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ABSTRACT

Australian Government policies have increased accessibility of under-represented groups into Universities, and one significant group in this shift is mature aged women (Department of Education, Science and Training 2004). University policy related to provision of support for nontraditional groups of students, through improved academic and support services is beneficial in improving student retention rates among non-traditional student groups (Krause et al. 2005). The present paper reports a phenomenological approach (Moustakas 1994; Smith & Osborn 2003) to understanding how expectations of higher education impacts on adjustment to study within lived experiences of 12 women aged between 40-49 years studying Psychology. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview with topics such as reasons for commencing study, factors in forming their expectations of academic and social support and how lived experiences differed from these expectations. Findings suggest the design of student services and transitions programmes must adjust to students' narrative life story (McAdams 2001) consider how their life stage interacts with expectations, motivations, and present and future goals.

Keywords: Attrition, mature age students, transition to university.

INTRODUCTION

Recent Australian Federal Government policies have resulted in increased accessibility, and encouraged participation by under represented groups, into Australian universities (Krause et al. 2005). The student population has become increasingly diverse (Pascarella & Terrenzini 1998) and the view of the student as being full time and straight from high school, has been superseded by a student population consisting of more mature students with diverse entry pathways into university (McInnis 2001).

Increasing diversity has not come without problems and one area of concern has been low completion rates of degrees by groups of non-traditional students (Taniguchi & Kaufman 2005). One student group, within the new diversity, are mature age females between the ages of 40 to 49, who have become an increasingly significant proportion of the student population. In 2002, 4,975 mature age female students between the ages of 40 to 49 were enrolled in Australian Universities. This group have been severely affected by attrition and during their first academic year, approximately 27% withdrew from their course (Lukic et al. 2004).

It is important to address attrition for mature age students, not only because students may suffer significant stress and anxiety in their lives when wrestling with the decision to withdraw from university; but also because Australian universities are funded on numbers of students who complete their study (Darlaston-Jones et al. 2003). In order to reduce attrition rates and improve university

learning for these students, it is important to learn more about their experiences and how they have overcome problems that might lead to withdrawal. This knowledge is applicable to the design of student support and counselling services and may reduce attrition rates and further increase accessibility to university (Darlaston-Jones et al. 2003; McInnis 2001).

Transition, Expectations and Adjustment to University

The adjustment or transition period, if achieved, often involves an assessment of whether the reality of university matches with expectations. If this period is successfully negotiated and expectations and reality are reconciled, then the student has more likelihood of committing to university study and successfully completing their course (Ramsay et al. 1999).

In an examination of the transition experience of Australian students to university, Urquhart and Pooley (2007) conducted a study with first year university students (n=12) studying psychology at Edith Cowan University. The participants in the study ranged from 17 to 45 years, were interviewed and asked to describe their experience of starting university; the academic and social adjustments they had had to make; their expectations of university and to describe any positive or negative experiences or emotions they had undergone. Emerging from the qualitative interviews were five themes: social support, expectation, time management, transition issues, and emotion. Although the themes identified were important to all student groups, the study indicated that there was a difference in how these themes were experienced between school leaver and mature age students.

As Urquhart and Pooley (2007) found, all student cohorts recognise the need for social, emotional, and practical information support to help them through their university career, thus it is important that universities understand the needs of diverse student groups, together with their motivations for attending university in order to plan their transition and assistance programmes accordingly (McInnis 2001). If these external expectations related to social, academic, informational, and transitional support are not met by the university, it is then that the student may be at risk of withdrawing from study.

In order to manage the gap between students' expectations of university and the reality of their experience it is important to learn more about their expectations of university. Expectations are not only related to academic and social support services provided to the student by the university, they also include internal expectations formed by the student of their own ability to cope with the academic and social pressures that study will entail. Internal expectations and how they influence adjustment and transition into university for mature age female students are now addressed.

