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An evaluation of the first year experience from the mature students' perspective; a multi-institutional comparison

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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of mature students across three higher education institutions in the UK. The issues arising are of relevance to academics who are involved in widening participation and in evaluating support in their own programmes for the diversity of students. The sample includes mature students from programmes in Health, where mature students form a majority, and in Business, where mature students formed a minority. Focus groups were used to gain access to student perspectives on expectations, motivations, sacrifices, transitions, induction, programmes and assessment. The findings include misleading information that did not acknowledge the particular concerns and needs of mature students, induction processes that were not experienced as inclusive by mature students, and varying experiences of support but overall the institutional context was significant.

Context

Within the context of widening participation, a greater number of mature students are being encouraged to enter higher education. It is recognised that mature students have differing priorities and concerns to 'traditional' students and they often find the higher education environment a difficult one in which to participate (see Bamber and Tett, 2000; Merrill, 2001 and Tett, 2004). This paper explores the experience of mature students on various programmes, including ones in which mature students are in the majority and ones where they are in the minority. Three institutions collaborated in this research providing a unique comparison of mature student experience not only within these institutions but also between the different types of institutions. The aim of the research is to explore the issues that may be particular to mature students within higher education, in order that institutions may improve the quality of the student experience. The results will enable the development of programmes that provide a high quality learning environment and level of support that allows mature students entering or returning to higher education to succeed in their studies.

Universities have embraced the widening participation agenda and have actively changed admissions policies to accommodate this. Many universities have also introduced retention policies in order to enhance the

student experience, to reduce the number of withdrawals and encourage re-entry into the HE system. Mature students are a potentially large market, yet many mature students have differing priorities to the 'traditional' undergraduate and require flexible programmes of study that combine well with their other commitments and life goals. This group of potential students can be a hard-to-reach audience and many students, once recruited, find the shift back into higher education a difficult one to succeed in.

Yorke's (1999) study of early leavers from six UK universities found that older students are more likely to have family responsibilities of various kinds than the younger students but of all the possible influences on their withdrawal, financial problems were by far the most commonly cited. Whilst younger students refer, more frequently, to the wrong choice of field of study and influences related to their lack of preparedness for living away from home, in contrast, the older students found the demands of employment whilst studying a relatively more powerful influence on their departure. Bamber and Tett's (1999) work on working class adults concluded that for this group, higher education is not only a difficult environment to access but even more difficult in which to survive. In particular the practical need to gain an income alongside studying was highlighted in relation to the flexibility of course design.

Mature students often find the transition to higher education a difficult one and one method of supporting an easier transition to university is through greater collaboration between further and higher education. This can take a number of forms including franchising, 'top-ups' and foundation degrees. Marks (2002a, 2002b and 2002c) argues that universities are intimidating to adult learners and a 2+2 top up degree based on the US system could be beneficial. This is where 2 years are studied at a further education college with the final 2 years at a university. This transfer from FE to HE has been found to be problematic with the need for, perhaps, whole degrees taught in FE Colleges (Bird and Crawley, 1994). Partnerships between educational institutions can result in synergy with the FE Colleges providing local market knowledge and accessibility combined with a university's national and international status (Duke, 1997). Access courses are often seen as a point of transition and can provide a useful bridging zone, however the risks associated with this route are explored in Brine and Waller (2004). These risks include financial insecurity and changes to learner identity. In addition to these anticipated problems, there are other factors including class identity and loss of existing relationships that may influence the decision to continue on to and succeed in higher education.

The integration of mature and younger students on a programme may also be problematic. Research conducted previously at the University of Salford in the Faculty of Health and Social Care (Trotter and Cove, 2005) discovered that it was difficult to satisfy the needs of both mature and younger students in terms of their teaching and learning requirements.

For this piece of phenomenological research programmes have been selected that will allow comparison of the mature student experience where they are in the majority and the minority on their programme. The research at St Martin's College, now the University of Cumbria, was conducted in the School of Applied Social Sciences and Business Studies and the Faculty of Health. At Middlesex two programmes in Health and Social Sciences and the Business School were chosen and at Salford, programmes in the new Salford Business School and the School of Health Care Professions have been researched. Focus groups were carried out in all three institutions with both sets of students, those based on the programme where mature students are considered the majority (health programmes) and where older students are very much in the minority (business programmes). The broad aim was to discover the range of opinions, beliefs and emotions tied to the mature student experience. The students were questioned about their expectations, motivations, sacrifices, transition, induction, the programme and the assessment regime, support networks and general reflections. According to the results, these have been themed either by institution or by programmes, with programmes being composed with mature students either being in the majority or minority.

Findings

The focus groups were asked about their expectations of university life. Lowe and Cook (2003) carried out similar research investigating the expectations of students prior to joining the University of Ulster and their experience two months later. That study came to the conclusion that for many students these did not match due to poor preparation and poor advice. The mature students in this study expected a full timetable, debt and a work hard/play hard balance. There was also a general nervousness about fitting in as the following quote shows

Loads of really clever people, much, much better than me

This notion of 'fitting in' has been researched in a number of studies (Reay et al 2001, Hutchings and Archer, 2001 and Ball et al 2002). Conclusions drawn from all these studies indicate that students choose universities where they feel they will be accepted and which already has a student body similar to themselves.

