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Factors likely to sustain a mature-age student to completion of their doctorate

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Abstract

Mature-age postgraduate students are those who are late to higher education or have returned to postgraduate study after an educational hiatus in industry. While some mature-age students seek a postgraduate qualification out of extrinsic motivations such as for vocational reasons, there are older non-traditional students who seek higher status; cultural, social, financial, or symbolic. However, some undertake doctoral study with intrinsic motives (based on an intrinsic desire or love of learning) which may have an extrinsic outcome. Mature-age students, who are a subgroup of non-traditional students are categorized demographically by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as being over the age of 35 years. This paper analyses empirical and peer reviewed journal and book research with additional secondary data collected from contemporary sources to inform the literature of the aspirations, motives, and outcomes of mature-age doctoral students.

Keywords: *andragogy, doctorates, postgraduate education, motivations, aspirations, vocational and personal outcomes*

Introduction

Within Australian higher education postgraduate studies, there is an increasing population of non-traditional mature-age students who are undertaking a doctoral qualification. They may be returning postgraduate students who commenced but did not complete their doctorate, higher education graduates who are returning to higher education after a hiatus in industry, or who commenced higher education from an industry experience or with a vocational education and training qualification (Daniels, 2012).

According to Daniels (2012), there is a growing need for research into Australia's ageing population resulting in an increase in the working age of most Australians. This has resulted in the questioning by some mature-age working people as to whether to retire or continue working, either in the same industry or commencing a new career path (Shacklock, 2005). Research into the retirement intentions of workers by Westwood and Lock (2003) identified five factors relevant to mature age workers; valued outcomes, work centrality, role identification, important work goals, and societal norms. Shacklock (2005) defined a sixth factor, health, and finances, (that is particularly pertinent in mature age doctoral students) which extend these five retirements intention factors. A work and financial situation, and health usually determine the intention and decision to continue working, to which Shacklock (2005) added the variable grouping of 'influences on the intention to continue working' (p.252). The negative influences are 'high levels of bureaucracy, lack of recognition, and work and time pressures' while positive influences within this grouping include 'a passion for working [and/or learning], a life partner, and external interests' (p.252). These positive influences are posited to be analogous to the motivations of mature-age people to enrol in higher education programs culminating in a doctoral qualification.

The motivations for mature-age students undertaking postgraduate doctoral research degrees have received little attention from research into doctoral studies, although there is an increasing volume of research that has commenced within the last few years. Mostly, this research has originated from the United States of America, Canada, and the United Kingdom with some Australian research having been completed with enrolled doctoral students.

According to Ryan and Deci (2017) motivation supports eudemonic wellbeing which they consider is an essential factor for personal and professional growth such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The processes of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation assist this development by the internalisation and integration of goal-oriented behaviour (Elliot, Dweck, & Yeager, 2017) such as self-directed learning (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008) and social expectations, resulting in psychological coherence, integrity and wellness. These are necessary personal attributes to undertaking a research doctorate as they are the embodied motivations and dispositions of the student and are therefore an enduring disposition to complete a personal goal.

This paper explores the current literature in conjunction with empirical data collected during Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor of Education research degrees at an Australian regional university. The research is located in the adult education (andragogy) literature of Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson (2015) and the learner orientations of Houle (1961), which are the original themes considered applicable to this integrated approach to mature age doctoral learning. The goal is to inform the literature on the doctoral aspirations and motivations of mature-age students identified by Stehlik (2011) and Elsey (2007), by the integration of andragogy, learner orientations, and the lived experiences of five doctoral student or graduate participants.

The Nature, Motivations and Outcomes for Mature-Age Students

Mature-age Students

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2000) identifies mature age people, 35 to 64 years of age with people who are over the age of 65 years being unclassified. This paper uses the terminology of mature age to refer to those students and graduates who are over 35 years of age at the time of the data collection and analysis. During 2019, 66% of the doctoral student cohort were over the age of 30 years with 30% in the age group 30 to 39 years, 19% aged 40 to 49 years, 12% aged 50 to 59 years, and 6% over the age of 60 years (Department of Education, 2020).

