(Much) Older University Students: Their Study Motivations and Experiences

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Abstract

Regional undergraduate students born before 1956 were invited to respond to an anonymous online questionnaire on being a university student in later life. Demographic information was collected – sex, place of residence, age group, any former university study, current study year and mode, and whether full- or part-time. Open-ended questions investigated study motivations, extra supports and facilities required, highlights of being a university student, negatives or challenges faced, contributions from their greater life experience, and how academic and administrative staff and other students related to them.

Most still envisaged a vocational use for their new knowledge, skills, and targeted qualification. Generally respondents reported relating well to others in the university community. Conflicting priorities and some technological issues provided challenges. Past experiences helped them to relate theory learned to “the bigger picture”, and they felt able to make significant contributions to class discussions.

In an ageing society where retirement may need to be deferred, considerations of equity mean that it is important to allow for the inclusion of this under-represented older group in higher education.

Background – our university

- The University of South Australia is a multi-campus university, established in 1991 by the amalgamation of the South Australian Institute of Technology and three campuses of the South Australian College of Advanced Education – some of its predecessor institutions have 19th Century origins.
- 2 CBD campuses; 2 in capital city suburbs; 2 regional locations – Whyalla Campus 400 km (250 miles) to the NW of Adelaide and Mount Gambier Regional Centre 460 km (about 300 miles) to the SE of Adelaide.
- The Centre for Regional Engagement offers programs in Business, Engineering, Social Work, Nursing, and Foundation Studies; also postgraduate studies (www.unisa.edu.au/cre/). (Metropolitan campuses offer many more program options.)
- Research centre based at Whyalla: Centre for Rural Health and Community Development (CRHaCD) (http://www.unisa.edu.au/crhacd/)
Context – what led to this study?

An earlier survey (2008) had as its main aims:

- To clarify ways in which the location of the University of the Third Age (U3A) Whyalla branch at the UniSA Whyalla campus, and the relationships developed, have been beneficial to both;
- To identify further possible ways of working together.

Data were gathered through a paper-based survey of U3A members and an online survey of campus staff.

As well as the questions on mutual benefits, participants were asked:

- (U3A members) Would you be interested in studying in one of the regular UniSA courses available at Whyalla? (Or a whole program?)
- (Campus staff) If individual U3A members or other retired people wished to study in a UniSA program here, what issues, challenges, and benefits can you envisage for yourself, your other students, and UniSA?

A staff member’s comment – catalyst for undertaking this survey of older students:

“It does not make too much difference when 55+ year aged students are already there and coping well, at times better than the younger ones.”

Research aims and method

Research question

What is it like for students aged 55 or more studying in undergraduate classes with younger students?

- Motivations for studying
- Experiences as undergraduate students
- Challenges faced
- Highlights of the study experience
- Contributions to their classes from their experience

Method

- University Human Research Ethics Committee approval
- Permission from Director: Centre for Regional Engagement to contact eligible students
- Anonymous online survey of regional undergraduate students born before 1956 (late 2010; available also early 2011 to allow new students and others who had not yet done so to participate)
- Responses summarized and emerging themes identified
Participants

- **2010 students in the study age range:** 20
  (1 Business student, 1 Engineering, 4 Nursing, 11 Social Work, 3 Foundation Studies)
- **New 2011 enrolments:** 5 (1 Nursing, 4 Foundation Studies)
- **Total:** 25 (including a former Foundation Studies student now in Social Work)
- **Completed questionnaires:** 10 (7 in late 2010; a further 3 early in 2011)
- **Response rate:** 40%

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<td>(None had previously completed university studies.)</td>
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Findings

Earlier experiences of tertiary study, or reasons for not having studied earlier

“I transferred to the country and could not continue studies.”
“It was by distance education and was at the wrong time of my life.”
“The rigidity of some professors of accepting that people with years in practical life have something to contribute.”
“Never thought I could or would.”
“It did not occur to me to do this.”
“I haven’t had the opportunity to do so before moving to Whyalla.”
“Married young and had a family and ran businesses.”

Time factors were also mentioned: one felt unable to do higher level study plus farming and off-farm work.

Main motivation for studying

(Several provided more than one source of motivation.)

- Increase or extend knowledge 4
- Gain a qualification 3
- Increase/enhance (work) skills 2
- Increase employability 2
- Gain opportunities for advancement or job change 2
- “Make a difference”; pass on experience 2
- Gain a pay increase 1

Intrinsic motivation, for the learning itself: “to keep my brain going”

Extrinsic motivation – desire to enhance employment opportunities through the development of new “knowledge, skills and techniques”; need for a “qualification to continue working in a profession I enjoy”.

Altruistic purposes were evident in some responses, e.g. using the new learning in a volunteer role.

The best things about being a university student

“Learning”; “new knowledge”
“Gaining a wealth of knowledge that I previously did not have”
“It is making me use a lot of my brain power which hasn’t been put to good use since I left school.”
“It is like a whole new world has opened before my eyes.”
Applying knowledge: “enhancing my work practice” and in “gaining formal qualifications” which meant that the “new knowledge” was acquired “in a structured way so that it becomes recognized” (2 respondents).

A sense of achievement (3): “achieving”, “the fact that I did it”, “working towards a goal, not sitting back waiting to retire”.

