

# Mature Student Experience Survey: Summary Report

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July, 2013

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## **Background**

A research partnership based on shared research interests was formed in 2009 between the Atkinson Centre for Mature and Part-time Students at York University and the Centre for Families, Work and Well-Being at the University of Guelph. We shared the concern that surveys used for populations of traditional students (typically 18-24 year olds) were not necessarily relevant to assess mature students' (25 years and older) experiences. This concern was based on the results of a large scale health survey of York University students conducted during the spring semester of 2009 (National College Health Survey) and other anecdotal evidence.

The Mature Student Experience Survey (MSES) was the first project developed for the research collaboration. The MSES is a longitudinal study of mature students that includes a focus on mature student health, motivations for attending post-secondary studies, and the mature student experience. Following ethics review and approval, the three-year study launched as a pilot in spring 2010 with a formal launch in fall 2010. Data collection for the study occurred each fall and winter semester for a total of six phases of data collection: Fall 2010, Winter 2011, Fall 2011, Winter 2012, Fall 2012, and Winter 2013. Data were collected using an online survey consisting of a mix of open- and closed-ended questions.

The population of interest for the survey was undergraduate university students aged 25 or older. Universities participating in the study included York University, the University of Guelph, Ryerson University (beginning Fall 2011), and the University of Waterloo (beginning Fall 2011). Recruitment occurred by email with the cooperation of the Registrar's office at each institution. Recognizing that participants could graduate or withdraw from studies over the course of the project, new recruitment occurred each fall semester both to offset the expected attrition and capture incoming mature students.

### Research Team:

- Dr. Tricia van Rhijn, Project Co-ordinator & Principal Investigator, University of Guelph
- Brian Poser, Co-Investigator, York University
- Dr. Donna S. Lero, Co-Investigator, University of Guelph
- Dr. Norma Sue Fisher-Stitt, Co-Investigator, York University

The remainder of this report includes an overview of the Mature Student Experience Survey work to date and plans for ongoing work.

**Mature Student Population and Participants**

Institutional data provided by the Registrars at the participating institutions demonstrated that mature students represent a significant minority population at these institutions; however, there is a great deal of variation in the proportion of mature students at each university ranging from 2.2 to 28.3% of the undergraduate population in the fall semester of 2011 (Table 1).

Table 1. *Mature Students (25 years & older) in Undergraduate Study by Institution – Fall 2011 Enrolment*

Institution	Total enrolment <sup>a</sup>	Number of mature students <sup>b</sup>	% Mature students	% Female mature students	% Full-time mature students
Ryerson University	28 021	7 920	28.3	60.4	46.6
University of Guelph	20 104	450	2.2	48.0	60.0
University of Waterloo <sup>c</sup>	27 862	1 759	6.3	---	---
York University	46 953	9 595	20.4	56.6	53.6

<sup>a</sup>Enrolment data from Fall 2011 published Common University Data Ontario (CUDO) for each institution.

<sup>b</sup>Total mature student enrolment and gender/full-time data provided by Registrars at each institution.

<sup>c</sup>Data not available for breakdown of female and full-time study for this institution.

A total of 2944 mature students participated in the study over the three year period (Table 2). Institutional enrolment of the participants in the Mature Student Experience Survey was as follows: Ryerson University (*n* = 940, 31.9%), University of Guelph (*n* = 125, 4.2%), University of Waterloo (*n* = 323, 11.0%), York University (*n* = 1525, 51.8%), and all other universities (*n* = 31, 1.1%). Participants were an average of 36.4 years of age (range: 22 – 80) and 29.5% had children who resided with them (Table 2). Participants were also primarily female (69.5%), single (53.2%), and born in Canada (61.2%). The men and women who participated were not significantly different in terms of their age; however, compared to men, women were significantly more likely to have a partner (i.e., married or common-law), have children living with them, and to be born in Canada.

Table 2. *Sample Characteristics*

	Total			Men			Women		
	<i>n</i>	Mean/ %	SD	<i>n</i>	Mean/ %	SD	<i>n</i>	Mean/ %	SD
Age	2944	36.4	9.7	857	36.2	9.8	2045	36.4	9.6
Partnered	1325	46.8		369	44.4		1031	52.0	*
Parent	864	29.5		191	22.3		671	32.8	***
Born in Canada	1802	61.2		489	57.1		1296	63.5	***

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Note. Significance tests conducted as follows: Independent samples t-tests used for continuous variables and Pearson chi-square difference tests used for categorical variables.

