

A mature student experience photo elicitation study: multiple responsibilities, study and wellbeing*Sapphire Skillen**University of Cumbria***Abstract**

This study investigates the experiences of mature students in university. Mature students are high achievers, despite their experience of competing responsibilities alongside their university degree study. Using photo elicitation and thematic analysis participants captured their experiences in photographs and provided context and narrative for each photo in the interview. The research found three master themes; stress and conflict of multiple responsibilities, productive attitudes to study, and valuing and prioritising wellbeing. The study found that participants were highly motivated despite the stress experienced from their multiple responsibilities. Their motivation was reflected in participants productive attitudes to their studies. Participants were also found to use their own well-being practices and resources to alleviate stress. The study concluded that mature students experience a positive association with their abilities and wellbeing.

Keywords: *mature students, wellbeing, responsibilities, stress, experience*

Mature students have been the focus of research since the 1970's with previous studies indicating them to be a highly desirable minority group, bringing with them a greater sense of maturity, experience and commitment to universities and higher education institutions. Usually returning to education to further their existing careers or to change careers altogether (Howard & Davies, 2013; Chung et al., 2017); mature students' life experiences and sought-after skills have initiated a nationwide recruitment drive to get more mature students onto university campuses, where studies show a significant economic benefit of investing in the lifelong learning of mature students (Reay, 2002; Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004; Kaldi & Griffiths, 2013). Studies also show benefits for mature students who are ultimately very successful and usually complete their degree in a high classification, unless they drop out first (Markle, 2015). Therefore, when mature students are being specifically targeted and recruited for their abilities it makes sense for universities to ensure that they fully support them through these challenges.

Literature shows initial hurdles for mature students can be found in university learning environments, that are typically based around traditional students learning styles and comprehension which can leave mature students feeling estranged (Bowl, 2001; Zeit, 2014; Jeong & Norton, 2016). It has been argued that universities reliance on a traditional higher education model causes dysfunction to the area of further education by leaving out diverse learning groups such as mature students (O' Shea & Stone, 2014; Bexley, James, Daroesman & Arkoudis, 2013). Unlike traditional school leavers, mature students are over 21 years old when entering further education and despite returning to education after at least several years break, exhibit a slightly more sophisticated learning style and comprehension (Wyatt, 2011).

However, a study by Spies, Seale and Botma (2015) showed mature students to be more dependent learners than previous research suggests. The research showed mature students to have a heavy reliance on their educators for guidance and a lack of thoroughness and effort in preparing for workshops, despite being given all the materials with clear explanations well in advance. The research also showed mature students have established ways of undertaking learning tasks that hamper their learning. Furthermore, it has been argued that to get the most out of mature students' life experience and knowledge, adult learners benefit from educators encouraging them to use more helpful learning techniques than those they have grown accustomed to (Spies et al., 2015).

Nonetheless studies also show mature students typically use deeper learning techniques, meaning that they immerse themselves more fully into their studies to fully understand their subject. Interestingly, acknowledging and supporting the deeper learning techniques of mature students can have life long, positive impacts on the university and the mature students' accomplishments, as this type of immersion often leads to higher grades and overall achievements compared to their younger counterparts, who typically use surface and strategic studying approaches (Richardson, 1994; McKenzie & Gow, 2004; Montgomery, Tansey & Roe, 2009). The more effective learning styles of mature students may be why institutions may not concentrate on supporting them as much as younger students (Schofield & Dismore, 2010).

Despite this, research by McKenzie and Gow (2004) showed mature students learning behaviours having a potentially negative impact on their studies, by refusing to complete tasks that they disagreed with. Whilst the most intrinsically motivated school leavers completed all tasks required of them, regardless of any differences they had with them. Interestingly, far from being a positive attribute in class settings, mature students' behaviour has also been shown to have negative impact on their school leaver peers in the same class. One study found that school leavers' and lecturers' accounts revealed mature students in having an overbearing presence in class settings, where other students were unable to come to conclusions themselves due to mature students interrupting and answering the lecturer before letting anyone think about the issue at hand.

The higher level of academic success of many mature students also indicates a higher level of intrinsic motivation (Cassidy, 2012; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Findings show that mature students have higher intrinsic motivation than traditional students and therefore more motivation to successfully persevere with their studies (Erb & Drysdale, 2017). Levels of motivation are due to levels of locus of control (Rotter's, 1966), where those experiencing intrinsic motivation have an internal wish to learn, while those experiencing extrinsic motivation look for external rewards to compel their learning. However, it is also argued that traditional students exhibit intrinsic motivation equal to their mature aged peers, where categorising motivation levels by age is therefore counterintuitive (Fazey & Fazey, 2001, Mercer, 2007). Furthermore, despite high levels of intrinsic motivation, mature students are more than twice as likely to drop out of university in their first year than traditional school

leaver students (UCAS, 2017). Therefore, intrinsic motivation is unlikely to be the only factor involved mature students' university experience. Understanding how to help prevent further drop outs and gain better insight appears to be far more complex and involves understanding what issues affect them on and off campus (McGivney, 2004).

