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# Transitioning from enabling education into higher education: A case study of the benefits and challenges presented to and by mature students with life experience

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## Abstract

Mature students who enter undergraduate programs via enabling pathways bring to their studies valuable skills and experiences that benefit them, their peers and their tutors by enriching the learning process. However, the case study reported here provides evidence that, somewhat ironically, those same skills and experiences have the potential to create tension and conflict that can be problematic for tutors and demoralise the students concerned to such an extent that they contemplate withdrawal from their programs. It is proposed that one way of avoiding this situation is by raising awareness of it and providing tutors with the necessary skills and strategies for managing students' expectations. This can be achieved via teacher education and professional development programs and initiatives.

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## Introduction

The increasing prominence of widening participation on educational and political agendas is driving universities to reconsider their approaches to student recruitment and pedagogy so as to provide more opportunities and better accommodate the needs of an increasingly diverse student population, amongst which there is a wealth of varied educational, social, and cultural experience (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1998; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). This resonates in the Bradley Review of Higher Education in Australia, which recommends that those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth, including low socio-economic background, should account for twenty per cent of undergraduate enrolments by 2010 (Bradley, 2008). Such students frequently face fiscal concerns, along with affective and cultural challenges emanating from feelings of uncertainty, lack of self-efficacy, and pressures to balance study with work and family commitments (Curtis & Shani, 2002; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Kinnear, 2009; Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2004). As Haggis asserts, particularly in this context, "meeting learner needs should be a key focus for institutional attention" (Haggis, 2006 p. 521) and so universities must provide not just access pathways but appropriate support so that students are given the best possible opportunity to succeed.

The generally high levels of success achieved by mature-aged entry university students are well documented (Cantwell, Archer & Bourke, 2001; Hoskins, Newstead & Dennis, 1997; Richardson, 1994) but, as Scevak and Cantwell note, much of that work 'has focused on

mature-aged students entering university via some form of preliminary or enabling program' (2001, p. 3) and they offer evidence suggesting that although experience may indeed bring with it distinct benefits, it can also 'act as a point of disjuncture' (ibid., p. 11). Specifically, these individuals can struggle with the requirement 'to convert practical knowledge ... into a form of propositional knowledge which is conceptual, explicit, coherent and organised upon disciplinary lines' (Trowler, 1996, p. 20). Other researchers (Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1998; Ayers & Guilfoyle, 2009) have associated mature students' challenges and higher attrition rates with external factors such as anxiety around family responsibilities, the difficulty of balancing study and work commitments, inadequate induction and transition support, and a tendency to underestimate the value of social support networks.

We look here at such conflictual dimensions from the viewpoint of a single case study. Although this reflects the experiences and perceptions of an *individual*, it is reasonable to suppose that these are broadly representative issues with important ramifications for engagement with non-traditional students.

### **Context of the case study**

The equity mission of the University of South Australia (UniSA) is embedded in its founding legislation. In 2006, replacing long-standing antecedent discipline-based preparation and bridging programs, the University-wide Foundation Studies program was established both as a pathway for those who lack standard entry criteria and as a means of actively preparing them for successful undergraduate study.

Being interested in exploring notions of 'added value' in enabling education, including the influence of Foundation Studies experience on transition to first-year undergraduate work, we undertook a three-phase study involving both current and former Foundation Studies students and comprising: (i) focus group sessions with both cohorts; (ii) individual case studies to expand upon themes and ideas emerging from phase 1, consisting of a series of monthly interviews; and (iii) interviews with individual staff members.

The case study reported here comprised part of that work and audio-recorded interviews of about one hour duration took place monthly over a period of four months, using subjects selected randomly from the preceding phase. This particular study was chosen for the present purpose because it illustrates a paradox whereby affective factors often cited as benefits for mature students entering, or re-entering, higher education can also introduce negative dimensions, even to the extent that withdrawal may be contemplated.

