First year mature age students' motivations for university study

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Abstract

As access to higher education changes, so too does the student demographic. As such, there is a higher increase of mature age students accessing undergraduate degrees with numbers in Australian universities reported to be as high as approximately 40%. This paper reports on one part of a larger qualitative study that involved two interviews six months apart with nine participants from an Australian inner-city university. The larger study aimed to identify the strategies and resources that first year mature age students engage with that assist them during their education. Illuminated in this paper are the mature age students' motivations for study and how these differ and are influenced from a variety of references points. Interrelationships between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are revealed in the data, providing insight into how higher education can move forward in understanding the study needs of this cohort of student.

Introduction

The Australian Higher Education sector has undergone dramatic changes over recent decades (Oades, Robinson, Green, & Spence, 2011). One of the main objectives of these changes has been an increase in the accessibility of university education to a broader range of the population; thus, extending beyond access to just the traditional Year 12 school leaver. These Government-led initiatives have afforded under-represented groups entry into higher education through funding and access models. As a result, the sector has seen the numbers of students in higher education increase dramatically (Birrell & Edwards, 2009). One of the major benefactors of these changes have been mature age students who are accessing undergraduate courses at university (Chesters & Watson, 2013; Cullity, 2006; McIntyre, Todd, Huijser, & Tehan, 2012). Figures from the Department of Education and Training (DET) show that there were 332,714 applications for undergraduate courses in 2018 with 195,761 of these being from non-year 12 applicants (DET, 2018). Significantly of these non-year 12 applicants 51% (100,121) had no prior experience of university (DET, 2018).

Pressure continues to exist on universities to provide the best possible opportunity for students to be successful (Oades et al., 2011). Research has identified that universities have been inclined to increase student numbers by offering a wider variety of courses (Longden, 2002; Schofield & Dismore, 2010). However, it has been reported that one of the risks associated with this course of action is a reduced quality of support offered to the students (Dobson & Sharma, 1999; Wimshurst & Allard, 2008). Further to this, student retention has an implied historical view on motivating students to perform academically with less emphasis on student support and encouragement, rather than understanding and nurturing their existing motivations (Tinto, 2015). To provide the best possible opportunity for students to achieve a university education

it is imperative that institutions offer quality support services that go beyond the academic focus.

Mature age students motivations for study have been shown to be based on a number of variables such as age, personal values, life experience and stage of life, which are markedly different from the traditional younger students (Swain & Hammond, 2011). Research in this area has revealed that mature age students are influenced by a wide range of motivations including self-transformation and unfulfilled potential, validating existing skills and experience with institutionalised credentials, personal interest and changing their life course (Askham, 2008; Reay, Ball, & David, 2002; Willans & Seary, 2011). As described these motivations can commonly be categorized as intrinsic (such as personal interest in a topic) or extrinsic (tied to the utility value of a task, such as gaining a better job), however it has been shown that these have a strong interrelationship when undertaking university studies (Fredman, 2014). Thus, these interconnected motivations play a significant role in the mature aged students undertaking undergraduate level study.

Intrinsic motivations

Intrinsic motivations are internally-driven desires to perform an activity for its own sake and the personal reward without any external factors present (Cherry, 2019). An example of this type of motivation for a mature age student is the desire to gain knowledge from their studies, while the knowledge may assist in other external rewards the initial motivation is for the personal satisfaction achieved. Willans and Seary (2007) discuss gaining new self-knowledge as a key motivator for mature age students as they attempt to change their own perceptions and assumptions regarding their educational abilities. This builds on previous research looking at the characteristics of undergraduate students that identified gaining an understanding of the knowledge and material being taught, rather than just passing subjects was a primary motivator (Archer, Cantwell, & Bourke, 1999).

