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June Scott
Northumbria University

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DO NOT DISREGARD THE MATURE STUDENT; WITH AGE COMES MUCH MORE THAN JUST WISDOM

June Scott, Department of Arts, Northumbria University, Class of 2021

In the academic year 2019/20, mature students accounted for 39% of undergraduate entrants at degree level in England (Hubble & Bolton, 2021). Despite this significant percentage of students who are starting their undergraduate studies aged 21 or over, there are still assumptions being made around the mature student which may be causing unnecessary barriers to them completing—or even starting—their degree.

This piece will examine my university experience as a mature student and explore whether and how the age difference between myself and ‘traditional’ students impacted me.

I became a full-time student in 2017, three weeks after I turned 50, studying Drama with Applied Theater at Northumbria University in Newcastle, England.

However, my first experience of being a mature entrant happened prior to that, at an open day event. I went with a fellow college student (I was studying part time to get my BTEC level 3 extended Diploma). As we walked in, a friendly volunteer student asked for a reference number to check us in. I opened my phone and read out the number from the email and they checked me in—or so I thought. I was given a tote bag and waited for them to speak to my friend. Nothing happened, so I asked if they were going to take their reference number too. “Oh, I thought you were their mother,” was the reply. This was my first experience of realizing I could be perceived differently.

I went on to work as a volunteer myself at these open day events. Yet, at the training for them we were told that we would be meeting “potential students and their parents.” There was no acknowledgement that potential students come from all age brackets. Because of this, and my previous open day experience, I always treated everyone as a potential student, sometimes even asking a grandparent what they were thinking of studying.

A study by Chapman (2013) investigated the experiences of mature students in a university in Northern England. It looked at why these students decided to attend university and at their personal journeys. Even though this study is eight years old, the issues presented in it are still valid in 2021: mature students can feel alienated and marginalized from student culture (drinking, partying, etc) and student life beyond the classroom, creating a sense of being ‘othered.’ The study concluded that while the participating students used the term ‘student’ to describe themselves, there was a consensus that mature students are “far more serious in their approach to their learning’ (Chapman, 2013, p. 58) and that an alternative definition was needed. Chapman offers the term ‘novice academic’ as it has the positive attributes of being a ‘scholar’ but not the negative assumptions of being a ‘student.’

My program cohort accepted me as another student, albeit one with a walking frame and numerous medical conditions. There were sometimes, though, that I felt my age—for example,

when they were discussing nights out and the parent in me kept emerging. I worried for them due to some of the activities they were involved in, but had to keep reminding myself of the student-to-student relationship—I was not their mother. This confirms Chapman’s finding that mature students have a feeling of ‘otherness,’ which in turn widens their sense of difference between themselves and younger students, including in seminars. A student on the study recalled that, “Sometimes I think people get fed up with us [himself and another mature student] because we’re keen. I think they could learn from us, from our experiences, but actually I think they just get annoyed” (Chapman, 2013, p. 53).

Northumbria Students’ Union were so accepting, and in my first ever freshers’ week I joined the team of freshers volunteers: I moved students in, chatted to parents, and even worked a late-night freshers ball. It seemed that I was a student. The union had a society aimed at mature students, which I joined. One of the first things the society did was to give me two badges: one with the logo of the society and one that stated, “I am not a lecturer.” I laughed at this, but upon reflection I felt that even the society thought it necessary to remind me that I was in the age bracket of a tutor and that no one would look at me as a student unless I labeled myself as such.

It is assumptions like this that I found commonplace within the university: that by being older, my time management and work ethic must be better. Other assumed characteristics included being more attentive in lectures and seminars. Chapman’s study also highlighted this:

The lecturers value mature students in seminars. It’s always, apart from one or two younger students, it’s always the mature students that speak. The lecturers always look in our direction. I don’t mind, I enjoy sharing my views. I’m there to get the best mark I can so I don’t care if they think I’m a swot (Chapman, 2013, p. 53)

What was not considered was the non-student part of me—the ‘me’ that comes with a disability, a family, elderly parents, a house, and so on.

The Office for Students (OfS) in its 2020 annual review said:

Mature students are not a homogeneous group and will often have more complex needs than 18-year-olds coming straight from school. They are more likely to have caring responsibilities, come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, be disabled, or be from black or minority ethnic groups (OfS, 2020, p. 46).

It is because of this that I feel that both I and other mature students need to be categorized as more than ‘students,’ considering that we must constantly juggle various commitments and pressures: family, work, house, job, health, and more. For mature students, studying brings extra pressures. There needs to be more empathy and acceptance of how much we have to battle to gain our degree.

I was incredibly lucky to have an amazing, supportive husband and children who backed me in my decision to start my first degree, but not everyone was so positive. My mother thought I was far too old to start something like this, and that I needed to settle down and do something stable. She had no idea that I had come so far to overcome those initial feelings of ‘should I?’ and

‘could I?’ Hearing it again from the person I thought would support my life choices made me doubt myself.

There were a handful of other mature students on my program in the arts department, although I was the only mature student in my cohort. I called myself a ‘vintage’ student due to the descriptor of a mature student being “students over 21 years of age at the beginning of an undergraduate course, or over 25 years of age at the beginning of a postgraduate course” (Hubble & Bolton, 2021, p.5). For me, this description did not fully encompass what I felt as a student returning to study after a break of over 30 years.

As much as my time at Northumbria has been predominantly positive, nurturing, and supporting, the instances of unconscious ageist behavior have left a huge impression on me. I do not feel I received any information or guidance specifically for mature students from the university prior to starting my degree. I still receive emails about student halls of residence, which are only suitable for single students or occasionally for two students to share—it is not family accommodation. The University of Edinburgh (2021) boasts accommodation for singles, couples, and families on its website, telling prospective students that “accommodation for students who wish to bring their partners or children with them” is available—it is limited but there is a provision for up to four-bedroomed flats designated for family usage. It does not, however, specify whether there is provision for a family flat that has adaptations for accessibility requirements.

I am looking to take a year out from university life to do some research and submit a PhD application. With all the other things in my life that act as a barrier to me studying, I refuse to let my age be one of them.

Universities need to follow suit, recognizing students as individuals from the initial contact through to the engagement and participation of every mature student.

Come on, universities: mature students are valuable. Do not lose us.

References

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