Researching ‘late entry’ and its effect on the lifelong learner experience: implications for policy and practice

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Overview
Applying to join a degree programme through Clearing or another late entry route has the potential to impact significantly on the longitudinal student experience, with particular implications for lifelong learning and adult learners either returning to or embarking upon study. Students who, for whatever reason, make a decision to join an academic programme at a late stage, may miss out on key pre-entry information and induction activities. Joining a programme at a late stage has the potential to affect students’ attitudes, expectations and engagement and can mean that their student experience differs markedly from those joining through a more ‘traditional’ route. As such, it is vital to examine their experience in the context of providing anticipatory and flexible support for future cohorts.

This paper will discuss the initial research findings from an action research project based in the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Community Health (NMCH) at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU). The research focuses on the experiences of students who have made the decision to join a degree programme at a late stage. It aims to determine the levels of academic preparedness amongst ‘late entry’ students and the effect, if any, that late entry has on social integration. Due to the highly diverse student population within the School, particular attention is paid to adult learners, as a vast proportion of students in the School are mature and have very varied prior experiences of learning.

Background and context
The first year
The first year at university has been the focus of a well-populated body of research for some time, and was recently identified as an area of core policy interest for higher education institutions (QAA, 2005). Early engagement in the first year is seen as vital in both aspiration raising and in providing a contribution to the construction of various learner identities (Trotter and Roberts, 2006). The first year experience itself is widely agreed to have far reaching implications, not only on progression and retention trends (Yorke,
2001), but also the longitudinal student experience (Pitkeithly and Prosser, 2001). McInnis (2001) argues that the first year is an especially difficult time for students as they are likely to be most susceptible to academic failure in this period, as they acclimatise to new methods of learning, teaching and assessment. Those learners without recent experience of HE can often respond to this new environment with a lack of ‘self-determining’ ability to organise study effectively (Packham et al, 2004), and as such early intervention academic support is essential.

It has been argued that the structure, organisation, and delivery of higher education has been traditionally geared towards accommodating school leavers (Callender, 1997), institutions now have to take cognisance of the requirements and preferences of a highly heterogeneous, ‘non-traditional’ (Leathwood and O’Connell, 2003) student population, including adult learners, those with non-traditional entry qualifications, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Such demographic and experiential variances have been underscored as indicators of student progression (Bank et al, 1992).

Increasingly, balancing personal commitments and part-time work with study has become a necessity for many students. Being a student may not now be the full time occupation it once was, with the dual identities and responsibilities of student and worker being the reality for many of those in higher education (Lucas and Lamont, 1998). Indeed, McGivney’s work with adult learners highlights some of the conflicting demands on their time and how these influence their ability and motivations to study (McGivney, 2003).

Late entry
There has been some suggestion that late entry has a detrimental impact on students’ ability to meet the challenges of higher education (Ozga and Sukhnandan, 1998; Baxter and Hatt, 2000; Yates and James, 2006, 2007). Baxter and Hatt note the comparatively poor progression of adult learners who made a late application (Baxter & Hatt, 2000). This may be attributed to factors such as learner confidence, lack of opportunities for socialisation and return to study after being away from formal education and its requirements. Such a trend was also noted by Tuckett (1996), who argues that integration into unfamiliar higher education culture is particularly difficult for those students who do not come under the category of full-time, undergraduate school leavers.

A large scale study by Davies and Elias (2003) questioned withdrawn students from 30 English higher education institutions. Though response rates were low (10%) and accordingly, no strong conclusions made, the authors noted that amongst respondents, those who had entered through Clearing tended to consult fewer sources of information and were less likely to have been influenced by positive factors in their choice of course or institution. Bennet (2003) echoes this perspective in noting that students who
make a late application are more likely to experience loneliness and isolation, and to be less satisfied overall with their programme.

Still with a focus on withdrawal, Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) found that: ‘non-completers tended to make reactive decisions to enter university and (consequently) often failed to obtain, or make, proactive choices. This forced them to contend with their reactive choices of institution and course, which inevitably provided them with low levels of choice compatibility.’ (p.324). This has clear implications for students who enter a course late or fail to join their preferred programme or institution. Yorke (1998) referenced the risk associated with Clearing students in his study of non-completion in northwest England.

