Examining Barriers for Mature-Age Students in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

Judy Skene, Susan Broomhall, Alexandra Ludewig, Deborah Allen
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A report that details findings of research into the experiences of mature-age students in the Faculty of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences and the perceptions of staff in the faculty regarding the learning and social experiences of these students.

Judy Skene
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**Executive Summary**

Mature-age students comprise 10-12 percent of commencing undergraduate students at The University of Western Australia (UWA) annually and approximately 40 per cent of these students enrol in The Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (FAHSS). This report details findings of research into the experiences of mature-age students in FAHSS and the perceptions of staff in the faculty regarding the learning and social experiences of these students.

Contrary to anecdotal evidence that mature-age students are more at risk of dropping out of study than their younger counterparts, data indicated that in FAHSS, these students have higher retention levels than students who are under-20 years of age. Staff surveys revealed perceptions that mature-age students sometimes needed reassurance and academic skills development, which was reflected in students' surveys by the willingness of mature-age students to seek staff out for feedback. The students however reported needing support through more flexibility with administrative processes such as timetable scheduling, submission deadlines and timely responses to administrative queries as their main concerns.

The largest group within the mature-age cohort are the 20-29 year olds and these students are an invisible minority on campus. Survey results indicate that these students differentiate themselves from younger students more strongly than the 30 year plus group do. The 20-29 year olds are likely to be full time students but report that suitable social opportunities for them on campus are limited.

Mature-age students are often regarded as hesitant to adopt new technologies. Findings from this research revealed that the students were quick to adopt those technologies that gave them the flexibility they needed to manage multiple responsibilities. Students strongly supported all lectures being recorded and the use of both audio and visual material.

Mature-age students are discerning clients, prepared to speak out critically but also often full of praise for the support and efforts of staff. Many are highly motivated to succeed and progress. Their comments and the data reported here have given rise to the recommendations that may assist the University in its goal to recruit more mature-age students in the future.

**Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1:**
Encourage the Admissions Centre to provide information sessions and online and print resources for prospective students that clarify academic expectations and the basic skills required to succeed at university.

**Recommendation 2:**
Design and implement a ‘Preparation for University Study’ course that could be completed prior to commencing study for those mature-age students, especially provisional entry students, who need development of their IT and academic writing skills.

**Recommendation 3:**
Conduct a faculty-based induction program designed with particular reference to mature-aged students in order to

3.1 build a sense of community and connection within the university context (Pitkethly, 2001);
3.2 allow mature-age students to explore a range of possible employment opportunities through the Arts Practicum;
3.3 address academic skill needs and improving communication between staff and students;
3.4 host social activities to enable students to meet one another and form friendship/support networks (Burnett, 2006; 5)

**Recommendation 4:**
Encourage and facilitate peer mentoring in a variety of forms, including collaboration with existing programs in Student Services, in order to create a sense of community, as well as to overcome issues relating to IT literacy.
Recommendation 5:
Encourage the Transition Coordinator to attend Mature Age orientation each year and to work with Student Services so that they can promote the role of the Transition Coordinator.

Recommendation 6:
Facilitate meetings for mature-age students for social gatherings and provide a venue exclusively reserved for their use (24/7) either at Faculty level, School level (potentially shared by postgraduate students), or both.

Recommendation 7:
Promote to academic staff the need for more flexibility for mature-age students:
• consider ‘preferential’ treatment when it comes to enrolment in tutorials of their choice (timetabling issues),
• advertise the ‘flexibility’ available to all students (lectopia, WebCT), and
• encourage greater uptake of lecture recordings and provision of course materials online.

Recommendation 8:
Encourage the Faculty’s Transition Coordinator to research and document Teaching and Learning practice from a (first year) mature-aged student’s perspective.

Recommendation 9:
Develop and implement an exit survey for mature-age students withdrawing from their program of study in the FAHSS.

Recommendation 10:
Encourage mature-age students to consult faculty advisers before dropping units.

Recommendation 11:
Identify and establish specific opportunities for mature-age students to engage actively with research from an early stage of their studies through, for example, exposure to professional, field, practical or simulated experiences which allow them to utilize their prior learning and which provide them with further intellectual stimuli. (Note: the proposed B. Phil in the Course Structures Review could provide the intellectual extension some mature-age students seek but they may not be identified as potential participants if they have entered through non-standard pathways. Any implementation of the B.Phil should consider the particular circumstances of mature-age students).

Recommendation 12:
Encourage staff using group work to help groups establish their assessment goals early in the process so that high achieving students, whatever their age, have the opportunity to work together.

Recommendation 13:
Raise awareness of professional and academic staff of the particular circumstances of mature-age students 20-29 years and encourage staff to think of ways of supporting them.

Recommendation 14:
Review the ongoing requirements for support for Mature-age Provisional entry Pathway (MAP) students, who may require additional support that includes:
• Allowing and encouraging students to complete IRIS and ACE before semester starts
• Reducing overlap in content between IRIS and ACE
• Programming the submission process for IRIS and ACE in such a way that a response is generated confirming the successful completion of those units
• Organising a social gathering in O week for MAP students
• Organising a social event early in semester for MAP and other mature-age students in FAHSS to meet
Acknowledgements

This research project was funded with a grant of $3,000 from the Diversity Initiatives Fund from the Office of Equity and Diversity.

The authors would like to acknowledge the generosity of respondents to the student and staff surveys and participants in the focus group and interviews for contributing their time.
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**Introduction**

Mature-age undergraduate students are under-represented in many courses at The University of Western Australia (UWA). Informal feedback from mature-age students in the past often noted social isolation on campus as an issue for these students. There is a perception among both faculty and professional staff that these students may be more vulnerable to attrition and that their specific circumstances warranted further investigation. The Diversity Initiatives Fund sponsored $3,000 for a joint project in 2008 between Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and Student Services to conduct some preliminary research within FAHSS and report findings.

The project team consisted of Susan Broomhall and Alexandra Ludewig from FAHSS and Judy Skene from Student Services. Deborah Allen was engaged as project officer. The coordinators would like to acknowledge her excellent contribution.

**Overview**

The impetus for this study was a perception amongst staff at UWA that mature-age students were often at risk of attrition and that they had circumstances that influenced their approaches to learning that differed from younger students. These perceptions merited further investigation to ensure that students were accessing services available to them and that if services were not meeting students’ needs, then provision could be part of future planning if an immediate response could not be made.

UWA defines mature-age students as those students who are over twenty years of age at 1 March of the year in which they are enrolling for the first time for an undergraduate degree. This definition is common to West Australian universities but other states and institutions have their own definitions. The University of Sydney defines mature-age as 21 and The University of Melbourne as 23 years of age. These differences make comparisons between institutions difficult but as UWA consistently enrols the highest percentage of school leavers, it follows that mature-age students are a small cohort in comparison to other Australian universities.

