

## **LECTURERS' PERCEPTIONS OF MATURE STUDENTS IN INSTITUTES OF TECHNOLOGY**

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While lecturers in Institutes of Technology have traditionally designed courses, and employed teaching approaches and strategies and methods of assessment for students who are 18 years of age and have just completed the Leaving Certificate, they are now having to cater for increasing numbers of mature students whose approaches to learning and pedagogical needs are quite distinct from the mainstream student. A study in Institutes of Technology, using semi-structured interviews, was undertaken to ascertain the level of understanding and insight lecturers have of mature students and how their pedagogical approach may have been extended to include them in the learning environment. While respondents revealed a high level of awareness of the needs of mature students, reflecting many of the theories and approaches expounded by educational theorists, the growing number of such students in mainstream classes was found to have presented many unprecedented challenges for which little or no provision had been made in terms of staff development.

Mature students have traditionally been under-represented in Irish colleges and universities. Citing Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Education (OECD) figures, the white paper on adult education, *Learning for Life* (2000), noted that 'just over 19% of new entrants to degree-level programmes in all OECD countries in 1995 were aged 26 or over, compared to the Irish figure of 2 percent. With regard to Certificate and Diploma Level programmes, the OECD average was almost 37% compared to an Irish figure of just 1%' (p.138).

Various efforts have been made to address this situation. The Commission on the Points System (1999) stated that by 2006, third-level institutions should set aside a quota of 15% for mature students, which should rise to 25% by 2015. Skilbeck (2000) and The *Report of The Action Group on Access to Third Level Education* (2001) argued, however, that a decline in birth rate had caused some alarm in third-level colleges. In the Institutes of Technology, for example, over 90% of students were aged between 17 and 19 years (Clancy, 2001). The institutes may see a reduction in this traditional cohort by one-third over the next decade. The increase in mature students may simply be an attempt to offset the fall in student numbers and to achieve goals of national development and renewal. Such an approach is very different from one espoused by Dewey (1916), who believed that progressive education should play a role in correcting unfair

privilege, rather than in perpetrating it. Almost a century later, Lynch (1997) and McMahon (2000) stress this point in relation to mature students, claiming that improved access should ensure social justice and democracy and be considered a right, not a privilege.

There is the implicit danger that if mature students are perceived as objects of government policies, the central issue of their pedagogical experiences in colleges may not be given due consideration. If the panacea for the fall in student numbers is to be found in initiatives to combat social exclusion and disadvantage, then an unfortunate mismatch is occurring. This can have implications not only for general institute strategy, but may also filter down to the lecture hall where this new cohort of students, bringing with them their own particular needs, will be seen merely as replacing what went before.

There is evidence that mature students can face a range of challenges both academically and personally when returning to education (e.g., Crogan, 1995; Heslop, 1996; Lynch, 1997; McGivney, 1990; McNamara, Mulcahy & O'Hara, 2001; Rogers, 2002; Squires, 1994; Woodbyrne & Young 1998). These include poor coping skills, unrecognized learning difficulties, financial problems, difficulty with juggling time commitments, and less confidence in their ability to learn vis a vis mainstream students. Snyder and Swann (1978) and Wlodkowski (1998) believe that adult learners can return to education with a fixed notion of what learning is, what education is, what intelligence is, and where they rate themselves on this elusive ladder. While it has been shown that non-completion in adult students is normally due to personal or financial factors rather than to academic failure (Richardson & King, 1998), societal influences, stereotypes, and expectations can play a part in the often negative perception of the intellectual abilities of the adult student. Age can become a divisive factor in many ways. Adults can experience a sense of alienation, of being outsiders and not 'owning' higher education. As students progress in their studies, they may also experience a distancing from significant others who do not share the same study experience. They may also suffer acutely from exam pressure, an accreditation process which, Skilbeck (2001) argues, has focused on competition, individualism, and a limited range of intelligence.

The *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education* (2001) states that 'education makes a fundamentally important contribution to the quality and well-being of society' (p.13). O'Riordan (1999) points out, however, that it can be a highly subsidized engine of social inequality as full-time third-level education is, in many ways, the preserve of students who come from a particular socioeconomic background with a modal age of 18 years. Jordan (1997) and IBEC (2001) believe that challenges arise for adult learners as the

administration, resource allocation and, most importantly teaching, are primarily focused on younger students. Several commentators support this view by arguing that the education of adults can often challenge the limits of standardization and conventional education and that colleges need to adapt to the needs of adult learners, rather than allow a situation to develop where adults have to adapt to a system that was primarily designed for people of school-leaving age (Knowles, 1994; McNamara et al., 2001; Rogers, 2002; Young, 2000).

