

## **SRHE Research Scoping Study Award: Final Report February 2016**

### *Mature-aged men's experiences of higher education: Australia and England compared.*

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#### **Aims of the Study**

This study is intended to improve our understanding of the challenges facing mature-age male undergraduates as they adapt to university study with a view to reducing attrition. On commencement, we identified three specific program goals:

- to review the literature on mature-age students with a particular focus on men,
- to develop a more robust understanding mature-age men's experience of transition through university and their adaptation to university study,
- to develop a series of research questions, which are informed by a new model of transition and which will be used as the foundation for further study.

#### **Background to the Study**

In Australia, and the UK, the proportion of male students relative to female students has been declining for a considerable period (Matthews, 2014). Although exact comparisons are difficult owing to differences in the academic year and data reporting methods, recent figures show that the majority of undergraduates are women: in Britain the figure is 56.2% (HEA, 2013) and in Australia the figure was 55.6% (Department of Education, 2013).

Gender segregation and the barriers to women's access to higher education have been the focus of research since the 1980s (Moore, 1987; Jacobs, 1996; Charles & Bradley, 2002; Reay, 2003; Barone, 2011, Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Some studies, for example, Lynch and O'Riordan (1998), Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Reay (2003), Reay, Crozier and Clayton, (2010), and O'Shea and Stone (2011) have focussed specifically on the inter-connection 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 (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). 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).

Until recently, little attempt has been made to investigate the specific experiences of mature-age male students with some notable exceptions (Berry, Foster, Lefever, Raven, Thomas & Woodfield, 2011; Burke, 2006; Burke and Hayton, 2012). Yet enrolment data suggests that some men, in particular men from low SES and minority ethnic backgrounds, are 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; HEPI, 2009), largely due to signs that the exclusion of disadvantaged men 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 HE and among the most likely to experience difficulty in making a successful transition to university study (EDA, 2008).

## Implementation of the Study

### Thriving in Transition.

This scoping study was influenced by the work of Martin Harris in the Department of Rural Health at the University of Tasmania. Harris postulates a four-stage developmental/sequential model of transition to a new environment and then identifies the characteristics and processes that allow individuals to thrive in challenging circumstances (Harris, 2009). The stages are illustrated in Figure One.

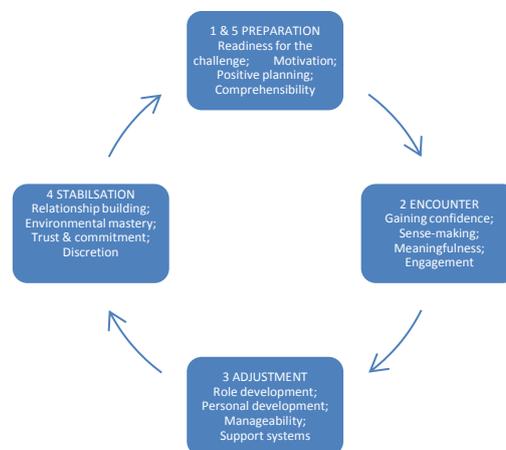


Figure 1: The Thriving Transition Cycle

In summary, Harris (2009) argues that people making a transition to a new stage of life, whether it is enrolling at university, taking up a new job or moving home, will either ‘thrive, survive or languish’ depending on their attitude and preparedness. Those who ‘thrive’ are ready to make a transition, motivated, well-prepared and able to think about and understand the complexities of the process. The key aspect of Harris’ model is that it presents transition to university as a cyclical process from enrolment to graduation and beyond. For this reason, the scoping study included students at different stages of their degree programs - from the first few weeks into their first semester up to the end of their third semester.

### Methodology.

Ethical approval from The University of Lincoln was obtained in March 2015 and from Murdoch University in April 2015. Approval was granted on the basis of informed consent for participation and anonymity in the reporting of data. All data reported here is anonymised or uses pseudonyms for the purposes of confidentiality.

Students were invited to complete an online survey using Qualtrics. The survey was based on similar instruments used by in earlier research by the authors. The questionnaire was divided into 10 sections covering the students’ personal background, experience of school, employment history, aspirations, transition to university and hopes for the future. The questionnaires were almost identical; however some differences were made to the language used in order to accommodate differences in describing the students’ ethnic backgrounds and school experience.

In order to safeguard students' privacy and protect them from undue influence, an email containing a link to the online survey was sent to students by a third party in the student administration offices at both universities. Owing to a misunderstanding on the part of the Murdoch University administrator sending the email, it was sent to larger group of students than intended, resulting in a larger, but not always relevant, response that was reduced to meet the project guidelines. A similar procedure for recruiting participants was followed at the University of Lincoln. Staff in the student administration office emailed students. A number of the subject co-ordinators also promoted the survey to students in their lectures.