People (3): “new people”, “helping other students” and “interacting with others”.

**Greater life experience: advantages and contributions**

“Life experiences, patience and self-discipline” – compensated for one student’s “reduced ability to take in new information”.

Directly relevant work place experience: “… dealing with people who are much less fortunate than I … people struggling on a daily basis to survive their social issues”.

Another: “With previous work in the same area, I can relate to the theory in the uni subjects”.

In “work-related subjects” they could describe “practical events”.

Their background gave “confidence in contributing in discussions”.

One had been asked “to explain issues by other students even with lecturer and ass. prof. there”.

Nevertheless, one emphasized, “The younger people have very valid experience as well”.

“Life skills” and a wider perspective:

“I understand what I am learning because of lived experiences.”
“I don’t get pulled down by minor things. I can see around corners.”
“Better understanding on how other disciplines work in with each other.”
“I can see the value of some parts of a course that others don’t.”
“The students seem to find these experiences interesting and are quite happy to ask me questions.”

All felt that their experience had allowed them to make contributions, including those as an older person.

**Negatives of being a university student and challenges faced**

Factors identified were to do with resources (financial, time and energy) and competing priorities of family and work. (Two respondents had experienced no negatives, and one “Nothing of significance” as a challenge.)

“Costs”
“Lack of time for family”; “family taken a back seat”; “fitting it round a large expanding family”; “just trying to study – having to discipline oneself to study time, not things needed to be done for family”
“Sometimes stressful when trying to get an assignment finished”
“Studying after working all day is very challenging”
“Attitudes of some other students, especially towards older lecturers”.

Technology provided challenges for some: “computer”; “keeping up with today’s lifestyles and technology in communications”. So did “competing priorities”; and finding “study time”.

One found it “harder to learn new things than when I was younger” and “absorbing information given” challenged another.

“To not grow tired and remain excited by learning new technology and skills” was a hurdle for another.

Other support needed or activities/facilities that should be provided

Five respondents felt that no additional support was needed – one of these praised a tutor’s “excellent support”. There was one nil response. One “managing reasonably well”, commented, “There is never enough time for full-time work, family and study.” Other needs mentioned were “computer skills”, which “left a lot to be desired”, “skills in how to write assignments, especially to be able to critique myself”; and “academic writing and research skill with the computer”, for which “sessions with library staff” had provided some help. Psychological support was also mentioned: “My self-esteem can be very low at times.”

Four saw no need for other activities or facilities; two others could not suggest any. (Most of the respondents had expressed little interest in university extracurricular activities.)

Pre-entry classes were needed as a preparation for some courses, said one. An external student found a metropolitan campus “an excellent centre to study through”, and a Mount Gambier Regional Centre student lamented the lack of a library there.

Relating to other students

Other students related “very well” to them (2), and another said that this applied to “most students”. Another found that it “depended on other students’ attitudes”. This could involve some looking up to them “for the experience”, and one commented that “other older ones try to dominate in projects”.

“I get on well with the students in my course.”
“When I meet them, I am readily accepted.”
“They see me as one of them.”
“I think with respect – we are all in this together.”

Complaints about students who had talked right through a lecture brought a negative reaction, whereas other class members were glad of the older student’s intervention.
Relating to teaching and administrative staff

Teaching staff related “very well” to them (2), “usually very well”, “OK”, or there were “no problems“. They provided “excellent support”, and were “warm and welcoming”.

They “just treat me as all other students”.

“Good – I’m not sure whether sometimes when I am struggling to grasp a concept whether staff feel I may be a bit set in my ways. Generally supportive though.”

Most described their relationship with administrative staff in positive terms. Apart from one student that had “not had contact”, and one nil response, other comments were “very good”, “good – as with other students”, “always ready to help”, “very helpful” (2), “excellent”, “good, supportive”, and the staff related “with kindness”.

Encouraging others to study

All respondents said that they would encourage others of their age cohort to consider studying at university. One added, “without hesitation”, another reported already doing so, while yet another responded, “Just do it!”

One response commended study at a particular campus, as “they really care about your progress”.

“One is never too old to study, although with other responsibilities as you are older one must balance work/study and life, family, children, grandchildren and wife and own brothers and sister, mum and in-laws all getting older.”

“A new door for me and my family.”

Lessons learned

- Students of 55 and more are themselves a diverse group.
- They contribute to campus diversity, which can enrich the learning environment, and provide opportunities for intergenerational learning.
- It’s never too late to undertake formal learning experiences!
- Life experience should never be discounted.
- Challenges can be overcome.

Implications

- What can we learn from the perceptions of older students that will help us to improve the higher education experience of other older students?
Will any changes implemented as a result of these understandings also benefit other groups of students?

New Social Work graduates (including two over 55) and their lecturers

What now?

- Develop preliminary recommendations for optimizing the higher education learning experience of older learners
  - Value their contribution
  - Recognize and respond to their needs
- Possible further research:
  - Develop a quantitative survey instrument.
  - Compare the experiences of this pilot study group with those of a larger cohort – other campuses of UniSA.
  - Compare UniSA experiences with those of a similar age cohort in other places/cultures.
- Make available understandings derived from this study for use in marketing university study opportunities to older citizens.

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