Generally, mature students are from poorer socio-economic backgrounds which significantly affects their ability to comfortably afford to study at university (Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009; Crockford, Hordósy & Simms, 2015; Baglow & Gair, 2018). Nonetheless, mature students have many more financial responsibilities than younger students, with many having to support their families as well as afford university (Cuthbertson, Lauder, Steele, Cleary & Bradshaw, 2004; Forbus, Newbold & Mehta, 2010; Richardson, Elliott, Roberts & Jansen, 2016). A study by Burton, Lloyd and Griffiths (2011) found that uncertainty and financial hardship were mature students' main obstacles at university; where contact and support for mature students early in the enrolment process helped to alleviate these worries. Other studies show a link between financial worries and retention rates in mature students, where significant anxiety around affording to live was commonplace amongst mature students (Bolam & Dodgson, 2003; Cotton, Nash & Kneale, 2017) Understanding the substantial financial commitments of mature students' compared to younger students, is crucial in offering the appropriate support and ensuring they are more likely to enrol and complete their degree, which has benefits for universities and society.

However, it is also argued that traditional students are at high risk of financial problems struggling to afford student accommodation and manage their money in general (Adams, Meyers & Beidas, 2016; Montalto, Phillips, McDaniel & Baker, 2018). Traditional aged students are managing their own money for the first time, many away from their homes and guidance from parents, often leaving them struggling to manage their money effectively and so quite accordingly, university's financial support is focused on helping young students develop good financial habits and responsibly manage their money (Watson, Barber & Dziurawiec, 2016; Potrich, Vieira & Mendes-Da-Silva, 2016; Aydin & Akben Selcuk, 2019).

Understanding how mature students from low socio-economic backgrounds experience imposter syndrome and burn out is important in preventing and lowering its impact. Low socioeconomic backgrounds can make mature students particularly at risk of imposter syndrome, stemming from self-doubt and low self-confidence (Chapman, 2015).

Imposter syndrome is when people have feelings of being a fraud and that their work is not up to the standards that are required. Low socio-economic backgrounds can add to these feelings, meaning that mature students have lower aspirations for themselves and feel like imposters in the academic world, which can negatively impact on their future career choices (Willans & Seary, 2019). Furthermore, imposter syndrome is also linked with having high standards, but due to lack of confidence and feeling like the work is too much, students either work too hard or too little on their studies. Imposter syndrome can also leave mature students feeling as they will be 'found out' any minute as not being adequate for university studies. Other external, environmental reasons are theorised to cause imposter syndrome, like the academic language used by lecturers making students feel like they do not belong in the academic world of university (Aird, 2017). This often causes significant stress and inhibits completion of academic work (Russell, 2017; Ramsey & Brown, 2017).

Concerningly, mature students with high levels of imposter syndrome also had higher burn out rates (Villwock, Sobin, Koester & Harris, 2016; Churchill, 2019). Burn out can be characterised by emotional and physical fatigue and poor academic outcomes, although, it is important to emphasise that research linking burn out and imposter syndrome is currently very limited (Leach, Nygaard, Chipman, Brunsvold & Marek, 2019). Further risk of burn out comes from mature students' juggling multiple roles and responsibilities alongside their university studies. Family and job commitments means that student life is only one of many responsibilities and with most university's geared toward 18-21-year-old lifestyles, university can become alienating and stressful (Kahu, 2014; Pearce, 2017). The demands of competing roles are exasperated by the frustration of not getting enough support during their study and thus being overwhelmed with family and job-related commitments. Moreover, studies show a lack of support for the financial and emotional toll of studying for a degree as a mature student (Hagedorn, 1999; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Pritchard & Roberts, 2006).

Interestingly, most research methods used in the study of mature student experiences do not allow participants much power, leading to researcher led studies which do not reflect the entire experiences of mature students. The use of mostly restricted quantitative questionnaires or semi structured and structured qualitative interviews and focus groups in mature student research can all be significantly influenced by researcher bias (Alsaawi, 2014). Although this type of method can gather rich, informed data of experience, the

influence of the researcher on the questions and therefore the data that is produced might not tell the whole story (Hammarberg, Kirkman & de Lacey, 2016). Namely, qualitative studies that have relied solely on dialogue through semi-structured and structured interviews are at least partly led by the researcher and their assumptions (Kvale, 1994). The lack of participant led and engaging studies into the personal experiences of mature students means that they can only communicate their experience within a standard interview dialogue or topic of interest to the researcher. Another questionable area within research of mature student experience is the phenomenological epistemology. The interpretative nature of phenomenology takes away from the participants own explanations adding the researcher's interpretation and narrative as the leading voice in the research findings (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty & Hendry, 2011).

