

Meeting the needs of mature student nurses in their initial weeks at university.

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Abstract

A phenomenological study was undertaken within a university in the southeast of England to explore the experiences of lecturers in meeting the needs of mature student nurses in their initial weeks at university. Initially the study sought to consider the extent to which lecturers' perceptions of mature students' needs correlated with those identified by students (as identified with the existing literature). The researcher aimed to gain a sense of lecturers' experiences with mature students and to identify those factors that enhance or inhibit lecturers in meeting the needs of mature students in their initial weeks at university. Finally, the research aimed to explore the extent to which lecturers tailor their practice to meet the needs of mature students.

Five semi-structured interviews were undertaken with lecturers holding a range of positions within a School of Nursing, Midwifery & Social Work. Interview transcripts were analysed using Colaizzi's (1978) framework for the analysis of phenomenological data. Whilst mature students were considered to be a diverse group, lecturers agreed that mature students needed and valued face-to-face contact with lecturing staff and when interacting with staff within the University as a whole. Some participants reported that time and resources presented a barrier to achieving this. Lecturers reflected upon the reliance on technology in Higher Education which they identified as a particular cause of anxiety for mature students. They acknowledged the potential difficulties in balancing home and university life for mature students. Lecturers believed that mature students demonstrated commitment to the course, but needed timely feedback to develop confidence in their ability. Lecturers reported that they themselves had received little formal training in meeting the needs of mature students but relied heavily on both their professional and personal experiences to guide them. Lecturers agreed that the transition into Higher Education presents a number of personal and academic challenges for mature students with induction week identified as a particularly stressful period for all students and therefore in need of a more detailed evaluation.

Introduction

The White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education' (UK DfES 2003a) included a clear commitment to widen participation in Higher Education (HE), and there continues to be a focus on so-called 'inclusion' which seeks to enable the full and equitable participation in HE for all prospective students, notably underrepresented groups (HEA, 2010). One such group is mature students and whilst definitions of mature students vary, the typical definition of a mature student in the UK (used for financial purposes) is age 25 years and over before the first year of the course (Directgov, 2010). Data from the University and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) indicates that the mature student population accounted for approximately 15% of all applicants in 2009 (UCAS, 2010).

There is evidence to suggest that mature nursing students approach their programme with commitment and often a wealth of experience (Montgomery *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, it has been reported that mature students are more likely to complete their programme than their younger counterparts (Anionwu *et al.*, 2005; Shepherd, 2008). However, mature students frequently face challenges relating to finances (Brown & Edelman 2000; Howard 2001; Kevern & Webb 2004), childcare (Glackin & Glackin 1998; Kevern & Webb 2004; Lauder & Cuthbertson 1998) and the balancing of multiple responsibilities (Allen, 1993). It is therefore apparent that mature students may face different (although not necessarily greater) challenges than younger students. It is recognised that the initial transition to university is significant for all students (Scanlonet *et al.*, 2007), and that the first months at university are critical in a student's progression. For mature students this transition can involve significant adjustments including marked changes to their role, status, lifestyle and income.

It therefore seems appropriate for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to examine and optimise the support offered to mature students, particularly in their transition to university. In 2008, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) reported that not all mature students feel that their needs and expectations are being met, and that some institutional practices may need to be developed in this area (Yorke & Longden, 2008). However, little research has been conducted into the personal practices of lecturers in meeting the needs of mature students. Whilst there has been a recommendation that mature students receive extra time and support (DfES, 2003b), less is known about the extent to which lecturers can and do offer this to their students. Moreover, it seems pertinent to establish whether lecturers and mature students share a common understanding of the main challenges faced by mature students. Otherwise, there risks being a tailored support system which fails to meet their actual needs. This study was therefore concerned with exploring these factors in one HEI in southeast England. The overall aim of the study was to explore the experiences of university lecturers in meeting the needs of mature student nurses in their initial week at university, and within this four key objectives were identified as shown in table 1 below.