In its strategic plan, the University has established targets for growth of the undergraduate student population, but recognises that school leavers are a finite recruitment pool. In recent years, a strong employment market has encouraged some school leavers directly into full time employment and whilst applications for places from WA Year 12 students overall rose from 9531 in 2007 to 10,052 in 2009, even in a weaker employment market, potential for growth from the school leaver population is limited. Mature-age students are therefore an increasingly important potential market for growth in recruitment. Understanding the reasons why mature-age students choose to enrol and their expectations of teaching, learning and services at UWA are an important aspect of any recruitment strategy aiming to attract larger numbers of this under-represented cohort.

Likewise, retaining current mature-age students is an important aspect of any growth strategy. UWA currently rates tenth amongst Australian universities in terms of retention of undergraduates. We hope that the recommendations and strategies identified in this study and outlined in this report will help to improve this ranking as much as increase, in general, the presence of mature-age students on campus. Although mature-age students identify issues that they consider important to them, the solutions are usually applicable to all students and will therefore improve the student experience for all.

Research on retention tends to focus on school leavers who dominate the undergraduate cohort and previous studies, particularly of the first-year experience, have reported their issues in depth. Even at other Go8 universities with a higher proportion of mature-age students than are currently enrolled at UWA, reports on the first-year experience do not customarily identify or report specifically on mature-age students, focusing instead on the school leaver cohort (see Burnett 2006).

During the course of this project, the University commenced a pilot alternative entry pathway for mature-age students who did not have a TEE score, a Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT) score or previous university experience. Students enrolling at mid-year under this scheme were offered provisional enrolment.

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in selected courses. Their ongoing enrolment was subject to completion of 24 credit points and proving their English language competency through passing a ‘text-rich’ unit selected by the faculty. Forty six students enrolled under the Mature Age Provisional (MAP) entry scheme in Semester 2, 2008, 21 of them in FAHSS. The MAP scheme was reviewed in December 2008 and there is strong commitment to continue it, although there is recognition that this cohort of students have particular needs that will have to be met to maximise their chances of success.

As data collection for this project was completed before the MAP students enrolled at mid-year, their experiences are not reflected in the survey results detailed in this report. However, the project team, and especially those from Student Services, have interacted with MAP students and established supports for them so this report contains some suggestions in relation to this cohort, based on a focus group of MAP students and staff observations to date.

Methodology:
Objectives of the project

This initiative sought to:
• collect data to determine issues and expectations of mature-age students in FAHSS
• establish if there was a gap between mature-age student perceptions of learning and staff perceptions
• identify issues of equity for mature-age students with previous educational disadvantage
• establish student expectations for comprehensive support
• identify student readiness for tertiary learning
• further improve the student orientation process for mature-age students
• build capacity for collaboration between Student Services and FAHSS
• collect data to provide recommendations for future service provision to mature-age students
• build awareness of professional and academic staff about mature-age issues

Action research methodology
The project adopted an action research methodology, adapting in response to data analysis. For example, the main survey instrument used revealed perceptions of student learning and it was then felt that it would be valuable to compare student perceptions with those of both academic and professional faculty staff so online surveys of those two groups were then conducted. Likewise, the survey of commencing mature-age students recorded their expectations rather than their experience and it was thought important to re-survey them to check whether their responses would differ once they were several months into their study program.

Data collection
To achieve these objectives, a range of methodologies were employed and both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. It was determined that it was important to establish retention data for the cohort so any inconsistencies could be further explored. This was the first stage of the research. It was followed by surveys of students, both paper-based and on-line, to try and capture various groups within the FAHSS mature-age cohort and also staff within FAHSS. The surveys provide the most comprehensive source of data. They are augmented by findings from a focus group and a small number of individual interviews.

Data sources included:
• Enrolment and retention data for mature-age FAHSS and non-mature-age FAHSS students 2003 - 2006
• Data from a hard copy survey of commencing mature-age undergraduate students conducted during Orientation Week in 2008.
• Data from commencing mature-age students in 2008 who were re-surveyed online in April 2008 about their experiences to date
• Insights from a focus group of continuing mature-age students
• Data from an online survey of continuing mature-age students who commenced 2003-2006
• Telephone interviews with mature-age students who had withdrawn from their enrolment
• Online survey of professional and academic staff in FAHSS about their perceptions of issues for mature-age students in the faculty
**Enrolment and Retention data**
The Institutional Research Unit (IRU) extracted enrolment and retention data for 2003-2006 for:
- Mature-age students in FAHSS
- Mature-age students overall
- Non-mature-age students in FAHSS
- Non-mature-age students overall

Key findings of interest from this data were that mature-age students in FAHSS had a slightly higher retention rate in most years than non-mature-age students but that in the overall undergraduate student population, mature-age students had a lower retention rate than non-mature-age students.

**Data extracted from Callista**
The data set extracted by the IRU for 2003 was used to track those students for completions and course movements, to gain a more detailed understanding of the patterns of engagement for one commencing cohort. Constraints with project funding did not allow this level of detailed investigation to be completed for the following years’ student intake.

**Hard-copy Surveys:**

**Survey A: Commencing mature-age students 2008**
The hard copy survey was based on a similar survey instrument administered by Monash University as part of an Australian-wide study of retention by Long, Ferrier & Heagney (2006). It contained quantitative and qualitative questions and was administered to students in person who attended the Mature Age Orientation session in February 2008, the week before their study program commenced. Fifty-eight students responded to the survey which was 90 per cent of the students who attended Mature Age Orientation and 38 per cent of respondents were from FAHSS.

The survey asked about reasons for enrolling, sources of support including financial support and how effective students thought different styles of delivery and tools would be for their learning. The project team thought that it would be useful to re-survey the students on the attendance list a few months later when they had had more experiences on which to base comments and to see whether they had changed some of their initial perceptions (Survey F).

**Survey B: Ongoing mature-age students**
A group of seven continuing mature-age students assisting with Mature Age Orientation, were surveyed to gain a snapshot of their views. Four of the seven students were enrolled in FAHSS.

**Surveys C and D: Online survey of academic staff(C) and professional staff (D) perceptions of mature-age learners**
As the student surveys asked respondents about perceptions of learning styles, it was decided to survey staff to gain their perceptions. Separate but similar surveys were developed for academic and professional staff in FAHSS. Staff were invited by email to complete the survey and there were 14 responses to the academic survey and 9 to the professional staff survey. Comparisons were then made between the students’ and staff’s responses and between the academic staff’s and professional staff's responses.

**Survey E: Online survey of 2003-2006 mature-age students in FAHSS**
The IRU had produced a data set of mature-age students commencing study in FAHSS between 2003 and 2006. These students were emailed a link to an online form and asked to complete it. The survey was the same format as the hard copy and online version for the 2008 cohort and there were 64 respondents.

**Survey F: Online survey of 2008 mature-age students**
As noted above, the commencing mature-age students in 2008 were emailed a link to an online version of the survey that other ongoing mature-age students 2003-2006 completed. 22 respondents completed the online survey.

**Focus Group of continuing mature-age students**
A focus group of six students who had all successfully completed at least two semesters of study took part in a focus group discussion. All participants were female.
Telephone interview with students who had discontinued studies
Names and addresses of students who had discontinued their studies between 2003 and 2006 without completing or giving a reason were extracted from Callista. A letter inviting them to participate in a telephone interview was mailed to these former students from the Director of Student Services on behalf of the project team. This process protected the confidentiality of students. Of the 83 letters mailed, 14 were returned as ‘address unknown’ and five students provided times when they could be contacted but only one student completed an interview.

