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Mature-Age Male Students in Higher Education

Experiences, Motivations and Aspirations

Madeleine Mattarozzi Laming
Aileen Morris · Pamela Martin-Lynch

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Palgrave Studies in Gender and Education

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Preface

What happens when men enrol in a university degree as mature-age students? How does it compare with the experiences of mature-age women? The answer is that we know very little about these men and their experiences, and even less about how to support them to make a successful transition to university. This book is an attempt to answer these questions and provide some suggestions to policymakers and university leaders. We have tried wherever possible to let the men speak for themselves. The result is a chorus of men telling their own stories in their own words within a framework provided by us on the basis of our experiences and observations while teaching in universities in Australia and the UK over many years.

Murdoch, Australia
Lincoln, UK
Perth, Australia

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Praise for *Mature-Age Male Students in Higher Education*

“This book raises critical questions relating to the university experiences of a largely overlooked cohort of learners. Compelling narratives from older male students foreground the embodied nature of this return to learning, presenting ‘hidden’ stories relating to the motivations, triumphs and desires of these men. For those readers passionate about developing a more holistic understanding of the contemporary HE student experience, this publication promises rich insight into a somewhat neglected population.”

—Professor Sarah O’Shea, *University of Wollongong, Australia*, and 2017
Churchill Fellowship recipient

“I highly recommend this book to all those working in higher education, where there is now such diversity of students, young and older, female and male, many with responsibilities of families and paid work, from diverse cultural, educational and socio-cultural backgrounds. The authors, through the inspiring stories of the student participants, succeed in providing valuable insight into the lives and identities of a significant sub-set of this diversity—mature-age men. In the process, this reveals another layer of meaning within the tapestry of students which now populates our universities. The authors conclude with important recommendations for institutions to improve and enhance the experience of those returning to education, offering them a greater chance to achieve their goals.”

—Dr Cathy Stone, *The University of Newcastle, Australia*

“The lack of research on the topic of male participation and experience in higher education is a serious omission, especially in light of the fact that women have participated at higher rates than men for almost thirty years. It is therefore essential that mature-age men are encouraged and enabled to successfully participate in higher education as ‘second chance’ learners. The experiences shared by the men in the book are powerful, and unique in the literature; the authors have contributed significantly to understanding the contemporary experience of mature-age men in higher education in the UK and Australia, and in helping policy makers to understand the implications for policy and practice. Furthermore, the book is clearly written and enjoyable to read.”

—Professor Liz Thomas, Director of *Liz Thomas Associates*

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Part I

Concepts, Theories and Issues



1

Mature-Age Male Students

Abstract This chapter outlines the background and change that has taken place in higher education systems in both the UK and Australia. It outlines the move to a mass system of university participation across a number of countries and describes the more recent focus upon widening access to those groups previously under-represented in the student body. A case is made for why examining the experiences, motivations and aspirations of the mature-male students is important now and some findings from international research are shared. The parameters, issues and challenges of the study are outlined, key terms defined and the chapter concludes with an outline of the book's structure.

Keywords Widening participation • Mature-age male students • Mass participation

The lack of information about the experiences of mature-age male students is perplexing. Interest in the experiences of students making the transition from school to university or to other forms of tertiary education has grown considerably over the last 20 years. In part, this

interest has been prompted by the government policies designed to bring about a rapid expansion of the higher education sector. Governments in many developed nations have been intent on transforming higher education from an elite system in which 5–10 per cent of the relevant age cohort is enrolled in an undergraduate degree, to a universal system in which more than 50 per cent of potential applicants are enrolled in the expectation that increasing the number of graduates will increase economic productivity and prosperity (Trow, 2010). Australia and the UK have set ambitious targets in this respect. In Australia, the *Review of Australian Higher Education*, better known as the Bradley Review, set a target of 40 per cent of young people to attain a minimum of a bachelor-level qualification by 2020 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). The review was particularly concerned with the educational future of ‘those disadvantaged by the circumstances of their birth: Indigenous people, people with low socio-economic status, and those from regional and remote areas’ (Bradley et al., 2008, p. xi). In England, the Labour party’s Blair government set a goal of 50 per cent participation in higher education for all 18–30-year-olds by 2010 stating that ‘education must be a force for opportunity and social justice, not the entrenchment of privilege.’ (HEFCE, 2002). Both policies made explicit reference to mature-age students as under-represented and identified them among the people who should be encouraged to enrol. The twin and, to some extent, competing aims of increasing opportunities to participate in higher education (as underpinned by values around social justice) and the importance ascribed to higher education as contributing to a nation’s knowledge economy (signifying a more utilitarian and human capital approach) have been key motivations underpinning the access and widening participation policy agenda in both countries.

