Mature age student equity project

Seeing students as an important part of the solution.

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(Executive summary only)

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Executive Summary

UWS is on track to improving mature age student retention rates however, ongoing dedicated staff and funding are required to consolidate these gains.

Over thirty nine percent of the student population of UWS comprises mature age students.

As a response to the Students at Risk Project (Campbell, 2008), identifying mature age students as being among those most at risk of early withdrawal, failure or poor performance, the Mature Age Student Equity Project - 2009-2011 (MASEP), undertook a survey and research to better understand the often complex and diverse circumstances of mature age students - with a particular focus on the provision of UWS support services.

The survey, conducted online, had 770 respondents and was followed by interviews and a focus group conducted between October 2010 and March 2011.

Steady improvement in retention of mature age students is being achieved at UWS. While this improved retention reflects well on initiatives undertaken by the university, and has resulted in a fully adjusted financial benefit to the university of over 4.3 million dollars from 2008-11, mature age student retention remains significantly lower than that of UWS students coming directly from secondary school. (UWS Information & Analysis Unit, July 2012)
The Mature Age Student Equity Project research findings resonated closely with conclusions drawn from Davis, Catterall and Yang’s 2011 research into VET/Pathways students transitioning to UWS. Both studies found the majority of mature age students to be resilient, focused, committed and willing to rise to challenges and that early, targeted assistance is particularly effective in optimizing mature age student success, retention and engagement.

**Ongoing challenges faced by mature age students**

Students returning to formal learning reported significant obstacles in accessing available services. The majority are chronically time-poor, have multiple non-negotiable priorities and commitments, and frequently lack the confidence to effectively navigate information communication technology systems; all of which significantly affect their ability to access information and attend available services.

- 46% of respondents spend less than 3 (non-compulsory) hours per week on campus.
- 47% of respondents are employed for 15 or more hours per week.
- 20% are employed for more than 30 hours per week.
- 48% indicate that they have carer responsibilities – with 11% specifying more than one area of carer obligation.

Significant numbers of respondents do not have the advantage of cultural familiarity with academic and/or online learning environments.

- 52% of respondents are first in family to attend university.
- 22% have low SES postcodes.
- 84% of respondents were aged 25 and over.
- 30% of participants indicated that they were unaware of available services.

Mature age students see themselves as a “distinct cohort with needs specific to their age group” (Terblanche, 2012).
Respondents were very clear about what they wanted, as was shown in both the qualitative and quantitative data:

- 74% of respondents want information provided prior to academic sessions.
- 85% prefer information delivered via email.
- 82% want blended (both online and face-to-face) access to services and information.
- Students want:
  o More information about university expectations, academic pathways, services, and assistance.
  o Practical recognition of their complex circumstances.
  o To be alerted in advance about e-learning and academic skills training and have these flagged as important.
  o Support services to be available outside office hours.

**Recommendation priorities:**

The appointment of a permanent full-time UWS Mature Age Student Officer.

To coordinate, evaluate and maintain targeted mature age student programs, scholarships, workshops, websites, events, e-newsletter, publicity and publications; as well as facilitating ongoing communication with students and staff.

**Continuation of the Mature Age Student Starting-out & Introduction to e-Learning Workshops.**

Funded and promoted as a joint program with the UWS Counselling and Library staff, these workshops (held prior to academic sessions), have a proven record of success:

- Attendance has increased by 205% - from 52 mature age students attending in 2009, to 159 mature age students in the Autumn session of 2012.
• 100% of attendees would recommend the workshop to their peers.
• 97% reported sustained or increased confidence in navigating the UWS online systems as a result of attending this workshop.
• The use of current students as guest speakers consistently rated favourably in evaluations and fosters an expectation that students have something valuable to offer.

The average GPA of students attending 2009/2010 MAS Starting-Out Workshops was 4.49 compared with the average GPA of 3.69 for the 2010 general MAS population.

Public acknowledgement of mature age students’ successes through scholarship grants and media exposure – particularly in the Greater Western Sydney area.

“No single influence is more powerful than social proof, seeing someone else succeed at the thing you might have initially believed you could not do.” (De Becker, 1997, p.247).

Future focus

Targeted strategies, implemented by multiple departments across UWS, are proving effective. It is now critical to maintain this momentum through the provision of a full time, dedicated mature age student staff position; to consolidate these gains and coordinate future strategies to recognise and retain this significant sector of the UWS student population.

According to the AUQA Cycle 2 Supporting Materials February 2011 (p123),

“The extensive improvement work now being put into assisting first year transition, support and retention for mature aged students is justified given that retention for this group is stable and comparatively low ...”