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Older adults in their first year at university: Challenges, Resources and Support

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bettertogether

'The purpose of this event is to provide accurate, honest information on what can be expected on returning to study. We need to make it clear that studying is no easy option; that financially it is often extremely difficult, and that employment prospects may be enhanced but not guaranteed. We must be equally careful not to be gloomy, or to frighten people and let them know that there are staff who can help.'

Memo to Student Services' staff regarding Mature Students' Information Day. University of the West of England, 1993.

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Summary

This study surveyed the experiences of older adult students in their first year at university. It describes the personal and academic challenges they faced; the psychological resources they applied or acquired to meet those challenges; and the forms of support they drew on during the year.

22 students aged 30 to 61 years completed free-text questionnaires about challenges, resources and support at three points in the academic year.

Thematic analysis of participant responses indicated three main areas of challenge: the meaning of university, issues of ability and achievement, and concerns about balancing demands. Individual motivations for study were maintained through the initial emotional impact of becoming a student and despite doubts about being able to manage. Ambitions for academic achievement met with anxieties about ability, workload, study support and age differences. Participants were concerned about balancing demands from home and work with those from their programme of study. Thus the challenges were both organisational and indicative of competing emotional commitments.

Participants drew on a range of psychosocial resources to meet these challenges. Central to these were their life experience, their enthusiasm for learning, their ability to work with others and their mature self-awareness which enabled specific coping strategies. Robust support for personal and academic concerns was provided by family, friends and fellow students while participants reported a more varied experience of support and guidance from the university.

The findings were discussed in relation to the literature on responding to personal challenges, the life-stages of students, and the implications for the support of older adult students. The findings suggested that most - though not all – older adult students enter higher education with a significant psychosocial resource pool and/or the determination to acquire the resources and support they need to achieve their academic goals.

Introduction

This study continues a programme of research into counselling and psychological support for students at the University of the West of England that was initiated by the university Directorate in 2007. It follows previous related studies in this programme, particularly Topham and Moller (2011) on student wellbeing and academic performance, and Russell and Topham (2012) on social anxiety and student learning.

Consultations with university stakeholders recommended a research focus on older adults and their experience of higher education. Older adult students are a diverse group who have tended to be low users of student services; this might suggest that they, perhaps by virtue of psychological maturity, are adequately equipped to cope with the changes and challenges of higher education. The view of university staff was that they are a neglected group in comparison with traditional-age students; that neglect was considered to be both academic and pastoral.

For students of all ages the transition to higher education initiates processes of psychological adjustment, personal and academic development, and varying needs for support (Kantanis 2000, 2002; Ramsay, Jones and Barker 2007; Evans, Forney, Guido et al. 2010). Although now incorporating a wellbeing perspective, the historical orientation of UK student support has tended towards a deficit model of mental health and associated functioning (Maddux, Snyder and Lopez 2004). Privileging a largely cognitive view of student development, emotional concerns have been seen as lesser problems to be solved - by student services or external agencies - rather than as processes to be engaged with as an intrinsic and valued part of the student journey. Research with adult learners has indicated the personal and academic richness of that journey and suggested ways in which it may be facilitated (e.g. Mercer and Saunders 2004; Dirkx 2008).

This study aims to describe the practical and psychological challenges experienced by older adult students in their first year at university, together with the personal and social resources that they engage to meet those challenges. It is hoped that analysis of how participants negotiate the process of becoming a student will inform institutional approaches to the support and development of older adult students, as well as providing an orientation for individuals considering higher education.

Background

'Universities and colleges welcome mature students and value them not just for their enthusiasm, but also for their experience and skills.' (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service 2012, p.4)

'Mature students decide to study for many different reasons, including improved job prospects, making a fresh start or purely for interest in their subject.' (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service 2012, p.4)

Research projects have many origins. For this study, an early observation was that the Students' Union shop played a lot of hip-hop but not much Mozart. This stimulated thinking about older students in the university population and their visibility; the low profile of older students was evident from a walk around any of the university campuses. Two undergraduates in the researcher's tutorial group were surprised to hear that there are several thousand older adults studying at the university. Overall, there was an impression that the university and its culture were geared to the younger, traditional, 18 to 21-year old student.

The advent of the Open University in 1971 created opportunities for working age adults without prior educational qualifications or the time to attend a sited university; and governments have since sought to extend higher education to low participation groups (Dearing 1997; National Audit Office 2002). One such group, older adult students, became a significant proportion of university populations. According to the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), in the academic year 2007-08, 21% of full-time undergraduate entrants and 92% of part-time undergraduate entrants were over 21 (HESA 2009). At the University of the West of England in the academic year 2008-09 the total student population, undergraduate and postgraduate, was 29,300. Of these, 36% were aged 18 to 21 and 24.2% (7,090 students) were aged 30 or over (University of the West of England 2010).

Older adult students are often entering university for the first time, often part-time and often with limited or adverse experiences of education; they tend to be committed and successful students (Larkin and Hartley 2008). In preparation for this project, discussions were held with university colleagues in outreach and admissions departments, with academic staff and student representatives. There was a shared view that older students are a neglected group in terms of research and support and that, as studies show, they often arrive at university with little confidence in their ability as learners in a university (Carney-Crompton and Tan

2002; Young 2000). Colleagues consulted expressed considerable admiration for the way that older adults engaged with studying (see also Richardson 1994; Harris and Brooks 1998) as well as managing other commitments and the stresses arising from the whole experience (Given 2002). With regard to the characteristics that they bring to studentship, consultees observed that:

· mature students are real, serious students while most young (18-year old) school-leavers were not yet ready, or psychologically able, to make a serious commitment to education;
· they manage far more challenging lives (work, family, money, life crises) while studying than do younger students;
· while starting as fragile, vulnerable learners, they display a persistence and resilience that sees them through to the end of their studies;
· mature students, particularly women, are effective in giving and getting support amongst their peers that was both practical and emotional.

A senior colleague with responsibilities linked to the student experience noted that the many mature students who study part-time can feel isolated, disembodied and a lack of belonging. He suggested that the university may not be able to solve such problems structurally and may need to focus instead on helping students to cope better with the challenges. To that end, it would be helpful to understand more about the psychological aspects of their university experience.

The tension of resource

There is a general acceptance that UK universities have a remit to promote and provide higher education to all who can benefit from it, an aim that was reinforced by the Labour government in their last policy document on higher education: *Higher Ambitions: the future of universities in a knowledge economy* (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2009). Even before the arrival of the Coalition government in May 2010, it was clear from this document and others that the need for public sector cuts would require universities to be more discerning and efficient in their activities. This has implications for the student experience: supporting a diverse student population on a shrinking unit of resource and, within that, providing adequate developmental as well as remedial student services. Where resources are limited, there is an increased risk that students will fail to thrive or opt to withdraw.

The orientation of student support

In response to declining staff-student ratios, universities have re-engineered the provision of student support, both academic and personal. They have invested in the provision of online information and guidance; created 'one-stop shops' offering advice and referral to a range of specialist support services; promoted systems of peer mentoring and academic support; expanded group provision for academic induction, welfare advice, employability guidance and psycho-educational counselling. The expectation is that students familiarise themselves with these systems and achieve a high level of self-support.

Within university student services the model of support has moved a long way from *in loco parentis* to that of a professional support service for independent adults (Association of Managers of Students Services in Higher Education 2009). While this model offers the prospect of greater integration with faculties and more development work with students, the key driver for student services remains the immediate demands of students - academic, practical, financial and personal. Services are problem-focused because it is problems, and the feeling of demoralisation at not being able to resolve them (Frank and Frank 1993), that motivate students to seek help. Problems and demoralisation engender intense emotions and, together, may constitute a temporary or lasting threat to psychological health.

The life-stages of students

The idea that human development continues from childhood through adulthood is now well established although the form of that development remains open to debate (see Sugarman 2001 for a review). Lifespan psychology views psychosocial development as a sequence of stages; at each stage of life there is a specific potential for maturation which requires an appropriate response from the psychosocial environment. Each lifestage engages the individual with an increased range of experience and stimulates their potential for gaining new capacities.

Lifespan theories which propose a sequence of development stages loosely identified with age tend to focus on socio-emotional development (Erikson 1959, Levinson 1986). These contrast with focal theories of development where the final stage is reached by adulthood (cognitive development, Piaget 1983), where stages are sequential but not linked to any age range (moral development, Kohlberg 1981), or where the developmental arc is ascribed to a particular age range (career development, Super 1990; student development, Chickering and Reisser 1993). Table 1 summarises three life-stage models.

Table 1: Life-stage models of human development

Author	Age	Stage	Core task or conflict
Erikson 1959: Lifespan stages	10 to 20	Adolescence	Identity vs identity diffusion
	20 to 40	Young adulthood	Intimacy vs isolation
	40 to 60	Middle adulthood	Generativity vs stagnation
	60 on	Late adulthood	Integrity vs despair
Levinson 1986: Seasons of life	17 to 22	Transition	Independence, leave home, explore
	22 to 25	Early adulthood	Establish adult role, start family
	28 to 33	Transition	Reflect, revise dreams
	33 to 40	Adulthood	Consolidate goals and anchor to family, work and community
	40 to 45	Transition	
	45 to 50	Early middle age	
	50 to 55	Transition	Accept ageing, resolve mid-life crisis
	55 to 60	Middle adulthood	
Gould 1978: Adult personality	16 to 22	Leave parents' world	Independence and identity
	22 to 28	I'm nobody's baby	Goals and responsibility
	28 to 34	Open to what's inside	
	34 to 45	Midlife decade	Stability
	45 on	Beyond midlife	Permanent personality. Appreciation.

Adapted from Erikson 1959; Levinson 1986; Gould 1978.

Applying a life-stage model of psychosocial development to the present context, an individual's need and desire for higher education is matched by the availability of universities and the support for attending them.

Although the models suggest a linear process, life-stages are more accurately viewed as organising concepts which can overlap rather than as discrete, fixed periods of time. Developmental tasks may be addressed outside the age-related norm and life-stages can be re-visited later in life; this consideration may be relevant to the decision to enter higher education by some older students. One student known to the author reported that at 19 she had intended to study art but had become pregnant. Now aged 50, her children grown and flown, she had commenced an art degree at university. Similarly, memories of unsatisfactory experiences at school may persist into adulthood until emerging needs and opportunities coupled with maturity in other areas of self can lead to a more positive view of education and openness to further study.

The UK Higher Education Statistics Agency defines a student who is aged 21 or over at the start of their programme of study as a 'mature student'. While it may be helpful in targeting and evaluating higher education policy initiatives to distinguish 'mature' from 'traditional-age' (18-21 year-old) students', it is not evident that this administrative distinction refers to psychosocial development.

Chronological age is not a definitive indicator of life-stage but it is likely that a student of 19 and a student of 39 will have developmentally different experiences of university. While this may reflect different material and other circumstances, a life-stage approach holds that they are each engaged with developmental tasks appropriate to their level of maturation.

For example, at 19 (late adolescence) the developmental focus is on identity and independence from family or origin, whereas at 39 (middle adulthood) the maintenance of generative stability in one's work and family and social network will be the priority. Neuro-scientific research has clearly shown that frontal lobe development is not complete until the early twenties including, for example, the capacity for forward planning and emotional self-regulation (Sowell, Thompson Holmes et al. 1999; Lebel and Beaulieu 2011). These findings indicate that what can be expected of students, academically and personally, will be framed by their individual stages of neurological development. It is likely that few older adult students would relish, or be capable of, helping to 'drink the bar dry' at the end of term.

Thus a university may comprise two populations differentiated by life-stage: those who are in late adolescence and those who are in middle-adulthood. Following Levinson (1986), age 30 is associated with a shifting from the concerns and competencies of adolescence to those of 'early adulthood' (Levinson 1986) or 'young adulthood' (Erikson 1950). Participants in this study were described as older adults to indicate that, being 30 or older, they were assumed to have made or be making that shift. The idea of two populations implies different forms of student development requiring adjusted approaches to student engagement, experience and support. Thus one question is about how universities can provide support and guidance to students that is appropriate to their life-stage; another concerns the psychosocial resources that each group brings or acquires when choosing to engage in higher education.

