

THE ADJUSTMENT OF MATURE AGE UNMATRICULATED ENTRANTS TO LIFE AS INTERNAL STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND: A PILOT STUDY

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Primarily as a result of community pressure mature age students are occupying an increasing number of places at most Australian universities. Several reports have indicated that such students tend to perform better academically than their fellows who have proceeded more directly from school to tertiary study (van Helden, 1975; Barrett, 1977; Bowlay, 1977). This finding is usually attributed to the assumed greater motivation and commitment possessed by the mature age student. After all most mature age students have had to make significant financial and social sacrifices to attend university. Such a step would not be taken without considerable thought. However, such students are thought, at least initially, to tend to have more problems adjusting to university life, more doubts about their ability to succeed in their studies, and more difficulty with their studies due to the rustiness of their study skills and techniques (Barrett, 1977; Bowlay, 1977). To date no Australian research has examined directly the veracity of these assumptions about the adjustment of mature age students. Such a study will be reported here, but because of the small numbers of mature age students involved this research can only be considered exploratory in nature.

The Mature Age Admission (MAA) Scheme at the University of New England

In 1974 the University of New England (U.N.E.) introduced a Trial Admission Scheme under which persons who were at least 25 years of age but who lacked formal academic attainments were invited to apply for admission to U.N.E. stating why they believed they could succeed in a university course. In 1974 and 1975 only external study was open to such entrants. After it was shown that the performance of these Trial Admission entrants compared favourably with those of the normal U.N.E. intake this scheme was extended and made available to internal students — subject to a strict quota. In 1977 32 of the applicants were enrolled internally as full-time students. Although there were no hard and fast criteria for granting admission under this scheme the following factors were looked for in the applications of prospective entrants: evidence of

educational disadvantage; literacy of the letter; degree of persuasiveness of their arguments; evidence of quasi-professional qualifications; contact with current tertiary students and experience of life.

The Survey

In the second half of 1977 a mail survey was sent out to about two-thirds of the new internal first year students at U.N.E. A response rate of about 60% was obtained with usable responses being received from 366 students. Replies were received from 21 of the 32 MAA entrants (a 66% response rate). Because of the small number of MAA respondents (particularly relative to the overall survey response) and other statistical problems it was felt that statistical tests would be of little value or validity and so the attitudes of the MAA and other entrants will be compared by inspection only.

The responses of the MAA subjects to global variables such as their motivation to attend university, overall satisfaction with life at both Armidale and U.N.E., study methods and overall self-esteem rating will be compared to those of the other 1977 respondents (see Table I) but their responses to more detailed items (see Tables II, III) will be compared to those of the new internal U.N.E. undergraduates in 1975 (Watkins, 1976) as these data are not yet available for other 1977 students.

Motivation

The subjects were asked to rate the strength of their motivation and the importance of their reasons for coming to U.N.E. using a 6-point Likert scale from 0 to 5.

Table I
Mean Scores of 1977 MAA and Regular Students on Global Variables

Variables	MAA (n=21)	Regular Intake (n=345)
Strength of motivation to attend U.N.E.	4.43	3.77
Overall satisfaction with life in Armidale	3.95	3.82
Overall satisfaction with life at U.N.E.	3.84	3.62
Study methods	8.86	7.01
Self-esteem	3.90	3.70

From Table I it can be seen that the great majority of MAA entrants claimed to be very strongly motivated to come to university and their mean motivation score was well above that of the remaining 1977 internal intake. The MAA students' main reasons for coming to university were to further their education, to obtain a degree for career purposes, and an interest in a particular course. These were also the reasons most often reported by the 1975 internal intake but the latter were more frequently influenced by the desire to experience university, family pressure, the award of a scholarship, and the thought that they would try university. The rural, more personalised atmosphere of U.N.E. was its major attraction to both the MAA and internal students. Both groups were also slightly in-

fluenced by the closeness of U.N.E. to home but the internal group was somewhat more swayed by U.N.E.'s being the only university offering the course they wanted and the offer of a scholarship to U.N.E. MAA students were sometimes influenced by U.N.E.'s being the only university they qualified for.

Expectations and reality of university life

The subjects were asked to state how the realities of seven aspects of university compared to their expectations using the following scale:

1 = more than expected 2 = just as expected 3 = less than expected. The results can be seen in Table II.

Table II
Mean Scores of 1977 MAA and 1975 Internal Intake to Items on Reasons for coming to University and to U.N.E. in Particular and their Expectations of University Life

	1977 MAA (n=21)	1975 Regular Intake (n=424)
Reasons for going to university		
interest in a particular course	3.57	3.73
to experience university	1.33	2.30
to obtain degree for career purposes	3.95	3.97
to further education	4.05	3.35
awarded scholarship	0.05	1.44
family pressure	0.10	1.02
thought would try university	0.20	1.06
Reason for coming to U.N.E.		
only university offering course	0.81	1.82
U.N.E. is close to home	1.48	1.60
only university qualified for	1.33	0.45
U.N.E. was first offer received	0.47	0.77
rural more personalised atmosphere	2.79	3.24
offered scholarship to U.N.E.	0.05	1.13
family pressure	0.00	0.64
Expectation of U.N.E. life		
workload	1.90	1.76
course difficulty	2.05	1.75
academic background assumed	2.00	2.00
opportunities to talk to staff	1.85	1.90
discussion of world problems	2.48	2.38
relevance of courses to real world	2.10	2.24
an intellectual atmosphere	2.33	2.41

It would appear that the MAA found that there were fewer discussions of world problems and less of an intellectual atmosphere at U.N.E. than many had expected.