In more recent work, King’s (2008) findings supported those of Baxter and Hatt in identifying Clearing students as a group who require additional support. King argues that, in general, widening participation students require greater levels of support than ‘traditional’ students when entering university. However, she also notes the lack of research undertaken on the explicit needs of the differing groups within that large category.

**Discipline specific context**

As in all years, students in the first year of a programme in NMCH are required to balance academic performance with learning in clinical placements (Andrew et al, 2007; 2008). Whilst on placement, they are required to integrate and articulate theory and practical knowledge (Carr, 2005). This involves the creation and management of a professional identity, developed throughout the programme in a portfolio and reinforced by reflective exercises. For some students, the maintenance of this identity creates an extra layer of complexity in acclimatising to a multiplicity of new roles.

Nursing, midwifery and healthcare professions are often viewed as career choices made with strong preconceptions and long-held motivations (Andersson, 1993; Spouse, 2000). The essence of late entry contradicts this in many respects. This research, therefore, provides an opportunity to consider students making a late application and, in particular, those within one of the healthcare professions.

Some pre-registration programmes of study within the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Community Health (NMCH) at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) have traditionally used complex, costly and lengthy selection processes in recruiting students. This resource intensive endeavour has been seen as vital in ensuring the incumbent cohort are equipped with the necessary skills, attributes and disposition to become dynamic healthcare professionals.
The real value of this research is in raising awareness of the experiences of ‘late entry’ students to inform both policy and practice. Given the omnipotent jurisdiction of institutional policy, should late entry routes be found to have no significance on the student experience and progression and retention, will any impact on the traditionally resource intensive recruitment procedures be felt? Will staff change teaching and admission practices to reflect the differing entry points for students? These are just some of the areas where it is hoped that research will encourage reflection and debate.

**Research methodology**
Action research is often used in professions such as nursing to evaluate and enhance practice (Tolson et al, 2005). The approach also creates scope for the use of a variety of diverse and complementary research tools (Waterman et al, 2001). This particular study has employed focus groups, one to one interviews, and participant questionnaires in addition to quantitative instruments.

The first phase of the research has involved the interrogation of a dataset collected through an online questionnaire, targeted at those students identified as having made an application for entry after 5th August 2008. This initial data concerned demographic characteristics and the early student experience. Face to face interviews with key admissions staff were also conducted to provide a complementary perspective. Thematic analysis of the interview data has been undertaken through an iterative system of reflection and discussion amongst the researchers (Edgely et al, 2009).

The second cycle of the action research process involved focus groups and interviews with late entry students. In addition, the thematic analysis of the focus group data will be complemented by longitudinal, quantitative tracking of academic achievement amongst the ‘late entry’ group in comparison to the rest of the student population and the identification of trends as regards progression and withdrawal. This is due to be undertaken when assessment results are available at the end of the academic year 08/09.

Ethical approval has been sought and granted for all elements of the research by the School of Nursing, Midwifery and Community Health Ethics Committee.

**Preliminary Results**

*Quantitative data*
In session 2008/2009, 106 students applied to the undergraduate nursing programmes after 5th August. For the two separate undergraduate nursing programmes: the large diploma/degree pre-registration nursing programme (DipHE/BN Nursing) and the smaller honours programme (BA/BA (Hons) Nursing Studies), this represented around one fifth of the total cohort. All students within this category were emailed an invitation to participate in the
online questionnaire in late October 2008. They were asked basic
demographic information, their initial impressions of the programme and
reasons for their late application.

25 responses to the questionnaire were received. As is often the case with
this type of research, the response rate was low (around 24%). This may
have been exacerbated by the fact that researchers were not able to contact
the students until many were away from campus on placement, and students
may not have been accessing their university email account with any
regularity at this point.

Despite the relatively low response rate, a useful sample picture of the late
entry group emerged. 23 (92%) of the students were female, and 80% (20)
were under 25 on joining the course. For the majority (68%), the highest
qualification they had obtained on entry were Scottish Highers. 58% (14) of
respondents had been in work before starting the programme, 17% (4) were
in school, 17% (4) in college, 8% (2) at another university and one applicant
was unemployed on entry. This diversity of backgrounds is typical of the
School’s student body as a whole.

