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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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