Mature-age students are usually employed within a professional management, consultant, academic, or mid-management role (Chesters, 2015; Elsey, 2007; Taylor & House, 2010) who have returned

to learning to enhance their career prospects or are planning for life after work (Shacklock, 2005). They return to or commence postgraduate higher education or vocational education and training with a repertoire of skills and knowledge from their respective industries and their employment role. Higher education mature-age students are articulate, literate and self-esteemed in their ability to graduate with a research doctorate (Elsey, 2007). As students they are self-sufficient in their ability to learn and undertake projects and at a student life-cycle stage which requires lesser personal contact with teachers and trainers. This characteristic of the mature-age student may determine their entry into learning programs under a special admissions system of recognition of prior learning or current competence (Open Universities Australia, 2020; Taylor & House, 2010). Being self-empowered from their industry experiences possibly ensures their resilience and motivations as external part-time enrolled students (Chesters, 2015), but not their successful completion of the doctorate.

Learning Pathways

While traditional students matriculate through the education system sequentially, non-traditional students delay their entry into or return to education or training due to various personal factors, employment dissatisfaction, unemployment or impending unemployment, or to gain required employment skills and knowledge (Dymock, 2013), or for situational reasons. Mature age students may have deferred their higher education and postgraduate education for marital, family, or employment commitments, or combinations of these reasons, and government designed societal strategies which attempt to raise the aspirations of people (Taylor & House, 2010).

Mature-age student admission into university education, other than a traditional matriculation pathway is achieved with open access; the recognition of professional and vocational skills and knowledge learned within industry. This provides an opportunity to achieve admission without formal academic qualifications. An assessment of the knowledge and skills of the prospective student, in conjunction with formal and/or informal qualifications can result in admission to a higher education program. Thus, a mature-age student may gain admission into an undergraduate or postgraduate university qualification outside the traditional educational pathway (Dymock, 2013). This assessment method

can be a motivator to mature-age students otherwise ineligible to apply for admission to a professional or vocational development program.

Mature-age Learning

Malcolm Knowles (1913 – 1997) identified six distinguishing principles of adult learning under the terminology of andragogy to differentiate adult learners from children and adolescent learners. The andragogic learning principles of adults include the learner's need to know, the self-concept of the learner, prior experience of the learner, a readiness to learn, their orientation to learning, and their motivation to learn (Knowles et al., 2015). These andragogic learning principles are both the motivation and the motive for adult, and mature-age student doctoral study.

The learner's need to know

The learning path of mature age students is a lifelong and lifewide quest for the appropriate knowledge and skills to solve a current problem, or to comply with changing laws that effect society or personal interest. Adulthood, parenting, social behaviours, developing technology, and task processes and instruments pertaining to adulthood need to be learned and understood regardless of occupation or lifestyle (Knowles et al., 2015).

Self-concept of the learner

In this respect, mature age learning is self-directed in what to learn, and self-regulated as to how and when to undertake this learning either formally within an educational institution, or informally from published information, or influential people who are considered informed and credible. Such learning issues are the volitional decisions mature age people make to satisfy a personal or professional need (Knowles et al., 2015; Mezirow, 1990).

Prior experience of the learner

For mature age learners, lived experiences, including theoretical and practical, provide the ontology or knowledge gathered to address the problem or situation, the epistemology or source of the information, and the axiology or believability the learner attributes to the informational source (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This knowledge is retained within

the person as cognitions to be applied to the solution to a situational problem (Knowles et al., 2015; Mezirow, 1990).

Readiness to learn

Adults and therefore mature age people have attained a level of life experiences that they use to determine the need for further learning. This may be a need for increased competency, the autonomy to determine that they require additional knowledge and skills, and the relatedness to interact with other persons to assist with the identification of, and the support to undertake a learning pathway (Elsey, 2007; Knowles et al., 2015; Stehlik, 2011). As identified by Houle (1961), adults are ready to learn when they are goal or activity oriented to achieve an intrinsic or extrinsic goal that will result in an improvement in their personal and or professional lives. Learning oriented adults are continuously ready to learn due to the intrinsic motivational need for knowledge.

