



**La Trobe University
Equality & Diversity Unit
HEESP Project 2008/2009**

Final Report

***Recruitment and retention of mature aged students from rural
communities in Central Victoria***

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Executive Summary

This HEESP project was conducted during 2008 and 2009 and originated from discussions within the social work team at Bendigo regarding the experiences of mature age students. Mature age individuals experience the processes of accessing university education in very different ways to school leavers. Given the nature of recruiting students to regional campuses, it was timely to examine some aspects of the mature age university experience within the regional context of Bendigo campus.

The project found that recruiting mature age individuals and then retaining them as students in university education is a complex task and quite different to recruiting school leavers. Mature age individuals require more 'lead in' time with comprehensive information from, and contact with university staff before they decide to apply for a course of study. Mature age individuals find the application process puzzling and isolating because there is little targeted information and assistance. Mature age individuals then experience significant culture 'shock' when commencing their part-time or full-time studies at university because of the myriad of complex issues such as work, ageing parents, children, relationships, health and academic literacy all impacting on their university experience.

As La Trobe University embarks on the development of peer mentoring for some aspects of the university experience, this report highlights the experiences of social work staff and students at Bendigo campus during the implementation of a peer mentoring program in Semester 1, 2009. This project was implemented in parallel with the new Common First Year (CFY) curriculum within the Faculty of Health Sciences. This project report documents the complexities of the mature age experience during the VTAC application process and the first semester of the university experience for a group of social work students and makes the following recommendations for the further investigation and development of resources that could enhance the LTU experience of mature age individuals.

It is recommended that all current mentoring programs at LTU be comprehensively mapped and evaluated to ensure consistency, quality and a connection to the diverse student population. It is also recommended that LTU embark on a range of pilot programs situated in TAFE and Adult Education colleges during the VTAC application process (August-September each year) to provide information, counselling and academic skills to prospective mature age students throughout all regions. Also that mentoring is provided as a key resource for prospective mature age individuals; with current students who act as guides during Open Day and Orientation Week, mentoring prospective students about the life and education transitions that become key issues for mature age individuals in the intervening period between Open Day and Orientation Week.

Mature age individuals are a significant market for LTU, especially within the northern Victorian region and LTU can respond to current federal policy and funding developments by becoming a leader in enhancing the first year university experience for mature age individuals from rural and regional communities. This will certainly result in better higher education outcomes for the university, the individuals concerned and the communities that they live in.

1 Overview

This HEESP project has achieved far more than was ever envisaged due to a number of factors such as the enthusiasm of staff at Bendigo campus; the number of students who were prepared to be mentors and the provision of a social work student on placement for 12 weeks. The following project report provides an indication of activities that have occurred over the past twelve months; data from these activities and some conclusions and recommendations. Please note that the project was managed and conducted by Rob Townsend. Kathryn Barton who was to be a project officer accepted a voluntary redundancy and departed LTU at the end of 2008.

2 Project Outcomes

The following are the details pertaining to the project outcomes.

2.1 Data base of adult education and human service providers

A data base of potential organisations to receive information was developed by this project via contacts that social work academic staff have with human services organisation in the northern and western region of Victoria. The need for a data base has now been superseded by the Faculty of Health Sciences at Bendigo establishing an external relations unit to coordinate marketing and clinical contacts. Rob Townsend is the social work liaison person for marketing at Bendigo.

2.2 Information mail-out

The following organisations were contacted and sent information about the Faculty of Health Sciences and Social Work courses at Bendigo. Some made return contact for clarification and all of the organisations placed information on their notice boards. Campaspe College of Adult Education in Echuca, Kerang Learning Centre, Kyneton Community & Learning Centre, Castlemaine Continuing Education Centre, Inglewood Community Resource Centre. No visits or workshops were requested by any of these organisations so the mail-out will be able to be repeated in 2009 with an expanded list of organisations.

2.3 Mature age information at Bendigo campus

Staff from Social Work attended the mature age information evening at Bendigo campus and provided feedback to the campus committee that this information evening came too late for many mature age individuals in terms of exploring their options. The Faculty of Health Sciences has agreed to conduct a Mature Age Information evening in July 2009 as a way of recruiting mature age students; the flier advertising this evening has been sent to all agencies that have contact with the Faculty via placements.

2.4 Individual contact during selection process

As selection officer, Rob Townsend kept a data-base of mature age students who had made contact prior to and during the course information and selection process up to September 30, 2008. A total of 18 mature age individuals from rural communities were contacted individually to ensure that had sufficient information and support to be able to apply for entry into the Social Work course in 2009. The tracking of these individuals resulted in 14 of them applying for entry in the Masters of Social Work/Bachelor of Human Services, with all being successful, seven starting in 1st year, three articulating into 2nd year and four articulating into 3rd year of the course. The four that chose not to apply or not to enrol in 2009 have been followed up and been given information about selection in 2010. The reasons given for them not applying were *financial reasons* such as having to keep working and two had personal *health issues* that meant they could not study the minimum of two subjects per semester.

2.5 Surveying prospective students

Surveying individuals who were interested in applying to study at Bendigo campus was an issue of concern for the Faculty Ethics Committee who deemed it a conflict of interest for social work staff to survey or interview prospective students. The committee believed that the power issues outweighed the need to survey these individuals. As a result, no prospective students were surveyed or interviewed; for future reference we now know to employ individuals outside of the Faculty to survey and interview prospective students.

2.6 Literature review

A 3rd year social work student completed her twelve week placement as part of this project; Mel Delves worked as a research assistant on the project from December 2008 until March 2009. Mel completed a comprehensive literature review on mature age access to tertiary education and the 1st year experience at university.

2.7 Interviewing of current SW students

A total of twelve current social work students responded to an email survey which was sent to all current 3rd and 4th year social work students (n = 80). The students were asked to respond to the following questions;

- What have been the positive aspects of being a mature age student?
- What have been the negative aspects of being a mature age students?
- What advice would you give to mature age students considering study?
- Other comments?