The unfulfilled potential with a desire to bring about self-transformation has been identified as a key motivator that can have gendered orientations. Britton and Baxter (1999) using a narrative analysis of 21 mature age students and their reasons for attending university found four narratives that were applicable: 1) unfulfilled potential, 2) struggling against the odds, 3) credentialism, and 4) self-transformation. The seven males all identified within the unfulfilled potential and self-transformation narratives, while the remaining female participants' motivations were spread across the four narratives (Britton & Baxter, 1999). Further research in similar cohorts found that understanding their own identities was an important factor in mature age students' motivations (Burke, 2007; Hedges, 2011; Whannell & Whannell, 2015). Especially in the area of class identity the social mobility that can be achieved through education, for example from a working class to a middle-class identity, can be a motivating factor (Baxter & Britton, 2001). This tends to be challenging for females in their family and personal relationships as they can be more susceptible to anxiety and guilt over their changing identity. A possible explanation of this is the strong emotional and affective aspect of moving between classes, which may be more prevalent in working class women and their existing family and personal relationships (Baxter & Britton, 2001).

Engaging with formal study has been shown to be physically, cognitively and emotionally challenging as students' existing identification as a learner, based on previous experience, clash with new perceptions of themselves as learners (Willans & Seary, 2011). Changes to the mature age students' identity and self-image, including increased confidence and self-awareness, are two factors that have been described as being intertwined with study for the mature age student

(Mercer, 2007). It is suggested that personal growth is not a direct product of acquiring knowledge and learning skills but works together in that the mature age students become more accepting in their understanding of themselves as a learner (Daddow, Moraitis, & Carr, 2012). In many cases this was rooted in past experiences of compulsory education in which the student has formed a learner identity that influences their motivation. In these cases study can be identified as resolving past perceptions in their attempt to change their identity (Mercer, 2007). These motivations are similar to what have been categorised as "proving to oneself" whereby the main motivating factor is personal development (Swain & Hammond, 2011p:608).

Changing and strengthening their personal and cultural identity are significant motivators for specific cohorts who are looking to increase their roles as local and global citizens (Swain & Hammond, 2011p, 608). One study for example, looking at Pacific Islander students, identified how their success at tertiary level could be enhanced through aligning teaching practices and building supportive relationships with peers especially from a similar cultural background, thus influencing intrinsic motivation. Understanding that people of a similar cultural background were attempting tertiary study played a significant motivational role for mature age students (Airini, McNaughton, Langley, & Sauni, 2007). In a similar vein, familial capital has also been identified as providing motivation for mature age students to return to study after a break of some time, as well as an incentive to continue (Airini et al., 2007). It should be noted however, that these two examples are aspirations that provide some insight into the crossover between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations with the personal satisfaction aligning with an external reward by increasing capital in cultural and familial environments.

Extrinsic motivations

Extrinsic motivations are defined as performing a behaviour or engaging in an activity in order to achieve some external reward (Cherry, 2019). One of the most commonly identified extrinsic motivations for mature age students is career aspirations, either changing careers or furthering an existing career by gaining new skills that will assist them. Stone and O'Shea (2013) found that many mature age students from a regional university were motivated by career aspirations with male students more keenly aware of their traditional 'breadwinner' role and focused on completing their studies as quickly as possible. Investing in their career through study has been shown to be a financially beneficial pursuit for mature age students even though they face more substantial risks, economically and socially, than the traditional student (Chesters & Watson, 2013).

A study specifically looking at male mature age students discovered that education allows a shift in social class through employment in positions that were traditionally identified as being out of reach for the 'working class' (Burke, 2007). Snowden and Lewis (2015) identified that mainstream media perpetuates the view of university study being crucial to gaining a 'good job' and this was a factor in the educational choices made by mature age students. Mature age students maintaining their motivation while negotiating new roles and identities is an important factor of student retention, and therefore it is imperative that there are strong support networks in place from both the university and their social lives (Agllias, Howard, Cliff, Dodds, & Field, 2016).

The decision to engage in university study is often precipitated by an event in the mature age students' lives (Stone, 2008). These can be a major life transition such as illness or divorce, but can also include employment changes and children starting education which provides the mature age student with an opportunity to re-evaluate their established ideals and goals (Stone, 2008). There are a number of components that must be taken into consideration and these

include the emotional commitment that university study requires to be successful (Whannell & Whannell, 2015). Bowles et al. (2014) describe a range of factors that are significant in transitioning into university study and established a strong association between motivation, commitment, willingness to succeed and effort, as being key for students to not only transition into university but to maintain their initial momentum throughout their studies.

