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Breaking the barriers: supporting and engaging mature age first-infamily university learners and their families

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Abstract

This nuts and bolts session will report on preliminary findings from research currently being conducted with older, first-in-family university students. This student cohort often has family commitments and so the research was specifically interested in the impacts of returning to education for both the students and their family members. The study is significant because mature age/first-in-family students are often at risk of attrition and they also represent a growing student cohort; hence higher education institutions need to be actively engaging with this group to improve retention and explore the possibilities for intergenerational educational participation. This research has been funded under the Office of Teaching and Learning Seed Grant initiative and is a partnership study between University of Wollongong, University of Newcastle and Open Universities Australia. The project is innovative, as it not only focuses on the students' experiences but also, more significantly, their families in order to better conceptualise family discourses around how knowledge and learning are negotiated.

Keywords

their, learners, university, infamily, families, first, breaking, age, mature, engaging, supporting, barriers

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Breaking the Barriers: supporting and engaging mature age first-in-family university learners and their families

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*This nuts and bolts session will report on preliminary findings from research currently being conducted with older, first-in-family university students. This student cohort often has family commitments and so the research was specifically interested in the impacts of returning to education for both the students **and** their family members. The study is significant because mature age/first-in-family students are often at risk of attrition and they also represent a growing student cohort; hence higher education institutions need to be actively engaging with this group to improve retention and explore the possibilities for intergenerational educational participation. This research has been funded under the Office of Teaching and Learning Seed Grant initiative and is a partnership study between University of Wollongong, University of Newcastle and Open Universities Australia. The project is innovative, as it not only focuses on the students' experiences but also, more significantly, their families in order to better conceptualise family discourses around how knowledge and learning are negotiated.*

Keywords: First-in-Family learners; higher education participation, intergenerational effects; educational participation; mature age students; students with dependents

Background

This presentation will be based upon the preliminary findings from a study that has been funded by the Office of Teaching and Learning (OLT) and is currently in its very early stages. The study is examining the impact of returning to education for older first-in-family students. A key dissemination activity under the terms of the OLT grant will be the presentation and discussion of the preliminary findings at this nuts and bolts session. Through these preliminary findings from the data, the implications of the return to education will be examined both in relation to the individual student and also, their families. Primarily, this nuts and bolts session will seek critical feedback from session participants to help inform the further development of the research.

The impetus for this research is derived from both educational policy directives within Australia and also increases in the numbers of older students participating in higher education. In relation to the first point, based on recommendations from the Review of Australian Higher Education (2008) led by Denise Bradley, the Australian

government has committed to increasing the participation of older students in university, with the objective of having 40% of all 25 to 34-year-olds attaining a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025. It is thus timely to initiate a detailed exploration of the experiences of this mature age cohort in order to better assist universities to engage with and retain these learners. These national policy directives mirror an increase in the numbers of mature age learners accessing higher education both within Australia (OECD, 2011)¹ and also, internationally (Skilbeck, 2006). In exploring the experiences of the contemporary mature age student, the research's objectives are to **both** consider how institutional interventions can best target this group and also, explore how this return to education impacts on the family and community of the learner.

Summary Literature Review

This study does not exclusively focus on women but a larger proportion of participants are mothers. The literature on women returning to HE, particularly older women with caring responsibilities, indicates how this cohort encounters unique issues (Edwards, 1993; Reay, 2003). Returning to education is a gendered experience (Stone & O'Shea, 2013) so how older women's higher education engagement impacts upon these family and caring responsibilities warrants closer and more 'nuanced' attention (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010, p.163).

While the research literature tells us that adult women returners often regard their return to education as a means to model educational engagement for their children (Stone & O'Shea, 2013, 2012; Debenham & May, 2005), what is less well known is the actual impact this participation has on the wider family and the community of the learner for **both** genders. In recognition of this, Wainwright and Marandet (2010) argue that institutions of higher education need to create a 'culture of learning' (p449) that embraces not only the students as parent but also 'between parents and their children' (p449). These authors point out that 'little attention has focused on the impacts of parents own participation in learning on the home and most especially on their dependent (16 and under) children' (p.450); a gap that is echoed by Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates (2008) in their book *Education and the Family: Passing success across the generations*. In recognising the powerful impact that higher education participation has on older and FiF participants (O'Shea, 2013; O'Shea & Stone, 2011), this study addresses this gap, exploring how this decision to return to higher education impacts upon family members, not only influencing family discourses around education but more importantly, the learning of dependent children.

Description of the Research

The project is a partnership between the University of Wollongong, the University of Newcastle and Open Universities Australia. The aim is to capture a variety of student learning experiences through the recruitment of participants at each institution who are at various stages of their study and studying in either face-to-face or online modes. This project employs a narrative biographical approach which involves in-depth semi-structured interviews with both the students themselves and also, immediate family

¹ In the most recent OECD indicators (2011), just under 34% of the 20 – 29 year-old cohort in Australia are enrolled in tertiary institutions, which is significantly above the OECD average of 26%.

members. Survey data will also be collected, particularly from the online students for whom participating in an interview may be more difficult. The inclusion of family members represents **an innovative approach** to studying the higher education experience, as it looks beyond the confines of the campus and explores the duality of worlds within which many older/FiF learners may exist. There is an invisible but tangible divide between the public world of the university and the private domain of the family. Narrative inquiry enables analysis of the ‘different worlds’ that exist in educational settings as participants are invited to articulate university on a symbolic and lived level. This is a powerful methodology for those individuals who may feel disenfranchised or voiceless, enabling story tellers to move away from traditional perceptions or dominant discourses and instead present a perspective that resonates with personal truth. For those students who are the first in the family to come to university and may have had little experience of this environment, this approach offers the possibility to story this experience in personal terms using familiar language and metaphors rather than the rhetoric of the institution.

