IS IT EVER TOO LATE?

Based on a Study of Mature Women at University.

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Introduction

There is currently much interest in minorities, feminism, educational motivation, human resources, and continuing education. A group which combines to varying degrees all these topical interests is purposefully pursuing academic studies within the universities, namely mature women enrolled in degree courses. Consideration of this specific group leads to a wider examination of the role of tertiary education.

Very little has been written about mature women returning to education until a few years ago, when a number of articles specifically orientated towards the influx of mature women on campus, appeared in the United States (Brandenburg, 1974; Buccieri, 1970; Cless, 1969; Manis and Mochizuki, 1972; Waters, 1971). In Australia, Edwards (1975) and Wesson (1975) have written about mature women returning to finish their high school education; Encel (1974) refers to the rising population of mature students at universities and Brophy (1975) recounts her experiences in embarking upon a university degree course.

The Australian Association of Adult Education (1973, 1974) has also discussed issues relating to this group. In the United Kingdom the Open University caters to mature women, and they are not appearing on university grounds in any noticeable numbers. In France a number of universities report rapidly increasing enrolments of students aged 60 and over, and find that they relate well with the young students (Telegraph, 1974).

In the last few years there has been a visible growth in the number of mature women at the University of Queensland. A pilot study, conducted by the author, began in 1974 and continued through 1975. It involved forty women aged forty years or over, enrolled in first-year Psychology as part of a degree course at the University. Six tests and questionnaires were completed by each woman and the results are currently being processed.

The undergraduate population of universities is overwhelmingly composed of young adults who are continuing their structured educational study begun in grade one. Most educational administrators consider that education should be given without a break. A number of departments recognise that a small number of young working people may also want and need more education, and evening hours have been arranged and external study programmes promulgated. It is also accepted that older men may need to get a degree for advancement in their careers.

But why are mature women enrolling in demanding degree courses at the university? What sort of background have they, how do they cope, what do they expect from their courses, and what are they trying to prove?

We may say when we see them, "Ah, very interesting, how nice for them, congratulations for the effort, but ...do we want them in our classes?" As with most minorities, there is a certain fascination so long as they are at a distance, but many justifications are at times offered as to why they should not be close to home. The economic: can we afford their taking places which might otherwise be allotted to younger students? The social: they disturb the homogeneity of the undergraduate population. Standards: will they be able to cope? Will they lower the high academic standards? There is the nagging, uncomfortable puzzle: why do they want to be here in the first place? Are they "peculiar" in some way?

When these various questions are considered, however, it seems that many benefits may accrue to the university. Academic standards need not be affected; those who cannot cope are refused re-entry like any other student. Considerations of achievement will be dealt with later. Their presence may influence the student population. Language and activities may be subtly subdued. The conscientiousness of the older women often permeates the group. The wealth of their experience can generate new ideas. Lecturers may be tempered from being patronising or relying on age for authority. Younger students can adjust to the concept of education being a life-long interest, not simply something to be crammed into the last few years of adolescence never to be pursued further.

On a more individual level the propinquity of differing ages breaks down barriers and stereotyped notions of a generation gap. The older ones learn to disregard the term "ratbag" and find the younger generation are for the most part sensitive, intelligent, courteous, accepting people; the younger ones find that the "oldies" are for the most part sensitive, intelligent, courteous, accepting people, and they meet and

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mingle on equal ground. Many of the mature women are at first worried about being accepted by the younger generation. Buccieri (1970) mentions the fear among the mature women at the University of Michigan Center for Continuing Education of Women. Members of the pilot-study group at the University of Queensland had similar qualms, but subsequently mentioned with pleasure many instances of younger students approaching them, both to offer and receive aid in a course, and for general conversation, curious as well as congratulatory.

It is difficult to predict which individual will make the greater economic contribution to society upon graduation. The younger woman may "drop out" for a few or many years, or may go overseas. The older one may change from a dependent consumer to an active contributor to society; some may support a dependent husband and children.

The University of Queensland Group

The forty women involved in the present study have varied backgrounds. To give an "average profile" would give a picture which no individual would match, but the following are a few indicative statistics. Most have been at least twenty years away from any formal education; only five have ever been to university in their youth, and only one of them has graduated. Ten have trained as nurses and six have trained as teachers. Sixteen finished grade twelve at the usual age, two finished grade eleven, fourteen grade ten, and eight left school earlier. By returning for high school matriculation at an average age of forty-three, twenty completed enough matriculation credits to enrol at university. Their average age is 44.5 (ranging from 40-56). Thirty-three are or have been married (six widowed, 2 divorced, and 2 separated). The women have had a total of 114 children (one woman had nine). At the time of this study there were still a total of 93 children living at home (ranging from 2 to 33 years of age). The average age of the youngest was 12 years, but twelve children were still at primary school. Clearly the women are not free of home responsibilities.

