

Mature Age Fact Sheet

Melbourne's school-leaver cohort is becoming more diverse, and we are also recruiting a more diverse range of mature age students. These students have specific needs.

Who are the mature age undergrad students?

This project discusses students over 23, who have not come straight from school, and are entering their undergraduate degree.

Their profile is very mixed. They may be middle-aged students coming back to study after raising children; students who had no prior opportunity to study at tertiary level; students undertaking a 2nd undergraduate degree immediately following their first; or professional people studying to upgrade their qualifications.

Mature age students also have differing family and work commitments, disabilities and mental health conditions, different cultural backgrounds, and expectations of their study.

In 2005, the University of Melbourne enrolled 411 mature age students into first year undergrad courses. Here's a snapshot of interesting facts about them:

- 86% (355) were local (6% (26) of these were rural) and 14% (56) international
- last year of schooling varied from 1961 to 2003 (unknown = 85)
- age ranged from 24 to 77; with 59% 24-29; 30% 30-39; 11% 40+ (0.3% >50)
- 58% (242) were female, 42% (169) male
- 4% (16) declared a disability on enrolment

What are they like?

Are there any common themes for mature age students? Some have been identified, though of course they will not apply to every student:

- Mature age students may be more committed to their course choice and clearer about their reasons for studying
- In general, they have less time to devote to study than school leavers, as they may have even more outside commitments than the school leaver cohort
- Mature age students may feel isolated from the rest of their peers because of less time spent on campus, or greater outside responsibilities. This isolation can affect both their academic and social engagement with the University.
- Group work may challenge those who have limited time to spend on campus
- Mature age students are more likely to give precedence to family or work needs over studies. If something has to be sacrificed, it will usually be studies.
- Flexibility in curricula, assessment schedules and attendance seem more important to these students.

- Mature age students seem over-represented in their use of services (eg LLSU and Student Finance), as they may be more likely to take advantage of supports offered. However, for some the availability of services can limit their access.

How does the University provide for these students?

Some mature age students find the University teaching and support programs innovative and extremely helpful, while others have experienced the University as patronising and a waste of time. Academic and general staff who assume that all first year students are school leavers risk alienating a sizeable proportion of very able and committed students.

Transition and induction programs need take into account the diversity of the student population, including mature age students, in order to successfully engage students with their course and the University academic community.

What more can be done to support mature age students?

Mature age students seem to expect a degree of flexibility from the University that allows them to pursue their course and maintain other commitments to work and family (the school leaver cohort increasingly expects the same).

Non-school leaver students will in general make use of support that is offered and benefit from it. In addition, these students can be very serious about their studies and make good progress in their courses. They may seem quite demanding to University staff as they pursue the best use of their limited time.

Some suggestions from staff and students about how to better support this cohort:

- Time management is a factor, with these students generally expecting comprehensive online access to curriculum and services. They may need support in organising their timetables and study tasks around their outside commitments.
- For those who have been out of study for a long time, returning can be difficult in terms of IT, changes in ways of learning, and writing reports/essays/ exams etc. The availability of out-of-hours or online support is an issue for these students.
- Outside commitments may severely limit their time on campus. Flexibility for group work and out-of-class projects should be considered.
- Sometimes decisions will need to be made between employment and study, so flexibility and understanding from the University is greatly appreciated.
- Mature age students would like to be recognised as having different needs, experience and contributions to the University academic community. Most do not want to be treated like school leavers with limited life experience.
- Mature age students need to be targeted with relevant information about services and resources. If they know about it, they will generally use it to best effect. So marketing and promotion of services is essential.
- Specialized support (for example: a dedicated website, email list, bulletin board, after-hours study groups, specialised mentors) should be considered to assist in engaging these students successfully.