Internal Expectations and Adjustment into University

Central to the decision to embark on academic study are a student's internal expectations of ability to cope with academic challenges, to manage roles and responsibilities both at university and at home or work, together with expectations for career development and changes to identity (James 2001; Michie et al. 2001). Students have expectations of their ability to cope with the challenges of academic study which may or may not be realistic and this may affect their integration into university.

Murphy and Roopchand (2003) focused on the complexity of mature age women's completion of university courses in a study of their intrinsic motivation and self esteem. In this study, participants from a university in the north east of England (n=160) were involved in an independent groups design using two questionnaires, measuring their motivation and self esteem. The results showed that mature age students had higher levels of self esteem and motivation towards learning. Murphy and Roopchand related mature students' higher self esteem to being older, having clearer motivations and making more informed decisions, and due to their high levels of self esteem and motivation they tended to do well in the university setting, they gained in self confidence as they gathered more positive feedback.

In their conclusion to this study the authors acknowledged that although mature age students developed higher self esteem and confidence, there was confounding evidence as many mature age students saw themselves as being more anxious and less confident when they compared themselves with traditional students (King 1998 as cited in Murphy & Roopchand 2003). They suggested that entering university formed a transition in mature students' lives and if these students achieved good academic results during their initial period of study, they gained positive feedback, grew in self confidence and self esteem and became increasingly motivated to study. These participants were established at university and therefore we might expect that the mature students surveyed had successfully negotiated a transition stage and had developed self confidence, there is no account made of mature age students who may not have received positive feedback and had therefore withdrawn from study in the early stages of their course. We must question how mature age students cope with university if they find study difficult, whether support and transition programmes can be put into place and how self esteem affects the experience of mature age female students.

In an investigation of the adjustment behaviours of mature aged women returning to formal study via a university enabling programme, Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) analysed the experiences of 10 mature age women undertaking part-time study at the University of Newcastle, Open Foundation Course. The women completed questionnaires on approaches to learning and on attributional beliefs and then took part in two focus groups, one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end. The women reported developing maladaptive learning processes moving away from deep processing to surface learning approaches mainly due to difficulties in time management as they negotiated their competing roles.

However, Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) found evidence that this change enabled them to carry on with their courses and retain their motivation for self-improvement. For most women surveyed, motivation to study was about identity regeneration and the researchers suggest that some women entered university with the expectation that study would aid their self growth and their identity development, but otherwise had little knowledge of the processes of university learning and the impact that study would have on their life outside of university. Hence, their expectations of what university would offer, in terms of self development, were realistic but their expectations of how they would manage and cope were unrealistic. This finding is strongly related to attrition because if the gap between expectations and ability to cope was large, the mature age student would not have planned for resources to enable them to negotiate through university and hence may be forced to consider withdrawing.

Research on expectations, focussing on mixed age group students, general cohorts of mature age students and mature age women, show a complex relationship between expectations, motivation for study, perceived self efficacy and roles other than that of a student. In order to understand this dynamic more fully in relation to mature age female students the characteristics of this group need to be considered in more depth.

The Characteristics of Mature Age Female Students

Cantwell et al. (2001) conducted a study of students entering the University of Newcastle (n=8503) via differing entry methods. Data was collected on their age, achievement level, gender, entry qualifications, and discipline of study. Results showed that older students outperformed younger students. However, mature students entering university via non-traditional entry programmes, tended to favour part-time, rather than full-time study and those who withdrew from university prior to degree completion, had higher achievement levels than other students in this category. This study indicated that higher attrition rates amongst mature age students were related to factors external to university such as the role demands placed on them by family responsibilities, the need to combine study with paid employment and financial pressures.