2.8 Interviewing of staff

Ten Bendigo LTU staff were interviewed about their experiences and perceptions of mature age students in rural and regional contexts. Social work academic staff who were interviewed included: Fiona Gardner (Head of Campus), Jennifer Lehmann (Undergraduate Coordinator) and Natasha Long. Other staff who were interviewed included: Jenny Reeves and Ann Scott (Academic Skills), Lorraine Meades (Psychologist/Student Counsellor), Claire Nihill and Shannon Kerrigan (Equality & Diversity), Jon Neal (Student Engagement), Cris Stanway (Careers), Leon Mouldon (Campus Transition Coordinator) and Mick Watham (BSA Mature Age Representative). Mick Watham also provided a narrative of his experiences as a mature age student which provided insight into current issues which have added to the data in this report. A copy of the narrative is provided in the hard copy of this report.

2.9 Mature age mentor program 2009

In February 2009, the project commenced recruiting mentors for a mature age mentor program within the Social Work course at Bendigo. Rob Townsend had been recruited by the FHS to conduct its mentor training for the Common First Year mentors so it was decided that the mentor training should be consistent not only within the Faculty at Bendigo but across all campuses.

An interesting development was that the Nursing Mentoring Program for mature age students and the Oral Health/Dentistry Mentoring Program for students from non-English speaking backgrounds wanted to join the HEESP project in 2009 because the coordinators, Fran Sheehan and Jeremy Graham, believed that their mentors would benefit from the philosophy and direction of a mature age oriented program.

As a result of recruiting; 18 social work mentors, 12 nursing mentors and 10 Oral health/Dentistry mentors attended mentor training on Wednesday 11th March 2009. A copy of the training program is attached in Appendix A. Following this training day, each discipline then organised their own framework for connecting mentors with mentees. As per the original HEESP proposal, we then organised to connect new social work students with mentors. On Wednesday 18th March a session of 'mentor speed dating' was held for social work students; 17 mentors and 14 mentees attended. This was a popular and successful way of introducing mentors to mentees. So much so that the LTU media unit sent out a press release of the event, see Appendix B, unfortunately because this was close to Easter and because of the dominance of bushfire issues in this region, the story didn't get picked up.

Two follow-up sessions for Social Work mentors and mentees were then organised; one on Wednesday 1st April where Associate Professor Mandy Kenny, Director of FHS at Bendigo came to the session for mentors and spoke about developments within the FHS at Bendigo. A session on Wednesday 13th May was facilitated by Jenny Reeves from the Academic Skills Unit; providing an interactive session on academic culture and skills. A light lunch was provided at all mentor training and follow-up sessions. This allowed people to interact after the formal part of the sessions and talk about their experiences as mentors, ask questions and de-brief.

The Social Work, Nursing and Oral Health/Dentistry mentors were all offered the opportunity to complete the Team Building training which was paid for by this HEESP project and was delivered by Corey O'Connor from Training @ La Trobe. On Thursday 16th April, nine mentors participated in this training and on Friday 17th April, ten mentors participated in this training. The mentors have to complete a 1,000 word essay and once complete, this unit of training will appear on their transcripts as accredited training. There is a planned mentor/mentee evaluation session scheduled for Week 2 of Semester 2, 2009. This evaluation has been delayed due to the need for consistent data collection methods on mentoring across the University. The Faculty of Health Sciences has developed evaluation instruments for peer mentoring and these will be utilised. See Appendix C. A summary of the formal evaluation will be made available to Equality and Diversity by the end of August 2009.

3 Project Data

The demography of regional communities in Australia is changing from a population profile of residents from Anglo-colonial backgrounds to that of complex cultural diversity and from agricultural and mining industry to where tourism, hospitality, financial services, human services and education are now dominant industries requiring significant human capital and infrastructure changes. Individuals and families moving to regional communities via internal mobility or international migration are often doing so as part of substantial life changes for financial, familial or lifestyle reasons.

This HEESP funded project was conducted in 2008-2009 and explored how mature age individuals interacted with higher education programs at La Trobe University, Bendigo as a way of managing various transitions in their lives and in the varied rural and regional communities of the region. University staff and individuals were interviewed and surveyed respectively, staff interviewed consisted of Social Work lecturers and staff from Student Support Services, all working at Bendigo campus. In total ten staff were invited to discuss issues that they felt face mature age individuals in this regional area both in applying and successfully completing their chosen course. The interviews were of an informal nature and university staff were encouraged to talk from their own experiences of teaching mature age individuals. All but one had previous experience of being a mature age learner and their responses defined some of the themes identified. A survey via email was sent to all mature age individuals enrolled within the School of Social Work and Policy. They were asked to make general comments about the positive and negative aspects of being a mature age individual at the Bendigo Campus, twelve responses were returned.

3.1 Literature Review: adults, education & community transitions

The regional community context of Australian society is significant because recent census data has highlighted emerging trends in regional communities involving significant social change (ABS: 2007). The more recent redistribution of Australia's regional population via internal and international migration *reflects a highly mobile population responding to a range of triggers including employment opportunities, housing costs and lifestyle preferences. These trends... suggest some major challenges for policy and service provision in regional education and employment* (Mission Australia: 2006: 11). Currently there are immigration programs targeting humanitarian entrants for resettlement in regional and rural Australia. Skilled

migrants can fill skill shortages and there are opportunities for guest workers to come to Australia to fulfil specific employment contracts in regional and/or rural communities (Broadbent, Cacciattolo & Carpenter: 2006, ICEPA: 2006).

The experiences of social inclusion and exclusion by individuals residing in a range of Australian communities are influenced by a variety of compounding factors. This includes mobility and migration experiences, population demographics, the history of specific communities, government social and economic policies, local, state and federal political environments. Most of the individuals participating in these two research projects had been searching for and creating a sense of 'place' and 'community', a sense of belonging to somewhere outside the realm of pre-existing familial and cultural experiences. This search for something 'other than' appears to be a function of age-related life transitions, no longer satisfied or dependent on the same social connections that have sustained them in the past; they have been seeking some meaning to their individual lives rather than solely that of financial gain or familial stability.