The final data set consisted of survey responses from 98 students in the first three semesters of their course at Murdoch University and 43 students in their first two semesters at the University of Lincoln. Results were exported from Qualtrics and then analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 21. Follow-up interviews were conducted with fifteen students at Murdoch University and ten at The University of Lincoln. Interviews were recorded as MP3 files after the student had signed a consent form and later transcribed. Unless otherwise stated, the results of the questionnaire have been aggregated and all data has been anonymised. Where the response rate has been at least 85 per cent of respondents, the percentage for each answer has been assumed to represent the total cohort of students. When the response rate has been significantly less than 85 per cent, the N figure has been included in the results and discussion.

**The student samples.**

**Age.**

In keeping with commonly accepted definitions in Australia and the UK, 'mature-age' was defined as 20+ years. Participants at Murdoch University tended to be older than their counterparts at The University of Lincoln. It is possible that this difference can be attributed to the strength of the mining sector in Western Australia 2004-2014. It was evident from information provided previous employment and aspirations for the future that a number of Murdoch University students had chosen to spend some years in the workforce before commencing a degree. The participants' ages are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

*Year of birth: participants at Murdoch University and The University of Lincoln*

	1940-49	1950-59	1960-69	1970-79	1980-89	1990-99
Murdoch	3%	7%	9%	20%	38%	22.5%
Lincoln	-	2.	5%	12%	16%	65%

**Sociocultural status.**

Accurate determination of the students' socioeconomic status proved very difficult using the conventional measures of parental occupation given the disparity of ages, and the change in occupational status and educational norms over time. Nevertheless there was some consistency in the overall patterns of parental employment at Murdoch and the University of Lincoln.

Information about parental education provided reasonably reliable indicator of the participants' socioeconomic status in their formative years. It also reflected the changes in society throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Parents of many of the oldest participants would have left school for full time employment at 13-14 years of age, particularly if they lived in farming communities. Entry into many occupations that now require a degree e.g. banking, teaching a nursing, did not require a matriculation certificate until the 1970s. What was clear from comments made about their family backgrounds and the schools they had attended is that the samples at both Murdoch University and the University of Lincoln included individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds encompassing extreme disadvantage

to comparative privilege, although the majority came from families that might be described as 'middling' in terms of income and social status.

The majority of students participating in this study spoke English as their first language, although in some cases they did not speak Standard English at home. At Murdoch University, 89 per cent of the participants of participants described themselves as Australian; one identified himself as Aboriginal Australian. Seven per cent were Asian (including China, South Asia and South East Asia). Two students described themselves as European (Italian) and two as African (Nigerian and Liberian). Seventy-nine per cent of participants at the University of Lincoln identified themselves as British (white), nine per cent as British (black) nine per cent as mixed – white and black African. One student identified as mixed – white and black Caribbean.

***Previous education, employment and current enrolment.***

A minority of the students who participated in this study stated that they had left school without completing a full secondary school program, although the figures varied significantly between Murdoch University and the University of Lincoln.

Australia does not have an intermediate secondary certificate comparable to the British system. Generally speaking, students who leave school before completing Year 12 have no formal qualifications. The number who did not complete Year 12 is high – forty-two per cent. The relatively high per centage of students (11%) who did not respond to this question means that this figure needs to be treated with caution; however, the demand for skilled trades and semi-skilled labour in Western Australia has been unusually high over the last decade as a result of the mining boom and it is probable that many of these men did not see any benefit in remaining at school when they could earn high wages. Examination of responses given the forty seven per cent of Murdoch University students, who did complete Year 12, suggests that a substantial section of this group had always intended to go to university, but had deferred their applications or enrolment for some years in order to take advantage of the demand for labour in a very strong economy. A smaller proportion of students (32.6%) enrolled at the University of Lincoln left school before completing their GCSE.

A number of participants chose not to answer the questions about their previous employment (N = 90 at Murdoch; N = 26 at Lincoln), and it is impossible to speculate about why or what they were doing before they enrolled. Of the participants who did answer, just one student at each university stated that they had not worked prior to enrolling. Work histories varied enormously and included full time work in a managerial position, clerical work and retail. Nine per cent of participants from Murdoch and seven per cent from the University of Lincoln had been in the armed forces or emergency services (and sometimes both).

