Older mature-age students in undergraduate HE: taking charge of their own wellbeing

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Introduction

Australian universities are currently experiencing a movement of more non-traditional students into undergraduate programmes, due in part to the findings of the Review into Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) – known as the Bradley Review - and the resulting recommendations that universities should engage in widening participation to increase the percentage of the Australian population with tertiary degrees. These recommendations stem, in part, from societal changes: the need to up-skill society in line with changing work patterns and longer life expectancy as well as federal government policy directives responding to these changing demographics (Billett, 2011).

There is a substantial international literature attesting to the benefits of ongoing engagement in education and learning, whether to improve career opportunities (Deakin Crick & Joldersma, 2007; McDonald, 2011) or for personal development (Narushimi, 2008; Stanwick, Ong & Karmel, 2006; Volkoff, 2009). The benefits can be particularly important for older individuals, who may have missed out on previous educational opportunities or had negative learning experiences (Daniels 2008; Ding, 2011; McAllister, 2010). Whatever the reasons people enter university as mature-age students, research suggests it is a positive step both for individuals concerned, and for society more broadly (European Commission 2006). Harris and Ramos (2011, p.75) suggest that ‘(o)pportunities for adults to engage in learning throughout their lifetimes are essential for both economic efficiency and social equity reasons’, as changing social attitudes and government policies result in widening participation becoming a focus of education in many countries.

In this paper I report on a study into student support in an Australian university, set in an environment where universities engage with current policy discourses of widening participation yet may struggle with implementing strategies that effectively address
the needs of those non-traditional students who are at the centre of such aims. The focus here is on findings that emerged as an unexpected theme of the data analysis: students’ narratives that suggested they effectively take responsibility for their own educational well-being regardless of any available or received institutional support.

**Australian mature-age students**

While Australia has had, at least within the last decade, a high proportion of its adult population engaged in learning of some kind (OECD 2011), increasing numbers of older students are now entering tertiary education, including university. As in many other countries, the Australian population is aging, and this, combined with a rising pension age, is encouraging many to gain or improve their qualifications, enabling them to remain longer in the workforce, or simply to continue learning and remain active in their communities. The consequence of this means that more people are studying as mature-age students and numbers will likely continue to rise alongside an expected increase in workforce participation identified by Headley (2011).

While many Australian universities have engaged actively in programmes to attract students from non-traditional sectors of the population (low socio-economic; first in family; Indigenous; and those with disabilities), the attention given to providing specific and relevant support for mature-age students can be minimal, or not sufficiently broad. Given that ‘mature-age’ describes students aged from 21 years to 80, or 90, or conceivably older - 3 generations - it is little wonder that strategies to support this highly diverse student cohort may be inappropriate or beyond the scope of the institution’s understanding of student needs.

**The research**

The research from which this paper developed is a project aimed at investigating older mature-age (35 years and over) students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of widening participation strategies in one Australian university. The minimum age of thirty-five was selected because the recommendations of the Bradley Review (Bradley et.al. 2008) place an emphasis on implementation strategies to increase participation of 25 to 34 year olds, and there is little if any attention given to students beyond that age. This indicates a gap in the research informing educational policies concerned with participation, since not only are universities likely to see an increasing number of students aged 35 and over, but other factors may make
participation beyond this age more challenging. For example, international research (European Commission, 2006) has shown that after age 34, educational participation across the community begins to decrease. While the European Commission’s document does not suggest reasons for this, it highlights the need to focus on identifying the causes and addressing what mature-age students do want from their university experience.

Participants in the study self-selected by responding to invitations disseminated across all five faculties of the university (a multi campus institution with four regional campuses). Although focus groups had originally been planned to identify any major issues, these proved difficult to organise, and the initial data was eventually collected via open-ended interview questions designed to encourage each individual to define their own needs and preferences for what support should be provided; as well as to identify what supports were/were not available. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, and, in the case of regional students (some living many hundreds of kilometres away), by phone.

These interviews revealed stories of mature-age student experiences that were as diverse as the participants themselves, and the range of support needs was equally broad. Less clear from the data were what specific supports were in place, and were helpful. As one participant noted, 'well, it's hard to know if you need it when it's already there, I suppose'.

While these older students did identify some institutional support mechanisms, they were aware that this support was not put in place specifically for them, but consisted of generic support strategies for the student body as a whole, or for specific minority groups, for example, prayer and wash rooms for Muslim students. However, other, unexpected themes began to emerge as each student talked about how they tackled the issues they faced and addressed their needs, to varying degrees, in a fairly matter-of-fact way, that suggested they managed what needed to be done to simply get on with the task of studying. They identified elements impacting on their capacity to have positive experiences as students, and set about getting what they needed to provide for themselves a positive experience; to do as well as they could and make the experience at university a positive and enjoyable one - to take charge of their own educational well-being.

