

Mature Women Students and the Pursuit of Higher Education: An Examination of the Role of the Ban Righ Centre at Queen's University

Queens University: A Case Study

The student population at Queen's University continues to grow and as of November 2008, 19,982 students were enrolled at the University. Out of the total student population, 2509 (or 12.6%) can be classified as mature students according to the age parameters set for the study. Of this mature student group, the majority of students are men (1,347 or 54%) while women make up the remaining 46% (1,162 students). National and provincial statistics show an overall increase in the number of mature women students enrolling in university. At Queen's University, a decline in the number of mature women undergraduate students and an increase in the number of mature women graduate students are evident (based on the project definition). These trends suggest that supporting undergraduate mature women students is essential to attracting and retaining them. It also suggests that the Ban Righ Centre is likely to experience increasing demand for its support services among mature women graduate students.

Using Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario as a case study, this research project offers a multi-scalar approach to understanding the experiences of mature women students. Since Queen's University is home to a unique support centre for mature students—the Ban Righ Centre—the study also examines the ways in which this type university support mechanism influences the experiences of mature women students.

The project has three objectives:

- 1) To understand the experiences of mature women students at Queen's University;
- 2) To determine what role the Ban Righ Centre plays in the social and academic experiences of mature students;
- 3) To determine areas for improvement in meeting the needs of mature students at Queen's University.

Barriers Faced by Mature Women Students

Analysis of the qualitative data identified that the barriers experienced by mature women students at Queen's University can be divided into five broad themes.

(1) Financial constraints

Poverty is a huge problem for women when they are going to school... -Faculty Participant

The financial challenges faced by the mature women students at Queen's University come in a number of forms and for a variety of reasons. These challenges are also experienced to different degrees throughout the various stages of pursuing higher education; from making that first step and deciding to go back to school, attending courses, and attempting to finish their degree.

(2) Self-confidence

I think that for women ... if they are coming back for their undergraduate [degree] chances are that they haven't been back since high school. They have no idea- their fear is that they can't do it and that their brains don't work... -Faculty Participant

Feelings of apprehension and self-doubt were two prominent factors influencing the decisions of mature women students to consider pursuing a university degree. Although many of the women who participated in the project had dreamed early on in their lives that they might eventually attend university, they experienced high levels of self-doubt regarding their ability to participate in and contribute to the classroom and university communities.

(3) Balancing multiple roles

They [younger students] are going back to residence and you're going home to clean the house or do the laundry or look after the kids... -Mature Woman Student

For many mature women students their role as a student is added to a collection of other roles they already perform in their everyday lives. Often, mature women students are mothers, caregivers, partners, employees, and volunteers, among various other roles. Not only do the demands of multiple roles impact the availability of time to pursue education, but there are significant levels of stress and strain that can result from trying to perform multiple roles if women do not receive adequate support.

(4) Isolation

The university is not a place [designed] for women. It's certainly geared towards teenagers and certainly towards young people...there is not a lot of social connection [for older students]—people can be very lonely. – Faculty Participant

The isolation experienced by the mature students in our research took a variety of forms. Some participants noted feelings of isolation that they did not fit into the university population like other students (because of age, responsibilities, international status, ethnocultural grouping, etc.), and that they were alone because others did not understand the challenges they were experiencing. Participants felt the lack of interaction and connection with colleagues acutely and there were also discussions around how a lack of interaction with other students made it difficult for mature women students to share information.

(5) Discrimination

"I don't have the same barriers as you may [a younger student], but I still do have barriers right. I am still old enough to be most of my peers grandmothers....or well at least elderly mother. – Mature Woman Student

Several mature women participants reported experiencing discrimination of various kinds while attending university. In many cases, participants perceived this discrimination to be on the basis of their status as a mature female student (i.e. age and gender), though some participants also discussed discrimination on the basis of ethnocultural identity and ability/disability.

The Supporting Role of the Ban Righ Centre

Described by some students, staff, and faculty as a place of encounters (BRC website), the Ban Righ Centre becomes, for many mature women students, the focal point for formal and informal support and networking on campus. During the course of this investigation, a resounding consensus among participants was identified that along with the more formal aspects of BRC programming, it is the staff of the Ban Righ Centre who play a crucial role in the successful functioning of the centre. A large number of participants commented on how important it had been (and in many cases, continued to be) for them to be treated with kindness, compassion, and respect. In the words of two participants:

The people here get it... they understand...they're good at problem solving and encouragement.... I think that you really need that [when] you are already feeling isolated and alone because you are a mature student.... It's nice to come to a place where the staff treat you as if you are a friend. –Mature Woman Student

[It's] vital... it helps you balance life and school. At a lot of levels it's sort of that point in the middle that keeps it from falling apart. –Mature Woman Student

Report Recommendations

The analysis of focus group and interview results, as well as our statistical review of mature students at Queen's University, affords several recommendations for facilitating mature student experiences. These recommendations touch not only the way in which the university itself is experienced on a daily basis, but also the ways in which mature women students are acknowledged within the university setting.

- (1) To re-conceptualize who is defined as a "mature student" at Queen's University to include age parameters.
- (2) To create additional, targeted funding opportunities for mature students at the University.
- (3) To offer faculty and teaching assistants training for working with mature students within their classes.
- (4) Finding creative ways to enhance the participation of mature students within the university, as well as creative ways to incorporate the voices of mature students (for example on student, departmental, or university committees).
- (5) To maintain and enhance the physical space and resources of the Ban Righ Centre, a center which is paramount to the continued success of many mature women students at Queen's.
- (6) To facilitate early contact with new mature students by providing them with information on the services and programs that may benefit them and assist them in their university journey.
- (7) To promote mature student networking, including familiarity with university resources as well as interaction with other mature students.
- (8) To develop outreach opportunities that include not only Queen's University, but also universities across Canada/North America to promote both the services of the Ban Righ Centre at Queen's, as well as the idea of university support mechanisms designed with mature student needs in mind.

