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Social Support and Sense of Community for Mature Age Women Studying Psychology

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Abstract: The topic of mature students is of current interest in Higher Education, particularly in reference to predicted increases in part time mature students. This paper explores experiences of support for women aged between 40-49 years studying psychology in a professional learning context. The purpose of the study was to investigate what social supports are important in the experiences of mature age women who have decided to return to university. Within a descriptive phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) to understand experiences of support, the women took part in a semi-structured interview. Women reported their needs for academic support, social support and a sense of community within the university. Recommendations for social support through design of supportive learning environments and transition programs are discussed in the context of universities encouraging diverse student populations, attrition rates amongst mature age female students, and students experiencing a complex relationship around expectations driven by their motivations, their ability to cope with the academic workload, and managing family roles (Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1998).

Keywords: Mature Age Female Students, Adult Learning, Life-stage

Australian Federal Government policies have resulted in increased accessibility and encouraged participation by underrepresented groups in Australian universities (Krause, Hartley, James, and McInnis, 2005). The view of the student as being full time and straight from high school has been superseded by a student population consisting of more mature students with diverse entry pathways into university (McInnis, 2001). In Australia in 2000, 36% of enrolling students were over the age of 20 (Lukic, Broadbent, and Maclachlan, 2004). One student group, within the new diversity, are mature age females between the ages of 40 to 49 years, 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 years were enrolled in Australian Universities. Similar trends have been noted in North America, Canada, and the United Kingdom (Taniguchi and Kaufman, 2005).

One area of concern when increasing diversity has been low completion rates of degrees by groups of non-traditional students (Taniguchi and Kaufman, 2005). Mature age females have been severely affected by attrition and during their first academic year, approximately 27% withdrew from their course (Lukic, Broadbent, and Maclachlan, 2004). In Australia during 2002, the attrition rate for 17-20 year old undergraduates was just under 18% (Lukic, Broadbent, and Maclachlan, 2004). It is important therefore to examine the experiences of this cohort in order to reduce attrition rates and improve university learning for these students; to learn more about their experiences and how they have overcome problems that might lead to withdrawal. All student cohorts recognise the need for social, emotional, and practical information support to help them through their university career (Urquhart and Pooley, 2007). It is important that universities understand the support needs of diverse student groups in order to plan their transition and assistance programmes accordingly (McInnis, 2001), such as work done in the area of gender, age, nationality, and ethnicity. For example, transition of international students (see Harryba, Guilfoyle, and Knight, 2013, 2012a, 2012b; Guilfoyle and Harryba, 2009; Guilfoyle, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c), as well as Indigenous Australians (Veldman, and Guilfoyle, in press) have been a focus in Australia. Mature age women are an important subset within diverse campus environments.

The experience of mature age female students tends to be complex and despite the high attrition rate many adult students perform to a higher standard than school leavers, positively influence their course, and contribute more effectively in tutorials (Richardson and King, 1998). This finding was supported by Justice and Dornan (2001) who found that older students reported

more use of high level study strategies. Hoskins, Newstead, and Dennis (1997), from their study of records at a university in England, also found that mature age students gained better grades on average than traditional students.

Much of the research into student populations and design of induction and transition programmes has been based around cognitive, social, and moral development of late adolescents and ignores the needs of diverse student groups (McInnis, 2001; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1998). Kantanis (2002) however, conducted a study into issues affecting mature age students' transition to an Australian university. She collected data from two focus groups of mature age students at Monash University and found that although there was significant overlap between the needs of mature age students and school leavers, there were some issues that were directly related to mature age student transition. These issues involved: Orientation, which mature age students felt was geared around the needs of school leavers; computer literacy with a need for early assistance learning packages to be provided for mature students who had no recent experience of computing technology; part-time study assistance with additional services being provided for after-hours access to resources; interaction with the university community including both younger students and staff; support networks to encourage interaction between the university and family, friends, work colleagues, and social support networks. The recommendations from this study were that mature age students require a transition programme geared more specifically to their needs and administrators should plan transition programmes that take into account the needs of different student populations. Hence the gap between expectations and reality could be managed more effectively through transition programmes.

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, and were 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 leavers and mature age students. Recommendations for further research included investigation of the differing transition needs between school leavers and mature age students.

