Small communities grow great through harmony,
great ones fall to pieces through discord
Sallust

Discord to Harmony:

The challenges of mature age VET students in partner institutes as they
adjust to higher education

A HEPP Grant Project
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discord /*diskawd*/ n. lack of agreement or harmony between persons or things:

The Team

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The Context of the Project

Maximising student opportunity through accessibility and inclusiveness is one of the key foci of Federation University Australia

Collaboration between the sectors was one of the focuses of the terms of reference for Review of Australian Higher Education-Final Report (2008) resulting in a recommendation that there be a more flexible and responsive tertiary education and training sector (p.179).

Context cntd

NCVER emphasise the need to focus on a number of challenges including barriers to participation and completion and outcomes for disadvantaged learners

In a recent study, TAFE Coordinators described a range of academic difficulties that their students faced in the transition from TAFE to HE

(Weadon, Baker 2014, unpublished journal article)

Data gathering

Sydney
Albury Wodonga
Mildura
Horsham
Ballarat
Melbourne
n=

The Focus

.Objectives	.Effects	.Measures/Evaluation
To conduct an analysis of the resources/activities and affordances currently available through partner institutes and FedUni, and used by mature age students from low SES backgrounds transitioning from VET to a HE environment	Provide mature age students who are adjusting to the challenges of HE with appropriate resources/affordances thus building confidence and capacity within a virtual Community of Practice	Evaluation and feedback from student participants
Produce an online CoP for mature age, low SES students, that provides students with a place to connect with each other as well as the support that will contribute to improving participation in HE and build capacity and confidence in engaging with the HE environment	An opportunity for our mature age TAFE students to connect with each other and past students who have successfully completed a HE qualification via a TAFE pathway. The data collected will complement and contribute to the Academic Skills Portal currently being developed by the Project Coordinator, Student Digital Academic Resources.	GPA of mature age students compared to school leavers from low SES backgrounds Launch of the new site Number of 'hits' on the site
To ensure that resources promulgated and developed for this CoP are easily accessible, discoverable and appropriate to the transitioning phase between VET and HE for mature age students.	By locating the resources within the portal, students will have a virtual connection point for mature age students with the advantage of a centrally located resource/affordances area that can be easily accessed.	Evaluation and feedback from student participants Completion/ retention rates of low SES mature age students
To build a working relationship and common understanding of what is required, between all Fed Uni and Partner staff who work with and support mature age students from low SES backgrounds.	Team building within the University and its partners resulting in positive outcomes for mature age students from low SES backgrounds.	Increased number of programs offered at TAFE partner providers Increased enrolment at TAFE partner providers

The Literature

Much of the transition literature refers to the first year experience of undergraduate post school leavers. It can be argued that 'adjustment' (Kantanis, 2000) is a term that better describes the period of transition to higher education for all students including mature age VET students.
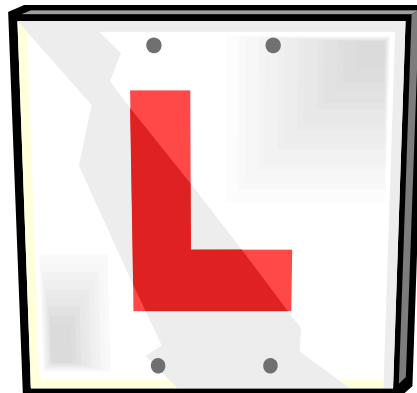
The mature- age learner's re-engagement with a formal learning environment may be somewhat akin to the novice Paintball player who, unless well positioned and attuned to the rules of the combative game, is bombarded and worn down by constant 'hits'

Wilans & Seery (2011)

Focus Group Questions:

1. What have been the biggest challenges for you as you transitioned from VET into higher education? e.g. Access to technology, time, access to staff, etc.

2. Can you share with the researchers and the participants, academic resources that you have been able to access which have been made available by:

a. Your TAFE to assist with your study?