Eleven per cent of respondents at Murdoch and fourteen per cent at the University of Lincoln had worked in what be described as semi-skilled occupations; however this term is somewhat misleading. Entry to these occupation usually required a vocational certificate or technical diploma rather than a degree, but their jobs might have been highly specialised and requiring a high degree of proficiency. For example, one Murdoch student had worked as a diving instructor and another had been a shot-firer working in both mining and demolition. At first glance only one student appeared to have trade qualifications; however, almost all of the participants, who had been in the armed forces, had acquired trade and/or technical qualifications during their enlistment.

At both universities, nineteen per cent of respondents had held a series of skilled or semi-skilled, short term positions that were similar in nature despite the differences in location, e.g. a combination of part-time and full-time work in retail, hospitality and catering, but in some instances, the types of

work undertaken by Murdoch students, e.g. casual work on a mine site, was indicative of a different employment context.

The students participating in this study were enrolled in a wide range of degree programs. At Murdoch University, Science and Arts were the most common degree choices with each accounting for 22 per cent of participants. Science includes biomedical science, as well as the traditional disciplines of chemistry and physics. Arts is the most diverse faculty at Murdoch University and includes specialisations in history and literature, as well as philosophy, sociology, development studies and counter-terrorism. Business studies was the next most common choice with eleven per cent of participants enrolled in degrees offered by this School. Other courses included law, education, computer gaming, nursing and psychology with three students each, and media with two students.

At the University of Lincoln, the largest group of participants (21%) was enrolled in Science, including biomedical science and forensic science, followed by media with sixteen per cent. Engineering and Arts accounted for twelve per cent of participants each, followed by business, social work and psychology with nine per cent each. One student was enrolled in computer gaming and one in fine arts.

Thirty six (84%) of the students at the University of Lincoln were enrolled full time compared with fifty-five (54%) at Murdoch University. Four students at Murdoch University did not reply to this question.

#### ***Families and accommodation.***

Not surprisingly, given their age, many of the students participating in this study were married or in a committed relationship: 59 per cent of Murdoch students and 48 per cent of students at the University of Lincoln stated that they had a partner or spouse. A further 32 per cent of Murdoch students and 14 per cent of students at the University of Lincoln had one or more children. A larger proportion of the participants from Murdoch University were living in their own homes (70% at Murdoch; 21% at Lincoln).

#### **Results and Discussion**

Much has been made of the need to increase participation by students from non-traditional backgrounds in higher education in both Australia and the UK, (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008; DfEE, 1999). This has included mature-age students as well as students from diverse sociocultural backgrounds, sometimes without sufficient attention to understanding who these students are. Waller (2006) warns that attempts to treat mature-age learners as a single homogenous group will inevitably overlook the nuances and complexities of their situations and experiences. Learners of all ages have multiple identities and are engaged in a number of complex relationships at the micro-, meso- and macro levels of society. This study has been mindful of this warning; nevertheless, some common themes have emerged from the data collected through the questionnaires and reinforced by the interviews.

#### **Reasons for enrolling and hopes for the future.**

Employment or career progression was the most commonly identified reason for enrolling at university. Thirty-eight per cent of Murdoch students and thirty per cent of students at The University of Lincoln stated that a desire for a new job or a promotion led to their decision to enrol in a degree course. It would be disingenuous to expect that students of any age were unaware of the connections between education and employment in (Laming, 2012); however a substantial number of participants phrased their response in terms of wanting a better job, a job that was more rewarding and possibly better paid. Asked what led to the decision to enrol, one Murdoch student replied:

My career sucks and I feel my brain is going to waste (BSc, physics and nanotechnology).

One student at the University of Lincoln expressed similar views:

Working in a supermarket, you are treated like trash by both the public and the management who seem to have even less ability to lead than a boiled potato, I could not stand the thought of slaving my life in a job like that, not after seeing the wasted talent of my co-workers who had been stuck there for most of their lives (BSc, biology).

Wanting a better life, rather than just a better job, also emerged as a significant theme. Twelve per cent of Murdoch University students used that phrase, or something similar; however the same sentiment was evident among students from the University of Lincoln (9%). A 'better life' implies more than more money; it suggests that these students wanted work that was interesting and fulfilling, that provided satisfaction and received respect; if it also earned enough money to provide a certain amount of leisure and entertainment, so much the better.