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 the north east of England (n=160) 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. Due to their high levels of self-esteem and motivation they tended to do well in the university setting, and gained 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 saw themselves as being more anxious and less confident when they compared themselves with traditional students (King, 1998 as cited in Murphy and 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 a study investigating the adjustment behaviours of mature aged women returning to formal study via a university enabling programme, Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) undertook a study 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.

It is clear from this review of literature that research into school leavers, international students (Guilfoyle and Halse, 2004; Guilfoyle, 2006b) and mature age students shows that there is a difference between expectations and experiences encountered at university, and the nature of this gap may affect how student adapt to the university environment (Baker, McNeil, and Siryk, 1985; Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, and Hunsberger, 2000; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, and Alisat, 2000). Research on expectations, focussing on mixed age group students, general cohorts of mature age students, and mature age women, shows 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 are now considered in more depth.

The Characteristics of Mature Age Female Students

Richardson and King (1998) argued that the problems that the adult student has to overcome relates to the roles that they had outside of education rather than their role as a student. In a survey of 70 mature age students at a Scottish University, Wilson (1997) found several factors relating to the characteristics of mature age students which affected their adjustment into university. For some students the factors created positive attributions, but paradoxically, for others, the same factors created negative attributions. The first factor identified by Wilson was age difference: Which could be positive in terms of older students having a deeper rather than surface approach to learning (Justice and Dornan, 2001; Richardson and King, 1998), or negative in terms of the gap between younger and mature students. For older students the differences were isolation from university life through part-time enrolment and living away from the campus; however, motivation was also a key factor. This factor included identity regeneration as a reason why some mature age female students returned to education. For these students, studying was identified as a means of developing their identity and this goal enabled them to keep strong motivation (Caffarella and Olson, 1993). Furthermore, relationships with spouses, family and friends, for some mature age students resulted in friction, whilst others reported that they gained support from partners and children. Another factor identified by Wilson was finance, the focus of which was financial burdens, which differed significantly from the financial burdens of the younger student. Older students reported greater

financial pressures related to providing a secure home for their families, making mortgage repayments, and maintaining a comfortable lifestyle. This responsibility often necessitated paid work which in turn placed increasing role pressure on the mature age student; for some, their work experiences complemented their study, but for others the pressure and time constraints of paid work contributed to increased stress. Most students within higher education are experiencing financial pressures due to increased costs and have to work to support themselves through University. The finance debate in relation to mature students is subtle and connected with concerns about future earning potential and returns on investment. Furthermore, institutional support and relations with lecturers, including the need for greater flexibility in delivery mode, assessment schedules and attendance requirements were also factors relevant to the older students. Wilson acknowledged that these issues were important to mature age students, but cautioned that evidence was complex and that each mature age student faced a unique combination of factors that could enhance their experience of university or alternatively, could become the catalyst for withdrawal.

Cantwell, Archer, and Bourke (2001) conducted a study of students entering the University of Newcastle (n=8503) via differing entry methods. Data were 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.

Indeed, research does show that mature students often have more competing demands for their attention than younger students. These demands centred on work, parental, spousal, or relationship roles together with the possibility of demands for caring for aging parents (Jacobs and Berkowitz-King, 2002; Leder and Forgasz, 2004; Ramsay, Barker, and Jones, 1999). In their study of North American female students, Jacobs and Berkowitz-King (2002) found that women over the age of 25 years were disadvantaged in completing their degrees due to the fact that they had competing demands on their time and were therefore more likely to be enrolled part-time. The issue of studying part-time also affected social interaction and deterred the formation of social support networks (Kantanis, 2002).

In an analysis of degree completion among non-traditional students, Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) found that being part time had negative effects on degree completion because it was socially isolating and gave less time for interaction with lecturers. Interestingly, they found contradictory evidence relating to marital status. Married students had a better chance of gaining a degree than single mature age students because of the financial and motivational support they received from their spouses. For some however, having young children decreased the likelihood of completing a degree and they concluded that this was possibly because of the constraints of studying versus spending time with young children. For others, having young children was a motivating factor in degree completion because they felt that they were providing an example to their children and also investing in the future financial and psychological security of the family.

In a qualitative study of 12 mature age female students from the United Kingdom, ranging between 29 to 49 years, Reay (2003) supported the idea that women considered studying at university provided a good role model to their children. They also reported that women often cited a desire to 'give something back' as one of their motivating reasons for returning to study.

The impact of role demands on mature age female students has been shown to be a complex issue. Scott, Burns, and Cooney (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. When personal circumstances were controlled for however, 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 that the development of a 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 enabled them to cope effectively with the demands of university (Scott, Burns, and Cooney, 1998).

