

# TRANSITION EXPERIENCES OF MATURE STUDENTS AT ONTARIO COLLEGES

HAYFA, F. JAFAR  
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF IRAQ, SULAIMANI

## Abstract

Drawing on 24 semi-structured interviews, this small-scale qualitative study delves into mature students' social, academic, and career preparation experiences pursuing college education. Using Schlossberg's (1989) transition model, the findings reveal that mature students' overall experience is influenced by their mature status, as they possess greater confidence derived from their previous work and education experiences and the acquisition of new skills from their programs. However, some mature students perceive the career services offered by the college as being geared toward younger students, often disregarding their previous work experience. Consequently, they find these services less applicable to their needs. The transitioning-in stage for mature students is characterized by initial uncertainty that gradually transforms into a growing sense of confidence, fuelled by their experiences. These experiences motivate mature students to actively contribute to the college community by becoming mentors and assuming a supportive role for younger students during the transition-through stage. The transitioning-out for mature students involves evaluating career options and harbouring some skepticism. Nonetheless, the majority of participants expressed positive experiences and excitement about the new chapters in their lives. This study highlights the significance of tailored support and resources that acknowledge the specific needs and experiences of mature students throughout their college education.

**Keywords:** mature students, transition experience, Ontario colleges, Schlossberg's transition theory

## Résumé

S'appuyant sur 24 entretiens semi-structurés, cette étude qualitative à petite échelle se penche sur les expériences sociales, pédagogiques et de préparation à la carrière des étudiants adultes qui poursuivent des études postsecondaires. Utilisant le modèle de transition de Schlossberg, les résultats révèlent que l'expérience globale des étudiants adultes est influencée par leur statut d'adulte, car ils possèdent une plus grande confiance en eux grâce à leur expérience de travail et d'études antérieure et à l'acquisition de nouvelles compétences dans le cadre de leur programme. Cependant, certains étudiants adultes considèrent que les services d'orientation professionnelle proposés par leur établissement s'adressent à des étudiants plus jeunes et ne tiennent souvent pas compte de leur expérience professionnelle antérieure. Par conséquent, ils trouvent ces services moins adaptés à leurs besoins. La phase d'intégration des étudiants adultes se caractérise par une incertitude initiale qui se transforme progressivement en un sentiment croissant de confiance, alimenté par leurs expériences. Ces expériences motivent les étudiants adultes à contribuer activement à la communauté de leur établissement d'études postsecondaires en devenant des mentors et en assumant un rôle de soutien pour les étudiants plus jeunes au cours de la phase de transition. La transition vers la sortie pour les étudiants adultes implique d'évaluer les options de carrière avec un certain scepticisme. Néanmoins, la majorité des participants ont fait part d'expériences positives et exprimé leur enthousiasme à l'égard des nouveaux chapitres de leur vie. Cette étude souligne l'importance d'un soutien et de ressources sur mesure qui tiennent compte des besoins et des expériences des étudiants adultes tout au long de leurs études.

**Mots-clés :** étudiants adultes, expérience de transition, collèges de l'Ontario, théorie de la transition de Schlossberg

## Introduction

Since the creation of Ontario Colleges in the late 1960s, post-secondary education in Canada has become more accessible to a wider and more diverse population. In addition to new high school graduates, Ontario colleges also attract new immigrants, internationally educated students, university graduates, and mature students. Many of these students attend college with aspirations for career advancement, furthering their education or pursuing the skills needed for a second career (Collom et al., 2021; Genco, 2007). Mature students (age 26 years and older) make up 21% of the student population in Ontario colleges (Colleges Ontario, 2021). The growing presence of mature students in Canadian post-secondary education (PSE) has been attributed to the recognition of the importance of attaining higher education (HE) and government initiatives to raise the post-secondary attainment rate of adults (Kerr, 2011).

Mature students are non-traditional student who differ from traditional, younger students in many ways and require unique educational, economic, and personal support (Tanjiguchi & Kaufman, 2005); because many are “expected to fit into structures that already exist, that might not consider their qualities” (O’Brien et al., 2009, p. 635), their progression through college is more challenging. Furthermore, mature students often have to contend with a weight of responsibility and competing obligations toward work and family, along with financial tensions while completing school, challenges that may not be experienced by younger students (Singh et al., 2021). As a result, mature students are vulnerable to academic difficulties and are more likely to fall behind or risk attrition and mental health issues (Chen, 2017; Singh et al., 2021). Tackling these challenges can be costly for both students and institutions. Hence, there are benefits to improving success and outcomes among this group of students through increasing awareness of their experiences and reducing barriers to their academic success, graduate outcomes, and social integration.

This study investigates how mature students pursuing PSE at one Ontario college perceive their situation, self, support, and strategies while moving in, through, and out of the college. Accordingly, this study aims to (1) understand how mature students integrate socially and academically within the college, including the resources they use to support themselves in this integration; and (2) identify the challenges mature students face in terms of academic success, social integration, and career preparation.