Psychological health

In universities, as throughout western culture, psychological health has tended to be assessed in terms of the presence or absence of mental health problems (Rana and Walkling 1999; Royal College of Psychiatrists 2003). While the mental health problems of university populations approximate those of the wider society (Cook et al. 2006) there is now a marked trend towards the concept of student well-being. As a strategic aim it promotes an active, holistic approach to the student experience; as a focus on positive mental health it offers a conceptual balance to a deficit model of mental health (Maddux, Snyder and Lopez 2004) and a perspective on psychological processes that is less stigmatising. Nonetheless, many student counsellors would say that personal development, rather than emotional

problem-solving, has always been at the philosophical heart of counselling (for example, see Rogers 1951; Mearns and Thorne 1999).

Approaches to student mental health are also represented by the field of positive psychology which originated and is more prevalent in the U.S. (see Seligman 2002) but has proponents in the UK (e.g. Joseph and Linley 2006). Positive psychology developed out of research on explanatory style (Burns and Seligman 1989) which showed, for example, that an optimistic view of one's experience is linked to positive emotions and longevity, while an optimistic view of one's likely academic achievement has been associated with better academic performance and well-being (Ruthig et al. 2007).

A key tenet of positive psychology is that each individual has certain preferred psychological resources or 'signature strengths' (Seligman, 2002). These can be identified from within a range of such resources derived from a cross-cultural collation of valued strengths (Dahlsgaard, Peterson and Seligman 2005). Positive emotions and well-being are best predicted by a life that utilises one's strengths, rather than in the pursuit of short-term pleasures. While the latter may be attractive to some students, the model also holds that positive emotions derived from the exercise of strengths are a buffer against adverse experience. Research on strengths (skills, abilities, aptitudes, attributes) has shown them to be associated with increased wellbeing, achievement and an ability to cope with stressors (Park, Peterson and Seligman 2004; Linley, Nielsen, Wood et al. 2010; Wood, Linley, Maltby et al. 2011).

Building on this, Hendry and Kloep (2002) suggest that each individual has their own 'resource pool' to draw on, consisting of biological dispositions, social and structural resources, skills and self-efficacy. Development is formulated as a function of the interaction between the individual's resource pool and the challenges they face (Kloep, Hendry and Saunders 2009). Applying this model to the present context, older adults seeking change through higher education are assumed to identify the challenges, engage resources and enlist support in order to negotiate their development as students.

Student support

Mature students make proportionately less use of student support services than do younger students, and this is particularly the case where they are studying part-time. In one survey of the student experience, only 29 out of 600 participants (mean age 34) responded to a question about their use of student facilities and only 10 of those mentioned the counselling service (Last 2010).

There is no nationally collated data on the age distribution of students seen by counselling services in UK HEI's. Individual service reports vary as to whether they refer to service use by 'mature students' (over 21) or postgraduate students (age unspecified but presumed to be at least 21). One survey of 18 universities found that 75% were aged 25 or under (CORE 2010). At one counselling service in the three years 2007 to 2009, student clients aged 30 and above comprised no more than 16.5% of the total number of student clients seen by the service in each of those three years (UWE Counselling and Psychological Services 2010).

The literature on the provision of psychological support for older adult students is limited. There is a recognition of the emotional as well as the practical challenges of being an older adult student (Baxter and Brittan 2001; Kasworm, 2008); also studies of developmental processes associated with being an older adult student (e.g. Mercer and Saunders 2004) with some referencing lifespan psychology as a guide to student support (Johnston and Merrill 2004; Mahan 2007). While it is clear that older adults can become successful students, it is less clear how specific psychological issues arising from entry into higher education are experienced and managed, or what attention they receive from institutional support structures.

Aims of the study

These considerations, together with the views of local stakeholders, recommended a survey of the experiences of older adult students in order to identify:

i. The personal and academic challenges of their first year at university;
ii. The individual resources that they drew on and developed to meet those challenges;
iii. The social and academic support that they engaged or received.

It was intended that analysis of the data obtained would contribute to understanding the psychological and psychosocial means whereby older adults manage becoming a student. This understanding would:

i. Inform the university's engagement with older adult students in helping them prepare for and manage their higher education experience, and
ii. Guide student advisory and support services in negotiating and providing support for older adult students.

Method

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was given by the University Research Ethics Committee (study reference number UREC09-10/05). Ethical issues were also considered in relation to professional codes and frameworks issued by the British Psychological Association (2009) and the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2010).

Participants

Participants were recruited from successful student applicants to a large metropolitan university in the UK. The study was promoted through routine email communications from the university's marketing department to students who had confirmed their place (Appendix I). It was promoted at a transition summer school for applicants who had gained entry after successful completion of Access programmes. Additionally, participation by undergraduate psychology students was offered as a Level 1 credit-bearing option.

Participants were required to be over 30 years of age in order to distinguish them clearly from traditional-aged students (18-21 years). At 40.9 years, the mean age of participants placed them well into middle adulthood by life-stage criteria, above (See Table 2, below).

The study aimed to recruit student participants who met the following criteria:
- Accepted by the university to start the following September;
- Aged over 30 on September 1st of that same year;
- Joining an undergraduate programme (including Foundation programmes);
- Entering at level 1 or level 2, or a Foundation programme;
- Studying full-time or part-time.

102 students made enquiries about the project and were sent detailed information about the project and a consent form (Appendix II). All contacts and queries were dealt with individually in order to build a sense of personal engagement with the researcher and the project. 14 enquirers did not meet the criteria and were excluded; 40 initially agreed to participate. Written, informed consent was obtained from all participants before or shortly after the start of the autumn term when they commenced their programmes of study. Consenting participants were asked to complete a questionnaire to establish demographic features of the group (Appendix III). The profile of those who actually participated (n=22) is

summarised in Table 2, below.   Information provided on mode of study was incomplete but indicated that the majority would be studying full-time.

Table 2: Demographic features of participant sample (n=22)

Gender (n=22)					
Female 13			Male 9		
Age (n=15)					
Mean age 40.9 yrs.	Age range 31-61 yrs.	30-39 yrs. n=7	40-49 yrs. n=6	50+yrs. n=2.	
Ethnicity					
White-British / English-White 11	British 1	White / Caucasian 2	South-east Asian 1	African 1	nk 6
Social class					
Working class 5	Middle class 3	Lower middle class 1	None 4	Don't know 1	nk 8
Level of study					
Foundation 7		Undergraduate 9		Not known 6	

Data collection

The study obtained participant data from free-text questionnaires that were delivered to participants at three points during their first academic year (Appendix IV).   Each questionnaire invited participants to comment on one aspect of their higher education experience:

i. The personal and academic challenges of being a student (October);
ii. The psychological and psychosocial resources that they drew on or developed in response to the challenges of being a student (February);
iii. The external support that they received in relation to the challenges of being a student (June).

It was judged that this sequence of enquiry would allow time for participants to reflect on their changing experience, and thus be more likely to provide valid personal data, than making repeat enquiries each term.   Perceptions of social support, for example, may be more fully appraised towards the end of the academic year than at the beginning. The sequenced approach was also intended to spread the demands of the project on the participants in consideration of their academic activities and adjustment to university.

The aim of each of the three questionnaires was to focus participants' attention on one aspect of their student experience (challenges, resources, support); to encourage reflection on that experience and on their adaptive responses to their first year as a student in higher education.

The topic of each questionnaire was broadly defined in the guidance for participants at the start of each questionnaire. Thus, challenges '*may be academic, personal, practical or professional. They may be positive or negative, temporary or long-lasting'.* The description of resources included '*skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, emotional responses and ways of thinking or acting'* that participants had brought to university or had developed while at university. Support was deemed to include '*personal, social, academic and other*' institutional support that was received by participants during their first year.

Analysis

The data for analysis consisted of the responses of 22 participants who returned completed free-text questionnaires. Thematic analysis of the data on participants' experience was informed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The analysis took an inductive, semantic and realist approach to the data with a view to addressing the research questions and integrating the outcomes within a psychosocial perspective on development. As described above, this holds that individual attributes and potentials are realised and shaped during key periods of development through interaction with environmental and social conditions. In addition, there are research-based constructs, both fractional (e.g. coping strategies) and holistic (e.g. identity) which are intrinsic to a psychosocial view of individuals. These considerations suggested that a theory-driven approach to the data would be helpful in structuring an understanding of participants' experience.

However, the nature of participant experiences in each domain of interest (challenges, resources and support) was unknown, as were their perceptions and evaluations of their responses to becoming a student. This consideration required the researcher to be open to new or variant constructs of experience and behaviour via an initial inductive approach to the data. In adopting this approach, a semantic and realist view of the data assumed that there was a direct relationship between participant experience and the expression of that experience in words; and that the meaning of the language used to describe experience was

shared by all participants. Thus 'anxiety' was assumed to be the same experience for all participants unless otherwise qualified; and synonyms for anxiety (e.g. worried, nervous) would be grouped together thematically, unless otherwise qualified.

13 participants completed all three questionnaires during the academic year. The free-text data from the questionnaires was collated by topic for all participants who responded: Challenges (n=19), Resources (n=19) and Support (n=13). The collated free-text responses to each questionnaire topic were analysed as separate data sets. Items in each data set were assigned codes which summarised the meaning of the item as judged by the researcher. When all data items had been coded in all three data sets, each set was reviewed for possible variations on or additions to the initial coding. For example, emotions related to the Challenges data were more apparent on a second round of reflection.

The item codes were collated into draft themes on the basis of semantic similarity and difference. Item codes were reviewed for those that could apply to more than one theme. The draft themes were represented in visual maps suggesting relationships between themes and subthemes. Themes and maps were reviewed against the original data sets and revised accordingly. The criteria for these reviews were (a) consistency with the original data items and extracts (b) relevance to the research questions and (c) internal semantic coherence.

Findings: Summary

From the analysis of free-text data, 11 main themes were identified (challenges 3, resources 4, support 4) which incorporated 26 sub-themes (challenges 7, resources 11, support 8). These are summarised in Table 3:

Table 3: Summary of main themes and sub-themes

Focus	Main themes	Subthemes
Challenges	1. Meaning of university	Emotional impact
		Degrees of confidence
	2. Ability and achievement	Amount of studying
		Study support
		Age differences
	3. Balancing demands	Jobs and money
		Family commitments
Resources	1. Life experience	Bring maturity to studying
		Prior knowledge
		Organisation and study skills
	2. Persistence and passion	Open-mindedness
		Learning to learn
	3. Getting on with people	Student community
		Relationship with tutors
	4. Self-awareness	Clear values
		Processing emotions
		Coping with pressures
		Positive thinking
Support	1. Family, friends and colleagues	Understand and encourage
		Practical help to enable studying
		Guilt for impact on family life
	2. Relationships with fellow students	Empathy and emotional support
		Academic discussion and collaboration
	3. Mixed experience of staff	Approachable and encouraging
		Lack of feedback
		Generally helpful services
	4. Cries unheard	

The themes and sub-themes arising from the analysis of data are summarised as thematic maps in Appendix VI a / b / c.   It will be helpful to read this chapter and the subsequent Discussion chapter in conjunction with these thematic maps. In the following sections of this chapter, participant quotes are numbered to reference their location in the data files; these will be available from the author for a period of 6 years after the publication of this report.

