

Older mature-age students in Australian higher education: how are they ‘getting on’?

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Introduction

Widening participation in higher education is a concern for educators and policy-makers in many industrialised nations, including Australia. This paper explores the Australian context within which such participation strategies are implemented and focuses on one group of such students. One non-traditional learner group that receives scant attention in the Australian research literature, and yet is growing rapidly, is made up of those individuals who, for one reason or another, enter higher education at age 35 or older. While current mature-age status in Australia is set at 25 years or over ([Krause et al., 2005](#)), the European Commission ([2008](#)) has identified that it is in the age group of 34 and over that educational participation decreases. The European Commission's document *Learning for All*, which urges the setting up of more equitable education programmes for these older learners as the number of older citizens still actively participating in society continues to increase, has relevance for the Australian context.

This paper is in two parts. The first part explores the context of increasing higher education participation in Australia, and focuses on this group of under-represented students. The second part describes a small research project in its early stages that aims to highlight some issues for this group and asks the question: how do universities implement strategies to help older mature age students' access and participation? The research will address the identified gap in the Australian higher education literature, and will subsequently have the potential to inform higher education policies for widening participation in other OECD countries. While approaches to issues and potential solutions concerning increasing participation vary across these countries, there are some common elements. There are mutual benefits to be gained from a sharing of knowledge and research focussing on attempts to increase numbers of so-called ‘non-traditional’ students entering and succeeding in higher education.

The Australian Context

Researching the experiences of non-traditional learners in higher education is high on the agenda in Australia, following recommendations of the Review of Australian Higher Education ([Bradley et al., 2008](#)). This major report emphasised the need to broaden educational provision to increase numbers of students from sectors of the community that traditionally are not represented in higher education. The recommendations from this document have largely shaped the Australian research agenda for widening participation. Responding to this report, the Australian Government has set a target: by 2025 40% of 25- to 34-year olds will have attained a university degree¹. To facilitate this the Higher Education

¹ This goal is more modest than the recommendations in the Report, which are for increased low socio-economic status student participation at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) has been implemented to fund universities to 'improve access ... retention and completion rates of those students' ([DEEWR, 2011](#)). The HEPPP aims 'to assist eligible universities to meet the Australian Government's target of 20 per cent of domestic undergraduate students coming from low SES backgrounds by 2020' ([DEEWR, 2011](#)).

As a result, a range of non-traditional cohorts, for example Indigenous Australians, individuals with disabilities, mature-age students, those who are first in their family to attend university, and of course the growing numbers of domestic non-English speaking background (NESB) and international students, are adding to the changing face of Australian higher education. In particular, disadvantaged younger school-leavers and those under 25 are increasingly encouraged into higher education through research-informed projects such as those run by the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education in South Australia, which maintains a strong research focus on 'early intervention' programs that target school students.

An economic focus

It is important to clarify a distinction between the aims of Australian education policy-makers and those of their European counterparts in a discussion of the major purpose of increasing higher education participation. While the European Commission works towards policy frameworks that acknowledge both the economic and social participation of under-represented learners, Australia's focus is more singularly focused on employability and economic outcomes. Here, social inclusion is a term that is rarely mentioned in the context of increasing participation in education. Such a narrow approach has resulted in criticism from educators and educational researchers (see for example [Daniels, 2008b](#); [Gale and Tranter, 2011](#)). [Gale and Tranter \(2011, p 42\)](#) go so far as to posit that 'students from disadvantaged backgrounds are being enlisted into university in order to achieve the nation's economic aspirations'. And yet, claims such as this - whilst disturbing- elide equally troubling situations emerging from the need for financially secure employment that drives some older non-traditional students into higher education.

As populations in many countries live longer, older citizens are increasingly being expected to remain active in, and to contribute to, society through extending their participation in society. Australians, too, are living longer and – importantly - are being expected to contribute to society through continuing participation in the workforce; in fact, Australia leads the OECD nations in extending the pensionable age for its citizens². Many of these older citizens find they need to retrain after their existing jobs become obsolete as a result of technological advances and subsequent obsolescence of many trades. Others, especially older women, may actually begin their careers in their 40s or even 50s after being home-based primary carers for their families for a large part of their lives. Some, whose previous work has been unpaid, casual or manual, may wish to explore more appealing career options through university study, aware of the benefits of a degree qualification for what will be, for many, a still lengthy period of workforce participation.

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By 2017, Australians will be need to reach 65.5 years of age to be eligible for the age pension, with this minimum age rising to 67 by 2023. It is possible that this minimum age will continue to increase as the population ages.

This group of mature-age students differs from others who may already have a successful career, financial security, or are already retired, and who enrol in a university degree for personal interest. For the latter group, university is a challenge, a new interest; but for older students who know they will need to be in paid employment for many years to come, university education is a chance to share in the benefits that many of their peers have taken for granted throughout their working lives³. They need an income, and university is seen as a pathway to obtaining this, and gain enough financial security to support themselves as they become increasingly less able to do the work they had done previously.

Access and participation issues for older mature age students

[McKenzie and Gow \(2003\)](#) have identified differences in the learning needs and academic performance between school leavers and older mature-age students, claiming that these differences have implications for 'the targeting of academic support services for students of different ages' (p.107). A recent review of the relevant literature (Aird, Miller, van Megen and Buys, 2010) found that while there exists a body of knowledge on the mature-age experience in adult, higher and vocational education, most of this literature pre-dates both the release of Bradley et al's report, and the Australian Government's 2009/2010 budget in which the changes to age pension eligibility were announced ([Centrelink, 2010](#)).