The Current Study

The research study presented in this paper is one section of a larger PhD research project that is investigating the first-year mature age student university experience. A longitudinal qualitative interview study was undertaken over the participants first year of university during 2017/2018. The first two participant interviews took place in semester two 2017 with follow up interviews taking place in semester one 2018 as these two participants had started university at mid-year enrolment. The remaining seven participants' initial interviews were held in semester one 2018 and second interviews in semester two 2018. The overall project is designed to gain an understanding of mature age students' notions of success as well as trying to identify strategies they develop that are beneficial in their studies. It takes its theoretical position from Bourdieu's (1986, 2010) concepts of cultural capital and habitus to help explain why some strategies are successful. The research presented here aims to highlight the motivations of the students as this was identified as a significant influence for the participants in this study.

Methodology

The research reported in this paper was conducted under the approval of the Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee at Swinburne University of Technology (Project 2017/256).

The sample for the current study was nine mature age students from an inner-city university campus in Melbourne, Australia. Participants were invited across the university from various disciplines. Specific inclusion requirements for participation included being over the age of 21 undertaking a first undergraduate degree, with no previous formal study for a two-year period. The sample was populated by responses to flyers that requested 'first year first semester' mature age students. The participant ages ranged from 21 to 45, with eight females and one male. They were enrolled in a variety of programs with their demographics outlined in Table 1.

Pseudonym	Sasha	Kylie	Gabriella	Jenna	Jackie	Louise	Lawrence	Gloria	Brooke
Age	26	25	21	33	23	26	41	45	23
Gender	F	F	F	F	F	F	M	F	F
Work	F/T	NE	P/T	NE	P/T	NE	NE	NE	NE
Degree program	Business/ Social Science	Arts	Nursing	Arts	ICT	Business/Social Science	Computer Science	Design	Media & Communications
Study Load	F/T	F/T	F/T	F/T	F/T	P/T	F/T	P/T	F/T

NB: FT = Full time, PT = Part time, NE = Not employed

Table 1. Participant profiles

After participants provided informed consent, semi-structured interviews were conducted with questions aimed to allow the participants to express their experiences at university. The interview data was transcribed and coded thematically using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches guided by research questions and an initial coding framework informed by literature broadly influenced by the four key areas of: motivations, notions of success, student experience, and theory/method. During analysis these themes were expanded to identify more concepts and data that illustrated specific themes. The data was cross checked for reliability of emergent themes as a part of exploring the data for patterns and relationships, to find explanations for what was observed (Boeije, 2010, p.76).

Findings and Discussion

In this section of the paper we unpack the motivations identified by the participants across time (interview one and two), followed by a concluding section that looks at shifts and recommendations of mature age students' motivations.

Motivations described in first semester of study

Attending university in an attempt to gain knowledge that will lead to career opportunities was the most significant motivator in the initial interview for the participants of this study. This has been identified as a self-transformation motivation (Askham, 2008). In most cases the insights into their motivations generally revolved around gaining knowledge although this was specifically with a view to increasing their employability. All participants spoke at some point about future endeavours being a significant motivation in their consideration of university study. This adds support for the interrelationship of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Fredman, 2014).

Participants identified their previous employment experiences and their desire to make changes, as Sasha explains "*I have done a lot of things career wise, so my motivation is to finally get…you know do something that I want to do…as a job*". Education has been identified as an important factor in accessing opportunities that may not have been previously available (Burke, 2007; Mercer, 2007) Jenna was very forthright in her desire to open up opportunities that had the potential to increase her social position through employment:

> I was stuck in a dead end job that had no meaning and when I applied for other jobs, I didn't actually want to work there it was just another dead end job that was going nowhere. So, I felt like I was not really open to everything that I could possibly achieve. So, going to uni hopefully broadens my career in a way that I wouldn't have been able to do not going to uni.

These initial interviews with the participants and the specific question of their motivation for attending university identified a similar pattern to previous research that has illuminated self-transformation and life transitions as significant influences for mature aged students (Stone, 2008; Swain & Hammond, 2011).

