# What it means to be a young mature-age university student

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**Introduction**

Difficulties with categorising and defining mature-age students are closely linked with understanding their diverse and differing experiences. Particularly in regards to adults in their 20s, 'there is no hard and fast distinction between "young person" and "adult", not least because transitions between "youth" and "adulthood" are increasingly blurred and fragmented' (Crossen et al. 2003, 57). The 'epistemological underpinnings' of many attempts at understanding mature-age students, writes James (1995), result in 'species approaches', which limit the findings and sociological understanding of the research subjects. To remedy the tendency in HE literature to give overly determined shorthand accounts of older students, it is necessary to consider biographical factors to understand the variety of motivations and situations of mature students (Waller 2006). This paper focuses on under-studied questions of age variation amongst older students by examining the first-hand written accounts of a younger cohort of adult students (between early 20s and early 30s) who are deemed 'mature-age' by the tertiary institution but whose experiences of university culture complicate this identity.

Adult students are often viewed as ideal students – more motivated, focused, and dedicated to their studies – and notably, are positioned as ideal subjects of increasingly neoliberal institutions of higher learning (Morrissey 2013). As Read, Archer and Leatherwood

(2003, 272) write, 'The almost "mythic" qualities of the independent learner reflect the current economic and material contexts of higher education, representing an ideal student who can proceed efficiently through the system without support or additional assistance'. Individual responsibility, particularly the view that life-outcomes are entirely the result of one's efforts (or lack thereof), are one of the main 'institutional logics' of neoliberalism (Wacquant 2009), and can be readily seen in expectations of university students (Leathwood and O'Connell 2003). Idealised portrayal of older learners as *independent learners* lends itself to an under-emphasis, particularly in university policy, on the structural factors affecting mature learners' educational trajectories, as well as the subjective challenges they may face as part of a community of learning.

Learning identity is constructed through participation in practice, and evidence suggests older learners face obstacles to becoming full participants precisely because of differing practices. Christie et al. (2008: 576-577) found that mature students did not consider themselves 'full members of the university community' and that they negotiated 'conflicting feelings about their membership of the university'. These students viewed themselves as legitimate participants in academic pursuits, but not as 'proper' students, i.e. that the social aspects of university life were inaccessible for them. We write elsewhere (authors retracted - forthcoming) about our findings that mature-age students' feelings of social marginalisation within university culture are often reinforced by stigmatisation from younger students who disparage outward displays of eagerness to learn, which in turn causes them to 'tone down their displays of enthusiasm'. While some mature-age learners report not wanting a social life at university, their confidence as learners is affected by social isolation within the institution. Older mature-age students, though, begin to adapt to and adopt the institutional and student discourses that signal them as the ideal students, and use this to their advantage (authors

retracted - forthcoming). Mature-age students are stigmatised learners, unable to be full participants in the community of learning, but also with differing interests and social integration outside of HE. However, there appears to be a different story for *young* mature-age students.

In our research, we found a significant difference in descriptions of social integration at university from many of the students between their early 20s and early 30s compared to older students. The literature has little to say about the experiences of students within this age-range, and does not distinguish them as a demographic in comparison to older students. These young mature-age students are either assumed to share interests and life-experience with 'traditional' or school leaver students, or it is assumed they are in the nebulous life-stage known as 'mature age'. These 'traditional' and 'mature age' categories gloss over what we found to be a particular set of experiences of university culture; namely, of feeling alienated from both 'traditional' and 'mature age' cohorts, and of feeling 'in-between, or 'alone'.

