

## **FIRST YEAR AT UNIVERSITY: A STUDY OF MATURE FEMALE STUDENTS**

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Six mature women students were interviewed about their first year at university. Overall they enjoyed their courses. All agreed that as a result of their year their outlook on life had changed; they felt more confident and independent. They differed from the majority of undergraduates in that they had to cope not only with their studies, but with a variety of personal, domestic, and child-care problems. The findings of the study are similar to those of other studies in Northern Ireland which have investigated the reasons why women leave the formal educational system between the ages of 16 and 25 and their attitudes and reactions to re-entering education as mature students.

Adult educators recognize that many women participate in adult education (Deem, 1983; Thompson, 1983), but often the courses they study cover subjects such as domestic management, personal relationships, and physical appearance. This tends to perpetuate woman's stereotyped role in society. As a reaction to this, adult educators have designed courses to develop the personal growth of women. In 1981, for example, the Women's Educational Centre was opened in Southampton as a co-operative venture between the university, the local education authority, and the Workers' Education Association. New Opportunities for Women (NOW) courses have been established at Hatfield Polytechnic and the University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne (Griffiths, 1988) while Strathclyde University and the Polytechnic of North London discriminate in favour of women to give them greater access to higher education.

In Northern Ireland, three universities - The Queen's University of Belfast (QUB), the University of Ulster (UU), and the Open University (OU) - offer opportunities for adults to continue their education. Thus, in a small province, there is competition to attract mature students.

Courses for women have been offered in recent years. A successful NOW course has been available at UU (Jordanstown) since 1976 and its development has been recorded in detail (Griffiths, 1988). It offers women the opportunity

to acquire new skills and gives them confidence to undertake further study. A research project, sponsored by the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC), investigated the problems faced by mature women who undertook degree courses at the Education Centre at the New University of Ulster at Coleraine, now a campus of the UU (Morgan, Dunn, O'Hara, & Greer, 1980). Problems encountered by women prior to, during, and after university were examined. The Equal Opportunities Commission (1988) published a digest of statistics showing that the percentage of women in higher education in the province has increased in recent years. Their fields of study are the Arts and Social Sciences, rather than the Sciences.

Morgan et al (1980) reviewed the development of Women's Studies, historical attitudes to working women, and educational opportunities. They investigated the reasons why women had given up their education, and the impact of marriage and children on their lives. They point out that the stereotype for many women is a three-phase *sequential* model - formal school education, marriage and family, return to training and career. One of their recommendations is significant.

Educational institutions and the public should be encouraged to consider the view that, for many women, the years after 25 (approx.) are to be considered the normal and unexceptional starting age for an academic and professional career (p.77).

The present paper is an analysis of the reactions of a small group of mature female students to their first year at the Queen's University of Belfast. The only thing the women had in common was that they studied either one or two first year courses in Information Studies.

#### METHOD

After the summer examinations, a letter was sent to the eight mature students who had taken either one or both courses, asking them to participate in a small research project. Six of them willingly agreed. A pilot interview was conducted with a mature female student following another degree programme and some changes were made to the structured interview schedule. Each woman was interviewed either in the researcher's room at QUB or in her own home.

#### *The Women*

To preserve anonymity fictitious names are given. Sarah (35), separated, has two sons (13 and 9) and lives in Belfast. Margaret (46), married, has two sons (21 and 19) and lives in Bangor. Jane (35), married, has two sons (12 and 9) and

lives in Belfast. Mary (35), married, has two daughters (6 and 12) and a son (10) and lives in Bangor. Anne (23), divorced, has a daughter (4) and lives in Belfast. Carmel (39), divorced, has a son (12) and daughter (15) and lives in Larne.

