Mature Students Experiences and Family Life
2010 Version

Over the past decade, there has been a significant enrolment increase of mature students with some noticeable trends (Morris, 2009). First, educational decision-making for traditional students shifts from being influenced by others to making autonomous and rational decisions for mature students (Adshead & Jamieson, 2008). Second, much of the existing research highlights the turbulent experiences of female mature students (which make up the majority of mature students) in higher education, with very little pointing to the male experience. Gender roles (inclusive of domestic responsibilities) in the family act as a catalyst for the associated risks for returning back to school. To be educated is to produce a new identity, which can threaten and disrupt relations with family members and friends. People might be viewed as superior, or begin to feel superior; both accounts re-shape former relationships (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Brine & Waller, 2005; Johnson & Robson, 1999; Kevern & Webb, 2003; Maher, 2001). Then again, education can become a very transformative tool for mature students (Merrill, 1999). While higher education institutions need to accommodate for such limitations, ultimately, the ability to ask and accept support from faculty and staff is a necessary factor in accomplishing degree programs (Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1998; MacKenzie, 2007).

Key Points from the Literature

- There can be several motives for mature students to return to school, such as: being a role model for their children, improving their financial situation, moving beyond being stigmatized as a 'slow learner', and/or finding better employment options (Kinser & Deitchman, 2008; MacFadgen, 2007; MacKenzie, 2007; Scanlon, 2008).
- While women often enroll for personal development reasons, men enroll to better their careers (Reay 2002).
- There are ongoing adjustments that women must engage in in order to consolidate their public and private worlds and to continue their education (Merrill, 1999; Stone, 2008).
- The mature female students must deal with childcare responsibility, financial restrictions, and travel distance. While they might have positive aspirations, female students negative experiences both within and outside the school can be difficult to navigate through (Brine & Waller, 2005; Jepsen & Montgomery, 2009; Holmes, 2005; O'Brien et al., 2009; Moss, 1998; Stone, 2008; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010).
- Women returning students are more likely to feel insecure about expressing themselves (Fleming & Murphy, 1997); anxieties and concerns about adapting to classroom life (Kohler Giancola et al., 2008; Leonard, 1996); new relationships relating to the social context (Johnson & Robson, 1999).
- While engaging in practicum experience causes women to supplement their income by working part time, which reduces their study time and availability of financial resources, female mature students find they garner greater respect from colleagues and a much richer learning experience (Duncan, 2000).
- Women students in general possess significantly greater time-management skills than men students (Trueman & Hartley, 1996) and a greater sense of continuity from pre-entry experiences (Johnson & Robson, 1999).
- Male mature students find that the notion to return to school is ridiculed by their male peers, because a) Education is not viewed as 'real' work; b) Education is boring and does not work towards self-betterment; and c) Education is controlled by the state, and is a vehicle for the state to control and regulate working class peoples. Resultantly, there is a rejection of education, and the cultures that surround education that possesses deeply seated values (Marks 2000).
- Receiving support from the partners of returning students was a significant concern for mature students (Kaldi, 2009; Kortesoja, 2009; Norton et al, 1998; Leonard, 1996; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Female partners of male students, on the most part, adapt and become self-reliant in order to overcome relationship tensions. Male partners of female students do not, generally, adjust to the new situation, and

do not assume much more of the family responsibility and provide the emotional support and encouragement so that the female student can immerse herself in her academic career (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Leonard, 1996; Stone, 2008). Heterosexual male partners can also feel 'threatened and excluded' by their wife or partner attending university (Wilson, 1997).

- The mature student's age, race, and class become a factor in post-secondary education (Kortesoja, 2009; Mathers & Parry, 2009; Whittick, 2005).
    - Older students (in their 50s and 60s) are interested in courses that personally enrich their lives than obtaining career aspirations (Schaefer, 2010).
    - While mature students from lower-economic social class have greater barriers to overcome, one study pointed out that previous student loans do not deter students from returning to school (Tumen & Shulruf, 2008).
    - Mature students of colour attest their successful re-entry experiences to having peers, faculty and staff of the same racial background form a support network for them (Whittick, 2005).
- Aboriginal students are, for the most part, mature students. There are more female aboriginal students than males (Diallo et al., 2009; Junor & Usher, 2002; Hill, 2009). Despite the increased participation of Aboriginal students in post-secondary education, they still make up a significantly small percentage of the entire student population (Malatest, 2004).
- Married mature students are less likely than single mature students to participate in vocational programme. Marital statuses were also significant among undergraduate and post-graduate, but not graduate (masters') programs (Kortesoja, 2009).

