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ABSTRACT

This paper, based on a questionnaire and interview study of 118 married and single mothers who had interrupted their studies at one of three New South Wales universities, explores the question of what factors prevent successful completion of study. A cluster analysis was performed on the responses to an item that listed 21 reasons for dropout. A four-cluster solution was accepted. Eleven participants in the first cluster identified the following difficulties: lack of money, child care, and self-confidence; lack of support; and their own ill health. The second group of eight was characterized as suffering from practical difficulties. The third cluster was the largest--74--and was characterized by role overload. The fourth cluster of 13 individuals named course dissatisfaction as their reason for leaving. Multivariate analyses revealed that the four groups were significantly different on age, age of youngest child, and motivation for return to study. The first group was significantly younger than the sample mean and had children who were younger than the mean. The second group was significantly older than the sample mean and reported high levels of interest and humanitarian self-actualization motivation for study. The third group's mean age and age of children were similar to the sample means. The fourth group members were of average age as were their children. The study concluded that student mothers did not form a homogenous group and difficulties they encountered related particularly to family life cycle stage. (YLB)

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# SINGLE AND MARRIED MOTHERS AS STUDENTS: OBSTACLES TO SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF STUDY.

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### Abstract

Research in Australian and overseas has revealed that mature age entrants to universities make exceptional students despite the often very high life loads they bear. Relevant Australian research suggests that mature age women with children perform even better, on average, than both school leavers and mature age entrants in general. Successful completion of tertiary study confers considerable benefits on mature-age students, particularly those who are single mothers for whom study offers improved employment prospects and the chance to escape poverty.

This paper, based on a questionnaire and interview study of 118 married and single mothers who had interrupted their studies at one of 3 NSW universities, explores the question of what factors prevent successful completion of study. Answers to this question highlight what could be done to improve student mothers' chances of completing their courses. The study concludes that student mothers do not form an homogenous group and that difficulties they encounter relate particularly to family life cycle stage.

The last few decades have seen a rapid world-wide increase in the numbers of mature age students enrolled in higher education. Changes to the labour market including the increase in required level of training for many professions and para-professions have influenced this growth. Women have been strongly represented amongst the numbers of mature age students. Again, this may be attributed to social changes, such as the increase in the divorce rate and associated increased numbers of mother-headed families, changes to women's roles associated with the growth of the women's movement, and women's higher work force participation rate.

In Australia the increase in the number of students has been the result of the above changes combined with policy decisions such as the abolition of tertiary fees and the introduction of special entry schemes. Many of the Australians who have taken advantage of the opening up of tertiary education have come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Their participation has contributed to Australia having a very egalitarian higher education systems by international standards. Australian mature age students then are often the representatives of the talented from previous age cohorts whose ability might otherwise have been wasted (Anderson, 1990).

Australian mature age students have, as in other countries, proved themselves to be exceptional students who experience considerable academic success. This is reflected in the career success that they experience after graduation. As well as these tangible rewards for the efforts expended on study, mature age students and graduates report a wide variety of other personal benefits such as increased confidence, self esteem, competence, skills and knowledge. They also report that their studies benefit their families and enrich their personal relationships. This is particularly true of mothers who return to study. Their grades are on average better than both school leaver students and other mature age students and they report even larger gains in self esteem and self ratings of ability (Burns et al, 1988).

Changes in women's roles have especially affected mothers. There has been an increase in the expectation that women will return to work at some time after the birth of their children for the sake of their careers and their own satisfaction. Increases in the cost of living have also meant that many married couples have found that one wage is insufficient to support a family. For women whose marriages have broken down return to the paid work force becomes the alternative to eking out an existence on welfare. Gaining a tertiary qualification or up-grading an obsolete one gives a woman access to more prestigious jobs and thus much increased earning power. The rewards for successfully undertaking mature age study then are considerable and failure to complete a course is a loss for the student, the family and society.

Mothers face special difficulties which may make completing a course of study very taxing. As the major part of housework and child care remains women's responsibility mothers who wish to work and/or study as well as fulfilling domestic obligations must juggle these multiple roles. Husbands may be more or less supportive but are likely to more involved in their breadwinner role than in contributing to day-to-day housework and child care. Good, affordable child care also remains scarce. Apart from practicalities considerable feeling still exists in the general population that separation from their mothers does pre-school aged children harm.

Women then decide amongst competing pressures about how to mother 'properly', to contribute to the family purse and to pursue their own interests and self-development. For different mothers by virtue of different personal

circumstances and preferences the decision to re-enter education and/or the paid work force will seem best taken at different parts of the life cycle.

Various patterns have become apparent from previous research (Burns et al, 1988) in the way mothers manage this juggling act. Some women, particularly those who are highly skilled and employed in jobs which offer good maternity leave provisions, interrupt paid work little if at all when they have children and combine mothering with paid work and continuing education. Other well-educated women may take time off from paid work when they have babies and small children to upgrade or diversify their qualifications. Some mothers prefer to leave their re-entry to study until the children have become more independent. The judgment of when this occurs varies from woman to woman. Some wait until the children have begun school, some until they start secondary school, others until the children have left home. Still others who have left paid work to have children may find that either a marital separation or the increase in demands on the family budget force them into retraining when their children are very young.