Agricultural production based on intensive irrigation is the largest industry in the Shire of Campaspe in terms of net worth, whereas mining and agriculture have been the largest industries in Loddon. Dairy farming and dry land farming involving cattle, sheep and grain are the main agricultural industries. However, employment in both regions now occurs mostly in the service sectors of retail, finance, hospitality and tourism. In recent years both Shires have been significantly affected by drought, which has had an impact on all economic, social and personal circumstances.

Communities in regional Victoria where 16% of the population have been born overseas are significantly less diverse than Melbourne, where 36% of the population are born overseas (DVC: 2006). Issues of cultural and social marginalization motivate many people, especially newly-arrived migrants to choose to reside within the greater social diversity of urban areas. However, in recent years a number of regional municipalities in Victoria, and around Australia, have actively welcomed more diverse groups into their communities for a range of economic and social reasons. Currently there are immigration programs that target and promote humanitarian entrants to resettle in regional and rural Australia. Skilled migrants can fill skill shortages and there are now opportunities for temporary visas which allow workers to come to Australia to fulfil specific employment contracts in regional and/or rural communities.

The Goulburn Murray Regional Migration program has recently been extended as a joint initiative of the Shires of Campaspe and Moira (Shepparton) under the Victorian Government's Regional Migration Fund, and provides an emerging context to research in regional and rural communities (City of Greater Shepparton: 2005). The skilled migration program in these local government areas (LGA) acknowledges that there are up to 40 different nationalities in the region and that both Shires require further strategies to attract and retain skilled migrants to the area to combat labour and skills shortages. Programs encouraging migrant and refugee families to relocate from urban to regional communities provide an opportunity for those migrants who may want to consider alternatives to living in the large cities. Some migrants arriving in Australia have resided in rural and regional areas in their countries of birth and prefer this to urban environments. There is no doubt that these important policy initiatives can make an economic difference at local levels by providing labour. However, the challenges for each regional and rural host community are to locate funding for the community development processes, and coordinate case management and service brokerage processes required to assist in the transition of newly-arrived migrants and refugees into rural and regional communities (Broadbent, Cacciattolo & Carpenter: 2006).

3.2 Higher education and mature age adult transitions

Defining 'mature age' within the context of higher education is one dilemma faced, with current research indicating that mature age refers to any individual aged 21 or over and/or who enter education from a variety of pathways other than the traditional school leaver pool (Stone: 2008, Kenny, McLennan, Nankervis, Kidd, Connell and Buykx: 2007, Cullity: 2006, Richardson: 1994). There is difficulty in finding concrete definitions for mature age and this in part may reflect the different selection and entry criteria that differing education institutions utilise. The major themes consistently reported in current literature were about the motivations and challenges that individuals face in entering education, how the personal, societal and economic commitments and obligations appear to impact on an individual's overall success, and how learning processes and cultures impact on successful transition and what attempts education institutions have made to improve transition and integration of individuals within student life (Stone: 2008, Kenny, McLennan, Nankervis, Kidd, Connell and Buykx: 2007, O'Shea: 2007, Stone: 2000, Fulmer & Jenkins: 1992).

Diversity can be seen in the wide age groups involved, the motivating factors for study, location and or 'regionality' of education in Australia. The amount of positive or negative personal influencers a person has within their lives creates even more

complexity within this cohort and the impact this has on attempting education study, can alter from individual to individual. What can be identified is the difficulty faced when trying to research the first year higher education experience for mature age individuals. Rendon (1994) as cited in O'Shea (2007) comments that there now appears to be a 'tapestry of differentiation' among first year individuals, and it is this variation between and through different individual cohorts that makes truly understanding the mature age individual trajectory difficult. This can create difficulties in making generalisations about this group, as most studies on mature age individuals, considered differing demographics which either excluded or included several different variables. The difficulty in finding literature on specific individual groups suggests that research should be based on 'particular individual cohorts rather than generic groupings' (O'Shea: 2007).

Stone (2008, p. 269) identified that there appears to be some sort of 'catalyst for action, some event that had occurred which then led, directly or indirectly, to the decision to study.' McGivney (2006, p. 85) circumstantiates this notion and suggests that a variety of reasons prompt adult learners to consider education, including factors such as 'the need to deal with an immediate situation or crisis in their life' (life transition, illness, redundancy, bereavement, divorce). O'Shea (2007, p. 42) identifies in her research on females who were the first in their family to study that the decision to study, was related to some sort of recent catalyst which was both personal and work related.

Kenny et al (2007, p.13) however, identified a major reason that prompted mature age individuals within nursing to return to study *is the desire to expand their education as a means of enhancing career/employment options*. Whilst this may be true for a large proportion of mature age individuals, Harper and Kember (1986) as cited in Richardson (1994) believe that in particular, older mature age individuals might be more likely to be studying out of interest or for pleasure rather than for vocational reasons. Motivation to study and motivational factors were considered higher in mature age individuals. Kenny et al (2007, p.18) states that as a group, they appear to have a strong commitment to study' and goes on to suggest that motivation is intrinsic within them.

Extensive research has been carried out on the issues or challenges that mature age individuals face which differentiates them from the traditional school leaver group (Stone: 2008, Dawson: 2007, Kenny, McLennan, Nankervis, Kidd, Connell and Buykx: 2007, O'Shea: 2007, Trott: 2007, Cullity: 2006, Stone: 2000, Scott, Burns & Cooney: 1996, Fulmer & Jenkins: 1992). The major challenges for

individuals in regional and rural communities included family responsibilities whether to a child or other family members, financial and work commitments and an overall lack of time to successfully balance these competing commitments in their lives.

Cullity (2006) believes that it is the personal, social, attitudinal, educational, cultural, vocational and financial circumstances that can impact on beliefs about academic study. Stone (2008, p.275) identified the major challenges experienced by mature age individuals in her study as that of *financial struggles; lack of time; difficulties with organising and prioritising; dealing with changes in relationships with partners and children; and balancing the needs of study with the needs of family, home, partners and children*. Overlapping themes of this nature were evidenced in numerous studies, of the juggling act required to balance financial, family and other work responsibilities. Reat reported that their lives have a very different focus, that is, a balancing act between academic, economic and domestic responsibilities (Reat: 2002, as cited in Kenny, McLennan, Nankervis, Kidd, Connell and Buykx. 2007, p. 20).