This study uses Schlossberg’s transition model as a

theoretical framework. Goodman et al. (2006) explained that the concept of transitions consists of a series of three phases: *moving in*, *moving through*, and *moving out*. Moving in is the initial stage of a transition, in which individuals enter a new environment or experience a significant change. The moving through phase is the time when individuals engage with the new environment. Finally, the moving out phase is the process of disengaging from that environment and preparing for a new transition (Evans et al., 2009). Each phase provides a set of challenges and influences that interact with the institutional culture, values, and expectations that affect mature students’ journey from the start until the end. The analysis in this study is also informed by an intersectional lens, focusing on students’ status in Canada, to understand how their multiple identities affect their experience at college.

The study consists of five sections, starting with the literature review about the transition experiences of mature college students. The second section lays out Schlossberg’s transition model as the analytical framework used in this study, while the third section presents the research method. Section four presents the findings of the interviews undertaken for this study, organized by the three transitioning stages described in Schlossberg’s model. The study concludes with a discussion, conclusion, notes on limitations, and suggestions for future research.

## Literature Review

The transition into college is a critical element of mature students’ first year in college. Several studies have brought to light the challenges and barriers mature students face as they enter or re-enter college. There are concerns over interpersonal relationships, adjustment time, and academic stress (Genco, 2007; Woosley & Miller, 2009), as well as ability to access needed resources, supports, services, and flexible study options. There are also concerns regarding balancing their multiple roles and responsibilities and experiencing social exclusion (Rhijn et al., 2016). When it comes to academics, there are challenges with low academic confidence and poor self-esteem and time management, as well as financial challenges (Dunne, 2019) and pressure to support families while continuing with semi-skilled employment (Busher & James, 2019). These challenges indicate that re-entering formal education is a risky endeavor for mature students.

Mature students may go to college in more significant numbers than ever before, but when compared to traditional

students, they are less successful (Rodríguez et al., 2021). They frequently have a non-traditional academic journey, which often results in dropping out of education to take care of immediate needs (Busher & James, 2019; Chen, 2017). For instance, O'Donnell & Tobbell (2007) suggest that mature students are more vulnerable to difficulties in managing their transition to PSE because of their minority status in their institutions and because they have had little recent experience of formal education. Chen (2017) argues that the youth-centric environment of academic institutions contributes to the alienation and isolation of mature students. Furthermore, studies have highlighted that the institution's internal educational policies do not always take into account the needs presented by the heterogeneity of the student body (Carreira & Lopes, 2019; Chen, 2017; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; Reid, 2016). This indicates that the success of older students depends, in part, upon the fulfillment of having a "supportive, adult-friendly higher education environment" (Schaefer 2010, p. 69); and as Read et al. (2003) describe, a "friendly" space is one where mature students would not feel foreign or inauthentic (p. 267).

Steinhauer and Lovell (2019) identified four themes to describe the experience of mature college students: "limited time available; a more comfortable connection with other non-traditional aged students on campus; the pursuit of a degree is primarily to earn a higher wage, and established support system mostly off campus" (p. 1). Concerning the latter theme, Raaper et al. (2021) also found that the support networks for mature students tend to exclude formal support services and centre on family (well-being support) and fellow students (academic/well-being support). These findings indicate a lack of institutional support in student networks, which is likely to further disadvantage mature students. Nevertheless, mature students, as they go through their college education, try to enhance their personal capacity, learn to balance work, school, and life, and maintain support. Many students develop "self-strategies and self-adaptations which redefined their abilities to stay in school" (Priode, 2019, p. 118).

A few studies have explored mature students' perceptions of how their institutions have prepared them for life after graduation (Purcell et al., 2007; Rodríguez et al., 2021). In this research, some students, particularly from non-traditional profiles, face specific difficulties in achieving effective labour market transitions. Purcell et al. (2007) found that mature students need more time to find high-skill jobs, are more likely to find employment below their skill level, and are paid lower wages. Rodríguez et al. (2021) ar-

gued that the opportunities offered to students to improve their employability are unevenly distributed and, therefore, sparsely available to underrepresented students, particularly non-traditional students.

Despite the challenges mature students face in their transition to PSE, many students found their time in PSE to be positive and were proud of their academic achievements, resulting in newfound confidence, embracing lifelong learning, and contemplating further studies in HE (Dunne, 2019).

This study seeks to extend the research on mature students in HE by taking a more holistic approach through the exploration of how mature college students perceive their experiences while navigating the campus climate issues during the three main phases of their college life: transition into, through, and out of college. This research will add to the existing knowledge available in this territory. Additionally, furthering understanding of non-traditional students' perceptions of their college experience and of what is advantageous for their academic success is beneficial for students and their institutions.

## Analytical Frameworks

This study utilizes Schlossberg's transition theory as a theoretical framework to examine the experience of mature students. Schlossberg's theory is widely used to conceptualize adult transitions and considers how context, psychosocial development, and meaning may influence how an individual is able to adapt to change (Goodman et al., 2006). Schlossberg et al. (1989) stated that the transition model allows practitioners to understand students' needs through a structured approach to predicting, measuring, and modifying reactions to change.

Central to Schlossberg's model are four factors that influence an individual's ability to successfully cope with change, referred to as the 4 S's: *Situation*, *Self*, *Support*, and *Strategies*. The Situation factor refers to the trigger for transition and previous experience with similar events. The Self factor indicates important factors about the self, such as the personal and demographic characteristics that affect how an individual views life and responds to change. Support refers to one's networks of friends, family, institutions, and communities. Finally, Strategies are the coping responses that help to modify the situation or mitigate stress and challenging situations (Schlossberg et al., 1989).