b. Federation University Australia to assist with your study

3. Which of these academic resources have you found to be most suitable and useful to your needs?

4. What would you have liked more assistance with in your study?

5. Does being a mature age student require specific resources egg. Resources that are tailored to your particular needs? Would you be happy to assist us in the development of such resources?
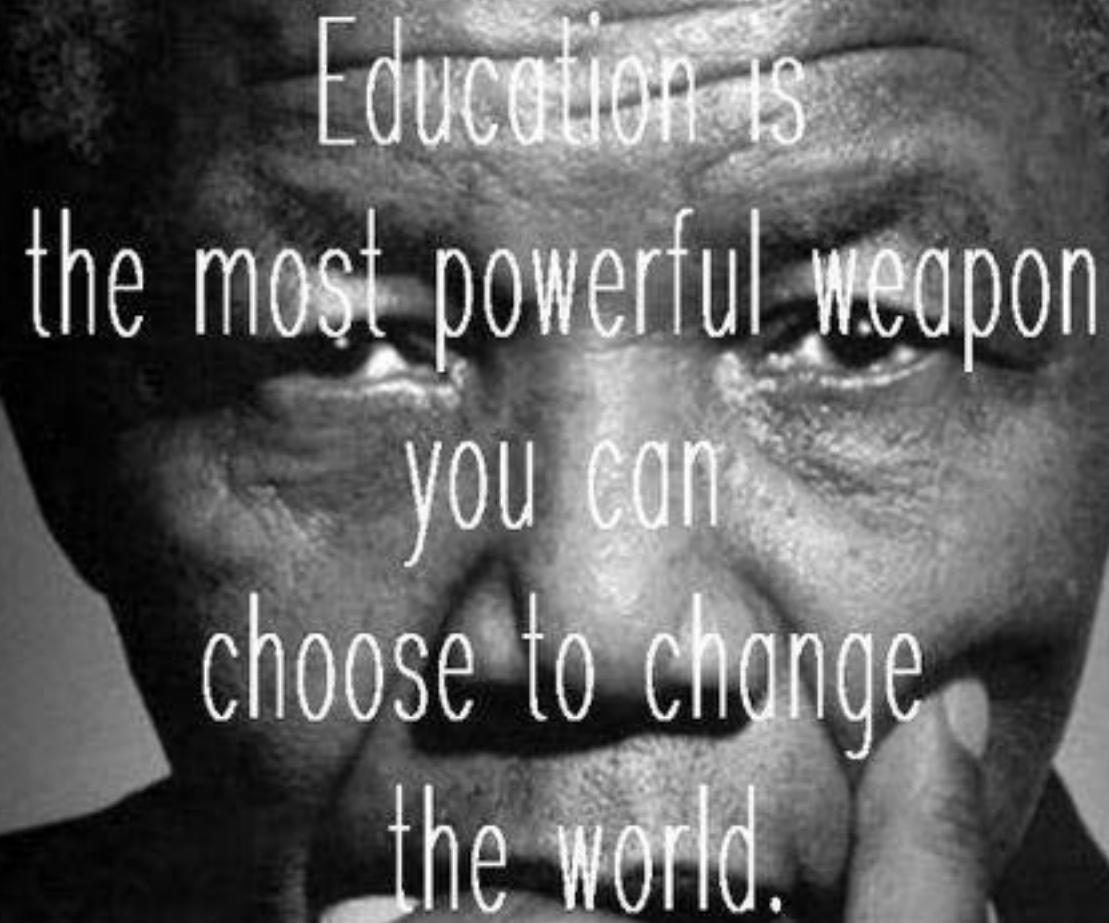
Survey Questions for Staff

Survey Questions for Staff: (this survey will be made available on SurveyMonkey)

This survey should not take any longer than half an hour to complete. We will instruct them to keep their answers to dot points.

1. How long have you taught in the higher education program (s)?
2. Have you taught both TAFE and Higher Education? Y/N
3. Describe the differences in the needs of the mature age students to assist with their study as they transition to higher education.
4. What resources have been made available to mature age students as they transition from TAFE to Higher Education? (List)
5. Have you been involved in developing resources for students who are transitioning from TAFE to higher education? Y/N
6. If not, are you aware of the resources available to students? If yes, are they appropriate for mature age students who are transitioning from TAFE to higher education?
7. Would you be interested in assisting in the development of resources for transitioning mature age students?
8. In your experience, have mature age students accessed online materials with ease or do you believe that they prefer other sorts of resources?
9. Are you aware of the concept of a Community of Practice?
10. In your experience, have mature age students accessed online materials with ease or do you believe that they prefer other sorts of resources?
11. How could we better connect partner TAFE staff and Federation University staff to work together to develop resources for mature age transitioning students?

This is what the students are telling us….

Q.1: What have been the biggest challenges For you as you transitioned from VET into higher education?

- Limited and inconsistent teacher access, knowledge and expectation
- Academic referencing and writing
- amount, type and delay on feedback on assessment
- Limited face to face learning and "Death by PowerPoint"
- Course workload & unrealistic assessment (AWP project)
- Competing demands – work/study/life balance
- Lack of recognition of prior learning and work/life experience
- Less practical application of course content
- Geographic challenge of regional locations for student networking
- IT challenges – MOODLE, email, Web site navigation difficulties, inconsistency and change communication

This is what the students are telling us….

Q.2 Can you share with the researchers and the participants, academic resources that you have been able to access which have been made available by:
Your TAFE to assist with your study?
Federation University Australia to assist with your study

TAFE

- Ebscohost (Kangan)

- A4 word list for academic writing (Wodonga)

- Permit to resubmit assessment tasks.

- Frequent access to teaching staff

- Library resources and databases

- Workshops

FEDERATION UNIVERSITY

- Library resources and databases

- Additional prescribed texts

- On line resources e.g.: Academic Guide, Formatting Guide, "Blackboard"

This is what the students are telling us….

Q.3 Which of these academic resources have you found to be most suitable and useful to your needs?

- On line resources
- Access to teaching staff
- Tutorials as well as lectures
- Library staff
- Flexibility of delivery of BAM course
- Each other

This is what the students are telling us….

Q.4 What would you have liked more assistance with in your study?
What would you have liked more assistance with in your study?

- Academic writing and Referencing
- Spread out Induction through the early weeks of semester 1
- An example of an assignment, before the first one is due
- An initial assignment on referencing, structure, writing style
- Clarification of expectations
- Purposeful and directed learning, given competing demands
- Prompt and concise feedback on assessment tasks
- Using journals as a resource
- More group tasks and collaboration in semester 1 to avoid the feeling of isolation
- Navigating the university web site

This is what the students are telling us….

Q.5 Does being a mature age student require specific resources e.g.. Resources that are tailored to your particular needs?

- Clear and consistent expectations to be given on academic writing and referencing
- A user friendly academic guide – "Academic Writing for Dummies"
- Student mentors and buddies
- The opportunity use December/January for course preparation
- Academic calendar to be finalised and available in advance
- More prompt assessment feedback, particularly between assignments
- Classroom interaction, discussion and workshops
- On line Interactive learning
- More user friendly website – a "one stop portal" and instruction on how to use it
- Better access to prescribed texts
- Teachers and students to "be on the same page" with MOODLE
- Combination of online and face to face learning
- Combination of hard and soft resources and "people" resources

What next?.................

Continue gathering the data
Collate and code data
Create the Community of Practice
Continue to learn from each other

And we will do all of that in a

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

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