Findings: Challenges

Main theme 1: The meaning of university

Becoming a student was an intentional, positive choice for participants: *I am doing this degree with the aim of changing my career….because I had become very disillusioned with what I was doing at work (137).* The decision to enter higher education, whether for personal or career development, was a significant personal event with a clear rationale: *The long-lasting challenge facing me in higher education is to try to enhance my experience in art and extend my practice (116).*

There were reflections on their choice to become an older student: *There is always a call from a voice within raising doubt over the purpose and intention of pursuing learning at an advanced age (119).* There was a recognition that being a student was difficult, perhaps more than had been anticipated; that things could and probably would get better; and that the individual was being challenged to take some responsibility for making that happen: *Learning a new subject will be hard, and already it has stretched me, but again I have the resources around to work through this, and to feel that I am doing all I can and asking for help when I need to (105). I think that the academic and professional problems will not be too difficult if I stick in and work at it I can do this…. (134).*

Subtheme: Emotional impact

The emotional impacts of starting at university were mixed and powerful: *I do sometimes feel quite emotional about my choice to study at University. This feeling is mainly positive, and I feel a great sense of achievement at having got here (138). The changes in my life at the moment may be difficult and unnerving but they are also exciting and pushing me out of my comfort zone which isn't a bad thing in my case (123).* Participants used words such as 'alien', 'bewildering' and 'overwhelming' to describe their initial encounters with the organisation and methods of learning. Early experiences could be discouraging: *A lecture was delivered at high speed and I came away feeling down-hearted and lost (138).* Anxieties about academic ability were common, with one participant *hoping that I haven't bitten off more than I can chew (111)* and another *quite apprehensive about exams and writing essays and making sure that my writing style is correct (123).*

Subtheme: Degrees of confidence

Participants expressed varying levels of confidence about their choice and about being able to cope with the demands of studying. *I do have periods of saying to myself 'What the hell are you doing?', and feel pretty daunted by the long 3 year stretch ahead of me. These negative feelings are only temporary ones, but I do go through periods of self-doubt and*

anxiety (138). …I worry about whether or not I have the skills to do well in exams, presentations and in my third year when I have to write my dissertation (112).

Yet no participant was unequivocally negative about the challenges; the concerns and uncertainty were often mixed with hope and positive reminders to self: *I'm hoping that in the next few weeks things will calm down and I can get a grip on things (107); As I am new to this, I am sure I will learn techniques and strategies to deal with this (138); Practically, I worry how I will cope with study and personal life, but I do pride myself in the fact that I am well organised (138).*

Main theme 2: Ability and achievement

Many participants were motivated by a desire for academic achievement: *I feel this is my last opportunity to do what I would like to career-wise so have put a lot of pressure on myself to do well (123); I don't just want to pass I want to do well and if I don't it gets me down and I lose motivation (112).* The desired levels of achievement varied, possibly due to individual implications for employability. *I need to do really well in this degree to find a company to take me on and pay me a wage similar to what I am earning now (137); [I] know I will have to give 100% [just] to obtain my degree (135).*

Anxiety about academic ability was common while often implying that this was temporary and surmountable: *A university degree is beyond any qualification I have attempted in the past. I am not particularly academic and a lot of the words in passages etc. I am required to read are new to me. Initially I felt I had thrown myself into a world alien to me (135).* Some could identify specific concerns and the challenges that they presented: *I am concerned about my ability to do the coursework. I am generally better at exams as I find these have a very clear scope and structure whereas coursework may not be as so and needs more time and input from myself (137).* Yet participants were aware that their initial judgments of academic ability were open to reflection and change: *When I talk to my peers who are much younger than myself, I sometimes think that I may worry too much and I think my standards might be too high (120); I will be relieved to get first assignment finished and marked to know what level I am working at and towards (136).*

Subtheme: Amount of studying

The amount of studying required came as a shock. Participants described *… a feeling of bewilderment with the volume of information being thrown at one at the beginning of the course (116)* which they struggled to organise and evaluate: *I have been given a massive amount of information and am not quite sure what is relevant and what is wishful thinking*

(113). One participant reported *working constantly so [I] have no personal life at all – there is no longer any spare time for that (124).*

Students were expected to comply with requirements but staff appeared to be unaware that older students might have commitments outside university: *There doesn't seem to be any understanding that not everyone can spend every spare minute of every day doing work for uni and that if we receive an e-mail the night before giving us work to be done for the next day that is not going to be done! (124).*

Subtheme: Age differences

Participants commented on how age differences in a class affected their learning experience. *I can feel irritated that some of them lack the motivation and drive that I have (138).* Where they shared classes with younger students, there might be a 30-year age gap and sometimes a marked difference in attitudes to studying. *I am focused on covering as much as possible during lectures and seminars but I don't feel this is the goal of most of the group. A fair amount of time wasting seems to be going on (106).*

They noticed differences in their cognitive abilities compared to both younger colleagues and their younger selves. *My brain isn't as quick or absorbent as it was 30 years ago (106); My memory might not help due to my age as I have so many more things to remember than my peers. (120).* And they might no longer have the stamina: *Unlike these younger students I cannot stay up all night studying at the last minute, I need a measured pace throughout each module (106).*

Subtheme: Study support

Participants felt quite isolated from staff in their attempts to understand subject matter, get to grips with university systems and manage their workloads: *I….don't feel like we are really receiving any help – just being expected to get on with it ourselves and automatically know how to do everything without being told (124); I had a problem with getting all the relevant information that was apparently being uploaded to Blackboard. For several weeks I was being told that this information was there, when it was in fact not. None of the full-time staff were interested in solving the problem… I felt I had no one to turn to (116).* And they perceived an imbalance between students of different ages in relation to student support: *The younger students sometimes look to me for support and guidance (138); I feel that for older students especially it is much harder because we have no-one to rely on to help us out i.e. parents (124).*

Main theme 3: Balancing demands

For those in employment and with family/social lives outside university, the extra demands on their time was a significant challenge: *I have a family and need to travel to Bristol which takes approx. 3 hours each day (113)…. one or two evening commitments every week means that life is usually busy (134)….I need to spend more of my own time meeting the deadlines than I imagined (135).* They were engaged in a constant balancing act in order to maintain relationships with family and friends while fulfilling commitments to employment and studying. *Balancing full time study commitments and a full social circle is a juggling act that usually results in one part or the other missing out on scheduled activities (119).* And there was a fear that a balance may not be achievable: *I am concerned that I will not be able to put the time into my degree that it deserves and requires (137).* They recognised that time management was a necessary study skill to be acquired and practiced: *I need to timetable my study / home life stuff but never seem to have the time to make the timetable, let alone figure out where extra study can be done (107).*

Subtheme: Jobs and money

The employment of students and/or their partners helped to finance living and studying but could also compete with time for studying: *I need to work part time for additional financial support and this is supposed to fit around my studies. I…accept this as part of what is involved in gaining my degree; this doesn't stop me wishing it could be different (113); I had a part-time job when I first started which I had to give up because there was no chance of being able to complete the [university] work required (124).*

For participants with concerns about money, these tended to be significant and constant: …*I can't afford to live just on my student loan the same as many mature students (124)…being able to manage day to day expenses on a drastically reduced income (111)…an ongoing battle sorting out bursary, student finance and benefits (112).* Behind these concerns was the fear that insufficient finance, for daily living or for study-related costs such as childcare, would mean that it became too expensive to continue studying. *Personally, I hope that…. financially, we can continue to support my learning (100).*

Subtheme: Family commitments

Participants recognised a dual commitment to studying and to their families, and the conflict that arose from trying to meet both commitments. The conflict was both a practical problem and an emotional pressure: A*rranging suitable cover for the half term holidays and teacher training days is a nightmare (107). I'm already worrying about how I'll manage Christmas for the family with exams starting in early January! (106).*

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There was a concern that their commitment to studying did not adversely affect their family and that they were responsible for any such impact: *I'm presently trying to make sure I spend at least one day at the weekend with my family as I don't want my studying to take over their lives as well (136). I am committed to continuing my course, but sometimes feel very guilty and selfish that the family have had to suffer as a consequence (138).*

Findings: Resources

Main theme 1: Life experience

In various ways, participants regarded their life experience to date as an asset in meeting the challenges of being a student: *I understand how the real world is; I have experienced setbacks and have overcome them (137).* Confidence was often associated with life experience: *I feel confident that my life experiences have allowed me to relate to a lot of what we do on our course as well as being able to use those experiences to understand the course (123). My life and work experience also gives me ….a confidence that means I am not afraid to stick my hand up and say I don't understand (112).* Yet the capacities of younger students and the demands of studying meant that past experience was not over-rated: *…..perhaps I might be expected to have confidence in my abilities and knowledge of myself. But this is far from the case. I am treading completely new ground, and I have to find my own path (131).*

Subtheme: Bring maturity to studying

Participants' view of their maturity combined positive attitudes to studying with a pro-social sense regarding fellow students and others. *I think that maybe because I am older and understand the way in which the 'outside world' works I am more committed to the course….. (111); I feel I have brought with me to university a mature, motivated attitude that I have gained through my life experience. I think this enables me to make deadlines, manage my time well and also sets a good example to others. By others I don't just mean fellow students, but my children too…. (112); As a mature student… I have more patience and can listen and be less judgemental about things (114).*

Subtheme: Prior knowledge

Prior knowledge came from studying, work and personal experience. It helped participants in getting to grips with their studies, in coping with placements and in shaping professional aspirations: *My knowledge in the subjects of the program….has given me a boost, confidence and a head start in my studies. It made learning a lot easier for me and I can focus more on the details rather than just the superficial knowledge (125). …..on my first*

placement I have had to draw upon my skills as a carer to help me get through a day (120). I have learnt what it is like to be on the receiving end of a service from a social worker and having had some pretty awful experiences, am able to shape the type of social worker I don't want to be as well as the one I would like (100).

Subtheme: Organisational and study skills

Participants brought a range of skills to support their learning, acquired from previous studies, employment and personal experience: *Good time keeping and time management/organisational skills are essential – I have some of these from previous employment (124); As a mother of 4 children I already have pretty good time management skills and am very good at prioritising tasks (133).* Previously-acquired study skills and technical competencies enabled participants to focus more on course content: *My Access to HE diploma has prepared me well academically and this too has helped with my confidence in referencing, reading and research skills (112); Additional skills such as word processing and computer filing have also been a great advantage as I have not had to worry about obtaining these new skills as well as learning for the course (113).*

Main theme 2: Persistence and passion

Participants communicated a strong and sometimes over-riding drive and enthusiasm for being a student: *I prioritise studying over other uses of my time sometimes to the exclusion of everything else (106).* Their enthusiasm helping them to cope with the difficulties, both mental and physical: *I am passionate and excited by the new things I am learning which helps to soften the blow of the late nights and effort required to pass the modules (137). …..you realise that after 1 week you have spent 4hrs waiting for public transport, standing in the rain and blowing a gale!!!! (120).*

Subtheme: Open-mindedness

Participants recognised the value of being open to new ideas and different perspectives: *Being open to other people's ideas often initiates an understanding of a subject from a different viewpoint (113). ….there are lots of grey areas. I think this helps me to take a balanced view of some arguments/theories and be able to argue for and against (106).* Some participants regarded their open-mindedness as an attribute of life experience and personality rather than age: *My background….has also allowed me to be very open minded on discussions that some of my peers haven't been so open minded on or not experienced first-hand…(123); If I did not question myself, my motives, my direction and even my own abilities then I believe my mind would be closed to new ideas and new directions. In this way*

I find my experience of the course is very similar to that of the other, younger, students on the course (131).

Subtheme: Learning to learn

In addition to the skills and attributes brought with them, participants described their progress in adapting to learning: *When things go wrong, I take it as a lesson to learn and improve from the mistake done (125); Knowing where to look and how to pull out relevant information is a skill I am still developing but is improving greatly (137).* There was a growing appreciation of the nature of study at university level: *…..getting a better understanding of the depth of study needed (106); I have learnt that this course is as much about the thinking behind the work as about the work itself: that it is the 'why' that is of most value and not the 'how' (131).* And after settling into the learning environment, one participant was *now enjoying the challenges presented to me (135).*

Driven by personal limitation or preference, some participants actively sought ways of making learning more effective and enjoyable: *I have struggled with a particular subject but have found I learn better using a visual image so I borrowed a DVD from the library. Experimenting with alternative methods of learning also helps make studying less repetitive (113); I have taken a Dictaphone to many lectures as there is too much information to take in (120).* For one participant: *My mobile phone has become a fundamental part of my studies with tools for managing my time, scheduling and timetabled events (130);* but generally there was little reference to options for technology-enhanced learning such as podcasts and online lectures.