Quimby and O'Brien (2006) also investigated factors which affected the psychological well-being of non-traditional female students with children. The participants in this study were 209 non-traditional students, defined as being at least 25 years of age and living off campus. Each woman surveyed was the primary caregiver for at least one child. The women completed surveys and questionnaires relating to demographic variables, attachment style, perceived social support, role management self-efficacy, and wellbeing. The results indicated that, for some students, the difficulties involved in managing their multiple roles and their lack of perceived social support caused significant psychological distress, whilst other women benefited from managing multiple roles.

The literature reviewed indicates a complex relationship between motivation, life stage, expectations and roles, all of which influence the study experience of mature age women. Due to the complexity of issues which affect mature age female students a range of authors suggest (Scott, Burns, and Cooney, 1998; Wilson, 1997; Quimby and O'Brien, 2006; Taniguchi and Kaufman, 2005), it is important to gain further understanding of the factors which influence the experience of mature age female students. The importance of social support from other students to help mature age women students cope effectively with the demands of university has been identified (Scott, Burns, and Cooney, 1998). As community psychologist's, we know that support can be pivotal in the transition experiences of other cohorts, such as international students (Guilfoyle, 2005). We were interested in findings above which show further any mitigating role of social support.

Social support is defined by community psychology researchers such as Guilfoyle, Banham, Cavazzi, & Napolitano-Lincoln, 2011). Like many they argue when it works well, social support provides a buffer variable in any setting. It is the bond which can enable individuals to more efficiently cope with stress. Dalton et al. (2001) defined social support as "a collection of social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural processes occurring in personal relationships that provide aid that promotes adaptive coping." (p. 234). Social support is a process developed through strategies which highlight an immediate social network to enhance member's feelings of confidence through advice and guidance when dealing with the challenge of study. Helgeson (2003) suggests both quantity and quality of supports are important, thus perhaps facilitating small group discussions (Gerity, & DeLucia-Waack, 2007) to bring as many individuals into contact as possible to facilitate a supportive environment. Social support, like a sense of community, should not be measured as an outcome, rather as a critical process. As Taylor, Sylvestre & Botschner (1998) argued, social support is something you do, not something you provide.

Our aim was to identify findings about the role of social support and how it interacts with other forces in women's life reviewed above, that can ultimately be used by policy makers involved in student retention, learning, social support, teachers, and counselling services. We aimed to interrogate the reports of women in detail in line with the above definition in case it might challenge existing ideas about the mature student learning experience and present new thoughts or knowledge about what supports are needed. The purpose of the study was to investigate what social supports are important in the experiences of mature age women who have decided to return to university.

The following research question was examined: How does social support interact with motivations, life stage, expectations and external roles of mature age women at University?

Research Methodology

Essentially, to unpack the complexity of support within a context of motivation, life stage, expectations and roles, it is necessary to know about the lived experiences of mature aged women students. A phenomenological research methodology, which was described by Schwandt, (2001) as an exploration of a person's 'lifeworld', was adopted. This methodology specifically involves detailed description of how a person experiences events in their life. Phenomenological research analyses lived experiences and attempts to make sense of them, 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 and Robinson, 2002). The essence comprises forming deep understanding of lived experiences (le Vasseur, 2003).

Participants

The research question is only interested in the experiences of mature female students and consequently the research methodology focused solely on this subgroup. Our preliminary analysis showed the greatest percentage of mature age women within the University occurred within one Faculty. An age range was selected based on Levinson's (1986) midlife transition theories. To control for Faculty variation, mature age females studying psychology became the focus of the study as they provided a unified but diverse student group and enabled the researcher to analyse their experiences of social support. The participants were purposefully selected via advertisements on noticeboards in the School of Psychology and Social Science and through flyers presented in psychology lecturers. Potential participants contacted the researcher via email or telephone. The researcher then screened potential participants prior to selection to ensure that they met the age and course criteria, as detailed below, of the study. The participants were 10 female students, aged between 40 and 49 years, studying psychology at Edith Cowan University. The number of participants was in line with criteria set out by Cresswell (2007), Moustakas (1994) and Wertz (2005) to provide quality of data and valuable findings.

