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Academic skills in higher education: Does age matter?

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Changes in the higher education sector over recent years have also led to changes in the type of students being taught; one of these being the increase in the number of mature students entering university. This means that educators have had to re-evaluate their approaches to teaching to cater for the increasingly diverse student body (Bowl, 2001; Lillis and Turner, 2001). The Dearing report highlighted that to assist in the integration of diverse students and to prepare graduates more fully for employment, key skills needed to be incorporated to all university courses to develop essential skills needed both on a degree course and in life outside university (NCIHE, 1997).

Much research has been conducted into the necessity and implementation of key academic skills and has found numerous approaches and opinions nationwide and institutional wide (Thomas, 1994; Leggett et al., 2004; Wingate, 2006). This research was part of a 2 year project into staff and student perceptions of the teaching of learning of academic skills in a diverse school in a north-western UK 'new' university. The aim was to identify issues within the school and to investigate differences between 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' student variables. This paper focuses on the similarities and differences between traditional aged students (18 to 21) and mature students (over 21 years old) and asks how different these two groups are with regards to key academic skills.

Online questionnaires were sent to all first year students in the school and once the exclusion criteria of part-time or withdrawn before the end of the course was applied the final sample group was 228 student (136 students aged 18 to 21 (younger) and 92 students aged 22 or over (mature)). Focus groups were then conducted to expand on the results.

25 academic skills were identified through research and were classified into eight subjects: IT, use of notes (Notes), Numeracy, personal and organisational (Personal), Reading, Reasoning, Researching and Writing (Tariq and Cochrane, 2003; Buckler et al., 2006; Washer, 2007). Students were asked to rate the importance of each skill, their perceived ability when starting the degree, support they have sought for these skills and which ones they would have liked further training on.

The mature students rated their skills significantly higher in Reading, Writing and Researching when starting their degree and although they rated their abilities higher for all other subjects it was not significantly higher. They also rated all skills as more important for their degree than the younger ones, significantly so for Reading, Writing, Researching and Reasoning. Mature student often use much deeper approaches to studying than younger students (Sadler-Smith, 1996, Zeegers, 2004) and therefore due to previous life and educational experiences they have a better understanding of academic skills importance and demands at university (Lizzio and Wilson, 2004; Buckler et al., 2006; Yorke and Longden, 2007). Younger students, although often recently having come straight from college, often use a more surface approach to learning and can be more concerned with passing their modules rather than truly understanding the content (Archer et al., 1999).

Mature students required significantly more training in Personal and Reading and slightly more for all others except Research however, the percentages for further training required for both groups were very similar, ranged between 38 – 57% for younger students and between 37 – 58% for mature. It would be expected that there would be a wider difference between the two groups however alarmingly, the highest skills for which more training was required by both groups was Writing. The students identified that this was because writing at university level is very different from the writing required for college and at home; the subject-specific terminologies required and the use of formal academic language and referencing.

Younger students sought slightly higher more support for all subjects except Notes where they were significantly higher. The percentage of younger seeking support ranged from 52 – 66% for all skills except Reasoning which was considerably lower at 38%. Mature ranged from 43 – 62% for all skills except Reasoning which was also considerably lower at 34% and the highest area for support was Research skills. These results were surprising and indicated that contrary to previous beliefs it is the younger students who are either less confident or are encountering more problems with academic skills than mature students. Some claimed that once they realised that requirements were so different at university from college (Lowe and Cooke, 2003), they sought help to avoid failure and disappointing their families. Some mature students stated that they were not as confident as the younger students and therefore found it difficult to ask for help due to concerns about admitting they have problems (Macdonald and Stratta, 2001; Rogers, 2007).

This research found that there are significant differences between mature and traditional-aged student in this school however, they experience similar issues with confidence in their skills. Changes in all areas of education have meant that whether a student has come straight from college to university or has returned to education as a mature student, many require assistance with academic skills (Keane, 2006; Wingate, 2006). Mature students often have a more suitable approach to studying than younger students and therefore should not always be seen as the weaker student (McCarey et al., 2007). Perhaps it is time to rethink the traditional / non-traditional divide between students in favour of a broader view that would not consider students based on their age or previous educational experiences. To provide the future graduate workforce advocated in the Dearing report, academic skills need to be taught and developed for all students regardless of background, age or previous qualifications.

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