364 Mature Student Motivation and Drop Out: Age-related patterns in experience.

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

How do the motivations of mature students interact with the factors which are associated with their increased chances of dropping out of undergraduate courses in Higher Education (HE)?

Whilst mature students may have common reasons for enrolling in HE, these motivations can change as they progress through the different stages of an undergraduate degree. Motivation may be heavily dependent on a students' context and their individual circumstances, perhaps even more so for students who are older than the traditional university ages. Age-related difference can, therefore, be a key factor effecting both initial and continuing motivations during HE study. This paper uses the findings from a longitudinal mixed-methods study to consider how differences in motivation can impact on mature undergraduate students decisions to drop out or persist with their studies.

Full paper

'our ridged structures mean that access routes to higher education take place outside the schooling system and apply to adults rather than teenagers. We do not seek to correct the effects of schooling immediately. Rather we wait until the alienation has weakened through the confused years ( ) of the late teens. As people move into their twenties, maturity, family responsibility and career needs, come to the forefront and they become more susceptible to the benefits to be obtained by the qualifications provided by the higher education experience' (Wagner, 1989, p. 33)

As UK policy becomes increasingly preoccupied with educating people whilst they are young, mature students must be more motivated than ever to participate in HE, particularly given the financial risks. However, as Wagner (1989) outlines in the quote above the desire and readiness to study in HE occurs later in life for many, as circumstances and relationships prompt a range of motivations for enrolling on an undergraduate degree. A students' life-stage seems to have an initial influence on decisions to participate in education (Schuller & Watson, 2009) and also has been seen to contribute to ongoing motivation to help students complete their undergraduate degree (Foster, 2009). Mature students consistently continue to be twice as likely than younger students to drop out of their studies in HE in England and Wales (HESA, 2022; HESA, 2016). This paper uses the findings from a three-year mixed-methods study in a red-brick university[1] to understand the impact motivation has on mature students in negotiating barriers that can influence drop out.

Student motivation can include a diverse range of elements and this presents challenges in defining, measuring and making comparisons (Breen & Lindsay, 2002), although themes of motivation are often apparent. Motivation can be instrumental in sustaining commitment (Carre, 2000) and reaching goals can be supported with motivational learning strategies (Leutner, et al., 2001) to help students to overcome barriers. Economic or family circumstances (Callender, 2008), a lack of belonging due to their background characteristics (Sutton, 2018; Reay, et al., 2010) and difficulties adapting to the routines and requirements of university life (Christie, et al., 2008) can hamper mature students efforts to persist with their degree.

This research tracked the motivations of an undergraduate year group during the three years of their degree. Yearly surveys were used to understand patterns of motivation across 7 disciplines (n=825). Experience of motivation was

collected through termly interviews and monthly electronic diary entries with a small sample (n=10) from this year group.

Key differences were observed in mature students initial motivations when compared with their traditional-aged peers. In the survey mature students aged 25-29 were more focussed on needing qualifications for a particular job whereas those aged over 30 split their answers between wanting a challenge (25%), increasing their earning potential (25%) and 'other' reasons (37.5%). In contrast, whilst traditional-age students used all of the available responses, their answers were much more concentrated on the natural next step motive (46.9%). Interestingly there were many young mature students (aged 21-24) who also used this answer (29.5%), demonstrating similarities between younger mature students and traditional-age students. Employment goals demonstrated some consistent answers across the age groups. Many traditional-age students also selected reasons related to paid employment, such as I need this qualification for a particular job (23.6%) and to increase my earning potential (13.8%), which were also commonly selected by mature student age groups. In the interviews and diary entries it was apparent that one of the main differences was that older mature students (aged 30+) seemed to be more influenced by intrinsic or personal motivations: looking for fulfilment and achievement without necessarily having a specific outcome. In comparison younger mature students (aged 21-24) and traditional age students tended to have more instrumental and outcome-based motivations.

Initial motivations appeared to evolve for traditional-age students and younger mature students as they progressed through the stages of their degree. However mature students aged over 25 tended to consistently report their initial motivation throughout their studies. There were also differences between age groups in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Mature students' motivations for study and their experiences of employment and caring often acted as both motivators and barriers throughout their years of study. This insight could help universities better support mature students, by providing support to help them to mobilise their motivation to help them to become more resilient to barriers and more confident in pursuing their goals.

[1] Using the Department for Education (2016, p. 18) definition.

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