Paper title – Factors that affect the persistence with their studies of regional mature-age female university students with children at home.

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Abstract

_The project will investigate the factors that affect the persistence of regional mature-age (aged 21 or over) female university students with children at home. By surveying this cohort across four regional campuses of [Authors’] University, the research will initially establish factors which students find most difficult to manage, and which may have caused them to consider ceasing or intermitting university study. The major focus is on the retention of this cohort of students, who are being enrolled in increasing in numbers at our regional campuses. Many in this category are from Low SES communities and are often first in family to attend university. It is essential that this group continue with their studies and not cease or intermit, as their persistence will not only benefit themselves and each regional / rural campus but also the local communities where they will most likely pursue their future careers._

_With this paper we would like to contribute to discussions in our community of practice as Australian practitioners of academic language and learning (ALL)._
Our research will incorporate data obtained from four regional campuses of [Authors’] University – two larger and two smaller – which are situated in various regions of Victoria. The research team members represent all campuses. The research design is qualitative and informed by literature review.

**Participant group**

Participants will be regional mature-age (aged 21 or over) female university students with children at home. They will be drawn from all faculties and all year levels of the university. As the focus is on the first year experience, participants from other years will be asked to respond to both a survey questionnaire and focus group discussions drawing on their recollections of first year. In Semester 1 data will be collected from second and subsequent year students. By the beginning of Semester 2, the First Year cohort too will have sufficient experience of university life (and the inherent stressors) to enable them to effectively complete the survey questions and also participate in focus groups. Both sets of data will be combined to produce a comprehensive report of findings, which is planned to be made available for circulation as a paper by late 2014.

**The research process**

1. Regional team members have produced an agreed survey document. Its composition was informed by our own experiences of working with this cohort; by our knowledge of the local campus, area, and community; and by the method and findings of an earlier study by Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1966), and the common themes found in the broader literature. Edwards’ (1993) characterisation of education and family as competing “greedy institutions” provides a useful perspective. Anecdotally, our experience has chimed with the frequent emphasis in the literature on financial pressures and family responsibilities as challenges to mature-aged mothers’ persistence with their studies (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Deutsch & Schmertz, 2011; Edwards, 1993; Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013; Heenan, 2002; Kantanis, 2002; Kevern & Webb, 2004; O’Shea & Stone, 2011; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996; Shanahan, 2000; Stone & O’Shea, 2013; Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010; White, 2008): for example, Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1999, p. 233) found that 30% of their sample who had interrupted their studies, in contrast with only 5% who persisted to graduation, reported that “family hostility/lack of support” had been an obstacle to continuing with their studies. Our study includes scrutiny of these as well as other likely factors which we have asked students to rate according to whether the factor posed a difficulty for them and its importance as an obstacle to their persistence. At the same time, we inquire into factors that have helped them to continue studying. Influences are complex, with family, for example, being both a cause of stress and a source of support (cf. Deutsch & Schmerz, 2011).

2. Ethics approval has been obtained.

3. At each campus, a range of advertising methods is being used to encourage prospective students in the research category to become involved and undertake the anonymous survey.

4. A drop box is established for questionnaires to be submitted at each campus.

5. In addition, a personal approach is being made by Student Learning lecturers to students known to fit the stated category with a request to consider undertaking the survey.

6. Surveyed students are invited to participate in focus groups, to explore salient questions from the survey questionnaire in further depth.
The presentation at the conference will document results obtained up to July 2014.

7. The collected data will be analysed to identify convergent and divergent experiences and perspectives, and to tease out the implications for improving the provision of support for the research cohort. Data will be analysed on an individual campus basis, and on a combined regional basis.

8. When final data has been obtained and analysed (approximately October 2014), each Student Learning lecturer will hold discussions with their associated Campus Director about responding to the major issues being faced by this cohort, to reduce cessation or intermission of studies. These discussions will be informed, as well, by practices and recommendations by students at other institutions reported in the literature, which emphasise such measures as timely and targeted information (Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013), including advice for family members (Johnston, Collett, & Kooymman, 2013; Kenny, Kidd, Nankervis, & Connell, 2011; Norton, Thomas, Morgan, Tilley, & Dickins, 1998); targeted orientations (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Filipponi-Berardinelli, 2013); opportunities to form social networks (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; Home, 1997; Kevern & Webb, 2004; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998); and awareness raising for teaching staff (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2008; O’Shea & Stone, 2011; White, 2008).

9. A regional report will be forwarded to the Pro Vice Chancellor (Region) for consideration at a University-wide level.

What has been done?

By June 2014, mature age female students who have children at home who are enrolled in second year or higher levels of academia will have completed a questionnaire, and have participated in focus group discussions. These students will complete this activity by reflecting on their first year university experience. An analysis of this data will be prepared for the purposes of explaining the focus and method of research, and presenting the current findings and emerging trends at this conference.

We decided on a combination of survey and focus groups for two reasons:

- The survey will enable us to assign priorities to different factors, by learning how important our respondents perceive them to be.

- The focus groups will allow us to draw upon students’ own ways of expressing the challenges they face, when we design materials to communicate with subsequent cohorts about these challenges and how the university can help with them. We think it helpful for students commencing their studies to hear from others in a similar situation, in their own voices, rather than being offered what may be perceived as more distant, institutional advice.

The expected impact of the initiative

It is critical that each mature age female student who has children at home, and who has made the decision to undertake a university qualification, is supported in their quest. Research indicates that regional mature age mothers most often access their closest regional campus which is situated in their home community and where their family resides. These women, when qualified, predominantly move into positions of employment within their home community. There is great benefit for both the person and the community when this occurs.
Factors that affect the persistence with their studies of regional mature age female university students with children at home.

Regional education communities endeavour to welcome and retain students, and provide a positive and rewarding experience. Nonetheless, we are aware of stressors for the cohort on which this study focusses. By determining the major issues of concern for mature age female university students with children at home (at individual campus and at regional level), it is envisaged that a range of supports can be put in place to alleviate difficulties faced by this cohort and enhance the likelihood of them continuing with university studies. These supports may include a Survival Guide for mature age students and their families, modelled on one that we have produced for students articulating from TAFE (http://www.latrobe.edu.au/students/learning/starting-out/tafe-to-uni); information meetings for mature-age mothers and their families, drawings on ideas from Filipponi-Berardinelli (2013) and Johnston, Collett, and Kooyma (2013); offering opportunities for establishment of Learning Circles and creation of awareness among the cohort that Student Learning staff are prepared to offer support informed by our understanding of challenges that these students commonly face.

QUESTIONS OR ISSUES FOR AUDIENCE DISCUSSION:
1. After presentation of our initial findings, we will invite audience responses to whether the key issues that have emerged in our study are also challenges for their university (or others that they know of) and if so, how have the issue/s been addressed or managed?
2. What other issues for mature age mothers have been recognised by your universities? What approaches to the issues compare or contrast with our approach?

References:


Factors that affect the persistence with their studies of regional mature-age female university students with children at home. Nuts and Bolts submission