Changing the World One PhD at a Time: Mature Post-Graduate Researchers as 'Quiet Activists'

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

This paper shares an account of a year-long qualitative research project which examined the experiences of mature post-graduate research (PGR) students (defined as those over the age of 25 when commencing their PGR studies) at the University of Bristol (UoB). In total 87 in-depth interviews were conducted across 6 faculties representing 16.5% of mature PGRs at UoB. The paper highlights that many mature PGRs motivation to return to Higher Education (HE) stem from activist ideals of improving the world grounded in experiential knowledges. Life experience can represent highly valuable knowledge which can used engaged to tackle a range of challenges including environmental change. The paper advocates for the implementation of further accommodations to empower mature PGRs, enabling them to leverage their wealth of knowledge and experience to enhance research insight and application.

Full paper

Context

Current research has illuminated the nuanced experiences of older mature students (Newson Bell, 2021), mature first-in-family students (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2020), and the impact of class (Reay, 2002), and gendered caring responsibilities (Lister, 2003) on experience. Much of the work looking at mature students, however, predominantly focuses on undergraduates (UG), overlooking the novel experiences involved in undertaking post-graduate research (PGR). This focus on UG students persists in research exploring the impact and prevalence of ecoanxiety for students (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020). Although there is a growing body of literature points to the mental health implications for those studying, researching, and teaching environmental topics (Kelly, 2017; Pihkala, 2020) how this interacts with mature students research environmental issues remains unclear. This represented the main motivation for the project presented in this paper, which initially set out to explore experiences of ecoanxiety in mature PGRs reentering HE. However, after putting a call-out for qualitative interview participation across the University of Bristol's (UoB) various PGR networks, we were astounded by the scale of response: within the first month we had more than 75 requests for interview, many focused on the environment, many not. Most shared with us a desire to improve the PGR education available to mature students, what we observe as 'everyday resistance' where they hope to use new knowledge and insight to bring about political, social, and organizational change (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010).

Emergent Themes

Many mature PGRs that we spoke with were driven by activist notions of "making the world better" (Meyer et al., 2022). This most prominently emerged in participants researching the environment in some capacity. Eco-anxiety was a common motivating factor in reengaging in PGR studies, framed as a way to *"do their bit for the environment"*. For PGRs with caring responsibilities, this manifested in wanting to help future generations. As one participant put it, *"It may sound cliché, but... I'm pursuing this because I want to leave the world in a better state for my kids."*

Most participants were motivated to return to higher education (HE) out of frustration with or experiencing injustice in their lived experience. For many, this stemmed from encounters or observations - in their professional or personal lives - with injustices related to gender, race, or ability discrimination. For example, one participant had been caring for a family member which granted her profound insight into the challenges of navigating interactions with medical institutions which she engaged as contextualizing knowledge in her research analysis. Her (largely invisible) every-day and interpersonal experiences had been harnessed to catalyze knowledge production for social change – with her PGR serving as a form of 'quiet activism' (Hankins, 2017; Winter et al., 2020). However, participants generally felt that knowledge and insight from lives outside of academia (both professional and personal) were not understood, acknowledged, or appreciated in HE contexts.

For some mature PGRs, their aim to create positive change was limited by their experiences in HE systems, particularly the homogenous way that PGRs are considered in localized policy and practice. Participants referred to not feeling like an 'ideal student' (Gregersen & Nielsen, 2023) as external responsibilities shaped their engagement with study and the linked-activities that can build networks and connections within research communities. This contributed towards a feeling of not belonging in HE. Many students recounted poor experiences interacting with university systems of which hierarchical structure and impenetrable bureaucracy (and lack of help in navigating it) could not accommodate their complex lives and responsibilities resulting in humiliating complexity when trying to gain extensions or extenuating circumstances. There was a widespread sense that academia had a high occurrence of behaviors which PGRs described as *"unprofessional"* (missed meetings, and unreasonable and changing demands exceeding the scope of research), which could lead to PGRs reporting disillusionment with HE.

Next Steps

We write this paper at the point where we are 2/3rd of the way through our interviews, conducting analysis as we go using a thematic, iterative approach. Our initial analysis has identified the extent to which change motivates mature PGRs and we frame this as a form of 'quiet activism' where lived experience and interpersonal experience intersects with the political (small p). But it has also drawn attention to how the structure of HEI's can present barriers to achieving change.

Through this paper we hope to find ways to develop the project's insights beyond UoB and identify opportunities for future collaboration with a view to improving the experience of mature PGRs across the UK HE sector.

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