Developing 21st Century Diverse Adult Learning: Rural and Regional Student Access, Progression and Success in Higher Education

Robert Townsend, La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia

Abstract: The recent review of Australian Higher Education identified the need to increase higher education participation rates amongst disadvantaged groups. The report in particular notes the need for urgent attention to increase higher education participation rates in rural and regional areas. Consistent with this review and other key government policy directions, La Trobe University has identified the need to increase regional participation rates and its strategic and operational plans have as key outcomes, the creation of educational pathways that support lifelong learning. A strong focus of these plans is enhanced relationships with the broader education sector including schools, vocational and community education providers. This paper will present and summarise research conducted in regional Australia that has clearly identified how mature age individuals experience a range of barriers in accessing, progressing and succeeding at university. This work demonstrates that in many rural and regional contexts, mature age students face additional barriers exacerbated by financial and time costs and the geographic distance between communities and university campuses. The paper will conclude that the development of bridging programs, articulation agreements and formal mentoring programs between universities, schools and vocational and community colleges will enhance a diversity of access, success and achievement in a higher education context.

Keywords: Diversity, Adult Learning, Higher Education, Rural and Regional

Introduction

The demography of many regional communities in Australia is shifting from a population profile of Anglo-colonial to that of complex cultural diversity and from primary industries to where tourism, hospitality, financial services, human services and education are now dominant industries necessitating significant human, social and economic capital planning and resource allocation. Individuals and families are moving to regional communities via internal mobility or international migration and are often doing so as part of substantial life changes for financial, familial or lifestyle reasons. This paper explores a qualitative research project conducted from 2008-2009 where staff and students from a regional campus of La Trobe University, Australia were asked to explore the experiences of mature age students as they related to the first year university experience in a regional community context.

Research Design

The research was conducted in the context of increased competition between various cohorts for limited places in regional social science programs. Numbers of mature age students were decreasing and anecdotal evidence was revealing that barriers to access to higher education
programs were preventing this specific cohort from progressing into and through higher education. The research was designed as a qualitative process in an education setting (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington & Okely: 2006) with elements of context-specific ethnographic research (Neyland: 2008) with staff and students in one Faculty department immersing themselves in university organisational processes to research the first year experience for mature age students.

A total of ten staff, consisting of seven tenured social science lecturers and three staff from student support services at one regional university campus were interviewed by a student research assistant using a semi-structured format. University staff were interviewed about their own experience of recruiting, teaching and coordinating mature age students in a regional context. An email survey was sent to approximately 60 mature age students enrolled in the 3rd and 4th year of a Bachelor degree program within the School of Social Work and Social Policy. The students were asked to respond to questions about the positive and negative aspects of being a mature age student at the Bendigo Campus. A total of twenty responses were returned, consisting of sixteen female and four male, a return rate of some thirty percent. Staff and students have been given pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

The aim of the email survey was to simply gain access to mature age student ‘voices’ which are often lost in research about the first year university experience. Individuals were asked to respond in writing to a few prompting questions about the positive and negative experiences of studying at a regional campus of La Trobe University. The data was then analysed into themes to ascertain commonalities about the barriers and incentives for mature age individuals accessing and progressing through higher education programs.

The aim of the research was to inform a new approach to curriculum being implemented by La Trobe University where three year bachelor programs were being replaced by four year undergraduate masters programs. This curriculum change was being implemented in conjunction with aims to increase student diversity by actively recruiting individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds, mature age individuals and people from rural communities to various social science and health sciences undergraduate programs.

**Role of Higher Education in Mature Age Adult Transitions in a Regional Community Context**

The regional community context of Australian society is significant because recent census data has highlighted emerging trends in regional communities involving significant social change (ABS 2007). The more recent redistribution of Australia’s regional population via internal and international migration reflects a highly mobile population responding to a range of triggers including employment opportunities, housing costs and lifestyle preferences. These trends... suggest some major challenges for policy and service provision in regional education and employment (Mission Australia 2006, p.11). The experiences of social inclusion and exclusion by individuals residing in a range of Australian communities are influenced by a variety of compounding factors. These include experiences of mobility and migration, the history of specific communities, government social and economic policies and local social and political cultures.