### **Judy's story**

'Judy', a mature student in her thirties, completed Foundation Studies in 2008 with a grade point average of 6.38 (of a possible maximum score of 7.0) and began undergraduate studies in Early Childhood Education in 2009. She left school at sixteen and is a married mother of seven children aged from five to twenty years. While caring for her young children, she was involved with the Little Athletics Committee for seven years, simultaneously holding several positions of Office which together amounted to a full-time job, and was also Rent Coordinator and a member of the Housing Co-operative subcommittee. For the six years immediately prior to enrolling in Foundation Studies, Judy was a kindergarten committee member as Fundraising Coordinator, Minutes' Secretary and Playgroup Coordinator. In these various activities, she was also practically oriented in a 'hands-on' sense, working directly with the children concerned.

As we will show, Judy's case demonstrates that life experience and successfully undertaking an enabling program can enhance the undergraduate experience by providing an 'edge' over

peers who enter university straight from school. Her story is particularly intriguing, however, in that it also identifies detrimental experiences of conflict.

### **Getting the edge: accrued benefits of life experience and preparation**

To situate the conflict faced by Judy, we first offer some insight into those aspects of her experience which, although generally positive, had ominous overtones leading to disruptive attitudes and behaviours that threatened her commitment to continue her studies.

#### **Motivation**

Judy's family is an important source of motivation:

...the only thing that keeps me going is that I'm doing this course so that we can ... build a bigger house so that the children have got their own rooms ... because I'll have five teenagers at once, and that's the goal ... so when I get really down I pull out the house plan: you want that, you've got to do it.

Such drive and aspirations have helped her cope with first-year undergraduate challenges, even when driven to tears and ready to give up, and it is her children who lie at the heart of it, because she wants them to learn from her perseverance. In her words, 'I don't want my kids to see a quitter, and that's the reason why I didn't quit'.

#### **Confidence**

Judy manifests confidence and strong convictions, apparent in her views on such things as child-rearing, lecturers' approaches to teaching, and her feelings about Foundation Studies and her degree program. However, it became evident that her confidence is not intrinsic but had grown in response to the demands of her life:

I honestly thought I was a dumb bunny... and to be honest I have times when that little person is still inside but I won't let them come out—but running little athletics for seven years ... and having five children in that time—learnt—you learnt to have to stand up for yourself and be a little bit more—at least project confidence if nothing else ... placating grumpy parents, ... [R]unning play group for two years gave me the confidence to stand up in front of groups so it helped.

Judy's acquired confidence in her social interactions did not extend, however, to the university environment, where she initially felt inhibited by powerful beliefs instilled during childhood: 'Women are servants ... yeah, girls cook, clean and run after the men, that's what they're meant to do, they don't need a brain ... the confidence to challenge'. She speaks of 'not belonging there at all' and feeling 'less worthy' than others. By the time she completed Foundation Studies, however, she felt as though she had the confidence and self-belief she needed:

...because of the Foundation Studies program I know what I'm talking about. I'm already three steps above the rest of the class because I'm not trying to work out how to read all of this and keep up with the work; ... I already know how to structure my essays ... and how to research and how to do all of that ... I'm a lot more confident now.

As we will see, this newfound confidence also makes her vulnerable to particular challenges. Other telling remarks in this regard included:

... academically I know what they want ... I don't feel like a student anymore ... I sort of walk along feeling an equal with lecturers and tutors and things like that ... I don't know if that's what we're supposed to be feeling, like the whole, independent learning sort of thing...

This sounds really horrible, but I really feel I'm much more superior than most of the other students, I really feel that... I don't know, it dawned on me a few months ago, I was talking to somebody, and I'm internally thinking ... you don't know what you're talking about. ... so beneath me... [laughing]. If I hadn't done the Foundation Studies and just walked in, I would have sat down, shut up, and even if I didn't agree with what they were saying, I wouldn't have said anything ... [Foundation Studies] gave me the confidence ...