Among those mature students who participated in more than one phase of the study (*N* = 1334), 91.8% (*n* = 1224) reported no change in their partner status. Of those who experienced a change in partner status, 55.5% (*n*

= 61) experienced the creation of a relationship (e.g., single to common-law, common-law to married, single to married) and 44.5% ( $n = 49$ ) experienced the dissolution of a relationship (e.g., married to separated, separated to divorced, common-law to separated or single).

Over the course of the project, a majority of the mature students were enrolled in full-time study (60% or greater course load), ranging from 55.1% to 63.5% of participants. Enrolment status was quite stable for the majority of participants who completed more than one phase of the study, with 86% reporting no change in their enrolment status over time (54.0% in full-time study; 34.0% in part-time study). The remaining participants did alter their enrolment status over the course of the study with 3.2% moving from full-time to part-time, 2.2% moving from part-time to full-time, and 1.1% reporting more variability (e.g., full-time to part-time to full-time or part-time to full-time to part-time).

### **Analytical Work and Selected Findings**

The MSES includes a longitudinal component that will be used to evaluate the ongoing state of mature students' health (with health being broadly defined to include physical, emotional, and psychological well-being) and to predict academic and other outcomes (e.g., academic success and retention, career trajectories, and other impacts individually and in the family). In addition, each year of the study includes a cross-sectional component investigating specific areas of interest. Although analytical work is ongoing and will be for some time<sup>1</sup>, details of the cross-sectional components and selected findings from the three years of the project are included below.

#### **Year 1 (2010-2011): Mature Student Health**

The initial focus on students' health and their use of campus resources arose out of the mutual interest of the research team and also in the context of other health-related studies undertaken at York University (e.g., the NCHA survey conducted by Health Education and Promotion) that, while inclusive of mature students, did not include questions that were particularly relevant to them.

Tricia van Rhijn and Brian Poser presented findings from year one of the study at the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS) 2011 annual conference<sup>2</sup>. Key findings included that physical health, nutrition, sleep and stress were negatively impacted by participation in school (with heavier impacts on women), but that overall sense of well-being was positively impacted. It appears from the data that, while students felt they had less physical activity, less sleep, and higher levels of stress, they felt positive knowing that they are actively pursuing career-related or personal fulfillment-related goals. An important secondary finding was that few mature students used – or for that matter were aware of—the wealth of campus supports and community resources available to them to assist them in remaining healthy and to support their academic progress.

#### **Year 2 (2011-2012): The Mature Student Experience**

The second year of the survey focused on the mature student experience. This focus arose out of recognition that the primary focus of existing research has been on academic outcomes for mature students (i.e., academic performance and course/program completion). We recognized that an understanding of mature students'

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<sup>1</sup> We are willing to conduct additional analyses pertaining to institution-specific data upon request.

<sup>2</sup> Copies of all conference presentations are available upon request.

experiences beyond the school context was required to better understand their experiences and behavioural choices as students.

For this second year of data collection (fall 2011 and winter 2012), we emphasized the mature student experience with a series of new questions. Questions pertained to concepts such as motivation to attend university, self-efficacy beliefs about school and family, how mature students defined success, and strategies for being successful.

Tricia van Rhijn presented findings from year two of the study at Congress 2012 to the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education. She reported her early findings regarding the multi-dimensional motivators for student participation in post-secondary education. Key findings included that mature students tend to identify self-determined motivators for participation in university. These findings depart from earlier published work on the motivations of traditional students who, in general, are more extrinsically motivated. The findings support the notion that mature students work with a future focus towards improved possible selves, particularly in terms of educational attainment (degree, certificate, etc.) and occupation (e.g., jobs requiring specific training).

The findings have important implications for our programming for this population. Specifically, Tricia points to a paradox noted in the literature: that while mature students' academic performance is typically higher than that of traditional students, the retention of mature students is markedly lower than for traditional students. The paradox suggests that it is factors outside the university environment that have the biggest impact on students' persistence rates. These data can provide a better understanding of the motivations of mature learners attending university and thus support more effective interventions.

### **Year 3 (2012-2013): Partner Relationships**

The third year of the survey added an area of inquiry exploring partner relationships. This was an emergent theme in the research that suggested both the experience of strain on partner relationships when attending school along with partners being identified as an important source of support that contributed to mature students' ability to be successful at school and in their lives. Other areas of investigation included choices regarding course scheduling, social exclusion, and experiences in multiple roles, specifically the experience of school-family conflict and enrichment.