Trott's (2007) research on recognising the expectations of mature age individuals commented that *adult learners are rarely in a position to remove themselves from their day-to-day work and family commitments to immerse themselves in an on-going campus existence* (2007, p. 53.). Lack of time has been identified as a major contributing factor that impacts an individual's decision to discontinue study and comments such as this are of particular importance when studying the impact of learning procedures and culture and what part this plays in the successful transition of mature age individuals to education.

Furthermore it became apparent in research that the incentives for study can and do have an impact on transition and attrition rates. Interestingly the motivational factors that propel individuals into education can have both constructive and/or detrimental repercussions for this group. The possibility of increased economic stability appears to play a determining role in some individual's decision to return to study. However increased economic instability, due to reduced working capacity and the expenses studying create can influence an individual decision to discontinue (Bexley: 2008, Kenny, McLennan, Nankervis, Kidd, Connell and Buykx: 2007). Bexley (2008, p.11) identified that 40% of individuals surveyed considered finances were an important reason in an individual considering deferring or discontinuing study. Bexley's (2008) research surveyed over 900 first year individuals studying at La Trobe University from both regional and urban campuses but her findings here were not limited to mature age individuals.

Kenny et al (2007, p. 21) identified that most mature age individuals were *unprepared for the time and financial commitments that undertaking further study will require of them*. They identified that along with family responsibility, financial stress did play a major role in a mature age individual's decision to discontinue study. Furthermore, Kenny et al (2007, p.31) identified after extensive research on financial constraints that mature age individuals with children are seen to be more financially vulnerable with more complex financial problems.

Evident in several research studies was the impact that gender plays and how this influences a person belief about study. The emphasis on studying gender, in particular female mature age individuals, may have something to do with the ease of separating gender from other variables that may or may not be consistent throughout this cohort. Scott, Burns and Cooney (1996) explored the reasons why female mature age individuals with children discontinued study. In particular females in this study expressed that the greater responsibility for domestic and child rearing work played a substantial role in their decision to discontinue study, this in part had to do with in built cultural expectations of the traditional roles of mothering and motherhood.

Worth noting is that there appears to be a strong link between lower socio-economic class and a persons beliefs or ideals about what were appropriate gender roles in the literature. These cultural expectations did not always support furthering educational opportunities for women (Cullity: 2006, Scott, Burns & Cooney: 1996, Fulmer & Jenkins: 1992). Cullity (2006) and Fulmer and Jenkins (1992) reinforce this in saying that the poor self-concept developed and held especially by women in their research, found that it was derived from a mixture of social and cultural reasons which includes within it perceived priorities of women which reflect gender, class and ethnicity.

Initially mature age individuals can have significant fears and can place unrealistic expectations on themselves in regard to commencing study. O'Shea (2007, p.39) identified that commencing education studies can initiate feelings of anxiety, unfamiliarity and self doubt in individuals. Other authors commented that the most common anxieties identified was that of self doubt, fear of repeated failure; or exposure to ridicule, alongside feeling overwhelmed and intimidated during this transition process (Stone: 2008, McGivney: 2006, Cullity: n.d). Bolam and Dodgson (2003) comment on past research undertaken in regard to this which indicates that individuals felt unprepared for assignments and admitted feeling that they lacked basic study skills necessary. Martins and Anthony (2007, p. 58) comment on the

'impostor syndrome' that most mature age individuals feel when commencing education, which likely stems from a general lack of confidence in their ability to succeed.

When exploring what impact learning processes and culture have on transition, identifying that the fears that individuals present with can be compounded by the discourse and jargon that sometimes is used almost without thinking in academic circles. Cullity (n.d, p. 2) in her research on the issue of whether a learning culture entuses or intimidates mature-age commencers identified that *the unexplained use of academic language can disengage individuals from the learning process*. This can then lead to a very real gap in the almost assumed requirements and expectations that faculty staff have and the interpretations or assumptions individuals make of those expectations (Street: 1996, as cited in Cullity 2006, p 190).

Furthermore, in exploring studies that identified the entry of individuals through alternative entry programs (AEPs) it was found that simply assimilating individuals into education can reinforce the 'dominant/elite culture' often associated within higher educational circles. However, utilising programs that gradually immerse individuals into academic culture can increase their overall academic capacity to succeed (Cullity: n.d.). By gradually increasing an individuals understanding of the literary and academic skills required can promote academic confidence which in turns assists the development of deeper learning strategies that need to be fostered successfully in adult education (Cullity: 2006, p. 4). Not understanding what is required or how to achieve what is required, coupled with individuals feeling insecure in approaching teachers or lecturers, only compounds fears that are present when commencing study.

There has been an increasing focus within literature on the significance and benefits of successfully engaging mature age individuals through the transition process in adult education. Heirdsfield, Walker and Walsh (n.d, p.2.) comment that establishing social networks is clearly important in individual transition. How individuals make the successful transition to university life has been studied extensively by Tinto (1993). In fact, Tinto (1993) as cited in Erskine (2000: p. 44) commented that individuals who integrate into university tend to stay, while those who are not integrated tend to withdraw, and his conceptual model is the most widely recognised and reported in research. In exploring his work, he has synthesised research on individual departure, emphasising the role of the institution and social/academic integration of individuals attributes, skills and dispositions and

the institutions academic and social systems and found that individual's departures were mainly related to isolation and incongruence. Of particular note from Tinto's 1987 investigations was that when individuals feel a sense of belonging and acceptance they are much more likely to make the effort required to continue studying (Tinto: 1987, as cited in Stone: 2000). However most of Tinto's work focuses on the general transition into university life and does not differentiate mature age individuals as a separate cohort.

Adult learning in any context involves transactions between the person and the environment. Adult learning is an active, self-directed process that can be applied to all settings, in everyday life and to a holistic process of adaptation to the world. To learn is not the special province of a single part of human functioning. It involves the integrated functioning of the whole of a person, their thinking and feeling, perceiving and behaving. Learning is the major process of human adaptation; it occurs in all human settings, it encompasses all life stages. When learning is conceived as a holistic adaptive process, it provides conceptual bridges across life situations, portraying life as a continuous process.