Other aspects of Judy's Foundation Studies experience also promoted confidence. She singles out her improved information literacy skills; her knowledge of the physical layout of the campus and of how and where to get things done; and her understanding of systems, procedures, rules and regulations. And she speaks of a developed strategic approach:

I don't know whether the lecturers are happy about the fact I did Foundation Studies ... because I know the rules ... first-year students don't, they very rarely read their course and placement book. I learnt to play the game... 'I'm a first year student, I don't have a mind of my own, I spew out what they want'—that's what I tell the other students: listen to them, find out what they want ... you make a note of that, you make sure you put that in the paper, and extra brownie points if you argue the same way they argue.

### ***Prior relevant work experience***

When she began her Early Childhood Education degree, Judy had considerable experience of working with children which she brought to bear during her studies. Able as she was to utilise such personal knowledge, she could concentrate on theory and thus stated, 'I feel very confident and very knowledgeable about children'. This, along with acquired confidence from Foundation Studies, helped her overcome the lack of self-belief from which she had suffered since childhood.

### ***Interactions with academic staff***

Foundation Studies helped Judy to develop effective strategies for interactions with academic staff and her understanding of role relationships matured. She commented:

...I found a topic that we both agreed on and it was amazing how much my grades changed and the rapport changed once I found the common ground. And I did the same with this one that I got the credit for, to the point where we now go and have coffee... and yes I used the same method with the courses that I haven't enjoyed.

I think a lot of it [lack of criticality] has also still got to do with the fact that the young people come from school... they still look at, it's a teacher/student relationship. I think a lot of it stems from when they left high school... Whereas I look at my tutors as equals.

...the biggest thing is that I got over my 'you're the teacher, I'm the student.' ... I'm not a child, I am an adult talking to another adult, that I did learn through Foundation Studies. Being treated as an adult and being encouraged to speak up and, right or wrong, voicing your opinion.

### **Dimensions of conflict**

There were several areas where Judy's experiences, skills, strategies, and affective attributes impacted on her undergraduate situation, creating conflict. Most poignantly, perhaps, was the way in which raising seven children and working in childcare coloured her perceptions of Early Childhood Education practica, which bored and irritated her due to the lack of recognition afforded her prior experience: 'I'm working in a childcare centre which annoys me because I don't need to practise how to look after children, and my running playgroup for

two and a half, nearly three, years doesn't count for anything either'. Frustration, newfound self-confidence and perception of role relationships led to tensions in her interactions:

...she [course coordinator] said, 'What were your personal goals?' I said, 'I don't have any personal goals' and she said, 'Right, well you really need to come and see me'. So I had a chat with her after that tute and I said..., 'I'm not learning anything, I'm not being challenged—for goodness sake, you've got to give me twenty kids for it to be challenging' ... and she said I need not to say that I'm bored in the tutorial because it's not good for others to hear that. And I said, well I'm sorry but I'm not the only one who feels that; there are lots of mothers and people who work in childcare and in these fields and they're not learning anything. She said, 'Well, it's not good'.

Tensions over *practica* also arise from the fact that Judy's experience with children exceeds that of her mentor—something that again alludes to resentment that her prior experience is not recognised:

I cringe at the fact that ... she is my mentor, yet I can run rings around her ... She told me to go and pat this one kid in the sleep room and she said, 'Oh, she's a bit of a squirmer, it will take you a while'. I sat there and went, 'There's no way this kid's going to sleep; her eyes are wide awake, she's fighting it. Until I get her to sit still or keep still she's not going to'. So I did this: [lengthy description of Judy's technique follows] ... Within 5 minutes, she was asleep.

Her experience of *practica* led her to conclude that they are too theoretical. It is interesting to consider how this may reflect residual feelings of insecurity—after all, it is with practice, not theory, that Judy is most familiar and thus comfortable. Equally, it may reflect feelings that her experiences are more valuable to her than the theoretical orientations, which seem not to work. Regardless, we are given a glimpse of the potential to undermine her studies and aspirations: 'well, it's causing ... actually, I'm really depressed'. She later continues: 'I don't normally cry in public, but I walked in there [course coordinator's office] and I said, "Can I have a word with you?" And that was it: Niagara Falls'.

