. This does not entail a therapeutic model of education. As Ecclestone and Hayes (2009) caution, not all emotional expression requires intervention, nor should emotional labour be mined or extracted. However, failing to acknowledge these experiences risks presenting education as a purely technical process, divorced from the human conditions that make learning possible. As Zembylas (2020) argues, emotional awareness is not a distraction from rigour but a necessary feature of ethical pedagogy.

Practically, this might mean building spaces within the curriculum for reflective writing or dialogical assessment, where students can speak to their lived experiences without reducing those experiences to data. It also means treating moments of relational connection, for example being welcomed into a conversation, being heard, being invited back after absence, not as peripheral gestures but as critical components of the learning environment. When

students feel good about being seen, they are more likely to continue. When they do not, disengagement may follow, not dramatically, but quietly and persistently. Disengagement is often misread as students who stop attending or submit work with diminishing quality are sometimes labelled as disinterested or unmotivated. But beneath this behaviour may lie a more complicated story including of effort unrecognised, or identity not reflected in course design. Biesta (2010) and Brookfield (2017) both propose that learning involves not only performing tasks but seeing oneself in the learning process. When students cannot locate their values or voice in the material, withdrawal may be less a choice than an outcome of exclusion.

At its most thoughtful, education recognises and leaves space for what is not measured. It attends to emotional and relational experiences without reducing them to checklists or evaluation forms. Cousin (2009) insists that certain kinds of learning resist formalisation, precisely because they are shaped through emotion, dialogue and human encounter, to mark them would be to diminish their meaning. The aim, then, is not to count everything, but to remain open to what cannot be counted, for instance *'I am trying to become a better person,'* one student writes. This is not a learning objective or a benchmark of attainment, it is something else entirely, a quiet declaration of growth, situated not in the measurable but in the meaningful. If education can learn to witness and honour such statements, without attempting to standardise them, it moves closer to the change it claims to support.

Curriculum as Conversation; Teaching with the Whole Learner in Mind

Curriculum is often presented as a plan, with mapped outcomes, unit descriptors and measurable assessments. This design implies smooth, linear progression from entry to graduation. In practice, however, the experience of learning rarely follows a straight path. Students arrive with complex histories, competing priorities and very personal reasons for being there. They do not simply absorb knowledge, they interpret, resist, carry, reshape and live through it. When we begin to take student meaning seriously, the limitations of a delivery model become clear. This is a call to allow structure to remain open to something more personal and unpredictable. The idea of curriculum as conversation invites this possibility not as a model or method but an attitude: one that holds the student in view not only as a learner but as a person whose presence in the classroom already holds meaning.

To think of curriculum as conversation is to acknowledge that students bring something with them and that teaching is not a one-way act. The term conversation does not imply politeness or mutual agreement but suggests presence, response and the possibility of change on both sides. When students struggle to participate or to submit a piece of work that falls short, they are not simply failing to meet an outcome. They may be managing fear, doubt or longstanding emotional patterns. These conditions are rarely visible in formal processes, yet they shape the effort required to learn. Zembylas (2020) describes the emotional silence of academic life and argues that this silence must be broken if education is to matter in real ways. What is often dismissed as distraction or lack of preparedness may in fact be the unspoken weight of previous learning wounds.

Relational teaching does not mean offering therapy or reducing expectations, it means noticing. It means hearing what is said between the lines and offering enough space in the curriculum for students to bring meaning with them. Matthews (2021) writes about curiosity and partnership as *'foundations for meaningful learning'*. His work supports the view that students need not only to be taught, but to be taken seriously. Some of the students involved in previous research describe moments where the most important learning happened when

someone simply paused and paid attention. These moments were not built into the timetable. They emerge because a tutor recognises a human being rather than a name on a list. Fang, *et al.* (2025) found that mature learners especially valued this kind of attentiveness, as for them, learning was never just about gaining knowledge. It was about returning to education as a way of reclaiming agency, often in the face of long histories of exclusion or self-doubt.

This approach has clear implications for curriculum design without requiring the removal of content or the dilution of academic standards. It requires small shifts allowing students to reflect on what learning means to them and making room in assignments for emotion, not as indulgence but as part of the work of making sense. Recognising effort, even when performance falls short, as Kahu and Nelson (2021) argue that sustained student engagement is linked to emotional safety and a sense of purpose. When a student continues after a failure or turns up to class after a difficult night, that is an act of learning as much as completing a task; yet this effort often passes unremarked because it cannot be measured. Thomas, *et al.* (2021) maintain that a sense of belonging is one of the most reliable indicators of student success and that it is not created by policy but built through interaction, presence and care.