The adult learning experiences of mature age individuals who participated in the research projects outlined earlier clearly revealed that individual experiences of migration, culture, family, relationships and health are very much different through the life cycle of the individual. Informal learning needs and experiences that individuals have, can impact on experiences of more formal adult education. Most of the individuals interviewed for the research projects were searching for integrated experiences of the informal and formal learning that can occur from engagement with a formal curriculum, but also from interacting with other adult learners.

There are diverse groups of people participating in education and training programs throughout the nation with intense competition between education and training providers for limited funding and space. Education and training practices therefore, need to be able to manage the communication of diverse information to diverse groups of individuals without resorting to narrow and limited classroom-based practice. A new kind of inclusive adult education practice would mean that educators would need to know their individuals; that is, who they are, their academic, cultural and social backgrounds, their existing skills and knowledge, with practitioners being able to identify why each individual is participating in specific education programs and how they learn. Within this engagement and inclusive-based practice, education and training practitioners might also need to be able to identify and communicate clear learning outcomes.

One role of education and training practice can be to assist individuals to develop the skills of self-managed, independent learning in an environment that provides clear expectations and appropriate resources. The group of mature age learners interviewed in these research projects were 'looking at' education as being the place where they could reconnect to adult education but also have the freedom to engage in learning in a way that suited their individual needs rather than being serviced as part of a group. This type of flexible practice means leading, as opposed to controlling individuals to manage their own learning. This then facilitates the use of learning resources designed to achieve the desired learning outcomes, focussing on what each individuals wants and needs to achieve at any given time. Effective and inclusive education and training practice would mean encouraging active learning, cooperation and collaboration among diverse groups of individuals with real-world problems to solve, setting of authentic tasks, accepting relevant applications and offering a degree of choice that enable individuals to be active learners rather than passive recipient vessels for eclectic education and training offerings. Many of the individuals interviewed for the research projects in Victoria wanted a flexible mix of group connection and activity that connected to their individual learning needs and styles.

3.3 Summary of Responses from current students and staff

The following is a summary of the data collected from the twelve current students and the ten staff. Interestingly, several major themes emerged that were intertwined throughout both staff interviews and student surveys. Both staff and students identified that mature age students present with pre existing competing priorities when entering higher education, which can then create greater complexity when attempting to integrate university study amidst these demands. Most staff remained uncertain about the correct pathways that mature age students need to follow when entering higher education. Both staff and students stated that making connections into university life, either from academic support services or from the creation of social networks had a positive impact on the university experience and, both staff and students spoke about the fact that a mature age student's previous life experience brought more diversity into coursework, however staff disagreed that separating age cohorts would enhance learning opportunities in some subjects.

The majority of staff and students talked about the various struggles that mature age student's face both initially and throughout their studies. Attempting to successfully integrate family, work and other personal commitments with studying was referred to as a juggling or balancing act by most and one that had the potential to create more

stress during this life transition. Contributing factors were described in terms of personal, financial, domestic, societal and other work related obligations. Students commented that long placement times particularly had the potential to have a profound effect on their financial stability. One staff member commented that it was 'all the complexities that go with trying to integrate family, study, work.' Similarly half of the staff interviewed expressed that they themselves struggled with this dilemma and also mentioned that 'finding the time and having to juggle study on top of everything else' was a hindering factor in their own experience.

Half of the students surveyed reported analogous thoughts to that of staff. One student spoke about the difficulties. *'Combining study with work and family commitments; this was very difficult at times, especially around childcare arrangements. I had to find time to study and felt that I was neglecting my family at times. It was difficult finding an even balance between study, work, and family. I had little time to unwind myself.'*

However, only two staff identified other complexities that these students present with when entering higher education and the impact that this can have on their ability to successfully assimilate into university study. One staff member commented that 'major life disruptions can lead people here'. Another staff member made similar comments and felt that often students returned to study due to personal crises in their lives such as unemployment, divorce or change in health status and so 'bring baggage' alongside often other personal expectations they may have in regard to study. Comparatively, three students identified additional emotional stressors as a significant factor that impacted upon their journey through university.

Both staff and students made the observation that mature age students in general entered university with higher expectations and a greater commitment toward studying. Staff spoke about the fact that mature age students were more willing to participate in conversation and generally displayed higher motivational and commitment levels toward subjects. One student made comment on this and stated that mature age students *'in general had higher expectations of both themselves and the university.'* Interestingly, staff identified fear and lack of confidence as factors that might prevent students from applying to university, but fear was not ranked high as a contributing dynamic from the students who responded. However this may in part be due to the general nature of the questions asked.

The second theme that emerged was that most academics interviewed were ambiguous about the pathways available to assist students both apply and transition into university life. It was clear in conversations that most staff found these processes confusing and somewhat obscure. Half identified the course administrator as a key reference person, but there were a plethora of other ideas suggested. This included contacting other organisations such as VCAT and TAFE. Some suggested sourcing the La Trobe University webpage, or contacting the Student Administration Office. Whilst others knew of more specific programs such as the Special Entry access scheme (SEAS) or the Special tertiary admission test (STAT) and finally others suggested utilising informal contacts such as family and friends. Most staff suggested several different modes of entry and there was very little overlap in ideas presented.

One staff member expressed her own concerns about this and stated: 'How to enrol is confusing. Even I am confused by it and do not have a clear understanding of the correct pathway to follow when you are a mature age student. It appears to be an unclear process, and one that I find difficult to understand. So I can only imagine how students would feel'.

Creating connections once enrolled was seen as an essential component which could successfully enable integration into university culture. Half of the staff interviewed felt that students who utilised academic skills support and student support services were more likely to successfully integrate and go onto succeed within the first year. Likewise several students attributed their own success partly from acquiring skills and knowledge gained from accessing such resources.