Many institutes offer excellent facilities, student support, and state of the art technology. However, even in the face of rapid technological advances, few would dispute the centrality of the teacher's role (Skilbeck, 2001). While stressing that teaching lies at the heart of the educational process, Jarvis (1996) has noted that many of the positive impacts of peripheral supports can be greatly reduced if the mature student's pedagogical experience is not properly considered. This is especially true when teaching adults. McNamara et al. (2001) and the green paper, *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* (1998), state that it is the learner, and not the tutor, who is at the centre of the learning process, and that much of the success of students centres on the ability of staff to recognize the needs of the adult learner. Teaching strategies, approaches, and methods of assessment in the Institutes of Technology have, however, traditionally focused on the 18-year old student.

The white paper, *Learning for Life* (2000), maintains that many tutors who teach adults are recruited on the basis of a business, trade, or second-level teaching qualification, and lack expertise in the delivery of programmes to adult learners. This is supported by commentators who argue that little or no progress has been made in the development of qualifications in this field (e.g., Bassett, Brady, Fleming, & Inglis, 1989; Brady, 2001; McNamara et al., 2001; Wlodkowski, 1998). In fact, 'adult education may be viewed as a semi-profession in the very early stages of professionalisation' (Jarvis, 1995, p.187). The Qualifications Education and Training Act (1999) stressed that the theory and practice of teaching and learning would grow in importance in the future, which reflects McNamara et al's (2001) finding that over 90% of adult education co-ordinators expressed a need for a Diploma in Further Education and Training. The study described in this paper was designed to explore and uncover viewpoints, perceptions, behaviours, and attitudes of staff relating to mature students in Institutes of Technology.

#### METHOD

The primary method chosen was the semi-structured interview, which took place between October and December 2002. The duration of interviews was

between 28 and 45 minutes. Analysis took the form of open and axial coding, informed by grounded theory (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Open coding involves the break-down, analysis, comparison, and categorization of data, while axial coding is the organization of relationships between categories. The respondents were ten lecturers, chosen on the basis of purposive sampling from various Institutes of Technology, and were wide-ranging in terms of age, discipline, subject area, and years of teaching experience. Interviews were recorded, and each respondent's name was coded using fictitious initials. To gain a greater understanding of the research questions, several focus groups of mature students and lecturers were conducted prior to the main interviews.

## RESULTS

### *Levels of Understanding and Insight of Lecturers Towards the Pedagogical Needs of Mature Students*

Respondents stated that while mainstream students will often approach third-level college as the next educational step in their lives, adult learners have made a deliberate decision to alter their lives personally, socially, and financially. They also stressed the importance of being aware that the transition from the home or workplace to returning to a course of study can often be quite difficult and challenging. Adults can also be concerned about getting value for their time and financial investment in education. It was believed that the tutor should assume more of a facilitation role and that there should also be some type of formative evaluative procedure. Links could be developed with previous educational centres or other outside bodies that the adult may have attended.

Staff should encourage and reassure mature students – something that you may not bother about with the 18-year old. They have just come through the Leaving Certificate.

People holding down ordinary jobs are not used to being constantly under pressure.

Their time is precious...they want value for money.

They will grow in confidence when they...see you as a facilitator, rather than the traditional view.

There was agreement that while great determination is required by adults to return to education, they can also suffer from a lack of confidence, which can manifest itself in many ways.

The lack of confidence can hold them back.

We need to help them get over the initial culture shock... We need to bridge this confidence gap... If they can get over the first few months they tend to perform proportionally well.

They can be dominant in class because they feel they have to establish why they are there. It is a defense mechanism on their part.

Respondents believed that the age of both the adult learner and the tutor can sometimes act as a constraining factor in the learning environment.

Mature students tend to do better in an environment where they are old enough to take a paternal attitude or in a group with other mature students... it is difficult for people in their late twenties or early thirties.

It is absolutely difficult for a younger lecturer... you get many different types of characters and many complex individuals... the young lecturer is just out of college... and there could be a little resentment there [by the mature student].

There was unanimous agreement that mature students delivered benefits both professionally and personally.

These people are wonderful people who come into our kinds of places, at this stage of their life and sit in classrooms and participate. They have great gumption to even be here.

Mature students with learning problems will take up whatever support you are putting on for them whereas standard students... do not like the remedial baggage that goes with it.

They are now aspiring to a whole new life... you are making a difference in a very real and immediate way.