Even in regular lectures and tutorials, Judy's experience of child-rearing led her to question her tutors and to feel angry. She comments:

I'm finding that there's a lot in the course that I'm, as a parent, all these little alarm bells going... I'm just sort of biting my tongue and—I have a whinge and if the lecturer happens to hear me I'll stand my ground—I don't know whether Foundation Studies was a benefit for that but I've learnt to stand my ground on it.

A recurrent theme was Judy's negative perceptions of her undergraduate program, resulting from the knowledge gained from Foundation Studies:

I actually find some of these courses limiting actually because they say, no, you must use your reading only, you must use a textbook only ... I've already—some courses I found books that are much better and suited to my reading style... But I'm not allowed to use them. I have to use the textbooks which are so full of examples you get lost in what they're trying to actually say, and I found that very, very frustrating.

I have big arguments with this tutor ... all your paragraphs have to be the same number of lines—excuse me—a paragraph is an idea; when it's finished you start another paragraph. But yes, I had a huge debate with her about that and about she didn't like some of my referencing... She said, 'We all use Harvard'. I said, 'Yes, you might base it all on Harvard but you don't all use Harvard'. And she said, 'Yes we do'. And I said, 'No, I've had lecturers

that want the footnotes, which is not Harvard, and I've had other lecturers who want footnotes and Harvard'.

Finally, Judy's familiarity with University rules gained as a Foundation Studies student means that she is in a position to challenge authority, and—again, given her increased confidence—is prepared to do so. In relating one dispute, she remarked:

I said, 'Well no, you can't mark us down as absent if we're in the class—incomplete maybe but not absent ... I know the rules'. First year students don't, they very rarely read their course and placement book.

It is interesting that Judy frequently refers to her younger peers ('teeny boppers') and emphasises the differences in their behaviours and expectations:

...that's one criticism of the whole course—they really don't consider mature-age students; it's based around teeny boppers ... so it makes it very, very frustrating from our perspective. And I've spoken to a lot of mature age students and they all feel exactly the same.

This lack of consideration appears to background much of Judy's frustration.

## Conclusion

With Judy there are clear overtones of Scevak and Cantwell's 2001 findings that experience can 'act as a point of disjuncture' and that 'the nature of the students' work is rarely such as to explicitly encourage the transformation of everyday procedural knowledge into its more structurally complex underlying propositional form' (p.8). Students' persistence in this and the apparent inability of university teaching to modify that mindset can seriously undermine their academic achievement. By successfully completing Foundation Studies, Judy had acquired a relevant skills set and familiarity with the systems, procedures and physical context of university. These, coupled with considerable practical experience and her greatly heightened sense of self-belief, should have positioned Judy to excel as an undergraduate. However, while she has certainly performed strongly, the occasions when she has struggled to effectively transform her experiential procedural knowledge into its propositional form, with its theoretical underpinnings, have triggered conflict—perhaps because deep-seated insecurities around her academic ability lead her to hold on to what she knows best and reject what she does not. This would certainly help explain the strength of her views and the emotional attachment associated with their expression.

As Ayers and Guilfoyle (citing Murphy & Roopchand, 2003) point out, mature students tend to exhibit high levels of motivation as a consequence of clearer aspirations and a conscious decision to study. This means that while they can be keen learners playing an important role in creating dynamic classrooms, they can also have unrealistic expectations that leave them facing greater emotional and intellectual challenges when things go wrong. Given the targets associated with the participation agenda, such challenges are likely to become increasingly salient in degree programs and warrant closer collaboration between support services and academic faculty, who need to be made more aware of the various challenges (and opportunities) that this cohort brings to the teaching and learning environment. In particular, academic staff need to know how to respond to these non-traditional students in ways that value their experiences, while managing students' expectations and behaviours where necessary.

The strength of feeling exhibited by Judy in the face of conflict is suggestive of the critical importance of these things in helping this cohort make the transition to higher education,

a point that is underscored by Knowles' observation of the intimate relationship between identity and experience:

If you ask an adult who he is, he is likely to identify himself in terms of what his occupation is, where he has worked, where he has travelled, what his training and experience have equipped him to do, and what his achievements have been. An adult is what he has done. (1996, p. 89; cited in Peters et al, *ibid.*)

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