



Article

“You’re a Mature Student and You’re a Tiny, Tiny Little Fish in a Big Massive Pond of Students”: A Thematic Analysis Investigating the Institutional Support Needs of Partnered Mature Students in Postsecondary Study

Tricia van Rhijn ^{1,*} , Caitlyn Osborne ¹, Deborah Gores ¹, Amiah Keresturi ², Ruth Neustifter ¹, Amy Muise ³ and Victoria Fritz ¹ 

¹ Department of Family Relations and Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON N1G 2W1, Canada

² McMaster Children’s Hospital, Hamilton, ON L8N 3Z5, Canada

³ Department of Psychology, York University, Toronto, ON M3J 1P3, Canada

* Correspondence: tricia.vanrhijn@uoguelph.ca; Tel.: +1-519-824-4120 (ext. 52412)

Abstract: Mature students in postsecondary education—those over 25 years of age, also known as nontraditional students or adult learners—make up a significant minority population on Canadian postsecondary campuses. Despite academic performance that tends to be higher than that of traditional students, the retention of mature students is lower due to the stressors they face in their home and school roles. This paper examines the insights of mature students and their intimate partners on how higher education institutions can provide better supports to make postsecondary programs and campuses more accessible to adult learners and enable their success. A sample of 25 mature postsecondary students enrolled in Canadian higher education institutions and their partners participated in dyadic interviews that explored the connections between their relationship and school experiences. A data-driven, inductive thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews found three themes that focused on the institutional support needs of partnered mature students, highlighting the need to (1) increase institutional knowledge and awareness of mature students’ needs, (2) offer flexible study options to complete courses and program requirements, and (3) provide relevant supports and programs. Mature students felt marginalized at their institutions related to the programs, instructors, staff, resources, and supports that are strongly focused on traditional-aged and circumstanced students. Recommendations are provided for higher education institutions to provide resources and supports that meet mature students’ unique needs to both access and be successful in their pursuit of postsecondary education.

Keywords: postsecondary education; mature students; dyadic interviews; partner relationships; institutional supports



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1. Introduction

Defined as postsecondary students over the age of 25 [1], mature students bring valuable experience and are more intrinsically motivated to succeed than their younger peers. Often driven by self-improvement goals and having clearer perspectives regarding the purpose of their education than traditional students [2], mature students have different role-related responsibilities and face unique challenges while enrolled in institutions designed for traditional students [3]. These unique challenges stem from factors such as role strain, financial strain, and difficulties transitioning back into a student role following a gap in education [4]. Mature students are a significant minority population representing 24.7% of Canadian postsecondary students [5].

Despite a higher academic performance and stronger commitment to their education than traditional students, mature students’ retention rates are lower due to the increased

number of stressors they face [6–8]. Additionally, mature students may take a more circuitous route by “stopping out” to respond to their individual (and family) needs, but returning to study eventually [9] (p. 20). These unique pathways emphasize the need for higher education institutions to recognize mature students as a distinct population in need of support. Thus, to enhance mature students’ participation and success in postsecondary education (PSE), institutions must recognize that mature students experience different barriers than traditional students and cannot be adequately supported in the same ways [1,10,11]. As the population of mature students in PSE grows, especially during challenging financial times and related to changing demographics and reductions in traditional, direct-entry students, so does the need to effectively address their unique experiences and concerns.

Student retention is a timeless consideration for institutions and for all students. Tinto’s as well as Bean and Metzner’s foundational works on student retention advocate for the importance of understanding students and their unique circumstances in order to help them persist in their studies, thus increasing retention [12–16]. Success for mature students is broadly defined to include retention, passing courses, and, ultimately, program completion. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to examine the views of mature students and their partners to provide insight on how institutions can better support their success.

