

UNIVERSITIES AND SENIOR LIFELONG LEARNERS: QUO VADIS?

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ABSTRACT

Students aged 60 years and older who attend university are generally less concerned with vocational training, and more interested in studying for interest and pleasure. Australian universities may have to consider how to advance lifelong learning opportunities for such students. This paper examines and discusses the need for universities to be more senior student focused.

KEYWORDS

Senior aged learners - sapiential learning – university massification – participation barriers - gerontology

INTRODUCTION

The concept of lifelong learning contains the idea that learning is integral throughout life and that it can involve many forms of educational experiences. The lifelong learning concept perceives education to be more than just the acquisition of skills and qualifications to include learning for interest or pleasure (Kerka, 2003). Universities are well recognised as institutions that facilitate lifelong learning needs of many people, from young school leaver undergraduates to mature age students and post-graduates. An underlying assumption is that these groups are generally there for vocational reasons seeking or upgrading qualifications for use in vocational areas (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1998). However, there is growing evidence of people 60 years of age and older (defined for the purposes of this paper as *senior students*) who attend universities for non-vocational, sapiential or serendipitous reasons (Kim & Merriam, 2004). These senior students may be full time or part time students studying for an award or attending for non-credit learning.

Notably, many older Australians *are* already choosing to study at university. In an international comparison of educational participation rates for OECD countries in 2003, Australia had the highest university enrolment rates in the age group 40 and over (ABS, 2003). In 2001, of Australian university students 60 years and over, 44% of awards were for undergraduate studies and 56% were for post-graduates (ABS, 2003). If Australian universities wish to engage senior students, they need to change how they view, accommodate, and encourage them at their institutions (Edwards et al., 2002), as a variety of internal and external pressures are forcing a review of long held and treasured practices in Australian universities.

The “massification” (DEST, 2003) of higher education means that universities have entered a corporate world where their product is developed, marketed, scrutinized and sold with ever increasing amounts of accountability to the stakeholders. Another dimension to the changing scene of university life is that a sense of competition between providers of higher education has crept into decision making. Accountability of universities as public resources in respect of use and funding practices that scrutinize and underpin university activities and funding, means that the senior student sector of the university, a generation who funded academics and the institutions, cannot be ignored, overlooked or have decisions about their education made in a vacuum (Cook, 2005).

Discovering what senior students think about their University experience may help inform stakeholders in higher education about appropriate policies and practices for this growing cohort. This information may be of benefit to current and future students and educators, to the institution they attend and to the community, as it can be used to either remediate and modify practices which inhibit full and meaningful participation in university life, or it can illuminate and promote those elements that encourage senior Australians to participate in and enjoy the benefits of a university education. This paper will examine perceptions about senior students at university, why universities may need to consider senior students in framing future directions of their institution, and suggest how and why they need to do this.

Literature review

Literature on senior students attending Australian universities is almost non-existent, perhaps because there is a broad definition as to what constitutes older students. ‘Senior students’ are generally categorised with the ‘mature age’ students possessing an age range from over 21 or over 25 year olds up to 60 or 65, after which they are allocated a separate ‘other’ category. Research on ‘older’ undergraduate students at university have tended to consider senior students as “non-traditional” (Bean & Metzner,

1985), or as being categorised as ‘mature age students’ who did not continue after high school graduation (Candy, 1995). In light of the lifelong learning concept of moving in and out of education throughout one’s lifetime according to one’s changing situation, needs and desires, it may be better to consider chronologically older students at university as *senior students* than as aged or elderly students. The low visibility of senior students and their needs at Australian universities may in part be due to their relatively small numerical representation. It may also be due to a lack of recognition by university authorities that the senior students have any acknowledged significance

The lack of a clear definition or acknowledgement of senior university students is problematic on a number of levels. Firstly, there appears to a sense of “invisibility” for senior students which imply that they are not considered important enough to warrant attention. Secondly, in ignoring senior students as a ‘different group’ from the universal label of ‘mature age’ student, means that qualitative differences in their needs and experiences at university are overlooked. Senior students are more diverse than younger students in their motivations, needs, expectations, and experiences of higher education (Richardson & King, 1998). Thirdly, stage of life and developmental differences amongst a heterogeneous student body may mean that senior university students cannot be considered the same as many of their student peers (Britton & Baxter, 1994; West & Eaton, 1980). Literature on the need for inclusiveness and diversity in Australian Universities falls short in including senior students as a recognisable group who may wish to participate in higher education (Blackmore, 1997; Coaldrake & Stedman, 1998; DEST, 2003).