The following passages quoted from students' writings are representative of the themes and sentiments that emerged and are indicative of young mature-age students' experience of university culture as isolated learners:

*Difficulty relating with school leavers and older mature-age students*

> I am inclined to think my experience at university may be different to the majority of students because as a 22 year old, I am a few years older than those just out of secondary school, yet I feel I am too inexperienced in life to classify myself as a 'mature-aged' student. (Male 22)

*Difficulty integrating socially*

On my student card under my name in nice big bold letters it says "mature age". I'm only 24! I don't feel like I'm at a mature age, but when I first started here everyone was either 18-20 or 30-50. I often was left wondering where I was meant to fit in? (Female 24)

I do feel somewhat the odd one out. Being thirty-four, I neither quite fit with the young students nor the older ones. (Male 34)

*Alienation from university culture*

As a mature age student I feel a little alienated from the university social life because I'm not young enough to hang with the fresh out of high school kids, yet the older mature age students mistake me for a nineteen year old. I'm left floating between the two social groups. (Female 22)

These students clearly feel distanced from older mature-age students yet they also distinguish themselves from younger school-leavers. Importantly, each appears to think they are the only one in that position, that they are an anomaly. They are not alone in their age and life-circumstances but their perception of being isolated inevitably shapes their experience of university.

**Methodology**

The YMA students discussed in this paper are part of a larger cohort of students who participated in a research project on 'University Culture' via a reflective written assessment task of the same name. The students were taking a first year anthropology subject at [retracted for review process] University in 2009, in Melbourne, Australia, and were enrolled in a wide range of degrees. There were 487 students enrolled in the subject and 344 gave written

consent to have their assignments used as data for the project, which had been approved by the University's Human Ethics Committee. Their subject coordinator, [retracted], was not involved in marking their assignments and students were not obliged to participate in the project.

The participants were 64.5% female and 33.7% were male (1.8% gave no answer). Students were from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, although 55% self-identified simply as 'Australian'. Their ages ranged from 18 to 56, with 42.5% of the cohort aged 21 and over and therefore considered 'mature-age' by the university. Of the 344 respondents, 101 were between the ages of 22 and 35, meaning that 29.4% of the participating students were YMA. It was striking to find that students indicated believing they are the only ones in their circumstance, given that students in this age range constituted nearly a third of our sample. NVivo coding software was used for initial stages of analysis of the qualitative data.

The assessment task was inspired by an ethnography of a U.S. college (Nathan 2005) which analyses the culture of college life. They were also asked to 'reflect on what shapes your own perspectives and experiences of university' and to discuss how this compared to the students described in a chapter of Rebekah Nathan's ethnography (2005, 90-106). Although the Nathan reading influenced some of the language used by students they tended to refer to her text only briefly, or not at all. Most were more concerned to discuss their own observations and experiences and their reflections are insightful, often revealing their deeply emotional engagement with university life.

**Alone in the middle: neither school leaver nor 'mature age'**

Students between their early 20s and early 30s are generally considered similar to school leavers, as in the description offered by Osborne et al. (2004, 296-297) of 'delayed traditional' students (those in their 20s) who are characteristically 'similar to 18 year olds in terms of their interests and commitments'. While there are similarities in life circumstances between 18 year olds and those in their twenties, there are also differences that are vital to understanding young mature-age students. Older students are generally more likely to face the challenge of 'competing roles' (Jacobs and Berkowitz King 2002), and are forced to compartmentalise their lives due to competition between their home and family commitments, work, and university (Clayton et al. 2009). Due to competing demands, older students are also more likely to have fractured schedules in order to enable a precarious work-life-study balance (Stone and O'Shea 2013), as opposed to having university activities virtually filling their daily lives like many school leavers (Reay et al. 2010). We found that YMA students, like mature-age students in general, are much more likely to have these competing demands. The main difference between the accounts given by YMA and mature-age students is, unlike the mature-age students, the YMA students expressed desire for social integration at university.

Competing roles have particular meanings and consequences for YMA students. The following passages are illustrative of the tensions these YMA students experienced between the desire for social integration and the competing demands of having and making a life outside of the institution.

> Having come from a fifteen-year full-time job to being a full-time student, I tend to notice some differences. For one, I must juggle full time study with paying the rent, feeding myself and family commitments too. As a lot of younger students still live at home, it's not a huge worry for them. (Male 34)

YMA students have life-circumstances equally as complex as other mature-age students. Their responsibilities and commitments mean they are not likely to have the time to socialise at university, and they distinguish themselves from younger students according to these criteria. The social disconnect is based in part on the reality of the competing demands, but also on the sense that they cannot relate to younger students who they feel are having a much different experience.