The transition framework is designed to depict the complex reality that accompanies and defines the human capacity to cope with change (Evans et al., 2009). Good-

man and colleagues (2006) conceptualized transitions as consisting of a series of three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out. Each phase provides a set of challenges and influences that interact with institutional culture, values, and expectations and affect the mature students' journey from the start to the end. Successful transition is expected to foster strength and growth. Many mature students share a common experience as they enter or re-enter the college system, carrying with them their previous educational and/or work experiences (Busher & James, 2019). Thus, this model offers a relevant framework through which to examine the experience of mature students transitioning in to and out of the college environment.

Given the diversity of college students, this study uses an intersectional lens to understand how participants' social and political identities co-exist and influence their social and academic experiences at college. Intersectionality theory is a conceptual lens that emerged from feminist legal theory and critical race studies (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). It clarifies and centres, for analytical focus, the complex nature of human experience, highlighting the social factors, identities, and ideologies that shape a person's experiences and possibilities (Wolfgram et al., 2020). The preliminary analysis has shown that there are differences in participants' experiences based on their status in Canada. As a result, the analysis will investigate how this particular identity intersects with age to shape the experiences of mature college students.

## Methods

This study utilized empirical data collection gathered from 24 semi-structured interviews conducted in person with mature students, at one college in Toronto during the winter of 2018. The aim of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of mature students at college.

To ensure consistency in the data and to focus on the experiences of mature students who have gone through the necessary transitions, all research participants were required to meet two sample-selection criteria. Firstly, students had to be 26 years of age or older. Secondly, students had to be in the second or third year of their diploma or advanced diploma programs, indicating that they had already undergone the three stages of transition and were preparing for the transition to the labour market. Table 1 displays the profile of the participants who took part in this study.

The research ethics board of the college granted permission to conduct this study. A snowball sampling tech-

nique was employed to identify participants. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the preferred research method for this small-scale qualitative study because they allowed participants to construct their own understanding and sense-making of their experiences in a unique way (Merriam, 2009; Miller & Glassner, 2004). During the 45- to 60-minute interviews, participants were asked to discuss why they chose to pursue or re-enter post-secondary education, as well as their social and academic experiences throughout their time at the college. These questions were aligned with the theoretical framework of this study (Crossley, 2010; Merriam, 2009) to provide insight into the experiences of mature students at college.

To gain an in-depth understanding of mature students' experience, a thematic analysis framework was utilized. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic" (p. 79). To generate themes, an iterative process of coding was carried out, beginning with the participants' interviews and comparing them to the Schlossberg's 4 S's framework.

It is important to note that this study is limited to the experience of 24 mature students enrolled in one Ontario college. Because the study uses an individual-level perspective based on interviews, the scope of the study is restricted to the responses of this particular group of mature students.

## Findings

Based on the three stages of the transition model, the analysis revealed broad themes related to mature students' perception of their college experience—namely, trying to fit in, gaining an ability to survive, and examining career options. The following subsections explore transition triggers for mature students and discuss each theme in detail.

### Transition Triggers

The study participants reported that their decisions to pursue college education were motivated by various aspirations, such as finding a job, becoming financially stable, advancing a career, or aiming for a career change. Additionally, various life events, such as maternity leave, immigration, being laid off, or waiting too long for a promotion, triggered their decision to pursue college education.

**Table 1**

*Summary Profile of Participants (n = 24)*

Category	%
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	58.3
Male	41.6
<b>Age</b>	
26–30	54.2
31–35	16.7
35+	29.1
<b>Status in Canada</b>	
Canadian citizen	54.2
International student	37.5
Permanent residents	8.3
<b>Previous Education</b>	
High school diploma	12.5
College diploma	25.0
University – Degree	50.0
University – Master’s degree	8.3
University – Incomplete	4.2
First-Generation	41.7
<b>Marital Status</b>	
Single	62.5
Married	29.2
Divorced	8.3
<b>Program Level</b>	
Diploma	37.5
Advanced diploma	12.5
Certificate	4.2
Graduate certificate	45.8

Many participants reported that their previous work or educational experiences motivated them to enter the education system at a different stage in their lives compared to traditional students, who entered college directly after

high school. They expressed a lack of satisfaction with their employment, often due to low pay, a lack of fulfillment, or dissatisfaction with their position in society because of their job. One domestic student stated:

Not having a diploma or degree was limiting me from getting a job that I wanted. I was always stuck in factories or retail jobs, and I just didn't think that was where I was supposed to be. So, I came back to get a proper education in a field that I felt comfortable in.

In addition to the reasons mentioned earlier, the search for greater job security was also a trigger for pursuing college education. As one domestic student expressed, "I was just tired of the contracts being shortened." For some participants, the lack of job opportunities, even with a previous degree or diploma, was a trigger for them to decide to go back to college. For example, one domestic student reflected on her experience by saying,

After I finished my degree in English, I realized there weren't a lot of options for employment. I was working retail, I was working at a non-profit organization, and there was just no room to move up. I felt I had to go back to school and find something that was more promising and more specific.