The impact of role demands on mature age female students has been shown to be a complex issue. Scott et al. (1998) surveyed motivation amongst Australian mature age female students with children (n=235). Two groups of participants were identified, one of current students and the other mature age women who had interrupted their study. Both groups completed a questionnaire designed to gain information about women continuing in education. The results showed little difference in motivation between mature age women with children who graduated and those who did not. However when personal circumstances were controlled for, the researchers found personal history and life circumstances underpinned the reasons for return to study and contributed to the decision to leave study. For some women, return to study was a mechanism to escape from low self esteem, disappointment with marriage or life in general and unsupportive families. Such women reported high levels of motivation for study in an effort to discover new roles for themselves but may have underestimated their ability to cope with study and difficult personal circumstances. Other students reported development of new identity beyond that of 'wife' or 'mother' was their major motivator to return to study. When they achieved this from their study experiences, they found university fulfilling. For others social support from other students and academic staff at university enabled them to cope effectively with the demands of university (Scott, Burns, & Cooney 1998).

Due to the complexity of issues which affect mature age female students (Scott et al. 1998; Wilson 1997; Quimby & O'Brien 2006; Taniguchi & Kaufman 2005), it is important to gain further understanding of the factors which influence the experience of mature age female students. Their experience involves a complex interplay of psychological states including life stage, motivations for return to study, expectations and self efficacy. While research implicates psychological life stage as an important factor, explicit arguments about the role of such psychological theory are not being made. Therefore we now turn to a discussion of life stage in order to identify whether this concept has utility in the understanding the issues which affect mature age female students.

Does Life Stage Explain Mature Age Women's Reasons for Return to Study?

Adult educators often subscribe to the view that the decision to participate in adult learning is related to developmental changes which take place throughout the lifespan (Tennant 2006). A life span developmental model was defined by Erikson (1968) who proposed that people progress through eight developmental stages. Within each stage individuals must experience a psychosocial transition crisis which must be resolved prior to successful development and successful advancement to the next stage.

Erikson maintained that middle aged people start to be concerned with producing something that can be left for future generations (Ackerman et al. 2000) and that their psychosocial development involved a resolution of the conflict between generativity and stagnation. According to Erikson (1968) generativity became most salient around the age of forty and revolved around establishing and guiding the next generation and contributing to the future (Ackerman et al. 2000). A major characteristic of this stage was that the individual became concerned with the future of society as a whole and fostering development of others as well as making a valid contribution to society (Peterson & Stewart 1993).

According to Erikson (1968) the ability to become a generative adult is dependent upon successful resolution of earlier developmental stages, most significantly the development of identity (Vandewater et al. 1997). Research indicates that few people establish identity achievement by the end of adolescence (Waterman 1982) and this may be particularly so for women who traditionally have based their identities on children and partners (Vandewater et al. 1997). Vandewater, Ostrove, and Stewart (1997) proposed that there was a relationship between the development of identity and well being for mid-life women and that generativity could not be attained until successful resolution of earlier personality development. Hence the resolution of the generativity stage involved women in an assessment of their identity status, whether they have a traditional role regret relating to career choice over home, an analysis of their roles and a re-evaluation of how they could contribute to future generations (Stewart & Vandewater 1999; Vandewater et al. 1997). Levinson (1986) also proposed a life stage theory of adult development in which he identified a mid life transition stage to take place

between the ages of 40 and 45. He suggested transitional phases which served to terminate existing life structures and allowed the creation of new ones enabling the person to move forward and explore new possibilities for life.

However, the rigidity of boundaries for developmental stages has been refuted by McAdams (2001) who proposed that identity takes the form of a personal story and that identity construction is an ongoing process which takes place throughout the lifespan. Reconstructions of the past, perceptions of the present and goals for the future are integrated by the individual to form a narrative life story. The life story takes into account cultural values and norms and is constantly updated and re-evaluated as the cultural and social context changes. McAdams agreed that generativity was an important issue in the life story during middle years and this translated into revision of one's life story and consequent adjustment to formulated plans (McAdams et al. 1993).

In a review of literature relating to the psychosocial development of women, Caffarella and Olson (1993) suggested that Erikson and Levinson's theories were too prescriptive for many women and that these theories had largely been developed from the perspective and life course of men. They proposed that developmental theories relating to women must be based on women's experiences, and their individual differences must be taken into account. They suggested that issues that have more prominence in women's lives must be incorporated into theories of development; Sales (as cited in Caffarella & Olson 1993) related that women adapt to their changing roles related to children being born, developing, leaving home and having their own children. Targ (as cited in Caffarella & Olson 1993) also suggested that unanticipated events in women's lives had major significance in identity generation, such as divorce and widowhood and that factors such as these needed to be understood in developmental theories relating to women. Caffarella and Olson concluded by recommending that any attempt to understand the psychosocial development of women must be tempered with knowledge of the diverse patterns of development, the importance of identity and intimacy and the centrality of relationships to women.