Main theme 3: Getting on with people

Participants were motivated and possessed the ability to engage with fellow students and staff. *The group I have met on my course are supportive of each other and we have formed a close bond already (131).* This was a personal choice although, as one participant observed: *There is still a lot of peer pressure at university and I don't feel that this is something that I need to do* (sic) *to be 'accepted' (123).* Previous experience of working in groups had given them the skills to manage collaboration and to be sensitive to difference: *I have worked in an environment where there are other people to consider and I have learnt to adjust whether I am working independently or as part of a team. I am able to get on with people who have different backgrounds or who are in a different age group (113).*

Subtheme: Student community

Membership of a group of fellow students was valued for its personal and academic support: *Having a good social network at uni and discussing issues in a group helps me to deal with the stress (124). …. even if it is just a phone call to talk things through I offload the things on my mind to ensure I do not 'mull things over' (105).* Support networks operated outside of formal attendance periods, and might persist beyond university: *…we contact each other outside of university for moral support and assist each other with the understanding of what is expected of us for assignments (136); Being part of the student community is so important to me. They will also form a network that will be invaluable to me in my practice after the completion of my studies (131).* This future-oriented comment would probably be unusual in a cohort of traditional-age first-year students.

Subtheme: Relationship with tutors

For participants who were uncertain about their abilities, the affirmations and attitudes of their tutors were important: *Since starting university I have overcome my initial nervousness about whether or not I or my work is good enough to make the grade, having received a good grade in my first assessed assignment… (112); I no longer have the confidence to ask for help because of the dismissive attitude of some of the tutors (130).* Other participants asserted an equal and collegial relationship with teaching staff*: I am able to speak to my tutors more on the same level because of my age and my experiences and am able to voice my concerns about my ability (or lack of) to the suitable people (123).* Some participants viewed their relationship with the university and - by implication - their tutors from a commercial perspective: *My attitude is that I'm a customer paying for the services of the college and university (not a passive recipient) which gives me certain expectations (106); I believe that University is akin to a business arrangement; I am paying a considerable amount for my place and while I do everything to the best of my ability, I have no qualms in speaking up if I feel that something is not in my best interest, is ambiguous or there are issues that I could (and should) be helped with by the University or its' staff (111).*

Main theme 4: Self-awareness

Participants described themselves as being aware of aspects of their personality and of its impact. They were curious about other people and about differences between them: *I now reflect more on why I think a certain way about situations and also why other people may do the same. It has also made me think more about my values, although I was aware that I had them, I was not aware of how they compare to other peoples (100).*

Increased self-awareness and active reflection translated into behaviours for managing self and engaging with others: *I believe I am very self-aware and have the critical tools to analyse my position e.g. management self-development, emotional intelligence, negotiation skills and crucial conversations (131); Humility: Ability to identify self-limitations on certain subject matters and source for help by any means (119).* Participants stated or implied that self-awareness was a product of pre-university experience, although by this second term they may also have been encouraged to engage in reflective activities on some programmes of study.

Subtheme: Clear values

The values which underpinned participants' commitment to studying were both personal and altruistic: *I value myself and hence I know that I am worth putting in long hours and pushing myself to work hard with the knowledge that I am aiming for my future (105). .....knowing the difference my becoming a registered nurse will make to mine and my family's futures is a very good motivator so I suppose I have also brought with me a strong sense of responsibility and family values (112).* They recognised the changes in values and valuing that can come with maturity: *My values have become stronger as I have matured; my commitment to this degree is greater than what it would have been when I was a teenager. I understand and value the education that I am receiving (137); I know I'm very fortunate to be doing what I'm doing…. (133).*

Subtheme: Processing emotions

Participants described varying but generally positive relationships with their emotions: *I realise that emotions are just emotions and they are natural, so I can recognise and put them into context (105). Whilst I can feel empathetic, I find it difficult to show emotions particularly when I have been taught most of my life to keep them hidden. I see this as a challenge but not necessarily a negative one (100).* They felt equipped to work with their emotions in order to manage personal and academic challenges: *I have life experience and because of this I feel that I am able to look at situations without jumping in and using my emotions to control how I feel (114). Stress can be an issue and is a barrier to learning so recognising my own emotional state and identifying how to alleviate my stress is essential. (113).* And they were sensitive to the different emotional experience of younger students: *My emotional responses within lessons have also altered; because of the age gap between myself and the other students I have realised I need to filter my comments so they take them into consideration (130).*

Subtheme: Coping with pressures

In addition to the benefits of social support described previously, participants employed cognitive and behavioural strategies to manage the pressures of being a student: *I have managed to cope quite well with my first year at university. This has been down to a number of factors that has enabled me to 'see the bigger picture' and to work through the hard times, for example: I am able to detect when I am overloaded and remove myself from a given situation for a break (105).*

They could reason from a higher level perspective on their current situation to the adoption of specific responses*: I try to remember to enjoy the next three years as I chose to study for a degree, no-one forced me back into education. Making time to do things that I enjoy or plan a day off from study is just as important as attending university or planning a day where I do study (113).* And they understood that adapting to studenthood might require time and an attitude of acceptance: *I have to balance part-time study with part-time paid employment. This can be stressful - I have taken the invaluable advice to learn to ease myself into uncertainty (131).*

Subtheme: Positive thinking

Participants reported that positive thinking was important in meeting the ongoing and various challenges of being a student. It was conceived as a facet of personality and as a belief in self: *I am a positive thinker and I know I am capable of completing my degree (113); I have a positive outlook in life. I know things don't go the way things have been planned or the way I expect, but somehow I know I can handle it in so many ways (125).*

Positive thinking involved the use of specific coping strategies*: I think it is very important to have a good sense of humour.…..I try to take some form of positive action if I am worried about something such as e-mailing tutors/students advisors/doing extra reading etc. (124); I turn any knocks I receive either academically or personally into a learning process. It doesn't make the failure hurt less, but ensures I'm not likely to make the same mistake again (107).*

Participants indicated that they had become more optimistic as they had matured and observed that this might be different for younger students: *I know from past experience that you always come through difficult times, so I focus on things getting better (105); Many of the other students, but by no means all, have a youthful self-confidence that helps drive their work, but I am not at all sure that that even at their age I would have shown the same confidence (131).*

Findings: Support

Main theme 1: Family, friends and colleagues

Participants described receiving strong, positive support for being a student from their family: *My family and extended family have been amazing and fully supportive, especially my husband and my teenage children, which has enabled me to put my study time first (136); Father constantly tells me how proud he is (133).* As well as emotional support, they provided practical help to facilitate studying: *My mother has created a space in her dining room where I could go to get away from the noise at home (107); Jobs and chores I once would have undertaken at home have been done by my husband and son (113).*

Subtheme: Understand, encourage and enable

Participants were encouraged by their friends and colleagues who showed interest in the course and in how they are coping: *Those who have been through university offer understanding and support whilst those who haven't have offered moral support and provided me with the motivation to succeed, almost on their behalf (111).* They felt that their ongoing needs for study time were understood and accepted, inside and outside the family: *Friends have understood when I have been unable to go to things (137); My work have been very understanding where I have taken more time off when I have busy periods at University (123).* Family and friends were valued for being available to talk to about participants' student experience: *Most importantly is the time they have given me to talk things through and to support me this year (105); Being able to arrange a car share provided the opportunity to discuss worries and concerns (113).*

Subtheme: Guilt for impact on family life

Some participants were uncomfortably aware that study requirements and other course commitments had an impact on their family life: …*this often provokes feelings of guilt, particularly regarding the amount of time I spend with my children (112); I try to study in the evening when the boys are in bed (137);…I sometimes feel very guilty and selfish that the family have had to suffer as a consequence (138).*

Main theme 2: Relationships with fellow students

Participants valued their relationships with other students although the data did not indicate whether these were solely or mainly with other older adult students: *I spend most of my time at university with the same group of friends. We have provided a lot of support for each other – sharing information, emotional support, doing work together as a group, discussing events*

etc. I found this very useful and necessary in many ways as it helped to improve all of our performances. I don't have any other support (124).

Subtheme: Empathy and emotional support

Student friends were an important source of emotional as well as academic support: *They have certainly been the first people I have turned to when I haven't quite understood something in a lecture, they have also been the people who best understand the pressures of the exam period and how deadlines can make you want to cry (107).* Support was reciprocal and could go beyond academic issues to provide ...*some counsel, guidance and sharing of experiences that has often aided my academic work and/or decision making regarding many aspects of my life (112).* Referring to perceptions of a lack of formal support from the university (below), one participant's view was that *many people are suffering because of this which makes support from other students even more important (124).*

Subtheme: Academic discussion and collaboration

Friendships were established with other students for academic support and development: *I have a small network of students who I have grown close to and we support each other through lectures and assignments (136).* Other collegial relationships included student blogs, discussion boards, peer-assisted learning and ….*many opportunities to discuss and understand academic work when I have had queries or concerns (112).*

Main theme 3: Mixed experience of staff

There was a range of perceptions of the quality of university support. For some participants, their experience was of little support for students: *I have had great difficulty getting any support from the university on any subject and I have been and still am wandering in the dark (120); I think the level of support is very poor in fact virtually non-existent, everyone I speak to feels the same way (124).* From others there was the highest praise for the quality of support: *Tutor and programme leader both extremely supportive when my father was very ill and after another family tragedy. Put my mind at rest about meeting course commitments and offered to help at any time (133); I have found the UWE and its staff most helpful (137).*

There was a feeling that academic staff were divided into those who were willing to support students and those who were not. One consequence was that *[support] is something that has had to be hunted down at times, simply because of the demands that are made of those particular staff members where time is concerned (111).* It may also have been the case that the availability of support depended on staff beliefs about their role: *The staff on the*

course I have felt is a mixed bag with some willing to support and some indicating that because it is adult learning we must do it on our own…. (123). One participant suggested that *….any support that I have received from the university is almost certainly down to the goodwill and understanding of individuals (such as certain lecturers, programme leaders) rather than being the result of any policy regarding support that has been made by the university establishment (111).*

Subtheme: Approachable and encouraging

Lecturers and tutors were experienced as approachable and encouraging: *Tutor very approachable and willing to listen – supported me when I was disappointed with an assignment grade. Raised morale (133); The module leader has been fantastic and fully supportive….She is easy to contact and very amiable (136).* They were experienced as helpful: *The tutors……have been supportive in terms of working through assignments and making sure we understand what's involved (106). ….the standard of teaching I feel has been very good and without it I wouldn't have got through the first year of this course (123).* There was concern about taking up too much of tutors' time *especially if I am not the only one seeking support (112),* and a belief that more time should be available: *I am aware that there are cuts being made and course leaders and tutors are being given more and more work to do; however I feel that there is not always enough support given especially for those who have been out of education for a while like myself (123).*

Subtheme: Lack of feedback

Feedback was important for older adult students who may have no prior experience of higher education and lack objective appraisals of their academic abilities. Participants found that *… feedback on assignments is slow and in some cases non-existent and this is a weakness in terms of developmental opportunities (106).* For one participant, negative experiences of trying to get feedback on academic questions meant that *I will probably not use this method again (112).* For another who failed an assignment: *…this gives me the opportunity to have that one-to-one session that I craved for during the lessons. The tutor will go through my essay plan, what is needed etc. This is what I really wanted early on and I only get it when I have failed (120).*

Subtheme: Generally helpful services

Student services and their staff (including the students' union) were generally experienced as supportive and professionally skilled, in one case resolving a situation *that could not have only been more complex without their help but also a lot more stressful (112).* However,

time with advisers could be an issue: *the session is usually only half an hour which is not enough time to settle and then ask the questions (120).* And while one participant felt supported with her psychiatric diagnosis, another was dissatisfied that *unless I have a specific diagnosis they are unable to help (123),* reflecting the external constraints on funding for some aspects of student support. Participants appreciated the facilities and resources provided for studying: *The Blackboard and on-line information is invaluable to me as I am doing this degree part time… the UWE job finding resources that again have proved very useful. The Library is excellent. (137).*

Main theme 4: Cries unheard

Outside the patterned themes of participants' experience - positive, negative and mixed - there are a number of strands which are less clearly drawn but which suggest significant individual impact. The examples given here indicate concerns around learning, wellbeing, isolation and trust:

- *A lot of what we have been asked to do is open to interpretation which for the first year I thought would be either clarified or more specific questions would have been asked of me (123). I prefer to work in smaller intimate groups like seminars, when I can achieve a better understanding of what is being said, and feel happier about contributing to discussions (138).*
- *My GDP tutor is the only one that has asked me about my disability and is it affecting my leaning. It is, but if I say YES, then I would have to have another review and I do not want to be kicked off the course due to my epilepsy (120). As for how [being at university] will affect me – at the moment it's affecting me very badly and I feel extremely anxious and unwell to be honest (124).*
- *There have been some discussions that would have been inappropriate or even pointless to discuss with my family, no matter how supportive they are (112); All in all I have not had much support from family, friends or colleagues. I have been a real loner, lost a few friends along the way as I was not able to attend certain social functions (120).*
- *I tend to ask a lot of questions about organisation of modules and deadlines and this is not always welcomed (106); None of the full time staff were interested in solving the problem and I felt I had no one to turn to… it becomes a challenge not to be cynical in looking at certain people with tenure as their attitude is one of only being there to pick up a cheque (116).*

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Although the individual backgrounds to these reports are unknown, collectively they suggest an experiential space where some students' relationship with the university community is partial or unresponsive, and unsatisfactory as a context for learning. They indicate aspects of being an older adult student that may be overlooked, particularly if it is assumed that they are always able to cope, and/or where the student lacks confidence in articulating their needs and concerns.