#### PREPARATION FOR STUDY

The six women decided to take a degree for various reasons. All had intended to go to university, but marriage at a young age and the birth of children effectively excluded them from higher education for a long period. The interviews revealed that an important change in their lives contributed to their decision to do a degree. Sarah was having marriage problems, Margaret's two eldest sons were leaving home to go to university. Both Jane and Mary had undergone major gynaecological surgery. Anne, the youngest woman, had recently been divorced and Carmel, who was also divorced, had been made redundant. In most cases it took a long time for each woman to make the final decision.

Why did these women choose QUB? Apart from the availability of courses, other reasons included the fulfilment of a life's ambition and the university's location. Two women originally had considered studying speech therapy at UU (Jordanstown) and one thought of social work. When they discovered that there was intense competition to obtain places they changed direction. The OU was rejected because of the expense, the summer schools (which created child-care problems) and the perception that study with the OU was a long, isolated experience. Several women rejected the OU outright, but Jane and Anne also rejected it having completed foundation courses, which they praised.

The women had interesting academic backgrounds. Their educational experiences were broader than the average undergraduate with a few General Certificate of Education A levels. They had followed formal courses such as A-level classes in further education colleges and OU foundation courses. It is clearly a sign of the times that several women in this small group had experienced distance learning. The fact that all the women had worked, were mothers and had been involved with hobbies, voluntary organizations and so forth meant that they had acquired knowledge, skills, and attitudes in informal and non-formal learning situations. One student decided to enter higher education as a result of taking the New Opportunities for Women course at UU. Although the women studied many courses when they were adults, and were free from the pressures at school to follow subjects girls were expected to study, it is revealing to find that they selected subjects in the arts and social sciences. This of course, had implications for what they could and could not study at university.

### *Information and Advice*

To make educational decisions, students need information, advice, and counselling. The women obtained advice and information about courses before coming to QUB from a variety of sources, including tutors at further education colleges and the OU, husbands, careers advisers, and the Educational Guidance Service for Adults (EGSA). Despite the importance attached to educational guidance by adult educators, only one woman had received practical help from EGSA before coming to QUB. Another became aware of its existence after applying. When interviewed, the other four all admitted that had never heard of EGSA.

The women had to make decisions about the courses they would follow at QUB and were interviewed by an adviser of studies at enrolment, prior to the beginning of the academic year. Some women knew exactly which courses they intended to take, while others were unsure. Three of the students had attended open days and/or spoken to lecturers in specific departments before meeting their adviser.

Deciding to come to university and choosing courses were important decisions for these women to make, yet the impression gained was that they received information in a rather *ad hoc* fashion.

### *Children*

As all the women had children, most of them had to make child-care arrangements to undertake the course. Some of these were made before the start of the academic year, while others could not be made until each student knew her timetable. The age of children was a crucial factor in the decision to apply to QUB in the first place. Most children were at school and left home in the mornings before their mothers. Two mothers had to make special arrangements for young children. Mary had to engage a child-minder as one of her children was too old for the QUB creche, yet too young to be left on her own. Anne had to take her daughter to nursery school in the mornings and so missed some of her 9 am lectures. As the year progressed, half-term holidays and afternoon lectures posed further problems.

### *Courses Selected*

Each woman had to select four courses in the first year. The breakdown is as follows: Biblical Studies (1), Communication and Information Skills (3), Computer Science (1), English (1), German (1), German Studies (1), Information Systems and Environments (4), Latin (1), Philosophy (1), Psychology (3), Social Anthropology (3), Social Studies (3), Spanish (1). Five of the students had a

specific degree in mind, namely Social Studies, English and Spanish, Psychology, German, and Information Studies. As far as expectations were concerned, the women indicated that they were at university to prove something to themselves. This attitude is conveyed in comments such as 'launching myself into the unknown' and 'prove to myself that I could do it.'

#### EVALUATION OF THE COURSES

The six women represent a small group within a minority group, i.e., mature undergraduate students. In view of the small number involved and the range of subjects they studied it is only possible to evaluate overall reactions to their first year studies.