However, this is the age when almost all of the children have at least entered school, and most are nearing high school age. Lowe (1972) claims that the age of forty is a significant point in life from which we may look backwards as well as forwards, and re-evaluate our lives in terms of our experience. Bernard (1975) and Lopata (1971) write of the options and variety of roles and life patterns which are now open to mature women.

At this time of life a number of mature women realise that they have more freedom to pursue interests of their own. No one in this pilot group mentioned boredom; one mentioned a feeling of frustration and inadequacy; one specified economic necessity, and many mentioned this possiblity in the future and the desire to qualify for employment. Most mentioned positive aspects of knowledge, interest and keeping up with the children; many wanted to make a contribution to society, and felt that through experience they had much to offer, but realised the need for a theoretical and professional grounding. Similar reasons were given by women returning in Victoria to go through the Higher School Certificate (Edwards, 1975: Wesson, 1975).

At the University of Western Michigan (Manis & Mochizuki,1971) there is a counselling programme for women who are considering restructuring their life-roles at middle age. As a result of discussing alternative opportunities, some go into immediate employment, some take interest-expanding courses in crafts or adult education, some brush up on rusty skills, and some enrol at university. There may have been months or years of vague discontent for these women. In the University of Queensland study, half said they wanted to go to university when young, but could not do so because of lack of parental interest or finance; the distance was too great; or the war had started. One summed it up as follows: "There was a war, my parents did not believe women wanted or needed an education. I lived in the country and there was no high school. The only ones were in the city in those days and my folks did not trust the people in the city." Another said: "I have always regretted, but not resented, that a depression childhood and war-time adolescence greatly contributed to many lost opportunities." This vague discontent has popularly been thought to belong to women of the upper and middle classes being caught up in suburban neuroses because they did not have enough to do. The University of Queensland group comes from a wide range of backgrounds, both financially and educationally; their present incomes range from below $4000 to over $15,000. The waiving of university fees prompted a number of women to begin earlier than they had hoped to; as one said "I feel I don't have to save to be able to send my chidren before I can go." Some of the group are working, but most of them are financially able to pursue their studies without outside employment; compared to the whole population they are among the more fortunate. The educational level of many in the group is higher than that of their husbands: most feel that their spouses view their studies encouragingly, some consider them ambivalent, and a few feel that their husbands are hostile. Perhaps the ambivalent husbands feel it is a passing interest, and the study of one or two course units will discourage their wives; intellectual commitment that continues to a final degree may then tip the ambivalence one way or the other. Friends may also be puzzled. One woman related, for instance, that when she started at university "many laughed and thought I'd give it up. Now a few ask how I'm getting on, but very few are genuinely interested. Some think

I'm eccentric as they cannot understand why I am studying."

Hiltunen (1968) reports a common feeling among mature women seeking another role outside the home that "we are not wanted". Though the reactions of other people loom large, it is often the feelings within that are the most overwhelming. The role of wife and mother has become so ingrained that any thought that it may not be completely fulfilling is apt to be fraught with feelings of guilt. Letchworth (1970) has found many of these women feel selfish when "she feels she may neglect the full responsibilities of the home, her children, and her husband ...feels selfish when she spends money on education ...feels guilty for competing or even wishing to compete with her husband." Edwards (1975) mentions that the woman who feels guilty about taking time to study something she enjoys will succumb to any family antagonism. Manis and Mochizuki (1972) have found that a woman who has spent many years away from the classroom and the job, leading a relatively sheltered and isolated life, is beset with fears, doubts, and conflicts. She fears that she is basically inept and unable to succeed. This lack of confidence was also very evident in the Queensland group, especially during their first semester. With all these fears, doubts and conflicts there must have been much soul searching before even deciding to apply for admission to university. One of the group said she heard the Vice-Chancellor, Sir Zelman Cowan, on the radio encouraging older people to take advantage of the free system, and that gave her the final push. Some had to pass high school subjects before gaining entrance, and take a couple of years doing this; this may be beneficial in adjusting them to structured education, but it can also be frustrating when time seems so short. Even those women who have been working, and have achieved recognition and responsibility in their jobs, often still have doubts and fears about university. The return of their first assignment is a traumatic experience; it can be quite devastating if the assessment is not up to the standard they wish to achieve. The final marks of the first semester are the authoritative judgment of their worth in their eyes, and those of their family, friends and non-friends However, almost all of them are successful students (Brandenburg, 1974; Buccieri, 1970; Doty, 1971; Edwards, 1975; Letchworth, 1970). Halfter (1962) investigated the comparative academic achievement of young (384 women 18-25) and older women (133 women 40 years of age and over), and found that the older women gave a superior total performance; in particular, the older women earned more A's than younger women, there was an approximately equal percentage of B's and C's, and a lesser percentage of D's and F's. The individual performances of the University of Queensland group have not been so extensively investigated, but they follow the same general pattern. First-year Psychology at the University of Queensland consists of three courses. Of the 120 courses completed by the 40 women, only one failed with a 2 (in the statistical component); three received a 3 (pass conceded), and all subsequently brought this up to a full pass. The mean for the 120 courses was 4.92 on a 7-point scale, which is above average. Without the statistical component (which is 1/5 of the course) the mean was 5.05. University guidelines suggest that 35% of first year marks should be 5 or higher.