Furthermore, the majority of staff felt that students who had a sense of connection to the university community remained and went on to successfully complete courses. Both staff and student identified that the 'issue of connectedness' was a contributing factor in their own personal journey as a mature age student. The majority of both staff and students stated that 'making new friends' and 'increasing their own personal support networks' were positive aspects of their university experience. One staff member when commenting on his own experience referred to the support of other mature age students as providing 'a sense of comradely.'

Overwhelming most students spoke about the significance of their own prior life experience and how they were able to relate this into coursework. One student made comment that *'These experiences also enabled additional insight and understanding when tackling social work issues.'* Another student mentioned that: *I*

remember on many occasions the younger students not being aware of certain life experiences and learning from the older students....such as childhood development, pregnancy, parenting and experience in the workforce, organisations and team work and managerialism.'

Just under half of the staff acknowledged that a student's life experience brought a greater sense of 'richness' into the classroom dynamic and others agreed that mature age students were often more 'conceptual' in how they then applied this academically. Despite staff acknowledging that there are differences amongst student cohorts, when asked about their thoughts on separating mature age students and school leavers for some subjects, most staff disagreed and conveyed that all students regardless of age display different learning styles and that rather the emphasis should be on teachers developing ways that engage different groups that promotes a reciprocal transfer of knowledge across the generations.

3.4 Role of higher education in regional and rural communities

Some of the students reported analogous thoughts to that of staff, one individual spoke about the difficulties combining *study with work and family commitments. This was very difficult at times, especially around childcare arrangements. I had to find time to study and felt that I was neglecting my family at times. It was difficult finding an even balance between study, work, and family. I had little time to unwind myself.*

Some staff identified other complexities that these individuals present with when entering education and the impact that this can have on their ability to successfully assimilate into study. One commented that *major life disruptions can lead people here.* Another felt that often, individuals returned to study due to personal crises in their lives such as unemployment, divorce or change in health status and so 'bring baggage' alongside often other personal expectations they may have in regard to study. Both staff and individual learners made the observation that mature age individuals in general, entered education with higher expectations and a greater commitment toward studying. Staff spoke about the fact that mature age individuals were more willing to participate in conversation and generally displayed higher motivational and commitment levels toward subjects. One individual made comment on this and stated that mature age individuals *in general had higher expectations of both themselves and the university.*

The second theme that emerged was that most people working in education were ambiguous about the pathways available to assist individuals both apply and transition into education in rural and regional areas. It was clear that most staff found these processes confusing and somewhat obscure. Creating connections within an institution, once enrolled was seen as an essential component which could successfully enable integration into education culture. Staff felt that individuals who utilised learning skills support and individual support services were more likely to successfully integrate and go on to succeed within the first year of study. Likewise several individual learners attributed their own success partly to acquiring skills and knowledge about study and learning that were gained from accessing such resources.

Furthermore, the majority of staff felt that individuals, who had a sense of connection to the education community, were more likely to persist and successfully complete courses. Both staff and individuals identified that the issue of connectedness in a regional and rural community was a contributing factor in their own personal journey as a mature age individual. The majority of both staff and individuals stated that making new friends and increasing their own personal support networks were positive aspects of their education experience. One staff member when commenting on his own experience referred to the support of other mature age individuals as providing a sense of comradely.

Overwhelming most individuals spoke about the significance of their own prior life experience and how they were able to relate this into coursework. One individual made comment that these *experiences also enabled additional insight and understanding when tackling social work issues*. Another individual mentioned that: *I remember on many occasions the younger individuals not being aware of certain life experiences and learning from the older individuals....such as childhood development, pregnancy, parenting and experience in the workforce, organisations and team work and managerialism.*

Just under half of the staff acknowledged that a individual's life experience brought a greater sense of 'richness' into the classroom dynamic and others agreed that mature age individuals were often more conceptual in how they then applied this academically. Despite staff acknowledging that there are differences amongst individual cohorts, when asked about their thoughts on separating mature age individuals and school leavers for some subjects, most staff disagreed with this notion. Staff conveyed that all individuals regardless of age display different learning styles and that rather the emphasis should be on teachers developing

better ways that engage different groups, promoting a reciprocal transfer of knowledge across generations especially in a rural and regional context where these connections are crucial to community life. In a regional context there also needs to be consistency across sectors, so that all individuals can access the type of education that is relevant for them.

Higher education reforms over the past ten to fifteen years have included the introduction of HECS and fee-for-service places as funding mechanisms for all major courses of education. The reforms have also led to an expansion in the number of higher education institutions that service populations living within so-called 'rust belt' areas of major cities and urban sprawl suburbs. This has been occurring alongside the growth of multi-sector adult education institutions with the expansion of Australian HE programs and services into most Asian countries. The new Rudd Labor Government has received the Bradley Report on Higher Education Reforms (2008) which has recommended a package of reforms regarding new national targets for educational attainment, more comprehensive individual support, higher quality accreditation and systems management within institutions and specifically, greater funding in regional and rural areas. Minister Gillard has also signalled that the VET sector will be expanded in both size and in the types of programs on offer.

4 Conclusions

4.1 Course Information

Course information is reaching mature age adult in rural communities in a very ad hoc manner from the School of Social Work and the Faculty of Health Sciences. Advertisements in local papers throughout the region at key times appear to be more directed at the parents of school leavers rather than potential mature age students. Similarly Open Day appears structured for Year 12 students and their parents although significant numbers of mature age adults do attend. Too often the marketing of courses at Bendigo does not give sufficient time for mature age adults to consider university study as an option. Mature age adults have to consider a range of factors quite different to school leavers before making the decision to embark on university study, issues raised by the students interviewed for this project, included; family, income, work rosters and self-confidence are the main ones.

The data from this HEESP project and the ensuing conversations within the FHS at Bendigo has resulted in a targeted campaign in 2009 for prospective mature age students. Fliers targeting mature age adults have been sent to all agencies that host clinical placements and a mature age information evening is being held on 15th July, well ahead of Open Day and VTAC application dates.

The School of Social Work will once again use the agency data-base developed in this project to send out information about courses in 2010 and staff engaged in supervision and liaison of social work placements will be encouraged to use their visits to all agencies to distribute information and talk to workers about courses at La Trobe University, Bendigo.