Orientation to learning

A belief or philosophy in the benefits of learning new or innovated knowledge and skills, a disposition to learning, is necessary for mature age learners to commence an instructional program either formal or informal to achieve their life goals (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Adults seek learning due to a goal, activity of learning orientation to learning (Houle, 1961) which will achieve competence and autonomy in their lives and relatedness with others to satisfy this learning orientation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Houle (1961) concluded that the three determinants of continuing learning result from goal orientations of goal orientation, activity orientation, or learning orientation. Goal oriented adults learn as they perceive the need to learn – their learning is episodic, activity oriented learners participate when the learning has a perceived personal or career meaning, while learning oriented adults seek and accumulate knowledge for its own sake resulting in a continuous process of knowledge accumulation (Knowles, Holton III, & Swanson, 2005).

Motivation to learn

Mature age people are motivated by a psychological need to learn as required. The motivation may be intrinsic or for the enjoyment of

learning, or extrinsic such as enhanced employment opportunities or ambition. Often the actual motivation includes a proportion of both types of motivation such as a need to learn for learning's sake, but within a field of personal and professional interest (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Goal achievement or the need to achieve is considered an intrinsic motivator for some mature age students as a personal rather than a professional goal, although achieving an extrinsic goal such as a career improvement is also a motivator.

The dominant motivation to learn is an intrinsic motivation which is a dispositional learning orientation towards higher education and vocational qualifications. Extrinsic motivations have a goal achievement orientation and an external locus of control from an activity orientation, that is, when the situation to learn occurs and is needed (Houle, 1961; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Motives to Learn

Motives are the reasons to undertake a particular course of action such as a higher education or vocational education and training qualification. Motives for enrolling in a program at a university include such factors as stability in lifestyle such as marriage, relationships, career, stage of life, interest, or social cause (Elsey, 2007) and an orientation to learn (Houle, 1961). Within many countries, educational programs exist, both financial and enabling, that provide the impetus for mature age people to seek admission into their preferred institute of higher education.

Five Doctoral Aspirations and Motivations

Mature age students enrol into doctoral programs with a variety of motives and ambitions concerning the actual program and their expected personal and vocational outcomes as acknowledged by Knowles et al. (2005). Stehlik (2011) lists five motives of mature-age students in commencing a program: career enhancement, personal development and interest, timing being right to undertake a doctorate, personal challenge, and self-fulfilment or personal quest (Skakni, 2018). The findings of earlier research by Elsey (2007) focused on the personal and professional or vocational aspects of undertaking a research doctoral program.

Career Enhancement

Career development was seen to be the predominant motive for commencing a learning program by many mature-age students. This included career advancement in the form of career promotion to higher level responsibility and financial reward either in a new field of employment or extending a current field.

Personal Development and Interest

Although closely aligned to career development, personal development includes the interests of the person in developing their analytical abilities, improving their understandings of their worldview through their lived experiences, and the fulfilment of lifelong aspirations to complete a higher academic qualification. This can result in a state of self-actualisation and personal satisfaction of their achievements.

Timing is Right

Many mature-age students defer their learning until the time is right which includes stage of life – children not living at home, stable relationships, financial stability, supportive family. These are the resources required to undertake a learning program. The right timing implies that the student has the personal freedom to devote time to learning in addition to other interests.

Personal Challenge

For some mature-age people the need to achieve personally is part of their personality or dispositions. These are goal achievements the person may define for their personal satisfaction or ambition, such as to achieve a doctoral qualification in a field of interest. Such motives are referred to as quests by Skakni (2018), self-fulfilment aspirations and motives.

Self-Fulfilment

Self-fulfilment is a eudemonic psychological belief that has a lifelong effect on the person in contrast to a hedonic or short term/immediate sense of accomplishment on the completion of an activity. The emotive state is likened to a quest for self-actualisation or ongoing contentment with one's life stage. This is the preferred outcome which results in the

psychological wellbeing of the person and its correlation with good physical health (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Ryan, Soenens, & Vansteenkiste, 2019; Skakni, 2018).

