

Mature-aged men's experiences of higher education: Australia and England compared. (0231)

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## **Introduction**

There is a large body of literature documenting the experiences of mature-age women entering higher education for the first time or returning to study which dates back over thirty years; no similar body of literature on the experiences of mature-age men exists. We do not suggest that no further research needs to be undertaken on the experiences of female students; however the experiences of male students who make the journey into higher education deserve attention as the existing evidence suggests that some men, in particular men from low SES and minority ethnic backgrounds, are at risk of becoming marginalised in the new knowledge-based, globalised economy and that their needs are being overlooked by university policy and procedures. This paper reports on a scoping study designed undertaken at [deleted for review] University in [deleted for review] Australia and [deleted for review] in the UK to improve our understanding of the challenges facing mature-age male undergraduates as they adapt to university study with a view to reducing attrition in this group.

It would appear from a preliminary examination of enrolment and completion data that some men are being deterred from undertaking university level studies; particularly men from white working class backgrounds and culturally and linguistically diverse communities are the least likely to enter HE and among the most likely to experience difficulty in making a successful transition to university study (EDA, 2008). As a consequence they are at risk of becoming marginalised in the new knowledge-based, globalised economy; a situation that has significant social, as well as personal, consequences (Berry et al, 2011).

## **Aims of the study**

Our immediate aim was to develop a more robust understanding mature-age men's experience of transition through university and their adaptation to university study. Our secondary aim was to develop a series of research questions to be used as the foundation for further study.

## **Methodology**

This study was structured in two parts, a literature review and a small-scale empirical study undertaken concurrently at [deleted for review] University in Australia and [deleted for review] in the UK.

The literature review explores key aspects of the topic in an attempt to develop a comprehensive picture of the issue: the challenges facing mature-age male students, the economic and social benefits of higher education and the current HE policy frameworks. The literature review was also used to generate the survey questions for the empirical study.

The survey instrument was tested using volunteers from the [deleted for review]. Initially we planned to use both print and online versions of the survey instrument; however the testing

process indicated that an online version using Qualtrics would be more effective (Sax, Gilmartin & Bryant, 2003) Mature-age male undergraduates were sent a targeted email with a link to the survey; it collected quantitative data on demographics and qualitative data on reasons for enrolling, future plans and barriers to study or concerns. Participants were also invited to participate in an interview (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). The survey target was 40 students; 20 at each university and 10 of those students, to take part in an interview.

The interviews, which are still in progress, were intended to explore issues raised in the survey in further depth. The study draws on the work of Harris and Barnett (2013) who argue that transition to university is a cyclical process presenting all students with a series of challenges throughout their enrolment. They recognise that becoming a university student can involve profound changes in the individual's psychosocial assumptions about their identity, environment and the relationship between them. For mature men, this could include loss of status conferred by their employment prior to enrolling or, paradoxically, confer an increased status. The interviews addressed the participants' developing sense of academic identity and their emotional comfort at key points in their enrolment (Harris & Barnett, 2013).

### **A review of the literature**

In the UK, educationalists have begun to monitor and investigate men's access to, and participation in, higher education (HEPI, 2009), largely due to signs that the exclusion of disadvantaged men from under-represented groups is a continuing trend that has significant social consequences (Berry et al, 2011). Research over the last decade indicates that men from white working class backgrounds and culturally and linguistically diverse communities are the least likely to enter HE and among the most likely to experience difficulty in transition to university study (Brennan, Durazzi & Sene, 2013; EDA, 2008).

Each author has contributed to the literature review. An initial document search produced the following categories to be explored further:

- Access and participation in HE
- Boys' school education
- Enabling and transition programs and first year experience
- Gender gap issues
- Impact of ethnicity/colour
- Male students
- Mature-age students
- Resilience and coping skills
- Students aspirations and career plans

Work on the literature review is continuing.

### **Preliminary results**

Data collection is still underway and it is too early to draw conclusions about the issues facing mature-age male students, however a preliminary examination has revealed that time and family support stand out. Many men struggle to combine study with family responsibilities and

this situation is made more complicated when they are also working. There are contradictory emotions at play: pressure to provide for their families, or guilt that they were not able to was balanced against the belief that the family would benefit in the long term. Family support was the second key issue; lack of family support, which ranged from isolation, to hostility and failure to understand the demands of university study, magnified the impact of other problems. However, where the student felt supported they were confident that other barriers could be overcome. The implications of these findings are that mature-age male students require tailored support programs including guidance on managing study/family balance.

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