Some international students and permanent residents perceived college education as a fast-track to immigration and believed that obtaining a Canadian credential would make the transition into the labour market easier. One international student stated, "My first reason was to apply for my immigration...also to help me to find a job quickly, because I have a lot of experience back home." Similar to domestic students, international students view college education as a pathway toward success in life and a promising tool for gaining social mobility and improving career possibilities, as illustrated by one international student who explained, "I have academic experience from other countries.... When I came here, it was a little bit difficult to get a job in my field. So, I decided to study again."

Once mature students make the decision to enroll in further education, they proceed through the three transition stages: transition in, transition through, and transition out. The following subsections discuss the themes that emerged within each transition stage.

### Transitioning In: Trying to Fit In

*Transition in* marks the beginning of mature students' journey into and through college. For mature students, the transitioning-in stage is often accompanied by uncertainty, as they believe they must compete with younger students while striving to strike the right balance and build confidence gradually.

Mature students began their college experience by accepting and living with the expected challenges and uncertainties. Many expressed their excitement about this new step in life, which resulted from various life events, as described above. For some mature international and landed immigrant students, the transition was more complicated than that of domestic students who studied in the Canadian education systems. Many of them were new to the country, spoke English as an additional language, and were now learning in a different education system than what they were familiar with. Nevertheless, both domestic and international students were experiencing multiple transitions at the same time, making the experience overwhelming for many. For instance, one international student, who aimed to apply for a permanent residency in Canada after graduation, stated, "As a new person that gambled everything to come to Canada I was scared and very anxious and freaking out."

Another challenge in this first stage of their college life was adjusting to being back in school, "just going back to the classroom," and "getting back into a routine." The idea of being older than other students was intimidating for some participants, as they believed they would have to compete with younger, smarter, and more technology-savvy students. As a second-career domestic student indicated:

I didn't know what I was going to face. I know it's highly competitive. I know these young kids are highly intelligent. I know they are very bright. Just knowing that I was going to go up against them, compete with them, lots of A-type personalities will choose to be in my program.

Despite the challenges of learning to compete with younger students, some participants, particularly international students, found campus diversity in terms of age groups to be very positive and gave them the sense of belonging. One international student explained, "Being with mature students gave me a good feeling. Because I knew, it's not only me as a mature person attending classes." Having other students from the same age group also showed mature students that they shared similar challenges and skills. One international student stated:

When I talk to someone that has 15 years of experience maybe in logistics, maybe in finance, maybe engineering or something, everything more or less, we had faced the same kind of problems, the same kind of challenges, and I think we can cooperate more. The level of the discussion is much better.

Some participants highlighted using technology in the classroom as a new change that has added to in-class learning. For example, a domestic student expressed her concern, saying, "I didn't know that in-class learning had changed so much where kids are actually bringing their laptop and downloading lectures and all of these things. The first week...was a little bit difficult just getting over those little hurdles." However, despite the challenges, many participants found interacting, communicating, and competing with younger students to be a rewarding experience, as they gained more technical and intercultural skills.

Pressures to fulfil the many different roles in the students' lives, such as employment, parenthood, and marriage were another challenge reported by some participants, particularly new immigrants. As a new landed immigrant student expressed:

The challenge is not just to go back to the classroom but also to balance personal life. It was difficult for me to find balance, and to give my daughter the attention that she needed. This was particularly challenging because we had moved from another country, and she was also adjusting to the changes.

Although working and studying helped many students to practice and transform knowledge to relevant skills, it had an adverse impact on the amount and the quality of learning. A Canadian student expressed: "Work means getting to class after long hours or work schedule, not able to cover readings ahead of the class time which creates a negative feeling, you would think you are lagging behind."

Despite the challenges mentioned above, many participants recognized the process of transitioning in as a stage of exploration and learning about "what is going on" and "how things are working" in this new environment. However, for international mature students, paying higher tuition fees raised their expectations. One participant expected "around the clock and thorough support for international students," saying, "For the money I spend as an international student, if I need to ask the same question several times until I understand, I expect a patient response, given allowance for cultural differences, even if English is my first language." This entitlement could be common among all students, regardless of their age and status in Canada. Yet, it alludes to the lack of effective, culturally sensitive, and universally designed communication tools, particularly during students' first year at college.

In the course of transitioning in, mature students grad-

ually built more confidence in sharing their personal traits and previous experience as examples of the real world. As one Canadian student reflected:

After getting over all the fear of being judged and being an older person and coming back...I realize that...the only thing that I had [a] one-up on all of those things was my work experience. Because that's what made me valuable to them [younger students]. They wanted to know what it was like in the real world.

In summary, the transitioning-in stage for mature students in college can be a challenging but also rewarding experience. Mature students often face uncertainty, competition with younger students, and the need to balance multiple roles in their lives, such as work and family responsibilities. However, they also gain technical and intercultural skills, build confidence, and realize that their life experience can benefit their younger peers.

### Transitioning Through: Ability to Survive

The *transition through* stage marks the engagement of mature students in their programs after surviving the stage of uncertainty and exploration. During the transitioning-through phase, mature students began to assess the college environment against their expectations in terms of teaching quality, program design, course content, and campus culture, using their previous work and education experiences as a benchmark.