Work with a group of mature age student mothers suggested that different patterns are likely to generate different difficulties. Women who leave their educational run late, until their 50's, may find that with the independence of their children, few apparent obstacles remain in their path. However, they may also find that family and friends have formed a set opinion of them and their role which excludes that of aspiring scholar. As one mother of two adult children remarked:

*In theory everybody is behind you. In practice their needs of you, quite unconsciously, still have to be met. Each person still wants his quota of time and attention and life's structure still has to be maintained.*

Older women may also discover that fitting in at university is difficult and some remarked that they thought that staff were hostile to their presence.

On the other hand those at the other end of the family life cycle find that the demands generated by young children leave them little time or energy for study. Husbands burdened with heavy work responsibilities may have little patience with expectations that they also contribute to the tiring work of caring for babies and toddlers. The expense of paid child care can also lead to the situation where the mother of small children who wishes to study may have to work to pay for child care so that she has time to study but is then too exhausted to be able to study. Mothers with older children may also find the expense of servicing school children's material requirements forces involvement in paid work which leaves little time or energy for study.

Despite this litany of potential disasters many women do complete study successfully whilst they are mothers. To gain some insight into what helps mothers complete a course of study I am going to address the question of what hinders them. To do this I will examine the results of research conducted with a sample of student mothers who had interrupted a course of study at one of three eastern Australian universities between 1983 and 1988. 'Interrupted' has been chosen because it has become obvious that for most mothers their periods of absence from university have the characteristics of strategic withdrawal to regroup rather than abandonment of the entire enterprise.

Potential participants who had been identified from institutional records as having left study without completing their courses were contacted by letter and invited to complete an enclosed questionnaire. The questionnaire covered a wide range of topics, including details of the interrupted course, reasons for dropping

out, previous and subsequent educational and work experience, and motivation for return to mature age study.

Motivation for return to study was chosen as a key issue as least partly because of the frequency with which mature age students and their teachers attribute student mothers' academic success to their being 'more motivated'. In order to analyse how motivation relates to other variables such as academic persistence it was necessary to operationalise it and find a way to measure it. A modified form of Maslin's Continuing Education Women Questionnaire (Maslin, 1978) was chosen as an appropriate means to do achieve this. Because Maslin's original sample differed in important ways from Australian samples of mature age student mothers it was decided to conduct an exploratory factor analysis. The Questionnaire was administered to a sample of 117 recent mature age graduate mothers. The subsequent factor analysis yielded five main types of motivation which were used as the basis for five motivation scales. The five factors were named Humanitarian Self-actualisation, Compensatory, Career/ Family advancement, Prove Oneself and Autonomy.

Judging by the number of letters which were returned to sender geographic mobility would appear to be a major factor in interruption of study. However 118 useable questionnaires were returned. The respondents were aged from 34 to 60 (mean 44) and they had from 1 to 9 children (mean 2.5) whose ages ranged from new born to adult. When the participants discontinued study they had been enrolled in a wide variety of disciplines and had completed anything from none up to 99% of the course. (The latter student had completed her dissertation but did not submit it).

An unstructured question asked participants to indicate the main reason why they had interrupted study. Responses to this question indicated that 12 were false dropouts who had transferred from their original courses or institutions of enrolment but had not actually left study. This in itself is an important fact as it indicates that present methods of higher education record keeping are artificially inflating dropout rates.

Following the open-ended question was a list of 21 possible reasons for leaving study. These had been derived from discussions with mature age student mothers and graduates. Respondents were asked to indicate whether each reason had been a factor in their decision to leave their course of study. Before continuing it is important to note what did not cause students to leave their courses, namely poor performance due to previous low levels of education. Table One compares the entrance qualifications of three samples of mature age student mothers - those still studying, recent graduates and the interrupters. It is evident from the table that early school leavers are under-represented amongst the interrupters. Table Two gives the frequency with which participants agreed that each factor had contributed to their decision to interrupt their studies.

A cluster analysis was performed on the responses to the 21 reason for dropout items. A four cluster solution was accepted. The 11 participants who formed the first cluster stressed lack of money, child care and self confidence, lack of support and their own ill health as their main difficulties. The second group of 8 was characterised as suffering from practical difficulties, for example distance from the university and lack of access to facilities such as libraries. The third cluster was the largest - 74 strong, and was characterised by role overload, that is their central complaints were of the pressures arising from family responsibilities and the

demands of paid work. The fourth cluster, composed of 13, named course dissatisfaction as their reason for leaving.

Multivariate analyses revealed that the four groups were significantly different on age, the age of their youngest child and their motivation for return to study.

The first group were significantly younger than the sample mean and had children who were younger than the mean. They indicated that family responsibilities had been a reason for leaving study, as had lack of money, family support and adequate child care. Stress-related personal ill health also contributed to their difficulties.

In comparison, the second group were significantly older than the sample mean. Group members did not suffer from family-related problems, the exception being lack of family support, but were high on student adjustment difficulties, for example feeling that they were rejected or not supported by university staff and fellow students. They also reported high levels of interest and Humanitarian Self-actualisation motivation for study, and somewhat lower Career, Family Advancement motivation.