The workload, course difficulty, academic background assumed, opportunities to talk to staff, and the relevance of the courses to the real world were much as the great majority of the MAA group had anticipated.

The 1975 internal students surveyed, in contrast,

had also found the workload and the course difficulty to be greater and courses to be somewhat less relevant to the real world than they had expected.

Satisfaction with life in Armidale . . .

The students were asked to rate the importance of [using a 6-point scale from 0 (unimportant) to 5 (important)] and their satisfaction with [using a 6-point scale from 0 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied)] nine aspects of Armidale life and their overall satisfaction with life in Armidale. The results are shown in Table III.

Table III
Mean Importance and Satisfaction Ratings with life at Armidale and at U.N.E. in Particular of 1977 MAA and 1975 Internal Intake

	1977 MAA (n=21)		1975 Regular Intake (n=424)	
	Importance Ratings	Satisfaction Ratings	Importance Ratings	Satisfaction Ratings
Rating of life areas in Armidale				
accommodation	4.57	3.95	4.18	3.55
finance	4.19	3.05	4.08	2.52
transport	3.52	3.71	2.94	3.42
health	4.05	3.67	4.10	4.01
recreation	3.43	3.62	3.86	4.77
entertainment	2.52	3.19	3.52	3.29
social life	2.86	3.57	3.72	3.46
sexual adjustment	2.33	3.57	3.04	3.49
psychological adjustment	2.38	3.71	2.24	3.88
Ratings of life areas at U.N.E.				
administration	3.33	3.55	2.60	3.13
teaching staff	4.48	3.80	3.85	3.39
fellow students	3.55	3.33	4.28	3.94
lectures	4.40	3.65	3.92	3.12
tutorials	4.60	3.80	3.87	3.14
course content	4.79	3.70	4.15	3.06
assessment methods	4.33	3.55	4.08	3.16
union facilities	2.44	3.55	3.13	3.01
social activities on campus	1.67	3.15	3.24	3.82

The MAA, similar to the 1975 intake, rated accommodation, finance, and health to be the most important aspects of their lives in Armidale. The undergraduates were more likely to rate the social and recreational aspects of their lives to be important than the MAA students who placed more emphasis on accommodation and transport. The great majority of both the MAA and regular undergraduate subjects were satisfied with life in Armidale (only 2 out of 21 of the former expressing overall dissatisfaction). The MAA groups were generally fairly satisfied with all aspects of life in Armidale — finance and entertainment being the most common sources of dissatisfaction.

Satisfaction with life at U.N.E.

The subjects were asked to rate the importance of [using a 6-point scale from 0 (unimportant) to 5 (important)] and their satisfaction with [using a 6-point scale from 0 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied)] nine aspects of life at U.N.E. and their overall satisfaction with life at U.N.E. The MAA group, unlike the 1975 undergraduate intake, generally considered the university facilities and social activities on campus to be relatively unimportant. The former also were less concerned with their fellow students but tended to place more emphasis on the academic side of university life — the teaching staff, lectures, tutorials, course content, and assessment methods.

Both groups were generally satisfied with life at U.N.E. (only one of the twenty-one MAA group expressing overall dissatisfaction). The MAA subjects tended to rate all academic aspects of U.N.E. life as being quite satisfactory—the social activities on campus were their main source of dissatisfaction.

They tended to express higher levels of satisfaction than did the 1975 undergraduates with respect to all aspects of life at U.N.E. except their fellow students.

Study methods

A fourteen item study methods scale (Entwistle, Nisbet, Entwistle, and Cowell, 1971) was used to assess the study techniques of the 1977 MAA and regular students. The results are shown in Table I. It can be seen that the MAA displayed study methods on average somewhat better than the other students (15 out of the 21 MAA scored above the mean for the other students).

Self esteem

A self-esteem rating scale (Watkins, 1978) was used to compare the self-esteem of the 1977 MAA and regular intake. It can be seen, from Table I, that both groups had generally high self-esteem (a score of 0 representing very low and 5 very high self-esteem). The mean self-esteem scores of the MAA groups was slightly higher than that of the other students. Only 3 of the 21 MAA subjects expressed low self-esteem.

Conclusions

Although this research was only exploratory in nature the following trends were of interest:

1. The great majority of MAA entrants sampled here claimed:
 - (a) to be strongly motivated to attend U.N.E.;
 - (b) to have found life at U.N.E. to be much as they anticipated except there were fewer discussions of world problems, and less of an intellectual atmosphere than they had expected;

(c) to be well satisfied with life both at U.N.E. and Armidale;

(d) to have high self-esteem.

2. Relative to the regular internal intake the MAA entrants tended:

- (a) to be more strongly motivated to attend U.N.E.;
- (b) to have found U.N.E. closer to their expectations. The regular intake being more likely to find the work load and course difficulty to be greater and courses less relevant than they had expected;
- (c) to be at least as well satisfied with life both at U.N.E. and Armidale;
- (d) to have better study methods;
- (e) to have higher self-esteem.

While these conclusions are only tentative, it would appear that the claim that mature age students tend to be more highly motivated and have greater commitment than the regular intake is supported by this study. However, there is no evidence here that they also have more problems adjusting to university life, less academic self-confidence and poorer

study techniques. Further research is currently being undertaken to investigate these matters more adequately.

References

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