THE ADJUSTMENT OF MATURE AGE UNMATRICULATED ENTRANTS TO LIFE AS INTERNAL STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND: A PILOT STUDY

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Primarily as a result of community pressure mature age students are occupying an increasing number of places at most Australian universities. Several reports have indicated that such students tend to perform better academically than their peers who have proceeded more directly from school to tertiary study (van Helden, 1975; Barrett, 1977; Bowly, 1977). This finding is usually attributed to the assumed greater motivation and commitment possessed by the mature age student. After all most mature age students have had to make significant financial and social sacrifices to attend university. Such a step would not be taken without considerable thought. However, such students are thought, at least initially, to tend to have more problems adjusting to university life, more doubts about their ability to succeed in their studies, and more difficulty with the rustiness of their study and techniques (Barrett, 1977; Bowly, 1977). To date no Australian research has examined directly the veracity of these assumptions about the adjustment of mature age students. Such a study will be reported here, but because of the small numbers of mature age students involved in this research this can only be considered exploratory in nature.

The Mature Age Admissions (MAA) Scheme at the University of New England

In 1974 the University of New England (U.N.E.) introduced a Trial Admissions Scheme under which prospective entrants were invited to apply for admission to U.N.E. and who satisfied only the requirement of being 25 years of age or more were accepted for admission. The U.N.E. was the first university in Australia to adopt such a scheme and the number of mature age students has increased significantly since its introduction. The scheme was extended to enable mature age students to complete their courses at a later stage of their lives. The main criteria for admission to the MAA scheme were that the student was over 25 years of age and possessed at least 2 years of school education. The MAA students were required to complete a maximum of two years of study under the scheme before being accepted as a full-time student at the university. The study was conducted on the following hypothesis: there would be fewer discussions of world problems and less of an intellectual atmosphere at U.N.E. than they had expected.

It would appear that the MAA found that there were lower scores on the motivating and the importance of their reasons for coming to U.N.E. using a 6-point Likert scale from 0 to 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table I</th>
<th>Mean Scores of 1977 MAA and Regular Intake Students on Global Variables</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>MAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variables</td>
<td>(n=21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of motivation to attend U.N.E.</td>
<td>4.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction with life in Armidale</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall satisfaction with life at U.N.E.</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study methods</td>
<td>8.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Table I it can be seen that the great majority of MAA entrants claimed to be very strongly motivated to come to university and their mean motivation score was well above that of the remaining 1977 intake. The MAA students' main reasons for coming to university were to further their education, to obtain a degree for career purposes, and an interest in a particular course. These were also the main reasons most often reported by the 1975 intake; but the latter were more frequently influenced by the desire to experience university, family pressure, the award of a scholarship, and the thought that they would try university. The rural, more personalised atmosphere of U.N.E. was its major attraction to both the MAA and internal students. Both groups were also slightly influenced by the closeness of U.N.E. to home and the interest in a particular course that they had wanted and the offer of a scholarship to U.N.E. MAA students were sometimes influenced by U.N.E.'s being the only university they qualified for.

Expectations and reality of university life

The subjects were asked to state how the realities of seven aspects of university compared to their expectations using the following scale:

1 = more than expected
2 = just as expected
3 = less than expected

The results are shown in Table II.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table II</th>
<th>Mean Scores of 1977 MAA and 1975 Internal Intake to Items on Reasons for coming to University and to U.N.E. in Particular and their Expectations of University Life</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reasons for coming to university</td>
<td>1977 MAA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in a particular course</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to experience university</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to obtain degree for career purposes</td>
<td>3.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to further education</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>awarded scholarship</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family pressure</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thought would try university</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It would appear that the MAA found that there were lower scores on the motivating and the importance of their reasons for coming to U.N.E. using a 6-point Likert scale from 0 to 5. The MAA students were more strongly motivated to come to university and their mean motivation score was well above that of the remaining 1977 intake. The MAA students' main reasons for coming to university were to further their education, to obtain a degree for career purposes, and an interest in a particular course. These were also the main reasons most often reported by the 1975 intake; but the latter were more frequently influenced by the desire to experience university, family pressure, the award of a scholarship, and the thought that they would try university. The rural, more personalised atmosphere of U.N.E. was its major attraction to both the MAA and internal students. Both groups were also slightly influenced by the closeness of U.N.E. to home and the interest in a particular course that they had wanted and the offer of a scholarship to U.N.E. MAA students were sometimes influenced by U.N.E.'s being the only university they qualified for.