Given these drivers and the resulting changes in the policy context for higher education in the UK and Australia, there has been a move to open up higher education and move away from attracting only those applicants who were once described as ‘traditional students’ (Anderson & Vervoorn, 1983). Historically, traditional students were those coming from white, upper-middle and middle-class backgrounds, usually educated at private schools, aged 17–19 when embarking on university study, and more often than not, male. Somewhat wryly, Anderson and Vervoorn

(1983) described the traditional Australian student of the 1960s and early 1970s as

the son of a doctor, lawyer or someone else with a house in St Ives or Kew. Because his parents wanted him to have the best education money could buy, they sent him to a private school, to study academic subjects and learn the importance of not getting his hands dirty. He went direct from school to college, avoiding the real world *en route* except for glimpses through the windscreen of the sports car his parents bought him. After a few years, he too becomes a doctor or a lawyer, and so begins to accumulate the money necessary to build a house larger than his father's and to send his children to university. (p. 1)

By the 1980s, the focus shifted to the recruitment of students under-represented within the existing undergraduate population: women, students from other culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, students with disabilities, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and mature-age students. In Australia, under-represented students also included Indigenous students (Gale & Parker, 2013).

One consequence of these changes in enrolment patterns has been an increase in research into the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, including mature-age students, for example McGivney (1996), Osborne (2003b), Waller (2005), O'Shea and Stone (2011) and Long and Townsend (2013). Despite the work that has been done here, there are significant gaps in our knowledge. Some of the missing knowledge concerns the experiences of mature-age male students. Their voices are largely unheard in discussions about widening participation and increasing equity.

We know very little about the motivations and aspirations that prompt mature-age men to enrol in university studies, or about what happens to them as students. There has been little attempt to investigate the specific experiences of mature-age male students, with some notable exceptions—Veronica McGivney's (1999) *Excluded Men: Men Who Are Missing from Education and Training*; Penny Burke's (2006) *Men Accessing Education: Gendered Aspirations*; and Berry et al.'s (2011) *Male Access and Success in Higher Education*. Yet enrolment data suggests that some men, in particular

men from low socioeconomic and ethnic minority backgrounds, continue to be under-represented in higher education and at risk of becoming marginalised in the new knowledge-based, globalised economy. In the UK, educationalists have begun to monitor and investigate men's access to, and participation in, higher education (Crawford & Greaves, 2015; Thompson & Bekhradnia, 2009), largely due to signs that this under-representation and decline is a continuing trend that has significant social consequences (Berry et al., 2011). Research over the last decade indicates that men from white, working-class backgrounds and culturally and linguistically diverse communities are the least likely to enter higher education and among the most likely to experience difficulty in making a successful transition to university study (BIS, 2015; Devlin, 2011; Higher Education Academy and Equality Challenge Unit, 2008; Kirby & Cullinane, 2016; Stevenson & Whelan, 2013).