One striking feature of responses to this question was the number of students who enrolled in response to a life-changing experience – twelve per cent of students from the University of Lincoln and thirteen per cent of Murdoch students. Three students identified the death of a partner, close friend or family member as the trigger. One student was re-skilling after a workplace accident left him paraplegic. Another spoke of becoming a single father after a very difficult divorce and wanting to make his children proud of him by getting a degree. Comments made by a substantial number of students at both universities indicated that they were military, or ex-military, personnel who were undertaking a degree in preparation for a new career after being discharged.

Getting a degree was very important to the majority of students. Seventy-seven per cent of Murdoch students and 67 per cent of students from the University of Lincoln stated that graduating with a degree was very important. They used expressions such as 'vital for my career' or 'essential to my chosen field', but there were students who took a different approach:

I come from an intelligent family, so not having any meaningful qualifications feels like I would be failing them and myself (Murdoch, neuropsychology).

Very important - 1) To regain my sense of self-worth. 2) To find out how well I can perform academically. 3) To enjoy myself University of Lincoln, Arts).

Where participants rated completing a degree as somewhat important or not very important, their comments indicated that they were interested in the content of their degree, rather than the extrinsic rewards that it would bring:

It's not important for me to have the degree. It's important to me to have the knowledge (University of Lincoln, computer science).

Very important. It maintains my sanity. If I wasn't doing it, I'd be dying of boredom (Murdoch, sound and screen production).

Often, these students were older; they were doing a degree out of interest or to fulfil a long-held desire. Eleven per cent of Murdoch students and seven per cent of students from the University of Lincoln said that they had enrolled because they had the opportunity to do so, and the money. Sometimes they were using a redundancy payment to retrain for a new career, in one case their employer was supporting their studies, but many of them retired. Two of the oldest students at Murdoch had been professional engineers for many years, qualifying at a technical college as was usual in their youth, and were taking their degrees as a long delayed reward. Students at the University of Lincoln tended to be more concerned with the practical advantages of obtaining a degree, which reflects their generally younger ages.

Another group of participants (4 % at Murdoch; 7% at Lincoln) stated that they had applied for a place once they knew that people like themselves could go to university. These students were the most likely to report difficulties at school and encounters with unsympathetic or hostile teachers that led to poor academic performance and early leaving. In some cases their home life could also be described as disadvantaged. They were the least likely to have had had a family member finish secondary school and go to university, but at some point, they had undertaken vocational studies or an access course and discovered that they were capable of learning. At least one mentioned a particular TAFE teacher, who had advised them to apply for a university place; something they had not considered until then.

The selection of a discipline area was governed by personal interests and career plans. Many of participants – 42 per cent of participants at Murdoch and 40 per cent of participants at the University of Lincoln – said they had chosen their degree because they had ‘always been interested’ in that particular field. At the same time, career opportunities were very important – eighteen per cent of participants at Murdoch and fourteen per cent of participants at the University of Lincoln – had chosen their course to find employment in a particular field, for example teaching, law, engineering or social work, but added that this field interested them deeply. A substantial number (6% at Murdoch and 14% at Lincoln) were already working in the field and upgrading existing qualifications such as diplomas or technical certificates.

When asked what they hoped to achieve by taking a degree, the majority of respondents at both universities (66% at Murdoch [N = 83] and 83% at Lincoln [N = 29]) stated that they hoped it would lead to a better job or career, a promotion or new opportunities for advancement. Belief in the links between higher education and employment are so ingrained that this is not surprising; however as has already been established, desire for a better job or new career frequently encapsulated the wish for a different kind of life. The complexity of aspirations and motivations revealed in response to these questions should not be overlooked - fourteen per cent of Murdoch students insisted that the acquisition of knowledge was their real goal, but if knowledge brought them a good income, so much the better. Only those participants who were retired, or approaching retirement, were able to say categorically that they were not interested in a degree as a means of finding employment. Even among this group there was an awareness that a degree might bring new opportunities. The same student who stated that studying would allow him to regain his self-worth was also aware that his degree had a practical dimension:

As I will be 62 when the course is completed career prospects are not a priority. However I have not ruled out part time teaching. Should my final results be satisfactory, I should like to continue in Higher Education - M.A., doctorate - who knows? (Lincoln, Arts).

Eight per cent regarded this degree as the first step towards a postgraduate qualification; all of these students were interested in scientific fields that require postgraduate qualifications for meaningful employment. Nine per cent were intent on vindicating their belief in their own academic capability, often in response to teachers or family members who disparaged their intellectual worth in school.

...in my experience peers, and other similar aged people, cannot understand WHY I want to study and they mock education. I live in a farming community where education is undervalued and other non-intellectual forms of work are perceived as the main route to prosperity (Murdoch, arts).