The achievements and difficulties experienced by mature students appear to be framed within restricted qualitative research interviews, which do not allow full participant power (Pringle et al., 2011). Furthermore, literature points to inconsistencies between excellent intrinsic motivation and high dropout rates, where financial issues, multiple responsibilities and self-confidence play an important role in mature students' retention. The current study was designed to explore mature students experience using a participant led method of photo elicitation. Photo elicitation will allow the participants to capture and guide their experiences in more personal way, without researcher influence potentially providing additional elements of mature student life, that goes unexplored through use of interviews alone.

Method

Design

Photo elicitation was the method of choice to interview and collect experiential data from participants. Visual accounts of participants experiences contain very rich data, that interviewing alone would not be able to access (Harper, 2002). Allowing participants to describe their experience with whatever they wish to capture in photo form, also provides a diverse range of subject matter that participants may not have considered themselves. Participants were not guided on what kind of experience to capture, simply that they would look to photograph whatever their experience is as a mature student. In this way, the photo elicitation is participant led and therefore benefits from researchers' assumptions being

unable to intrude on participants actual experiences. Meaningful accounts of the mature student experience can be unlocked as the images themselves promote dialogue and a comfortable bases for discussion. Photo elicitation is a modern, multidimensional approach which allows the participants to describe their experiences visually as well as verbally, allowing for richer, more fully informed data (Bates, McCann, Kaye & Taylor, 2017). Thematic analysis in a semantic way, was chosen as the most appropriate way to analyse the data due to its effectiveness in communicating participants experiences on face value, thus empowering participants and their perspectives. Thematic analysis also shares autonomy with photo elicitation and the participant led and empowering approach, using open coding to decipher patterns across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participants

Five participants (four female and one male) took part in the study and were chosen as a convenience sample of mature students enrolled in a university course, all being over 21 years old. In addition, to prevent restricted information disclosure and be in keeping with anonymity, participants were only considered for the study if the researcher did not know them personally. Participants had to meet the inclusion criteria of: currently enrolled mature student over 21 years old, attending the same North of England University. This criterion was to ensure the participants were still enrolled and going through the process of university study as mature students, meaning that the data collected would be current and applicable to present day matures student experiences.

Materials

The documents used for this research included a photograph information sheet; a guideline for phone interviews; a guideline for qualitative phone interviews; participant information sheet; participant consent form and participant debriefing sheet. A digital recording device was also used for recording of the interviews and a telephone was used to conduct interviews.

Procedure

In line with BPS ethical guidelines, all participants were made aware that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any point within two weeks of taking part, without giving a reason, by emailing the researcher with an agreed word or number ("Code of Human Research Ethics", 2019). Full anonymity and confidentiality were provided for each participant by using pseudonyms and ensuring photographs or interview data that revealed their identity or that of any individuals was not included in the research. Furthermore, to protect participants and the public from harm and invasion of privacy, participants followed guidelines that advised photographs of people, nudity, private spaces, illegal activity, dangerous activity and anything that may be deemed as risky or graphic in nature were not allowed for the study. If they were to photograph any of these things, the photos would not be used (Bates et al., 2017).

Participants were advised interviews would last between 20 – 40 minutes and the interviews were done over the telephone. The interviews were participant led and to build rapport over the telephone the researcher used set up phrases to greet participants with, thanking them for taking part in the research, explaining briefly why the research was important then making sure the participant was ready to start the interview by asking if was okay to proceed (Farooq, 2015). Then the researcher requested a memorable word or number from the participant to use should they wish to withdraw from the study. Once the memorable word/number was noted by the researcher the interview would begin.

Several questions were prepared to help promote dialogue and prompt participants during the interview, asking for a word or emotion to describe each photo and what stuck out in the photos for the participants. Researchers would describe each photo that they were looking at in succession to the participants over the phone, so that the participant knew which photo they were going to talk about each time. Allowing the participants themselves to lead the interviews with their own explanations of their photographs allowed for further probing into expressed experiences to occur as and when it is necessary during the interview process. At the end of the interview the researcher would ask if there was anything else about their mature student experience that they wanted to say that they had not yet been able to. After allowing participants to explain any further information that they wanted to add the

researcher thanked them again for taking the time to participate and explained that they would be sent a debrief sheet via email with information on services had they been upset by the interview (Meo, 2010; Bates et al., 2017). The researcher further explained that they would be given access to the full report should they wish to read it.