Recommendations

- Higher education institutions need to actively recruit adult students, since adult students already possess pre-conceived and tainted notions of the usefulness of education (Marks 2000).
- Mature students' partners need to be a part of the educational world so that they can see how they can be a significantly positive influence on their partner's success (Norton et al, 1998).
- Consider women's language and free expression as tools for constructing particular realities and articulating personal experiences that give voice and agency to women (Hayes & Flannery, 2000).
- Ensure campus support services are tailored for the unique backgrounds of mature students (Barton Pernal, 2009; Hermann et al., 2008; MacFadgen, 2007; Tones et al, 2009).
- Offer a 3-hour workshop on essential skills such as "basic research and computer skills, study and test-taking techniques, stress and time management" (Kohler Giancola et al, 2008, p. 226).
- Mature students have a distinct advantage over traditional students in the way that they can capitalize off their previous experience when apply for positions (Rugg et al, 2008).
- Offer courses that cater to part-time mature students (Barton Pernal, 2009).
- Provide opportunities for a social network among peers at schools to take shape (MacFadgen, 2007).
- Post-secondary institutions need to ensure that provisions made for mature students address social inequities such as race, age, gender and class (Adshead & Jamieson, 2008; MacKenzie, 2007; Rugg et al, 2008; Tones et al, 2009; Whittick, 2005).

Suggested Reading

- Adshead, L. & Jamieson, A. (2008). Educational decision-making: Rationality and the impact of time. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 40*(2), 143-159.
- Rugg, G., Gerrard, S. & Hooper, S. (2008). *The stress-free guide to studying at university: A student's guide towards a better life.* London: Sage.
- York Stories Collective. (Eds.). (2000). *York stories: Women in higher education.* Toronto: TSAR.

References

Adshead, L. & Jamieson, A. (2008). Educational decision-making: Rationality and the impact of time. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 40*(2), 143-159.

Barton Pernal, N. (2009). *Reentry women students who are seniors: An important university subpopulation.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

Baxter, A. & Britton, C. (2001). Risk, identity and change: Becoming a mature student. *International Studies of Sociology of Education*, *11*(1), 87-104.

Brine, J. & Waller, R. (2004). Working-class women on an Access course: Risk, opportunity and (re)constructing identities. *Gender and Education*, *16*(1), 97-113.

Diallo, B., Trottier, C. & Doray, P. (2009). *What do we know about the pathways and traditions of Canadian students in post-secondary education? Note 1: Transitions Project.* Montreal, QC: The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

Fleming, T. & Murphy, M. (1997). *College knowledge: Power, policy and the mature student.* (Maynooth Adult and Community Education Occasional Series, No. 143). Maynooth, Ireland: National University of Ireland.

Hayes, E. & Flannery, D. D. (Eds.). (2000). *Women as learners: The significance of gender in adult learning.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Herrmann, D., Raybeck, D., & Wilson, R. (2008). College is for veterans, too. *The Chronicle of Higher Education, 55*(13), 99.

Hill, S. (2009). *Best practices to recruit mature aboriginal students to medicine.* Ottawa: Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada & The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada.

Holmes, D. (2005). *Embracing differences: Post-secondary education among aboriginal students, students with children and students with disabilities.* Montreal, QC: The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

Jepsen, C. & Montgomery, M. (2009). Miles to go before I learn: The effect of travel distance on the mature person's choice of a community college. *Journal of Urban Economics, 65*, 64-73.

Johnson, S. & Robson, C. (1999). Threatened identities: The experiences of women in transition to programmes of professional higher education. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, *9.* 273-288.

Junor, S. & Usher, A. (2002). *The price of knowledge: Access and student finance in Canada*. Montreal, QC: The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

Kaldi, S. (2009). Mature student teachers in initial teacher education in Greece: Personal and academic identities. *European Journal of Teacher Education, 32*(1), 35-49.

Kevern, J. & Webb, C. (2003). Mature women's experiences of preregistration nurse education. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 45*(3), 297-306.