Mature students are distinguished by their age and adult identity (the roles and responsibilities that accompany adulthood [3]) with multiple roles as students, partners, parents/caregivers, family members, and employees, among others. Balancing these roles and the resulting role strain can result in a lack of connection to the campus [17] and a barrier to mature students’ PSE persistence. Role strain can be magnified by many factors, particularly when dependent children are involved and for women who tend to take on more of the household and childcare responsibilities [6,18,19]. As over half (59.6%) of mature students are female [5], considering the unique circumstances these students face is crucial. In addition, many mature students entering study are in relationships and heavily rely on their partner for support [6]. Adjustments in relationship and school roles have a bi-directional effect, mutually influencing each other in both positive and negative ways [20], suggesting that partners (and families) must be included in considerations of institutional attempts to better support mature students. Thus, institutions must consider partner relationships when creating and adapting supports and resources for mature students [21].

The financial implications of going back to school as a mature student can also act as a barrier [22,23] and influence retention [9,24]. Maintaining employment alongside education and family responsibilities can result in role overload, compromising the wellbeing and quality of relationships; however, for mature students with families to support, leaving paid employment may not be feasible [22]. Further, financial support is generally lacking for mature students [24,25] due to the eligibility criteria based on financial need calculations, full-time student status, or on-campus extra-curricular involvement [25]. While this exclusion may not be intentional, it is certainly impactful.

Despite benefits related to personal development occurring from PSE [4,22], becoming a student after a gap from formal education is difficult. For example, feeling ostracized from the traditional student identity functions as a barrier to mature students, resulting in low perceptions of academic self-efficacy and difficulties overcoming social exclusion on campus. Challenges in academic integration are further experienced by minority groups such as mature students of low socioeconomic status [24,26] and barriers can be compounded. While the demands of PSE are most noticeable during the first semester, often causing feelings of anxiety, mature students can find ways to balance their roles and adjust to postsecondary study over time [4,24]. Yet, mature students feel marginalized on campus not only because of their age, but also because of differences in their situational and familial circumstances [3,25]. As a result, they often miss out on shared peer experiences such as living in residence and being involved in campus life [2,11]. Despite social support being an important contributor to mature student success [4,27], mature students report that they rely on and establish relationships with peers less often than traditional students [2]. Additionally, mature students have been found to lack knowledge of resources or be

uncertain whether their needs could be addressed by those that are available, given that the supports typically target traditional students [1,28–30]. Therefore, understanding the unique support needs of partnered, mature students is critical to enabling their success.

2. Materials and Methods

The goal of this research was to explore how higher education institutions can better support partnered, mature students and to make recommendations as to how these institutions can modify and implement policies and programs. This study was part of a broader project investigating, from both partners' perspectives, the connections between relationship and school experiences when one partner is enrolled in post-secondary study. Interview questions were developed for the dyadic interviews to investigate the broader research questions drawing on both theoretical considerations related to student retention theories and earlier research as detailed in the literature review. The research question being investigated in the current study focused on what institutional supports are recommended that would help partnered, mature students be successful. Dyadic interviews were utilized to bring in partners' perspectives related to the relationship impacts and their observations of their student partner's experiences at their higher education institution. Following institutional ethics review, full- or part-time postsecondary (college/university) students aged 25 or older and their intimate partners (cohabitating) were recruited via emails to several mature student organizations at Ontario universities, social media posts to mature student organizations, and broader postings to Facebook and Twitter. Couples participated in remote, semi-structured interviews via JaneApp, an encrypted video conferencing application, receiving a \$25 honorarium. A total of 25 dyadic interviews (conducted January 2017–November 2018) were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. A data-driven, inductive thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo (version 12) following six stages of thematic analysis [31]: becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and generating the written report. The fourth author completed the initial coding and worked with the first author for the theming steps.

Participant Characteristics

The 25 couples were all mixed-gender (with one male-identified and one female-identified partner) and their demographic characteristics provided in Table 1. Demographic characteristics for the student partner are provided in Table 2. Student participants were enrolled in 13 different higher education institutions in Canada, 11 of which were in Ontario, one in Quebec, and one in British Columbia. Although not analyzed, these descriptive statistics of the demographic characteristics are listed to provide important dyadic and individual contextual information about the study participants.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics of the Couples ($n = 25$).