4.2 Course Recruitment

Direct recruitment of individual mature age adults, specifically those from rural communities and individuals from diverse backgrounds and abilities is an issue that has been discussed with the FHS and the School of Social Work at Bendigo. Recent data from ACER has revealed that although LTU does attract students from a full range of equity categories, we can do much more to attract and 'coach' mature age individuals through the complex and often daunting process of applying for entry into a university course.

Allowing mature age individuals to have direct access to key academic staff who have the knowledge and skills to encourage mature age individuals to participate in the process of course selection, rather than just student and course administrators, can make a difference. Mature age individuals often want answers to complex questions with regard to part-time study options, timetables, key support services, flexibility and academic support services. The information they require about these issues is often more detailed than currently provided and appointing key academic staff to act as contact points via email and telephone for mature age individuals during the initial application timeframe can make a significant difference to whether an individual applies for entry into a course.

Due to the ethical issues that were not really considered in the framing of this project, Rob Townsend was unable to track with sufficient data whether his direct contact via email or phone made a difference to the application process for mature age individuals from rural communities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it did! However, a key recommendation here is that LTU commission significant research about the information and processes that can and do encourage mature age individuals to engage with the process of entry into a university course.

4.3 Life & Education Transitions

The literature review in this report undoubtedly states that life and education transitions are significant issues for mature age individuals and especially so for those living in rural and regional communities. Most higher education institutions and La Trobe University in particular, do not provide comprehensive transition support for mature age individuals accessing university. Programs such as summer school academic skills workshops and pre-entry counselling services could make all the difference to the self-confidence and skill base of mature age individuals wanting to access university courses, at both regional and urban campuses. These types of programs are common place in the community college sector of the U.S.A. and a recommendation of this report is that LTU embark on a range of pilot programs situated in TAFE and Adult Education colleges during the VTAC application process (August-September each year) to provide information, counselling and academic skills to prospective mature age students.

Supporting the transition period for mature age individuals is a key gap in the services provided by higher education institutions in Australia however, such services are provided to the secondary school sector in supporting individuals from Year 10 onward to consider accessing university courses. Mentoring could also be provided as a key resource for prospective mature age individuals with current students being able to not just act as guides during Open Day and Orientation Week but in the intervening period when life and education transitions become key issues for mature age individuals.

4.4 Learning Support

One of the key outcomes of the mentoring program that was established as part of this HEESP project was to provide broad based learning support to new mature age university students around the resources that are available on campus. These resources include the equality and diversity officers, academic skills staff, counselling services and library liaison staff.

The feedback given during the follow-up sessions was that information given by mentors about accessing academic skills and student counselling services was invaluable to the first year experiences of social work, nursing and dental/oral health students. Feedback from academic skills and counselling staff was that during semester 1, 2009 more FHS first year students were accessing services than ever before and that advantaged both the students and the support staff. Student support staff were more fully informed of the common first year experiences.

4.5 Social Networking at Regional Campuses

One of the main purposes of mentoring for first year mature age students was to develop a more effective way of developing social networks for these students who often do not spend much time on campus outside of attending lectures and tutorials. This aspect of the project will become more apparent when the formal evaluations have been completed. One main issue that has been raised by students is that there are few spaces for mature age students to meet each other away from the noise of the main cafeteria space at Bendigo campus. A mature age lounge space was opened within the BSA building, near the main cafeteria but this space appeared to be not much different to the main spaces of the cafeteria. Mature age students were requesting more relaxed spaces away from the noise of the cafeteria.

As a result, in semester 2, 2009 counselling staff will host two social work students on placement at Bendigo campus in a project to identify issues and potential developments in providing different spaces, information and interactive resources within the BSA building at Bendigo. This project will be led and supervised by Leonie Farrugia, a new counsellor at Bendigo campus.

4.6 Summary of Key Recommendations

1. All current mentoring programs at LTU be comprehensively mapped and evaluated to ensure consistency, quality and a connection to the diverse student population.
2. LTU embark on a range of pilot programs situated in TAFE and Adult Education colleges during the VTAC application process (August-September each year) to provide information, counselling and academic skills to prospective mature age students throughout all regions.
3. Mentoring is provided as a key resource for prospective mature age individuals; with current students who act as guides during Open Day and Orientation Week, mentoring prospective students about the life and education transitions that become key issues for mature age individuals in the intervening period between Open Day and Orientation Week.

5 Project Expenditure (as of 06/07/2009)

HEESP Funds \$ 9,715.00		
Expenditure		
Item	Expenses in actual \$ In-kind expressed in (..)	Total actual & in-kind project expenditure
Project management		
R Townsend	564.70	
	(564.70)	1,080.00
Project officers		
R Townsend	4,517.60	
M Delves (project assistant)	(\$10,920.00)	
		15, 437.60
Travel	800.40	
		800.40
Printing/materials	476.82	
		476.82
Catering	1,250.00	
5 lunch time events for 30+ people @ each event		1,250.00
Mentor training	1,250.00	
1 mentor attended a rural social work conference to present & discuss the project findings (\$250)		1,250.00
35 individual participated in Building Team Work with Training @ La Trobe @ \$30 pp		
Totals	\$ 8,859.52	\$ 20,344.22

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Appendix A

Peer Mentor Training Program

- | | |
|----------------------|---|
| 11.30 – 11.35 | Introduction to training (5 mins) |
| 11.35 – 11.55 | What is a peer mentoring relationship? (20 mins) |
| 11.55 – 12.10 | What is a good peer learning or peer networking activity at LTU Bendigo? (15 mins) |
| 12.10 – 12.40 | What knowledge & skills do peer mentors need? (30 mins) |
| 12.40 – 2.50 | On-going support & LTU resources. (10 mins) |
| 12.50 – 1.00 | Now what? Discussion (10 mins) |

Lunch will be provided & we will munch as we discuss...

Appendix B

Speed dating for the mature age student

Most mature age students return to university after a major transition in their lives, a lecturer at La Trobe University, Bendigo, has found.