While these examples illustrate how mature age students' often use their studies to move into different careers, there were at least two participants who described skills that they had already built without formal accreditation. Thus, credentialism within their industry was a motivation. Gloria explained she had been a media producer for a number of years but was finding it difficult to break into her passion for animation production:

> So, what happened was I decided that I needed to upskill in some way and it needed to be substantial and it needed to be long-term, and this was it, because I've tried a lot of things. I've done a lot of things… Then I can work across and I can incorporate all those different medias I've got – yeah. So, I know how to assemble and pull things out and put things in a way.

A potentially more significant example of requiring credentials in their previous industry was Lawrence who had worked in Information Technology (IT) in China but found that his qualifications were not recognised in Australia. In his first interview, Lawrence revealed the complexity involved in study for mature age students as while his wife had been studying, he had provided for his family:

> Interviewer: have you been working in computers and networking?
> Lawrence: Yeah in China, I just come here, I have been in Australia for four years but the first two years I work as a cleaner. After my wife graduated from the university, she got a job and now it is my turn [to study].

The brief response from Lawrence highlights multiple motivations surrounding credentialism as well as linking to his cultural and personal identity. The cultural and familial capital is important as it was his 'duty' to provide, by working in a position outside of his preferred field. The fact that he now saw it as 'my turn' provides some evidence of strengthening his personal identity (Swain & Hammond, 2011).

Returning to study and the value on grades also emerged as a core consideration for the mature age student making the decision to study for the first time at university. Kylie was focused on gaining good grades to allow her to transition to her preferred course of study:

> Kylie: I think it's the grades as well as the knowledge for me, it's both. I need the grades to be able to pass to get looked at to get into the double degree, hopefully. And then yeah, I need the knowledge to be able to teach it.
> Interviewer: So, the grades is almost like a pathway?
> Kylie: Yeah for me.
> Interviewer: whereas the knowledge is something that you want for later on?
> Kylie: Yeah.

For Brooke, the idea of good grades would lead to other opportunities once she had finished studying, although she wasn't clear on the relationship: "*I think like my original desired outcome was to get good grades and to get a job out of it somehow*". Even though she was unclear about the practical aspects of linking grades with outcomes, this provides an example of the complex relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Fredman, 2014).

Motivations described in semester two of study

During the second interview there had been a marked shift in the motivations for the majority of participants. Participants who described examples of extrinsic motivations that aligned with careers appeared to identify focus and commitment as beneficial to maintaining momentum (Bowles et al., 2014). Attitude to study was key to this motivation. An example was provided by Sasha who had changed employment and was now studying online rather than on campus to support this shift in study/work/life balance. In her second interview she revealed the shift in her study delivery mode highlighted her want to succeed:

> Sasha: It's like harder. Studying online is harder. And I've done it before. You know when I was 21, I studied online and worked full time and I ended up stopping and I really…that's what I don't want to do…I really want to stick it out…
>
> Interviewer: What makes you so sure that you are going to do it this time?
>
> Sasha: Well I think my attitude is different, my motivation for studying is different, I'm older. Like, I don't want to bust my balls, you know I don't want to be tired and stay up late and give up my free time for nothing.
>
> Interviewer: So, your time is more valuable.
>
> Sasha: Yeah, definitely. By no means, I don't think I'm old but I'm definitely nearing thirty. I want to have a career that I love and want to be in. So, yeah, it's different. My attitude and mentality are different this time around.

Kylie had described some bureaucratic issues in transferring to a double degree in Education and Arts, but was focused on achieving her goal even if it meant changing universities. Once again attitude and motivation were closely aligned for the mature age student:

> Interviewer: So, your motivations haven't changed at all?
>
> Kylie: I am going to be a secondary history teacher.
>
> Interviewer: Yep. You're pretty set.
>
> Kylie: Yep. I'll go to Ballarat [location of another university] if I have to. They'll let me in.