One student from Murdoch, who is an Aboriginal Australian, stated that he wanted to contribute to his community, which had need of people with qualifications like his.

### **Expectations.**

While some students had quite unrealistic expectations of university life and study that they admitted were influenced by films and television, only a very small minority stated that they really had no expectations – nine per cent of participants from Murdoch and seven per cent from the University of Lincoln. It is very likely that this is a reflection of the massification of the university systems in both Australia and the UK. Just ten per cent of Murdoch students and nineteen per cent of students at the University of Lincoln did not have a friend or immediate family member who had been to university. Seventy-five per cent of Murdoch students and 53 per cent of participants from the University of Lincoln said that they knew at least a little about university before they enrolled. These figures may also explain why thirteen per cent of Murdoch students and 21 per cent of students from the University of Lincoln stated that they had no particular concerns about studying at university prior to commencing their degree.

Results for questions regarding expectations need to be read closely to understand the nuances of meaning. Five per cent of Murdoch students and fourteen per cent of students from the University of Lincoln stated that their expectations of university life and study were about right; however this did not mean that they were always happy with their experiences:

My expectations was that university and living in the dorms would be hard, it was for the first couple of months, then I grew accustomed to it (Lincoln, psychology)

Some students were very candid about the differences between their expectations and the reality of university study.

Considering the nature of my course I assumed I would be surrounded by liberal academics, creatives and younger people who aren't that enthusiastic about the topic and just haven't worked out what they wanted to do with their lives yet. The actual studying I expected to be more difficult than it was. I hadn't accounted for my experience at college covering as much of the first year university level as it had (Lincoln, media production).

Six per cent of students at Murdoch University and twelve per cent of participants from the University of Lincoln thought their studies would be harder or more challenging. A number of students commented that first year units or subjects repeated a lot of material they had covered in upper secondary school or at college. A substantial number (17% at Murdoch and 5% at Lincoln) thought that going to university would be an intellectually stimulating and enjoyable experience that engaged them in the study of new and exciting material. Of this group, the majority were satisfied that this expectation had been met; however there was a minority who were disappointed.

I expected my classmates to be more mature and competitive. Also my teachers to be at a more professional level (Lincoln, arts)

I feel I'm being conformed (Lincoln, social work)

Be subservient. University is not a creative place. It's a didactic situation where one must play the role of student in regurgitating what the lecturer has 'professed'. Do this and pay your money and you'll have a degree (Murdoch, psychology).

### **Concerns before commencement.**

Among those students who did have concerns about going to university before they commenced their degree, differences between the two universities were marked. Twelve per cent of students from the University of Lincoln were concerned about managing the competing needs of study, work and family

life; the figure for Murdoch students was more than double that at 26.5 per cent. It is possible that this is a reflection of the higher percentage of older students at Murdoch. More than half (56%) of the respondents from the University of Lincoln had no family responsibilities compared with nineteen per cent of Murdoch students.

Students at the University of Lincoln were more concerned about making friends and fitting in (19%) than Murdoch students (7%). It would seem that this concern was a by-product of the greater proportion of students living away from home or in student residences at the University of Lincoln as well as their younger age:

I wouldn't make friends and be alone, away from family (Lincoln, media production).

My only concerns were being far away from my friends and family and that it's expensive to live in the student accommodations (Lincoln, chemistry).

Students at both universities who were over 25 years of age tended to downplay the importance of making friends on campus and often referred to having friends elsewhere.

I'm here to study and I socialise off campus when I want to (Murdoch, law, aged 35)

At Murdoch, 96 per cent of respondents [N = 78] had not joined a student club or society; at the University of Lincoln the figure was 74 per cent [N = 26]. The most popular club at both universities was the Law Students Society; students joined to take advantage of professional networking opportunities. Students also joined discipline-based clubs such as the psychology students' club to find peers with whom they could study, whereas those who joined more general clubs such as the musical theatre society or comedy club were seeking friends with similar interests. Of the students who replied to the question about reasons for not joining a club, 33 per cent of Murdoch students and 35 per cent of students at the University of Lincoln stated that they were too busy to be involved. A further nineteen per cent of Murdoch students and twelve per cent of students at the University of Lincoln did not find any of the clubs appealing. Many found the idea of joining a club full of teenagers risible or repugnant.

#### **Adjusting to university.**

The response rate for this question was unusually low – 45 per cent of Murdoch students and 49 per cent of students from the University of Lincoln chose not to answer this question. Although it would be unwise to speculate about the reasons, the low response rate suggests that this topic requires further investigation in any follow up study.