Other sources of information
The First Year coordinator in FAHSS attended events such as Mature Age Orientation and collated anecdotal evidence from students. Student Advisors in FAHSS also reviewed their database for an overview of the key issues that mature-age students raise and provided a summary to the project team.

One of the project team has also been part of a joint initiative between Student Services and the UWA Guild during 2008 to seek feedback from mature-age students generally as to whether the Guild and Student Services could be more supportive of their needs. Students were emailed an invitation to attend a meeting in Semester 1. More than 50 students either attended a lunch time meeting or emailed comments. A lack of social events appropriate to mature-age students was one issue noted. A follow-up meeting was held in Semester 2, where Guild representatives encouraged the mature-age students to organise themselves into a club and apply for support from the Guild. Several students volunteered but progress has been slow.

A further source of information from mature-age students has been received from discussions with students enrolling under the new mature-age provisional (MAP) entry scheme in Semester 2, 2008.

Results Discussion
Retention rates
The following data shows that in each of the years 2003-2006 the mature-age demographic in FAHSS has better retention rates than the standard FAHSS cohort. In 2003-2005, the FAHSS mature-age students have a higher retention rate than non-FAHSS mature-age students. This peaks in 2005 at 84 per cent but drops to 71.7 per cent in 2006, the only year in which the FAHSS mature-age students have a higher attrition rate than non-FAHSS mature-age students.

The non-mature-age students in FAHSS also recorded a drop in retention rates in 2006, although not as marked as the mature-age, from 73.2 per cent to 70.6 per cent. Unfortunately due to the short timeframe of this project and demand on the IRU for other data, we were not able to obtain 2007 figures, to see if the rise in retention for FAHSS mature-age in 2005 to 84 per cent and then drop to 71.7 per cent corrected to pre-2005 levels of 77-78 per cent or whether the decline continued. It would be valuable to collect this data for 2007 and 2008 when available, to see what pattern is establishing. As there was a decline in the non-mature-age FAHSS cohort as well in 2006, there could be external factors such as a strong employment market influencing decisions to defer study rather than factors unique to the mature-age cohort.

Overall, the mature-age FAHSS students had higher retention rates than their younger peers, disproving the anecdotal evidence that these students are more at risk of attrition. These findings are confirmed by research data from other Australian universities.2

This led the team to question what was distinct about FAHSS to cause this pattern. Even though retention rates were slightly higher, qualitative data revealed instances of social isolation and inflexible delivery of services that impacted negatively on the student experience. Retention rates of less than 80 per cent are also an indication that more could be done to improve this figure for both mature-age and non mature-age students in FAHSS.

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2 McInnes & James (1994) reported mature-age students having a stronger sense of purpose and more clearly defined goals for studying at university; Cantwell, Archer & Bourke (2001) showed mature-age students to outperform school-leavers at tertiary level. These findings were reinforced by Zeegers (1999) who confirmed that school leavers attained on average lower grades than mature-age students. Hoskins et al. (1997) attributed this to the higher levels of intrinsic motivation displayed by mature-age students, while Tinto (1999, 2000), McKenzie and Grow (2004) and Lawrence (2003) showed what other factors in mature-age students aided their academic performance.
The data also shows that FAHSS enrols a high percentage of mature-age students, typically about 40-42 per cent of the total commencing mature-age cohort. Although enrolment patterns of mature-age students for all faculties were not obtained, it is safe to assume that this is the highest concentration of mature-age students in one faculty.

Mature-Age Student Enrolments 2003 - 2006

Mature-aged students and retention rates

Students included in these tables are restricted to the following population.

- The students who commenced studies at UWA for the first time in 2003 or 2004 or 2005 or 2006.
- The students who enrolled in a Bachelor’s Pass degree course in year of entry to UWA.
- The students who were not full-fee-paying overseas students.

Any student who reached the age of twenty years before the first day of March (Semester 1 entrants) or the first day of August (Semester 2 entrants) in the year of entry to UWA is considered to be a mature-aged entrant.

With one or two exceptions faculty ranking for combined degree courses for single counting is Law, ECM, NAS, MDHS, Educ, BIZ, LPS, AHSS. This means that the only combined degree course currently reported under AHSS is BMus – BA.

Table 1: New students 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>UWA not AHSS</th>
<th>AHSS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mature-aged</td>
<td>Not mature-aged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New students 2006</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>2072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New students who re-enrolled in 2007</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>1757</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of new students who re-enrolled in 2007</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>84.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Re-enrolled in 2007 and faculty of enrolment is the same as in 2006.

There is a significant difference in retention rate, from 2006 calendar year to 2007 calendar year, for type of student within ‘UWA not AHSS’ (chi-squared test, p = 0.0014).

There is no statistically significant relationship between retention and type of student within AHSS, for the same period (chi-squared test, p = 0.9191).

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3 Data provided by the Institutional Research Unit, 2007
Table 2: New students 2005

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>UWA not AHSS</th>
<th></th>
<th>AHSS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mature-aged</td>
<td>Not mature-aged</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mature-aged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New students 2005</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>1933</td>
<td>2090</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New students who re-enrolled in 2006</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>1616</td>
<td>1733</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of new students who re-enrolled in 2006</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>83.6</td>
<td>82.9</td>
<td>73.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Re-enrolled in 2006 and faculty of enrolment is the same as in 2005.

There is a significant difference in retention rate, from 2005 calendar year to 2006 calendar year, for type of student within ‘UWA not AHSS’ (chi-squared test, p = 0.0052).

The difference in retention rate for type of student within AHSS, for the same period, is not as significant (chi-squared test, p = 0.0422).

Table 3: New students 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>UWA not AHSS</th>
<th></th>
<th>AHSS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mature-aged</td>
<td>Not mature-aged</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mature-aged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New students 2004</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>1894</td>
<td>2035</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New students who re-enrolled in 2005</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>1602</td>
<td>1707</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of new students who re-enrolled in 2005</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>84.6</td>
<td>83.9</td>
<td>78.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Re-enrolled in 2005 and faculty of enrolment is the same as in 2004.

There is a significant difference in retention rate, from 2004 calendar year to 2005 calendar year, for type of student within ‘UWA not AHSS’ (chi-squared test, p = 0.0024).

There is no statistically significant relationship between retention and type of student within AHSS, for the same period (chi-squared test, p = 0.6519).
Table 4: New students 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>UWA not AHSS</th>
<th></th>
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<th>AHSS</th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mature-aged</td>
<td>Not mature-aged</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Mature-aged</td>
<td>Not mature-aged</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New students 2003</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>1766</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New students who re-enrolled in 2004</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>1443</td>
<td>1569</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of new students who re-enrolled in 2004</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>81.7</td>
<td>81.1</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>76.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Re-enrolled in 2004 and faculty of enrolment is the same as in 2003.