In contrast, there is a large body of literature, which dates back over 30 years documenting gender segregation and the barriers to women's access to higher education (Barone, 2011; Charles & Bradley, 2002; Jacobs, 1996; Moore, 1987; Stone & O'Shea, 2012). Some studies, for example, Lynch and O'Riordan (1998), Archer and Hutchings (2000), Reay (2003), Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2010), and O'Shea and Stone (2011), have focused specifically on the inter-connections between gender and class or socioeconomic status to examine the experiences of working-class women, while other research has looked at the impact of violence on women's participation in education (Stalker, 2001; Wagner & Magnusson, 2005; Daniels, 2010). The experiences of women enrolling in university degrees for the first time as mature-age students have appeared in much of this work, either as an aspect of women's lived experience, or as a topic for investigation in its own right (Redding & Dowling, 1992). It is not our contention that research into the experiences of mature-age women has been exhausted. Nor are we arguing that no further research needs to be undertaken into the experiences of women returning to study. In fact, much of our interest in the experiences of mature-age male students comes from our own work with mature-age female students, and we are interested in comparing and contrasting their experiences with those of men. We understand that although men are in a minority in higher education, they are not necessarily a disadvantaged minority (Berry et al., 2011). Nevertheless, there is a case for examining the experiences of mature-age male students who have made the journey

into higher education. Where researchers have attempted to examine the experiences of both female and male mature-age students, the results have sometimes been skewed towards female students simply because male students appear to have been reluctant to offer their own experiences (Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003). The result of our interest in the experiences of mature-age students who were largely invisible was a study focusing solely on men.

Another challenge facing researchers interested in the fortunes of mature-age students of either gender is the lack of a precise definition of the term in government and university policies. ‘Mature-age’ students may be defined as those who are more than 20 years of age, more than 22 years of age, or alternatively those who completed their secondary schooling at least three years prior to enrolling at university. Kahu (2014) defines mature-age students as those over 25 years of age in their first year of enrolment, pointing out that many, if not most, school leavers will turn 21 while at university. Thompson and Bekhradnia (2009) note that changes in the methodology used to calculate the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) have created uncertainty over the numbers of mature-age students enrolling for the first time. In order to include as wide a range of responses and experiences as possible, this study has opted to use the lowest age limit of 20 years; however, we are mindful of the distinction between younger mature-age students (20–40 years) and older mature-age (40+ years) (Findsen & McEwen, 2012; Mallman & Lee, 2014) and refer to the men in our study using these terms throughout the book.

Some Findings from International Research

While two universities in Australia and the UK are the primary focus of our research, the experiences of mature-age male students in other parts of the world also merit investigation. It appears that this topic has not attracted the same level of interest in many European countries, and it is not regarded as relevant in many less-developed countries where male students outnumber female, and women continue to have difficulty accessing university education (Morley, Leach, & Lugg, 2009). The lack

of a precise definition of ‘mature-age’ and the unavailability of disaggregated data make it difficult to obtain a clear picture of the situation. For example, the *Europe 2020* strategy sets two goals for participation in post-compulsory education: firstly, that 40 per cent of those aged 30–34 should have a higher education or equivalent qualification and, secondly, that 15 per cent of adults between the ages of 25–64 to be engaged in some form of lifelong education by 2020 (European Commission, 2009). However, data reporting on progress towards this goal does not distinguish between forms of tertiary education and motivations for engaging with it. Lifelong learning includes education and training undertaken to improve employability, or retraining for new employment or, for more intrinsic reasons, such as personal growth or pleasure. It is very likely that some of the people engaged in lifelong learning will progress into university study; however, it is not clear what proportion might be able to do so. Moreover, the age range stipulated in the *Europe 2020* strategy excludes people who might meet the definition of mature-age students in other contexts (Eurostat, 2016). The statement on higher education also implies that many of the people being encouraged to enrol will be mature-age students, but the lack of disaggregated data means that it is not clear how many of these might be students enrolling for the first time, students returning after incomplete attempts in the past or students transferring by agreement into higher education from other forms of tertiary education. It may also include students returning to take a second degree in a new discipline area where this is supported or financially available—in both the UK and Australia funding regulations discourage students from enrolling in a second undergraduate degree.

What we do know is that the European university sector has followed a similar pattern of expansion from the 1980s, albeit with some regional variations. Until the early 1990s, the universities in many European countries were elite institutions—approximately 5 per cent of school leavers progressed to university study. In 2001, the average participation rate had risen to 25 per cent across the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), where 16 of the 22 member states are European. This upward enrolment trend is particularly strong in Central and Eastern Europe, but it is by no means confined to those