Furthermore, reflecting on their experiences, mature students underscored other challenges that could be attributed to various personal, external, and college structural factors in both academic and social domains. For example, concerning course content, many students criticized the content of their courses and viewed them as adding little to their prior knowledge and skills, or not stimulating enough for greater intellectual efforts. One domestic student stated, "Unfortunately, because we just get a taste of everything we don't go deep in a specific field." Another international student echoed that sentiment, saying, "When you have previous experiences, not only academic but of work, you expect a little more from the classes with little more details." Interestingly, many participants constantly referred to the course syllabus as a trusted tool to assess the quality of their learning. Because of their prior knowledge, mature students see the course syllabus as a transaction between them and the college, and assess their learning experiences accordingly.

Most participants who struggle with multiple commitments also reported a lack of flexibility in building their timetable, which created financial burdens for many mature students, particularly those who decided to give up full-time jobs and experienced a drastic reduction in income. One domestic student expressed his concern, saying, "When I needed more time toward my studies, I had to give up my shifts, so financially was a challenge as well. Because I need to choose one thing or the other."

The inflexible course schedule presented a major challenge for international and landed immigrant students looking for jobs to support their education and families. An international student expressed her concern about finding a part-time job in a relevant field:

I find that the schedule that the school does is like a trap. They tell you that you can work part-time, but you only find out that you really can't. Because it's [an inflexible] schedule. I already had a lot of experience back home, and I didn't feel that I wanted to come to Canada to work at a Tim Hortons. I'm not saying it's a bad thing, but I suppose I came here to find that better life, so I didn't work.

Another aspect within the transitioning-through stage with the co-curricular activities, which is often seen as good for creating community and a sense of belonging for students. However, many mature learners felt that the activities and services provided at the college were more geared toward younger students. For instance, one international student noted,

I feel that I am very different from the rest of the students.... I think the type of activities the college offers are more to them...people come directly from high school or just finish a university degree, they are very young.... I don't think that the college supports a lot of people like me.

While the college provided a variety of social activities to engage students on campus, mature students were not frequent attendees. In addition to the perception that co-curricular activities were not tailored to their needs, time on campus was prioritized toward achieving academic obligations such as assignments and group projects. One participant reported, "The time that we spent on campus was very important to us because that was the time that you were getting a chunk of your schoolwork done."

While transitioning through, mature students' role gradually shifted to becoming mentors to support and guide

younger students, and they perceived this as a kind of responsibility. One international student noted, "So my experience really helped me not only to deal with assignments, but to deal with my 'younger' colleagues who were a little bit lost. I think it was good." Similarly, another landed immigrant student explained, "They were really young, so I don't expect them to understand. So, I had to put my time with them, I was one of the oldest in the class."

In summary, during the transition-through stage, mature students faced various challenges related to inflexible course schedules, lack of tailored co-curricular activities, and financial burdens. However, they gradually became more confident and less concerned about being among younger students as they found ways to contribute and engage, including serving as mentors to their younger peers. The experience helped them to further develop their skills and knowledge, and they continued to assess their learning experiences according to their prior knowledge and expectations.

## Transitioning Out: Examining Career Options

*Transitioning out* marks mature students' preparation for the job market and examining their career options. When asked how prepared they were for transitioning out of the college and preparing for employment, participants' sense of readiness varied widely, from those who felt highly confident to those who felt skeptical and concerned. Factors such as the students' status in Canada, their initial goals for pursuing college education, and their experience at college all contributed to these disparities.

Generally, participants stated that their mature status affected their overall experience positively. They felt confident because of their previous education and work experience, as well as because of the new skills they acquired from their current program. They reported developing both technical and social skills, such as communication and intercultural skills, as well as a more positive attitude. Most of the students mentioned that their program also made a positive impact on their personal development. A Canadian student mentioned:

It was an overall positive experience...I have a new skill set, I learned a lot, I can express myself and talk about subject areas in a conversation, even now that if I have to go to an interview, I feel like I can, I can give a good representation of myself.



While college education improved some students' confidence, others, particularly the mature international students, seemed to be less confident when examining their career options. One international student expressed her concern, saying, "You find like McDonalds, Burger King, and those kinds of jobs. But, I'm completely looking for something else. Because I'm already a professional. I want to work in my field; I want to be a manager again." As discussed earlier, for many mature international students, the purpose of attending college was career advancement or a pathway to the Canadian labour market. Students with years of international work experience expected to land a job, at least one similar to what they had in their previous career; yet, entry-level jobs were more available. Many participants cited experiencing emotional and technical difficulties in tailoring their resumé to make it fit an entry-level job.

Concerning institutional support, some participants believed that career counsellors do not necessarily have enough skills to guide mature students in their job search, particularly students with many years of work experience. Therefore, they expressed a need for specialized help in marketing their previous work experience. Some participants mentioned that younger students with no previous work experience might be the best beneficiaries of the resumé and job search services provided by the career services office, while these services are less helpful for mature students.

Students, who expressed their concern that their courses provided basic rather than in-depth knowledge, as discussed in the previous section, also noted that they did not feel well prepared for the labour market. As a domestic student stated, "I don't think my program prepared me enough for employment. I feel I still need to go to university for employment." Similarly, an international student enrolled in a post-graduate certificate program reflected, "I believe that what the college did for me was to format and put all my knowledge together to Canada. But I believe that there is some sort of skills that I already have." It seems that rather than Canadianizing or formatting their previous knowledge to fit the Canadian context, mature international students are expecting to gain advanced knowledge and skills on top of what they already have.