Although life stage theories might be too prescriptive for many women, life course and life story may play a part in a woman's decision to return to study and these models should be considered in the complex interaction between life stage, expectation development, and experiences in a woman's journey through university.

The object of this study is to explore mature age women students' aged 40 to 49 years, reasons for commencing study, the formation of their expectations and to describe their experiences at university in order to discover whether their expectations were met. The purpose of the study is to explore the differences between expectations and experiences of university and discover how mature age female students address this gap.

Research Purpose

This study aimed to explore the experiences of mature aged female students between the ages of 40 to 49, who were studying psychology, in the context of potential differences between expectations and experiences of university, and to discover how they address any gap.

Research Methodology

A phenomenological research methodology, described by Schwandt (2001) as an exploration of a person's 'lifeworld', is suggested. Phenomenological research analyses lived experiences and attempts to make sense of them, and to describe and understand them (Polkinghorne 2005). Holstein and Gubrium (1994) suggested that one of the basic tenets of phenomenological research involved interpretation of the particulars of lived experiences in order to render meaning to the experience. This involved collection of data from people who had experience of the subject being investigated, and from what they communicate to the researcher, to develop a description of the 'essence' of the

experience (Moustakas 1994: Racher & Robinson 2002). The essence comprises forming deep understanding of lived experiences (le Vasseur 2003). Essentially to unpack the complexity of motivation, life stage, expectations and roles, it is necessary to know about what the lived experience of mature aged women students holds.

Design

The rationale for this design choice was driven by Polkinghorne (2005), who advocated data collection methods which had vertical depth, that is, allowed for explanation, understanding and reflection and would enable participants to explore meaning of their experiences and relevance of interrelationships. He suggested that quantitative methods were inappropriate for collecting information about experiences because techniques such as short answer questions and Likert scales were only suitable for gathering surface information. Qualitative phenomenological based interviews would allow researchers to redirect or rephrase questions enabling collection of information which would be multilayered and complex in nature reflecting the true nature of issues under examination.

The research, therefore, followed a phenomenological approach as defined by Moustakas (1994) and formed an in depth qualitative study describing the lived experiences of women aged between 40 and 49 years, why they decided to study at university, what their expectations were and whether experiences matched expectations.

Participants

The experiences of the first author as a mature age woman studying at university have provided a focus for the study, and through bracketing of these experiences researcher interpretative biases are made explicit (Cresswell 1998). This bracketing included observations that mature age women may decide to study psychology because they feel it addresses a need to contribute to society (Erikson 1968). Their expectations of study may not take account of their conflicting life roles and for some women significant stress may occur in the resolution of the conflict between expectations and reality (Scott et al. 1998; Quimby & O'Brien 2006). Mature age females studying psychology provide an example of a unified but diverse student group and create a framework for analysis of reasons to attend university, development of expectations and the relationship between experiences and expectations.

The participants were 10 female students, aged between 40 and 49 years, studying psychology at Edith Cowan University. The participants were purposefully selected via advertisements on noticeboards in the School of Psychology and Social Science. Information and informed consent letters were distributed to participants.

Materials

Five open-ended questions were used in a semi-structured interview to gain information about the social and cultural contexts affecting the mature age women students. The questions were: what were the factors determining your decision to come to university; what were your expectations of university; when you started at university how did your experiences differ from your expectations; what did you do when your expectations did not match up to your experiences at university and what could the university have provided which would have helped you to make the adjustment to university? The questions were followed by prompts such as "Can you give me more information about." (Rice & Ezzy 1999). A portable recorder was used to record the interview.