The impact of success is all the greater because of initial doubts. Usually those who have tentatively tried and succeeded in one course increase their course commitments as well as their self-confidence. The initial doubts seem never to be finally resolved, however, and even those in their third year with a string of 7's and 6's behind them are still not quite sure what the next assessment will be. Those few who do not succeed have to bear their disappointment, but they usually persevere, and go from strength to strength. Their high motivation goes far to explain their success.

The University of Queensland study group has not yet finished its university courses, but information has been acquired from a few outside the study who have: one is teaching in high school, one is a speech therapist, two are social workers.

Implications for the role of tertiary education

This raises the much larger question of the role of education in the life of individuals and in society as a whole.

This article has so far dealt with a minority of women over 40 who have not been in a structured education system for 20 years or more. It has been shown that this group, in spite of many disadvantages, can survive successfully in a system designed philosophically, administratively, theoretically and practically for a very different kind of population. Cless (1969) points out that for eight centuries higher education has been shaped to meet the needs of men (and, we could add, certain types of societies). Higher education in the U.S. she says, has been designed exclusively for the white upper or middle class male, and men have assumed that the pattern that works for them is, therefore, the best pattern. In spite of this structure, even the atypical at University of Queensland can succeed; if they can do so, a vast reservoir of potential students outside the later adolescent group, well motivated and determined, also could survive in the present academic system; but perhaps the structure can change and be less rigid in its philosophy and administration. There are indications in this direction. The Australian Universities Commission's Fifth Report (1972) points out that most Australian universities have provision for the admission of mature-age students who do not conform to formal matriculation requirements; however, the number admitted so far has been small. Usually they are expected to give some evidence of their capacity to undertake university work, and of having a strong motivation to do so. La Trobe University and Macquarie University are admitting a small quota of students regularly on this basis, and some other universities have followed suit. It would be interesting to know whether the small quotas will be enlarged as the demand grows.

In the U.S.A. a number of universities such as Michigan, Minnesota, Radcliffe, Sarah Lawrence, N.Y.U. and C.U.N.Y. have set up various programmes specifically designed for mature women, with considerable success. Several people involved with these students (Brandenburg, 1974, and Manis and Mochizuki, 1972) point out that many women do not want a special programme, but prefer to stay in the mainstream of student life. Much of the satisfaction in the University of Queensland group lies in the fact that it is not being treated differently.

The mainstream simply needs to be widened. Relaxing admission requirements may solve one problem; bridging courses (suggested by Emery in Lifelong Education 1973) to bring entering students up to a certain standard may solve another.

If education is seen as a life-long process, there should be easier accessibility to the institutions which provide the opportunities to learn; no longer should the adult, male or female, be expected to make the exceptional effort and sacrifices to adjust to a system geared for the young. In a complex society, where new knowledge is accruing so swiftly and changes occurring so rapidly, it cannot be assumed that once the degree is granted in the early twenties, the individual still has authoritative knowledge at forty. The need to keep up to date is recognised, but under the present system, it is not encouraged. The new shift apparent in women's lives cannot but help to be reflected in their seeking admittance to tertiary institutions. Bernard (1957) points out that in the U.S.A. in 1940 only about 24.5% of women in the 45-54 age bracket were in the labour force, and that the proportion has now more than doubled. The effect on tertiary education is apparent in the U.S. Dept. of Commerce statistics (quoted by Van Dusen and Sheldon, 1976) which show that tertiary enrolment of women in the U.S.A., between the ages of 25-34 increased 102% from 1970 to 1974; for men in that age group the increase was only 46%. This trend of older adults entering tertiary institutions will, no doubt, be increasingly evident in Australia.

If all forms of tertiary education proceed on the basis of continuing education, adults can enter and exit from the institutions as the need or desire manifests itself. Private employers or governments might be willing to subsidise an employee for six months or a year (a sabbatical?) to reduce the economic disadvantages. If the flow in and out of universities is facilitated, many more potentially able people might take advantage of the opportunity to further their education, and the benefits would be felt more widely throughout the population. It has been mooted that two or three or more careers are possible in a lifetime; motherhood could be one of these careers for some women and, after a few years out of the mainstream, they could easily flow back into the education system if they so desired. We should not only be tolerating mature women as students but actively encouraging them.

In a recent article H. Schoenheimer writes:

> There is a powerful case, long accepted as inevitable in Western Europe, for a total restructuring of education. The concept is already far advanced of "permanent" "lifelong" or "recurrent" education, with part-time and full-time learning spaced out over a whole life-time. An international OECD team will be looking at Australia from this viewpoint very shortly. (The National Times April 26-May 1, 1976).

Will they find us wanting, or will they find Australia among the countries leading the way in showing that it is never too late?

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