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# The effects of increasing numbers of mature students on the pedagogical practices of lecturers in the institutes of technology

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This article is concerned with the effects that growing numbers of mature students have on the pedagogical practices of lecturing staff in the Institutes of Technology in Ireland. It is predicted by the Commission on the Points System and Mature Students that mature student enrolment may reach 15% by 2006, increasing to 25% by 2015. Lecturers in the institutes have primarily designed courses, employed teaching approaches, strategies and methods of assessment for a student who is 18 years of age and has just completed the Leaving Certificate. Mature students do not fall within these parameters, and have approaches to learning and pedagogical needs that are quite distinct from the mainstream student. It is important that the needs of this cohort of students are recognised. A small survey of lecturers from various Institutes of Technology, using semi-structured interviews, was undertaken to ascertain the level of understanding and insight they have towards mature students and how their pedagogical approach may have been extended to include both the mature and mainstream students within the learning environment. While respondents revealed a high level of awareness towards the needs of adult learners, reflecting many of the theories and approaches expounded by educational theorists, it was found that incorporating growing numbers of mature students into mainstream classes presents many unprecedented challenges for which little or no provision has been made in terms of staff development.

## Introduction

Offsetting the demographic decline requires... a new emphasis on adult learners ... predictions suggest that it will affect the Institutes of Technology more than the University sector... the promotion of wider participation and access can be a major factor in addressing skill needs and offsetting school leaver decline.  
(O’Cathain, 2002, 4–5)

Adult learners have traditionally been under-represented in Irish colleges and universities. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Education (OECD) Policy Analysis (1997) revealed that only 21% of Irish adults have completed third-level education, ranking Ireland 17th out of 28 countries

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surveyed. The analysis also revealed that 'just over nineteen percent of new entrants to degree level programmes in all OECD countries in 1995 were aged twenty-six or over, compared to the Irish figure of just two point one percent.' With regard to certificate and diploma level programmes, the OECD average was almost 37% compared to an Irish figure of just 1% (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p.138).

Costello (2002) outlines how the Irish tertiary education is based upon a binary system of provision encompassing the university sector and the Institutes of Technology. The Higher Education Authority acts as the funding mechanism for the university sector, while the Department of Education funds the Institutes of Technology directly. The institutes' principle function is 'to provide vocational and technical education and training for the economic, technological, scientific, commercial, industrial, social and cultural development of the State' (The Regional Technical College Act 1991). Traditionally, the sector has a limited level of degree provision, with its main focus being at non-degree level. A ladder of progression, which O'Riordan (1999) believes is the only working system for easing the points race, is offered where the student can advance from the certificate to diploma, degree and then to postgraduate level.

The Institutes of Technology currently make up a total of 13 colleges and account for just under 40% of student enrolment with the socio-economic backgrounds of students, according to (Clancy 2001), showing a contrast with the universities, which reveal Higher Professional intake at 40.9% and Unskilled at 40.2%. The institutes' student figures are Higher Professional 11.7% and Unskilled 8%. Over 90% of students in the Institutes of Technology in 1998 were aged 17 to 19, almost 6% were aged 20 to 22, whereas only 3.7% were over 23 years of age. Between 1992 and 1998 there was only a slight increase in the percentage of mature students (from 2.5% to 4.5%). The age profile of full-time students attending the Institutes of Technology is, therefore, predominantly in the 17–19 age group. In recent times, various efforts have been made to address this age imbalance. The Commission on the Points System and Mature Students stated that by 2006, third-level institutions should set aside a quota of 15% for mature students, which should rise to 25% by 2015. Skilbeck (2000) and Department of Education and Science (2001) argue, however, that a decline in birth rate has caused some alarm in third-level colleges and that the Institutes of Technology may see a reduction in their traditional cohort by one-third over the next decade. It is believed, therefore, that this unprecedented increase in mature students may simply be an attempt to offset the fall in demographics and achieve goals of national development and renewal.