Robert Townsend made an in-depth study of the experiences of fifteen students from the Shire of Campaspe as part of his PhD in Education.

His findings have been fed into an innovative new program at the University for dealing with the concerns of mature-age students.

‘After a marriage break-up, ill health or arrival from another country, people reassess their lives,’ Mr Townsend says. ‘Many decide to take up university studies to pursue the vocation they’ve always wanted.’

The La Trobe lecturer discovered that experiences of tertiary study often do not live up to expectations for mature-age students.

‘Mature age students find it difficult to adapt because unlike school leavers they have lives, children, partners, work and housework,’ he says.

This means they have less time to socialise. They don’t tend to hang around on campus drinking coffee with others of their year. They spend lunchtimes in the library and do most of their research on computer at home.

Their social needs are not generally met by universities, Mr Townsend says, which are very outcome-oriented. Universities hand out timetables and books but mature-age students need more.

‘What they need as a resource are fellow learners not just class notes,’ Mr Townsend concludes.

The La Trobe social work lecturer is working at changing the system by introducing mentoring with a difference for mature-age students.

Last week some of La Trobe’s 2009 intake of mature-age students in health sciences met 45 mentors from third and fourth year health sciences courses.

This was no touchy, feely get-to-know each other occasion but a question of addressing the nuts and bolts of an education for students who have busy lives. The session enabled them to develop links with students who have similarly crowded schedules.

‘We called it speed-dating for mentors,’ says the lecturer. ‘I’m no micro-manager so I got the mentors to sit in a row and the “mentees” spent a few minutes with mentor trying for a match.’

‘These are people from diverse rural and regional communities. They wanted to know how to solve the day-to-day issues of life as adults when they return to study such as child care and transport.’

Mr Townsend says the university system as a whole is changing in the direction of more inquiry-based learning which suits the mature age student. Health Sciences at La Trobe now has a common first year and other universities are introducing common undergraduate courses to encourage the production of what he calls human capital.

‘We know universities are about knowledge and skills development for the professional but we should also be about social capital development as well. We are training citizens. We need professionals with all the skills to function in society. To do that we need to engage with students as social beings and address the social needs of being a mature-age student.’

Appendix C

**Mentor evaluation of FHS Peer Mentoring program
2009**

During semester 1, 2009, the Faculty of Health Sciences peer mentoring program involved second, and later, year Health Sciences (HS) students, who had trained as mentors, mentoring first year HS students. You are invited to complete this questionnaire, even if you did not meet with mentees during the semester, as the information you provide will help us to improve the mentoring program to better serve the needs of both our mentors and mentees.

Please feel free to be quite open with your responses to the questions. All responses and comments received will be treated confidentially.

Questions

1. Please tick each box next to responses that apply to you, and add a comment if needed:

What was the extent of your participation in the FHS peer mentoring program during semester 1?

- i. I completed all / part of the Peer Mentoring training at the start of semester.
- ii. I was assigned mentees to meet with.
- iii. I met with my mentee(s) during the semester, a total of times.
- iv. I did not do all of the above because

.....
.....

2. Please circle the number, between 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*), that shows how much you agree or disagree with each comment.

In this peer mentoring program I felt that	<i>Disagree strongly</i>					<i>Agree strongly</i>
a. the purpose of the program was clear from the start.	1	2	3	4	5	
b. the Peer Mentoring training was useful to me.	1	2	3	4	5	
c. the structure of the program made it easy for me to participate.	1	2	3	4	5	
d. the program timetable & time commitment suited me.	1	2	3	4	5	
e. the mentoring supervisor supported me in the things I needed help with.	1	2	3	4	5	

3. a. If you missed out on the mentoring experience because your mentees did not attend meetings, do you have any suggestions or thoughts about this and the peer mentoring program?

.....

.....

.....

.....

- b. If you missed out on the mentoring experience please **go to question 7.**

If you mentored in the FHS peer mentoring program during semester 1, 2009
please answer all remaining questions.

For questions 4-6, please circle the number, between 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*), that shows how much you agree or disagree with each comment.

	<i>Disagree strongly</i>					<i>Agree strongly</i>
4. As a mentor I was able to help my mentee(s) to						
a. improve their academic skills.	1	2	3	4	5	
b. make friends.	1	2	3	4	5	
c. discover the services the university offers.	1	2	3	4	5	
d. improve their communication skills.	1	2	3	4	5	
e. find their way around the University.	1	2	3	4	5	
f. gain confidence to ask for help.	1	2	3	4	5	

Any other comments?

.....

	<i>Disagree strongly</i>					<i>Agree strongly</i>
5. During the peer mentoring program I found						
a. the LMS Peer Mentoring site helpful.	1	2	3	4	5	
b. I used the mentoring information and materials to help with the mentoring work.	1	2	3	4	5	
c. the mentoring information and materials were helpful in my own work at university.	1	2	3	4	5	
d. communications with my mentoring supervisor via email and in meetings were useful.	1	2	3	4	5	
e. meetings with other mentors were useful.	1	2	3	4	5	

Any other comments?

.....

		<i>Disagree strongly</i>			<i>Agree strongly</i>	
6.	Looking back over my mentoring experience in this peer mentoring program					
	a. I enjoyed being a peer mentor.	1	2	3	4	5
	b. my mentee(s) and I worked well together.	1	2	3	4	5
	c. having a mentor-buddy to share mentor meetings with was helpful to me.	1	2	3	4	5
	d. I feel that I performed well as a mentor.	1	2	3	4	5
	e. the peer mentoring program helped me to develop leadership skills.	1	2	3	4	5

Any other comments?

.....

7. Please write your responses to the questions in the spaces provided:

a. What has been the greatest benefit you received from your experience in the mentoring program?

.....

b. What were the negatives of being a peer mentor?

.....

c. What suggestions do you have for improving the program?

.....

d. Are you willing to be a peer mentor in the future? (Please explain.)

.....

e. What support do you think first year students may need during semester 2?

.....
.....
.....

f. Any other comments?

.....
.....
.....
.....

Thank you for assisting us to evaluate
the Faculty of Health Sciences Peer Mentoring Program for Semester 1, 2009.