Of the students who did reply [N = 54 at Murdoch; N = 22 at Lincoln], it appears that most participants at both universities were adjusting to study and campus life, although many admitted to some initial difficulties. Nine per cent of students at Murdoch and seven per cent at the University of Lincoln said they were struggling to adjust to study. In most cases these students admitted that they were not really prepared for study or they had misjudged the effort required to combine study and work:

Between work and assignments & study I got overwhelmed toward the end of the semester. I fell into a depression period and didn't get an assignment completed and will now probably fail that unit. I talked to my parents and the student advisor. I got words of encouragement which helped pull me out of my slump. I know how to better arrange my life for next semester (Murdoch, neuropsychology).

Six per cent of participants at Murdoch and seven per cent at the University of Lincoln said that they were not adjusting. The low response rate made correlations ineffective; however it was clear that these students were missing a significant number of classes and struggling to keep up with reading and preparation outside of class. Almost all described their attempts to study outside of class as ineffective. Many of these were attempting to study under adverse conditions; they were dealing with mental illness, disability of very difficult circumstances:

I was an emergency services worker; however I had to leave because of stress. I am divorced. My extended family is ambivalent about my studies and it's hard to find time for my kids and work and study. I thought studying would be easier ... social connectivity is lacking as it's a demographically young environment as a student. Being a student at 38 causes me to feel somewhat unaccomplished as I'm older than some of the tutors. This is my baggage... (Murdoch, psychology)

In contrast, all of the students who were thriving, i.e. adjusting well, or very well, were attending most classes if not all of them. As Credé, Roch, and Kieszczynka (2010) have argued, attendance is a key factor. Even when students did not particularly enjoy lectures, workshops or tutorials going to class made them more familiar with the university environment and improved their orientation to study. They were familiar with the academic staff and were comfortable asking for information and assistance; they were participating in class forums or had found peers with whom they could work and were spending significant amounts of time on study and preparation outside of class.

The exceptions were external students studying online through Murdoch University. Not all external students identified themselves as such, but among those who did comments can be divided into two opposing groups. There were external students who were intent on gaining a qualification and had no interest in any other aspect of university life or culture:

These questions [about social connections with other students] are not relevant to me. I'm external. (Murdoch, law).

There were external students who clearly wanted to be part of the university community as far as that was possible.

Some form of connection with other online students [would help me to adjust to university] (Murdoch, sustainable development).

I'm an external student. I would like to get more involved in uni, but I'm on the wrong side of the country (Murdoch, physics and nanotechnology).

Harris' (2009) model emphasises the importance of students' feelings about their experience in adjusting to a transition such as university. Asked about their feelings at that particular point a majority of students from the University of Lincoln (56%) stated that they were very happy or at least pleased with their experiences to date – analogous to Harris' 'thriving'. Murdoch students were less likely to be 'thriving' (34 %) and more likely to be 'surviving'. Twelve per cent of Murdoch students described themselves as challenged by their experiences, but intent on continuing in contrast with 5 per cent of students from the University of Lincoln. Murdoch students were also more likely to fall into the 'languishing' category (Harris, 2009), with seventeen per cent describing themselves as frustrated or anxious compared to two per cent of participants from the University of Lincoln. Murdoch students offered more varied reasons for their unhappiness; some referred to existing mental health issues, some were disappointed in their performance, at least one admitted that he had just not made enough of an effort to pass in his first semester, but others were angry at what they perceived to be deficiencies in the course.

The study also asked who or what is helping you to adjust to university life and study and what would help you to adjust. Rather surprisingly, seventeen per cent of Murdoch students stated that no-one was helping them to adjust to university study and life. It is not clear how many of these students were unaware of the services available to students; comments made by some of them indicated that they had chosen not to use them. The comparable figure for the University of Lincoln was seven per cent despite the fact that the percentage of students citing personal issues as the main reason they were struggling to adjust was similar – twenty per cent at Murdoch and sixteen per cent at Lincoln. The contrast between Murdoch and the University of Lincoln was striking in response to the question about who was helping them to adjust. Students from the University of Lincoln were six times as likely as Murdoch students to rely on their peers. Once again, this is a reflection of the difference in ages between the two cohorts; Murdoch students were more likely to rely on family members, partners and friends for help.

### **Challenges.**

Time and money presented the most serious challenges to adjusting to university study, but there were others. Reflecting their greater chances of having a family, fifteen per cent of Murdoch students stated that they struggled continuously to find time for family commitments while studying and that their inability to join in family activities was a source of friction within their households.