Dewey (1916) stated that progressive education should take part in correcting unfair privilege, rather than perpetuating it. Almost a century later, Lynch (1997) and McMahan (2000) stress this point in relation to mature students, claiming that increased access should ensure social justice and democracy and be considered a right, not a privilege. Thorn (2001) supports this by claiming that this right should spring from increased access for under-represented groups, and not merely as a device to overcome the decreasing numbers of traditional students. An approach

where the criterion for success is solely quantifiable can blunt the true nature of access initiatives:

Access...[and]...equity...refer to...policies and procedures for enabling and encouraging groups at present under-represented as students...to gain access to and demonstrate successful performance in higher education...it is understood to encompass not only entry to higher education, but also retention and successful completion

(Department of Education and Science, 2001, p. 14)

It appears that there is a policy in place that sets aside a quota for the numbers of mature students who will be populating the lecture halls and classrooms of the institutes and universities in the country, yet there do not seem to be practical pedagogical and support measures in place where colleges can ensure successful performance, retention and completion.

There is also the implicit danger that if mature students are perceived as objects of governmental policies, then the central issue of their pedagogical experiences in colleges may not be given due consideration. If the panacea for the fall in demographics is to be found in the initiatives to combat social exclusion and disadvantage, then an unfortunate mismatch is occurring. This can have implications not only for general institute strategy, but may also filter down to the classroom where this new cohort of students, bringing with them their own particular needs, will be seen merely as replacing what went before. It can be stated that all students in tertiary education will have a variety of needs, regardless of age. However, some research has shown that mature students, for a variety of reasons, including the fact that, as a body, they are typically more diverse than 18 to 22 year old students, may face particular academic and personal challenges (e.g. McGivney, 1990; Tuijnman & van der Kamp, 1992; Squires, 1994; Crogan, 1995; Rogers, 1997; Woodbyrne & Young 1998; McNamara *et al.*, 2001). These include poor coping skills, unrecognised learning difficulties, financial problems, difficulty with juggling time commitments and less confidence in their ability to learn *vis-à-vis* mainstream students. Snyder and Swann (1978) believe that adult learners can return to education with a fixed notion of what learning is, what education is, what intelligence is and where they rate themselves on this elusive ladder. Age can become a divisive factor in many ways. Lynch (1997) and Uí Casaide (1997) suggest that mature students can experience a sense of alienation, of being an outsider and not 'owning' higher education, which they can perceive as being the preserve of the young. As the student progresses in his/her studies s/he may also experience a distancing from significant others who do not share the same study experience. Sutherland (1999) and Wlodkowski (1999) also state that mature students may suffer acutely from exam pressure. The formal examination system is narrowly perceived 'by many academics as a series of hurdles which eliminate weaker students' (Toohey, 1999, p.186) and in the case of mature students may increase the likelihood of 'second chance failure' (Fleming, 1997, cited in Department of Education and Science, 1998, p. 99). Skilbeck (2001) argues that the accreditation process

to date has focused on competition, individualism and on a limited range of intelligence.

Boon (1980), Brookfield (1986), Woodbyrne and Young (1998), and Brady (2001) state, however, that mature students can be highly motivated, have high completion rates, tend to have a positive influence on a course and have a higher tutorial contribution. Knowles (1994), Ramsden (1992), Jarvis (1996), Rogers (1996), Brookfield (1995) and Wlodkowski (1999) claim that adults can be experientially rich learners with effective powers of deduction and abstraction, have preferred paths of perceiving, judging, remembering and problem solving and will often take a deep approach to learning. Studies have shown that 'non-completion in adult students is normally due to personal or financial factors rather than academic failure' (Lucas & Ward, 1995 cited in Richardson & King, 1998, p. 16). Woodley (1984) undertook a study of all universities in the United Kingdom and found that mature students were as successful as younger students. Research on the progression of former Foundation students in the University of Ulster in 1993 revealed that 'adult students with previous restricted or truncated educational histories can become competent and successful higher education students' (O'Fathaigh, 1995, p. 58).