Transcription

All recordings of interviews were transcribed in full, in verbatim. Any identifiable information, including names were removed (Willig, 2008). In order to analyse and identify quotes in the data, line numbers were then inserted. Following transcription of the interviews, the data was analysed using thematic analysis. All digital recordings of the interviews and photographs were encrypted and kept safe in an encrypted laptop that was secured, before being deleted and all physical copies of transcripts and photos shredded.

Analysis Procedure.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data by looking for reoccurring themes across all the interviews. Interview transcripts were read repeatedly until the researcher felt as though they had fully absorbed the data. Once fully absorbed, the researcher could look for patterns across the participants interview data and organise these patterns, or themes, into categories. These categories were further scrutinised and reorganised into more suitable themes until the researcher could confidently categorise all the themes into appropriate categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The current research used a deductive theoretical framework and semantic approach to the data analysis. Using deductive approach was critical in understanding the experiences of mature students without influencing their accounts with conceptions driven by literature. Furthermore, using a semantic approach meant participants accounts were not diluted by the interpretive process (Clarke & Braun, 2016).

Reflexivity

An imperative part of qualitative research is to reflect on the impact that the researchers' approach may have on the research that is being conducted (Landridge, 2007). It is therefore important to ask specific questions around reflexivity which include:

What is my relationship with the topic being investigated?

I am a 34-year-old mature student enrolled in a North of England university. I have children and live together with them and their father within an hour's journey to university. Although I have never spoken to participants in the study before the interviews, it was likely that I would have many things in common with the local, female mature student participants with families. I was aware that my own experiences of university could make me assume other participants with similar ages and backgrounds to myself would experience the same difficulties juggling parenting and other substantial family commitments alongside their degree. These assumptions may have affected the questions and interpretation of the data, however I did my best to use formal guidelines for questions and allow participants to express their experiences with little, to no interruptions as to not influence their data. I did feel at times that my own inexperience with interviewing and my bias assumptions impeded my line of questioning and prevented me from following up information with more open-ended questions to elaborate and give more rich, informed data.

How might the findings impact on the participants?

The participants were very happy to be offered the opportunity to read through the report when it was completed and available to do so and all felt happy to share their experience to further understanding within universities on how to engage with and support mature students.

Results and Discussion

Thematic analysis of the photo and interview data provided three master themes.

Master Theme 1: The stress and conflict of multiple responsibilities.

Master Theme 2: Productive attitudes to study.

Master Theme 3: Valuing and prioritising wellbeing.

These themes highlight, not only the legitimate tendency for mature students to experience significant conflict and stress whilst managing so many things alongside university study, but how they manage to continue their degree despite these pressures by

using dedication and appreciation as well as engaging in enhancing their personal wellbeing utilising various resources in their daily lives.

Theme 1: Stress and conflict of multiple responsibilities

This master theme captures the different, yet reoccurring multiple responsibilities that participants experience outside of university. In particular, these multiple responsibilities seemed to be experienced as conflicting and stressful in addition to university study and something they often recognised as contrasting to a younger, traditional university students' experience. Furthermore, participant photographs showed both indirect and direct conflicts, as responsibility showed up in different ways for each student. The urge to socialise and be part of their peers' social group outside of University is complex, where a participant is torn between their maturity, juggling multiple responsibilities and needing to experience connecting with their peers. Below, this participant's photograph (Figure 1) and narrative, illustrates the differences in lifestyles that made her feel jealous of her slightly younger peers' social lives and lack of responsibility



Figure 1: Jealous

“I did feel quite jealous that they were, I suppose being younger as well and being able to have, you know, not the responsibilities and things I had, you know that I had to come home to and things, yeah, maybe.” (Participant 4)

The narrative for this photograph outlines the participant's experience of responsibility stopping her having the carefree lifestyle her peers enjoy. The photograph shows the restrictive nature of her responsibilities meaning she was in pyjamas, directly

compared to her peer's lack of responsibilities allowing them to enjoy dressing up and nights out, something this younger mature student may still desires to be a part of.

Another aspect of mature students experience of responsibility is the connecting with peers in a teaching and mothering role, where they feel responsible for helping and guiding their group and guilty when they prioritise their own study before helping their peers. This participant enjoys helping her peers with assignments and feels guilt when she puts her own responsibilities ahead of looking over her younger peers work that they email to her.