Most of the individuals participating in the research project reside in rural and regional communities as a yearning for a sense of ‘place’ and ‘community’, a sense of belonging to somewhere outside of prior experiences (Smyth: 2008). This search for something ‘other
than’ appears to be a function of life transitions, no longer satisfied or dependent on the same social connections that have sustained them in the past, say in an urban context, many individuals in Australian society have been seeking some meaning to their individual lives by seeking a ‘sea’ or ‘tree’ change rather than planning a lifestyle solely aimed at financial gain or familial connections (Sampson & Gifford: 2010).

‘Mature age’ within the context of higher education is an issue that requires defining with research indicating that ‘mature age’ in this context refers to any individual aged 21 or over and/or who enter education from a variety of pathways other than the traditional school leaver pool (Stone 2008, Kenny, McLennan, Nankervis, Kidd, Connell & Buykx 2007, Cullity 2006). The major themes consistently reported in the literature are about the motivations and challenges that individuals face in entering education, how the personal, societal and economic commitments and obligations appear to impact on an individual’s overall access, progress and success in higher education (Stone 2008, Kenny, McLennan, Nankervis, Kidd, Connell & Buykx 2007, O’Shea 2007, Stone 2000).

Rendon (1994) as cited in O’Shea (2007) comments that there now appears to be a ‘tapestry of differentiation’ among mature age individuals accessing higher education, and it is this variation between and through different individual cohorts such as men, women and various ethnicities, that make understanding the mature age cohort difficult. Stone (2008) however, identified that there often exists some sort of ‘catalyst for action’; an event that has occurred that leads to a decision to access higher education. McGivney (2006) circumstantiates this notion and suggests that a variety of reasons prompt adult learners to consider education, including factors such as life transition, illness, redundancy, bereavement or divorce. Kenny et al (2007) however, identified a major reason that prompted mature age individuals who are already working to return to study is the desire to enhance career and employment options.

Research about the issues or challenges that mature age individuals face which differentiates them from the traditional school leaver group outlines that the major challenges for mature age individuals accessing higher education includes family responsibilities to a child or other family members, financial and work commitments and an overall lack of time to successfully balance these competing commitments in their lives (Stone 2008, Dawson 2007, Kenny, McLennan, Nankervis, Kidd, Connell & Buykx 2007, O’Shea 2007, Trott 2007, Cullity 2006, Stone 2000). Cullity (2006) explores the personal, social, attitudinal, educational, cultural, vocational and financial circumstances that can impact on beliefs about mature age study. Worth noting is that there appears to be a strong link between lower socio-economic class and systems of beliefs or ideals about appropriate gender roles and access to higher education. These societal and local cultural expectations do not always support furthering educational opportunities for women in particular (Cullity 2006, Scott, Burns & Cooney 1996, Fulmer & Jenkins 1992). Poor self-concept developed and held especially by women, are derived from a mixture of social and cultural experiences and pressures which includes perceived priorities of women which reflect gender, class and ethnicity.

Knowles (1984) explored the notion of andragogy which better explained the notion of adult learning as maturation rather than child learning as development. He explored five basic assumptions of adult learning that differentiates it from child learning, he asserted that adult learners were more likely to have a concept of self based on experience which motivates a readiness to learn dependent on new social roles which leads to life transitions and a new orientation to learning, a motivation to learning which derives from an internal maturity.
Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007) have revealed that Knowles’ conception of andragogy attempted to build a comprehensive theory and model of adult learning that considered adult situations and life changes. Self-directed learning then becomes possible when specific events and situations cluster to form a stimulus and the opportunity for reflexive exploration. In many contexts however, self-directed learning occurs from limited alternatives that occur within individual environments. Thus, self-direction as a motivation for learning is subject to the ability to gain access to a range of available education resources and services (Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner: 2007). The mature age learners interviewed for the research project were ‘looking at’ higher education as being the place where they could reconnect to adult education but also have the freedom to engage in learning in a way that suited their individual needs rather than being serviced as part of a group.