Data Collection Procedures

The interviews took place at a mutually convenient location agreed between the researcher and participant. Participants were interviewed in the order that they contacted the researcher. Each interview took approximately between 1 hour and 1 hour 30 minutes. The interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Five open-ended questions were used in a semi-structured interview to gain information about the social and cultural contexts affecting mature age female students. The questions were formulated around expectations and experiences of social, emotional, and practical information support: Themes which were identified by Urquart and Pooley (2007) in their study of transition into university. The questions were followed by verbal prompts such as "Can you give me more information about?" (Rice and Ezzy, 1999) which enabled the participant to elaborate on points she wanted to make, and non-verbal prompts which helped develop rapport and hence facilitated the collection of rich data.

Approval to undertake this study was granted from the Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement of research. Confidentiality was ensured and all references to names or other identifying information was omitted from transcripts. Names of participants were not recorded. All research data is stored in the School of Psychology and Social Science. An information letter and an informed consent letter were distributed to participants.

Analysis

Meanings and perspectives were considered to create frames of reference and describe how the phenomena were experienced by the participants in the study (Osborne, 1994). Verbatim transcripts were made. Significant statements relevant to expectations, discrepancies between expectations and reality supplied by women, and information related to experiences of social, emotional, and practical information support while at 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.

Findings and Interpretations

Recurrent sub-themes and concepts associated with support are presented in Table 1. The findings and interpretations will be discussed in relation to these themes, sub-themes and concepts and how they bear on the research question. The discussion will be illustrated with extracts from the interviews and interpreted with reference to previous research.

Table 1: Themes and Sub-Themes of Social Support in Mature Age Women’s Experiences of University

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Concepts
Support	Academic	Self-doubt Self-efficacy Success
	Sense of community	Adjustment Acknowledgement Anonymity
	Social	Friendships Peer support

Support

Academic Support

The participants in this study generally considered themselves to be exceptionally well supported academically and well beyond their expectations:

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 academic support enabled the students to develop self-confidence. This premise is not true for all students; however this finding 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 and women mentioned that they had achieved higher grades than they expected and they had found their success motivating:

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.

The primary researcher reflected on her own experience as a mature aged woman graduating from University, and considered the importance of academic success to the development of self-efficacy and recollected that, throughout her own journey through university, she had met people who had had problems coping with study. For one woman in particular a poor mark for an assignment had resulted in her doubting her abilities and feeling overwhelmed within a complex situation of managing university study and the demands of her family. Instead of seeking academic support, the woman withdrew from study (Primary Researcher's Reflective Journal, 10 September).

The women who participated in the study had developed successful academic strategies; however there was a split in approach identified about sourcing help: Some women were self-confident and stated "*if I needed help I knew where I could get it*". Whereas others felt:

I never could bring myself to go and see a lecturer personally but a lot of the young ... everyone did but I actually felt that I was a bit nervous, I was a bit scared of doing that you know

Other women contradict the stereotype of mature age student being confident due to their age and experience. They shared how they developed in self-confidence as they progressed through the course:

When I very first started I think I felt the lecturers were on a higher plane than we were ... but when I actually got more comfortable being here and more involved in other people's research and I got to know the lecturers that way and I just felt more comfortable with them.

These students found that support developed their feelings of self-efficacy; however, for some women, if they did not gain good academic results, they developed negative feelings relating to their abilities and were inhibited about seeking further support.

Sense of Community

One of the key themes to emerge regarding transition to university revolved around lack of personal interaction with the university or more specifically with the psychology School. For the women the decision to return to study had been a difficult and complex one, for some it had involved several years of research and anticipation, for others it had involved giving up jobs, selling businesses, whilst others had dramatically changed their personal circumstances in order to study at university. The women found the application process was straightforward but acceptance at university represented the prospect of a major change in their lives and they felt that this was not acknowledged:

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) (see also work by Guilfoyle) 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 reported their first interaction with the university to be distant and unwelcoming:

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.

Although the academic support was considered to be excellent, a theme underlying this was that they were expecting that there would be some connection with the academic establishment of the university, as one woman said "*I suppose I wanted to feel welcomed and feel a part of it*". A feeling of "*isolation*" and not knowing "*who to turn to, who to ask*" was identified.

Peer support programmes were rarely mentioned by the women and they were not acknowledged as being a source of support:

I know they have introduced mentors and I have phoned them up a couple of times and even that, it seemed like support but then it wasn't. You still felt isolated; the mentors were always busy as well ...