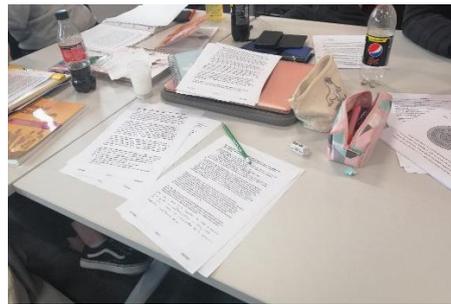


Figure 2: Feeling guilty

“And sometimes it makes me feel guilty and I say, oh I’m a bit busy, I’ve got to, almost excuse myself. I always say though, I will always read it. It might be a day or two later so. I don’t think it’s a pressure on me because I do actually enjoy doing it.”
(Participant 3)

The photograph illustrates her study environment as a communal learning space, reflecting her experience of being involved in helping her peers. Here the participant experiences a supportive relationship with her peers that she feels very much committed to.

Mature students, who where parents and juggled family commitments had more directly, impactful experiences of their responsibilities, that impeded on their study time. This participant outlined this difficulty with a photograph of her child’s swim suit and goggles at the swimming pool, where she had had trouble getting her child showered after his swim. The participant wanted the photo to caption to be an exclamation mark to illustrate it as a stressful impasse.



Figure 3: !

“So, I guess it’s an aspect of my life. So, on a Saturday we’ve got a complicated arrangement. We take the children swimming at the local pool. . .I find this an absolute bind because it is right in the middle of the day...it just represented a struggle I had had on that particular day” (Participant 1)

This participant’s narrative describes how this struggle is part of her wider responsibilities as a parent. Interestingly, the photograph shows how, like the shorts and goggles in front of her, this complicated weekend arrangement is thrown in her path.

Theme 2: Productive attitudes to study.

This master theme captures how, despite the conflicts and pressure of extra responsibilities, participants inhabited productive, positive attitudes towards their university study, revealing a significant dedication and appreciation towards their studies. Photographs showed their work spaces and the chaos caused by prioritising their study.

Part of the mature students’ dedication to their studies was illustrated through their photo narratives of their studying environment, where they described how their setting worked for them. Being aware of how their work environment affected their studies and ensuring it was beneficial to them appears to also be significant. Take for example, Participant 1’s narrative describing her confidence in ensuring she had a comfortable work space for studying, meaning that she prioritised and safeguarded her productivity.



Figure 4: Being productive

“I feel quite comfortable and productive. Yes. Which is interesting because when I was a student in the past, I used to have a battle with actually getting down to writing and so on. I think, maybe, as I’m older I’m a bit more confident.” (Participant 1)

The photograph captures the cosy, isolated communal study space with the participants belongings placed around the computer, showing self-assurance in claiming this space for her benefit. Participant 1’s narrative illustrates how compared to her young student days, she is more of an expert in her learning.

Emphasising their study space environment, participants drew on various valuable features associated with studying. Speaking about her photograph of her study area at home, Participant 5 illustrates her sense of appreciation for the entire university experience. For this participant, this picture elicits study as a highly valuable aspect of the university, where she savours every part university culture.



Figure 5: Appreciation

“I think being older, as well, you appreciate everything so much more. I appreciate every little bit of my university experience.” (Participant 4)

This participant's narrative shows what being appreciative means for her, in that she gets so much more out of her university experience than perhaps her younger traditional peers do. This participant's awareness of the value of all the aspects of university life appears to enhance her experience and motivation with her studies

Outlining how dedication to their studies impacted other areas of their lives, participants typically illustrated the compromises they made to study for university. This was in several cases, a photograph of dishes filling their sinks. Here, Participant 2 illustrates how the priorities of studying created an element of chaos, with a photograph of her dishes.



Figure 6: Change of priorities

“Yeah. So, one priority is very much studying and everything else, you know, the dishes in the sink.” (Participant 2)

This participant's narrative indicates how everything, other than study, is very much abandoned, much like the dishes waiting to be washed in the photo. The high level of demands put upon them during their university study is met by mature students with dedication.

Dedication also emerged through studying for long periods during unsociable hours and getting up extra early to travel to their university. Participant 5's narrative outlines the mature student's experience of their dedication as an understanding that their commitment to studying was different and more challenging than most of their traditional aged peers.



Figure 7: Dedication

“I’m up at half five every morning . . . So, I always have a costa coffee in the morning usually start doing my uni work at that time in the morning, which not many people do.” (Participant 4)

Participant 5’s narrative emphasises how she meets the challenging elements of her studies with a routine that she exploits to do her university work. The photograph shows how her studies go with her, early in the morning in an otherwise social location. This participant is an example of mature student’s commitment to their studies.