The women received some form of written statement at the beginning of most courses outlining some, if not necessarily all, of the following - aims, objectives, content, methods, and assessment. The amount and presentation of this material varied from department to department. This did not escape the notice of the women, particularly those who had completed OU courses.

In general, the women were satisfied with the courses which they found both interesting and challenging. While criticisms were made about some lecturers, the students were generally satisfied with the teaching abilities of the academic staff. Dissatisfaction arose when lecturers organized their material badly and/or were poor communicators. One point that annoyed some women concerned professionalism rather than teaching abilities. It was annoying, for example, to make special arrangements for children to be looked after, come to a lecture, and then find that it had been cancelled.

The formal lecture was the main teaching method on all courses. Apart from some criticism of the lectures in two subjects, the group claimed to have liked lectures in most courses. The women enjoyed the seminars as they were able to participate. Several women commented that tutors relied on them to maintain discussions because of the reticence of many undergraduates. Practical classes in several courses were criticized because they were badly managed, although they were regarded as an appropriate learning method.

The women favoured an assessment system which included a continuous element and a final written examination. The assessment in seven courses was considered inappropriate because it was entirely based on a final written examination. Six courses had an element of continuous assessment which varied from 20 to 60 percent. This inconsistent approach did not appear to be a matter of concern, but all the women favoured the idea of knowing that success or failure

did not entirely depend on their performance on a written examination. They expressed annoyance at doing work for essays which did not count.

Overall, the women were satisfied with the organization and presentation of their courses. Despite these favourable reactions, a degree of criticism, some already noted, cannot be ignored. The students who had followed OU courses and were impressed by the course units tended to be critical of the organization and presentation of some QUB courses. One woman, for example, was critical of the organization of practical classes in one course and wrote a letter of complaint to the head of department.

Each woman was asked if the courses she studied met her needs. Most women found it difficult to answer the question with any degree of depth. This implied that needs are not explicitly expressed in many cases. Some students found that some courses did not live up to their expectations, although this is not the same as meeting needs. Each course was presented to students as a 'product' over which they had little control. They had no opportunity to contribute to the design of courses, but this did not seem to be a cause for concern.

#### REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST YEAR AT QUB

The women felt that they were treated well by their lecturers and tutors. They commented that the academic staff respected them because they contributed to seminars, showed interest, and handed in work on time.

Mixing with the student body did not cause problems for the women. Although some women initially felt that they would be overwhelmed by the young undergraduates, they quickly realized that this was not the case. It was claimed that mature students were criticized by young students for talking too much in seminars, yet the young students, according to the women, were often reluctant participants.

All the women mixed primarily with other mature students, whenever possible. They felt that although they were accepted by the other students, they did not wish to mix with them socially, as they had their own interests and social life.

Little specific provision was made for mature students. Those who consulted their tutors felt they were treated no differently from other students. Following pressure from a group of final year mature students, the Students' Union agreed to make a room available as a common room for mature students. The reaction of the women to this initiative was interesting. They said it would have been useful if it had been available at the beginning of the academic year when they felt at sea in a strange environment. As it was established after the year had

begun, the women had made friendships and developed their routines. While claiming that the common room was a good idea, they also said that they did not want to get involved in an introverted 'ghetto' where mature students focused on their own problems.

The women encountered a number of study problems at the university. They did not like the booklists distributed by some departments which gave no indication of the materials they should concentrate on. They complained that preparation for essays was difficult as there were not enough books in the special undergraduate collection in the library. Other complaints about the library included the lack of space at certain times and the unacceptable level of noise. Two women attempted to overcome these deficiencies by using other libraries. One student used her local public library, another asked a friend, who was a student at UU (Jordanstown), to borrow books on her behalf.

