

## *Part-Time & Distance Education Mature Students* 2010 Version

Current research indicates that part time studies, which include courses taken by returning students online, are a worthwhile endeavour and requires further research. It is noteworthy that the cost-benefits of undergoing part-time studies are not as readily apparent, and that the student needs to be mindful of long-term gain as opposed to more immediate benefits full-time returning students experience (Broomfield, 1993). In particular, distance education (which is now evolving into online-forms of learning) allows learners more opportunities to construct knowledge rather than having it “deposited” into their heads (Edward & Usher, 2000; Ke & Xie, 2009). Insights from this form of enquiry can be gained by considering the backgrounds and experiences of mature part-time students, their changing relationship to the learning process, and how their decisions to return to school relates to their socio-economic context (Fuller, 2001).

### **Key Points from the Literature**

- The majority of part-time male mature and returning students are in their early 30s, whereas women are often found to be in their late 30s. There is a shift in priorities in relation to age. Part-time students under 40 generally take courses to advance their careers. Contrastingly, part-time students over 40 generally take courses out of their own interest or personal development (Broomfield, 1993; Jackson & Jamieson, 2009).
- Most undergraduate part-time mature students fund their own tuition fees (Fuller 2001; Jackson & Jamieson, 2009).
- While part-time programmes tend to increase women’s involvement, efforts to ‘tailor’ part-time programmes generally do not reduce the conflict between domestic and study roles due to socioeconomic variances among students (O’Driscoll et al., 2009).
- A part-time student’s identity, human and social capital all contribute to a successful learning experience (Jamieson et al., 2009).
- Given recent economic trends, there is expected to be growth in online learning participation among mature students (Kolowich, 2009).
- Time constraints and skill deficits for both lecturers and mature students are two key factors towards mature student success in distance education. Developments in both these areas are needed (Dearnley, Dunn & Watson, 2006).
- Information technology used in distance learning creates a greater distance between “IT-haves” and “IT-have nots”. This distance leaves the “IT-have nots” feeling physically and psychologically dislocated (Edward & Usher, 2000; Chu & Tsai, 2009).
- Faculty members are concerned about their materials being online, in relation to intellectual property (Isenberg, 2007).
- Feelings of distrust and isolation are reoccurring themes in distant learning because of the lack of human interconnection (Holley & Taylor, 2009; Isenberg, 2007).
- There is a high drop-out rate among mature students who participate in online learning due to factors relating to family support, organizational support, satisfaction and relevance (Park & Choi, 2009).
- Mature students ranked online learning as a mode of instruction that is more relevant to their lives and provides more opportunity for reflective learning. In the same study, critical thinking and student negotiation was ranked low among mature students (Chu & Tsai, 2009).
- Mature distance learners took in their assignment feedback well and used the new knowledge gained through feedback to further motivate themselves (Furnborough & Truman, 2009).
- Mature learners, who have been away from technology from some time, find it difficult to readjust to new forms of online learning (Shaw, 2005).

## Recommendations

- Policy makers need to find ways to support mature students and to ensure that those with financial barriers are provided assistance (Fuller 2001).
- Instructors engage with self-directed learning readiness as a mode to maximize student potential (Chu & Tsai, 2009). In addition, using interactive teaching strategies to diversify the online teaching experience “can facilitate student identity, socialization, and learning” (Holley & Taylor, p. 266, 2009; see also Ke & Xie, 2009).
- Ensure that there is a significant amount of internet practice for mature students to build their self-efficacy and confidence around online learning (Chu & Tsai, 2009; Hernández-Encuentra et al., 2009; Shaw, 2005).
- Make the curriculum relevant to the online learner’s needs and, if possible, encourage organizational support (Park & Choi, 2009).

## Suggested Readings

- Jackson, S. & Jamieson, A. (2009). Higher education, mature students and employment goals: Policies and practices in the UK. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 61(4), 399-411.
- Ke, F. & Xie, K. (2009). Toward deep learning for adult students in online courses. *Internet and Higher Education*, 12, 136-145.

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