There is a significant difference in retention rate, from 2003 calendar year to 2004 calendar year, for type of student within ‘UWA not AHSS’ (chi-squared test, $p = 0.0433$).

There is no statistically significant relationship between retention and type of student within AHSS, for the same period (chi-squared test, $p = 0.8317$).
New students who enrolled in a Bachelor's Pass degree course (excluding full-fee-paying overseas students)

Table 5: New students enrolling in FAHSS 2003-2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of entry to UWA</th>
<th>AHSS: Mature Age</th>
<th>AHSS: Not Mature Age</th>
<th>UWA not AHSS: Mature Age</th>
<th>UWA not AHSS: Not Mature Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
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<td>2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Age demographics of the mature-age cohort in FAHSS
The body of students commonly referred to a ‘mature-aged’ students proved a lot less homogeneous than
the label itself implied. Based on their enrolment patterns, concerns and general attitudes, specific cohorts
within the broader mature-age group were identified, namely

20-29 year olds (who are by far the largest, but largely also an invisible cohort, as they can be visually non-
distinctive)
30-39 year olds
40-49 year olds
50-59 year olds
60 and older

Table 6: Mature-Age students in FAHSS – Age group breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>2003</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(53.8%)</td>
<td>(57%)</td>
<td>(70.2%)</td>
<td>(65.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(27.7%)</td>
<td>(22.4%)</td>
<td>(17.0%)</td>
<td>(20.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(11.5%)</td>
<td>(15.0%)</td>
<td>(7.4%)</td>
<td>(10.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2.3%)</td>
<td>(5.6%)</td>
<td>(4.3%)</td>
<td>(0.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.6%)</td>
<td>(0.0%)</td>
<td>(1.1%)</td>
<td>(2.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those students who are 30 years of age and older are a visible minority on campus, especially those at the
higher end of the age range. Those under 30 years of age may be able to blend in to a large degree with
younger students but have their own issues about the differences in attitude and maturity between school
leavers and those with a few more years experience of life.

As the largest proportion of mature-age students in FAHSS are under 30, it was decided to do an additional
analysis of the survey data taking into account this age demographic. This analysis is presented in the
Discussion section of the report.

2003 mature-age cohort: a snapshot of their progress
The 2003 commencing cohort of mature-age students was chosen as offering the best opportunity to track
progress on completion and change of course. It was thought that this would offer some insights into where
in the faculty mature-age student were enrolling and at what stage of their degree some were discontinuing.
Five years after commencing, almost 40 per cent have completed their degrees. A further 10 per cent approximately are still completing after five years, which reflects the part-time status of some mature-age students. However, close to 30 per cent of students have discontinued their course attempt, which means that they have voluntarily withdrawn, or the University has withdrawn the student or discontinued the course. Students on approved leave are recorded as Intermit, whereas Lapsed (17.83 per cent) records those students who have not enrolled in any units prior to the enrolment due date or have not advised the University of their intentions.

Completion rates by course reflect the overall completion rate for mature-age students in FAHSS with the exception of Music, which at 12.5 per cent after five years is lower than other courses. Initially a small cohort in 2003 of eight students, only one had completed by 2007.
Table 9: FAHSS students commencing in 2003 who have completed their degree by 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Completions by course enrolled 2003</th>
<th>Completions</th>
<th>% of Commencements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>41.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian Studies</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Studies</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Studies</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td><strong>51</strong></td>
<td><strong>39.53</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10 below recorded the year of completion for students commencing in 2003. Some students would have transferred with some credits to be able to complete in 1-2 years. Of the 129 students commencing in 2003, 51 (39.54 per cent) have completed their degrees in five years.

Table 10: Year of completion for FAHSS students commencing in 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Completions by year</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>% of data set</th>
<th>% of total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.96</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23.53</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33.33</td>
<td>13.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25.49</td>
<td>10.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>15.69</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>51</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>39.54</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings from Survey A: Commencing mature-age students 2008

There were 58 respondents across all faculties, 37 of whom were full-time and 21 were part-time. FAHSS students were the largest group of respondents at 22 students.

Support
The most common sources of financial support (respondents could select more than one source) for commencing mature-age students in 2008 are: paid employment (60 per cent), savings (46 per cent) or govt support (33 per cent).

Motivation
The most common reasons for enrolling were intellectual / self-fulfilment of various kinds (‘I feel good when I’m learning about interesting things’; ‘I’m stimulated by ideas’; ‘I like discovering things I didn’t know about’; ‘I like broadening my knowledge’; ‘Studying lets me learn about things that interest me’. Even when mature-age students chose future employment as an option, they ranked ‘Study will help me to get a job in a field I like’ higher than ‘To get a better job later’ or ‘I won’t get a high-paying job without a degree’.

Learning environments
Before they commenced their studies, students anticipated the most effective forms of delivery would be the more traditional forms (Tutorials, lectures, written lecture notes, set textbooks). Newer styles and forums were not seen as particularly effective (online discussion with classmates, lectures on line, role play, informal discussions outside of lectures).

Comparison of Findings from Survey A and Survey F
Commencing 2008 mature-age students (Survey A) were surveyed again once they had almost completed one semester of study (Survey f). Twenty-two respondents completed the survey. Their perceptions of effective learning environments had changed with experience. In the pre-semester survey respondents had leaned towards considering most options as ‘a lot’ important to their learning, or ‘essential’. In Survey A, 8 of the 11 options received a zero score for ‘not much’, indicating that students were scoring in the higher brackets as they assessed the effectiveness of the particular delivery style on their learning. In the later survey they were more discerning, with scores ranging much more evenly across the five options.

The choices that received marked swing between to two surveys to being viewed as having little or no relevance were online discussions with classmates and role-playing.
Online recording of lectures and podcasts recorded a slight positive gain and students continued to agree that visuals and images accompanying lectures were important.

Findings from Survey B
Survey B: Experiences of a small group of ongoing mature-age students in any Faculty. Seven mature-age students at 2nd and 3rd year level were surveyed, four of them (57 per cent) were from FAHSS.

Support
The most common form of financial support for ongoing mature-age students (2008) surveyed is by paid employment (43 per cent) or partner (57 per cent).

Motivation
As with the commencing 2008 students, the most common reasons for enrolling were intellectual / self-fulfilment of various kinds (‘I feel good when I’m learning about interesting things’; ‘I’m stimulated by ideas’; ‘I like discovering things I didn’t know about’; and less than more practically oriented motivations (‘Study will help me to get a job in a field I like’).
Learning environments
Continuing students rated small group discussions and tutorials as the most important learning delivery, followed by in-class lecture presentations and written lecture notes. Where they diverged from the first year students was that they all rated visuals and images accompanying lectures as 'moderately effective' to 'essential' whereas the commencing students did not rate visuals quite as highly.