The *Report of the Action Group on Access to Third Level Education* (Department of Education and Science, 2001, p. 13) states that 'education makes a fundamentally important contribution to the quality and well-being of society.' O'Riordan (1999) points out, however, that it can be a highly subsidised engine of social inequality. The figures outlined previously show that full-time third-level education is, in many ways, the preserve of a student who comes from a particular socio-economic background and who has a modal age of 18 years. Jordan (1997) and IBEC (2001) believe that challenges arise for adult learners as the administration, resource allocation and most importantly the teaching and delivery in Irish tertiary education has primarily focused on younger students. Knowles (1994), Rogers (1996), Young (2000) and McNamara *et al.* (2001) support this by arguing that the education of adults can often challenge the limits of standardisation and conventional education, and that colleges need to adapt to the needs of adult learners, rather than allow a situation to develop where adults have to adapt to a system that is primarily designed for people of school-leaving age.

While some institutes offer good facilities, student supports and state of the art technology, Jarvis (1996) stresses, however, that *teaching* lies at the heart of the educational process and many of the positive impacts of these peripheral supports can be greatly reduced if the mature student's pedagogical experience is not properly considered. 'Almost everything in a [college] depends on the inner motivation of the teachers—their intellectual involvement with the subjects, their professional commitment to the role of the teacher, their love of student, and of learning' (Trow, 1989, p. 86). This is especially true when teaching mature students. *The Green Paper on Adult Education* (Department of Education and Science, 1998) and McNamara *et al.* (2001) state that it is the learner, and not the tutor, who is at the centre of the

learning process and much of the success of students centres upon the ability of staff to recognise the needs of the learner. As outlined previously, the teaching strategies, approaches and methods of assessment in third level colleges have, however, traditionally focused on the 18-year-old student. Lecturers, therefore, are now being faced with a situation where they are dealing not only with the traditional post-Leaving Certificate students, who can be an extremely disparate group, but also increasing numbers of mature students, who are bringing with them their own distinct and diverse learning needs.

The *White Paper on Adult Education* (Department of Education and Science, 2000) maintains, however, that many tutors who teach mature students are recruited on the basis of a business, trade or second-level teaching qualification and lack expertise in the delivery of programmes to mature students. This is supported by Bassett *et al.* (1989), Wlodkowski (1999), McNamara *et al.* (2001), and Brady (2001), who argue that little or no progress has been made in the development of qualifications in this field. In fact, 'adult education may be viewed as a semi-profession in the very early stages of professionalisation' (Jarvis, 1996, p. 187). The Qualifications Act (1999) stresses that the theory and practice of teaching and learning will grow in importance in the future, which reflects McNamara *et al.* (2001), whose study revealed that over 90% of Adult Education coordinators expressed a need for a Higher Diploma in Further Education and Training.

... [Tutors] should be trained in appropriate teaching methods to encompass the wide range of learners... and expand the range of delivery modes and adopt more adult-friendly pedagogies... if higher education colleges are to both attract and retain adult students who traditionally have been excluded there should be cultural change, flexibility... a more supportive, less competitive and more relevant environment. (King, *et al.*, 2002, p. 59; Thorn, 2001, p.10; Department of Education and Science, 2001, pp. 141, 200)

## Methodology

The research strategy for this qualitative research study involved interviews. The primary method chosen was the semi-structured interview, which took place between October and December 2002. The duration of interviews was between 28 and 45 minutes. Analysis took the form of open and axial coding, which is informed by Grounded Theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). The participants were ten lecturers, chosen on the basis of purposive sampling, from various Institutes of Technology, who are wide-ranging in terms of age, discipline, subject area and years of experience. The interviews were recorded using an audio tape recorder and all tapes were transcribed. Each of the respondent's names was coded using fictitious initials. In order to gain a greater understanding of the research questions, several focus groups of mature students and lecturers were also conducted prior to the main interviews.

