

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Understanding the Experience of Mature Students Completing a Degree Apprenticeship

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Abstract: Even though there is plethora of research into work-based learning, to date there is little research into how mature students navigate work-based learning. With the current government focus on lifelong learning, we need to understand how mature students can balance their studies and work and how they adjust to higher education. This paper discusses the narratives of mature students completing their CMDA alongside a BA in Business Management. The paper draws upon data collected through 1-2-1 supervision sessions with Level 5 mature-aged students through narrative analysis. Prominent themes include the struggles of balancing work, studies and childcare; fitting into a higher education culture which tends to be stereotyped as one for younger students; the difficulties of adjusting to rigorous study many years after leaving school or completing another degree; and being seen as a student while having a job role where they are seen (by themselves and others) as accomplished in their careers. The paper will argue the importance of understanding the academic abilities and individual needs of mature students; being understanding of personal circumstances; and ensuring they have the necessary means to adjust in a higher education setting which might be geared towards catering for younger people.

Paper:

The experience of mature students (those aged 23+) in higher education can vary a lot compared to their younger peers. Literature shows that mature students are more intrinsically motivated (Richardson, 1994) and their academic is at least as good as those of younger students. However, it is only more recent work which has stressed the importance of changing the narrative around who university is for (Fragoso et al., 2013) and making sure older students feel welcome and comfortable being undergraduate students. There is also much better understanding of processes which can enhance the experience of mature students, such as increasing their confidence and providing peer support (Pearce, 2017). More recent works acknowledges the importance of mature learners to be part of the HE ecosystem, placing values on their skills and experiences which can be valuable (Higgs, 2021).

This paper will focus on the experiences of mature learners completing their Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeships (DA) alongside a Business Management BA. The paper shows that the experience of DA mature students is not explored adequately so that we can understand how to best support them. The data was collected through oral narratives during supervision sessions with L5 students in a Business School in London. These sessions, although being a space to talk about coursework, very often entailed discussing overall progress and students sharing their struggles. Oral narratives are very rich and the process 'involves telling stories, recounting – accounting for – how individuals make sense of events and actions in their lives with themselves as the agents of their lives' (McAlpine, 2016:36).

The main findings reveal a number of unique struggles and barriers for mature DA students. For example, they discuss having to deal with childcare and how this often affected their studies (*'I do not have time to complete the assignment as well as I could, my 2-year-old was not well*) and looking after older family members sometimes being the main carer for them. They feel they cannot discuss this with their peers because they would not understand, and they are not sure who they can share these stories with since are not sure if the lecturers have time for these discussions. They discuss university culture (*they are here to have fun, for me this is a big deal, I out of my comfort zone*) and how they do not feel it aligns with their aspirations. They often did not understand how students would not complete coursework or show up to classes since this was a big commitment for them. They talk about not used to studies and exams (*I left school ages ago, it takes much longer to remember things, out of that mindset*) and how this affected their performance and was a struggle for them. They also mention how they often struggled with their identity (*at work I have an important role, manage people, here I feel at the bottom of the rank*). This difference in how they were perceived at work and how they were seen in higher education was something that often made them feel unease or out of place. Often they felt there was no one they could talk to when in class because there was no one else in a similar position. This influenced if/how they could make friendships and the overall university experience for them.

Since students shared these thoughts, we have trialled different ways to support them. As of yet, we have not collected data in how these ways of supporting mature students might have impacted the student experience. However, from anecdotal evidence and student comments, it is encouraging to see that students feel supported. We recommend asking mature students about their experience and making time to hear their stories while ensuring they understand that you have time for them. Showing compassion and understanding for their unique circumstances and whenever possible make adjustments for them is also vital. Compassions can be shown both through pedagogy and the making the classroom a safe space for trying things out. Lastly, we know that mature students might not feel comfortable seeking support so understanding the importance of referring them to support services where needed is also a vital part of what we can do to ensure they have the best experience in HE.

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