My wife and I fight about uni all the time, she hates uni, because it takes up our time. I feel really guilty when my son, he's three, wants me to play and I have to say Daddy can't play now because he has to study (Murdoch, business management).

In contrast, two per cent of students from the University of Lincoln struggled continuously to combine study with work and family commitments.

Lack of money was a constant refrain throughout the survey. Most students struggled to some extent; they economised on social activities, gave up owning a car and moved back with their parents or borrowed money from them. Students' living arrangements had a profound impact on their ability to adjust to university life and study. Most students were satisfied with their accommodation, but the causes of dissatisfaction were common to students at both universities – sharing with people who were noisy and distracting, living a long distance from campus and lack of money.

Living on campus was pretty dire; I wanted to live comfortably and be able to study in peace. My other house-mates were more interested in partying most of the night and then sleeping all day instead of going to lectures. They made the lives of myself and another house-mate very uncomfortable, to the point where the other house-mate struggled to leave her room and go to the kitchen. However for year two I am renting a two bedroom apartment and I feel that it is going to be a lot better (Lincoln, history).

However, it was apparent that noisy housemates were not always other students:

I have kids at home, and as the only parent/adult, I am so busy and distracted with parental responsibilities when the kids are awake I can't focus on study, and by the time they get to bed I'm so exhausted and wound up that my brain struggles to focus or even stay awake. I basically need to get all study done on campus while kids are at school etc (Murdoch, science).

Nor did home ownership guarantee a degree of affluence. A number of students complained about the difficulty of relying on their partner's income and/or surviving on part time work when they had a mortgage. Nevertheless, younger students were more likely to report moderate to extreme financial

hardship, while some of the older students were comfortably well-off as they had accumulated sufficient financial capital to fund their studies.

For some students, enrolling a degree was a challenge in itself; students who had not completed the usual matriculation program, but enrolled via an access program or articulated from a technical college, tended to feel uncertain about their prospects of success. Not surprisingly, the longer a student had been out of formal education, the more inclined they were to express concerns about studying, particularly when their previous experience had not been happy. One or two worried that they might be too old to get a degree, citing hearing loss and difficulty remembering information as barriers to learning. Others referred to previous episodes of mental illness, and worried that returning to study could exacerbate their condition:

The stress might result in a relapse. I am a former alcoholic and drug addict (Murdoch, arts).

Most students were adept at using ICT, but it was a challenge for a substantial minority of participants. While some students lauded online platforms as a way of making external or part time study more accessible and easier than previous forms of distance education, some had misunderstood the nature of online study and had assumed that they would be able to work through units at their own pace rather than meeting specific deadlines. Students often that 'support' for external students inadequate, but interpretations of support varied from wanting a dedicated external student advisor, more flexibility with assignment deadlines to accommodate work commitments and better access to tutors or lecturers. One stated that academic staff needed a better understanding of the constraints of external study:

For some tutors/lecturers to realise that they do have external students doing their units. For one unit we were given a list of texts that we had to provide annotated bibliographies for however only about 5% were available online, with the rest available in the library. Not much help when I'm a 4hr flight away (Murdoch, security and counter-terrorism).

At the same time, there were other students who praised the university for offering external students excellent support in all of the same areas.

Criticism of pedagogy and approaches to teaching was not confined to external students. Students expressed impatience with technological problems, dislike for what they saw as an over-reliance on online materials, and for classroom approaches geared towards school-leavers:

The only real annoying thing is the lectures inability to use the internet well. They are always fucking up the LMS lecture recordings and it puts me behind (Murdoch, law)

Not a teach yourself kind of deal. I do not understand why we pay so much to teach ourselves our course!? The help available is rubbish. I understood it was going to be difficult and you are very independent, however there is no alternative (Murdoch, commerce).

I love my degree course, but I hate and cannot stress that word enough, in regards to group work. I find group work with people who want to free ride through university very, very stressful and dread the thought of more group work (Lincoln, arts).

Timetabling was a particular concern for students attempting to combine work and study:

It would be nice to have some sort of after-hours support (online discussions, tutorials, VoIP-calls with support from higher level students perhaps?) (Murdoch, business management).