Discussion

The older adult students who participated in this study described the challenges they faced during their first year at university, the personal resources they engaged and the support they received in addressing those challenges.

Challenges

Three themes summarised the challenges to participants: the meaning they attached to becoming a student; their concerns about academic ability and achievement; and balancing the demands of studying with their social and occupational roles. Whatever the individual motivations for entering higher education, the challenges were willingly, if anxiously, accepted; she or he had made a positive choice to be there. Participants may have felt overwhelmed but they were also excited at the prospects, and anticipated being able to manage. Some focused on the emotional impact of becoming a student while others saw problems to be solved: finding time to study or getting a parking space on campus.

They expressed complex feelings and their self-reflections were nuanced rather than absolute. Even in the first term where challenges were perhaps most intense, participants' responses suggested internal moderation of their impact ('*adapting to a totally alien way of learning*'). Their responses indicated an ability to re-appraise their emotions ('*this is a fairly common concern*') in advance of acquiring the specific skills of being a student. They held a belief in their ability to adapt which was rooted in self-knowledge ('*I am well-organized*') and which implied hope for the future. In an essay on the emotional challenges facing older students, Kasworm describes learning as acts of hope: that they will be able to fully engage with the college environment, that they will be able to overcome the emotional, practical and intellectual demands of higher education, and that they will be able to identify themselves as a successful student. '*Each views this experience as the purposeful choice for a new and different future, a future of hope and possibilities.*' (Kasworm 2008, p.27).

Participants reported a need to achieve academically combined with anxiety about not being able to do so. This specific conflict contrasted with their more general feelings of self-efficacy and hope with regard to becoming a student. Yet there was little mention of the intellectual challenges which might be entailed or enjoyed by their programme of study - new knowledge, concepts and frames of reference. One explanation is that they had adopted the more instrumental approach that has come to characterise students within a fees-based system. Another is that, in the first term, performance anxieties in an unfamiliar environment are understandably high and tend to over-ride intellectual absorption.

Their anxieties were increased by the shock of the academic workload, by feeling that they were left to cope with it on their own, and by having to integrate the demands of university

with their outside commitments; participants were often entering higher education within the context of an established lifestyle and adding to that by becoming a student. The perception that younger student colleagues were cognitively quicker and more energetic, yet careless of their education, was a further irritant. So, in their first term of higher education, the fear and feeling of not being able to manage was ever-present but not necessarily seen as everlasting.

These challenges to participants reflected a wider picture: in a recent survey of mature students in the UK, 83% cited balancing studying with other commitments as their biggest challenge. This was followed by concerns about money, (re-)learning study skills and integrating with other students. The survey also noted a widespread lack of confidence about being able to cope, intellectually and emotionally (Million+ and NUS 2012). Earlier studies by Kantanis (2002) and Wilson (1997) painted a similar picture although, as Wilson points out, it is unlikely that every student will experience the same mix of challenges (Wilson 1997, p.61). Notably, participants in previous studies were less concerned with balancing commitments and finance; under the current fees regime, the financial challenges and the time needed to address them via employment have become more salient.

Resources

In their second term, participants reflected on the personal resources they brought to their life as a student; the assets, aptitudes and abilities that they deployed to manage the student experience. Major themes were the contributions of life experience, their persistence and their passion for education, a marked inclination to work with colleagues, and a level of mature self-awareness. These echoed the views of university staff consulted at the start of the project, and the findings of background research (e.g. Given 2002; Harris and Brooks 1998).

Their life experience had given them transferable skills in organising and studying, in meeting deadlines and overcoming setbacks, learnt in employment and from bringing up children. Being mature was associated with increased tolerance and understanding of others, and of '*how the real world is*'. Considering the task ahead and the unfamiliar context, there was a qualified sense of confidence.

Persistence and passion, their enthusiasm for the course content and a general openness to knowledge constituted a driving force; a counterweight to the anxieties, uncertainties and practical challenges which threatened to overwhelm them in the first year. Castles (2004) found that persistence in adult learners depended primarily on support, on having strong coping strategies but also on being a 'life-challenger'. The concept of a 'life challenger' includes attributes such as viewing change as a challenge, believing that one has the resources to cope, feeling committed to one's activities and having a positive attitude; also

included are the ability to juggle roles, success in studying and a love of learning. While this may paint an overly positive picture of the ideal adult learner, it also suggests that the conditions of life for many adults mean that higher education is not for the faint-hearted.

The theme of self-awareness embraced four attributes: clear values, ability to process emotions, ability to cope with pressures and positive thinking. These are psychological resources that enable effective self-management which, as a result of maturation, one would expect to be more developed in older adult than in traditional-age students. Awareness of these resources enabled participants to employ them intentionally and effectively in pursuit of their goals. They possessed a level of self-efficacy (Bandura 1982): the belief that one has the ability to attain certain goals. While participants were initially doubtful about their ability to cope with the academic and personal challenges, they possessed a general sense of efficacy which was increasingly deployed to manage those challenges.

The array of personal strengths identified by Seligman (2002, above) have much in common with resources identified here: persistence, curiosity, open-mindedness, perspective, teamwork, self-control, humility, gratitude and optimism. They also concur with the Blueprint for Careers, an internationally used framework for career development which is used to help mature applicants to Access programmes assess their aptitude for higher education across three categories: Understanding and developing myself; Exploring life, learning and work; Developing and managing life, learning and work (Learning and Skills Improvement Service 2012, p.5).

Participants might well be described as 'academically resourceful' (Rosenbaum 1990), a concept that refers to problem-solving and emotion management skills applied in higher education settings. Xuereb (2015) found that mature students demonstrated higher levels of academic resourcefulness and adaptive coping skills than traditional-age students. Her participants had a mean age of 24 and her findings suggest that there is a significant increase in mature coping skills by early adulthood. Similarly, Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) found that older female students (aged 35 to 44) exhibited better psychological functioning and reported better academic performance than traditional-aged students (18 to 22 years) despite having less, and less satisfactory, social support.

Participants had acquired those attributes and capacities identified as development goals for traditional age-students, such as competence, managing emotions, becoming more independent, managing relationships, integrity and a sense of purpose (Chickering and Reisser 1993). Bauer and Baumeister (2011) have provided evidence that self-management processes such as these can result in 'ego depletion', a reduction of the capacity for executive functioning. As the mental energy required for study persistence or deferring gratification, for example, is a limited resource whose full capacity is still developing in younger students, older adult learners may have surplus cognitive and emotional capacity to

attend to the academic challenges of higher education for which, in some other respects, they are less well-prepared.

Thus through life experience, maturity in self-management, commitment, social networks in and out of university, participants had acquired and personalised a 'resource pool' (Hendry and Kloep 2002). They could draw selectively from this pool to navigate the challenges of their first year and in support of longer-term development. In support of this more strategic approach, a qualitative study of coping strategies used by mature students found that they tended to see their life situation as an integrated whole rather than focussing on single sources of stress; that they were oriented to achieving long-term goals as well as coping with immediate challenges (Taylor 1998).

Support

Towards the end of their first year, participants described their experiences of support from inside and outside the university. They felt strongly that the various forms of support provided by family, friends and colleagues were important in enabling them to focus on their course of study and its demands. The author of a student survey at the same university (Last 2010) noted that *'....the majority of part-time students come onto campus for their study and study related activities only - <u>especially the mature ones</u>.......most of them had social networks outside the university…* (K. Last, personal communication.). The role of partners in providing a buffer against student stress for mature students has been reported by Norton, Thomas, Morgan et al. (1998); more recently, emotional and practical support for mature students was shown to be mostly provided by partners, family and friends (Ramsay, Jones and Barker 2007).

Despite the understanding and encouragement they received, some participants felt guilty about their partial withdrawal from family life and its impact on family members, especially their children. They did not say whether this conflict was discussed with their partner or others or whether it remained unexpressed; and there was no suggestion that participants might give up their studies because of such feelings. One hypothesis is that mature adults with supportive relationships have developed the ability to contain and manage mixed feelings: of academic ambition, hope and persistence on one hand with, on the other, academic anxieties, guilt towards family and frustration arising from constraints on family and social activities. In a study of female mature students (Shanahan 2000), compromises between the demands of home and their high academic standards resulted in feelings of guilt; Shanahan suggested that this was expressed as anxiety about their academic studies, as may have been the case with participants here.

From the start, many participants were positively oriented to getting on with their peers; a major source of support - given and received - came from active involvement with student

colleagues to form networks of support. One consequence may be that first-year mature students are less likely than younger students to withdraw due to problems with social integration (Yorke and Longden 2008): academic and personal support from peer relationships helps to maintain motivation and manage stressors during this challenging period of adapting to university life. Where participants had negotiated study time with their family, organised study routines and received strong social support, retention is also more likely through a stronger sense of belonging to the university (Kember and Leung 2004).

Participant experiences of institutional support, academic and personal, were varied: sometimes helpful, sometimes stimulating; sometimes contentious with a note of consumer dissatisfaction. Some studies have found that the structure of student services could be better suited to the needs of adult learners (e.g. Miller and Gleeson 2007); the concerns here were more about the quality of individual relationships with staff. Copsey (2011) has suggested that academic staff do appreciate the challenges of being an older student but rely primarily on their professional and personal experience to support them rather than on any formal training.

While part-time attendance and the demands of life outside university may have meant that working relationships with tutors took longer to establish, it was clear that participants expected an equal, adult relationship. Hence the view that professional development should promote engagement with adult learners as adults as well as learners. The idea that an older adult student is not just a learner but *'a whole person with roles as partner, parent, worker and money manager'* (Forbus, Newbold and Mehta 2010, p.147) underlines the diverse and substantial identity status of this group of students. It implies a need for staff to perceive and support them according to that status. Their capacity to cope with the general challenges of higher education, of incorporating its demands into their current daily life, should not mean that they are denied the extra support they need for the academic and practical challenges arising from their more complex life situations. Given the mature resources that older adults possess, these observations suggest that the orientation of student support needs to be consultative rather than prescriptive; less a question of how they are supported than how staff can negotiate with them, as autonomous adults, the academic support they need.

From their study of student coping, Clegg, Bradley and Smith concluded that '*the idea of being an adult, and being at university not school, involves notions of the capacity to cope with problems independently'* (Clegg, Bradley and Smith 2006, p.111). For students of all ages, they found that seeking help was associated with failure or loss of face but suggested that mature students might find it easier to ask for help because of feeling a peer connection with university staff. Nonetheless, the theme of 'Cries unheard' from some participants in this study is a reminder that there are older adult students who do not integrate, do not cope

and who feel adrift in the university environment. The perceived independence of mature students, the apparent indifference of some academic staff and a reluctance to seek help may all be factors which contribute to a lack of engagement. For students whose school experiences were unsatisfactory there may be an element of negative transference towards staff that has yet to be resolved. It is unwise to generalise from limited data and it may be that these are first-year experiences which will resolve in time. But they suggest a focus for attention and a questioning of the assumption that older students are always able to cope.