Flexible education practice in a higher education context means leading or facilitating individuals to manage their own learning. Effective and inclusive education and training practice in a 21st century context means encouraging active adult learning through the cooperation and collaboration of diverse groups of individuals with real-world problems to solve, setting of authentic tasks, accepting relevant applications. In regional and rural areas this is particularly important because of the distance many individuals have to travel to access campus based learning and the disconnections they experience between community and campus life.

When exploring the impact of learning processes and culture on transitions, identifying the fears that individuals present with can be compounded by the discourse and jargon that is used as second nature in education and training institutions. Cullity (2006) has identified that the ‘cultural capital’ involved in the use of academic language can disengage individuals from the higher education learning process. This can then lead to a real divide in the assumed requirements and expectations that staff have about what students are capable of achieving and the interpretations or assumptions that mature age individuals make of the higher education academic based experience (Cullity 2006).

There has been an increasing focus within literature on the significance and benefits of successfully engaging mature age individuals through the transition process in adult education. Tinto (1993) as cited in Erskine (2000) commented that individuals who integrate into university tend to stay, while those who are not integrated tend to withdraw, and his conceptual model is the most widely recognised. Most of the individuals interviewed for the research project were searching for integrated experiences of informal and formal learning that can progress from engagement with a formal curriculum, but also from interacting with other adult learners.

**Research Outcomes: the Role of Higher Education in Regional and Rural Communities in Australia**

The staff and students interviewed for the project identified that mature age students present with pre-existing competing priorities when entering higher education. These competing demands can then create greater complexity when attempting to integrate university study amidst these demands. Both staff and students stated that making connections into university life, either from academic support services or from the creation of social networks had a positive impact on the education experience. The majority of staff and students identified that there are various struggles that mature age students face both initially and throughout
their studies. Attempting to successfully integrate family, work and other personal commitments with study was referred to as a ‘juggling’ or balancing act by most and one that had the potential to create more stress during life transition.

Anya, initially found the whole experience challenging, trying to juggle uni, work and family but I persisted and am happy to have completed this degree. The contributing factors to this stress were described in terms of personal, financial, domestic, societal and other work related obligations. Lily made comment about the very real struggles that had to be contended with students with families finding the time for study; foregoing sleep to get work in on time, financial constraints; keeping a roof over our heads, paying the bills, food, etc, studying is difficult, especially for single parents. Gary stated that it was important to give some thought to how you are going to sustain yourself physically, mentally and emotionally as it is a long road. Learn to ask for help from lecturers, tutors and fellow students. NEVER think that you can’t do it…PERSEVERE!

Students identified additional emotional stressors as a significant factor that impacted upon university life, three students wrote about the added pressure of being a single parent in a regional community and how this added a further complexity in their experience. Sandy commented on the juggling act of family (the kids), work, home and uni. Mature age students are faced with these demands more so than students straight out of high school as we often have existing living expenses such as a mortgage and a car loan. Also, there are a number of mature age students who are separated from their child’s other parent, which brings further financial, physical and emotional pressures.

Five of the staff interviewed also expressed that finding the time and having to juggle study on top of everything else was a hindering factor in their own mature age university journey. Tom spoke about the difficulty of combining study with work and family commitments. This was very difficult at times, especially around childcare arrangements. I had to find time to study and felt that I was neglecting my family at times. It was difficult finding an even balance between study, work, and family. I had little time to unwind myself.

One staff member commented that major life disruptions seemed to lead people to university, another staff member made similar comments and felt that often the return to study was prompted by personal crises in their lives such as unemployment, divorce or change in health status and so they bring personal ‘baggage’ alongside other personal expectations they may have in regard to study. Another staff member commented that she had noticed over her years of teaching that perhaps many mature age students came to university seeking more meaning and connection in their lives. They have made a real choice to change paths in their personal lives and so bring with them an expectation or hope that this study will create a sense of meaning to their lives that has been questioned during a life transition.

