IS IT EVER TOO LATE?

Based on a Study of Mature Women at University.

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Introduction
There is currently much interest in minorities, feminism, educational motivation, human resources, and continuing education. A group which combines to varying degrees all these topical interests is purposefully pursuing academic studies within the universities, namely mature women enrolled in degree courses. Consideration of this specific group lends itself to a wider examination of the role of tertiary education.

Very little has been written about mature women returning to education until a few years ago, when a number of articles specifically orientated towards the influx of mature women on campuses, appeared in the United States (Brandenburg, 1974; Buciceri, 1976; Cless, 1969; Manis and Mochtuki, 1972; Waters, 1971). In Australia, Edwards (1975) and Wesson (1973) have written about mature women returning to finish their high school education; Ence (1974) refers to the rising population of mature students at universities and Brophy (1975) recounts her experiences in embarking upon a university degree course.

The Australian Association of Adult Education (1973, 1974) has also discussed issues relating to this group, but in the United Kingdom the influx of mature women on university grounds in any noticeable numbers. The economic: can we afford their taking places which might otherwise be allotted to younger students? The social: do they disturb the homogeneity of the undergraduate population. Standards: will they be able to cope? Will they lower the academic standards? There is the nagging, uncomfortable puzzle: why do they want to be here in the first place? Are they "peculiar" in some way?

When various questions are considered, however, it seems that many benefits may accrue to the university. Academic standards need not be affected; those who cannot cope are refused entry. Like any other student group, the achievements of mature students are bound to be influenced by their age and life experiences. Mature students are unlikely to major in philosophy and literature, but their increased understanding of the natural sciences is very valuable. They enter with a critical frame of mind and are likely to question subject matter thoroughly. In addition, their work habits may be superior to those of younger students. As a result of discussing roles at middle age, they may generate new ideas. Lecturers may be tempered or their approach to student learning may change from a dependent consumer to an active contributor to society. It may be that education should be given without a generation gap. The older ones learn to disregard the younger generation. Buciceri (1970) mentions the fear among the mature women at the University of Michigan Center for Continuing Education of Women. Members of the pilot study group at the University of Queensland had similar qualms, but subsequently mentioned with pleasure many instances of younger women approaching them, both to offer and receive aid in a course, and for general conversation, curious as well as congratulatory.

It is difficult to predict which individual will make the greater economic contribution to society upon graduation. The younger woman may "drop out" for a few or many years before she may go on to graduate. The older one may change from a dependent consumer to an active contributor to society. Some consider that education should be given without a generation gap. The older ones learn to disregard the younger generation. Buciceri (1970) mentions the fear among the mature women at the University of Michigan Center for Continuing Education of Women. Members of the pilot study group at the University of Queensland had similar qualms, but subsequently mentioned with pleasure many instances of younger women approaching them, both to offer and receive aid in a course, and for general conversation, curious as well as congratulatory.

The University of Queensland Group

The forty women involved in the present study have varied backgrounds. To give an "average profile" would give a picture which no individual would match, but the following are a few indicative statistics. Most have been at least twenty years away from any formal education; only five have ever been university in their youth, and only one of them has graduated. Ten have trained as nurses and six have trained as teachers. Sixteen finished grade twelve at the usual age, two finished grade eleven, fourteen were eleven or twelve, with six at grade ten, and eight left school earlier. By returning for high school matriculation at an average age of fifteen, they have amortised enough to enrol at university. Their average age is 44.5 (ranging from 40-56). Thirty-three are or have been married (six widowed, 2 divorces, and 2 separated). The women have had a total of 114 children (one woman is childless). Language is a common denominator: French, Italian, and German. The women have had a total of 114 children (one woman is childless). Language is a common denominator: French, Italian, and German. The older ones learn to disregard the younger generation. Buciceri (1970) mentions the fear among the mature women at the University of Michigan Center for Continuing Education of Women. Members of the pilot study group at the University of Queensland had similar qualms, but subsequently mentioned with pleasure many instances of younger women approaching them, both to offer and receive aid in a course, and for general conversation, curious as well as congratu-

Clearly on equal ground. Many of the mature women are at first worried about being accepted by the younger generation. Buciceri (1970) mentions the fear among the mature women at the University of Michigan Center for Continuing Education of Women. Members of the pilot study group at the University of Queensland had similar qualms, but subsequently mentioned with pleasure many instances of younger women approaching them, both to offer and receive aid in a course, and for general conversation, curious as well as congratulations.

However, this is the age when almost all the children have left home. The educational "drop out" for a few or many years before she may go on to graduate. The older one may change from a dependent consumer to an active contributor to society. Some consider that education should be given without a generation gap. The older ones learn to disregard the younger generation. Buciceri (1970) mentions the fear among the mature women at the University of Michigan Center for Continuing Education of Women. Members of the pilot study group at the University of Queensland had similar qualms, but subsequently mentioned with pleasure many instances of younger women approaching them, both to offer and receive aid in a course, and for general conversation, curious as well as congratulations.

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On a more individual level the propensity of differing ages breaks down barriers and stereotyped notions of a generation gap. The older ones learn to disregard the term "ratbag" and find the younger generation are for the most part sensitive, intelligent, courteous, accepting people, and they meet and
I'm eccentric as they cannot understand why I am studying.”