Mature-age students attending university bring with them a diverse range of expectations and experiences; nonetheless they have certain similar learning and social needs that are unlikely to be shared by younger students. While there is some acknowledgement internationally that university must adapt to the needs of these learners (European [Commission, 2006](#)), Australian higher education institutions have so far shown little flexibility in meeting the learning needs of students in the older mature-age bracket. The requirements of older adult learners in Australia, however, are somewhat different to those currently identified by the European [Commission \(2006\)](#) for its older citizens: the European focus is to a large extent on post-retirement activities and in this way it differs from the Australian one where many older adults are required to continue to support themselves in paid employment well past the retirement age of many European and OECD countries.

The strategies that have been implemented in Australia in response to the Bradley report seem to ignore the specific needs of the growing number of older citizens who find the notion of university study a feasible - and at times necessary - option. While it is known that mature-age students bring to their learning much in the way of life experience and skills, some universities still seem reluctant to acknowledge that their student cohorts are not comprised only of school leavers, or young adults.

Background to the study

Despite an immediate and growing need, there is little research in Australia into the experiences of, and outcomes for, this group of older non-traditional students entering higher education. As an initial step

³ Popular conceptions are that the generation born postwar - the baby-boomers - have had free higher education and full employment, and are looking towards retirement with substantial personal savings. While for many this is the case, baby-boomers are also older single mothers, manual workers and tradespeople who have not had the opportunities to increase their skills or accumulate personal savings during their working life.

towards addressing this omission, a pilot research study is being undertaken in one Australian university to map the expectations and experiences of older (35+years) mature-age students currently enrolled in undergraduate study.

La Trobe University in Melbourne, Victoria, is a multi-campus university providing education for approximately 25,000 students across five faculties: Education, Health Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences, Law and Management, and Science, Technology and Engineering. Surprisingly perhaps for a university originating from a Liberal Arts foundation, and with a strong reputation in the Arts and Humanities, La Trobe has comparatively low numbers of mature-age students, most of whom are enrolled in the 'services' disciplines of Health Sciences and Education.

In addition to being classed as non-traditional students by virtue of their age, mature-age students are also more likely than school leavers to be the first members of their family to attend university ([Horstmanhof and Zimitat, 2007](#)), another criterion for non-traditional/disadvantaged status. At this time La Trobe University keeps no records specifically of the numbers of mature-age students enrolled, or in which disciplines. In addition there is no record of how well these students achieve in their studies, although it is generally assumed that 'they tend to get through OK' (humanities lecturer, pers. com.). Orientation of mature-age students when they first come to La Trobe University is currently managed by the University's Counselling Services, whose staff are psychologists with no formal education training. There is little acknowledgement of the diversity that exists within this group or of the wealth of experiences they bring to their study environment, and these students are offered standard introductory workshops on issues such as time management. Once enrolled there is little if any additional learning support available that is designed for the needs of this group. Contrast this with the extensive additional support strategies that are in place for students from other countries who study at this university as international students (and who bring substantial funding to the institution as full fee-paying students).

The lack of a central database of these mature-age students, or of any means of identifying their presence within the institution has made it especially difficult to access details of this cohort, in order to invite participation in the research project. Communication was eventually achieved by emailing every domestic student enrolled at the University.

The Research

The initial study (in its preliminary stage at this time) focuses on currently enrolled undergraduate students. The purpose is to explore experiences of access and participation strategies for this group of students, and the aim is to access data from students enrolled in a number of disciplines. It is planned that subsequent longitudinal mapping will provide a body of data informing further research into the higher education experiences of older mature-age students, and include data on the levels of drop-out and retention. The first stage involves collection of data from participating students through an open-question survey; the intention is to gather some initial information via fairly rapid response, to gain basic knowledge of who these students are, in which disciplines they are studying and how many there are. This data will help direct the subsequent student focus group(s) shaping the further direction of the

research. Interviews with self-selecting participants will extend the depth of this data, with open ended questions focusing on existing support strategies, their effectiveness, and students' perceptions of what they would like to be offered as support and encouragement, but is not currently provided. Support networks outside the immediate study environment, for example, friends and/or family are known to be a factor in aiding student retention; information on the existence and perceived effectiveness of such support networks will also be sought from participants. Students will be asked to offer their own observations on how they are perceived by teaching and administrative staff, as well as by service providers that focus specifically on student needs, such as Student Support Services.

A narrative approach will be used to both gather and analyse data; narrative is known to be effective in providing insights into complex and contextualised student experiences ([Benson et al., 2010](#), [Daniels, 2008a](#)). The intention is to reveal the students' perspective, achieved through stories of experience told by them. Analysis of these stories will aim to identify what strategies exist, how helpful these are perceived to be, and also students' perceptions of what strategies and services they would find useful if they were available. The findings from this small-scale study will be useful in informing the provision of support for older mature-age students at one university; the next step will be to broaden the study to include other universities and so a larger database of information from this increasing group of students.

Summary

With an ageing population and the resulting move to extend workforce participation in Australia, there is a growing need for research into the higher education requirements of this group of older citizens. The need at present is not matched by an awareness of the specific conditions facing these older mature-age students, and this paper has identified such a gap in the research literature. The research described here aims to begin to address this gap with a small-scale study into the experiences of these students. Information about these older students' experiences is set within a policy framework of widening participation in higher education, and of continuing participation in social activities with an emphasis on paid employment. Although the research in progress is modest, there is potential – and there are plans - to enlarge the project. This research and subsequent studies will have relevance beyond the Australian context, for there are clear implications for other OECD nations as they progressively extend the working-life expectations of their aging populations.

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