Both staff and students made the observation that mature age students in general entered university with higher expectations and a greater commitment toward studying. Staff spoke about the fact that mature age students were more willing to participate in learning ‘conversations’ and generally displayed higher motivational and commitment levels toward a range of subjects. Most staff believed that mature age students had made a conscious decision to study, and so in that respect displayed a higher commitment to their study. Tessa stated that mature age students in general had higher expectations of both themselves and the university. One staff member from Student Support Services mentioned that she believed that mature age students do indeed place higher expectations on themselves and when they present for support, they often do so with higher levels of stress. Despite this, she commented that they
often have more ‘clarity’ in why they are at university and so in that sense are much clearer in what they want to achieve from their university experience.

Creating connections once enrolled was seen as an essential component which could successfully enable integration into regional education culture. Five of the staff interviewed felt that students who utilised English language or academic skills support and student support services were more likely to successfully integrate and succeed within the first years of study. Likewise several students attributed their own success partly from acquiring skills and knowledge gained from accessing such resources. Lin remarked that having to commence study again after a big break (something like 15 years) was difficult, stressful and frustrating...I can thank Academic skills unit to assist me get back into the swing of things and introduce valuable advice and support.

Furthermore, the majority of staff felt that students who had a sense of connection to their local and campus communities remained in study and went on to successfully complete courses. Both staff and student identified that the ‘issue of connectedness’ was a contributing factor in their own personal journey as a mature age student. Julie revealed: I enjoyed being able to talk to other mature age students and teachers. I enjoyed utilising the mature age lounge where it was quieter and more relaxing to spend time with my mature age friends (that I met at uni). My friends at uni understood the pressures of studying whilst working and having family commitments and so it was nice to feel normal in this circumstance.

The majority of staff and students stated that ‘making new friends’ and ‘increasing their own personal support networks’ were positive aspects of their adult education experience. Cate stated it was because there was a group of mature age students; we were able to support and encourage each other throughout the course. One staff member when commenting on his own student experience referred to the support of other mature age students as providing ‘a sense of comradely’ which was vital in rural and regional contexts where students relied on each other as a crucial resource.

Overwhelming students spoke about the significance of their own prior life experience and how they were then able to relate this to coursework. Connie said: I remember on many occasions the younger students not being aware of certain life experiences and learning from the older students....such as childhood development, pregnancy, parenting and experience in the workforce, organisations and team work and managerialism. Some of the staff acknowledged that a student’s life experience brought a greater sense of ‘richness’ into the classroom dynamic and others agreed that mature age students were often more ‘conceptual’ in how they then applied this academically. Staff mentioned that they felt mature age students were more likely to work from their own life experience and so that in part the knowledge that they gained was in making the connection from their own experience and applying that to what they are learning directly to coursework.

Despite staff acknowledging that there are differences amongst student cohorts, when asked about their thoughts on separating mature age students and school leavers for some subjects, most staff disagreed and conveyed that all students regardless of age display different learning styles and that rather the emphasis should be on teachers developing ways that engage different groups that promotes a reciprocal transfer of knowledge across the generations. Most students felt that they benefited from the interaction from other age groups. Jodie wrote: I believe we are also in a position to assist some of the younger students which in turn helps with our own learning. It is good to be able to draw on the strengths of all age groups.
There are diverse groups of people participating in higher education programs throughout the Australia and the Asia Pacific region with intense competition between education and training providers for limited funding and space. Higher education practices therefore, need to be able to manage the communication of diverse information to individuals of different ages, genders and ethnicities without resorting to traditional and limited classroom-based practice. A new kind of inclusive adult education practice would mean that educators would need to know their individuals; that is, who they are, their academic, cultural and social backgrounds, their existing skills and knowledge, with practitioners being able to identify why each individual is participating in specific education programs and how they learn. Within this engagement and inclusive-based practice, education and training practitioners might also need to be able to identify and communicate clear learning outcomes.