Well-being and education
What is well-being, and what does it mean in an educational context? 'Well being', according to the Oxford English Dictionary (2011/1989), is a 'state of being or doing well in life; happy, healthy, or prosperous condition; moral or physical welfare (of a person or community)'. Educational well-being, therefore, could encompass a range of academic aspects of the student experience as well as students' positive feelings about the process in general, and also receiving the encouragement and practical support needed to be a successful learner.

Three aspects influence the quality of the undergraduate university student experience: the academic, the social and the personal. This University's First Year Experience Plan 2012-2015, designed to facilitate students' transition and engagement, addresses all three, attesting that for students to fully engage and have the best opportunity to succeed, student needs relating to all three must be acknowledged, and addressed. These aspects align with elements of the definition of wellbeing used in this paper: that is, emotional and physical wellbeing (personal); being happy, part of the university community (social), and doing well in life, being (or aiming to be) prosperous (academic).

**Students and wellbeing**

The participants featured here are Brigitte, Matthew, Edward, Melanie, Frances and Sylvie (not their real names), whose ages ranged from 36 to 60 plus years, and who were studying in a range of disciplines. These students spoke about personal, social and academic aspects of their experience, identifying their expectations and also what impacted on their capacity to achieve enjoyment and satisfaction in their studies.

Moving into an unfamiliar learning environment can be daunting, and both female and male students confessed to a range of negative emotions relating to their personal and physical well-being, with Brigitte confessing that she was 'actually terrified of university.' Melanie explained her fears thus:

> I guess, without sounding like an idiot, I think, I do think it's things like, like the Library that do frighten mature-age students. It's a very, to me personally it's a very daunting building

Edward, the oldest participant, had previous experience of university study, but admitted, 'I've had to make a lot of adjustments'. As a first time student, Sylvie's fears were directed towards the processes, rather than the physical environment.
She confessed, 'I didn’t know how it was going to be. I thought it was going to be too hard. But I was going to do it anyway'.

Melanie felt invisible within the crowds of younger students and alienated by the lack of a physical space for herself, explaining:

*I do find it a bit of a struggle that there isn’t a space that I could just go and eat lunch and read a book, and, there isn’t another space for an older person to sit and not be bothered ... it’s rushed and it’s noisy and it’d be nice to have a quiet space for the older person who wants to sit and read and have a sandwich and a cup of tea.*

The combined physical and emotional challenges of the university environment were substantial for Edward, who depended on a wheelchair to get around. He too felt alienated, both by the obstacles he had to navigate in moving between classes, and also by the attitude of younger students towards him: ‘... they didn’t immediately warm to the grandfather in the room, or the old dad in the room, or whatever, um, ... they just remained aloof’.

The social aspect of university life can elude mature-age students especially when the majority of the student body is much younger, and age differences are clearly apparent. Mature-age students at this university are vastly outnumbered and participants did feel quite self-conscious about this. Matthew laughed as he explained; ‘You are a bit hesitant as an almost 40 year old man doing assignments with 17 year olds’. For Melanie, most apparent was the exclusion from any sort of group. She explained:

*... young people have got groups, whereas most of us mature-age students are here on our own, so ... they’re all hanging out together. So if one of them doesn't know how to use the library, one of their friends will show them how to do it. And I guess as a mature-age student you’re here on your own, you’ve got a few hours ... I’ll just wander around and not ask anybody.*

All the participants knew what they wanted from their undergraduate experiences. While most aimed for qualifications and different or better work, there was also an element of sheer pleasure gained from the learning itself. Edward, planning to continue his overseas teaching and social work on completion of his studies, expressed his enjoyment of the learning experience: ‘I love the lectures, I love learning. I love coming to the lectures. The teachers are teaching quality stuff. I’m learning heaps and heaps’. In his interview he emphasised that he placed that
experience ahead of the challenges he faced as both an older student and because of his restricted mobility.

Brigitte identified her preferred learning style, and pursued it:

*My preferred mode of learning's on campus. I don't really like online ... I just find it difficult. I find it difficult enough to learn what I need to learn, without having no contact, without having a face-to-face lecturer. I need that and I and I dare say most of the mature-age people do need that too.*

Despite the difficulties of studying at a regional campus, the demands on her time of paid work and being a single parent, Brigitte knew what she needed and engaged the support – both family and academic - that would help her achieve her goals. She used academic support provision extensively, claiming ‘*the best support I got was from the Study Skills Unit*’.