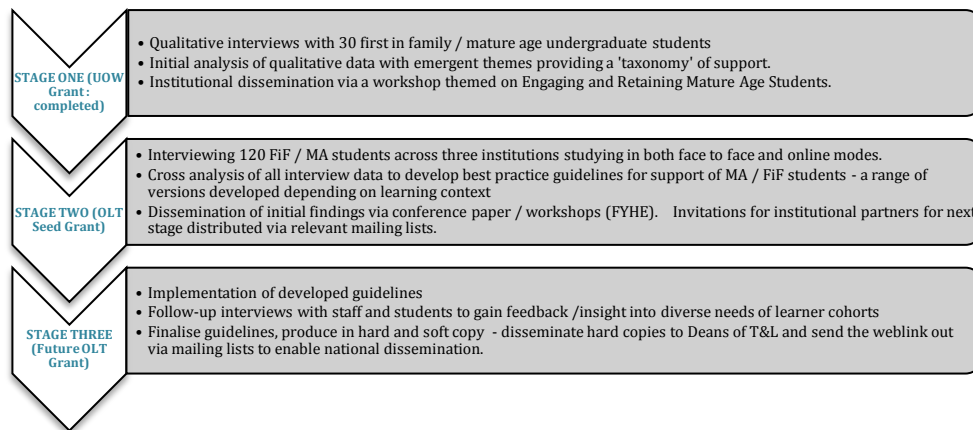
The following table indicates the target groups for data collection:

Location	Cohort Group	Numbers
University of Wollongong (UoW)	Final year U/G students Gender mix / FiF/ Over 25*	40 students plus 10–15 family members [^]
University of Newcastle (UoN)	Foundation / Access students Gender mix / FiF/ Over 25*	30-35 plus 8-10 family members
Open Universities Australia (OUA)	U/G students in the first year of online studies. Gender mix / FiF/ Over 25*	40 students plus optional survey for family members

*While HE institutions in Australia commonly name those over the age of 21 years as mature age, we believe interviewing those over the age of 25 years will be more representative of the issues facing this student cohort. [^] Family members include dependent children (over 8 years), siblings, partners, parents and extended family (cousins/aunts/grandparents)

Gathering data from students at three separate institutions provides a diverse participant mix, capturing those who are just considering university studies through to those who are completing their studies. Given the multiplicity of the student experience, it is not realistic to refer to one all-encompassing FiF/mature age student experience, as this is not a discrete entity but instead is multi-layered. The anticipated outcomes of this project are twofold: to better comprehend the intergenerational implications of the decision to return to education and also, to develop strategies designed to better support mature age students and to actively engage family members who may be considering attending university. The study is **the second stage of a three-stage research design** as outlined below:

Fig (1) Stages of research design



Overall, this research data will provide the basis for conceptualising a draft series of guidelines that highlight best practice for engaging and supporting mature age learners and families in the higher education sector; this series will be framed by the nature of the student cohort (single/married; age range etc.), stage of study and also delivery mode (face-to-face/online). The guidelines will be replete with student voice derived from the interviews in order to further contextualise and authenticate them. This approach recognises the complexity of the university learning experience for those students who are named as being mature aged and are first in the family to attend university.

Session overview

The proposed workshop relates to two of the FYHE conference topics namely 1) fostering a sense of belonging and 2) enabling and promoting access to the first year. The session seeks to engage participants in discussion around how institutions can: a) respond more effectively to student diversity; b) implement targeted support strategies that account for the learning contexts of this older cohort; and c) explore strategies for connecting with families and community of first-in-family (*FiF*) /mature learners. The session will report on the initial findings from Stage (1) of the project and also, the survey responses from Stage (2) and will be structured as follows:

Presenter (10 mins): Present the preliminary findings from the data collected from Stages (1) and (2).

Paired discussion (10 mins): Discuss the following questions in pairs or small groups:

1. How do the preliminary findings presented in the workshop reflect your institutional context and responses to student diversity?
2. What types of targeted support are offered by your institution for those students who are older and first in family to come to university?
3. What further strategies for connecting with families and community of first-in-family (*FiF*)/mature learners might institutions implement to improve engagement of these students?

Presenter + Whole group discussion (5 mins): Whole group discussion to report and to explore further how this research could be developed. The presenter will seek expressions of interest for participating in the dissemination workshop planned for early 2015.

Concluding Summary

There is scope for further research that provides rich qualitative insights into how individuals experience higher education study, particularly those who are returning after a significant gap in education. For example, O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) note the lack of literature on older adult learners' transition to higher education in the UK. Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) agree that further studies are needed to '...explore the emotional journeys that different students make as they encounter different learning environments' (p.579). This research aims to further enrich our understanding of these 'emotional journeys', exploring how this return to learning is negotiated within broader family and social domains in order to produce a series of best practice guidelines that inform institutional policy regarding the engagement and support of older, first in family student cohorts. This nuts and bolts session offers the opportunity to both present our preliminary findings and also, seek critical feedback from colleagues that will assist in developing and refining the proposed guidelines.

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