Distinctions in the mature-age learning experience
The two factors identified by mature-age students that distinguish them from other student cohorts are:
• their motivation: ‘mature age are more dedicated and have a definite goal in mind’
• their life experience: ‘we’ve been around the block so to speak, so when we learn things we can relate them to life experience. Younger students have to take for granted some of the information they learn’

Findings from Survey C
Survey C: Academic staff perceptions of mature-age students. The survey was completed by 14 academics in FAHSS and found the following

Academic staff identify:
1. life experience as distinctive: ‘The older the student, the more life experience they have, which can provide a framework for their studies’
   ‘Yes, in Humanities (my area) maturity and experience count for a lot, providing reference points for ideas and themes’
   ‘their studies are enriched by their life experiences’
2. motivation: ‘Mature-age students are usually more self-disciplined than straight-from-school students, and have better work habits’
   ‘The main difference is that mature-age students want to be here and are excited to be here’
   ‘In general I would assume mature aged students are more motivated to learn because they have probably taken more time to choose a subject, or have a clear goal’
3. lack of confidence/need for support: ‘(they) are more vulnerable to criticism and need greater support’
   ‘Some lack confidence in their return to the classroom’
4. degree of engagement in learning: ‘Others want greater levels of engagement with the unit material than their younger counterparts often seem to seek’
   ‘Many either have or devote more time to ‘extra’ work such as extended reading. This can cause a hostile tutorial environment if non-mature students feel they dominate discussion’

Findings from Survey D
Survey D: Professional staff perceptions of mature-age students. The survey was completed by 9 staff in FAHSS.

Professional staff identify:
1. the motivational distinctions of mature-age students: ‘Generally I find mature-age students to be very motivated, focussed, clear about their learning goals and interests’
   ‘A greater commitment to learning. More enquiring minds. Deeper engagement with material’
2. other distinctions that were about the social environment (rather than classroom learning): ‘I think mature aged students often feel like they don’t belong so they may not interact as much as they might if they felt they belonged and also they don’t hang around after class so the incidental experiences that go with uni life are not as important for them - they want to know clearly what is expected of them’
   ‘Mainly the social aspect of university life’
   ‘And those not in the y-gen are less involved in things like chat rooms and video sharing sites, etc.’
Comparative analysis of surveys C and D
Academics were not aware that learning experiences would be very different for mature-age students (9/14 moderately matching experiences of student leavers, the rest not much).

Professional staff were divided about the idea that learning experiences for mature-age were distinct to those of school leavers, although most (7/9) felt they were likely to be dissimilar.

Professional staff attention to mature-age students’ needs
Professional staff felt that the academic attention to mature-age needs was fairly variable, answers range from yes to no and everything in between. These responses related especially to:
1) provisions of flexibility: ‘Traditional methods of offering choices (eg assessment topics) in subjects have allowed people to pursue particular interests. With increasing flexible delivery, we are better meeting the needs of people short of time because of work and family commitments’
2) support /encouragement/time given to student: ‘Though in some cases mature aged students need extra reassurance and there is not always the time to give them a high level of support’ ‘Reasonably well, although mature-age students seem to need more time to discuss issues/readings etc, and current practices may be limiting’ ‘Students often feel marginalised by tutors and are very anxious about tutorial discussions for eg - some tutors are good at making them feel comfortable, others can fuel the anxiety’

Academic staff attention to mature-age students’ needs
Academics were slightly more certain that they catered to mature-age needs than the perceptions that professional staff held of academics’ accommodation of mature-age students. One notes growing attention to diversity of student learning needs: ‘Generally I think all units are gradually changing teaching to suit all’.

The issues around which they were most doubtful were similar to those professional staff identified, namely:
1) flexibility: ‘I imagine teaching times are inconvenient’ ‘Not if the student is working and looking to be on campus after hours’
2) provision of support to students: ‘A lot more could be done but the resources we have, particularly in terms of staff time, are limited’ ‘Most mature-age students appear to be more dedicated students (often the result of different motivations to return or attend uni) and in entry-level units I imagine many feel a bit frustrated at the slower pace needed to acclimatize’
Academics also identified an additional potential issue for mature-age students:
3) the nature of assignments: ‘Frequent writing assignments would be good for many mature agers, as would extra voluntary discussion groups’

Focus Group responses
The focus group consisted of six mature-age students who were all full time and female and had all successfully passed at least two semesters of study. Students were asked if they thought there were differences in the learning experiences of mature-age students. The students thought that there were not such great differences between older and younger students in their learning styles but rather in their logistical and administrative needs although they acknowledged that there were onerous pressures on younger students these days also.

The mature-age students thought there was less peer pressure on them: they didn’t have to live up to an image of ‘looking cool’ in class which seemed to equate sometimes to looking bored. Younger students feared ‘appearing stupid by asking a dumb question’ whereas the older students were not so concerned about that. The focus group participants also thought that the social pressures were less for older students, who mostly had well established networks outside university and could afford to forego social invitations in the short term.

Participants commented that mature-age students often struggled with IT issues early on and it was important to them that staff had good IT skills so that they could seek assistance and have an expectation that staff would use technology such as recording lectures and using visualizers. They also appreciated use of Course Materials Online and expressed the hope that more lecturers would use this facility.
Group work was a challenge for all participants. They acknowledged that they liked to have control over the process but often felt like ‘outsiders’. They wanted to finish tasks early and did not want to do ‘all nighters’ as this was not possible for most of them with family responsibilities. Some admitted that they wanted to achieve high grades but that some younger students were not as interested or prepared to put in the effort, which frustrated the mature-age students.

The students had found that individual staff members were flexible but often they had been asked to keep accommodations for extensions or changing tutorial times to themselves. They felt welcomed by staff and appreciated for their contributions.

In terms of suggestions for improvement, this group of students would value earlier knowledge of their timetable and tutorial allocations, so that they could make decisions about childcare well before semester started. They preferred an option of being able to group lectures and tutorials so that time on campus was reduced: this equated to saving on childcare. The students involved in this focus group had all previously volunteered to assist with mentoring and other activities so they were not students who had no wish to be engaged with campus life. Their suggestions were designed to maximise their ability to meet their study commitments and have some time to meet with other students.

**Telephone interviews**

Students who had enrolled in FAHSS between 2003 and 2006 but had discontinued their studies were contacted by mail and asked if they would speak with the project officer about their reasons for discontinuing. Five people responded but were then difficult to contact, due to very limited choices of times they were available. In the end only one interview was conducted with a student who had subsequently enrolled at Murdoch. This student reported mixed experiences at UWA: some positive but some where she felt excluded in units where she thought that there was a focus on younger students. She also reported frustration in the length of time taken to receive a response on an application for credit for previous studies. Murdoch, by contrast, gave her a positive response within 48 hours.

The respondent also commented that at Murdoch her unit contact hours were scheduled on one day (double lecture and tutorial) and this was much more convenient when joining study with paid employment. She concluded that she would consider returning to UWA to study but not as an undergraduate.

**Survey E analysed as under 30s and over 30s**

Mature-age students enrolling in FAHSS between 2003 and 2006 were surveyed online and then the data was analysed in two categories: below 30 years-of-age and above 30 years. There were 19 respondents in the <30 category and 53 respondents who were>30. The characteristic that distinguished the two groups most clearly was their attendance mode: 89.5 per cent of the <30s were full time whilst only 37.7 per cent of the >30s were full time. A higher percentage of the <30s were receiving government income support (68.4 per cent compared with 18.9 per cent of the >30s) and this might explain their full time status. However, a higher percentage of <30 students were also working in paid employment (63.2 per cent compared with 39.6 per cent for the >30s). The >30s recorded higher levels of support from spouses, partners, and savings than the <30s.