#### *Prior Experience*

Respondents believed that the mature student's prior knowledge and experience, which may have been gained through previous study, work, or general life experience, can affect the learning process. This can include the group dynamic between the mature and the mainstream student, the mature student's difficulty in applying practice to theory, higher emotional investment in knowledge, and negative transfer learning.

If they have more practical experience – they could monopolize... they may intimidate the younger ones.

The way maths was taught 30 years ago was very different in teaching methodologies as well as content. It would have been better if they had not come across maths at all because then you would be starting off with a

clean slate, setting up a structure or a system to learn something that was not contradicting something else. In maths you have to unlearn stuff before you can teach them stuff.

The mature student has difficulty in learning the principle after they have learned about the practical aspects. This is a learning curve for them.

Some are open to learning...others are locked into a system of thinking...It is interesting the way they are deflecting that. They are saying the language is too complicated. They are saying anything to avoid dealing with it.

One respondent, who teaches a Humanities subject, also stressed the importance of having worked examples and discussion.

You have to look for a metaphor that they can relate to, because they are not tuned into the distillation process of taking a concept and being able to build on it.

On occasion, an adult student may have a greater knowledge of a subject area than the tutor. Respondents perceived this as being both an enabling and a constraining force.

I have learned a lot from mature students...It is important to openly acknowledge this knowledge – quite often this is what they are looking for... you cannot do a lot to increase that knowledge, but you can increase their confidence... you can help them to structure that knowledge into the academic area.

To a certain extent they play a game of hunt the lecturer. They'll hunt you in a pack. They are waiting to see if your knowledge is running out.

Mature students will have a wealth of experience...you have to face that reality.

#### *Short-term Memory*

A minority of lecturers stated that mature students had an inherent difficulty with short-term memory while others stated that this was affected by extraneous factors. They believed there should be less emphasis on rote learning, and more on understanding and appreciation to internalize learning.

Both cohorts [mainstream and mature students] have the same memory capacity, but it is the numerous external demands on the mature student that can prevent effective learning in terms of using short-term memory.

If you are discussing it you are thinking about it, if you are thinking about it you are internalizing it in your mind and have defined it in more creative ways...They need to understand the concept.

The opinion was expressed that mainstream students come from a secondary school system which was described as 'a passive environment' that places heavy emphasis on rote learning and gives students an advantage when using short-term memory.

To get their points and to get on to courses 18-year olds have had to practice surface learning...the student who is good at lateral thinking may not be good at the regurgitation of facts. Maybe they do not get into third-level until later.

#### *Deep Learning*

Several respondents thought that mature students often approached learning with needs, motivations, and expectations that differed from those of mainstream students. It was believed, for instance, that the adult learner is more orientated towards deep learning. Reasons and motivations were offered as to why adults engage in this type of learning and why an approach to learning which is based around the memorizing-regurgitation cycle does not appeal to them.

It is founded on a very deep reason as to why they are there. Not only just for superficial qualification or advancement. It is for knowledge's sake. While most 18-year olds want it packaged, they want it presented in a neat little box... the mature student...wants to understand the concept – what is the thinking behind it.

It's slower to foster deep learning if there are no mature students

When teaching 18-year olds...it is not the same value...it's a treadmill for them almost.

Teaching adults helps to elevate our teaching, to remind us that teaching is not simply the transmission of facts. Adult learners...look for shades of grey. They want depth of knowledge...while the 18-year old switches off.

Adults were also in many ways perceived as being more challenging academically than the mainstream student.

Given any opportunity they will articulate what is going on in their minds to try and increase their learning. They wear you down...it is an intense experience teaching adults... intellectually and mentally it is more tiring.

The notes need to have far more depth... debate is wide-ranging – you have to anticipate issues around the debate.

#### *Assessment*

Mature students, due to their prior knowledge and experience, may be adept at discussing, demonstrating, or applying knowledge. The traditional written examination, however, may not reflect their understanding, capabilities, and insights. Continuous assessment, presentations, interviews, and journals were deemed to be more beneficial than the traditional examination. It was also stated that positive feedback should be used as an integral part of assessment.

Under no circumstances should somebody who has a life experience be subjected to an exam. All we are doing is setting them up for failure...[they are] being judged on something other than knowledge – exam technique, and typically this puts them off...the examination exists as a convenient motivator for the younger student, whereas the adult learner won't buy this at all.

Regular continuous assessment and regular feedback – feedback should always be positive and even if it is negative, it should be positive.

