

MATURE STUDENTS IN FULL-TIME PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION¹

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The characteristics and experiences of a group of people who had studied for an honours degree on a full-time basis as mature students are examined. All but one of the mature graduates in Physiotherapy at a Dublin university (n=13) provided information in a questionnaire, together with a sample of traditional-age graduates (n=13) who had attended the same course. A majority of the mature graduates reported that they had previously been in professional or white-collar occupations. They also reported experiencing more financial problems as students than the traditional-age graduates and more problems relating to the demands of family. However, fewer mature graduates reported problems with motivation to study or lack of confidence in clinical work. Although few mature graduates said that they had difficulty in integrating with younger students, a number said that family commitments limited their social integration.

Mature students in their twenties and thirties are becoming a common sight on university campuses and are to be found in professional and other courses. In professional courses, a large volume of core skills and knowledge must be acquired before a professional qualification can be awarded. Hence, such courses do not readily lend themselves to a part-time or distance-learning format. This means that mature students studying for a professional qualification must adapt to a system designed primarily for people of school-leaving age, without family commitments.

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Various reasons have been proposed to explain why adults choose to return to education. Many return for work- or career-related reasons. There is consensus in the literature that the most common motivation is to improve career or employment prospects. Some wished to continue their education immediately after completing secondary school, but could not do so because of personal and family circumstances (Cochrane, 1991). Others enter education to meet a need for self-development or to alleviate boredom (Knapper & Cropley, 1991).

Higher Education Authority (HEA) figures indicate that 43% of mature entrants to higher education in Ireland in 1993 were female (Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education, 1995). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (1987) reported that the majority of people returning to education as adults were aged 25 to 35 years, and that most mature students were married.

The high cost of education has been identified as a major barrier preventing adults from returning to education (Morrissey, 1990; OECD, 1987; Solmon & Gordon, 1981; Tuijnman & van der Kamp, 1992). The recent initiative in Ireland to phase out college fees may go some way towards easing the financial burden on students. For mature students, in particular, the pilot provision for retention of social welfare benefits while in full-time third-level education must be regarded as a positive development (Ireland. Department of Social Welfare, 1994).

There is evidence that once adults have embarked on third-level education, their experiences differ from those of traditional-age students. Knapper and Cropley (1991) maintain that adults learn in a different way. They say, for example, that memory becomes less effective with age so that more time is required for committing information to memory. However, these authors also report that mature students have some advantages over younger students insofar as they have stronger motivation to study and more realistic learning expectations. Tuijnman and van der Kamp (1992) point out that adults tend to learn in a more problem-oriented way and learn more effectively if the material is relevant to their needs and if it can be 'applied' in some way.

A further problem experienced by mature students may be lack of confidence in their own ability (Knapper & Cropley, 1991; Tuijnman & van der Kamp, 1992). This may be particularly relevant to the group of adults in the study described in this paper in that they joined classes of high achievers in terms of Leaving Certificate Examination 'points'; the traditional-age students had recently received tangible confirmation of their ability to succeed at examinations, which many of the mature students may not have received.

Lack of time due to family and other commitments is a problem for many mature students. It has been found that mature students do not participate in

extra-curricular college activities to the same extent as traditional-age students (Cochrane, 1991). University life is not solely concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and skills in the lecture theatre or laboratory but encompasses wider issues including socializing and exchanging ideas on an informal basis. It would be unfortunate if mature students were deprived of these aspects of college life due to pressure of other commitments.

The study reported in this paper sought to ascertain the characteristics and experiences of a group of people who had studied Physiotherapy as mature students. The graduates were surveyed by means of a questionnaire which was also sent to a sample of traditional-age graduates who had attended the same course to identify differences between the two groups.

METHOD

Participants in the study had been enrolled in a four-year, full-time degree course leading to a BSc (Hons) in Physiotherapy at a Dublin university between 1987 and 1994. Participants were considered 'mature' if they had applied to the university on a mature-student application form and had been accepted on the basis of interview. This meant that all mature participants had been at least 25 years old at entry to the course. (The minimum age for mature students has since been reduced to 23 years.) The entire population of mature graduates since the introduction of the honours degree course, which consisted of 14 graduates, was invited to participate in the study.

For the purposes of comparison, a sample of traditional-age graduates was also invited to participate. These graduates had been offered a place on the course on the basis of second-level examination performance (the 'points' system administered by the Central Applications Office). The same number (14) of traditional-age graduates as mature graduates was selected. As far as possible, the traditional-age graduates were matched by sex with the mature graduates. To facilitate a comparison between the two groups, only traditional-age graduates who had completed second-level education and entered the Physiotherapy course in the same calendar year were eligible for inclusion.

The same number of traditional-age graduates was selected from each graduating class. For example, there were two mature graduates in 1994; hence, two traditional-age graduates were required from the 1994 class. Class lists were obtained for each year, and stratified into males and females. The name of a traditional-age graduate was randomly selected from the appropriate stratum to correspond with the relevant mature name and, if that graduate satisfied the inclusion criteria, he/she was invited to participate. Due to the small number of males studying Physiotherapy, it was not possible in four cases to match male

mature graduates with male traditional-age graduates; female graduates were selected in these instances.