## Results

### *Levels of understanding and insight of lecturers towards the pedagogical needs of mature students*

Respondents stated that while mainstream students will often approach third-level college as the next educational step in their lives, mature students have made a deliberate decision to alter their lives personally, socially and financially. They also stressed the importance of being aware that the transition from the home or workplace to returning to a course of study, which can sometimes be quite rigorous, can often be quite difficult and challenging. Mature students can be quite concerned about getting value for their time and financial investment in education. It was also believed that the tutor should assume more of a facilitation role and that there should also be some type of formative evaluative procedure. Links could also be developed with previous educational centres or other outside bodies that the adult may have attended:

Staff should encourage and reassure mature students something that you may not bother with the eighteen year—they have just come through the Leaving Certificate. (DF:12)

There is always a sense of pressure and a sense of challenge people holding down ordinary jobs are not used to being constantly under pressure. (DF:12)

... their time is precious... they want value for money. (KM:14)

They will grow in confidence when they... see you as a facilitator, rather than the traditional view. (BD:8)

There was also agreement that while great determination is required by mature students to return to education, they can also, however, suffer from a lack of confidence, which can manifest itself in many ways:

The lack of confidence can hold them back. (GI:4)

We need to help them get over the initial culture shock... we need to bridge this confidence gap... if they can get over the first few months they tend to perform proportionally well. (DF:12,6)

They can be dominant in class because they feel they have to establish why they are there. It is a defense mechanism on their part. (G1:11)

It is also interesting to note that respondents believed that the age of both the adult learner and the tutor can sometimes act as a constraining factor in the learning environment:

Mature students tend to do better in an environment where they are old enough to take a paternal attitude or in a group with other mature students... it is difficult for people in their late twenties or early thirties. (DF:3)

... it is absolutely difficult for a younger lecturer... you get many different types of characters and many complex individuals... the young lecturer is just out of

college...and there could be a little resentment there [by the mature student]. (KM:13,14,11)

There was, however, unanimous agreement that adult students delivered benefits both professionally and personally:

These people are wonderful people who come into our kinds of places, at this stage of their life and sit in classrooms and participate. They have great gumption to even be here. (HJ:11)

Mature students with learning problems will take up whatever support you are putting on for them whereas standard students...do not like the remedial baggage that goes with it. (TU:1)

They have a stabilising effect on the class... a learning pattern that could be adopted by the eighteen year olds (BD:19)

They are now aspiring to a whole new life... you are making a difference in a very real and immediate way. (DF: 15)

### *Prior experience*

Respondents believed that the mature student's prior knowledge and experience can affect the learning process. This can include the group dynamic between the mature and the mainstream student, the mature student's difficulty in applying practice to theory, their emotional investment in knowledge and negative transfer learning:

If they have more practical experience—they could monopolise... they may intimidate the younger ones. (KM:4)

The way maths was taught 30 years ago was very different in teaching methodologies as well as content. It would have been better if they had not come across maths at all because then you would be starting off with a clean slate, setting up a structure or a system to learn something that was not contradicting something else. In maths you have to unlearn stuff before you can teach them stuff. (TU:3)

The mature student has difficulty in learning the principle after they have learned about the practical aspects. This is a learning curve for them. (GI:10)

...some are open to learning... others are locked into a system of thinking... It is interesting the way they are deflecting that. They are saying the language is too complicated. They are saying anything to avoid dealing with it. (TU:3)

The conflict with previous experience can be found not only with subject matter but also in the teaching approach:

The mature student could have learned a language using didactic methods, whereas many eighteen year olds may have been used to the Communicative approach. (BD:21)