This theme is further illustrated by directly emphasising how hard she works. Recognising and prioritising university work is experienced through a recognition of these efforts. The participant uses a photograph of her study area at university to capture her strong work ethic as a mature student.



Figure 8: Working hard

“... basically, it signifies to me that I do, I do work hard. Yeah. Even days I’m not in university I put a lot of effort into my assignments.” (Participant 3)

This photograph acts to reinforce the participants strong work ethic and desire to work hard at her university studies, she uses the entirety of the space to maximise her studying experience.

The mature students’ productive attitudes to study included the ability to use feedback constructively. Being able to use negative feedback in a positive, reflective way to improve on their studies was also something participant 5 illustrates when discussing a photograph depicting the constant travelling during his degree, compared to the more traditional lecture halls he was used to previously. Reflecting on the difference between his degree now and the degree he did earlier in his life, he describes how he now responds to getting a poor grade.



Figure 9: ‘Bum mark’

“You know if you get a bad mark, you know I remember in my first degree, it was like it's the end of the world, I'm going to fail kind of thing and I got a bum mark the other day and I was just like, well you know, I'll retake it, I'll rewrite it. It wasn't very good. I can understand why that was, you know, so I know that the younger me, you know cut and run kind of thing, if you get marks like that, you're never going to make a very good nurse and stuff like that. I guess its reflecting how the younger me would react in comparison to me now.” (Participant 5)

Participant 5 draws on his maturity to reflect on his recent ‘bum mark’ with calm reassurance that he can re write an improved version, no longer catastrophising as he would

have in his younger student experience. Therefore, the criticism of his work is part of a positive, productive study experience rather than a disaster. Interestingly the photograph, although initially capturing learning and travel differences, is also of the participant ‘in the driving seat’, also representing being in control.

Theme 3: Valuing and prioritising wellbeing

The mature students’ accounts also suggest they had a significant interest in implementing their own wellbeing practice, to take care of their mental and physical wellbeing alongside their study. These themes were something they all generally considered as a significantly beneficial part of their mature student experience.

Alongside their experiences of responsibilities and study, was an emphasis on the experience of their general wellbeing, especially acknowledging activities that helped their mental health. Describing how she uses yoga as a mature student to feel sane, participant 2 uses a photograph of her yoga mat to capture her experience of using yoga for her mind rather than as how she previously used it as purely physical thing, also naming this photo sanity.



Figure 10: Sanity.

“Yeah more mentally than physically now whereas before it was always a physical thing” (Participant 2)

This narrative illustrates how her expanded understanding of her yoga practice benefits her, in areas that her younger self had not considered. This participant represents the more developed experience of mature students in understanding and utilising their established

resources to benefit her whole wellbeing in new and evolved ways. The photograph sets the scene of her modest, helpful yoga practice.

Whilst participant 2 used an existing practice to aid her mental wellbeing, participant 4 used a photograph of her exercise trainers to capture her experience of using exercise for the first time. Interestingly the photos are very similar in their simplicity and each being of an exercising aid, participant 4's experience as a younger mature student means that exercise is an entirely new resource, yet with the same benefits for her whole wellbeing.



Figure 11: Motivation

“ . . .the worries that you have, the insecurities and I found exercise was a massive, it made a massive change in my life where it really helps me.” (Participant 4)

The narrative for this photo shows how she might have been overwhelmed by the stress of university life; the simple use of exercise turned this around. The photograph shows the uncomplicated and accessible nature of this resource, a source of profound benefit that is a good personal fit.

The need to focus on other areas of life as a means in promoting wellbeing was an experience that participant 5 encompassed through his photo narratives of exercising and being in a church. Here the participant explained how the photos were a pair, to show spirituality and exercising both as an aid to his overall wellbeing.



Figure 12 and 13: Looking after all bits of your life.

“. . . you have to look after all bits of your life in that respect. Physical health, emotional health, spiritual health.” (Participant 5)

The participant experiences looking after all aspects of their wellbeing as something they very much ought to do, as part of their daily habit. Interestingly, both photographs perspective of looking down at the feet illustrate this contemplative, introspective experience of self-care that he describes.

Looking after their mental wellbeing was not confined to the use of exercise and spirituality. Mature students come from a variety of backgrounds and with that in mind, they appear to use a multitude of methods to deal with the pressures of being a mature student. Take for example how participant 3 uses a photograph of her hand with her engagement ring, to capture her experiences of using planning her wedding with her partner to promote better wellbeing.