For other participants their motivation was similar to the first interview six months earlier, however, their enthusiasm had changed based on their grades from first semester. Gabriella mentioned that her motivation was the same, but her commitment had increased as she had achieved a high standard in first semester, and this was driving her to maintain the standard:

> Yeah, I think it's probably stayed the same…the reason I'm in the course is the same reasons…But I think like doing first semester as well that kind of motivated me to continue as well. And like… I finished first semester overall with a really high standard so I think that has motivated me to keep up my work. It's not like I'm feeling like I'm doing all this study and it's not getting me anywhere.

Conversely, Jackie had found that she was struggling with focus and motivation to continue in the same course and she was trying to maintain some sense of commitment until the end of the university year:

> And that was before, I just want to quit, when I started struggling…now I just say, "I just want to keep my head above the water", before I would have put it in the too hard basket…but I guess I just keep pushing through it. What else would I do anyway?

Jackie's motivation is an example of how changes to the mature age students identity and self-image occur as part of the process (Mercer, 2007). Her confidence to move through the experience and difficulties demonstrates how a self-awareness is interwoven with personal development and the experience of studying. This was also revealed by Brooke as she became more accepting in her understanding of herself as a learner, in association to finding it hard to relate the course material to her desired goals she explained how it was a difficult journey that she wasn't prepared for:

> I feel like I just don't have the mental power…so if ok, if you're an accountant, you do your degree and then you get a job, if you're a teacher you do your degree and you get a job. You don't need like crazy amount of experience…it's like a pathway, but with media, it's like…a winding road, and it's forward and back and there is lots of road works, you can't just go straight. You can't go like "I've got a degree and here it is"

Further to this she was finding study a burden that was potentially interfering with other aspects of her life:

> Like I'm getting married at the end of next year, and I just want to be like stable at that point, I just want comfort and stability like… I mean, everyone is different and it's like some people are less sensitive that others, it really depends on how sensitive you are and stuff but for me, it's kind of like exhausted me like really run me down.

Studying as a mature age student is transformational (Askham, 2008). And we would argue that the personal growth and identity shifts are also closely linked to the individual also seeing value in both the process of self-development as well as the study content. Jackie and Brooke's cases provide support to Tinto's (2015) theory that students need to understand the value within the curriculum to justify their time and effort. With both these cases, the reflections connected to their feelings that the knowledge they are receiving is not aligned with their end goals is an important consideration in their continuing studies, and subsequent motivations. Revealing tensions between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that can occur for mature age students.

Conclusion

This paper provides a glimpse into the motivational aspirations of mature age students and how they play an important role in their university education. In some cases, the initial motivations that provided the impetus for study were continuous throughout the first year. Kylie's insistence that she was *"going to be a secondary teacher"* was the reason she started university and had not changed. This is a similarly extrinsic motivation to Sasha who was using study to *"have a career that I love and want to be in"*. These career motivations have been well documented in previous research and it is not surprising that they are included here.

What was somewhat unexpected were the changes in motivation that occurred from first to second semester. There were positive changes, such as Gabriella, who shared *"I finished first semester overall with a really high standard so I think that has motivated me to keep up my work"*. This identifies how the motivations can be both intrinsic in that she felt that study was worthwhile, as well as extrinsic in achieving a tangible good grade. Motivation waning was an issue for a number of participants who were struggling to maintain momentum among other aspects of their life, for example, Brooke who commented that university was *"kind like a burden at the moment"*.

It is incumbent on universities to make provisions, in policy and practice, both academically and in pastoral care that are in the best interests of the students to allow them to continue their studies in a welcoming and supportive environment. One of the key findings from this research is that the motivations can change throughout a student's studies and this can have a dramatic effect on their ability to continue. To their credit none of the participants in this study had stopped studying even though some were questioning their choices.

This paper provides some interesting information regarding the mature age student motivations and their changes over the first year. While this study highlighted the experience of nine mature age students from a single university, it does provide an insight into the underlying motivations that mature age students arrive at university with and how these change. As has been expressed in previous research the mature age student motivations can be quite different to the 'traditional' university student. With the expanding intake of mature age students, it would be worthwhile to look specifically at their changing motivations alongside understanding the institutional role in supporting mature age students maintain motivation to successfully complete their university studies. It would be worthy of scrutiny to expand this study to a larger cohort and across a

number of institutions to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of motivations play in the mature age student experience.

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