Table 1. *Research objectives.*

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">I. Consider the extent to which lecturers' perceptions of mature students' needs correlate with those identified by students (as identified within the existing literature)II. Explore the experiences of lecturers in meeting the needs of mature students in their initial weeks at universityIII. Identify those factors that enhance or inhibit lecturers in meeting the needs of mature students in their initial weeks at universityIV. To consider the extent to which lecturers tailor their practice to meet the needs of mature students |
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Whilst this study examined the needs of mature nursing students, it is believed that many of the findings are applicable to mature students pursuing a range of academic programmes.

Literature review

The transition into HE has long been significant for any student, and involves integration into the academic and social spheres of the university (Tinto 1975). Research on the first-year experience indicates that many students encounter difficulties in the transition to university with feelings of loss and lack of identity (Scanlon *et al.*, 2007). Due to their living arrangements and other commitments, mature students are often less able to interact with the social and academic community at university (May & Bousted, 2004; Tinto 1993), leading to potential social isolation. The early part of transition to university is thought to be particularly stressful, and evidence suggests that the majority of those students leaving HE do so in their first year (Yorke, 2000). Bolam & Dodgson (2003) suggest that it is therefore important that during this stage students are provided with a high level of continuous support. It has been acknowledged that support networks are crucial in the students' successful transition (Forbes & Wickens 2005; Mackie 2001; Thomas 2002), although it would appear that existing literature has considered student-to-student support networks in greater depth than support offered by university lecturers.

McGivney (1996) suggests that the first step towards improving students' experience of HE is for HEIs to recognise and acknowledge the needs of mature students. A qualitative study by Carney & McNeish (2005) identified that mature students perceived their challenges to be different (than those of younger students), and included their extra personal commitments, lack of time, academic work (notably a different educational background), socialising with younger students, and management of finances. The mature students interviewed recommended that the institution provide a specific support system for mature students, giving the example of an access point for information on finance, debt and part-time working. There is evidence that developments have occurred in this area with the introduction of special pre-entry and induction activities for mature students (including a residential induction conference), the appointment of mature student officers and the establishment of specialist mature student services in some universities across the northeast of England (Bolam & Dodgson, 2003). Similarly Trinity College in Dublin have developed a 'welcoming programme', which focuses on socialisation of mature students as well as the development of study skills (Fleming & McKee, 2005). It is important to note that despite the aforementioned supportive initiatives for mature students, there are still reported shortcomings in the provision of support for mature students, particularly in relation to finance, the availability of childcare, the role of the tutor (which needs to be formalised and standardised in relation to providing pastoral and academic support for mature students) and recognition in timetabling of the needs of mature students (Bolam & Dodgson, 2003).

Recent studies investigating lecturers' attitudes towards mature students are limited. Back in 1980, Boon suggested that academics believe that mature students perform better overall, and have a positive influence on the course. There has also been little exploration of university lecturers' experiences in meeting the needs of mature students. It has been established that in order to fully embrace mature students within the system of HE, staff need to understand their experiences (Mercer & Saunders, 2004). Kelly (2005) revealed a high level of understanding by lecturers towards the pedagogical difficulties of mature students (which included a lack of confidence and conflicts with previous experience or learning methods), yet the dearth of staff development initiatives in this area was highlighted. The study revealed that the appropriate employment of teaching strategies (namely a diverse range of andragogical and pedagogical approaches which recognised the experience and prior learning of mature students) stemmed from experiential learning, personal insight and awareness on behalf of lecturing staff (rather than formal training), and therefore the authors recommended further staff development initiatives. In this study the researcher sought to explore lecturers' perceptions of mature students' needs and the extent to which they tailored their support for this group within the HEI under investigation.