One respondent, who teaches a Humanities subject, also stressed the importance of having worked examples and discussion, an approach which draws from constructivism, problem solving and other cognitive approaches to teaching and learning:



...you have to look for a metaphor that they can relate to, because they are not tuned into the distillation process of taking a concept and being able to build on it. (LN:12)

On occasion, an adult student may have a greater knowledge of a subject area than the tutor. Respondents perceived this as being both an enabling and a constraining force:

I have learned a lot from mature students... It is important to openly acknowledge this knowledge—quite often this is what they are looking for... you cannot do a lot to increase that knowledge, but you can increase their confidence... you can help them to structure that knowledge into the academic area (GI:16,17)

To a certain extent they play a game of hunt the lecturer. They'll hunt you in a pack. They are waiting to see if your knowledge is running out. (LN:24)

Mature students will have a wealth of experience... you have to face that reality. (HJ:12)

### *Approaches to learning*

Richardson and King (1998) outline that societal influences, stereotypes and expectations can play a part in the often negative perception of the intellectual abilities of the mature student and encourage ageist stereotypes. Erber *et al.* (1990) state that memory failure, for example, in an older person may be ascribed to intellectual impairment, whereas the same memory failure may be precisely ascribed in a younger person to lack of attention. While a minority of respondents believed that adult students had an inherent difficulty with memorisation, others stated that it is affected by extraneous factors:

... both cohorts [mainstream and mature students] have the same memory capacity, but it is the numerous external demands on the mature student that can prevent effective learning in terms of using short-term memory. (KM:7)

As a means of dealing with this situation, respondents made reference to Wlodkowski (1999), Bloom's Taxonomy, the Humanists and the Progressive approach where there should be less emphasis on rote learning, and more on understanding and appreciation to internalise learning:

If you are discussing it you are thinking about it, if you are thinking about it you are internalising it in your mind and have defined it in more creative ways... They need to understand the concept. (HJ:5)

The opinion was also expressed that mainstream students come from a secondary school system described as 'a passive environment' (LN:12) that places heavy emphasis on rote learning and gives students an advantage when memorising:

... to get their points and to get on to courses eighteen year olds have had to practice surface learning... the student who is good at lateral thinking may not be good at the regurgitation of facts. Maybe they do not get into third level until later. (GI:18,15)

*Deep learning*

It was stated by many respondents that mature students may take a deep approach to learning. This concurs with many theorists (e.g. Rowntree, 1977; Knowles, 1994; Ramsden, 1992; Jarvis, 1996; Rogers, 1996; Brookfield, 1995; the *Green Paper on Adult Education*, 1998; Wlodkowski, 1999), who argue that learning should not be perceived as a quantitative increase in knowledge, that the mature student's capacity for critical analysis should be part of the learning experience, rather than employing what Entwistle (2000) describes as the restricted process of routine memorisation. Reasons and motivations were offered by respondents as to why mature students engage in deep learning and why an approach which is based around surface learning and the memorising–regurgitation cycle does not appeal to them:

... it is founded on a very deep reason as to why they are there. Not only just for superficial qualification or advancement. It is for knowledge's sake. While most eighteen year olds want it packaged, they want it presented in a neat little box... the mature student... want to understand and the concept—what is the thinking behind it. (HJ:9,3)

It's slower to foster deep learning if there are no mature students (GI:15)

Will this come up in the examination? This is a question which is never asked by my mature students. (HJ:14)

... teaching adults helps to elevate our teaching, to remind us that teaching is not simply the transmission of facts. Adult learners... look for shades of grey. They want depth of knowledge... while the eighteen year old switches off. (LN:12)

... we can have some young students who are into deep learning. It's all to do with what they want to get out of the course. (KM:17)

Mature students were also, in many ways, perceived as being more challenging academically than the mainstream student:

Given any opportunity they will articulate what is going on in their minds to try and increase their learning. They wear you down... it is an intense experience teaching adults... intellectually and mentally it is more tiring. The notes need to have far more depth... debate is wide ranging—you have to anticipate issues around the debate. (LN:24.18)