Matthew, who ‘*left a great job to come to uni*’, also used - and valued - any academic support that would help him with assignments and exams. He elaborated,

*Before I die, I'd like to have the degree, and get educated. I don't want to jump from job to job any more. I don't want to do any manual work. I've done my time, and I want to actually do something I'm personally good at... I tend to put more time into learning something than I would've back then... you're like, everything's a bit more important.*

Frances’ experience was different again, as she already had a degree in Law:

*I went back to university, started this year partly because my degree doesn't help me to get a good job in Australia because it's a different law system. So I would have had to have retrained ... but ... I see there's an opportunity to do something else and I now study pastoral care.*

**Discussion**

These older students were concerned, even fearful, about coming to university. Once there, they faced issues common to many new students, but also some others that, as the data show, emerged because of their mature-age status. What is significant for this discussion is their attitude to these challenges, and the ways in which they described responding to them. Evident from the interview data were the positive ways in which each participant spoke about their experiences, both good and bad. Their responses indicated clarity of purpose; a proactive attitude towards getting things right for themselves, not always with enthusiasm, but with a positive
attitude and a determination to achieve the academic success they had set as their goal.

Matthew, for example, laughed frequently as he related difficulties he’d faced with timetabling, organising childcare, and the assumptions made about him as an older student. He was able to see the humour in a lecturer’s expectation that he would mentor a group of international students, when he himself was struggling, and out of his depth. Sylvie and Melanie both spoke of being confronted by less than ideal situations – physical and emotional - and each then described how they would simply get on with what they wanted to do. Edward’s love of learning and commitment to his work, he explained, gave him the determination to persist, to get his degree, and use the knowledge gained to further his humanitarian activities.

Having found her international qualifications of little use in Australia, Frances expressed no regret or resentment, explaining that, because this was a situation over which she had no influence, she had simply moved forward into a new field of study. Brigitte’s enthusiasm was almost tangible; this was despite having to overcome her fears, and the subsequent difficulties of juggling work, children and study. She identified what she needed, and made use of every available support mechanism to help her achieve her goal.

While there are clearly challenges and some substantial difficulties identified by these students in coming to, and staying at, university, there is no sense of helplessness, of expectations of support, or of apportioning blame. In fact, the approaches adopted by these students in making their experiences positive ones provide examples of:

- best practice in student attitudes and behaviours;
- skills development for independent and lifelong learning;

and offer insights into

- what is missing in widening participation support strategies for older mature-age students; and
- how universities can develop more relevant forms of provision and services.

It seems that their life experience and maturity may be what enable these mature-age students to apply reflective abilities to situations that confront them, and at least endeavour to achieve the best outcomes for themselves. Perhaps this is the
greatest asset that mature-age students have, and the greatest point of difference between them and school leavers.
A recent comment made to the author by a Humanities lecturer suggests that mature-age students are expected to be able to take care of their own needs. She argued, ‘But we’ve always had mature-age students here. Once they’re in, they do seem to get through OK’. However, mature-age students should not have to be responsible for their own educational wellbeing. And if student retention is becoming a focus of the widening participation agenda - which it is at this University - what does this mean for the commitment to quality resources and implementing strategies aimed to facilitate participation of an increasing number of older mature-age students who are already assumed to be doing well and getting through without help?

Summary
If well-being is ‘being or doing well in life’, and being happy (Oxford English Dictionary, 2011/1989), this article indicates that to some extent at least, older mature-age students in undergraduate higher education approach their learning proactively, reflecting and drawing on skills developed from their life experiences - something younger students lack - to construct enabling and manageable learning experiences and take charge of their educational wellbeing.
It should not be assumed, however, that this is a satisfactory situation, and with increasing numbers of mature-age students moving into Australian higher education, universities need to pay attention to the needs of this cohort. There is ongoing work to be done in terms of ensuring satisfaction in the student experience, to which retention rates are linked. Further theorisation of the notion of educational well-being, as identified in this paper, could add to our understanding of how these older students experience university, informing provision of services and providing useful examples for younger, less experienced students.
Although the strategies and responses provided here should not be seen as a substitute for the educational support these older students deserve, there are lessons and implications for student support services, academic staff, administrators and others concerned with developing specific, relevant and appropriate support systems as part of a more inclusive higher education widening participation agenda.

References


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