#### *Teaching Mainstream and Mature Students*

There was agreement among interviewees that mature students can be diverse in their needs, motivations, and expectations. When mainstream students, who are in themselves a diverse group, are included in the learning environment, these differences are considerably heightened. Different pedagogical strategies and approaches were offered when teaching both groups, demonstrating the difficulties and dichotomies that can arise.

Lecturers often have more traditional ways of doing things – they target a traditional audience. Their methods haven't been sufficiently challenged because the number of adults is not large enough...having a class driven by conventional teaching modes can be stressful for adult learners...teaching methods need not be dramatically different...what is important is one's approach and attitude.

A proportion [of adults] suffer in silence. A lot of lecturers are not aware that there is an issue there.

You are still directed by the syllabus and the course objectives. In a sense you are pitching it to two very different audiences. It is a lot more work on those who are delivering it.



Adults bring a wealth of knowledge with them and experiences and you cannot go in and don the robe of lecturer and lecture in the traditional method.

With the younger student you are building on the foundations of their understanding of the world ...With the adult learner you are confirming their understanding and moving to a different level.

One could tentatively conclude that teaching a group where there is a substantial number of adult students could prove difficult for many tutors. One respondent stated that quite recently she moved from teaching an all-adult group to a class comprising mostly mainstream students.

I was aware that I was dealing with a whole different body... You have to watch your vocabulary, words and the examples you use, your tone, pace and content... With the mature student you are not so much trying to make this come alive and have meaning, whereas with the 18-year old you are trying to connect to a bigger meaning for them... It is a juggling act in that you are making a connection with both groups in terms of relevancy.

#### *Staff Development*

Respondents highlighted the lack of training in pedagogical and andragogical approaches. Policy procedures aimed at accommodating the mature student were also suggested.

My approach [when teaching mature students] is in terms of what my gut is telling me...and not from any formal methodology that has been passed on. If there was some system in place when we are embarking on these types of markets, that people be made aware that there are some differences in the approach...

Teaching the two groups together is difficult for people with no training...Nobody goes into a job except this one with absolutely no training of any kind whatsoever...New lecturers are just parachuted into a situation and left to their own devices...This is a serious issue... I would set up a separate management department whose job it is to consider the educational needs of this group.

Projects from access...seeing what the critical elements are, feeding that back into the mainstream. The access office becoming a learning support unit... and that means changing syllabi to being more relevant to the actual students we are getting in, and we will be getting in, and the sort of training that teachers should need.

The approach we take to this cohort is wrong...It's a reaction to a supposed drop-off in demographics. If you start from that premise you are guaranteed to get it wrong. We should start from the premise: these people are out there, how best might we provide services to help them.

#### CONCLUSION

Respondents in this study exhibited a high level of understanding of, and insight into, the needs of mature students. They recognized that mature students can experience alienation, anxiety, and insecurity, which ironically can masquerade as overconfidence or arrogance. Personal commitments, prior educational history, work experience, facility for deep learning and rapport with both the tutor and younger students, can bring many challenges and rewards. The tutor is often compelled to have a greater mastery of subject matter and may have this knowledge questioned and challenged, a situation which can be particularly difficult for the young or inexperienced tutor. Greater transparency and accountability may also be demanded by the adult learner from both tutor and educational institution.

The presence of mature students can, however, greatly enhance the learning environment. They can act as excellent role models and deepen and broaden the learning experience for mainstream students, and indeed for lecturers. If the diversity, distinctness, and challenges that the adult learner brings to the educational environment is to be acknowledged, then the needs and concerns of tutors who are dealing with these challenges, often in isolation, and without any formal assistance or training, should also be given recognition.

Tutors in the present study outlined a number of pedagogical difficulties and problems that they had encountered and the benefits which mature students can bring to the learning environment. They also stressed the importance of promoting a more positive and inclusive culture for mature learners. While educational theories regarding mature students may not have been to the forefront of respondents' minds, many were unconsciously advertent to them. This appreciation stemmed not from any formalized method of training or acquisition, however, but from experiential learning, personal insight, and awareness. While respondents proposed various strategies that could be used to adapt to the learning needs of adult learners, the dearth of staff development initiatives to facilitate lecturers in dealing with this unprecedented pedagogical experience was highlighted and stressed.

These reflections point to an obvious need to develop teaching approaches, strategies for curriculum delivery, and assessment methods to meet the rich and

diverse pedagogical demands of both mainstream and mature students if colleges are to ensure successful performance, retention, and completion for all students. Staff development initiatives will be required to meet this need which, it could be argued, can only enhance learning for all students as best practice in teaching adults could also represent best practice for all learners. Finding such a forum, however, may bring its own challenges.

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