Conclusions

What was evident from this research project was that all the students felt that there were benefits gained from accessing education in a regional context, benefits such as increased ‘confidence and self worth’ and the acquisition of new social skills and support networks that far outweighed the challenges or ‘juggling act’ that accompanied this life transition. Advice that students offered to others contemplating study reinforce this: don’t be scared to get back into study. It is a juggle and a lifestyle change, but it is well worth it in the end. Go for it, give it your very best shot and be proud of you victories even the small ones. The challenges for mature age students accessing education in a regional context are complex; they bring with them motivation to study from their life experiences but also the major disruptions that can distract and cause emotional and financial stressors. Issues such as being a single parent or an individual whose children have ‘fled the nest’ or having to care for an elderly parent or relative or having a disability, can all act as impediments for individuals via financial and time poverty.

Access to education in Australia is now easier but also more costly for mature age individuals; higher education reforms over the past ten to fifteen years have included the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) and fee-for-service places as funding mechanisms for all major courses of education. The reforms have also led to an expansion in the number of higher education institutions that service populations living in rural and regional areas. The new Rudd Labor Government commissioned the Bradley Report on Higher Education Reforms (2008) which recommended a package of reforms regarding new national targets for educational attainment, more comprehensive individual support, higher quality accreditation and systems management within institutions and specifically, greater funding in regional and rural areas.

In a regional context, all sectors of higher education are expected over the next decade to encourage more adults to reconnect to education. The research project outlined in this paper however has identified some of the adult education processes, cultures and attitudes in regional communities are established in a traditional pedagogy of classroom-based and teacher-centred practice. Adult learners in a regional community context could gain more from formal and informal learning experiences if all adult education programs adhered to well informed adult learning principles that include: allowing learners to direct their own learning and decide what to learn, acknowledging and utilising a range of life experiences
to further the learning of the group, encouraging learners to connect their learning to experiences that are more meaningful in their own contexts.

This then satisfies a learners’ need to know why they are learning something, whilst maintaining respect for individual learners, and thereby ensures that learning is relevant and practical. Adult learners are also searching for social aspects to learning; wanting to connect to new aspects of community or utilising education as a way of connecting to a new community. The social capital elements of adult education have been neglected by government funding and by education institutions (Townsend 2008). Networking and recreational activities on-campus and within the educational experience has been lost to a major extent for mature age students. In regional areas this is exasperated by many individuals having to travel long distances to and from education campuses.

The lack of recognition given to the varied outcomes of adult education programs within diverse communities and disparate education sectors, means that there is limited research, practitioner debate and practice and policy development of the adult education required by those who are accessing these services. Research and policy development around adult learning and development increasingly faces challenges of understanding the multiple sources of influences that contribute to how and why people learn. Future research on adult learning and development in Australian adult education and training needs to understand the multiple pathways through which learning occurs within and across demographics such as age and cultural groups and rural, regional and urban communities, requiring an ecological approach to understanding learning as cultural processes.

The research project outlined in this article have revealed that in places like regional communities in Victoria, Australia, there can be a pivotal role for all of the higher education and training sectors in social capital development for individuals and sub-groupings. The research project can be seen to be adding to the emerging knowledge of the strong relationship between the importance of place and space and education practice as well as education participation and links to social outcomes like civic efficacy and identity, levels of community trust and increased social activity and inclusion within local contexts.

Given that most of the individuals accessing higher education have previously been motivated to use education as a gateway to other education and training programs, to test their current interest or skill levels and or to explore an employment transition, there is a clear need for direct and regular links between all education and training providers in the region. However, an examination of program offerings at the regional level suggested that there were no coordinated approaches to information, articulation, and recognition of prior learning.

This suggests a need for a co-operative approach in regional areas amongst adult education sectors and providers that presents local communities with clear options and links and pathways between the various sector based programs and providers. This would realise the overt policy goal of people using education and training pathways and eliminate reproduction of programs while highlighting the needs of distinct groups within the broader region. Introduction to tertiary study and other transition programs for mature age individuals and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds at a regional level, would provide the same opportunity for them to understand the adult education and training sectors and begin to negotiate their way through the programs they might want to participate in.