The students were also asked about their motivations for wanting to go to university at this stage in their lives. For many, especially from the Health programmes, it was to open up a change of direction and a chance to *leave 'poxy' jobs for a professional career*. For some, on the Business programmes, it was to *have something additional to make you stand out from the crowd*. For others it was considered to be a last chance

I think we're so scared of and so grateful if you like for the chance, the second chance, and so scared of failing, I think you really put your back into it and appreciate it a lot more.

Marks, Turner and Osborne (2003) analysed the reasons behind adult participation in higher education, paying particular attention to gender issues. For many, the idea of being a good parent had pushed them into higher education. For women, this had meant being a good role model whilst for the men this had meant the ability to earn a higher wage. This role model concept came out in our study too as shown by the following quote

I'm also doing this to show my children that you can do it at any age. That nothing can stop you if you want it.

I want my children to have a better life and that means more studying for a better job.

Very much related to this was a question regarding the sacrifices that the students felt they had made in order to go to university. This was wide ranging with some, although a few students expressed no sacrifices, seeing everything as a positive move. At the other extreme some students told of relatively serious sacrifices of financial security, job security, lifestyle, time with family, social life (old friends) and relationships. For international students there was the added loss of culture, home, familiarity and in some cases even support. Some cases highlighted substantial sacrifices

I didn't want to travel and didn't want to live in halls so I sold my house and bought in the area.

The potential loss of social contacts and relationships can be damaging as these support networks can be a deciding factor between withdrawal and remaining on course (Parmar and Trotter, 2005).

The students were asked how they had coped with the transition to HE in the early weeks of university life and more specifically, the induction process. In terms of transition, student comments included

Initial concerns integrating with younger students

Overwhelmed with the amount of work involved and new skills to develop

Not enough done to help integrate mature students

The induction process came in for particular criticism at all three institutions. Tinto (1993) highlights the induction process as an important stage in encouraging early adjustment and social integration to university life that helps with progression and retention. In Yorke (2000) of the six key determinants of withdrawal three relate to this early experience, namely poor quality of the student experience, unhappiness of social environment and dissatisfaction with provision. (p67).

One issue of particular concern highlighted in this research was that of 'misguided guidance'.

This describes practical but misleading information given to students which results in frustration for the student aimed at the institution. One example informed students in advance that induction (freshers' week) was every day from 9-5pm. After arranging childcare and cover for work commitments, they discover that they are only required for a few hours on Wednesday and Friday. Many mature students gave the impression that they felt that the induction period had heavily catered for the younger students with little information or activities related to the interests of older students. These quotes relating to the induction process demonstrate this

It was a blur, too much useless information, herding

It's cliquey and it's all related to drinking

Wanted group exercise, team building and ice breakers

The next area students were asked about concerned the programmes and the assessment regimes. Helping students understand assessment criteria in the early part of their first year can boost their performance

throughout their degree (Chapman and Bloxham, 2004). For the business students (mature students in the minority), the programme was better than expected but was generally considered to be hard work and demanding. Overall the students felt there were a lot of assessments, both coursework and exams. One issue that was raised was the request for feedback from exams, in some cases it had been fifteen years since the student had sat an exam and felt that the need for some kind of feedback was paramount. Overall, across the programmes and institutions students were generally happy with feedback received on coursework. Indeed, much research has been carried out in this area with Krausse (2001) looking, in particular, at the first major essay writing assignment as a door to either academic integration or attrition. She writes of feedback

The marker's interaction with first year students is another critical factor contributing to the quality of students' integration via the essay marking and feedback process. (p163)

The healthcare students presented with different issues. For 2 of the institutions the programmes had not met expectations as they thought it would be more academic and less practical. The use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) was criticised at one institution as being unhelpful and disorganized. The students also had difficulty with placements. This mismatch between expectations and experience endorses Lowe and Cook's (2003) research at Ulster.

When asked about support networks both sets of students mentioned that they received most of their support from peers, mainly other mature students. Family support was also seen as key.

My children are really, really proud of me for doing this

It's peer group support that's got me here today. I don't think I'd be here today without the support of everybody

However institutional differences were apparent between the levels of support felt within the health care area and the business area. There was no agreement across all 3 institutions as to whether programmes with predominantly mature students catered better for their needs.

In general, there were very different experiences from the business students to the healthcare students and different experiences between the institutions, indicating that the institutional context is paramount. Paradoxically, programmes with a majority of mature students are not necessarily the best at catering for them so there is no easy, quick solution to these problems. However, institutions may wish to ensure that they have achieved the following

- removed 'misguided guidance'
- ensured that induction is inclusive of all students
- captured peer support.

Many of the issues highlighted by the focus groups are applicable for all students, not just the over 21s. Addressing these will, therefore, improve the student experience across the first year.

For all the students in our focus groups the experience and sacrifices had been worthwhile as the following three quotes show

I was in tears of happiness on my first day

I see things differently now, it's as if my brain's been woken up

Good positive experience, would advise anyone to do it

Conclusion

This project has shown that whilst mature students may have different pressures and commitments outside of university life, their needs are similar to those of traditional students. All students, regardless of age, need to be given the correct information and to be inducted in an inclusive manner. The student experience, first year and beyond, needs to be as rich and as rewarding as this group of students hoped it would be.

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