Theories about older adult learners point to the need for closer examination of their learning needs (Roberson, 2002; Swindell, 1993; Truluck & Courtenay, 1999), with a view to improving content and delivery for effective and suitable educational programs, including self organized programs, that meet those needs (Weaver, 1999; Wilson & Kiely, 2002). The absence of related research about Australian Universities is telling.

Literature on older adult learners covers elements relating to education for and about health, for training, and general interest, and for short courses that evolve and devolve according to need and interest. This can range from learning through an Open University, through distance education, through University of the Third Age to learning in a retirement village (Kim &

Merriam, 2004; Swindell, 1993). Research on theories about older students typically considers the senior learner within a framework of ‘ageing’ rather than as an older student (Jarvis, 1992; Maderer & Skiba, 2006). Consideration of and understanding of senior students who are competent, confident, and healthy enough to be admitted to study at university is vital for equitable, effective and sustainable delivery of learning opportunities for this set of lifelong learners.

The Role of Universities in Providing Lifelong Learning Opportunities for Senior Students

With Australian universities deemed as an ‘industry’ by the High Court of Australia in 1983 for arbitration and conciliation purposes, it is logical to note that the core business of universities is that of a commercial, profit making entity. The significance of these changes to the operation of universities has meant that the notion of universities being a place of non-instrumental liberal education where an ideal of ‘education for its own sake’ may be sustained, has been subsumed and transformed by market driven imperatives and governmental directives (Scott, 1999). The shift in emphasis from social democratic ideals to the rhetoric of efficiency and economic probity has seen an intensifying of the idea of a university education as a means of social mobility to the weakening of any sense that it could be a means of self-direction and self realisation. The ‘creeping credentialism’ that has discoloured the concept of a liberal education underlies the delivery of courses that increasingly have a vocationally oriented focus (Edwards, Ranson, & Strain, 2002). There is little evidence of consideration of the effect that such a mindset has upon lifelong learners who wish to attend universities for reasons other than for career development.

Growing numbers of senior students at Australian universities may exert pressure on universities for an examination and consideration of their needs. Australian higher education levels indicate that 8.4% and 4.8% of people born between 1946 and 1955 had attained a higher degree or diploma respectively, while people born between 1956 and 1961 figured at 6.3% and 4.2% respectively (Kahlert, 2000). The implication of such trends is that these people are most likely to be interested in pursuing and undertaking educational opportunities at university because previous educational experience acts as a predictor for a desire to be involved in continuing learning (Kim & Merriam, 2004; Mehotra, 2003; Schuller et al., 2002; Truluck & Courtenay, 1999). In anticipation of a growing movement of older

people wanting their learning needs met at a university, Coaldrake and Stedman (1998) suggest that:

...the modern challenge to the medieval institution of the university has turned about; universities find themselves faced with demands for life-long learning, but this time there are demands for education to be made available easily and cheaply and sold to a commercial market (p.27).

Considering senior students at university

In order to attract and sustain senior students at university, and in order to help them to engage in meaningful lifelong learning activities, a re-examination of the purpose of universities may help universities to thrive and develop through the presence and involvement of older learners within their learning community. While some Australian higher education researchers have noted the value of attracting senior students to university, the push-pull forces of government policies and funding, changing demographics, e-education systems are some elements that are helping to create what Assiter (1996) terms as the inauguration of a 'post-modern university'. The idea of a 'post-modern university' is where the understanding of an academic community is broadened to include the concept of lifelong learning that is responsive to the needs and wants of a broad base of students. This representation suggests that current practices and directions of universities are increasingly becoming outdated and in need have review.