	<i>n</i>	Mean/%	SD (Range)
Relationship length		10.1 years	8.3 (1.3–32.0)
Relationship status			
Married	15	60.0%	
Living together	4	16.0%	
Common law	3	12.0%	
Engaged	3	12.0%	
Children?	11	44.0%	
Number of children		2.5	0.9 (1–4)
Age of youngest child		7.0 years	6.9 (0–20)

Table 2. Sample Characteristics of the Student Partners ($n = 25$).

	Total		
	<i>n</i>	Mean/%	SD (Range)
Age		34.7 years	9.2 (25–52)
Gender			
Female	19	76.0%	
Male	6	24.0%	
Canadian citizen?	21	84.0%	
Cultural background *			
White	20	80.0%	
Black	3	12.0%	
Chinese	2	8.0%	
South Asian	1	4.0%	
Filipino	1	4.0%	
Latin American	1	4.0%	
Southeast Asian	1	4.0%	
Aboriginal Peoples of North America	1	4.0%	
Student status			
Undergraduate (university)	16	64.0%	
Graduate	7	28.0%	
College	2	8.0%	
Enrolment status			
Full-time (60% or greater course load)	20	80.0%	
Part-time	5	20.0%	
Paid employment?	17	68.0%	
Average weekly hours in paid employment		20.0 h	15.7 (5–55)

* Percentages total to greater than 100% as participants were able to select multiple backgrounds. Response options provided based on the Canadian Community Health Survey from Statistics Canada.

3. Results

By using thematic analysis of the dyadic interviews, three themes focusing on the institutional support needs of partnered mature students were identified. In accordance with the inductive thematic analysis, themes were identified based on responses from participants rather than formulated based on pre-existing theory and/or research. These themes included the need (1) to increase institutional knowledge and awareness of mature students' needs, (2) for flexible study options to complete courses and program requirements, and (3) to provide relevant supports and programs. The following sections discuss each of these themes and related subthemes along with exemplar participant quotes.

3.1. Increase Institutional Knowledge and Awareness of Mature Students' Needs

Mature students felt marginalized as postsecondary students in many ways, in particular noting a lack of support in the following areas: understanding from staff and faculty, preparation for becoming a student, knowledge of resources and services, and guidance about application processes and post-graduation career opportunities. For each aspect, participants identified a need for increased knowledge and awareness of them as students and their unique circumstances.

Participants suggested that the postsecondary staff, administrators, and faculty needed to be better informed about how their needs differ from those of traditional students. These

mature student participants were keenly aware that postsecondary institutions are structured to support direct entry from high school, traditional-aged, and circumstanced students:

You're a mature student and you're a tiny, tiny little fish in a big massive pond of students who are being catered to because they're coming out of high school and we understand those better and we've got better infrastructure for them. Make sure that there's some infrastructure in place for mature students so that they get the counselling that they need, the academic advising that they need, the understanding of how finances could work for them, the understanding of, you know, you're a little bit older, you have this body of experience, this can help you integrate better in school. . . . We don't have the same issues that a 21-year-old has. (P22)

Participants acknowledged their life experiences and skills as strengths but recognized that they lacked confidence and some specific academic skills when returning to school.

These mature students and their partners suggested that institutions could provide up-front information to help mature applicants to better understand the potential impact of adding the student role to their lives and relationships. As student participant 19 noted, "I guess people don't realize it's not just you're doing school but you're also changing your life and your lifestyle's going to be really different when you're doing school. There was no emphasis on that when I applied". Once in school, participants noted that providing program- and course-specific information about expectations and time requirements would also help:

Something as simple as, if you're going to take this course, be prepared to spend 16 h a week doing this. You know, four hours is class time, whatever is going to be study time, whatever even if it's just super simple like that so you can go, do I have that sort of time? Can we devote this, you know, can we split up our family time to do this? (P21)

Receiving this information would not only help families to make an informed decision as to whether someone will return to school, but also allow an individual to anticipate the necessary socialization required for them to best succeed once they become students.