The Five Doctorate Outcome Motivations

The applications to society of a doctorate are a series of outcome motivations for the completion of a doctorate as they reflect the intrinsic and extrinsic aspirations of the student. The learning or the knowledge and skills gained for doctoral programs are given by Elsey (2007) as the application of research knowledge, utilisation of skills gained to other purposes, sharing the benefits of the doctoral experiences, personal and/or professional empowerment, and capitalising on the doctoral journey to commence new developments or business innovation.

The Application of Knowledge

Mature-age graduates have applied the research knowledge from their doctoral projects in furthering their research experiences resulting in publication of journals articles and book chapters, conference, and other presentations, teaching and learning programs, doctoral supervision and coaching, and guest speaking.

Utilisation of Skills

The utilisation of skills overlap with the application of knowledge and the sharing of the benefits of the doctoral experiences with other students, which includes the technical aspects of doctoral education such as conceiving, planning, and implementing research and other projects. This ensures that the rigour and demands of academic research is transferred to other students as is the philosophy of research such as methodologies and methods of data collection (Elsey, 2007).

Sharing the Benefits

There are overlaps between some graduate outcomes such as personal development and professional empowerment, and the generation of knowledge and development of research skills (Elsey, 2007). These coinciding doctoral outcomes demonstrate the integrated beneficial nature of a doctorate in the overall development of graduates. That is,

doctoral candidates graduate with the psychological and vocational skills necessary to undertake their roles within, and to make a meaningful contribution to society. These outcomes are accentuated with the existing knowledge and skills developed within an industry environment and reflected in the satisfaction levels of the graduates.

Personal and Professional Empowerment

Personal and/or professional empowerment refers to the emotive aspects of doctoral research projects including self-belief, credibility, respect and trust, critical thinking, that is, self-development. Self-development or empowerment can in turn result in the commencement of new developments or business innovation. Where doctoral candidates are undertaking their research with a methodology which collects narrative or lived experiences, the methodology encourages self-reflection, personal development, and transformative learning. The transformation of a worldview results in better meaning-making which can produce improved self-identity and decision making by doctoral graduates, and a higher contribution to society (McAlpine, Amundsen, & Turner, 2014; Stehlik, 2011).

Business Development and Innovation

The knowledge and skills learned during the doctoral experience provide the self-confidence to undertake new employment pathways or business by innovation or differentiating an existing business model (Elsey, 2007).

Research Methodology

The research data was collected using a qualitative paradigm during two research projects: the first in 2015 and the second in 2020. The participants were either doctoral students or graduates of Australian universities. The data collection was undertaken with a preliminary survey for demographic data, and a personal interview which included oral or written narratives of the research participant's lived experiences relative to doctoral research degrees. The interviews recorded the phenomenological ethnographic lived experiences of the participants with the oral interviews being transcribed by the author. The data sets include the student or graduate experiences of the aspirations, motives, and outcomes of an Australian doctorate. The empirical data

is augmented with self-published social media data. Participants are referenced by a pseudonym to differentiate their experiences. Due to the small sample which included the collected lived experiences of five people, the analysis is not generalisable.

Research Findings

Although self-identified as an intrinsic learner, Carly's aspiration to attain a PhD was motivated by the desire for a specific research-based role within a university environment, an achievement goal, and a motive to learn for career enhancement. These aspirations were articulated as:

> *a few years earlier I had missed out on a job in Melbourne purely because I did not have a PhD, and it came down to two final candidates. I was told later by one of the supervisory panellists that I had, that I was by far the better candidate, but the Director of the Institute wanted someone with a PhD. So, I thought if a PhD is going to get me the jobs that I want, I had better get one*

Her doctorate was not completed, and her motives of personal challenge and career development have not been achieved. Carly has continued to work in a research role. Although not quantified, some withdrawing doctoral students do not return to university to complete their doctorates (Kiley, 2009).

