Learning Strategies, Skills, and Experiences of Mature Students

2016 Version

Synopsis

According to current literature, it appears mature students typically invest e a great deal more into higher education and choose to enter university for different reasons than traditional students (see McCune et al., 2010). The mature students tend to make more sacrifices than their traditional peers, as they typically cope with a multitude of roles to play. As a consequence of these multiple roles, the literature frequently identified mature students suffer a sense of guilt for returning to education. Mature students also tend to choose institutions close to home (Burton et al., 2011; Elliot & Brna, 2009). Additionally, they tend to feel the skills they have gained throughout their life experiences have not prepared them for higher education (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). However, while at university/college, receiving support from a personal network and the institution can greatly improve their overall education experience (see Xuereb, 2014). This support tends to present itself in a multitude of forms, such as from the teaching staff, their friends and family and the institution's offerings. By understanding the multitude of skills mature students can bring into higher education, hopefully institutions can better cater to these students by identifying their learning strategies and work with the mature students to create a more positive and fulfilling university experience.

Key Points from the Literature

Learning Strategies

Mature students enter higher education for different reasons than traditional students. They tend to approach university from a different angle, with less social emphasis (Devlin, 1996; McCune et al., 2010) and greater commitment to education and completing their degree. Reasons for returning to higher education for mature students were for career and personal growth benefits (McCune et al, 2010). Kenner & Weinerman (2011) clearly identified differences in learning between traditional and mature students.

Motivation is a driving factor for mature students to complete their degrees, as they are aware of the benefits to themselves and society if they complete (Allen & Zhang, 2016; Devlin, 1996; Fehr, 2013; Thally, 2013).

Finding an institution close to home – the location/accessibility of a university/college can be a determining factor and an impact on whether students attend higher education as mature students would prefer to stay close to home because of family and work commitments (Burton et al., 2011; Elliot & Brna, 2009). Additionally, Elliot & Brna (2009) found that non-learners would consider pursuing a degree - if offered locally. Earlier studies, as identified in the 2010 version of this report, also suggest mature students have a preference to an institution closer to home.

Traditional students in many cases tend to be unsure of what they want to study or a career path for the future, versus mature students who tend to return to students with a specific purpose in mind. Based on this suggestion, it appears that mature students tend to value and appreciate higher education on a larger scale than traditional students. The mature students typically return for an education for work purposes (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013) and possess higher amounts of intrinsic motivation, such as personal fulfilment, than traditional students (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013).

Skills

It appears many mature students lack appreciation for the life skills they have accumulated over the years in the workforce and/or through family life. Mature students may face additional challenges in higher education, but they also have additional strengths (Kahu et al., 2013), not possessed by their traditional peers. Mature students possess different ways of thinking and "perceived their traditional-age peers to struggle with critical thinking skills (Allen & Zhang, 2016:80)" and were "less intimidated by the youngers when they found that in classroom situations, such as seminars, they tended to be more skilled orally" (Mercer & Saunders, 2004:295).

The skills gained in the workforce may not be relevant for the necessary skills desired for success in higher education, as some of those skills may not be efficient with the new learning styles taught (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

The 2010 version established mature students believe they did not have the appropriate level of academic skills. Recent literature suggests a similar sense of low self-worth is identified. Kahu et al. (2014) found some mature students feel as through their academic skills may lack, such as their study habits. However, a study by Richardson found "older students are more likely to display desirable forms of study behaviour than younger students" (2013:79).

Mature students believe campus engagement activities can benefit traditional students by assisting them to build on their communication skills – something the mature students acquired through the work place and prior life experiences (Allen & Zhang, 2016).

Non-traditional students also include veterans wishing to gain a college/university degree. Veterans entering college have a different set of life skills and feel they suffer from disconnect, especially with writing, at the college level (Blaauw-Hara, 2015).

Experiences

First year of higher education appears to be the greater hurdle for new mature students. During this time it is important to gain confidence (Mercer & Saunders, 2004), become aware of the academic requirements, and manage intrinsic/extrinsic factors.

Mature students tend to encounter difficulty when using their academic communication skills off campus with their friends and family in fear they do not understand (Mercer & Saunders, 2010; O'Boyle, 2015). They might also face individuals in their social circle who show a lack of respect and appreciation for the effort required to complete a degree (McCune et al., 2010).

A life-balancing act is a barrier faced by mature students, both male and female (Fragoso et al., 2013). Mature students with parental obligations tend to struggle with academics and family/life roles and feel a sense of guilt (Fehr, 2013). In particular, women tend to be faced with this interrole conflict (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013; Markle, 2015; ahmed Shafi & Rose, 2014) and tend to be more negatively impacted while trying to complete higher education, than males (Markle, 2015). Guilt felt in particular by women who return to higher education (Fragoso et al., 2013; Kearns, 2014; Mannay & Morgan, 2013). The feeling of guilt for returning to studying cast upon the women by family and friends (Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Mannay & Morgan, 2013) and feeling of guilt about the wellbeing of their children while they attend higher education, (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013) can unfortunately lead to women leaving higher education (Manny & Morgan, 2013).

Family and friends tend to be the primary support networks for mature women students (example: Xuereb, 2014). In a number of cases, women choose to start studies once children are older and more independent (Carney-Compton & Tan, 2002; Fragoso et al., 2013).

"[Mature student] education engagement differs significantly from younger students due to family and/or work obligations" (Deschacht & Goeman, 2015).

Mature student stressors include fear, barriers to support, role identification and emotional stress (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013).

Recommendations

Create an emphasis on bridging programs for mature students to prepare students for higher education and introduces them to resources available on campus (Adkins, 2014). As identified in Blaauw-Hara (2015), veteran students suffer from the inability to write successfully at the college level. Offering writing courses could assist with connecting *any* new students to the style of writing required of them in higher education.

Fragoso et al. (2013) suggests higher education institutions should offer some flexibility to allow mature students to adapt and institutions to incorporate the flexibility required by many mature students. Additionally, for teaching staff – knowing your audience is crucial to success by understanding not all students come from similar backgrounds (Fehr, 2013). A similar recommendation was noted in the 2010 version of this report. An example from Fehr (2013:254) suggests "[c]ombining flexible learning activities, exploring alternative lesson plans and adjusting policies to acknowledge family responsibilities could support the life balancing challenges experienced by student parents".

Higher education institutions should consider creating supplementary support networks for mature students with family, as seen by the University of Toronto who offers a family care website.

Further research should examine the "effects on the family when a parent – in particular a woman – decides to enroll in higher education" (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013:18).

Recommended Readings

Allen, T. O. (2016). Dedicated to Their Degrees Adult Transfer Students in Engineering Baccalaureate Programs. *Community College Review*, *44*(1), 70-86.

Kenner, C., & Weinerman, J. (2011). Adult learning theory: Applications to non-traditional college students. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, *41*(2), 87-96.

Mannay, D., & Morgan, M. (2013). Anatomies of inequality: Considering the emotional cost of aiming higher for marginalised, mature mothers re-entering education. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, *19*(1), 57-75.

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2016 updated version compiled by Jennifer Newton

2010 updated version compiled by Robert Mizzi

Original version compiled by Robert Mizzi & Arpi Panossian (2008)