Methodological Approach

This study was concerned with exploring and understanding lecturers' experiences of supporting mature students, and thus phenomenology was considered an appropriate research approach. It was not attempting to develop prescriptive or predictive theory, but rather to describe the actual experiences of lecturers working in this area. Interpretive phenomenology proposes that it is the relation of the individual to his or her 'lifeworld' that should be the focus of phenomenological inquiry. Heidegger (1962) asserted that humans are embedded in their 'lifeworld' to such an extent that subjective experiences are inextricably linked with social, cultural and political contexts, and thus humans have 'situated freedom' meaning that individuals are free to make choices, but their freedom is not absolute as it is circumscribed by the specific conditions of their daily lives (Lopez & Willis, 2004). This was considered particularly relevant, given that lecturers working in HE are undoubtedly linked to the influences of the context in which they carry out their everyday work.

The study took place in a School of Nursing, Midwifery and Social Work at a university in the southeast of England. Ethical approval was sought prior to the onset of the study and informed consent obtained from all participants. As in much qualitative research (Curtis *et al.*, 2000), this study employed a purposive sampling approach allowing the deliberate selection of information-rich cases that gave rise to data relevant to the research aims as described in the introduction (Patton, 1999). Five participants were selected who had direct involvement with first year students during the transitional period; a Senior Lecturer (Mental Health Nursing), Pre-Registration Nursing Lead, Programme Tutor (Nursing Diploma), Admissions Tutor, and the Programme and Achievement Officer. Semi-structured interviews were considered to allow a wealth of detailed information to be obtained. As a phenomenological approach seeks to explore lived experiences of participants, the emphasis was on participants talking freely about their experi-

ences of supporting mature students. Therefore prompts were devised (rather than a prescriptive interview schedule) only to start and guide the discussion if needed. These included the background of the participants, their experiences in working with mature students, their perceptions of mature students' attributes and challenges, any staff development opportunities that had enhanced their skills in supporting mature students, and any ways in which their practices were tailored to meet mature students' needs.

Other qualitative data collection techniques such as questionnaires may not have allowed such full and complete expression due to restricted space and the absence of a researcher to prompt as appropriate (Appleton, 1995). The researcher in this study believed that in order to present a clear auditable trail for the reader, it was beneficial to apply a recognised framework to data analysis. Colaizzi's (1978) framework was deemed most appropriate for this study and was favoured due to its logical approach to data analysis, and emphasis on moving back and forth between meaning statements and successive hypothetical lists until themes are accurately reflected. The stages followed within this framework are shown in table 2 below.

Table 2. *Colaizzi's (1978) framework.*

1. All interviews are transcribed verbatim and read in order to get a feel for them.
2. Significant statements and phrases that pertain to the experience under investigation are extracted
3. Meanings are formulated from the significant statements
4. Significant statements are organised into clusters of themes
5. The themes are used to provide a full description of the experience
6. Researcher returns the description to its original source for confirmation of validity

Findings and Discussion

Following analysis, a number of clear themes emerged. This paper discusses the three themes identified below which are considered most relevant to HEIs across the sector and are shown in Figure 1 below.

Perceptions of mature students' needs	Support for mature students	The transition to Higher Education for mature students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mature students need and value face-to-face contact with lecturers • Mature students need support with information technology • Mature students need information to allow them to balance student & family life • Mature students need to develop confidence. Effective and timely feedback is important in achieving this 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mature students develop effective peer support networks • Varying perceptions of the quality of support for mature students offered by the HEI • Lecturers rely heavily on their own experiences when supporting mature students • Lecturers' perceptions of the usefulness of existing training programmes is varied 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The transition to University is seen as significant for all students • Induction programmes should be delivered in smaller groups to allow the development between staff and students

Figure 1. Summary of key findings.

Perceptions of mature students' needs

Overall participants believed mature students to be a diverse group due to their varying age, experiences, educational background and ethnicity. However, despite this diversity, participants unanimously reported that mature students needed and valued face-to-face contact with lecturing staff. This supports the findings of Steele *et al.*, (2005) who conducted an exploratory interview-based study and reported that mature nursing students valued the pastoral and person-centred support given by their tutors. Participants reported that mature students were generally an articulate group, who were more likely than their younger counterparts to seek support and request tutorials. One participant reported:

"I firmly believe that they need to have an outlet that they can go to... and sometimes it's them offloading and transferring stuff onto us as lecturers... my input on that could be the difference between them continuing on the programme or falling off the programme" (Participant A)

Participants in this study therefore recognised the significance of their role in the provision of pastoral support. However, the participants did acknowledge that this was time

consuming, and that a more formalised structure to this support would be beneficial. One participant suggested the addition of pastoral support to the timetable.