Procedure

The interviews took place at a mutually convenient location agreed between the researcher and participant. Each interview took between 1 hour and 1 hour 30 minutes approximately. The interview was digitally recorded and reviewed and selected segments were transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

Prior to analysis the researcher acknowledged her own biases and prejudgements in order to make an unbiased analysis of the data (Cresswell 1998). All possible meanings and perspectives were sought to create frames of reference and describe how the phenomena were experienced by the participants in the study (Smith & Osborn 2003). The researcher reviewed the tapes several times to become familiar with the data. Verbatim transcripts of noteworthy segments were made. Significant statements relevant to expectations, discrepancies between expectations and reality and information related to reasons for attending university were identified. Significant statements were grouped into units of meaning, and then described. Clusters of meaning were defined through cross-case analysis and common themes and issues grouped together (Cresswell 1998).

To ensure rigour in the analysis records of the classification and categorisation of the data were kept and a full audit trail of notes, coding and any revision of documents was kept (Mays & Pope 1995). Researcher bias was acknowledged and notes kept in the audit trail or researcher's notes were assessed by the project supervisor to ensure that any bias by the researcher was acknowledged in the reporting (Mays & Pope 1995).

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATIONS

From the analysis three major themes emerged, these were reasons for attending university, preparation and support. Throughout all the themes identified, the relationship between expectations and reality of the university experience played an important part in understanding the experience of the mature age female student.

Life Stage/Identity and Reasons for Attending University

One of the major themes that emerged from the data was that the mature age women started university because they felt they were at a time in their lives when they were looking for new direction, and because of their life circumstances, and the ages of their children, they were able to engage in fresh opportunities. An example of how life stage influenced the decision to attend university was described by one participant:

> 'I was at a stage with my children. They were older ... I had never gone back to work after I had them and one was already at high school, one was coming up to high school and one was probably about year 5 and I was beginning to think I don't need to be at home anymore. They couldn't have cared less that I was home or not.'

Another participant describes the generative motivation to return to study as:

> 'I just needed to do something for myself and I suppose show that I was much more than just being a mother and a wife'.

This finding relates to Erikson's (1968) theory that a person could only become a generative adult following the successful development of identity. Vandewater et al. (1997) suggested that it might only be possible for women to attain generativity if they developed their identity away from that which was based on their children and partners. The data showed that the women seemed to be involved in an assessment of their identity status and a resolution of any role regrets that they might have had by choosing home and family over career choice. One woman described her conflict in deciding to return to study as:

> *'I had had to go through a lot of processes internally myself in terms of sorting my situation out, where   I was at and I think my Mother's illness helped in a way because I knew that I didn't want to finish up\having regrets.'*

The data shows evidence that women's reasons for returning to study may take the form of a personal story which is constantly being updated and re-evaluated dependant upon the context of their lives. This theme supports the theories of life story proposed by McAdams et al. (1993). For example below, one participant reported identity as if it was an ongoing narrative that was evolving throughout her lifespan:

> *'when I did my first degree I always wanted to do social work or something with people and helping people because that was where I thought I could contribute but due to circumstances I didn't do it as a seventeen year old; so I think I always had this yearning for wanting to give it a go'.*

These findings illustrate that the women were involved in a process of reconstructing their past experiences and integrating these with their perceptions of what is currently happening to them and analysing their future goals in an effort to develop an integrated life story. The findings show that for mature age women, the decision to return to study was strongly linked to their identity and particularly to defining their identity away from the home and family. This woman had strongly identified her interest in caring for people but the opportunity to work in this area had been subsumed by other demands, but had remained part of her life story and it is only in her middle years that the woman had an opportunity to revise and consequently adjust her plans.