A questionnaire, which had been piloted with a group of undergraduate Physiotherapy students, addressed the following issues: demographic details, academic qualifications, financial support, reasons for entering third-level education as a mature student, problems encountered during the course, and level of social integration as a student. The questionnaire was posted to graduates with a covering letter and a stamped return envelope. A second copy was sent to the non-respondents three weeks later. A total of 26 completed questionnaires was returned; 13 from mature graduates and 13 from traditional-age graduates.

RESULTS

Characteristics and Background of Mature Respondents

Ages of mature respondents ranged from 25 to 38 years (mean: 29.5) which is in line with the results of studies carried out by the HEA and the OECD. Eight were single when they began their course, four were married, and one divorced. Six had at least one child under the age of 18 years while they were students. Both the HEA and the OECD report that the majority of mature students are married. The subjects in this study did not reflect this; less than one-third (n=4) were married when they entered the course.

Just over half the respondents (n=7) were male. What is interesting about the sexes of the mature graduates is the striking contrast with the overall sex profile in Physiotherapy. Physiotherapy is a predominantly female profession; at the time of the study, membership of the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists (ISCP) (1995) was 36 male and 1,046 female. The predominance of females is also evident among current students; during the time this study was carried out, 12 students in the School of Physiotherapy were male and 106 female.

The results of this study suggest some possible reasons for the greater proportion of mature male graduates. One male reported that, at the time he left school, he did not think Physiotherapy was an appropriate career for a man. However, and perhaps of greater significance, of the six graduates who reported that they did not know anything about Physiotherapy when they were considering careers at school leaving age, four were male. Similarly, four of five students who reported that they were not interested in Physiotherapy as a career were male.

The reasons given by mature graduates for not studying Physiotherapy immediately after leaving school may be broadly categorized as inability/ineligibility to study Physiotherapy; lack of interest in the career; and lack of accurate information.

A total of eleven reasons related to inability or ineligibility to study Physiotherapy. Eight of these related to lack of qualifications, financial reasons, or family circumstances. It is of concern to note that the remaining three reasons were a perception by respondents that they would have been unable to succeed academically on the course. This perception was subsequently proved to be false, as all successfully completed the course.

Five individuals reported reasons relating to lack of interest at school-leaving age in studying Physiotherapy. All decided to pursue this particular career some years after leaving school.

A total of seven individuals reported reasons relating to lack of accurate information. The reasons included lack of knowledge about Physiotherapy or about suitable courses or the perception that Physiotherapy was not a suitable career for a male. It should be noted that five of the seven who reported reasons relating to lack of information were male. This suggests that information regarding Physiotherapy may not be as readily accessible to male school leavers as it is to females.

Immediately prior to embarking on Physiotherapy education, the mature graduates had had a variety of occupations. Ten were in professional or 'white-collar' work, two were at home with their families full-time, and one worked in the sports/leisure industry.

Individuals were asked about their primary reason for entering Physiotherapy education. Twelve reported that their primary motivation was to become Physiotherapists. The reason given by the remaining individual was self-development/self-fulfilment.

Eleven of the mature respondents reported that they had not received a grant. One received a grant of £1,000 from the Mature Students (Women) Special Higher Education Grants scheme, a scheme no longer in operation. One mature student received a HEA grant in her final year.

Respondents were asked if they needed to change their living arrangements to attend college. Six mature respondents had to make alternative living arrangements; two moved into rented accommodation during term time; and four moved home permanently.

Nine of the traditional-age graduates also had to change their accommodation arrangements to attend college. For seven of these, this involved a move to rented accommodation during term time. The remaining two availed of accommodation with friends or family or moved into family-owned accommodation which did not require them to pay rent. This pattern of living arrangements, with students returning to their family home in vacations, may be considered the norm for traditional-age students from outside the Dublin area

attending university in the city. However, it is an arrangement reported by only two mature respondents.

This raises the possibility that adults who do not live close to an institution offering the type of course in which they are interested will find it difficult to enrol unless they are in a position to move house permanently. None of the mature graduates who reported moving home permanently was married at the start of the Physiotherapy course. As it may be more difficult for a potential student who is married to move to a new area due to spouse's job and other factors, married people living some distance from their preferred college appear to be at an even greater disadvantage than single people. This may go some way towards explaining the low proportion of married mature students in this study.

Experiences on the Physiotherapy Course

Respondents were asked about any problems they had experienced which affected their ability to complete the course and to indicate problems which led them to seriously consider withdrawing from the course.

Some interesting differences are evident in the experiences reported by the two groups while they were students. Six traditional-age graduates said that they had not experienced any problems which affected their ability to complete the course, but only three of the mature graduates gave this response.

In terms of problems relating to respondents' confidence in their academic ability, there was little difference between the two groups. The problems in this category included doubts about academic ability to carry out coursework, doubts about ability to perform well in examinations, and examination fears/stress. Nine such problems were reported by five mature graduates, and eight by four traditional-age graduates. Thus, the traditional-age graduates' high 'points' achievement in second-level examinations would appear not to have given them an advantage over the mature graduates in terms of confidence in their academic ability.