All participants referred to information technology (IT) as being one of the greatest stressors for mature students entering HE, and often reported an over-reliance on the use of technology in the early weeks for providing students with key information. It was evident that participants took measures to address this need to some extent. One participant reported:

“I took them down to the university resource centre to get them to realise it was a place that was actually going to support them...and I did that several times...and I think I need to do that even more” (Participant D)

Participants referred to mature students being Prensky’s (2001) ‘digital immigrants’ (those who have not grown up in a technological world), and in accordance with existing literature believed that mature students were significantly less likely to report self confidence in using technology (Jeffries *et al.*, 2007). Participants in this study suggested that the integration of technology needs to take a structured and gradual approach for all students to allow it to enhance learning, rather than become a cause of immense stress in the early weeks.

A further need of mature students identified by participants was the ability to balance the demands of both family and university life. Participants talked extensively about issues of childcare, finances, and the general challenge of being a mature student. These findings concur with those of Montgomery *et al.* (2009) who conducted a questionnaire-based study with mature students and revealed that financial issues and balancing childcare presented the greatest challenges.

Participants unanimously reported that mature students approached HE with exceptional organisational skills, strong coping mechanisms and a conscientious approach to their studies. Participants attributed this to the realisation of a lifelong ambition which resulted in mature students being dedicated and determined to seek all information available to them.

“... usually when you walk into a classroom in the front row you would normally have a row of four or five mature females, usually together, they are so intense in everything that is happening, they have put this programme of study off for so many years, they are now here... and they want to know exactly what is going on”. (Participant A)

This reflects the work of Shanahan (2000) who also reported the great significance of a place in HE to mature students (which was often seen as a catalyst, particularly for mature women, to change the direction of their lives) and the subsequent additional pressure to succeed. Despite their many attributes, participants saw the mature student group as needing encouragement and reassurance in developing confidence in their

ability. In relation to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty amongst mature students, one participant reported:

“They often seem more anxious right from the beginning and uncertain, and almost like they don’t deserve a place” (Participant D)

Participants discussed the role of feedback in enhancing the self-esteem of mature students and recognised that following early formative feedback mature students are more likely to develop their confidence if adequately supported. This also reflects the findings of Mercer (2007) who reported that mature students’ self-reported growth in confidence became more salient as individuals’ academic careers progressed.

Support for mature students

All participants described the supportive networks that mature students rapidly develop in the transitional period. It was acknowledged that invariably mature students develop networks with other mature students. This was seen as a ‘natural’ pattern of human behaviour, and participants believed that these networks were formed independently of staff intervention. In accordance with previous findings (Forbes & Wickes, 2005; Mackie, 2001; Thomas, 2002), all participants viewed these social networks as crucial in the transitional period and prevented the potential isolation that younger students may experience.

In relation to their own needs when supporting mature students, staff reported relying heavily on their own personal and professional experience to guide them. There was little awareness of any formal guidance for lecturers or HEIs in meeting the needs of these students in particular. These findings further those of Bolam & Dodgson (2003) who conducted staff interviews, a student survey and focus groups with mature students, and concluded that staff training could be used further to make tutors aware of the problems that mature (and other students) may face. However, the results of the study presented here would suggest that participants had valuable insights into the problems that mature students may face (when compared to findings drawn from existing studies directly involving mature students), but have not always received the training required to support mature students in dealing with them. This is in accordance with the findings of Kelly (2005) who conducted a similar small scale study involving interviews with lecturers and also mature student focus groups to investigate the experiences of lecturers working with mature students in a technology institute. Kelly (2005) found that staff have sound insight into the challenges faced by mature students but have limited staff development training in this area.