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Satisfaction with life in Armidale

The subjects were asked to state how the realities of seven aspects of university compared to their expectations using the following scale:

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The results are shown in Table III.
The MAA, similar to the 1975 intake, rated accommodation, finance, and health as being the most important aspects of their lives in Armidale. The undergraduates were more likely to rate the social and recreational aspects of their lives to be important than the MAA students who placed more emphasis on accommodation and transport. The great majority of both the MAA and regular undergraduate subjects were satisfied with life in Armidale (only 2 out of 21 of the former expressing overall dissatisfaction). The MAA groups were generally fairly satisfied with all aspects of life in Armidale—finance and entertainment being the most common sources of dissatisfaction.

Satisfaction with life at U.N.E.

The subjects were asked to rate the importance of (i) 6-point scale from 0 (unimportant) to 5 (important)) and their satisfaction with (using a 6-point scale from 0 (very dissatisfied) to 6 (very satisfied)) nine aspects of life at U.N.E. and their overall satisfaction with life at U.N.E. The MAA group, unlike the 1975 undergraduates, generally considered the university facilities and social activities on campus to be relatively unimportant. The former also were less concerned with their fellow students but tended to place more emphasis on the academic side of university life—the teaching staff, lectures, tutorials, course content, and assessment methods.

Both groups were generally satisfied with life at U.N.E. (only one of the twenty-one MAA group expressed overall dissatisfaction). The MAA subjects tended to rate all academic aspects of U.N.E. life as being quite satisfactory—the social activities on campus were their main source of dissatisfaction. They tended to express higher levels of satisfaction than did the 1975 undergraduates with respect to all aspects of life at U.N.E. except their fellow students.

Study methods

A fourteen item study methods scale (Entwistle, Nisbet, Entwistle, and Cowell, 1971) was used to assess the study techniques of the 1977 MAA and regular students. The results are shown in Table I. It can be seen that the MAA displayed study methods on average somewhat better than the other students (15 out of the 21 MAA scored above the mean for the other students).

Self-esteem

A self-esteem rating scale (Watkins, 1978) was used to compare the self-esteem of the 1977 MAA and regular intake. It can be seen, from Table I, that both groups had generally high self-esteem (a score of 0 representing very low and 5 very high self-esteem). The mean self-esteem scores of the MAA groups was slightly higher than that of the other students. Only 3 of the 21 MAA subjects expressed low self-esteem.

Conclusions

Although this research was only exploratory in nature the following trends were evident of interest:

1. The great majority of MAA entrants sampled here claimed:
   (a) to be strongly motivated to attend U.N.E.;
   (b) to have found life at U.N.E. to be much as they anticipated except for more discussions of world problems, and loss of an intellectual atmosphere than they had expected. (c) to be well satisfied with life both at U.N.E. and Armidale;
   (d) to have high self-esteem.

2. Relative to the regular internal intake the MAA entrants tended:
   (a) to be more strongly motivated to attend U.N.E.;
   (b) to have found U.N.E. closer to their expectations.

   The MAA group, while these conclusions are only tentative, it would appear that the claim that mature age students tend to be more highly motivated and have greater commitment than the regular intake is supported by this study. However, there is no evidence here that they also have more problems adjusting to university life, less academic self-confidence and poorer study techniques. Further research is currently being undertaken to investigate these matters more adequately.

References


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