Life-stage student development

As outlined previously, a psychosocial view of student development entails a negotiation between individual potential, perceived challenges and social support. Traditional-age students are supported by the university, quasi-parentally, in moving towards greater autonomy as learners (Chickering and Reisser 1993). In contrast, older adult students arrive with a stronger sense of personal autonomy though lacking in academic skills and confidence. They have coping strategies which are still evolving in younger students; they are likely to have established social networks of family and friends which are locally available; and they may be more confident about seeking help and support from colleagues and tutors.

Overcoming challenges is central to student development and adult learners' self-efficacy has been shown to interact with their social support to bolster commitment at times of challenge (Goto and Martin 2009). Participants' drive to overcome challenges was indicated by, for example, their negotiation of family support and their anticipation of feedback on assignments which they hoped would validate their academic self-efficacy. From this perspective, their varied relationships with staff may have reflected variations in academic self-efficacy and personal self-confidence, which reinforces the proposal that staff need to engage with them as individual adult learners.

Vella and Schlatter (2006) cite evidence that correlates academic achievement with emotional intelligence and hold that UK universities do very little *'to assist students with their social and emotional growth, and acquisition of personal and interpersonal skills'* (Vella and Schlatter 2006, p.7). Their definition of emotional intelligence includes adaptive capacities, the ability to control impulses and cope with stress, together with intrapersonal and interpersonal skills – attributes that appear functionally equivalent to those described by participants: open-mindedness, processing emotions, coping with pressures and getting on with people. Conversely, writers such as Ecclestone, Hayes and Furedi (2005) are critical of the rise of what they call 'therapeutic education' which over-focuses on the psychological well-being of students at the expense of addressing pedagogic challenges. This binary was not apparent in reports from participants who both valued collegial support in discussing

academic content and emotional support in managing the challenges of being an older adult student. Clegg, Bradley and Smith (2006) concluded that students of all ages expect there to be challenges in life but require adequate support from the university for those that arise particularly from being a student; analysis of participant responses here was consistent with that view, but also that they deployed resources and sought support that were both pedagogic and psychological, formal and informal.

The challenges reported by participants in their first year may then signal the start of a process of change. In interviews with mature students across a three-year programme, Mercer and Saunders (2004) showed that students had to resolve tensions which are similar to those reported by participants here: managing multiple demands, wanting to succeed but fearing failure; feeling confident in life but not in college. They suggest that the changes in identity and the growth in self-confidence which can accompany the mature student experience are the necessary developmental outcome of resolving such conflicts. In this light, participants' deployment of personal resources and engagement with support were more than just ways of coping with challenges; they were also the building blocks of a revised, expanded and stronger sense of identity.

Limitations of the study

The study drew on the free-text responses of 22 participants to enquiries about challenges, resources and support. This is an adequate sample size for a qualitative study and produced a respectable data set. It could be argued that the enquiry forms did not enable sufficient depth of responding compared to that obtainable from individual interviews; these might have provided some triangulation and elaboration of the themes described, or invited alternative construction of aspects of the data set. And although participants were provided with definitions of each topic - challenges, resources and support - these were subject to individual interpretation.

Each of the three enquiry forms was sent out at the midpoint point of one term only. The rationale was to engage participants with each enquiry at a time in the academic year when they would have sufficient experience of student life to be able to respond; and to avoid overloading new students with research activity when they had other priorities. However, responses to a three-part enquiry obtained concurrently in each of the three terms might have given a fuller picture of how challenges, resources and support developed and interacted over the first academic year.

Due to staff limitations, the data was collected and analysed by one person only. The researcher and data analyst was a counselling psychologist who was experienced in setting aside preconceptions in therapeutic conversations and aimed to utilise this skill in the data

analysis, as well as having previous experience of applying thematic analysis (Topham, Moller and Davies 2014). Nonetheless, the lack of confirmatory analysis by at least one other researcher is less than ideal.

While not intended to be an evaluation study, it would have been useful to include information on the academic and other outcomes (including withdrawal) of the participants after the first year. This might have moderated reflections on the findings, enabled a closer integration with the literature on mature students and suggested further enquiries into the relationships between the psychosocial attributes of older adult students and their academic and personal outcomes.

Recommendations for further research

This study has shown that sequential enquiries through participants' first year can access how they experience and respond to the challenges of being an older adult student. Further research could usefully track experience and functioning through subsequent years at university (levels 2 to 3/4, or on to undergraduate years for Foundation students). Concurrent as well as consecutive enquiries into challenges, resources and support would provide immediate data which might be judged to have more validity than retrospective reporting and indicate developmental linkages between these variables.

A comparative study of the experiences and functioning of traditional-age students (18-21) would help to clarify commonalities and differences in how new students at separate life-stages appraise and cope with university. For example, whether a portion of the challenges identified here are common to all new students (e.g. fear of failure) while others are more common among older students (e.g. guilt about neglecting family). Another question is whether variables such as early experience and personality factors have a significant impact on student adaptation, regardless of chronological age and the presumption of maturity; for example, to what extent an optimistic student of 18 is better equipped for tertiary education than an under-confident 40-year-old.

The themes identified in this study offer a basis for quantitative study of a larger sample of older adult students. This would provide a more representative profile of this group of students and help to identify characteristics of that presumed minority, glimpsed here, for whom becoming an older adult student is more difficult and less rewarding. In particular, it may be worth enquiring into the barriers to obtaining support from lecturers, advisers and specialist services, as perceived by older adult learners.

Conclusions

The idea of enquiring into older adult students' experiences of challenges, resources and support was based on a psychosocial view of human development: that an individual's potential to progress in some respect, to develop some further capacity, is matched by a supportive response to that potential from their environment. Universities, with all their resources and systems of support, are available to those who wish to join them.

An analysis by Nelson and Wilkinson (2010) suggested that there is a long-term downward trend in the relative importance of adult learners. In a survey of the impact of fees on access to higher education, the Independent Commission on Fees (2014) noted the continuing decline in the numbers of mature students applying to and entering higher education. Recent data indicates that, for those aged 25 years and over, the numbers applying to university in 2013 was 11% below 2010 levels; the take-up of university places was 18% less compared to 2010; and that 43% fewer mature students started part-time courses in 2012/13 than in 2009/10 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2014).

As Nelson and Wilkinson observe, the reduction in older student numbers constitutes the loss of a valuable resource to society and lost opportunities for social mobility for individuals. For those who do enter higher education, it also means that their isolation is increased and valued sources of peer support and development, as reported here, are diminished.

Older adult students may be better equipped to deal with some of the challenges of higher education than their younger peers: coping with multiple stressors; managing emotions; organising time and study commitments; crises of identity and self-esteem. Yet traditional-age students arrive fresh from secondary education, better oriented to learning cultures and methods, more technologically proficient, with youthful energy and few other commitments. Both younger and older students have areas of strength and skill, of capacity and resilience; for a university, a learning community, the contribution that is attributable to the diverse life-stages of its students is a significant asset.

In the initial discussions with stakeholder colleagues there was enthusiastic support for conducting research with mature students. There was also a concern that the same problems of lack of support were being voiced by mature students as had been expressed ten years ago: that nothing had changed in terms of what the university was perceived to be providing; that the government's changing priorities had the effect of promoting widening access for younger students while diminishing it for older learners; and that where research illustrating their concerns was reported there was doubt as to whether it was being acted upon by the institution. It is worth re-stating those concerns in the hope that the findings of this study will encourage institutions to review and focus their support for older adult students.

Recommendations for student support

University staff in all roles may wish to reflect on the extent to which the findings of this study match their perceptions of older adult students. They might explore what it means to be an older student through workshops and seminars; and they might evaluate the extent to which the needs and attributes of older adult students are catered for by the campus facilities.

A summary of the study findings could be presented to enquirers at Open Days and other events promoting access to higher education for mature students. This would clarify the challenges and enable students to identify resources and support that they possess or could be helped to acquire. A summary might be drafted as follows:

Previous students have found it useful to
- *Choose a course that you are enthusiastic about;*
- *Discuss with your employer how they can support your studying;*
- *Discuss with your family the impact on family finances and how they might support your studying;*
- *Organise your life carefully with time for studying, work and home life;*
- *Think about how you can best manage the stresses of being a student, especially if you also have a job and a family;*
- *Get to know other people on the course and share your interest in the subject;*
- *If in doubt, ask for academic help and guidance from your lecturers and tutors;*
- *Tell your tutors or support staff if you have any concerns about the course or about being a student;*
- *Take every opportunity you can to learn study skills to help you be a more effective student.*

This information could be summarised in faculty programme information and incorporated in self-help literature by student services. University staff could use it as a checklist to use with incoming students and to review during personal tutor sessions. It could be also be provided for new staff inductions and staff development events on working with mature students.

In addition, staff development opportunities might consider:
- How best to facilitate working relationships with older adult students that are respectful of their resources while also being suitably challenging of academic engagement. This may be of particular interest for younger academic staff working with older students.
- The value of developmental (rather than prescriptive) advising for older adults; an approach which '*facilitates and guides, thus strengthening the advisor/advisee*

relationship and empowering the student for personal, academic and career success' (Bland 2003, p. 7). This engages with adult maturity and with older students' enthusiasm and self-direction, their desire for learning, willingness to debate issues and to share experiences (Bash 2003, p.140).

- The benefit to both students and lecturers of considering how teaching practices might integrate students' life experiences into their programme of study (for example, see LaBahn and Scarborough 2004.)

- Aiming for a more consistent experience of staff support by encouraging colleagues to clarify and periodically review the expectations of both students and staff regarding higher education and their roles in it.

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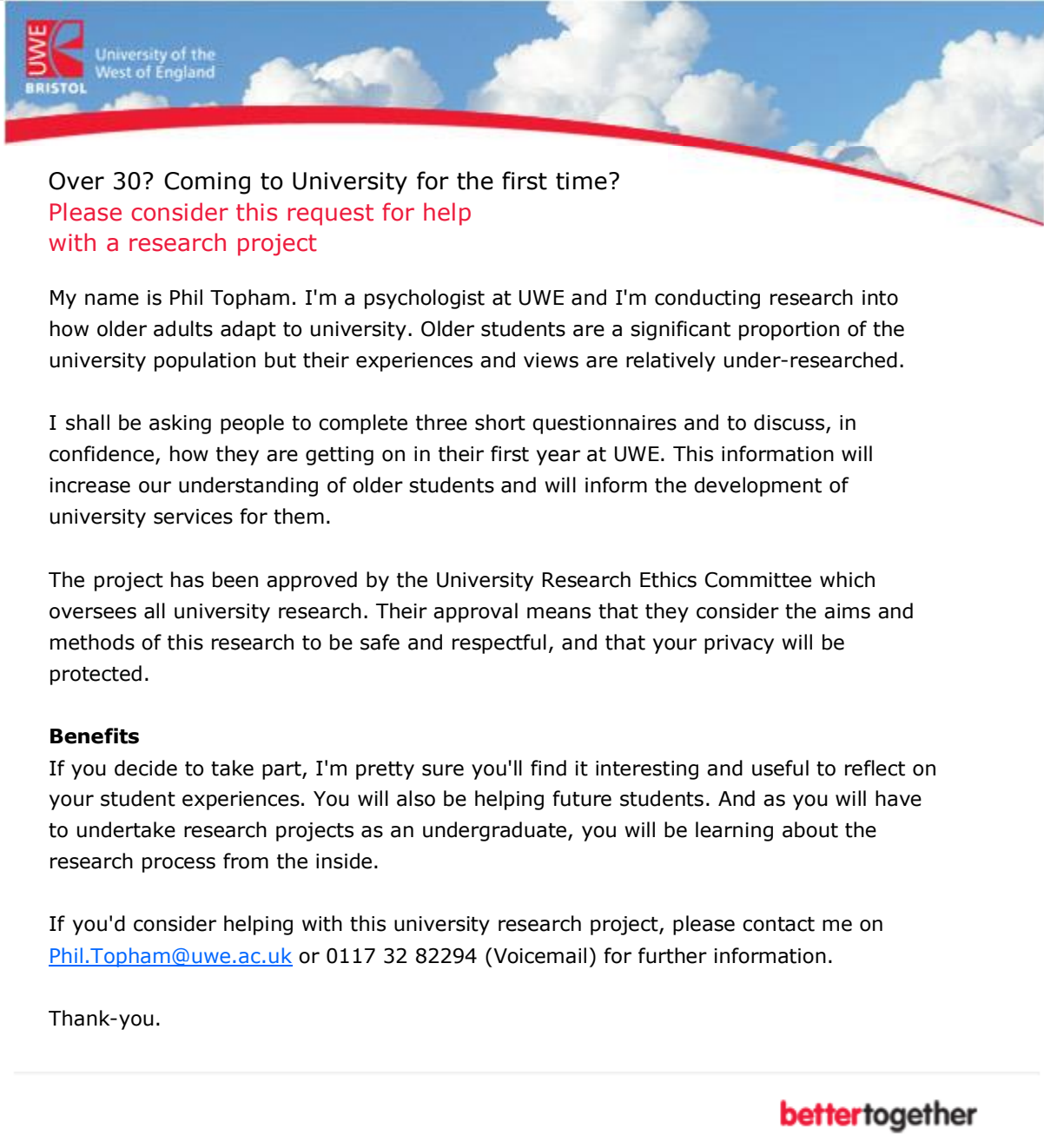
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Appendix I: Recruitment flyer

Over 30? Coming to University for the first time?
Please consider this request for help
with a research project

My name is Phil Topham. I'm a psychologist at UWE and I'm conducting research into how older adults adapt to university. Older students are a significant proportion of the university population but their experiences and views are relatively under-researched.