This feeling of a lack of acknowledgement and sense of anonymity from the Faculty became apparent as one woman reflected upon people withdrawing silently, without seeking support or making any connection to others, commenting "*you just don't see them again*". This point strongly concurred with experience reflected upon by the researcher who remembered discussions with students who, when they felt conflict between family and study and when their study was not going well, felt quite deeply that there would be no one at the university who cared or noticed if you 'never turned up to another lecture again'. Because of this anonymity the easiest option would be to go "*back to what I was doing in my other career and ... family*" and walk away from university. This was an area where the reality of their experience did not meet their expectations. As one woman concluded:

being a part-timer no-one really knows you so if you didn't turn up or come back no-one would really miss you.

Social Support

The mature age female students interviewed in this study had very little expectation of social support. They 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:

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.

The women 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:

I have made some wonderful friends and who have been very supportive you know – when there's deadlines for assignments, you don't know where you are going, you haven't got the right resources or you don't think you are on the right track.

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*” and:

more in terms of friendship and connection... 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.

If the students had not had access to social support, possibly because they had been studying externally, they would have been much more likely to recognise the importance that social networks have at university:

I think it is something they don't realise for the external studies how important it is that students are able to contact other students just to get that reaffirmation that you are on the right track and to normalise your experiences and that sort of thing.

Conclusions

The literature reviewed indicates a complex relationship between the characteristics of mature age female students, theories of adult development, motivations for attending university, and the relationship between development of expectations and how they relate to the reality of the university environment. The women in the study identified that university provided a higher level of academic support than they expected. This enabled academic success and increased their self-efficacy, which assisted their transition into university. These findings were consistent with those found by Murphy and Roopchand (2003) stressing the importance of academic support in the development of self-confidence.

In contrast to academic support, more was expected from the university in terms of providing a sense of community. Some of the women interviewed had planned and prepared their return to university over a long period. Even if it had been a sudden decision, return to study represented a major change in their lives and they expected more acknowledgement and welcome into the university community. This led to the women reporting a lack of connection with the university and they could envisage that if problems arose they would not know who to turn to for support, and their withdrawal would be unnoticed. Most of the women had a low expectation of social support; however, as they progressed through the course, realised that they relied on friendships to help them gain information, normalise their experiences, and support each other through difficulties.

Guilfoyle (2006a) suggests that ‘transition’ is a process of socialisation into, and adjustments to, a new unfamiliar environment and learning context to the university culture where rules are not explicitly stated. This affects all students, especially in the first year which is stressful, socially isolating, and disappointing (see also, Gall, Evans, and Bellerose, 2000; Ying, 2002). Thus positive and early transition programs facilitate positive learning experiences for students throughout their enrolment (Guilfoyle, 2006a). We suggest our findings about social support as key factor can ultimately be used by those involved in student retention, learning, social support, teachers, and counselling services in at least three ways. First, ideally institutions can extend this work and examine the experiences of their mature age students to help them build social support structures that meet their needs. Second, the literature suggests that some students had unrealistic expectations of the complexity of university and how it would affect other areas of their lives and this might lead to problems in adjustment and coping. Thus findings on other mature age women's experiences should be provided to first year women to help inform, normalise, clarify, and discuss, their expectations of the role of social support. Third, as suggested by Hultberg, Plos, Hendry, and Kjellgren, (2008) orientation to the needs for support should include both students and teachers, such that academics are, alongside the students per se, made aware of the key social support needs of mature age women.

Future research is needed. We feel the key concept of support emerged and needs greater clarity. We used this concept in a broader sense through both data collection and discussion of findings. In future research we suggest the need for further connections with existing theories or knowledge about the mature experience and how these interact with social support. Ultimately, discussions of social support for women are about building a sense of community; the sort suggested by Dalton, Elias & Wandersman (2001), based on Sarason's (1974) idea of "a readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships on which one can depend". The institutions must design a local structure that will focus on the processes that enable this community. The concept of sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) is paramount. We end by suggesting sense of community provides the definitional and thus operational clarity to implement ways that mature age women can provide support to each other. The University should facilitate the sharing of narratives and strategies should build four aspects of sense of community (according to McMillan & Chavis, 1986): (1) membership or feeling of belonging (2) influence, or feeling of making a difference, (3) integration and fulfillment of needs, and (4) shared emotional connection. Shared emotional connection will be particularly critical in the context of parental separations. This connection can be mediated by open contact with peers, with an overall aim to develop high-quality expansive interactions as a product of a number of successful sessions.

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