In the second year of the course, students begin clinical placements which continue throughout the third and fourth years. During these placements, students are required to assess and treat patients. Although this is not documented in the literature, at an intuitive level it may be surmised that mature students would find this type of situation less threatening than younger students, who may lack the maturity and life experience to cope easily in a hospital environment.

The results of this study confirm that young students found clinical work more problematic. Only one mature graduate reported this as a problem, whereas three traditional-age respondents did; one even gave serious consideration to withdrawing from the course.

Mature students also appear to have had an advantage over traditional-age students in motivation to study. Four traditional-age graduates reported a problem with this, compared to only two mature graduates. One mature graduate who reported experiencing a number of problems volunteered a determination to complete the course regardless of what problems were encountered.

Respondents' commitments outside college were found to have interfered with their studies in a number of cases. Problems included difficulty in attending college or in studying in the evenings or at weekends due to other responsibilities, and difficulty with childcare. Seven such problems were reported by mature graduates. One had considered withdrawing from the course due to childcare problems. Three of the traditional-age graduates reported that they had difficulty in finding time to study in the evenings or at weekends due to other responsibilities. None reported that these responsibilities prevented them from attending college.

The most dramatic difference between the problems reported by the two groups relates to financial difficulty. Only one traditional-age graduate reported financial difficulty, compared to seven mature graduates. Two mature graduates seriously considered withdrawing from the course because of financial problems. This may be related in part to the mature graduates' ineligibility for educational grants at the time they were in college. Only two mature graduates had been grant-aided, each for one year only. Only three traditional-age graduates reported that they had received a grant, but financial difficulties did not interfere with the studies of the great majority of the traditional-age graduates.

The participants in this study may have been more prone to financial difficulty than other mature students due to the attendance requirements of the course. Students on the Physiotherapy course have a very full timetable compared to many other university students so that working part-time during term to generate income is often not a realistic option.

Respondents were asked to assess the extent to which they integrated socially with other students during their time in college, and whether they would have liked to integrate to a greater extent. The traditional-age respondents reported a greater degree of social integration in college than the mature respondents. Ten mature respondents reported less than total integration, six indicating that they would have liked to integrate to a greater extent. The reasons reported for their limited integration related mainly to family commitments. In addition to this, one mature respondent had to work to pay fees and support a family. One respondent said that age prevented further integration and another expressed a wish to maintain pre-existing friendships.

Six traditional-age respondents also said that they would have liked to integrate to a greater extent, saying that their limited integration was mainly due

to full timetabling and off-campus location and the need to study at weekends or in the evenings. It is clear that these factors would also have applied to mature students, who followed the same course in the same location. It may be construed from this that the mature students accepted the timetable and location as a 'fact of life' of the course, and did not consider that these factors warranted reporting as barriers to integration.

Only one respondent in each group reported experiencing difficulty in integrating or making friends in college. Thus, the mature graduates appear not to have been at any disadvantage in this area. Of the 13 mature respondents, only two reported a preference for associating with other mature students. The remainder indicated that they preferred to associate with a mixture of mature and traditional-age students. The apparent ease with which this group of mature graduates had integrated with their colleagues may have been facilitated somewhat by the fact that they were comparatively young; nine were under 30 years of age when they began their course.

CONCLUSION

Although caution is indicated in interpreting results based on the small number of participants in this study, respondents were found to be typical of mature students in Irish universities in terms of their age and sex. However, in terms of the gender balance in the Physiotherapy profession, males were over-represented in our study.

The mature participants in this study had been predominantly in professional or white-collar occupations prior to returning to college. This confirms the findings of other studies (e.g., O'Sullivan, 1992). In our study, individuals chose to return to education as adults for career-related reasons. This supports other findings that identify work- or career-related factors as the most common reason for adults returning to education. However, as the course chosen in our study was a professional one, it is not surprising that a large proportion of our mature respondents indicated that their primary motivation was to enter the profession.

Our findings support findings from other studies that many people are prevented from following their chosen career immediately after leaving school. For example, Taylor and Spencer (1994) found that many people fail to enter the career due to early academic failure or lack of confidence in their own academic ability.

There was little difference between mature and traditional-age participants' confidence in their ability to succeed on the course though mature graduates suffered to a lesser extent than traditional-age graduates from lack of confidence in the clinical situation. Mature respondents reported problems relating to family commitments which interfered with their studies. Many of them were prevented

from participating in the social aspects of university life due to other commitments which is consistent with Cochrane's (1991) findings. However, few reported difficulty in integrating with younger students.

The findings that mature students appeared to have an advantage over traditional-age students in motivation to study confirms Knapper and Copley's (1991) finding that mature students are highly motivated. Our mature respondents, however, generally reported experiencing more problems during their course than traditional-age respondents.

Financial difficulty was the most common. A number of changes have occurred recently which will alter the financial circumstances of mature students. These include the scheme whereby unemployment payments may be retained by persons in third-level education, the extension of the higher education grants system to include mature students, and the abolition of university fees. Once these initiatives have been in operation for a number of years, it would be of interest to determine the extent to which they have eased the financial burden on mature students.

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