When asked for the reasons behind their late application, 77% (17) of
respondents noted that they had simply made their decision at a late stage.
For one student it was because they had made an unsuccessful application to
another subject, for another it was because they had achieved worse than
expected exam results and 3 (14%) students applied late after obtaining
better than expected results.

52% (13) of students felt they were coping well with the academic demands of
their classes, whilst the remaining 48% (12) said they were managing ‘ok –
but would like help now and then’. All respondents had found it easy to make
friends on their course, though only 2 students (8) said they knew students on
different courses. 71% (17) of the students added that they were anxious
about their upcoming placements.

Qualitative analysis: emerging themes
To complement the quantitative dataset, qualitative data was collected from
four students within the two identified programmes regarding their reflections
on the student experience and personal decision to make a late application.
The limited sample in this part of the research is a knock-on effect of the
relatively low return from the web-survey, and duly acknowledged. However,
the richness of the data provided by the students allows for a grounded theory
driven thematic analysis which elicits some valuable insights (Glaser and

Two of the students included in the focus group had studied at University
before (students 1 and 2), one had studied in college before working in the
private sector for many years (student 3), and one student had come from school (student 4). Students 1, 2 and 3 could be classed as adult learners who have returned to study, and as such will be the focus of the analysis within this paper.

Motivations and expectations
Each of the students were keen to be on their programme, and as such demonstrated high levels of engagement. All noted a desire to be a nurse at some point in the past, to varying degrees. Two of the students, spoke of needing a certain level of life experience to fully appreciate the responsibility of studying nursing.

I’ve always kind of thought about nursing off and on over all the years. But in my job that I was in I was really miserable…I was so stressed, and I was looking for something else to do, and then somebody mentioned to me about nursing again. And I though, yeah …this is the time to do that. …. Maybe about 5 or 6 different times, occasions, throughout my life that I’ve considered it and never kind of felt quite grown up enough… Student 3

Interestingly, none of the students had a particularly strong idea of what to expect from the course, yet none of them cited any surprising or unexpected elements to their experience. As late entrants, the students noted the rapidity of the process of admission. This was instrumental in ensuring that their experience was more logistical than contemplative.

I didn’t really have any expectations, because it (the process of joining the programme) was so fast, I didn’t have time to build up any kind of expectation really so…I was quite open minded and just took everything as it came. Student 1

With this in mind, it emerged that factors within the decision making process were also logistical, that it was ‘the right time’ e.g. a change of career was imposed or chosen, or children were at an age where study for the parent was possible. This has interesting implications that contest the notion of the ‘late entry’ student as lacking decision. Instead, it may be that the decision is influenced by enablers in their personal lives.

Socialisation
All students spoke about the relative ease with which they built relationships amongst their cohort, and noted the central nature of discussing studying within the discipline as providing ‘a common bond’. Importance is placed on the shared experience.

…when I was at uni the first time…I didn’t talk to people as easily …whereas with nursing everybody’s there for the same reasons, you know, you’re there because you want to be a nurse of some kind or other and that kind of gives
you a common bond, that if all else fails you can say ‘oh, what branch are you on?’ or ‘what kind of nurse do you want to be?’... *Student 1*

In keeping with the students’ varying levels of confidence, however, they attached different levels of importance to the process of socialisation. Those with more maturity recognised developing peer networks as a functional aspect of their student experience. Something which would allow them to compare experiences and engage in problem based learning.

I have my agenda and so it (forming friendships) doesn’t really matter to me. If I interact with people and I meet people and I get on, that’s fine. But if that doesn’t happen it doesn’t really matter because I go home to my life. *Student 3*

**Further research and implications for policy and practice**

In order to collect more robust and comparative data, a second cycle of the research will be carried out with the new cohort at the beginning of the academic year 09/10. With better-timed delivery of data collection, it is hoped that a second year of data will help elucidate some of the emerging issues and themes from the first cycle.

As part on the ongoing analysis, it is vital to consider the implications of findings for policy and practice, and to what extent the research can inform the re-development of both. There are a number of delicate issues surrounding target numbers and government funding, and the implications that these have for learning and teaching within the School. In order for the research to ultimately be useful, it will be imperative to frame the outcomes within this subject specific context.

**References**


McGivney V (2003) Staying or leaving the course: Non-completion and retention of mature student in further and higher education, Leicester, NIACE.


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