Mature students in higher education: academic performance and intellectual ability

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Abstract. Mature students are sometimes said to be deficient in the basic skills needed for effective studying in higher education or to be impaired by age-related intellectual deficits. However, the research literature on the academic performance of mature students contains no good evidence that mature students perform any less well than younger students on courses of study in higher education. Moreover, the idea that normal ageing impairs the capacity for learning in higher education is most questionable: even the oldest mature students can obtain good results when assessed by means of both examinations and coursework.

Introduction

In response to both political decisions and demographic changes, British institutions of higher education are increasingly recruiting students from within the older sections of the population. In fact, the total number of mature students (defined nationally as students admitted to undergraduate courses aged 21 or over or those admitted to postgraduate courses aged 25 or over) increased by 55% between 1981 and 1989, so that these individuals now represent one-fifth of all students on degree-level courses in the UK (Griffin 1992, pp.61-63). Similar trends have been noted in the United States in response to demographic, economic and technological developments (see Merriam and Caffarella 1991, Chapter 1).

Nevertheless, as Marshall and Nicolson (1991) commented, discussions about the role of mature students in higher education tend to stress their alleged needs rather than the potential benefits that they can bring. One argument here is that British institutions of higher education may waive their normal entry requirements in the case of older candidates, and hence many mature students lack recent experience of formal education. They may consequently lack the basic skills needed for effective studying in higher education, insofar as they may be 'out of practice in the art of learning' (Roberts and Higgins 1992, p. 106; see also Percy 1985). Another point of view appeals to research findings concerning the supposed age-related impairments in intellectual abilities (Percy 1985, Woodley 1984).

Negative stereotypes of this sort are often shared by mature students themselves (Doty 1967, Smithers and Griffin 1986, pp.103–105, Squires 1981, Woodley 1981, Woodley et al. 1987, pp.119–120). However, do they have any objective basis in reality? In the first part of this article, I shall address this issue by critically evaluating the research evidence concerning the academic performance of mature
students in higher education. In the second part, I shall locate this issue within the broader research literature concerning age-related changes in human intellectual capacities.

**Academic persistence and performance**

If it is true that mature students are lacking in the basic skills needed for effective studying in higher education, then it follows by definition that the ultimate academic outcome should be poorer in the case of mature students than in the case of younger students. First, they should be more likely to fail their courses or to withdraw from them on academic grounds: in other words, they should show poorer persistence (from their point of view) and poorer retention and completion rates (from their institutions' point of view). Second, those mature students who do manage to complete their courses despite their deficient skills should show poorer academic performance during their course of study, and poorer academic attainment in terms of their final degree assessment.

Many early studies of the relationship between age and performance in higher education found indeed that younger students tended to achieve better degrees than older students. In reviewing these studies, however, Eaton (1980) and Woodley (1984) noted that they had typically been based on students who had entered higher education direct from secondary school between the ages of 17 and 21. The 'older' entrants had simply stayed on at secondary school to obtain the qualifications needed to enter higher education. As Woodley noted, 'the results probably suggest that bright children admitted early to higher education fared better than those whose entry was delayed while they gained the necessary qualifications' (p.35). Woodley's own analysis of the 1972, 1973 and 1974 intakes of universities in the United Kingdom confirmed this pattern in the case of entrants aged between 18 and 20 admitted on the basis of standard qualifications.

Nevertheless, a few of these early studies did contain significant numbers of older entrants, and these indicated that academic performance tended to increase after the age of 21. These studies were however carried out during a time of compulsory military service, and many of these older entrants were returning service personnel. Eaton (1980) commented that such entrants would probably have had access to additional training (especially in science and mathematics) during their period of military service, and she referred to a number of studies carried out in the United States which tended to confirm the relatively good academic performance of returning service personnel. A more valid indication of the academic potential of mature students is consequently to be found in the results of studies carried out during the last 25 years or so.

Nisbet and Welsh (1972) investigated the progress of three cohorts of students at the University of Aberdeen, and concluded that the completion rate in mature students was 'approximately the same ... as for students straight from school' (p. 204). Similar findings were obtained by Walker (1975) at the University of Warwick. Woodley (1984) subsequently analysed the aggregated completion rate