I shall be asking people to complete three short questionnaires and to discuss, in confidence, how they are getting on in their first year at UWE. This information will increase our understanding of older students and will inform the development of university services for them.

The project has been approved by the University Research Ethics Committee which oversees all university research. Their approval means that they consider the aims and methods of this research to be safe and respectful, and that your privacy will be protected.

Benefits

If you decide to take part, I'm pretty sure you'll find it interesting and useful to reflect on your student experiences. You will also be helping future students. And as you will have to undertake research projects as an undergraduate, you will be learning about the research process from the inside.

If you'd consider helping with this university research project, please contact me on Phil.Topham@uwe.ac.uk or 0117 32 82294 (Voicemail) for further information.

Thank-you.

bettertogether

Appendix IIa: Information for participants

UWE BRISTOL | University of the West of England

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH PROJECT

An enquiry into older adults' experience of their first year at university

INFORMATION FOR PROSPECTIVE PARTICIPANTS
PLEASE READ THIS DOCUMENT CAREFULLY AND SIGN THE CONSENT FORM
AT THE END IF YOU ARE WILLING TO PARTICIPATE.

Introduction
My name is Phil Topham. I am a Counselling Psychologist and Senior Researcher in the Department of Psychology. As part of an ongoing programme of research into support for students, I am inviting you to take part in a research project about aspects of your university experience during your first year at UWE. If you choose to participate, I believe that you will find it interesting and useful.

The project will focus on how you adapt to life as a student at university. I am particularly interested in the personal resources that people bring to university, such as skills and personal characteristics that help them manage as a student, and in how they develop further resources while at university. Such resources may be internal and personal, or external and related to other people and sources of university support.

We hope that the project outcomes will provide information about:

i. Developmental processes that are involved in becoming a student and adapting to university life;
ii. Psychological resources that individuals bring to and acquire while at university;
iii. Student perceptions and use of institutional and community support;

These outcomes will contribute to our understanding of adult student development and will inform the provision of student support in this university and elsewhere.
You are welcome to contact me with any enquiries or concerns about the project via Phil.Topham@uwe.ac.uk or by calling me on 0117 328 2294 (Voicemail).

Why I am approaching you
I am inviting people to consider participating for two reasons:

i. We want to learn more about how students adapt to university. Rightly or wrongly, I am assuming that older adults, having significant experience of life and of themselves, will be reasonably well-equipped to think and talk about their experiences as a new student.

ii. Research and student support has tended to prioritise traditonal-age students (18-21 years) who are at a different stage of life. It is fair to restore the balance of attention to older students although I anticipate that one of the consequences of this research will be to engage younger students in a related enquiry.

What your particlpation will involve

There are two elements to the research project, one involving questionnaires and one involving interviews. You may take part in just the questionnaire element, or both questionnaire and interview elements. Fewer people are required for the interviews and there will be some selection to get a balance of interviewees by age, gender etc.

Questionnaires

You will be asked to complete three questionnaires near the start of each term. The questionnaires ask about attitudes to studying and about psychological well-being and will take 5-10 minutes each to complete.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Personal and other information that you contribute to the project will be recorded anonymously. You will be asked to use your student registration number on questionnaires to ensure that there is consistency in the recording and storage of research data. It also enables the researcher to withdraw your information from the project at your request.

The researcher will have full access to your questionnaire data, and may also collaborate with academic staff colleagues in the Psychology Department on the analysis of participant data. All Psychology staff have a commitment to confidentiality and subscribe to guidelines for the ethical practice of research. These can be obtained from the researcher or from the British Psychological Society via www.bps.org.uk.

Your responses will not be identifiable in the research report although anonymous quotes from participants may be used for illustration. You will be shown the draft report so that you may withdraw or modify any such quotations. All information supplied by you will be securely stored, physically and/or electronically, and will be destroyed six years after the end of the project (August 2017).

Reporting the research

The draft report of the research will be made available for you to read and comment on any omissions or accuracies. The final report will be discussed by university staff who are involved with the wider research programme of which this project is a part, and will be available to other staff within the university and to the participants. The report, in part or entirely, may then be considered for publication and other forms of academic dissemination outside the university.

Advantages and disadvantages of taking part

Student involvement with this research topic is essential and your participation will be valued. I believe that you will find it interesting and, as all students have to undertake research, will give you some insight into how research is conducted.

Equally, there may be reasons why you would not wish to take part. You may feel that it is too early in your university career to be taking part in such activities, or feel unprepared to do so. You may feel uncomfortable about completing questionnaires. These are all understandable reasons and we suggest that you consider the options for participation and withdrawal in the next section.

Participation and withdrawal

If you decide to take part you will be asked to give your signed consent, below. Before deciding whether to take part, please consider the following:

1. You are under no obligation to take part in this research project.
2. If you do decide to take part you may later withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.
3. If you decide to withdraw yourself and your information, at any time, this will not affect any future academic options, assessment or reference given by the university.
4. If you decide to withdraw from the project, at any time, you may request that any personal or other information provided by you in the course of the research project be returned to you and withdrawn from the project files. This applies to all forms, questionnaires and other records where you have made a contribution.
5. You have the right to request that this information is withdrawn after the research activities have ended, up until the date when the research report is accepted for internal or external publication.
6. You may also contact the researcher (see contact information above and below) if, after completing a questionnaire:
    a. you are uncomfortable with what has been said or implied in the discussion and/or
    b. you wish to change what you have written or said, and/or
    c. you wish to have your written or spoken comments removed from the record of the discussion.

Giving your consent

PLEASE SEE THE FOLLOWING ATTACHMENT to read and sign the consent form >>

Appendix IIb: Consent form

University of the
West of England
BRISTOL

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

*** CONFIDENTIAL***

STUDENT DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH PROJECT:
An enquiry into older adults' experience of their first year at university

PLEASE SIGN AND RETURN THIS PAGE TO THE RESEARCHER.
YOU MAY WISH TO KEEP A COPY.

Consent to participate in research
I have read and understood the information provided. I am willing to participate in the research project as described.

SIGNED:

(If replying by email, it is sufficient to type in your name as you would sign it.)

NAME IN CAPITALS:

PROGRAMME OF STUDY:

DATE:

EMAIL ADDRESS:

Please return this form:
By email to Phil.Topham@uwe.ac.uk
Or
By internal mail via your Faculty or Campus Reception, addressed to
Phil Topham, Room 3A1, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Frenchay Campus.
(Recycled envelopes are available at university Reception points.)

Thank-you for your help.

Appendix III: Demographic questionnaire

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY   **CONFIDENTAL**
Student development project: Older adults' experience of university

Your Student Registration Number:

About you
In order to include a range of student perspectives (and to identify the limitations of available perspectives) it would be helpful if you could provide the following information:

Age: Gender:

Ethnicity:

Whether you identify yourself with a social class (please specify):

Whether you identify yourself as having a disability (please specify):

UK student / International student   *(Delete one)*

Mode of attendance: Full-time / Part-time

Starting at Level / Year: Foundation / UG1 / UG2 / Other

Please return this form to the researcher:

By email to Phil.Topham@uwe.ac.uk

Or

By internal mail via your Faculty or Campus Reception, addressed to
Phil Topham, Room 3A1, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Frenchay Campus.
(Recycled envelopes are available at university Reception points.)

Information supplied by you in connection with this project you will be anonymous, will be stored securely and will be destroyed 6 years after the end of the project.

Thank-you.

Appendix IVa: Challenges – Free text enquiry form

![UWE Bristol University of the West of England logo]

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY   **CONFIDENTAL**

Student Development Evaluation: Challenges

Your Student Registration Number:

Today's date:

We are interested in what you see as the challenges facing you during your higher education career.   These challenges may be academic, personal, practical or professional. They may be positive or negative, temporary or long-lasting. Use the space below to give your view of the challenges ahead, and how you think that they will affect you.

Continue on the next page if you wish >>

Please check that you have responded as you would wish and then return this form to the researcher:

By email to Phil.Topham@uwe.ac.uk
Or
By internal mail via your Faculty or Campus Reception, addressed to Phil Topham, Room 3A1, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Frenchay Campus. *(Recycled envelopes are available at university Reception points.)*

Information supplied by you in connection with this project you will be anonymous, will be stored securely and will be destroyed 6 years after the end of the project.

Thank-you for your help.

Appendix IVb: Resources – Free text enquiry form

University of the West of England
BRISTOL

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY   **CONFIDENTAL**

Student Development Evaluation: Your resources

Your Student Registration Number:

Today's date:

We are interested in the personal resources that you use to manage your higher education career.   Personal resources can include <u>skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, emotional responses and ways of thinking or acting.</u>
Please do not include financial resources or practical support from other people.
You may have brought some of these personal resources with you to university and may have developed others while you are here.
Use the space below to describe the personal resources that you draw on as a student in higher education.

Please check that you have responded as you would wish and then return this form to the researcher:

By email to Phil.Topham@uwe.ac.uk
Or
By internal mail via your Faculty or Campus Reception, addressed to Phil Topham, Room 3A1, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Frenchay Campus. *(Recycled envelopes are available at university Reception points.)*
Information supplied by you in connection with this project you will be anonymous, will be stored securely and will be destroyed 6 years after the end of the project.
Thank-you

Appendix IVc: Support – Free text enquiry form

University of the West of England
BRISTOL
UWE

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY   **CONFIDENTIAL**

Student Development Evaluation: Your support

Your Student Registration Number: 10035327

Today's date: 07/06/11

Now that you have completed your first academic year, we are interested in your views of any support that has helped you to to manage being a student in higher education. Please use the space below to describe and evaluate

1. Personal and social support that you have received from colleagues, friends and family;
2. Academic and personal support that you have received from the university and its services;
3. Any other support that you have received.