The third group's mean own age and age of children were similar to the sample means. Group members' main difficulty was role overload.

The fourth group were high only on course dissatisfaction and were also of average age, as were their children.

These results fit well with a life cycle interpretation. The first group can be seen as women who returned to study 'too soon' when the physical and time demands of their infants and small children made study difficult. Husbands burdened with the increased demands for income generated by a growing family were reluctant or unable to give practical support. Thus for the relatively young student mother the heavy load of child care, study and often at least some paid employment led to stress and personal ill health. As one mother of two toddlers remarked:

*I had too high expectations of coping with new motherhood and study. I needed family support (not forthcoming) to mind the children so I could study/attend residential schools.*

The next group, in contrast, can be seen as having 'left their run too late'. Their main motivations for return to study were personal development and interest ones. Universities are frequently not very congenial places for persons whose interest is learning for learning's sake. Rather the undergraduate courses are designed for school leavers or others whose main motivation is to master the set curriculum to gain a career credential rather than the exploration of areas of personal interest. Added to their motivations for study being out of step with the ethos of the institution, the older group also suffered for being in a small minority and feeling conspicuously different.

The third and largest group demonstrated the truth of West's (1986b) contention that the difficulty for most mature age students is to fit university into their lives. The demands of family and usually work as well means that student mothers must be willing to take a flexible approach to organising study. This can mean being willing to withdraw for periods of time when the difficulties become too great. The factor that tilts the balance towards interrupting study was different for different women but case by case analysis suggest that sick children, sick or injured husbands, increased expectations that the mother would help with a new or newly expanded family business or the necessity of following a husband to a new location when his work demands it are very common factors.

The last group emerge as having a very instrumental approach to education. Their main motivations were career ones and if the course in which they were enrolled doesn't meet their demands they left and found a more suitable one. They were least likely to report the feelings of personal failure and extreme disappointment that characterised members of other groups.

The implications of these findings are several. One is that student mothers' circumstances will force them to take a flexible approach to completing study. Some consideration by institutions for the difficulties faced by mature students who have the responsibility for caring for a family and juggling many demands would help. Several of the participants told how inflexible and unsympathetic attitudes from institutions had turned difficulties into unsurmountable obstacles that necessitated withdrawal from study.

For the over-burdened younger mother, many of whom are single, the obvious solution lies with better child care and more financial support. The effectiveness of even apparently quite small increases in aid was demonstrated in Australia this year when financial assistance available under the JET scheme was extended from students in Technical and Further Education courses to those studying at universities. The benefit includes a \$200 up-front payment at the beginning of the study year to help with the costs of books and equipment. The result of expanding eligibility has been a large jump in university enrolments of single mothers, amongst others.

For the older woman access to counselling prior to enrolment and later opportunity to join networks of students facing similar difficulties could help alleviate feelings of isolation and lack of acceptance. Case histories of successful older students suggest that finding a group of like minded others was a powerful source of help and support both for overcoming isolation and gaining peer help with study difficulties. Institutions can assist this by adopting a policy of putting older students together in tutorial groups. (King, 1989).

The disgruntled practitioners who compose the course dissatisfaction group appear the least badly effected by their interruptions to study but would appreciate access to better academic advice about the content of the courses in which they intend to enrol.

Generally it would be to both the students' and the institutions' advantage if 'false starts' could be avoided. For institutions it means fewer wasted resources and for the student mothers themselves it means less waste of time, money and often, precious self confidence.

What of the fate of interrupted student careers? Work with graduate mothers has shown that interruption to study is very common but no bar to the eventual successful completion of study. The mothers involved in the current study confirmed this fact as all except 8 of them reported that they had either completed a course since dropping out, were currently studying or intended to do so in the future. Most reported, however, that they would have appreciated not having to interrupt their studies at all.

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Table One: Mode of entry to mature age study.

	Students	Graduates	Discontinuers
Early school leaver	25	25	15
Up-grade qualification	16	31	46
Graduate - degree in new area	22	25	27
Discontinued previous qual.	16	11	8
Deferred tertiary study	13	8	6
Other	8	-	-

Table Two: Percentage agreeing that factors were reason for interrupting study.

Reason	%	Rank
Pressure of family responsibilities	73	1st
Pressure of work responsibilities	53	2nd
Financial difficulties	36	4th
Your own ill health	20	
Ill health of a family member	14	
Lack of child care/child care too expensive	12	
Hostility/lack of support from family members	35	5th
Hostility/lack of support from others	14	
Practical difficulties eg distance from university	47	3rd
Hostility/lack of support from staff	18	
Hostility/lack of support from fellow students	3	
Dissatisfaction with course	30	6th
Decided study wasn't for me	6	
Lack of feedback on academic performance	8	
Lack of self confidence	30	6th
Lack of expected skills/knowledge	12	
Poor academic performance	10	
Lost interest	21	
Found another course which suited better	15	
Something better came up (eg job)	13	
Moved to another state/city/country	3	