**Motivation**

Students answered a series of questions about their reasons for enrolling. In many cases there was no discernable difference between the two cohorts but a few questions showed a degree of difference. Students >30 were more definite that they did not enrol to fulfil family expectations than those <30. The younger students were also more in agreement with the statement: Study will help me to make better career choices with 43.6 per cent agreeing that it matched ‘a lot’ or exactly their reasons for enrolling. Only 32 per cent of the >30s agreed.

Although career-focused, students did not agree that they enrolled because ‘I won’t get a high-paying job without a degree’: 73.7 per cent of the <30s thought that was no match or only a little and 56.6 per cent
of the older students agreed with the <30s. Both groups supported the statements: ‘I like broadening my knowledge’; ‘Studying lets me learn about things that interest me’; and ‘I like discovering things I didn’t know about’ as matching their reasons for enrolling.

Learning Styles
The survey also sought information on how effective students thought different styles of delivery and tools had been for their learning. Both groups did not put much weight on on-line discussion with classmates or role playing exercises. Traditional learning tools such as small group discussions and lectures recorded high scores from both groups. Somewhat surprisingly, the <30s rated small group tutorials more highly than the >30s (63.1 per cent of <30s agreed tutorials were ‘a lot’ or ‘essential’ compared with 49 per cent of >30s). Both groups rated traditional in-class lectures as effective for their learning and having a set text book, worked through week by week was also highly rated by both groups. All the mature-age students rated highly having lists of further reading material although the <30s rated lists more highly than the older students (68.3 per cent for <30s compared with 50.9 per cent for the >30s). In recording ‘other’ learning tools that were effective, several students mentioned weekly on-line quizzes as useful in maintaining a focus on the material.

The learning tool rated most effective by both <30s and >30s was podcasts and recorded lectures: 52.6 per cent of <30s rated these as essential and 35.8 per cent of >30s agreed. A further 26.3 per cent of <30s and 18.9 per cent of >30s rated recorded lectures as ‘a lot’. It is not surprising when taking into account the competing demands mature-age students face on their time that they favour the flexibility offered by recorded lectures but it is interesting that they are readily adopting technology that has immediate applications to their learning.

The qualitative responses to questions in the survey show an interesting pattern where the >30s often wrote lengthy sentences. The responses from <30s were usually very brief, often one word responses and generally positive. Responses from the >30s were varied. In response to the question: Do you think academic staff/units cater well to mature-age students’ needs, about seventy per cent answered positively, stating that lecturers and advisers had been supportive and encouraging. Those who were less positive cited issues with timetabling, unavailability of lectures on Lectopia, assumptions that all students have IT skills and patronising attitudes:

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Yes and no. The Arts faculty coordinators (Barbara and Rachel) are very helpful and supportive. However in the Language lectures, tutes, time restraints prevents academic staff from providing time with a student unless on a group basis which tends to disadvantage those older students who have been out of the education system for many years.

No – not all subjects provide lectures on WebCT/Lectopia. UWA are very rigid in semester timetables – more units need to be available in non-semester periods to avoid very intense 13 weeks x 2 then nothing from Nov to March.

Not particularly. I have felt patronised and treated as if a teenager by some staff, mainly in Libraries and faculty offices.

On a more positive note:

I haven’t had any problems with the units or staff at all, they’ve all been most helpful and appreciative of the extra input I put in as I’m so keen.

Yes, I would say that this university provides a number of support measures.

Students were asked what could be improved to help mature-age students in the way units are delivered. Unsurprisingly, recording of all lectures was mentioned by a number of students, both <30s and >30s. Students also requested scheduling of tutorials close to lecture times so that they could organise their contact hours effectively and limit the days they attended campus. Group work also rated a few mentions as one of the major problems for mature-age students.
We use webct/lectopia more out of lecture hours to fit around family/work commitments: so more online units please □ (>30)

Contact hours less spread out (<30)

Because it was 20 years since I had done any formal study I found I had to really discipline myself at first but attended several courses given by Student Services, which are available to all students, which were very effective in getting me on the right path to study. (>30)

Group work has been the most difficult learning delivery for me. I have found that younger people are more casual and tend to cram their work. As a mature age person in group work, this has been challenging. (>30)

An interesting comment from one student, in regard to the University’s proposed Review of Course Structures:

May be a bit way out but it would be interesting if an entirely different course structure was available for those who are not interested in just rushing through uni on their way to employment but who also value learning for its own sake. A third semester. (<30)

On the topic of whether some subject matter was more difficult to learn than others, students again gave a variety of responses. Some thought that ease of learning related directly to the quality of teaching, not the subject matter. Learning other languages rated a mention from several students as an area that they had struggled with: several included Anthropology in this category as they felt that the discipline-specific terminology equated to a foreign language. The amount of maths required in Psychology also surprised some students and they struggled with it. Again, the delivery mode had an impact:

Research topics 3rd yr psych, as they are seminar based & not online (>30)

Psychology. SPSS research methods. I did not expect that so much maths was involved for an ‘arts’ discipline. I have never been good at maths let alone using an SPSS program. I’ve pulled out from my BA in psychology in third year. (>30)

Learning another language was a real challenge. I tried Latin, without any prior experience, and failed but went on to do 2 years of Italian with reasonable success – this was helped by the fact that I had established study patterns by the time I started. (>30)

Most responses came from the older students who were more willing to analyse why they hadn’t always been successful and to express when their expectations were not met. Comments sometimes highlight a need for more extensive course advising so that students’ expectations are realistic and support such as study groups in languages to provide more opportunities for conversation and revision.

Campus experience

Mature-age students were asked if they thought their experiences of campus life matched other mature-age students and school leavers. The <30s thought their experience of campus life was a moderate match with other mature-age students, whilst the >30s rated their experience as ‘moderate’ or ‘a lot’ like other mature-age students. When comparing themselves to school leavers though, the younger<30 students were more certain than their older peers that their experience was different to school leavers: 84.2 per cent of <30s rated their experience as ‘not much’ or ‘a little’ similar to school leavers, whilst 73.6 per cent of the >30s agreed. It seems that the younger mature-age students have a desire to differentiate themselves from school leavers.

When asked if they thought their experience of learning matched other mature-age students or school leavers, there was little difference between the <30s and >30s when comparing themselves to other mature-age students: most agreed on a ‘moderate’ match. In comparison with school leavers, opinions were divided across both groups: 21.2 perc ent of the <30s thought not much but 52.1 per cent thought their experience of learning matched a ‘moderate’ amount or ‘a lot’. Of the >30s, 28.3 per cent thought ‘not much’ but 47.2 per cent agreed on a ‘moderate’ amount or ‘a lot’. So although the mature-age students are
distinguishing themselves from younger students in terms of their campus experience, that differentiation is not based on their perceptions of learning.