Situating universities within the spectrum of lifelong learning requires a broad and inclusive approach to policies and actions by university administration and academics, as the conventional view of learning as the transmission and acquisition of knowledge and skills tends to overshadow the broader sense of learning as personally transforming and valuable for its intrinsic enjoyment (Withnall, 2006). Rather than concentrating on more passive and utilitarian notions that universities are for the acquisition of knowledge and skill for vocational purposes, an approach that is "...more consonant with the needs of civic participation and of agents capable of generating change for themselves" (Edwards et al., 2002, p.257) may be effective for the positive development of 'post-modern' universities. The 'marketisation' of universities calls for long range strategic planning that analyses the changing student environment with the view to improving the efficacy of the organizational systems of marketing, delivery and control. Marketing and promoting lifelong learning opportunities to senior students based on viewing them only as consumers would be

flawed, because it not only lacks vision and leadership, but it may also have an opposite effect of deterring the older learner from engaging with that university (Manheimer, 2002)

Revealing the extent of barriers to learning for older learners at an Australian university in regards to *situational barriers* (those related to one's life situation at a given time), *dispositional barriers* (attitudes to self as learner), and to *institutional barriers* (practices and procedures of the university) (Cross, 1981) can assist in both the remediation and prevention of the restrictions currently encountered by senior students and help inform planning for future directions of the university. The prevalence of institutional *ageism* is an inhibitor to senior learners (Moody, 1998; Weaver 1999) that may need to be addressed by universities. Structural phenomena such as *credentialism* may discourage potential senior learners and fails to fully meet broader needs of the individual and the community (Adult Learning Australia, 2000).

Time for a change

The idea of university students as clients puts pressure on academics and administrators to provide a service to them. University staff may need to understand their professional responsibilities and to keep up to date with 'best practice' ways of delivering this service. Staff will also need to acknowledge the diversity of the student population by taking a 'pastoral care' approach to dealing issues that affect their learning, not just as a safety net or an add-on, but as connected to key learning outcomes (Dunkin, 2002).

A student responsive curriculum that is based on sound educational principles and an understanding of the changing social context of a university will help in the effective addressing of student needs and concerns (James, 2002). Universities should not become like a qualification drive-thru of devalued credentialism, but rather an institution of flexible authority and integrity. "Students are active subjects in their educational experiences, as well as objects in relationship between institutions and government or commerce entities" (Byron, 2002, p.45) Adopting a "client-centred" approach that seeks to discover, understand and act upon the needs and wants of the "end-user" of the educational "product" not only makes commercial sense, but also is a sound philosophical and ethical approach to meeting the objectives of the university as presented in the corporate 'Mission statement'. Consulting with senior students about their university experience is not about handing over control to

an interest group. It is about fine tuning those areas of university education that attract them and lessening those areas that inhibit them.

Adopting a Gerontagogical approach to discovering how universities can best engage senior learners may remove the tendency to objectify senior students as a group and allow for them to be the subject of enquiry. Evolving out of discipline of Educational Gerontology is the concept of Gerontagogy (Lemieux & Martinez, 2000). The use of educational intervention for the elderly, the hallmark of Educational Gerontology, while admirable and useful is problematic in that it links education *to ageing* rather than to *older people* who are in a teaching/learning context. In Gerontagogy, attention is focused on learning done by senior students and of the educational practice for senior students, not as part of the ageing processes, but as part of teaching and of learning of people. Gerontagogy is student focused and situates its examinations in the 'sciences' of education, using gerontology and andragogy as part of a collection of multidisciplinary tools, rather than as discrete approaches that are simply juxtaposed and compared.

A Gerontagogical approach recognizes the important understanding that lifelong learning is *about people* who have been acknowledged by a tertiary education institution as having the necessary qualities to be able to study in formal academic university courses. Finding and implementing senior student-friendly policies and practices in consultation with their "customers" may help to avoid the inefficient use of university resources, advance marketing opportunities and increase and maintain "customer satisfaction". Employing Gerontagogy as a tool to help in the understanding of senior students' needs and wants may assist university authorities to take a broad and ecological view toward learning as indeed being lifelong.

Universities and senior students: Quo Vadis?

In seeking an answer to the question, "Universities and senior lifelong learners: Quo Vadis?" it may be illuminating to consider the question "for what purpose and for whose benefit does a university exist?" (Coombes & Danaher, 2001). Traditionally, universities have focused their energy and resources into the educational, psychological and social needs of young adults in their late teens or early twenties, studying in undergraduate courses with the aim of attaining a qualification. In recent Australian university history, consideration has grown in relation to the needs and wants of international

and 'mature age' students. In general, senior students tend to study primarily for the intrinsic value of the knowledge, and secondly for the social dimension that accompanied involvement in education (Swindell, 1993). If Australian universities are to be a true place of learning for all, then they perhaps may at least need to consider framing their future directions in a way that considers and treats its senior students in a positive light.

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