Continue on the next page if you wish >>

Please check that you have responded as you would wish and then return this form to the researcher:

By email to Phil.Topham@uwe.ac.uk
Or
By internal mail via your Faculty or Campus Reception, addressed to Phil Topham, Room 3A1, Faculty of Health and Life Sciences, Frenchay Campus. *(Recycled envelopes are available at university Reception points.)*

Information supplied by you in connection with this project you will be anonymous, will be stored securely and will be destroyed 6 years after the end of the project.
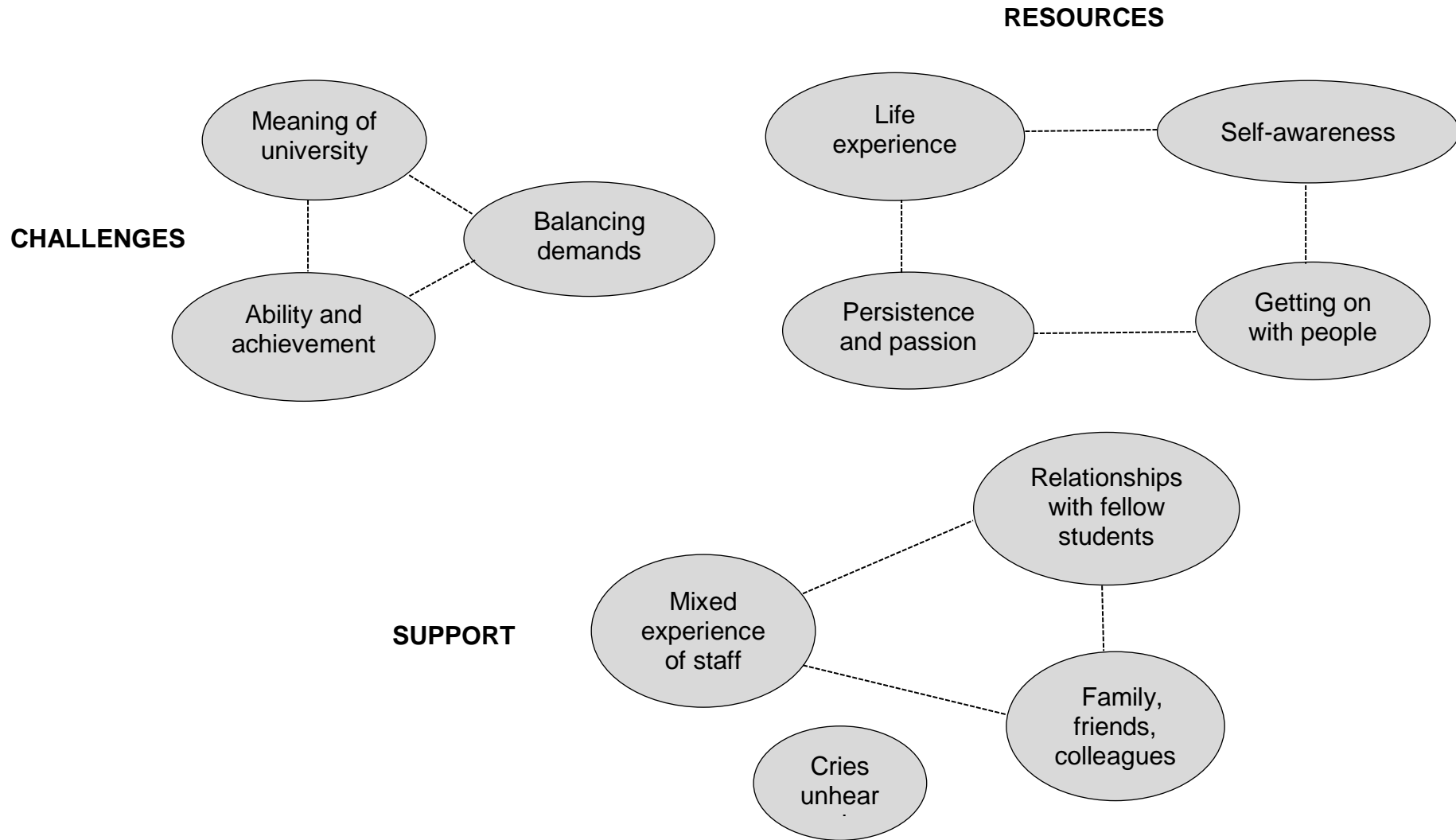
Thank-you for your help.

Appendix Va: Summary of themes and sub-themes

Challenges	Meaning of university	Emotional impact
		Degrees of confidence
	Ability and achievement	Amount of studying
		Study support
		Age differences
	Balancing demands	Jobs and money
		Family commitments

Resources	Life experience	Bring maturity to studying
		Prior knowledge
		Organisation and study skills
	Persistence and passion	Open-mindedness
		Learning to learn
	Getting on with people	Student community
		Relationship with tutors
	Self-awareness	Clear values
		Processing emotions
		Coping with pressures
		Positive thinking

Support	Family, friends, colleagues	Understand, encourage and enable
		Guilt for impact on family life
	Relationships with fellow students	Empathy and emotional support
		Academic discussion and collaboration
	Mixed experience of staff	Approachable and helpful
		Lack of feedback
		Generally helpful services
	Cries unheard	

Appendix Vb: Main Themes - Thematic map

RESOURCES

CHALLENGES

Meaning of university

Balancing demands

Ability and achievement

Life experience

Self-awareness

Persistence and passion

Getting on with people

Relationships with fellow students

SUPPORT

Mixed experience of staff

Family, friends, colleagues

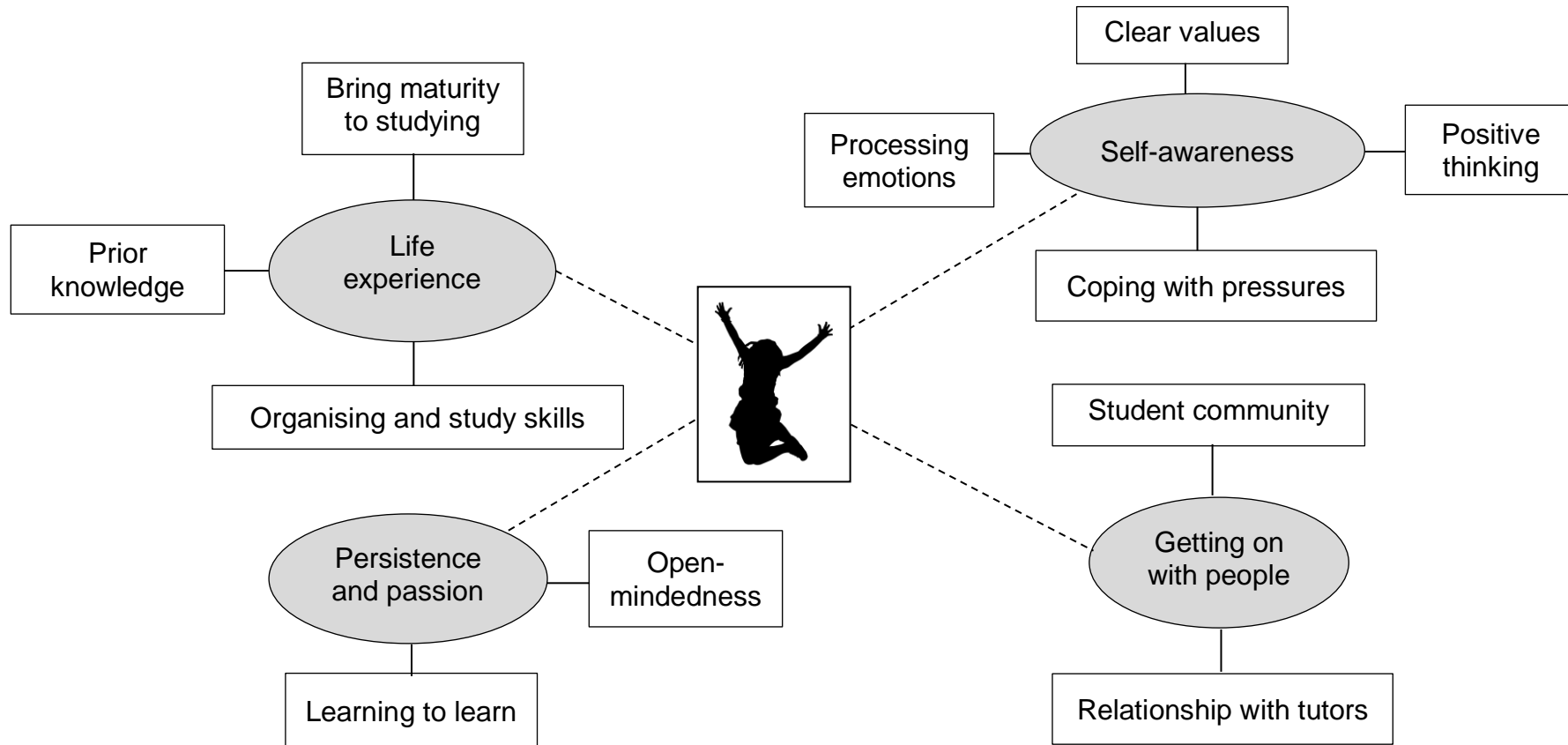Cries unhear

Appendix VIa: Challenges - Thematic map
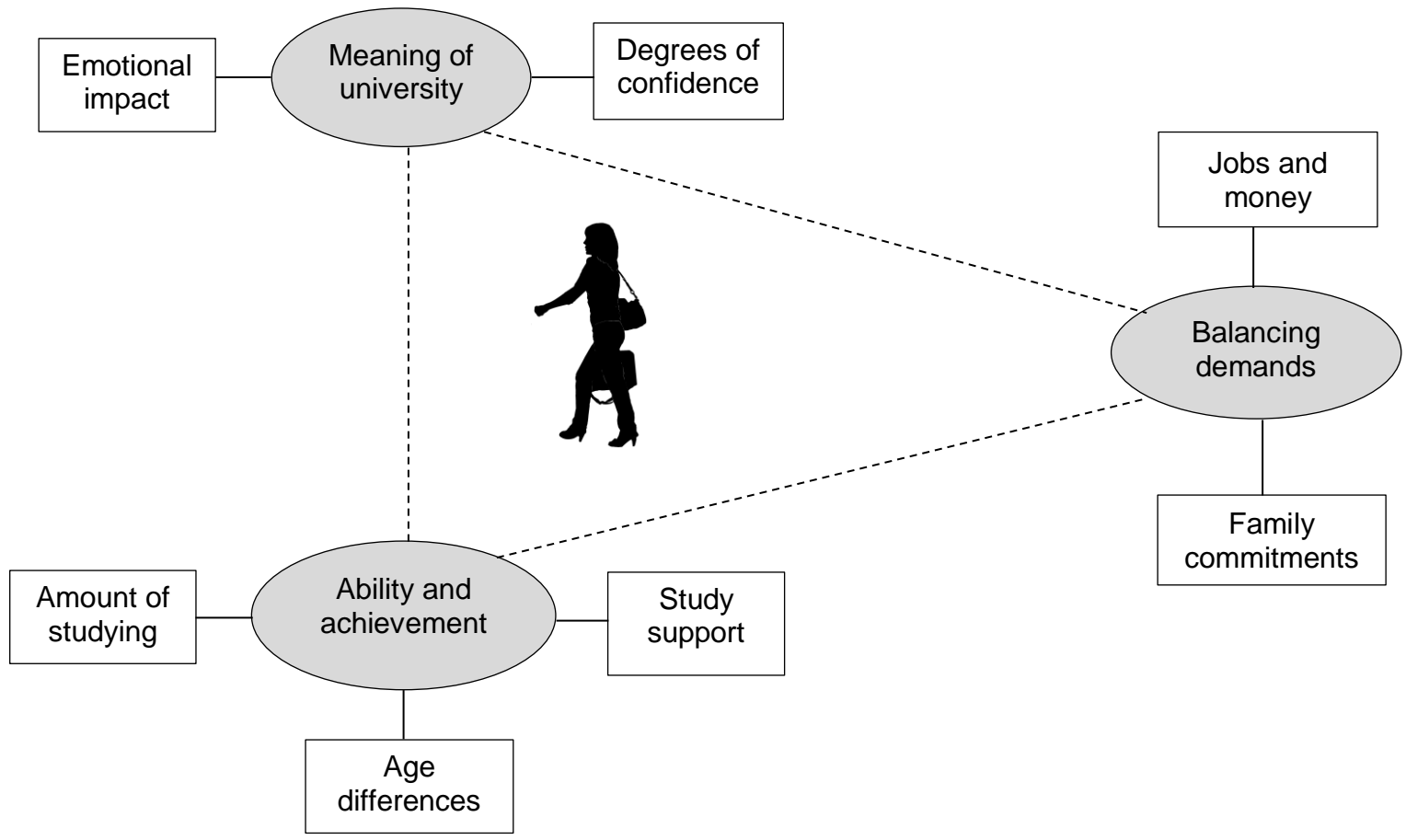
Appendix VIb: Resources - Thematic map

Appendix VIc: Support - Thematic Map

Approachable and encouraging

Generally helpful

Mixed experience of staff

Lack of feedback

Academic discussion and collaboration

Relations with fellow students

Empathy and emotional support

Cries unhear.

Family, friends, colleagues

Understand, encourage and enable

Guilt for impact on family life