Preparation

Another major theme identified in an analysis of the data was that many of the participants undertook very little preparation in finding out about the content of the course that they would be undertaking. Most were unprepared for statistics to be part of their course and others reported that they had little idea of what they were about to study. This was illustrated by one of the participants who said:

> *'it's different to what I expected. I thought they were going to teach us how to help fix someone's problems, to be able to sit across the desk from someone and ask what their problems were and for them to teach us how to give them strategies to fix what they can't cope with.'*

A recurring theme was of 'needing more in life'. For some women this was related to how they adapted to change in their children growing up (Sales, as cited in Caffarella & Olson 1993), for others it was stepping away from being a wife or mother (Vandewater et al. 1997) and these changes were realised as an opportunity to return to study. Focused in this motivation, it seems women had not thought through their transition to University and a common theme reported by several participants was that they enrolled without investigating fully what they would be undertaking. Their expectations were not based on detailed preparation or research, but on making a general change in life and as one woman said:

'I didn't really go into it with my eyes fully open about what it was really going to be like ... maybe I underestimated the degree of difficulty and the way .. the demand on your thought processes, to analyse and to critically think about things and there were some concepts that were very difficult. The statistics – that was something that totally came out of left field ... that was not something I was expecting to be   part of a psychology degree. I was thinking psychology would be about depression and anxiety and mental illness – how to diagnose and recognise symptoms and counselling.'

This finding supports work by Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) who found that some women entered university with the expectation that university study would aid their self growth and their identity development, but otherwise had little knowledge of the processes of university learning.

This finding might also be relevant to their choice of studying psychology. It would appear from the data that the mature age women interviewed had developed an interest in psychology because they had some specific connection with psychology, and through this connection they formed a link between their study plans and their life history. One participant related that she had developed an interest in psychology through her sister's experiences with a psychologist:

'she had seen a lot of psychs over the years and it just always interested me ... strategies they used to give her to cope with what she was going through.'

Although the women generally expressed that they had an interest in psychology, and the continuation of this interest was linked with their identity development through their decision to study, beyond that general point very few of the participants showed that they had a depth of understanding of what studying psychology entailed.

Support

Academic Support

Maybe because of the general lack of specific expectation above, students in this study generally considered themselves to be exceptionally well supported academically and well beyond their expectations, as exemplified by one student who said:

'When I came into the programme here I was just amazed about how professionally it was run, the amount of communication that was happening, the support that the students got in terms of resources and also the fact that your feedback came very quickly and timetables were there you could just log on and get your timetables.'

The effect of the academic support enabled the students to develop academic self confidence and this concurs with a study undertaken by Murphy and Roopchand (2003) who suggested that if mature students new to university achieved good academic results and gained positive feedback, they grew in self confidence and self esteem and became increasingly motivated to study. This was a strong theme in the findings with several students mentioning that they achieved higher grades than they expected and they had found their success motivating. One student in the study summed this up by saying:

'when I got my first result back and I had done quite well then I thought ... I can do this and I am good at it.'

Social Support

Interestingly, the major theme that developed relating to social support was that the majority of mature age female students had very little expectation for social support at university. They reported that they were not looking for it and generally did not expect that they would make friends or engage in social

interaction. Their expectation tended to focus on attending university, getting the work done and not being distracted by social contact. A theme that developed was that they expected there to be very few other mature age students and that they would be socially isolated, one participant said:

> 'I expected that I was going to be old and I was going to be in a class of kids who hadn't long been out of school and I wasn't sure that I would fit in'

This finding indicated that they underestimated the value of social support networks prior to commencing university but as they progressed through their courses most participants reported that they used social networks to exchange information on assignments and find out information about tutorials and lecture schedules. In reflection, one participant who had mentioned that she had not expected to gain social support at university stated that her adjustment to university would have been easier if there had been more 'connection':

> 'more in terms of friendship and connection…I expected the bigger social thing happening and I think this didn't happen because there was nowhere to go and if there had been then people would have got to know each other. In first and second year it was just come in do your class and go home.'