### **Challenges for mature-age men.**

Responses to the question about challenges that were specific to mature-age men were complex and required careful analysis. Thirty-nine per cent of participants at Murdoch and 35 per cent of participants from the University of Lincoln did not believe that the challenges they faced were specific to men, a proposition supported by previous research (De Silva, Robinson & Watts, 2011; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Several respondents commented at length that mature-age women students were just as vulnerable to the same challenges – balancing study with family and work commitments, lack of money, adjusting to new pedagogical approaches and online learning and some were adamant that mature-age women faced greater challenges owing to social expectations:

My wife is also studying & we have a 3 year old. Women have it much harder than men as society still expects them to be wives and mothers. It's so much harder for her than me...I can get away with things. When I babysit our son so she can study everyone says how good I am, but when she looks after him so I can study that's just normal (Murdoch, business management).

Of the students who did identify issues or challenges that were specific to mature-age men, seven per cent of Murdoch participants and twelve per cent of participants at the University of Lincoln felt constrained by gender expectations. In general these were to do with the expectation that they would be the family breadwinner, but some of the younger participants also stated that their community or social group did not regard university study as a legitimate occupation for men. Several offered more nuanced responses to the effect that university study was acceptable for young men, i.e. school leavers, but that they should be past that stage by their late twenties, let alone their thirties or older.

Social isolation emerged as the other major challenge. Although a substantial number of participants stated that making friends at university was not a priority, there were a number of men who felt isolated in class or on campus because of their age (16% at Murdoch; 12% at Lincoln). In most cases, comments suggested that this was a general sense that they did not have much in common with students who were still in their teens; however a number reported that they deliberately maintained their distance from young female students out of fear that friendliness would be misconstrued as sexual predation.

### **Dissemination and Project Outputs**

In considering appropriate avenues for disseminating the outcomes for this scoping study, we have sought opportunities to present our research within the context of the discussion about the future of higher education and of changes to participation.

Project outputs delivered to date:

- Laming, M.M., Martin-Lynch, P & Morris, A. (2015). *A tale of two men: Understanding mature-age men transitioning into university*. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Conversation about teaching and learning. Murdoch University, Murdoch.
- Laming, M.M., Martin-Lynch, P & Morris, A. (2015). *Mature-aged men's experiences of higher education: Australia and England compared*. Society for Research into Higher Education Conference. Newport, Wales.

Future planned outputs:

- Laming, M.M., Martin-Lynch, P & Morris, A. (2016). *"I expected it to be hard, and my instincts were right."* *Mature-aged men in higher education*. Paper submitted to the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Conference, July 2016.
- Monograph to be published by Palgrave Macmillan.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings from this study question common assumptions about teaching, learning and the students' experience. Changes to demographic and employment patterns have led an increasing number of men to university in search of qualifications that will enable them to secure meaningful employment. At the same time, universities are increasingly reliant on applicants from non-traditional and culturally diverse backgrounds to maintain their enrolment numbers. This situation raises ethical as well as pragmatic questions about how we meet their needs (Burke & Hayton, 2012).

Our research supports Pitman & Koshy's (2015) correlation between increased enrolment of students in need of support and increased attrition rates. Mature-age men are too diverse to be considered as an identifiable equity group, but we would argue that universities need to acknowledge that many mature-age men may have needs that are different from those of other students, a finding that endorses earlier research (De Silva, Robinson & Watts, 2011). These may arise from their previous experience of both education and work, and also relate to their life stage. With regard to the provision of general support and access, we make a number of recommendations for universities.

With regard to access to services and information, we recommend that universities:

- improve out-of-hours access to student services and/or advice;
- train front-office staff to recognise students in need of additional support;
- encourage academic staff to undertake professional development in inclusive education practice, including mental health first aid;
- provide additional support to students who have difficulty accessing or interpreting online advice e.g. a telephone call back system;
- provide a dedicated mature-age student advisor, accessible to external as well as on campus students.

With regard to course delivery and teaching, we recommend that universities:

- avoid a 'one size fits all' approach to curriculum and pedagogy in favour of more nuanced approaches that recognise differences in experience and circumstances among all students;
- invest in the professional development of staff to extend their pedagogical repertoire, particularly with regard to online learning;
- ensure that there are sufficient classes outside of normal teaching time, either in the evenings or (by negotiation) on weekends or in the non-teaching periods;
- provide 'human' support for students studying externally in the form of drop-in sessions or contact using Skype or similar programs;
- develop flexible assessment policies that take into account unavoidable commitments outside of university.

With regard to the social integration of mature-age students:

- revise the Orientation/Induction program to include mature-age students;
- develop a program of social events that will appeal to mature-age students, both within schools and across the university to be held at appropriate times. These should include family-friendly events such as picnics or film nights as well as events intended for adults only;
- create an online community for mature-age external students that will facilitate social networking;

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