Figure 14: Something else to think about

“It’s something else to think about. If I am stressed at uni or with my assignments, it’s the happy thing that me and my partner do together.” (Participant 3)

Participant 3 experiences great happiness from planning her wedding alongside her partner and outlines a need to have something else to focus on during her time at university. This is a very positive part of her life that she draws on for her own wellbeing. The photo illustrates taking herself to these happy places, by linking her hand and engagement ring directly to the wedding guide leaflet above.

Discussion

This study has highlighted several areas of mature student experience, most significantly the link between mature students' multiple roles and stress, their use of a productive studying attitude, and how mature students' value and prioritise their own wellbeing. Participants highlighted the stress of completing a degree amid the various commitments of multiple roles, such as managing complicated family commitments, a job and domestic obligations alongside university study. Interestingly participants showed aptitude for productive attitudes in their study, bringing commitment, appreciation, sacrifice and an ability to receive and use feedback positively. Furthermore, participants appeared to be drawn to, and benefit from having something else to focus on, outside university that made them feel good in body and mind. Mature students experienced prioritising their wellbeing by using varied wellbeing practices, from exercise to wedding planning.

The first theme arounds stress and conflict of multiple roles supports the current literature surrounding mature student experiences (Adams, Meyers & Beidas, 2016). The additional commitments came in a variety of forms for mature students; multiple, competing roles of: parenthood, employment, domestic, financial, family and peer commitments all cause the mature student's some conflict in their family or domestic lives. Participant 4's jealousy of traditional student's social lives, and their lack of responsibility illustrated how the conflicting roles can be experienced by mature students. These findings support Mallman and Lee's (2017) study that indicated how many younger mature students experience isolation from their peer group, yet desired academic based sociality with their younger student cohort. Participant 1's frustration from having a stressful family commitment that potentially limited her time for studying, also supported literature that has found mature students to have significant stress and conflict from overriding commitments impeding upon

their university degree (Mercer & Saunders, 2004). Furthermore, participant 3's feeling of guilt for giving their own study priority over helping their peers shows how this mature student takes on more of a teaching, mothering role within her sociality in university. Literature shows that providing this type of social support can be incredibly beneficial for undergraduate students who depend on good social supports to maintain morale and motivation to complete their degrees (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). However, it is not specifically associated with mature student experience within current literature and it more related to experiences between traditional students. The individual nature of participant stress and commitments is useful data for institutions to provide more individualised, appropriate support, beyond the over simplification of mature students experience that may not offer the appropriate services for everyone (Waller, 2005).

It can also be argued that the challenges and stress that come from having multiple roles is not restricted to mature students' experiences. Traditional aged students, such as young undergraduate parents or young undergraduate nurses working in full-time NHS placements alongside studying, also experience the stress that comes from competing multiple roles (Hwang, 2012; Mercer, Clay & Etheridge, 2016; Carpenter, Kaka, Tygret & Cathcart, 2017). Likewise, not all mature students experience multiple roles such as mature students who do not work or have children, partners, or elderly parents to consider throughout their studies (Fragoso et al., 2013). Therefore, personalised pathways of support for all students to prevent any additional needs and support being overlooked for both traditional and mature student groups would be beneficial.

There was no indication that participants experienced reduced confidence, or imposter syndrome in their photo narratives. There could be many reasons for this, such as photo elicitation not being a specifically intuitive method for participants to capture certain experiences, such as confidence or lack of it (Meo, 2010). Nonetheless, the absence of imposter syndrome narratives within this study indicates that this group of mature students experience more positive associations with their academic abilities (Aird, 2017). This could lead to better academic outcomes, less stress and prevent risk of dropping out of their university studies (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Understanding the mature students' experience of positive associations with themselves and their abilities can mean that more

positively engaged interventions could be used to enhance mature student and general student learning experiences.

Subsequently, there was no evidence of difficulties arising from the universities traditionally geared learning environments, as found in some of the literature (Bexley et al., 2013; O' Shea & Stone, 2014). Far from experiencing an alienating, difficult learning environment all participants illustrated motivation and studiousness through their narratives and photos of their studying environments. The second theme involving productive attitudes to study, supports existing literature that mature students are intrinsically motivated. In particular, participant 3's photo captured studying early in a coffee shop, illustrated how her early start and commute to university is utilized to do her university assignments, supporting existing literature indicating mature students' aptitude for high levels of commitment and intrinsic motivation in their undergraduate studies (Cassidy, 2012; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Equally as illustrative of mature student motivation and commitment was participant 4's photo which captured her lounge completely immersed in study materials and folders filled with hand written notes and ideas surrounding her studies. Capturing confidence in their learning was participant 1's photo of a cosy isolated study space where they arrived at the weekends and unsociable hours to study (Pearce, 2017). Furthermore, participant 3's photograph and narrative around how they use poor marks to improve their work and not catastrophise their experience, illustrates what is also found in literature that shows mature student's ability to learn from assessment feedback and supervise their own learning (Tett, Hounsell, Christie, Cree & McCune, 2012). These participants narratives on motivation, commitment and learning are important as it affects how likely they are to achieve their highest potential and complete their degrees with higher degree classifications. Furthermore, the narratives in this study outline the diverse expressions of motivation between each mature student and help in further understanding mature student learning experiences, beyond the impersonal learning theories found in the literature (Waller, 2006; Wyatt, 2011).