Family Support

Perhaps one of the strongest themes common to all participants was problems associated with their roles outside of university. Scott et al. 1998 reported on the complexity of the interaction that women face when juggling the demands of family, work and study and a major theme identified by the current study was the importance of family support. Most of the women planned their study around the needs of the family, in the majority of cases this involved them in part-time study; most of the women were willing to take longer to complete their degree and felt the need to reduce the impact that their studying had on the family. As one participant stated:

> 'my husband encouraged me initially … but because I have always been at home he has worked full-time he hasn't had to think "what are we going to have for dinner"… he was finding it a bit hard to cope so I just slowed it back down again and just went back to the two units. It took longer to finish the degree than I would have liked but obviously I had to consider everyone else.'

The overwhelming theme was that university study had become so important to them that they were willing to juggle and manipulate their lives in other areas in order to continue their degrees but they could only do so if they felt that they were looking after the needs of their families. Although some women reported that they were financially supported by their partners, and that their families were supportive, the majority of the women felt that they had responsibility for nurturing their families and they felt that it was their role to rearrange their study to ensure that the family was not inconvenienced.

A common thread was that although the women placed very high priority on their studies they felt that the level of importance was not understood by their families. One woman said:

> 'I would say that he is not crazy about me studying at all … And the kids … I know they wouldn't care if I studied either and they are lots of work, you know teenagers, helping them with their homework … So I can't say anybody is encouraging me to do this other than myself.'

The overriding theme related to family support was that although some partners and families expressed support and some tried to provide practical help, most of the women felt that they had 'consider everyone else' and there was an implication, for some, that studying was something of an indulgence and could only be undertaken when their families needs had been met. This finding

highlights the complexity of role demands and concurs with the findings of Scott et al. (1998) who found that women's roles outside of university can have both a positive and negative influence.

Induction Support

One of the major themes to emerge regarding transition to university revolved around lack of personal interaction with the university or more specifically with the psychology department. Most of the women reported that the decision to return to study had been a difficult and complex one, for some it had involved several years of research and anticipation. The application process was fairly straightforward but it represented the prospect of major change in these women's lives. One woman stated:

> *'I just remember getting a letter saying right you are accepted … that was it, there was no more contact, nothing personal, no names and contacts of people to give you help and advice.'*

As Urquhart and Pooley (2007) found, most student cohorts recognise the need for social, emotional, and practical information support to help them through their university career. The same is true for the women in this study who often reported their first interaction with the university to be distant and unwelcoming. In particular women reported a need for more personal recognition and acknowledgement at the start of their course; this is exemplified by one woman who said:

> *'this was a major thing for me …but they didn't even have my name on a list … I think they could have done a lot more for some of the mature age students.'*

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study found that there were three main themes which mature age female students identified as important in their experiences of university. These themes were life stage and its relationship with reasons behind the decision to return to study, preparation for study and support issues. Central to all of these themes is the importance of expectations and the differences between expectations and the reality of the lived experience. These women talked about their experiences from the point of view of having overcome difficulties and it might be possible to use their information when considering planning resources for new groups of students. These women have overcome difficulties and for other students, these problems may have become the factors which have influenced their attrition.

The major recommendations from this study involve:

- Careers counselling and course marketing material might be designed to give more specific information related to course content in order to help women make the correct choices when they recognise that they have a life opportunity to develop their identity away from home and children. An interview with a careers counsellor to help complete applications to university may help potential students choose the most suitable course for them.
- Practical support such as planning programmes that can be flexible to meet the needs of women as they juggle with their other roles and support they give to their families. This may involve flexible timetabling and delivery options
- Universities might investigate providing a contact person from the academic staff to perform a pastoral tutor role. This would serve the dual function of providing personal acknowledgement to the mature age students that they have joined the university environment and hence they are welcomed and feel part of the university community and it would give the students a contact point if they need to adjust their study load to facilitate their family commitments. Although peer mentoring does try to fulfil this function it does not cover the enrolment process and does not help students during their first few days at university. Students would then have a point of contact and this may make them feel accepted into the university environment.

- Connecting networks or cohorts of mature aged women such that women know who else is within their cohort and can share their experiences, this would enable social support networks to be developed and enable a forum for discussion that helps women normalise their experiences. This could be done by social functions or through e-mail links organised via mentoring support.

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