Kinser, K. & Deitchman, J. (2008). Tenacious persisters: Returning adult students in higher education. *Journal of College Student Retention, 9*(1), 75-94.

Kohler Giancola, J., Munz, D., & Trares, S. (2008). First- versus continuing-generation adult students on college perceptions: Are differences actually because of demographic variance? *Adult Education Quarterly, 58*(3), 214-228.

Kortesoja, S. (2009). Postsecondary choices of nontraditional-age students: Non-credit courses or a credential program? *The Review of Higher Education, 33*(1), 37-65.

Leonard, M. (1996) Transforming the Household: mature women students and access to higher education. In S. Davies, C. Lubelska & J. Quinn's (Eds). *Changing the subject: Women in higher education.* London: Taylor & Francis.

MacFadgen, S. L. (2007). *Mature students in the persistence puzzle: An exploration of the factors that contribute to adult learners' qualify of life and retention in post-secondary education*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada.

Mackenzie, J. (2007). *Educational experiences of aging nontraditional undergraduate students.*

Unpublished master's thesis, Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada.

Maher, F.A. (2001). Women's studies in England: Mature women students and their educational vision. *Gender and Education*, *13*(1), 7-23.

Malatest, R. (2004). *Aboriginal peoples and post-secondary education: What educators have learned*. Montreal, QC: The Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation.

Marks, A. (2000). Lifelong learning and the 'breadwinner ideology': Addressing the problems of lack of participation by adult, working-class males in higher education on Merseyside. *Educational studies*, *26*(3), 303-319.

Mathers, J. & Parry, J. (2009). Why are there so few working-class applicants to medical schools?: Learning from the success stories. *Medical Education, 43*, 219-228.

Merrill, B. (1999). *Gender, change and identity: Mature women students in universities*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.

Morris, A. (2009). The stretched academy: The learning experience of mature students from under-represented groups. In L. Bell, H. Stevenson and M. Neary (Eds.), *The future of higher education: Policy, pedagogy and the student experience.* (pp. 99-111). London, UK: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Moss, W. (1988). *Breaking the barriers: Eight case studies of women returning to learning in North London, Revised Edition*. (Access to Learning for Adults, Report No. 143). London, England: Inner London Education Authority.

Norton, L., Thomas, S., Morgan, K., Tilley, A., & Dickins, T. (1998). Full-time studying and long –term relationships: Make or break for mature students? *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *26*(1), 75-88.

O'Brien, F., Keogh, B., & Neenan, K. (2009). Mature students' experiences of undergraduate nurse education programmes: The Irish experience. *Nurse Education Today, 29*, 635-640.

Reay, D. (2002). Class, authenticity and the transition to higher education for mature students. *The Sociological Review*, *50*(3), 398-418.

Rugg, G., Gerrard, S. & Hooper, S. (2008). *The stress-free guide to studying at university: A student's guide towards a better life.* London: Sage.

Schaefer, J. (2010). Voices of older baby boomer students: Supporting their transitions back into college. *Educational Gerontology, 36*, 67-90.

Scanlon, L. (2008). Adults' motives for returning to study: The role of self-authoring. *Studies in Continuing Education, 30*(1), 17-32.

Scott, C., Burns, A., & Cooney, G. (1998). Motivation for return to study as a predictor of completion of degree amongst female mature students with children. *Higher Education*, *35*, 221-239.

Stone, C. (2008). Listening to individual voices and stories: The mature-age student experience. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 48*(2), 263-290.

Tones, M., Fraser, J., Elder, R. & White, K. (2009). Supporting mature-aged students from a low socioeconomic background. *Higher Education, 58*, 505-529.

Trueman, M. & Hartley, J. (1996). A comparison between the time-management skills and academic performance of mature and traditional-entry university students. *Higher Education*, 32(2), 199-215.

Tumen, S. & Shulruf, B. (2008). The effect of student loan schemes on students returning to study. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 30*(4), 401-414.

Vaccaro, A. & Lovell, C. (2010). Inspiration from home: Understanding family as key to adult women's self-investment. *Adult Education Quarterly, 60*(2), 161-176.

Whittick, G. (2005). *The re-entry experience of African-Canadian students: From disengagement to re-engagement at the University level.* Unpublished master's thesis. University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.

- Compiled by Robert Mizzi & Arpi Panossian (2008)
- Updated by Robert Mizzi (2010)