Students who were changing careers and studying in areas that were different from their previous education or work experience also found it more challenging to enter the labour market. One domestic student expressed her concern, saying:

Because it's one thing to go to school but it's a completely different thing to actually get a job in the field that you went to school for. I have a lack of experience in my field, and I think this is harming me in my job search. I do not know how I can get experience without working elsewhere.

The aforementioned concerns could indicate that prior learning and skills were not considered in the curriculum. As a result, some participants thought that transitioning out to further university education would be a better next move for them, not only for further education, but also for the reputation of a university degree that is perceived as having a higher value among employers. For example, a Canadian student explained, "I guess I was more confident that I had a university degree. Bachelor's degree looks better on a resumé."

While most participants stated that their overall social and academic experiences were positive at college, they still questioned what doors a college diploma would open for them other than entry-level jobs. Although many acknowledged that their college education provided them with more practical experience than what they would have received at a university, some still found more value in university degrees when looking for employment.

In summary, the transitioning-out stage for mature students is recognized as a time of examining career options, often accompanied by skepticism. Despite this, many express overall positive experiences and excitement about the new chapters in their lives.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores the experiences of mature students, who have needs and capacities that distinguish them from traditional-aged college students. Mature learners have a diverse profile along various dimensions, including age, ethnicity, status in Canada, and the personal motivations for pursuing college education. Schlossberg et al. (1989) argue that this diversity creates a dilemma as mature students' lives become more divergent, while the college system is more "rigid and hierarchical, in many cases encouraging dependency rather than autonomy" (p. 1). This aspect presents a challenge for mature students during their college education. This was evident in this study, particularly as personal differences played a role in mature students' motivation and expectations about college education and career options, and influenced how they perceived their experience at college.

Generally, mature students pursue college education for personal growth, career advancement, and exploration of new career and life experiences. Additionally, this study found that mature students' decisions to pursue PSE for some or re-enter college for others were often triggered by feeling dissatisfied with their job, the lack of job security, and lack of job opportunities opened by their previous field of education. Most international mature students perceive college as a fast-track to immigration and believe that acquiring a Canadian credential will facilitate their transition into the Canadian labour market. This perception is supported by studies that showed that post-secondary education obtained in Canada is a particularly effective means of enhancing adult immigrants' position in the labour market (Adamuti-Trache & Sweet, 2005; Sweetman et al., 2004).

Mature students start their college life with uncertainty as they explore how their age identity plays a role in their academic and social experiences at college. Going back to formal education was a challenge for many mature students, as they navigated a system that was designed for more traditional students coming directly from high school. Some of the challenges were time management, learning new technology, and a sense of competition with younger students. Nevertheless, this sense of competition gradually faded as their role shifted to becoming mentors and they began to feel responsible for supporting and guiding younger students.

The study found that mature students' academic and social experiences in college were influenced by their previous academic experience, self-confidence, and the ability to balance work-life commitments. While exploring new educational and career opportunities, mature students believe that their previous post-secondary education helped them adjust to the new academic system and helped them to build their confidence. Citizenship and residency status of mature students also affected their academic experience at the college. For international mature students, permanent residents, or internationally educated recent immigrants, factors such as English language competency, financial difficulties, and recognition of their foreign credentials have influenced their academic experience. Additionally, most mature learners were student workers in full-time or part-time jobs, which, at least in part, has affected the quality of their learning and engagement in extracurricular activities. This finding indicates that mature students are more affected than traditional students by an external environment that limits their participation in extracurricular activities (Priode, 2019). Time management for mature students was both a challenge and an important skill and strategy they needed, since their time on

campus was not only allocated toward attending classes but also, and mostly, toward doing coursework.

A few studies show that older mature students tend to perform better academically than younger students (McNeil et al., 2014). This reality indicates that mature students were able to build "individual agency" (Adamuti-Trache, 2011, p. 62) to adjust to the social context of college. Adamuti-Trache (2011) stated that an individual's capacity to make choices and adopt strategies over their life course is "attributed to their personal agency engaged in a struggle with structural and institutional barriers" (p. 65). Motivated by their willingness to pursue post-secondary education, mature students utilize various strategies to respond to, cope with, and adapt to the challenges presented to them in college. They mostly rely on their own agency as well as on family members and friends to mitigate difficulties during their time in college.

Most mature students reported trying to build their support system by trusting new skills and knowledge acquired during their studies and trying to fit in through building social and academic relationships. This finding echoes Karmelita's (2018) study, which found that the relationships mature students formed through their program served as a support system and participation in the program led to a shift in self-perception.