Students were asked if they had dropped units: 63.2 per cent of the <30s and 56.6 per cent of the >30s had. Reasons given focused on the cost of study, difficulty of juggling commitments, lack of interest in subject because it did not meet expectations and illness. Comments reflect that mature-age students are discerning clients and can have unrealistic expectations of themselves (and possibly of others):

Unreasonable self-expectation of what I could do (>30)

At the beginning of semester I have often changed my enrolment – generally after attending the first lecture of a number of units and making more informed choice about which ones I wanted to complete (>30)

Cut down work levels when pregnant or had a new born. Also if the lec/tut were delivered on different days it made it difficult for me to stay in the unit. Typically childcare costs and availability commitments meant I could only attend uni for 2 days a week. (>30)

Bit off more than I could chew by overloading, also with work commitments and personal hurdles. (<30)

Subjects weren’t what I expected or I was disappointed with the lecturer (>30)

Only 21.2 per cent of the <30s spoke with a student advisor before dropping units and 13.2 per cent of the >30s. This low figure raises the question of whether mature-age students are exploring all their options before dropping units and whether they need some more targeted advice before enrolment each year.

Students showed that they had made use of services offered by Student Services with uptake of all services recorded but it is difficult to discern whether some students are accessing multiple services or whether usage is widely distributed. Both <30s and >30s had consulted faculty advisers (approximately 30 per cent of each cohort) but no <30s had consulted a Faculty-based First Year coordinator, whilst only 7.5 per cent of >30s had. It would appear that these staff members are under-utilised by mature-age students generally and could be a source of advice and support. In terms of external supporters, family and friends were overwhelmingly the first choice by both groups, followed by General Practitioners and Psychologists.

Other sources of information

Mature-age student meetings

The Guild and Student Services collaborated to canvas the opinions of mature-age students about the suitability of services available to them at an open forum in May 2008. Over 50 students either attended or emailed responses to a call for comment. Key issues raised were:

• issues of isolation, an age-gap, general anxiety and the difficulty of managing work/life/family balance
• providing avenues for mature-age students to meet
  ° the need for a social club for mature-age students
  ° the value of having a mature-age common room
  ° having a web presence where information about social events could be posted
• concerns about parenting and childcare
  ° the availability of childcare
  ° aligning university and school holidays
  ° more holiday programs for older children
• financial concerns
• need to improve academic skills
• desire for greater flexibility in timetables, assignment submission and deadlines and unit withdrawal
• desire for all lectures to be recorded and available on Lectopia
MAP – provisional mature-age students
A meeting of five of the 19 MAP students enrolled in FAHSS in Semester 2 raised some additional issues:
• it was challenging to complete ACE and IRIS whilst trying to learn about university in the first few weeks
• there was a request for mentors who were mature-age students
• MAP students wanted to meet other mature-age students
• Workload issues had not be fully comprehended by most before enrolment

Discussion
The data reported in the Results section provide much rich information on the student experience of mature-age students within FAHSS at UWA. Despite some examples of negative experiences, many mature-age students exhibited determination to succeed at their studies and were motivated to excel. This discussion draws on their insights and those of staff members consulted in the course of the study. It summarises themes that arose from the data that point to improvements that could be made in the learning environment and in the provision of support services. As noted in the introduction, it is hoped that this discussion will be useful not just for staff within FAHSS and Student Services, but for any staff interacting with mature-age undergraduates in the University.

1.0 Being prepared for study
Mature-age students would benefit from knowing what to expect of study at university level, so that their preparedness would allow them to focus on content from the outset, rather than playing catch-up due to lack of basic IT or academic writing skills. The issue of understanding expectations of study at tertiary level will become even more important as more students are admitted under the provisional enrolment scheme for mature-age students.

Having financial and personal support was also a critical element for success identified by many respondents. For those students without strong personal support outside the university environment, mentoring, support services and networking opportunities with other students, especially other mature-age students becomes an important element in their likelihood of success.

Recommendation 1:
Encourage the Admissions Centre to provide information sessions and online and print resources for prospective students that clarify academic expectations and the basic skills required to succeed at university.

Recommendation 2:
Design and implement a ‘Preparation for University Study’ course that could be completed prior to commencing study for those mature-age students, especially provisional entry students, who need development of their IT and academic writing skills.

Recommendation 3:
Conduct a faculty-based induction program designed with particular reference to mature-aged students in order to
3.1 build a sense of community and connection within the university context (see Pitkethly, 2001);
3.2 allow mature-age students to explore a range of possible employment opportunities through the Arts Practicum;
3.5 address academic skill needs and improving communication between staff and students;
3.6 host social activities to enable students to meet one another and form friendship/support networks (cf. UQ, 2006; 5)

Recommendation 4:
Encourage and facilitate peer mentoring in a variety of forms, including collaboration with existing programs in Student Services, in order to create a sense of community, as well as to overcome issues relating to IT literacy.
Recommendation 5:
Encourage the Transition Coordinator to attend Mature Age Orientation each year and to work with Student Services so that they can promote the role of the Transition Coordinator.

Recommendation 6:
Facilitate meetings for mature-age students for social gatherings and provide a venue exclusively reserved for their use (24/7) either at Faculty level, School level (potentially shared by postgraduate students), or both.

2.0 Having the right conditions to succeed at study
There were two issues that were notable here:

2.1 Flexibility –lectures recorded, lecture and tutorial times
2.2 Perceptions of learning

2.1 Flexibility

Flexibility, in terms of lecture availability through lectopia, choice of due dates for essays and more (or priority) tutorial slot choices, was a primary concern for mature-age students.

Online facilities are cited here as a key delivery mechanism for mature-age students (although the same students do not list online delivery as a high priority in considering the most effective learning delivery). ‘All lectures should be on Lectopia’. One mature-age student reported that she had been told that ‘none of these lectures will be recorded when you’re in third year’. Mature-age students found this prospect very worrying as they were very dependent on lecture recordings for managing issues such as timetable or work clashes and childcare responsibilities when they faced failures in childcare arrangements or sick children.

Flexibility and forward planning: Tutorial timetables need to be made available much earlier – all mature-age students felt that this should be addressed as a matter of urgency. Mature-age students need to be able to organise childcare/work a lot earlier than they are currently able to. (This may be in contrast to many School Leavers who work in casual positions.)

Students observed that where there was flexibility, it should be promoted to establish a culture of flexibility: ‘Flexibility should be advertised’.

Academic and professional staff perceptions match those of the mature-age students themselves:

- Online resources: ‘I expect flexibility really helps: Lectopia, evening and day tutorial times, online discussion, etc.’
- Flexibility of teaching hours: ‘More tutorial times outside of 9-5 working/school hours is what is always asked for.’ ‘More tute times after hours ie between 8-9 and 5-6 rather than middle of day.’ ‘Offering greater number of lectures, tutorials etc all on the same day, or in later hours to coincide with other commitments’

2.2 Perceptions of learning

In addition to lecture recordings, more lecturers should utilise online resources and overheads, as mature-age students valued visual aids highly. Students would also value more resources in the library to ease demand: ‘There are not enough Reserve Texts in the library’.

