

## MATURE STUDENTS

### BACKGROUND

As a minority group on university campuses, the unique needs of mature students can be easily overlooked. It is important that the term “mature students” does not disguise the heterogeneity of this group: “...it is erroneous to speak of *‘the adult learner’* as if there is a generic adult that can represent all adults.”<sup>1</sup> However, amongst this varied group of students, there are common concerns that they share. Mature students need more recognition of the different hurdles they face in achieving success. These can include situational barriers like a lack of time, lack of money, health issues, or dependant care,<sup>2</sup> as well as attitudinal or dispositional barriers, including the fear of failure or alienation. Lastly, they also face systemic barriers such as restrictive course offerings and availability of instructors or support services outside of regular business hours.<sup>3</sup> Our Mature Student Policy sets out students’ priorities in increasing the visibility of mature students on campus as well as optimizing their educational experience.

### THE PROBLEM

From the beginning of their undergraduate experience, mature students are set apart from their peers, however this is not always done in an equitable manner. Institutions use different admissions criteria creating great degrees of inconsistency between eligibility, and admissions requirements and assessments across the province. Restrictive admissions requirements (at certain institutions) necessitate that mature students initially enrol as part-time students. This then limits their eligibility for provincial financial assistance. Part-time students are only eligible for assistance through the federal Canada Student Loan Program, however the outstanding loan is capped at \$10,000 and students must pay interest on the loans while in school.<sup>4</sup> As a result, very few part-time students use this program.<sup>5</sup> On top of this, the “time-from-high school” eligibility requirements of the Ontario Tuition Grant exclude many mature students.

Inconsistent admissions requirements also impact mature students’ ability to receive Prior Learning and Assessment Recognition (PLAR). “Universities are failing to offer robust and affordable PLAR opportunities for students who have gained

knowledge and skills from the labour market.”<sup>6</sup> While colleges are mandated to offer PLAR assessment, Ontario universities are not. Adult learners are therefore wasting time and money in courses whose material they have already grasped.

Financial assistance continues to concern mature students in serious relationships—spousal contributions make it difficult for those students who are eligible for Canada-Ontario integrated loans to demonstrate their need. The contribution of 70 percent of a spouse’s net income during the school year (and 80 percent of the combined family income in the pre-study period) is usually in excess of students’ eligible costs,<sup>7</sup> making it difficult for students to demonstrate their financial need.

Students with dependent children face particularly acute barriers on Ontario university campuses. Dedicated childcare space on campus tends to be expensive and limited—for example, the average cost of care is about \$262 per week for toddler aged children and some institutions acknowledge wait-times can be as long as two years for this age group (some applicants may never get offered a space while their child is eligible).<sup>8</sup> To make matters worse, sole support parents receive a maximum of \$83 each per week for childcare costs, while married students receive half of that through the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP).<sup>9</sup>

There is also concern that universities are not using teaching strategies designed for mature students as opportunities to strengthen education for all students. A primary reliance on only one form of instruction is concerning for institutions designed to equip students with the skills necessary to succeed in the world beyond the campus.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

#### *Improve Student Experience*

In order for Ontario to achieve its goal of increasing post-secondary attainment rates to 70 percent of the population, mature students will need to encompass a larger fraction of university student bodies. Not only because the 18 to 21 year old population in Ontario will decrease over the next decade, but also because it is becoming increasingly necessary for adults to pursue the development of new skills and enhance existing ones.<sup>10</sup> Universities

should recognize that the inclusion of mature students ensures post-secondary education in Ontario remains relevant, effective, and progressive. To this end, it is important that mature students are treated consistently and equitably in admissions processes at all post-secondary institutions in Ontario. Also, consideration should be given to ensuring that all students with dependent children have access to affordable supports on and off campus. In order to optimize the undergraduate, *mature student experience*, students recommend that:

- Universities continually assess mature student retention and persistence to examine how they could strengthen the quality of the educational experience they provide;
- Universities offer flexible service hours to ensure effective access for mature students;
- Universities ensure that there are orientation programs and year-round support programs that differ from traditional student-run orientation activities (when students identify that a deficit exists);
- Universities, students, and the provincial government develop a common set of baseline criteria for which students will be considered “mature students” upon applying to university in Ontario;
- The provincial government provide funding to support additional childcare space and infrastructure on or near post-secondary campuses specifically dedicated to post-secondary students; and
- On-campus childcare centres strive to offer flexible drop-in hours during the evenings to accommodate for mature students’ schedules.

### ***Increase Eligibility for Financial Assistance***

Students offer the following recommendations to ensure that all underrepresented student groups have access to *financial assistance* solutions that meet their unique needs:

- The provincial government should expand OSAP eligibility to part-time students;
- The provincial government should change the spousal contribution requirements to ensure that married and common-law students can access adequate assistance through OSAP;
- The provincial government should extend eligibility for the Ontario Tuition Grant to all students regardless of when the student graduated high school to ensure that all qualified students can access this program; and
- The provincial government should restructure the OSAP need assessment and Ontario Childcare Bursary to more accurately reflect the real costs for students with dependents.

### ***Re-evaluate Teaching & Learning Strategies***

It is important to recognize that, “Adult learners are not ‘blank slates.’”<sup>11</sup> Mature students bring with them a wealth of knowledge, attained through a variety of ways. Universities must embrace this understanding and place greater value on learning that occurs outside of traditional post-secondary environments. Further, recognition of the principles as to why adults learn, combined with methods of how adults learn, will ensure the effective synchronization of theories of pedagogy and andragogy in course delivery. Universities’ efforts to improve mature students’ *teaching and learning* experience should involve:

- Broadening methods of instruction and assessment by strengthening forms of active, collaborative, cooperative, and problem-based learning across all disciplines to ensure that all students reap the benefits of various educational strategies;
- Adopting the concept of “andragogy,” “the art and science of helping adults learn,” in conjunction with pedagogy, to ensure that adults are being taught in a way that is useful and meaningful to them; and
- Enhancing the delivery of blended learning, while researching other forms of instruction that capitalize on technological advancements, in order to facilitate mature students’ access to post-secondary education.

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<sup>1</sup> Heuy B. Long, “Understanding Adult Learners,” in *Adult Learning: A Guide for Effective Instruction, Third Edition*, ed. Michael W. Galbraith (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 2004), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Klein-Collins, “Alfi, What’s It All About? Strategies For Colleges And Universities To Become Adult Learning Focused Institution,” *National Council for Continuing Education & Training* (2011): 30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Part-Time Canada Student Loan: Just the Facts,” *Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities*, accessed February 19, 2015, <https://osap.gov.on.ca/OSAPPortal/en/A-ZListofAid/PRDR007095.html>

<sup>5</sup> *Canada Student Loans Program Annual Report 2007-2008*, (Ottawa: Human Resources and Social Development Canada, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Camman, Stephane Hamade, and Amy Zhao, “Student Mobility and Credit Transfer Pathways” (paper presented, and adopted, at the Fall General Meeting of the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance, Waterloo, Ontario, November 8-10, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> *OSAP 2014-2015 Eligibility, Assessment and Review Manual*, (Toronto: Student Financial Assistance Branch, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Guelph

<sup>9</sup> *OSAP 2014-2015 Eligibility, Assessment and Review*, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Angelika Kerr, *Adult Learners in Ontario Postsecondary Institutions* (Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2011), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph C. Chen, “Teaching non-traditional adult learners: adult learning theories in practice,” *Teaching in Higher Education* 19 (2014), 407.