Hiltunen (1968) reports a common feeling among mature women seeking another home that “we are not wanted”. Though the reactions of others may vary, it is often the feeling of being outsiders that is associated with the overwhelming. The role of wife and mother has become so ingrained that any thought of taking on a profession is completely fulflying. Women who have spent many years away from the classroom and the job, a leading a relatively sheltered and isolated life, is beset with fears, doubts, and conflicts. She feels that she is basically inept and unable to succeed. This lack of confidence was also very evident in the Queensland group, especially during their first semester. With all these fears, doubts and conflicts there must have been much soul searching before even deciding to apply for admission to university. One of the group said she heard the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Zelman Cowan, on the radio encouraging older people to take advantage of the free system, and that gave her the final push. Some had to pass high school subjects before gaining entrance, and take a couple of years doing this; this may be beneficial in adjusting them to structured education, but it can also be inhibiting. It has to be remembered that it has to be shown that this group, in spite of many disadvantages, can push on to take up their jobs, designed philosophically, administratively, theoretically and practically for a very different kind of population. The first marking of the new students showed that the first year marks should be 2 or 3 higher than the average.

The impact of success is all the greater because of initial doubts. Usually those who have tentatively tried and succeeded in one course increase their course commitments as well as their self-confidence. The initial doubts seem never to be finally resolved, however, and even those in their third year with a string of 7's and 8's behind them are still not quite sure what the next assessment will be. Those few who do not succeed have to bear their disappointment but there is always the hope that the next group will be more successful.

In the U.S.A. a number of universities such as Michigan, Minnesota, Radcliffe, Sarah Lawrence, N.Y.U. and C.U.N.Y. have set up various programmes specifically designed for mature women, with considerable success. Several people involved with these students (Brandenburg, 1974, and Manis and Michigan, 1972) point out that many women do not want a special programme, but prefer to stay in the mainstream of student life. Much of the satisfaction in the University of Queensland group lies in the fact that it is not being treated differently.

The mainstream simply needs to be widened. Relaxing admission requirements may solve one problem, bridging courses (suggested by Emery in Lifelong Education 1973) to bring entering students up to a certain standard may solve another.

If education is seen as a lifelong process, there should be easier accessibility to the institutions which provide the opportunities to learn; no longer should the adult, male or female, be expected to make the exceptional effort and sacrifices to adjust to a system geared for the young. In a complex society, where new knowledge is accruing so swiftly and systematically, it cannot be assumed that once the degree is granted in the early twenties, the individual still has authoritative knowledge. The need to keep up with the times is recognized, but under the present system, it is not encouraged. The new shift apparent in women’s lives can only be understood if that admittance to tertiary institutions. Bernard (1957) points out that in the U.S.A. in 1940 only about 24.5% of women in the 45-54 age bracket were in the labour force, and that the proportion has now more than doubled. The effect on tertiary education is apparent in the figures presented by Van Dusen and Sheldon, 1976) which show that tertiary education participation in the U.S.A., between the ages of 25-34 increased 102% from 1970 to 1974; in men that age group the increase was only 46%.

This trend of older adults entering tertiary education continues, and is more widespread in the U.S.A., than in other countries, but it is not quite as pronounced in Australia. The Australian study group has not yet finished its university courses, but information has been acquired from a few outside the study who have; one is teaching in high school, one is a speech therapist, two are social workers.

Implications for the role of tertiary education

This raises the much larger question of the role of education in the life of individuals and in society as a whole.

This article has so far dealt with a minority of women over 40 who have not been in a structured education for many years. It has not been pointed out that the inclusion of this group could encourage other women, who have spent many years away from the classroom and the job, to look to education in the future as an extension of their career, and as a way of providing them with a sense of achievement.

The University of Queensland consists of three courses. Of the 120 courses completed by the 40 women, only one failed with a 2 (in the statistical component); three received a 1 (pass granted); and all subsequently brought this up to a full pass. The mean for the 120 courses was 4.92 on a 10-point scale, which is above average. Why is it often the feeling of guilt. Letchworth (1970) has studied this problem in women when she feels she may neglect the family, her children, and her husband... feels selfish when she spends money on education... feels guilty for competing or even wishing to compete with her husband.” Edwards (1975) mentions that the woman who feels guilty about taking time to study something she enjoys will succumb to any family antagonism. Manis and Michigan (1972) reported that a woman who has spent many years away from the classroom and the job, leading a relatively sheltered and isolated life, is beset with fears, doubts, and conflicts. She feels that she is basically inept and unable to succeed. This lack of confidence was also very evident in the Queensland group, especially during their first semester. With all these fears, doubts and conflicts there must have been much soul searching before even deciding to apply for admission to university. One of the group said she heard the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Zelman Cowan, on the radio encouraging older people to take advantage of the free system, and that gave her the final push. Some had to pass high school subjects before gaining entrance, and take a couple of years doing this; this may be beneficial in adjusting them to structured education, but it can also be inhibiting. It has to be remembered that it has to be shown that this group, in spite of many disadvantages, can push on to take up their jobs, designed philosophically, administratively, theoretically and practically for a very different kind of population. The first marking of the new students showed that the first year marks should be 2 or 3 higher than the average.

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