It is also important to note that many factors influence intrinsic motivation and that it is not to say intrinsic motivation is solely associated with mature students' experiences as it is also be found within traditional student populations, just to a typically lesser degree (Bye, Pushkar & Conway, 2007). Furthermore, intrinsic motivation is not strongly linked with dropout and so mature students who drop out are not necessarily low in intrinsic motivation,

as finances and life circumstances often are to blame for being unable to continue (McGivney, 2004). The level of commitment and motivation is therefore a very individual experience and is not something that should be generalised.

Interestingly, the third theme around valuing and prioritising wellbeing illustrated how participants captured their individual wellbeing practices. It seems that these mature students actively sought wellbeing resources and that wellbeing came from having another focus outside of university. This ranged between exercise, spirituality and wedding planning. Participant 2's use of yoga for her sanity and participant 4 and 5's use of cardio exercise outlined the physical nature of many student's wellbeing practices, where no current literature currently explores this particular area of mature students' experiences. However, general literature shows that regular exercise not only increases good physical health but also good mental health and general wellbeing outcomes (Deslandes, 2014; Mikkelsen, Stojanovska, Polenakovic, Bosevski & Apostolopoulos, 2017). This narrative is noteworthy as it could indicate a growing general awareness of the benefits of exercise and overall wellbeing within mature student populations, which means more mature students will benefit from exercise and achieve better wellbeing and outcomes. Furthermore, this theme showed an element of mature student agency that may increase retention and prevent drop outs. Further research into self-care habits and their origins would be helpful in understand where these practices come from and support further awareness sharing in this area. This knowledge could help universities to help support students with good advice about self-care habits and their benefits, and support the need for more research into the benefits of self-care.

Wellbeing practices were not only exercise related, where participant 3 used the planning of her wedding to bring her a sense of happiness and escape from the stresses of university life. Though not specifically related to mature student experiences in the literature, utilising resources is a well-known and widely used technique to ground and support people who are going through difficult times. The literature shows that using resources in our lives that bring us happiness and comfort can act as protective factors that supports resilience and therefore helps people to get through challenges and cope with extra stresses and even trauma (Apter, 2001). Therefore, taking into consideration the high stress levels that mature students' encounter in their multiple roles, helping mature students to utilise their own positive

resources for wellbeing is an important strategy in helping them to develop healthy coping techniques (He, Turnbull, Kirshbaum, Phillips & Klainin-Yobas, 2018).

The study did have some limitations to take into consideration, namely interview technique and skill were not that of a skilled and experienced qualitative researcher and could have prevented a richer narrative of each photograph (Landridge, 2007). Furthermore, collecting background information on previous educational experience and the exact ages of each participant before the interview would have benefited the research, as these factors appear to affect the experience of university for mature students and would have been beneficial to see if these issues supported the literature regarding age and educational history (Askham, 2008).

Understanding the experiences of mature students is important for institutions and society so that older minority students from all walks of life can be supported adequately through university despite significant challenges, and prevent dropout rates from increasing (Burton, Lloyd & Griffiths, 2011; Markle, 2015; Ayala, Ellis, Grudev & Cole, 2017). By using photo elicitation this study allowed participants the power to communicate their mature student experiences more freely, without as much researcher influence or bias (Harper, 2002; Hammarberg, Kirkman & de Lacey, 2016). Mature students were highly motivated and committed learners with many conflicting responsibilities outside of university, yet no evidence of low confidence or imposter syndrome as indicated in the literature was found to support this, indicating a more positive experience with their confidence and abilities. Furthermore, mature students valued wellbeing practices and resources to help them in their daily lives, indicating significant levels of self-esteem. Mature students appear to be more positively aligned with their abilities and wellbeing than current and previous literature has found. Based on the findings of this study, future research into mature student experience should use effective stress level measuring methods to investigate the stress and confidence levels of mature students. This would enable researchers to pinpoint an accurate measure of stress and confidence in mature students and allow for further funding to support positive mature students' experiences of managing multiple roles. Importantly, this would also help to prevent further drop outs from mature students who may benefit from extra support to continue their studies.

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