The women did most of their studying at home. Studying itself was not a major problem as all the women had been students shortly before coming to QUB. In several households, all members of the family had work of some kind to do in the evenings, so it was possible to minimize distractions such as television. The women had to manage their time efficiently. As well as studying, they had to prepare meals, do housework, and look after children (this included helping with homework). Those women with husbands living at home could rely on them for various kinds of support, but the single women had generally to cope alone, although relatives could relieve some of the pressure at times. The conditions of one single parent who lived with her mother were bad at one point in the year. As four adults and one child were living in a two-bedroomed house, she had to study between 2 am and 8 am. It would appear, though it has to be accepted that our sample is very small, that it is less difficult for women who are living with husbands and children to study than for those who are single parents. Having said that, there was some evidence to suggest that not all husbands fully supported their wife's entry into full-time education.

The women favoured the flexible degree structure in QUB. The policy of accepting students into a faculty rather than a specific course permits students to change direction if they wish. At the time of the interview, four of the women were intending to pursue their original degree choice. Sarah was contemplating a degree in Social Anthropology, primarily because it would be a complete change. Jane intended to drop Psychology and was considering Sociology (major) and Women's Studies (minor).

The women did not participate in university life outside academic work. This was primarily because of their other commitments to family and home life.

Reflecting on their first year at university, all women admitted that they changed for the better as a result of their experience. This change took place gradually. For the first few months, they had doubts about their own abilities and had feelings of inferiority in relation to the rest of the student body. When they submitted assignments and performed as well as everyone else, their confidence increased. The word 'confidence' was used frequently when they responded to this area of questioning. Changes in their overall attitudes and position seemed to be more significant than their studies. As well as having greater confidence to study, they claimed to be more confident in social situations saying 'I have something to talk about' and 'I can now answer the question - What do you do?' One woman said that it was the first time in her life that she felt independent.

The final open-ended question in the interview about their general reaction to the year as a whole generated a number of encouraging responses, including 'I had personal problems during the year. Coming here helped.' 'I would encourage anyone to go.' 'Amazing to find what you are capable of.' 'Ask a busy person to do something and they'll do it.' 'At times I have regretted it, yet if you give up you have lost more.' 'Have had to give up a lot to fit QUB in.' 'Looking forward to next year.'

While the women had some reservations about their decision to study, they recognised that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages and were keen to continue.

Each woman had undergone the process of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1983), although each individual was influenced in a different way. By the end of the year, the women were looking at their own worlds in new and different ways. They had found a renewed self-confidence, new friends, interests and topics of conversation, they were thinking about their futures, had a new sense of independence and suddenly found they were released from thinking primarily about domestic duties and child care.

#### CONCLUSIONS

This small group of women decided to go to university because of a change in circumstances. Griffiths (1988) shows that women return to education, not necessarily higher education, for 'process reasons' and 'instrumental reasons'. The former refer to changes in circumstances, while the latter see education as a means to an end. Clearly these women decided to do degrees for process reasons, although instrumental reasons, such as the economic necessity to find fulfilling work, were important, particularly for the single parents.



The women selected QUB for various reasons after weighing up the competing local universities. Before coming to QUB, they had experienced varying amounts of formal and non-formal adult education. They were not fully aware of the range of sources of educational information available, although work by Butler (nd) indicates that access to information, guidance, and counselling is vital for adults. Most of the group had a specific degree in mind when they commenced their studies. Overall, they enjoyed their courses, although they were critical of some aspects of content, methods, and assessment. They got on well with 'school leavers' but preferred to mix with other mature students. They did not expect the university to make special provision for them. Family and domestic commitments imposed some constraints on the women such as the need to make child-care arrangements, the need to study at home, and an inability to participate in the wider aspects of university life. Reflecting on their first year at university, the women appear to have undergone a process of perspective transformation.

Clearly it is not possible to make broad conclusions on the basis of a small sample. Nevertheless, there is great similarity between the findings of this project and other research carried out in Northern Ireland (Griffiths, 1988; Morgan et al 1980). There is an obvious need for more research to investigate the needs of mature students, especially as their numbers are likely to increase in response to demands to broaden access and cater for life-long education. Staff development sessions dealing with the characteristics and needs of such students would also seem appropriate.

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