Although mature-age students identified group work as a limitation some staff saw it as an opportunity for interaction with other students: ‘More small group activities in tutorials, and small group assignments so that they are able to benefit from interaction with other students.’ Group work may well offer good learning opportunities but needs to be carefully managed to ensure this outcome.
Recommendation 7:
Promote to academic staff the need for more flexibility for mature-age students:
• consider ‘preferential’ treatment when it comes to enrolment in tutorials of their choice (timetabling issues),
• advertise the ‘flexibility’ available to all students (lectopia, WebCT), and
• encourage greater uptake of lecture recordings and provision of course materials online.

3.0 Focus not just on retention but completion
Mature-age students demonstrated resilience in their approach to study. Some had changed direction when faced with subject choices that they found difficult or uninteresting. They often sought help from a range of sources, not just faculty-based services.

Two subject areas were identified by mature-age students as subject matter of particular challenge for mature-age students:
1) Languages: ‘more in class time would have helped’;
2) Maths.

Many academics in FAHSS mirrored this: ‘Older students have difficulty in learning new languages.’ Other academic suggestions were relating to online technology issues: ‘Supposed ‘cutting edge’ technology subjects can, at times, be more confronting for mature-age students who don’t quite live and breathe the internet and Facebook as much as younger students tend to.’

Most staff respondents had had contact with mature-age students withdrawing from units. Interestingly the reasons they understood for the withdrawals were different to those most commonly cited by students themselves. [A student disliking the unit content is not likely to say so to the academic staff member at least!]

Most of the academic and professional respondents had been contacted by students wishing to withdraw from units, mainly for reasons of workload issues or family issues. Erroneously, most staff thought the mature-age students had consulted a student advisor whereas few students reported this.

Use of services/support
A broad range of services had been accessed by the respondents, of which the most popular were: UniSkills, UniMentor, Learning, Language and Research Skills, Faculty/Student Advisors.

Academics selected in order services that were perhaps most familiar to them at the Faculty level: Faculty/Student Advisors; Learning, Language and Research Skills; Counselling, Faculty based First Year Co-ordinator; UniStart and UniSkills.

The perceptions of some academics are reflected in the comment: ‘Mature-age students don’t access such facilities very much, perhaps because they tend to have less involvement with campus life than ones straight from school.’ However, this perception does not reflect the reality that mature-age students are prepared to seek out help and are frequent users of services offered through Student Services.

Professional staff named Faculty/Student Advisors; Learning, Language and Research Skills; Faculty based First Year Co-ordinator, UniSkills, and Counselling.

Professional comment: ‘Maybe a faculty based mature-age adviser would be useful for students. May help them feel like their needs are being met and that the Faculty is sympathetic to their specific needs.’

Other observations pertained to services and resources on campus:
• Availability of childcare was seen as being essential
• Need for lockers – mature-age students often try to compress their study into as few days as possible and so may need course materials for several units in the one day.

One FAHSS staff member summed up ideal support services thus: ‘A holistic approach is essential - good student support, practical measures such as timetabling which accounts for childcare responsibilities, buddy/mentoring systems...’
Recommendation 8:
Encourage the Faculty’s Transition Coordinator to research and document Teaching and Learning practice from a (first year) mature-aged student’s perspective.

Recommendation 9:
Develop and implement an exit survey for mature-age students withdrawing from their program of study in the FAHSS.

Recommendation 10:
Encourage mature-age students to consult faculty advisers before dropping units.

4.0  Quality of the student experience
Mature-age students often exhibited a desire to excel and withdrew from units because they did not like the content or were not challenged. Many mature-age students are focused on success and want opportunities to extend themselves. In seeking to support this cohort, there should be consideration given to the concerns mature-age students raise where they feel compromised in their ability to succeed, the main instance being group work.

The proposed B.Phil in the Course Structures Review has many elements that would be attractive to some high-achieving mature-age students. As mature-age students often enter through non-standard pathways, they may not be identified as potential candidates or may not view themselves as fitting the criterion of a TER above 98. The proposed residential and study abroad component may also be off-putting for some academically capable mature-age students. Implementation of the B.Phil should consider the circumstances of mature-age students and devise entry pathways and course structures that do not exclude capable mature-age students.

Recommendation 11:
Identify and establish specific opportunities for mature-age students to engage actively with research from an early stage of their studies through, for example, exposure to professional, field, practical or simulated experiences which allow them to utilize their prior learning and which provide them with further intellectual stimuli. (Note: the proposed B. Phil in the Course Structures Review could provide the intellectual extension some mature-age students seek but they may not be identified as potential participants if they have entered through non-standard pathways. Any implementation of the B.Phil should consider the particular circumstances of mature-age students).

Recommendation 12:
Encourage staff using group work to help groups establish their assessment goals early in the process so that high achieving students, whatever their age, have the opportunity to work together.

5.0  Under 30 and over 30
Students in the 20-29 years of age group are the majority of mature-age students but are often invisible to staff and other students. This cohort identifies strongly as being a distinct group with their own needs which are easily overlooked, especially in terms of social opportunities. Further research needs to be done to identify the needs of this cohort and inform staff, so that these students do not feel like an invisible minority on campus.

Recommendation 13:
Raise awareness of professional and academic staff of the particular circumstances of mature-age students 20-29 years and encourage staff to think of ways of supporting them.

6.0  MAP students
The following recommendation arises from feedback from MAP students in FAHSS, in discussion with the Associate Dean (Education).
**Recommendation 14:**
Review the ongoing requirements for support for Mature-age Provisional entry Pathway (MAP) students, who may require additional support that includes:

- Allowing and encouraging students to complete IRIS and ACE before semester starts
- Reducing overlap in content between IRIS and ACE
- Programming the submission process for IRIS and ACE in such a way that a response is generated confirming the successful completion of those units
- Organising a social gathering in O week for MAP students
- Organising a social event early in semester for MAP and other mature-age students in FAHSS to meet

**Conclusion**

Mature-age students in FAHSS make a valuable contribution to the academic and social life of the faculty. They are often dedicated and resourceful students who have to overcome many obstacles to enrol and succeed in their studies. They are appreciative of the dedication and professionalism of most staff that they encounter, whilst being outspoken of the negative aspects of their student experience. Some need extra support to build their confidence, whereas others are very independent and wish to succeed on their own terms.

Mature-age students in this research clearly articulated some actions that would facilitate their learning and improve their student experience. They challenged the University to be more flexible and responsive to their needs. Sometimes quite small changes in administrative processes such as the timing of submission deadlines would make their lives easier. Often the project team were informed by students that the perception beyond UWA is that this university is not very mature-age student-friendly. Whilst some students agreed that their experiences did not confirm this perception, others felt that UWA has a long way to go to match the flexibility of other universities.

If the University wishes to recruit more mature-age students, then we need to be responsive to the evidence presented in studies such as this and demonstrate to mature-age students that their circumstances are taken into account and that it is as important that their student experience is as good as it is for younger students.

**References**


McInnes, C., & James, R. (1995). First year on campus: *Diversity in the initial experiences of Australian undergraduates.* Canberra: AGPS.