For Clare, the aspiration to complete a PhD was also motivated by the aspiration for a career enhancement goal; to attain a lecturing position within a university. Clare expressed her aspiration for a PhD as:

> *My undergraduate degree was in social science ecology. I looked at ecology and international studies as double honours and degree was very much focused towards getting a government job as a policy person or [similar]. At that time, I was 37 and looked around at the people that were teaching, I thought 'no' this is where I want to be. I thought that all the academics that were teaching me had much better jobs than I could find anywhere else [and] the hours are flexible they do interesting [work] in universities and it is always great to work with young people*

The desire to change career and the enjoyment of learning provided both an extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Clare's aspiration of a PhD was not completed at that time, however, she has since re-enrolled in a PhD program. Her focus continues to be on career and personal development. Clare's contribution to society includes sharing the knowledge and skills learned during her doctoral experiences as a social researcher to develop cultural change within organisations.

James's motivation for undertaking a research doctorate was founded in family and possibly a predisposition subsequently influenced by his family's academic achievements; the majority were PhD graduates employed within various universities. His reasons for undertaking a PhD were given as:

> *It runs in my family. Basically, we are a bunch of academics. My sister is an Associate Professor, and she has been researching for most of her life, and my grandmother was a medical researcher. My father's always read, so we have always done this, and it seems I have been around people who have written a lot. In [one] sense it was a natural progression to develop work and develop my interest and develop my understandings [of] visual arts and philosophy. [These] are areas which will not get me employment so I've [got to] love it*

James, who had deferred his doctorate due to an accident, completed his PhD and continued his employment in the Arts field. While James had no stated goals, he did have a family orientation to learning, a readiness to learn, and an intrinsic motivation to learn. His PhD reflected his prior experiences which were evident in his professional and personal outcomes which were an enhancement of his career and improved professional credibility and a personal self-belief in his abilities. His contribution to society has been the establishment of a design company (innovation), a contract university lecturer role, and film production and set design. His art-based productions have resulted in national and international awards.

Susan commenced her doctorate prior to retirement, her aspirations were not career focused but were a post-retirement preparation goal. She had a readiness to learn, an orientation to learning, and sought intellectual stimulation as her ambitions after retirement were to research and publish, a new career as she states.

> *I am a great believer of lifelong learning [and] I am on the board of a regional men's group…I am co-editing books and writing my own based on my thesis…I am still a schoolteacher…I did not [complete] my PhD for career aspirations*

Susan's lifelong learning beliefs were the aspiration for her doctorate. She intended to develop her research skills and academic writing skills to enable the publication of this research. Since her graduation, she has published several articles and commenced another doctorate where she has attained an Honorary Researcher role. Her contribution to society is her commitment to community groups, where she applies the skills and knowledge gained from her doctorate, the publication of her research, and the sharing of her experiences with doctoral candidates at her university. Susan's outcomes are a personal and professional empowerment psychological achievement reflected in her research and writing activities.

John is an expatriate Australian vocational education and training teacher and administrator working overseas with his wife. His intention is to extend his career past retirement age and to continue in his current role upon the completion of his doctorate was the achievement goal of his PhD. He teaches within the same discipline as his career in industry, reflecting his prior experiences. He describes his aspirations, and his orientation and readiness to learn, of continuing his employment as

> *to reflect on my career…to assist me [to] reflect on my professional involvement in student lifewide learning…[and] to contribute to society*

Of his motives for extending his expatriate career, he states,

> *Geographically [this country] is also far more suited for travel compared to [Australia]. We have gone to Europe for 4-day weekends…[and] have been to many places in Africa and Asia… Workwise, we also enjoy working with 400 staff from about 50 different countries…[and] having lived [here] for 16 years, we have a good understanding of the culture*

John's motive for commencing a doctorate was to provide a better learning experience for his students and his belief in lifelong education, an intrinsic aspiration. He and his wife, who is employed at the same institution, are enjoying their time in their chosen country which provides

a base for their other external interests of travel and culture. They both intend to continue working in their respective roles while enjoying their overseas location and their organisational employment experiences.

Although all the research participants self-reported that they were lifelong learners, three who had withdrawn for personal or institutional reasons have completed, one is completing their doctorate, and one has not returned to complete their doctorate.