Participants also noted their overall lack of awareness about available institutional resources, supports, and services. At times, they learned about available supports only after a period of struggling or after they were needed, such as student participant 13:

There is [on-campus] childcare but we didn't use it because I didn't know about it. So that would have been good information to know when we were trying to make childcare arrangements in advance of my studies, but we didn't know about it so we couldn't take advantage of it. (P13)

Partner participant 17 noted that he "needed to know what courses he needed to finish his degree. . . his old courses were [from] ten years ago and named something different so he didn't really know what he had or what he didn't have". Other participants mentioned not knowing about learning or social supports such as a mature student organization.

Finally, participants noted that they would have liked to receive more information about the application process and post-graduation paths. For example, information about admission requirements, career paths related to their program, and content linking "between school and the workforce. Especially because I can't attend any events, so making everything, even networking behind a computer would be much more useful for me than going to a job fair (P15)".

3.2. Flexible Study Options to Complete Courses and Program Requirements

Flexibility relating to scheduling and academic work was identified as essential by participants. Challenges related to a lack of flexibility in the current PSE system and difficulty navigating their home and school lives were raised by participants, especially for part-time students. One participant noted, "It's a lot of accessibility issues I find for part-time learners. They're not great at providing scheduling possibilities for people who aren't there full-time"

(P20). Many mature students implored institutions to consider aspects such as offering schedules far in advance, giving information about what time and semesters classes are offered, if prerequisites are required, and providing more online/distance education options, as well as making exceptions for mature students when possible. Online/distance education options were not restricted to full courses, but also included offering course content, recorded lectures, or remote learning options within in-person courses because of time constraints. Providing this flexibility could save commuting time and allow for more autonomy in terms of how a student spends their time. Relatedly, discussions regarding the need for flexibility in scheduling labs, clinical time, or group sessions were also prominent, especially when set times required childcare arrangements to be made.

Their approach is well nobody gets special treatment, everybody's the same, which is fine, but I don't have the free time that the majority of the rest of the undergraduates have to plan out life. Or I should say, I have additional commitments on my time that they don't have. (P13)

The need for flexible scheduling was also noted for instructor/teaching assistant office hours, program/academic counsellors, and times when workshops and other resources were offered. Offerings that only happened during regular business hours were often inaccessible as many participants were employees as well as students. This lack of flexibility meant that student participants were unable to utilize resources to enhance their success. One partner participant stated, "Better office hours maybe because he is working normally during the day, then going to school at night. . . if there was better office hours, then he might be able to rely on TAs and profs better" (P15).

Participants also commented on the need for more flexibility related to their academic work, such as some accommodation related to deadlines and course composition that were reflective of their unique needs (e.g., recognizing that a sick child was as valid a reason for an extension as when the student themselves was sick). Some mature students acknowledged the importance of policies already in place within their programs allowing for this flexibility; however, those that did not have access to these types of accommodations identified their need. Some participants shared that having flexible, student-centered options available in course assessments would also help:

Some of my courses have this thing where, even if there's something due every single week, they'll have more flexibility [such as], "You have nine assignments, but you can choose seven out of these nine and only seven will be marked". I think that's really good because it allows flexibility in deadlines and, in a relationship, I find that it's harder to meet deadlines. (P16)

Participants also noted the challenges related to courses that included group work. They reported scheduling difficulties when trying to work with traditional students who often do not have employment or family responsibilities reducing their available time for schooling.

3.3. Provide Relevant Supports and Programs

Participants identified that a transition program, designated program/academic counsellors, connection with other mature students, inclusive financial supports, and supports for childcare, commuting, and housing could enhance their success. Acknowledging the difficulties of transitioning back to formal education, participants commented that having an institutional transition program would be helpful, including relevant resources and workshops focusing on both academic skills and life skills. Mature student participants also identified that having designated program/academic counsellors available who were knowledgeable about mature students' needs and available supports would help. These counsellors could provide guidance in terms of what courses they should take, available funding opportunities, connection to other institutional resources and supports, information about graduate pathways and employment after their degree, and even support related to relationship maintenance. The importance of establishing peer relationships was also

noted with participants recognizing the benefits of establishing relationships with other mature students. One student participant noted:

I have always felt a bit apart from the rest of my classmates, right? So, one of the big aspects of university is making connections with other people. Those opportunities are diminished cause many mature students don't live on campus, right? Lots of undergraduate students, especially in first year, live on campus, meet people, and then have that starting position where mature students are less likely to have that. Enhancing that outside of lecture time opportunity to connect with other mature students I think would be beneficial. (P13)

Related to institutional financial supports, many student participants pointed out flaws and gaps in their institutional policies (e.g., scholarship and grant eligibility requirements, inability to opt out of services not accessed) which limited their access. Specific examples included the inability to opt out of bus passes or student health benefits, entrance and in-course scholarship eligibility criteria that most mature students were not able to meet (e.g., requirements for on-campus extracurricular requirements, sustained full-time enrollment), and a lack of support for those with dependents. One student participant noted that, "I think the scholarships are not really for everybody. The financial support is very limited and there are also categories like 'you should be earning only this amount' and I get lost with that chance because I earned a lot in the previous year" (P14). This type of ineligibility due to prior year earnings was also a challenge relating to accessing financial aid such as bursaries. Finally, participants suggested the need for other supports to meet their unique needs such as those related to childcare, commuting, and housing. For mature students with children, access to drop-in childcare programs while attending classes would allow for them to attend classes or meetings without having to pay for a full day of childcare. Supports for commuting such as access to public transportation and parking were noted. Lastly, having housing that allowed for families and supportive learning spaces were noted. Overall, these participants recognized the importance of providing relevant programs and supports to enhance their success. Finally, several participants commented on the importance of postsecondary institutions involving their partners and/or children on campus, providing suggestions such as social events or discounted family campus gym memberships. As one student participant shared,

I would like to have a get together with everybody, with all the mature students. . . . If they had families or partners or anything like that, get together with everybody because they're a part of your life too and this is a significant part. It's also nice for partners to have a face to the names that you're talking about and all that kind of stuff. (P8)

One partner participant commented that occasional on campus activities that included them were "now suddenly a date night for us. . . and gives me a peek at where you go during the day" (P16). On campus activities could also include offering child minding during events to increase participation.

4. Discussion

This paper examines mature students and their partners' views on how institutions can make postsecondary programs and campuses more accessible to adult learners and provide better support to partnered, mature students to be successful. Two key findings emerged from the analysis that will be discussed, both related to mature students having distinguishing characteristics relating to their age and the roles and responsibilities that occur with their adult identity [3]. First, mature students feel marginalized at postsecondary institutions because the programs, instructors, staff, resources, and supports are strongly focused on traditional-aged and circumstanced students. Second, mature students require resources and supports that meet their unique needs to both access and be successful in their pursuit of PSE.

Mature students feel marginalized on postsecondary campuses. Participants in this study reported a lack of recognition of their existence as part of the student body and a lack of understanding of their unique circumstances. This marginalization and lack of recognition was apparent in many aspects of their PSE experiences ranging from a lack of fit in the design and availability of programs and courses, to the inaccessibility of support from instructors, staff, and resources. It is possible that the way resources are targeted to traditional students contributes to these feelings of marginalization since mature students lack integration and shared peer experiences due to not living on campus and limited involvement in campus life [2,11], experiencing challenges related to transitioning to the student role [4,24]. Accordingly, mature students may not be aware of existing resources that may be appropriate [29]. In addition, mature students are less likely to connect with and establish relationships with peers than traditional students [2]. Given the importance of social support to reinforce resiliency [27], it is not surprising that peer relationships help mature students to counterbalance stressful factors related to PSE that may prevent withdrawal [4]. Further, as the relationship and school domains have bidirectional impacts on one another [20], the consideration of partner relationships is important [21]. Therefore, a need to actively target mature students to plan and communicate services [25,29] and evaluate how the provision of resources meets mature students' needs [6] is required. Acknowledgement of the presence of mature students and awareness of their circumstances on postsecondary campuses may help to enhance engagement and reduce their marginalization.