The La Trobe Rural Health School in Bendigo has been coordinating projects in 2010 that are unique in their strategic approach to supporting learning and teaching amongst mature age students, a significant cohort in an increasingly diversified student body. The projects
fit with key government directions by enhancing learning and teaching in higher education by providing new cross sector education ‘spanning’. They support key directions of lifelong learning that maximises knowledge and skill sets of mature age individuals and supports individuals to pursue career change in areas of significant workforce need. These projects provide a model of community outreach and engagement to ensure success in higher education and to retain the graduates in rural and remote areas.

Using a participatory action research framework, the projects have facilitated consultation and collaboration between all levels of education service provision in the Loddon Mallee Campaspe region of Northern Victoria, Australia. An action learning team, representing La Trobe University, Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE, Continuing Education Bendigo and Murray Human Services plus a group of mature age students are participating in an action learning cycle of researching barriers and enablers that support successful transition, progress and success in learning and teaching in the university sector. This particular project will result in greater communication between the sectors, clearer articulation and pathway agreements and a community based online mentoring scheme that aims to ‘coach’ individuals through the processes of accessing higher education programs in a regional context. The online mentoring scheme will be designed and facilitated by mature age students in an attempt to empower students to connect to each other and create an online engagement process that cuts across gender, ethnicity, age and geographic barriers.

The recent Bradley (2008) report has acknowledged the complexities and unique nature of regional communities in Australia and made some recommendations regarding the unique role of education in regional areas and the need for a policy and funding framework that provides more flexibility. Individual universities are coordinating projects in their regions but will the current Federal government seize the chance to develop new policy frameworks for all sectors of higher education that will lead to the wholesale changes needed to support the transitions that individual are experiencing in rural and regional communities in 21st century Australian society?

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Appendix

Project: Integrated Rural Health Workforce Development—Victoria

La Trobe Rural Health School, established in Bendigo, Albury Wodonga, Mildura and Shepparton

Project description: the development of the La Trobe Rural Health School will enable La Trobe to specialise in the sustainable delivery of nursing and allied health programs. The School will engage with the health sector across northern Victoria to develop a new clinical placement program to enhance the learning, experience and quality of graduates. The school will further develop links with other higher education providers in the region through sharing of resources and articulation of educational pathways. A new hub and spoke delivery model will be implemented.
| Increased student enrolment | Increase health science full time student places By 102% | Increased enrollment of rural and regional students | Improve links between the La Trobe Rural Health School and regional secondary schools | Increase the profile of the La Trobe Rural Health school throughout northern Victoria | Improve the financial viability of La Trobe’s regional campuses | School engagement programs | Year 9/10 program | BSSC peer mentoring | CCB peer mentoring | Mentoring to other schools (Girton, Victory) | Evaluation of peer mentoring program | Marketing | School expos | School visits | Career expos | Media / Publicity | LRHS newsletter | Plan student load targets for 2011 and 2012 | Non traditional student engagement | 102% increase in student places (EFTSL) | Cohort of commencing nursing students increased from 127 to 197 (64%) | Cohort of commencing physiotherapy students increased from 20 to 40 (100%) | Standard model for school engagement | Peer mentoring tool | 01/07/09 | Feb 2011 | Project leader | Project co-ordinator | Project team | Administrative support | Faculty marketing | Regional secondary schools | LTU future students | LTU regional campus representatives |
About the Author

Dr. Robert Townsend

Dr Rob Townsend is a Lecturer and Researcher in Social Policy at La Trobe University, Bendigo. Rob has lived and worked in the central region of Victoria, Australia for over a decade. Rob lectures in social policy and adult and social learning frameworks and is also a Director of Continuing Education Bendigo. Rob is primarily interested in how access to Australian adult education and training programs can be facilitated in regional and rural areas via experiential adult learning frameworks that enhance the diversity and harmony of all communities.