In June 2013, Tricia van Rhijn presented findings from the project at two conferences: Congress 2013 to the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) and the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS). To CASAE, she reported findings with regard to the influence of self-efficacy beliefs for student parents attending university. Findings support the hypothesis that student parents' self-efficacy beliefs influence their perceptions of satisfaction. In particular, academic self-efficacy beliefs impact school satisfaction and parental self-efficacy beliefs impact family satisfaction. These findings may shed some light on the higher attrition rates found among student parents and mature students (compared to traditional students). Beginning post-secondary study after an extended period of absence from the formal school environment may negatively impact student parents' self-efficacy beliefs with regards to their capacity to do well in school. If that is true, student parents might benefit from institutional support in upgrading their skills and navigating the post-secondary environment in order to reduce attrition.

To CACUSS, Tricia presented findings regarding challenges to success from the perspectives of mature students. The objective of this study was to identify ways to improve services and resources for mature students in order to reduce attrition rates and improve individual and family well-being while attending school. Key findings include the identification of unmet needs for mature students in three key areas: social exclusion, difficulty managing multiple roles, and challenges to access (including financial support, resources and on-campus supports, and class scheduling issues). This presentation utilized direct quotations from the mature student participants to illustrate the dominant themes. We feel that this was an innovative approach as mature students' voices are often absent from discussions of university access and success. During the presentation recommendations were made to support the participation and persistence of undergraduate mature students focusing on how student services, institutional resources, and researchers can move forward to better meet the perceived needs of mature students.

### **Future Directions**

Future directions for the research partnership include conducting longitudinal analyses to determine the influence of a number of key variables on academic and other outcome measures. The analyses conducted will inform the development of recommendations for policy and programming supports for mature students.

In addition, the work started in Year 3 exploring partner and intimate relationships will continue. Given evidence demonstrating the benefits of social support for mature students, particularly from spouses and partners, investigation of this important relationship is warranted. Understanding these influences will help to improve support programs on campuses to better prepare mature students for study with the purpose of increasing completion rates.

The project will proceed in order to extend the survey work completed in the MSES with follow-up interviews. Over 300 participants from the third year of the MSES volunteered to participate in this follow up, mixed methods study. The primary objective of the research is to understand how sexual and relationship satisfaction are impacted when one individual in a romantic partnership attends university and its impact on academic success. This knowledge will help to clarify some of the relationship struggles that are loosely defined in the literature. The secondary objective is to better understand how differences in mature students' sexual orientation are a variable in academic success. This knowledge will help determine how inclusive and safe programs are for mature students with lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual orientations. The final objective is to develop resources for institutions and for individuals to access that support academic persistence and program completion without damaging partner relations.

Finally, several manuscripts are currently in preparation and expected to be submitted to peer-reviewed journals by the end of August based on the work that has been done to date. The three manuscripts are titled:

1. Why go back to school? Investigating the motivation of student parents to attend university
2. The influence of self-efficacy beliefs for student parents attending university
3. Challenges to success from the perspective of undergraduate mature students

**Thanks to all of the people who contributed to this project over the past 3 years:**

*Co-investigators who have moved on from the project:*

Anju Odam, former Coordinator, Health Education & Promotion, York University

Dr. Trudy Smit Quosai, former Research Associate, Centre for Families, Work & Well-Being, University of Guelph

*Collaborators:*

Dr. Rachel Langford, Director, School of Early Childhood Studies, Ryerson University

Dr. Martin Cooke, Collaborator, University of Waterloo

*Institutional Supporters:*

Joanne Duklas, Registrar's Office, York University

Stan Taman, Registrar's Office, York University

Brian Pettigrew, Assistant Vice President (Institutional Research and Planning) & Registrar, University of Guelph

Deb Kron, Coordinator, Resource Planning and Analysis, University of Guelph

Dr. Paul Stenton, Vice-Provost, University Planning, Ryerson University

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Diane Ossher, Director, Business Systems – Office of the Registrar, Ryerson University

Scott Bailie, Office of the Registrar, Ryerson University

Ken Lavigne, Registrar, University of Waterloo

Catherine Newell Kelly, Director, Centre for Extended Learning, University of Waterloo

Susan Elizabeth Johnston, Centre for Extended Learning, University of Waterloo

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Sonya Strohm (Spring/Summer 2013)

Taniesha Burke (Spring/Summer 2013)

*Undergraduate Research Assistants:*

Sarah Sandham (Winter 2011)

Natalie Shubrook (Winter 2011)

Katie Bogaert (Winter & Spring/Summer 2011)

Monica Dass (Winter & Spring/Summer 2011)

Claudia Havoic (Winter 2012)

Nicole Hodgson (Winter 2012)

Katelyn Bridge (Fall 2012, Winter & Spring/Summer 2013)

Last, but not least, we thank the mature student participants who took time out of their already busy lives to fill out our (lengthy!) surveys and share insight into their experiences!