Mature students assessed the college environment against their expectations in terms of teaching quality, program design, course contents, and campus culture. The analysis demonstrated that mature students develop their perceived quality of their academic experience from three main sources: their previous educational experiences, the course syllabus, and the reputation of Canadian educational institutions, particularly among international students and landed immigrants. Accordingly, students expect to obtain more advanced knowledge to upgrade their previous skills and knowledge. This finding confirms the argument of O'Brien et al. (2009) that many mature students are expected to fit into an existing structure that might ignore their traits. Thus, it might be difficult to look at students as a dichotomy of mature versus young students when designing the curriculum. Scholars have suggested that mature students require different teaching and learning strategies (Mew, 2020) and that the material must be presented in a way that competes with previously learned learning strategies so that students understand the value of the new strategy (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

As they prepare to transition to the labour market, most mature students struggle with career-related questions

(Tones et al., 2009). Most international students and landed immigrants with previous work experience and education stated that they were skeptical about gaining employment in Canada, particularly in non-entry-level jobs. An American study (Supiano, 2018) found that about 60% of executives and hiring managers think that most college graduates are prepared to succeed in entry-level positions. However, only one-third of executives and one-quarter of hiring managers believe graduates have the skills and knowledge to advance or be promoted. As such, college graduates may be better poised for entry-level jobs than for advancement. Obviously, this is a mismatch with the goal of most mature students: to advance their career. Colleges and career services may need to engage more in preparing students for their non-entry-level jobs or for career advancement by focusing more on transferable skills that will help them pivot into a new work environment (Harrison, 2017).

Research has extensively documented the employment barriers faced by immigrants in Canada. Immigrants often participate in PSE as a means to improve their employment prospects (Adamuti-Trache, 2011; Shan, 2009). The Canadian post-secondary education system has provided opportunities to recent mature immigrants who may try to lessen the tough scrutiny of employers by enhancing their resume with Canadian credentials (Adamuti-Trache, 2011). However, mature international or landed immigrant students still report lacking confidence in competing in the Canadian job market. Many mature learners have questioned to what extent a college credential could increase their chances of having a better career.

The diversity among students, whether traditional or mature, requires different approaches in counselling, academic advising, and career advising. Elder (1994) reflected on the importance of conceptualizing the experiences of mature students as a multilevel phenomenon. Thus, for career advising, it is important to situate mature students' transitions in, through, and out of college within a perspective that includes past and current experiences, as well as anticipated outcomes.

This article contributes to the study of mature learners' experiences within the Canadian college context. It provides a holistic perspective of mature students' experiences in three connected stages: transitioning-in, transitioning-through, and transitioning-out of their life at college. Future research could follow up with mature students after graduation and examine their perception of how college has prepared them for the labour market. Additionally, while access policies have brought further educational opportu-

nities to mature students, these equity policies mainly focus on access to the college system, with little attention to graduates' outcomes (Bennett, 2019). Therefore, future research could explore the labour market transition of mature students from an equity, diversity, and inclusion lens.

## Author Note

The Institutional Research Office at Centennial College sponsored data collection and interview transcription. The Applied Research and Innovation Centre (ARIC) at Centennial College funded the research.

Preliminary results of this article were presented at the 2019 Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education.

## References

- Adamuti-Trache, M. (2011). First 4 years in Canada: Post-secondary education pathways of highly educated immigrants. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 12(1), 61–883. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-010-0164-2>
- Adamuti-Trache, M., & Sweet, R. (2005). Exploring the relationship between educational credentials and the earnings of immigrants. *Canadian Studies in Population*, 32(2), 177–201. <https://doi.org/10.25336/p6t30g>
- Bennett, D. (2019). Graduate employability and higher education: Past, present and future. *HERDSA Review of Higher Education*, 5, 31–61. <https://www.herdsa.org.au/herdsa-review-higher-education-vol-5/31-61>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Busher, H., & James, N. (2019). Struggling to become successful learners: Mature students' early experiences of access to higher education courses. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 51(1), 74–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02660830.2018.1556483>
- Carreira, P., & Lopes, A. (2021). Drivers of academic pathways in higher education: Traditional vs. non-traditional students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(7), 1340–1355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1675621>

- Chen, J. C. (2017). Nontraditional adult learners: The neglected diversity in post-secondary education. *SAGE Open*, 7(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017697161>
- Cho, S., Crenshaw, K. W., & McCall, L. (2013). Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 38(4), 785–810. <https://doi.org/10.1086/669608>
- Colleges Ontario. (2021). *2021 environmental scan—student and graduate profiles*. <https://www.collegesontario.org/en/resources/2021-environmental-scan-student-and-graduate-profiles>
- Collom, G. D., Biddix, J. P., & Svoboda, B. L. (2021). “I’m not letting nothing stop me this time”: Transitions among adult learners using the Tennessee Reconnect Grant. *Community College Review*, 49(4), 413–434. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00915521211026679>
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Identity politics, intersectionality, and violence against women. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), 1241–1299. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>
- Dunne, P. (2019). Here’s my story: Mature students’ narratives of further education. *AISHE-J*, 11(1), 1–20. <https://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/379/651>
- Elder, G. H. (1994). Time, human agency, and social change: Perspectives on the life course. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 57(1), 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2786971>
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2009). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Genco, J. (2007). Adult re-entry students: Experiences preceding entry into a rural Appalachian community college. *Inquiry*, 12(1), 47–46. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ833905.pdf>
- Goodman, J., Schlossberg, N. K., & Anderson, M. L. (2006). *Counseling adults in transition: Linking practice with theory* (3rd ed.). Springer.
- Crossley, M. (2010). Context matters in educational research and international development: Learning from the small states experience. *Prospects*, 40(4), 421–429. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-010-9172-4>
- Harrison, A. (2017). *Skills, competencies and credentials*. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. <https://heqco.ca/pub/skills-competencies-and-credentials/>
- Karmelita, C. (2018). Exploring the experiences of adult learners in a transition program. *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 24(2), 141–164. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477971418791>
- Kenner, C., & Weinerman, J. (2011). Adult learning theory: Applications to nontraditional college students. *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 41(2), 87–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10790195.2011.10850344>
- Kerr, A. (2011). *Issue paper no. 9 adult learners in Ontario postsecondary institutions*. Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. <https://heqco.ca/pub/issue-paper-no-9-adult-learners-in-ontario-postsecondary-institutions/>
- McNeil, J., Long, R., & Ohland, M. (2014, October 22–25). *Getting better with age: Older students achieve higher grades and graduation rates* [Conference paper]. 2014 IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference, Madrid, Spain. <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/abstract/document/7044164>
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mew, L. (2020). Designing and implementing an undergraduate data analytics program for non-traditional students. *Information Systems Education Journal*, 18(3), 18–27. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1258149.pdf>
- Miller, J., & Glassner, B. (2004). The “inside” and the “outside”: Finding realities in interviews. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 125–139). SAGE.
- O’Brien, F., Keogh, B., & Neenan, K. (2009). Mature students’ experiences of undergraduate nurse education programmes: The Irish experience. *Nurse Education Today*, 29(6), 635–640. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2009.01.008>
- O’Donnell, V. L., & Tobbell, J. (2007). The transition of adult students to higher education: Legitimate periph-