Discussion

The six adult learning principles developed by Knowles (1913 – 1997) in Knowles et al., (2015) are themes for the andragogic learning process whereas, the themes developed by Stehlik (2011) and Elsey (2007) are developed from the perceptions and lived experiences of doctoral students. Thus, they are specific to a particular cohort of adult learners – mature-age doctoral students. The three sets of themes can be used to analyse the experiences of the participants relative to their aspirations, motivations, motives, and their expected and actual personal and professional outcomes. Of the five research participants, one has withdrawn from their doctoral program, two are in the final stages of the doctorates, while two are doctoral graduates.

The diversity of experiences of these participants provides the basis for the interpretation and integration of their lived experiences with reference to the three groups of themes.

For doctoral students, the need to know is the result of an aspiration to improve their knowledge and research skills for higher level or a change in employment as stated by Carly and Clare, or for personal aspirations including altruistic reasons such as the sharing of this knowledge and skills with others, the aspirations of James, Susan, and John. This sharing is an application of their knowledge and the utilisation of skills developed from their doctorate. For doctoral graduates, Susan and James, the sharing of knowledge is to help others and to undertake research for dissemination by publication or oral presentation, or to better their decision-making capacities in their respective fields of endeavour, a personal challenge, and self-development.

Doctoral students, similar to all adult learners, will defer their doctoral programs until they have achieved personal and professional stability

(James) that allows for time and personal application to the required research process, learning and skills necessary for doctorate completion. This may also be part of the personal challenge theme or 'quest' (Skakni, 2018) and may include the self-fulfilment need of Stehlik (2011) which can induce the eudemonic wellbeing identified by (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This can also affect the student's readiness to learn or preparedness.

The prior lived experiences of the student, including personal and professional, can affect their self-concept or a belief in their abilities to complete a doctorate as demonstrated by the participants who returned to doctoral study after volitional or non-volitional withdrawal as experienced by Clare and James. The self-belief of doctoral students is a part of their orientation to learning (Houle, 1961) and their motivations to learn (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Doctoral students have differing motivations to commence doctoral study which can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. Often, the motivation is a combination of the intrinsic, an internal locus of control and extrinsic, an external locus of control (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Intrinsic motivation is considered to have the more enduring effect on the completion of doctoral study as this belief is dispositional, that is, embodied and psychological and related to an orientation to learning. Such learning motivation develops the learner's self-fulfilment and self-concept, a belief in their own abilities, the situation of Susan, James, and John. The aspiration to complete a doctorate as a goal towards attaining an external benefit such as career status, or social, cultural, and symbolic recognition, and financial improvement is an extrinsic motivation, the motivation of Carly, Clare, and John. Often, mature-age people's motivation in seeking admission to a doctorate is a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, referred to by Ryan and Deci (2017) as integrated extrinsic motivation.

Conclusion

The intention by mature age students to retire or continue working and complete a doctorate is determined by the intrinsic motivators of an enjoyment or passion for work and learning. These motivations are usually in combination with other motives such as being in a stable partnership relationship, and having interests external to the job; both may be intrinsic or extrinsic, or a combination of both motivators; an

integrated extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). As conducting research itself is the process of the learning, this may be an intrinsic motivation and an enjoyment of learning for learning's sake. The aspiration to complete a doctorate may also be extrinsic and focused on professional development such as career enhancement or business development, goal achievements.

The data demonstrates some of the possibilities and influences that the experiences of undertaking a doctorate, whether complete or incomplete, can have on the professional and personal abilities of the person. The contribution to society of doctoral experiences has for many of the participants, included an improvement in self-development such as esteem, belief, and confidence (Elsey, 2007). The contribution to industry and professional development is the improved skills developed in the data collection process, analysis of the data, decision making and innovative development of businesses services and products that may result from these processes

This is of importance to the mature-age doctoral student and graduate as they arrive at postgraduate education with a complement of knowledge and skills from industry or academia. They usually require supervisory assistance with the academic rigours of research rather than the content of the research (Skakni, 2018; Stehlik, 2011). It is this industry knowledge and skills that mature-age non-traditional students bring to doctoral education which is the dominant differentiator with traditional doctoral students and graduates (Taylor & House, 2010). This ensures that their contribution to society from their doctoral experiences is grounded in industry practice and culture, and therefore, of application to society.

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