Inviting study in: The engagement of mature-aged distance students in the transition to university

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Abstract

Mature-aged distance students, who often combine study with complex lives, make up a sixth of New Zealand university students. A high first year attrition rate in this population highlights the need to better understand their transition to university. Past research has tended to take a narrow view of their experiences, identifying specific strengths and challenges. This thesis uses the meta-construct of student engagement, the students’ emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to their study, to enable a more holistic understanding.

Three research tools were used: an exploratory study analysing existing survey data; the theoretical re-conceptualisation of the key construct, student engagement; and a prospective qualitative study following students during their first semester. Study 1, the survey, established that mature-aged distance students, while highly satisfied, reported different patterns of engagement to traditional students. However, as the survey takes a limited view of engagement, the next stage of the project was the development of a conceptual framework that clarifies the nature of engagement and clearly distinguishes between engagement, its antecedents, and its consequences. The framework is the theoretical foundation for Study 2, which used family interviews and video diaries to follow 19 mature-aged distance students and their families through their first semester at university. Findings illustrate the individual and varied nature of student engagement, explore the importance of space and time as key influences on the students’ transition to university, and theorise the links between academic emotions and student engagement.

Overall, the thesis highlights three overarching features of student engagement. Firstly, engagement is multifaceted with the three dimensions interacting and influencing each other. Secondly, it is contextual, influenced by university and student psychosocial and structural characteristics. Finally, engagement is dynamic, fluctuating throughout the transition to university as the impact of various contextual factors strengthens and diminishes. Central to all three features are the students’ emotional experiences.

This thesis makes valuable contributions to both theoretical and practical knowledge of higher education. In particular, the conceptual framework and theorising of the links between emotion and engagement provide valuable insights that will guide future research with this and other student populations. In addition, the findings regarding the particular challenges of the transition period and the critical role of emotions for mature-aged distance students give rise to suggestions as to how these students can be better prepared for, and better supported in, their distance learning.
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# Table of contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. i

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. iii

List of tables .......................................................................................................................... ix

List of figures ......................................................................................................................... xi

Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 1

Research aims and questions ............................................................................................... 3

Structure of the thesis ............................................................................................................. 3

1. The research context ........................................................................................................... 5

Rationale for the research ...................................................................................................... 5

Mature-aged student challenges ............................................................................................ 8

Mature-aged student strengths ............................................................................................ 11

Studying by distance .............................................................................................................. 12

Student engagement ............................................................................................................. 15

Thesis aim ............................................................................................................................. 16

2. Study 1: Student engagement survey ............................................................................. 17

Abstract ................................................................................................................................ 18

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 18

Method .................................................................................................................................. 21

Results .................................................................................................................................. 23

Discussion ................................................................................................................................ 26

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................. 30

3. Conceptual framework ..................................................................................................... 31

Abstract ................................................................................................................................ 32

Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 32

Behavioural perspective ....................................................................................................... 33

Psychological perspective ..................................................................................................... 36

Socio-cultural perspective ..................................................................................................... 38

Holistic perspective .............................................................................................................. 39
Appendix N: Diary trigger diagram ................................................................. 181
Appendix O: Release of interview summary form........................................... 182
Appendix P: Release of interview transcripts form........................................ 183
List of tables

Table 1  Participation data by age for New Zealand tertiary institutions in 2012 ...................... 6
Table 2  Attrition and completion rates for bachelor courses in New Zealand tertiary institutions in 2012 ....................................................................................................... 7
Table 3  AUSSE engagement and outcome scales with Cronbach alpha coefficients from sample ........................................................................................................................................... 22
Table 4  Summary of hierarchical regression with satisfaction as the dependent variable ..... 24
Table 5  Summary of hierarchical regression with learning as the dependent variable ........... 25
Table 6  Bivariate correlations (Pearson’s) and descriptive statistics for study variables ...... 25
Table 7  Participant details ................................................................................................................... 56
Table 8  Summary of the participants’ lifeload and outcomes ......................................................... 63
Table 9  Participant details ............................................................................................................... 102
Table 10 Taxonomy of academic emotions ...................................................................................... 117
List of figures

Figure 1  Conceptual framework of engagement, antecedents, and consequences. ...............42
Figure 2  Online introduction video ..........................................................................................54
Figure 3  Conceptual framework of student engagement..........................................................87
Figure 4  Depicting the impact of interest on engagement........................................................94
Figure 5  Modified conceptual framework of student engagement...........................................133