> I don't feel like I'm having the "college experience" [described in Nathan's (2005) ethnography]. Is it because I'm mature age and have already had my fun before university? I don't have the late night talks, friendships and life experiences that Nathan wrote about. And I can't help but wonder if it's because I just don't have the time to hang around school and chat. I have a job, a partner and family to put before all of those things and don't see how I can balance one more thing on my already over loaded plate. (Female 24)

Dominant public perceptions are still that school leavers participate in HE 'at the right time' (Waller 2005, 70). YMA students may view their competing demands as further evidence that they cannot participate in university culture because they are not the 'right' kind of student: straight from secondary school, unencumbered of family commitments or work responsibilities, and able to be dedicated virtually entirely to the 'greedy institution' of HE (Edwards 1993). This is further complicated for YMA students, many of whom desire a form of the student life experience.

While older and young mature-age students may not have entered HE at the 'right time', many offer accounts in which they position themselves as being at an advantaged because of more focused, purposeful study. Their identity as students is positional in relation to school leavers, in that YMA students identify as purposeful and mature in relation to supposedly

unfocussed school leavers (Kasworm 2010). Being 'closer' to their high school experience than older students, YMA students appear to more consciously compare their attitude toward learning now with what it would have been coming straight from school.

> Although I have to work and have more time restraints that could affect my studies, I am more focused academically and always schedule adequate study time. I have noticed that many of the younger students appear most interested in the social scene. (Female 25)

> I have been a full-time Legal Secretary for the last five years and do not often have any common ground with other first year students. (Female 27)

Purposefulness and focus are certainly not the exclusive motivational domains of older students, however there is an important difference that YMA students perceive between school leavers and themselves. They view their life experiences, including things like work, travel, and building their own families, as forming another boundary to social connection with school leavers.

While YMA students felt more 'mature', they generally did not feel they could or wanted to identify as 'mature-age students'. There are often important differences between 'institutional age' and 'experiential age' (Aapola 2002), and the discrepancies can be problematic. In this instance, YMA students do not readily identify as 'mature-age', causing confusion about their identity and social position within the university.

> I'm very aware of being labelled that mature-aged girl who always has something to say. Many times in class I really did feel like I was saving the teacher by speaking up and having a go at

the answer. But I really don't want to be that person that asks a million questions right at the end of a tutorial and have everyone get annoyed at me. (Female 24)

As indicated earlier, the tension between feeling older than and different to school leavers can be seen in ambivalent accounts like these. The first student was wary of her desired academic practices, particularly the amount she participated in class discussion, potentially tying her to stigmatised notions of mature-age students as 'dominating' and 'obnoxious' (authors retracted - forthcoming). Where other older students more or less reconcile with these derogatory opinions of school leavers, YMA students are more likely to feel themselves to be in a limbo of academic practices.

**Conclusion**

The YMA students in our research appeared to believe not only that they were between the two main student demographics, but also that they were the *only ones* in that situation. They thought they were alone, and so perceived themselves to be isolated learners. YMA students are likely to be too busy for much of an additional social life and they associate making friends with activities that distract from, rather than enhance, their education. Yet they still express the desire for social integration at university. The YMA students in our research wanted a particular *type* of socialising, one focused more on academic interest. Such friendships might help make university life seem less overwhelming for YMA students and enhance their studies rather than prove distracting.

The mid-20s to mid-30s can be time of great transition in a person's life. People change and 'mature' as a result of experiences over the life course, including through work, travel, formal and informal education, and family commitments. Their views, tastes, manner

of speaking, interests, and habits may alter significantly in the decade or so after completing secondary school. Young mature-age students would find that they have much in common with other YMA students, if they could find them. Their narratives indicate that they do want to socially integrate and if they were aware of the existence of a young mature-age cohort they would want to form 'mature' friendships, based on shared academic interests. We suggest universities recognise the existence of the young mature-age cohort. Higher education institutions should actively facilitate YMAs making contact with each other. Such efforts would increase YMA students' social integration, improving retention rates and enhancing their learning outcomes. Young mature-age students do not have to be isolated learners. Bringing these students together would let them know that being young *and* mature age is something they share with a significant number of students.

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