The transition to Higher Education for mature students

All participants viewed the transition to university as a great challenge for mature students. This reflects the findings of Scanlon *et al.*, (2007) who conducted interviews with first year students and reported the difficulties when making the transition to University,

particularly in relation to the 'loss' of a previous identity. All participants who referred to the induction week viewed it as a most challenging time which was often chaotic for all students. However, it was acknowledged that the life experiences of mature students may equip them to deal with the process more ably. One participant in this study suggested that small group work would allow staff to meet individual needs of students:

"If I had my way we would induct over say a 6 hour period and we would have 50 students a day. We could really look at individual needs and could do it with students according to school leavers, more mature, gender, ethnicity... and therefore meet their needs more clearly" (Participant E)

It is interesting to note that other participants reflected on the benefits of integration between mature and 'traditional' students. Some participants considered mature students to offer a parenting role to younger students (as reported by Waller, 2006), whereas younger students were considered to possess a range of skills that could be shared with mature students. It is therefore unclear as to whether segregation is preferable in the early weeks at University.

As reported by other HEIs (e.g. Bolam & Dodgson, 2003; Greer & Tidd, 2006) this study revealed the recent launch of a pre-induction event. However, in contrast to the above studies, at this university all potential students were invited to the university two weeks prior to the commencement of the programme (as opposed to an exclusive event for mature students). This had been conducted twice, and was thought to be valuable to all who attended in allowing them to meet staff and fellow students. Participants unanimously reported that resources (notably time and staff availability) presented the greatest barrier to developing these further to include additional networking activities.

Conclusion

Lecturers interviewed in this study believed that mature students need one-to-one support and reassurance in the early weeks. In accordance with the views of mature students (as identified in the existing literature), they recognised that mature students often balance numerous roles and therefore need accurate information to enable them to plan their studies. They believed that the intense use of information technology from the start of the programme presented a particular challenge to mature students and considered there to be greater scope both within the School and wider university to support students in this area. Whilst lecturers enjoyed and valued the contribution of the mature student group, they identified time and resources as being the primary barriers to offering adequate pastoral and academic support. This was particularly relevant to the induction period, which was seen to be chaotic for all students and in need of a more detailed evaluation. When discussing the extent to which lecturers tailor their practice to meet the needs of mature students, it was evident that lecturers primarily offer an outlet for mature students to voice their concerns.

Limitations

Whilst the aim of this study was to explore the experiences of university lecturers in meeting the needs of mature student nurses in their initial week at university, it must be acknowledged that the scale of this study and the focus on nursing students may limit transferability to other HEI settings.

The use of purposive sampling allowed the researcher to approach those lecturers who had experience in working with mature students. However, it should be recognised that the roles occupied by some participants required them to work with students in particular and often extreme difficulties, whose progression on the programme was vulnerable. A larger sample may have captured the experiences of lecturers who had more general involvement with these students on an everyday basis.

This study has endeavoured to draw comparisons between lecturers' experiences, and the existing literature which has directly explored mature students' views. To maximise the value of this study, it would have been beneficial to conduct concurrent research directly involving mature students in this HEI, thus allowing comparisons between the experiences of the students and lecturers.

Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that further one-to-one time with lecturers would support mature students greatly in their transition into HE. It would therefore seem appropriate that this support is given recognition by lecturing staff, and that systems are developed to allow this support to be offered in a more structured way. Staff appear to be offering mature students considerable pastoral support, yet rely heavily on personal experiences rather than formal training. The findings also suggest that mature students require greater support with information technology skills prior to commencing the programme. This small research study suggests that technology should be 'phased in' in the transitional period to allow mature students to develop confidence and skills in its use. This study also presents a strong rationale for reviewing and improving the induction week. Finally, it is recommended that there is a need to research the mature student group in greater detail, recognising that this is not a homogenous group. Further research would allow the explorations of the specific experiences of these subgroups and the particular challenges they face.

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