*Assessment*

Many respondents stated that the mature students, due to prior knowledge and experience, may be adept at discussing, demonstrating or applying knowledge and the traditional written examination, therefore, may not always reflect their understanding, capabilities and insights. This reflects Newble and Cannon (1993) who claim that curriculum structure, teaching and examination methods may actively encourage surface learning and Gardner, H. (1993) who outlines that there should be a mixed modality and broad based criteria used in assessment. Continuous assessment, presentations, interviews, and journals were deemed by respondents to

be more beneficial than the traditional examination. It was also stated that positive feedback should be used as an integral part of assessment:

... under no circumstance should somebody who has a life experience be subjected to an exam. All we are doing is setting them up for failure... [they are] being judged on something other than knowledge—exam technique, and typically this puts them off... the examination exists as a convenient motivator for the younger student, whereas the adult learner won't buy this at all. (LN:16,24)

Regular continuous assessment and regular feedback—feedback should always be positive and even if it is negative, it should be positive. (LN:18)

### *Teaching mainstream and mature students*

There was agreement among interviewees that mature students can be diverse in their needs, motivations and expectations. When mainstream students, who are in themselves a diverse group, are included in the learning environment, these variables are considerably heightened. Different pedagogical strategies and approaches were offered when teaching both groups, demonstrating the difficulties and dichotomies that can arise:

Lecturers often have more traditional ways of doing things—they target a traditional audience. Their methods haven't been sufficiently challenged because the number of adults is not large enough... having a class driven by conventional teaching modes can be stressful for adult learners... teaching methods need not be dramatically different... what is important is one's approach and attitude. (DF:5)

... a proportion [of adults] suffer in silence. A lot of lecturers are not aware that there is an issue there (DF:3)

You are still directed by the syllabus and the course objectives. In a sense you are pitching it to two very different audiences. It is a lot more work on those who are delivering it. (HJ:10)

You might have mature and young one—you might have a divide—that is where you have to watch. You cannot have groups—it's a dividing thing and it can cause conflict. (KM:20)

With the younger student you are building on their foundation of their understanding of the world... With the adult learner you are confirming their understanding and moving to a different level. (CE:7)

One could tentatively conclude that teaching a group where there are a substantial number of adult students could prove difficult for many tutors. One respondent stated that quite recently she moved from teaching an all-adult group to a class comprising mostly of mainstream students:

I was aware that I was dealing with a whole different body... You have to watch your vocabulary, words and the examples you use, your tone, pace and content... with the mature student you are not so much trying to make this come alive and have meaning, whereas with the eighteen year old you are trying to connect to a bigger meaning for

them...it is a juggling act in that you are making a connection with both groups in terms of relevancy. (HJ:16,10)

### *Staff development*

While interviews cited various approaches that one should be cognisant of when teaching adult students, which draws from andragogical, Friirian and humanist approaches, the lack of training in pedagogical and andragogical approaches was also highlighted by many respondents (as outlined by Jarvis, 1996; McNamara *et al.*, 2001; and Department of Education and Science, 2001).

The fact that adults bring a wealth of knowledge with them and experiences and you cannot go in and don the robe of lecturer and lecture in the traditional method, the fact they may know more than you in one particular moment—these are important in the training of adults. (HJ:12)

Teaching the two groups together is difficult for people with no training... Nobody goes into a job except this one, with absolutely no training of any kind whatsoever... New lecturers are just parachuted into a situation and left to their own devices... This is a serious issue... (CE:15,9)

...my approach [when teaching mature students] is in terms of what my gut is telling me...and not from any formal methodology that has been passed on. If there was some system in place when we are embarking on these types of markets, that people be made aware that there are some differences in the approach... (HJ:4,12)

Policy procedures aimed at accommodating mature students were also provided by respondents:

I would set up a separate management department whose job it is to consider the educational needs of this group (CE:16)

Projects from access... seeing what the critical elements are, feeding that back into the mainstream. The access office becoming a learning support unit...and that means changing syllabi to being more relevant to the actual students we are getting in, and we will be getting in, and the sort of training that teachers should need. (TU:10)

The approach we take to this cohort is wrong... It's a reaction to a supposed drop off in demographics. If you start from that premise you are guaranteed to get it wrong. We should start from the premise—these people are out there, how best might we provide services to help them. (CE:15)

### **Conclusion**

Increasing numbers of adult learners are entering higher education. They are adding a new and challenging dimension to the teaching experience, which includes differences in learning styles, interests, attitudes and approaches to learning. The memorisation/regurgitation cycle, for instance, which exercises and facilitates short-term memory, may be typical of the educational experience of the younger student who has just come from a second-level system which, for the most part, is

examination-driven. This system may also foster an approach to learning that is based almost exclusively around the linguistic and mathematical intelligences. These approaches may differ from the more expansive and reflective approach of the adult learner who may be drawing from years of work experience, personal insight and prior learning, both formal and informal. The lecturer could also be dealing with a situation where the younger student's understanding is theoretical, whereas the mature student has to adapt not only to the learning curve of moving from the practical to the theoretical, but also may find that his truisms and beliefs can be at variance with what a theory is expounding.

Mature students can also experience alienation, anxiety and insecurity, which, ironically, can masquerade as overconfidence or arrogance. Personal commitments, prior educational history, work experience, facility for deep learning and rapport with both the tutor and younger students, can bring many challenges and rewards. The tutor is often compelled to have a greater mastery of his subject area and may have this knowledge questioned and challenged, a situation which can be particularly difficult for the young or inexperienced tutor. Greater transparency and accountability may also be demanded by the adult learner from both the tutor and educational institution.

The presence of mature students can also enhance the learning environment. They can have a positive affect on a class and deepen and broaden the learning experience for the mainstream student and indeed for the lecturer. If the research on the diversity, distinctness and challenges that the adult learner brings to the educational environment is to be acknowledged, then the needs and concerns of tutors, who are dealing with these challenges, often in isolation, and without any formal assistance or training, should be given recognition.

This study revealed a high level of understanding and insights towards mature students from respondents. They outlined the various pedagogical difficulties and problems they may encounter and the benefits, which mature students, can bring to the total learning environment. They also stressed the importance of the promotion of a more positive and inclusive culture for adult learners. While educational theories surrounding adult students may not have been to the forefront of a respondent's mind, many were unconsciously employing learning theories, strategies and andragogical approaches. This awareness and appreciation stemmed not from any formalised method of training or acquisition, however, but rather from experiential learning and personal insight and awareness. Many were unaware that they employed various approaches, perhaps reflecting that they are rarely afforded the opportunity to express or articulate them.

While respondents offered various strategies that can be used to adapt to the learning needs of adult learners, the dearth of staff development initiatives to facilitate lecturers in dealing with this unprecedented pedagogical experience was highlighted and stressed.

The literature has suggested that the adult learner will contribute to changing and shaping the nature of higher education. The teaching approaches and the curriculum structure and assessment methods employed have to be able to meet the rich and

diverse andragogical and pedagogical learning needs of all students if colleges are to ensure successful performance, retention and completion. There is a need for staff development initiatives to meet this need, which it could be argued can only enhance learning for all students as best practice for one cohort could also represent best practice for all learners. This requires an appreciation and understanding of individual student needs, a widening of the definition of the third-level student and a subsequent broadening and developing of the parameters of what is meant by teaching approaches, methods, strategies and philosophies. Finding such a forum, however, may possibly bring its own challenges as the lecturer is, in turn, the diverse and divergent mature student complete with a rich resource of experience and distinct learning styles and approaches.

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