Mature students identified many resources and supports they required to meet their unique needs to access and be successful in PSE. For example, appropriate financial supports were commonly identified. Financial concerns act as a significant barrier to PSE [22,23] and are identified as a reason for withdrawal [9]. Further, financial supports are particularly lacking for mature students when compared to traditional students [9,24,25]. One specific barrier faced by mature students is that the postsecondary financial aid system (including government student loan programs and institutional needs-based bursaries) has been built on the assumption that a parent(s) has a child attending PSE for whom they will incur the additional expense. Eligibility requirements consider household income from the prior year to determine the need for support. This approach is flawed for mature students because it assumes that their household income does not change for the school year; consequently, they may not qualify for any/adequate support because the model does not consider that they often reduce or leave paid employment to pursue PSE. Postsecondary institutions can assist in reducing the financial burden on mature students by providing appropriate and targeted financial aid that meets their specific needs [22,23].

Beyond financial supports, participants also stressed the importance of institutional flexibility related to scheduling and academic work. Flexibility related to scheduling options throughout a program and increasing the content offered via distance education is needed to increase accessibility. Also, flexibility in accessing support resources, including modified/extended office hours for instructors and support services on campus as well as workshops that are offered beyond the traditional 9–5 workday is necessary. Finally, participants identified the need for relevant supports to meet their unique needs. These supports included mature student transition programs, designated program/academic counsellors, connecting with other mature students, inclusive financial support, and supports for childcare, commuting, and housing. Supporting the transition into student life should be a primary goal for institutions, including targeted and relevant transitional supports, such as workshops that focus on the development of academic or technological skills [4,9,22,24]. Additionally, participants noted the importance of involving partners/families/children on campus via social events, offering childminding during on campus activities, and options such as discounted gym memberships. There is evidence that the provision of targeted resources and supports to meet mature students' needs can enhance retention. Evidence from the Mature Student First-Year Experience Program at York University demonstrated increases in mature student academic performance and retention for those who participated in the program compared to the general population of mature students [8]. The

program included not only a dedicated mature student orientation session, but also weekly workshop-based sessions provided over the course of the year from campus partners including career, counselling, health education, learning skills, and writing services, as well as from the libraries. Given the amount of institutional resources provided towards retention activities that are typically focused on traditional students and the higher attrition rates for mature students, providing targeted resources and supports could have a significant impact on mature student success.

This study is one of the first to examine the experiences of partnered mature students including partner voices to enhance our ability to understand mature students' lived experiences rather than focusing solely on their student roles. This perspective is important given the influence that family and lives beyond the institution has on mature students' ability to be successful in their studies. As this study only included 25 dyadic interviews, thus potentially limiting claims that can be drawn, future research should include a larger sample of mature students to ensure robustness. This work is also limited in that the participants were all mixed-gender and a majority were White, born in Canada, and studying at institutions in Ontario. Mature students are also likely to inhabit other marginalized identities and further research must investigate these diverse experiences. In addition, institutional-specific policies, practices, and supports were not investigated and are likely to vary widely across institutions; accordingly, future research should consider the availability of and access to these supports, as well as their impact on mature student success, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic which may have impacted mature students' experiences. Finally, it is important to note that, although both students' and their partners' responses were included in the analysis, the bulk of the coding came from the mature student participants themselves. Partners responses were supportive and sometimes added additional details (as per the quotations that were provided), but there were no differences in the findings when reviewing the partners' responses.

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to examine the views of mature students and their partners to determine how institutions can better support their success and to make post-secondary programs more accessible to adult learners. Even though mature students have a stronger academic performance than traditional students, they are more likely to stop/drop out of their studies [6–9,30], suggesting that institutions need to focus on the difficulties mature students have in navigating their multiple roles and the need for partner and family support. To best support mature students, institutions must ensure that they are recognized as a population with unique needs and meet those needs via relevant resources, supports, and programs. Unfortunately, mature students have been marginalized on postsecondary campuses and often struggle to fit traditional programs, policies, and practices as the “proverbial ‘square peg’ that meets resistance when forced to go through a round hole” [28] (p. 22). Interestingly, many of the needed changes identified by mature students (e.g., flexibility in how courses, programs, and supports are offered) could enhance accessibility not only for mature students but also for the broader postsecondary student population.

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