- eral participation in a community of practice? *Adult Education Quarterly*, 57(4), 275–354. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171360730>
- Priode, K. (2019). Juggling school with life: How the successful non-traditional nursing student stays in school. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, 14(2), 117–121.
- Purcell, K., Wilton, N., & Elias, P. (2007). Hard lessons for life-long learners? Age and experience in the graduate labour market. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 61(1), 57–82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2006.00338.x>
- Raaper, R., Brown, C., & Llewellyn, A. (2021). Student support as social network: Exploring non-traditional student experiences of academic and wellbeing support during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Educational Review*, 74(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2021.1965960>
- Read, B., Archer, L., & Leathwood, C. (2003). Challenging cultures? Student conceptions of “belonging” and “isolation” at a post-1992 university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 28(3), 261–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070309290>
- Reid, J. (2016). Redefining “employability” as something to be achieved: Utilising Tronto’s conceptual framework of care to refocus the debate. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, 6(1), 55–68. <https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-02-2015-0005>
- Rhijn, T. M. van, Lero, D. S., Bridge, K., & Fritz, V. A. (2016). Unmet needs: Challenges to success from the perspectives of mature university students. *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 28(1), 29–47. <http://hdl.handle.net/10214/10478>
- Rodríguez, M., González-Monteagudo, J., & Padilla-Carmona, T. (2021). Employability and inclusion of non-traditional university students: Limitations and challenges. *IAFOR Journal of Education*, 9(1), 133–151. <https://iafor.org/journal/iafor-journal-of-education/volume-9-issue-1/article-8/>
- Schaefer, J. L. (2010). Voices of older baby boomer students: Supporting their transitions back into college. *Educational Gerontology*, 36(1), 67–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17419160903057967>
- Schlossberg, N. K., Lynch, A. Q., & Chickering, A. W. (1989). *Improving higher education environments for adults: Responsive programs and services from entry to departure*. Jossey-Bass.
- Shan, H. (2009). Shaping the re-training and re-education experiences of immigrant women: The credential and certificate regime in Canada. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 28, 353–369. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370902799150>
- Singh, J., Matthees, B., & Odetunde, A., (2021). Learning online education during COVID-19 pandemic – attitudes and perceptions of non-traditional adult learners. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 29(4), 408–421. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-12-2020-0147>
- Steinhauer, A., & D’nn Lovell (2019). Non-traditional community college students’ academic pursuits: Time, connectedness, support, wages and research. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 45(3), 223–226. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2019.1666066>
- Supiano, B. (2018, August 28). Colleges say they prepare students for a career, not just a first job. Is that true? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/colleges-say-they-prepare-students-for-a-career-not-just-a-first-job-is-that-true/>
- Sweetman, A., McBride, S., & Branch, S. C. A. S. (2004). *Postsecondary field of study and the Canadian labour market outcomes of immigrants and non-immigrants*. Statistics Canada. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/catalogue/11F0019M2004233>
- Taniguchi, H., & Kaufman, G. (2005). Degree completion among nontraditional college students. *Social Science Quarterly*, 86(4), 912–927. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42956102>
- Tones, M., Fraser, J., Elder, R., & White, K. M. (2009). Supporting mature-aged students from a low socioeconomic background. *Higher Education*, 58(4), 505–529. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40269199>
- Wolfgang, M., Vivona, B., & Akram, T. (2020). *On the intersectional amplification of barriers to college internships: A comparative case study analysis* (WCER Working Paper No. 2020-4). Wisconsin Center for Education Research. <http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/publications/working-papers>
- Woodsley, S. A., & Miller, A. L. (2009). Integration and insti-

tutional commitment as predictors of college student transition: Are third week indicators significant? *College Student Journal*, 43(4), 1260–1272. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A217511787/AONE?u=anon~cf-458b76&sid=googleScholar&xid=977aaa8d>

## Contact Information

Hayfa Jafar  
hayfa.jafar@auis.edu.krd