Assessment, too, needs to be considered within this view. When students are assessed only on their ability to recall or reproduce. They are invited to perform correctly, which may reward those who are already confident, but risks alienating those who are still trying to find their place. Cook-Sather and Felten (2021) make the case for assessments that invite students to position themselves in relation to what they are learning. This does not mean that standards fall; it means that students are asked to think rather than recite. It allows space for students to be present in their work, to bring who they are to the task as Bryson and Hand (2021) argue, identity and learning cannot be separated; outcomes-only approaches are likely to fail the very students they aim to support. The tension between standardisation and responsiveness is not easy to resolve, but it begins by asking whether the current approach really reflects what learning looks and feels like for students.

These ideas have particular resonance for students whose lives sit outside the assumed norms of higher education: for example, mature students, students with caring responsibilities and students who have experienced academic failure before, who often arrive with little confidence but deep motivation. Dunne, *et al.* (2021) highlight how identity and inclusion are shaped not by grand interventions but by everyday acts of recognition. For those students, curriculum as conversation is not a luxury but is often the only space where they feel allowed to belong. When the curriculum makes no space for this, the student may still complete the course, but something is lost. When it does make space, students often describe their learning experience not only in terms of course content but also about who they are and what they are capable of. None of this denies the need for structure or coherence; it asks instead that those who design and deliver curriculum remember that learning happens in the middle of real lives: i.e., that students are more than bodies on chairs or names on spreadsheets. When curriculum is seen as conversation, it becomes a space where knowledge is not simply transferred, but also made meaningful. It invites tutors to listen not only to what students say and the experiences they bring with them, but also to recognise that effort, emotion and experience are not distractions but part of the fabric of learning. By doing so, tutors can treat students not as problems to be solved but as people already learning, from the outset and long after lessons have been completed.

Conclusion; Learning That Lasts

Not all learning can be seen or marked. This article has returned to that idea from different angles: through student voices, institutional routines and teaching practices. Higher Education often focuses on what can be listed, timed or assessed, yet many of the most lasting learning moments are quiet and unrecorded. They happen when confidence begins to build, when failure is met with dignity or when someone feels that they belong. These experiences do not sit in the official curriculum, but they shape how students learn, and these moments hold more weight than any grade. If education is to support change that truly lasts, then more care must be given to what is not easily measured.

Throughout this discussion, the stories of mature learners offer a reminder that meaning often lies in how learning feels, not just in what it includes. These students show that confidence grows when someone takes time, that belief builds when a voice is heard and that identity shifts when past failure is no longer treated as a life sentence. Their experiences suggest that educational achievement is not just a matter of skill or knowledge, it depends on trust, relationship and a sense of possibility. These factors are not marginal to learning; they are often the reason it continues, especially when students face difficulty; yet these elements remain largely ignored in course documents, teaching policies and evaluation tools.

This is not a call for lower standards or soft approaches as academic challenge matters. But to support real growth, we must acknowledge that students do not arrive in identical shape, with many carrying earlier disappointments, self-doubt or pressure they cannot name. They study while working, caregiving or managing illness and persist while unsure if they belong. In those conditions, what helps is not simply clever content but moments of being seen, thus noticing matters. When tutors pause, when they speak with care, when they give room for a hesitant question, something shifts; the student begins to believe in learning. That is not performance but is trust being built and it is central to what makes learning possible. The system around them, however, often fails to see this, as although the student voice is widely promoted, it is often reduced to forms, surveys or scripted panels. Few studies have seriously explored the emotional weight of returning to study or the inner changes that shape student persistence as most retention research still focuses on logistics, not belief. Many students who leave do so quietly; they do not say much, but something inside them has shifted. The moment is emotional, not just practical. If institutions want to understand what helps students stay, they must look past grades and workload calculators, they must ask different questions and they must listen to what is often missed: for example, those private movements in confidence or purpose that come long before the student leaves or excels.

This article ends with a quiet invitation asking tutors to notice more. It asks course designers to leave room for meaning and for institutions to treat students as people who are changing, not just performing. It also asks researchers to do more as there is very little large-scale work that centres on emotional experience in course design. We know that confidence, identity and belonging matter, but they remain outside most educational planning. Awareness of the gap provides opportunities for tutors and institutions to treating learning not only as achievement but also as a positive relationship, wherein students can experience belief and change and, sometimes, carry away the memory of being seen, when it mattered most.

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