

Mature age student equity project

**Seeing students
as an important part
of the solution.**

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HREC Protocol number H8245

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“What do you need to get this done?” (Armitage, 2011)

This question, posed by a UWS colleague proved pivotal in the completion of the 2011 Mature Age Student Equity Project research report. In trying to list the very many people who have assisted us, it serves as a reminder that any project of this sort needs the generous support of a great number of people - a web of affirming influence often spreading far beyond the immediate participants.

What did we need to get this done?

Opportunity: We would like to express our gratitude to the Director of Student Support Services at UWS Ellen Brackenreg, and the Head of Student Equity, & Disability Services Trevor Allan, for initiating the Mature Age Student Equity Project and giving us the opportunity to work on this project. Their vision, wisdom, patience, trust and kind guidance are greatly appreciated.

Pathfinders: The Mature Age Student Equity Project is part of a response to the findings and recommendations contained in the UWS Students at Risk Project 2007/2008 conducted by Marnie Campbell. We are indebted to Marnie not only for her project work but for her generosity of spirit, friendship, and kindness.

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Inspiration: Finally we would like to honour the contribution of the mature age students at UWS. These students have been our primary source of encouragement and inspiration.

Particular thanks go to the mature age students who participated in the 2010 survey, generously giving their time and feedback, and to the many mature age students who have talked and worked with us, sharing their experiences, setbacks and triumphs – they are the experts!

Executive Summary

UWS is on track to improving mature age student retention rates however, ongoing dedicated staff and funding are required to consolidate these gains.

Over thirty nine percent of the student population of UWS comprises mature age students.

As a response to the Students at Risk Project (Campbell, 2008), identifying mature age students as being among those most at risk of early withdrawal, failure or poor performance, the **Mature Age Student Equity Project - 2009-2011** (MASEP), undertook a survey and research to better understand the often complex and diverse circumstances of mature age students - with a particular focus on the provision of UWS support services.

The survey, conducted online, had 770 respondents and was followed by interviews and a focus group conducted between October 2010 and March 2011.

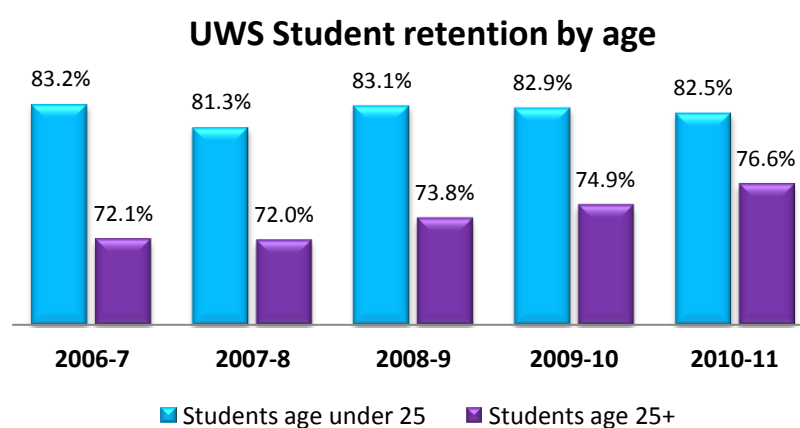
Steady improvement in retention of mature age students is being achieved at UWS. While this improved retention reflects well on initiatives undertaken by the University, and has resulted in a fully adjusted financial benefit to the University of over 4.3 million dollars from 2008-11, mature age student retention remains significantly lower than that of UWS students coming directly from secondary school. (UWS Information & Analysis Unit, July 2012)

The Mature Age Student Equity Project research findings resonated closely with conclusions drawn from Davis, Catterall and Yang's 2011 research into VET/Pathways students transitioning to UWS. Both studies found the majority of mature age students to be resilient, focused, committed and willing to rise to challenges and that early, targeted assistance is particularly effective in optimizing mature age student success, retention and engagement.

Ongoing challenges faced by mature age students

Students returning to formal learning reported significant obstacles in accessing available services. The majority are chronically time-poor, have multiple non-negotiable priorities and commitments, and frequently lack the confidence to effectively navigate information communication technology systems; all of which significantly affect their ability to access information and attend available services.

- 46% of respondents spend less than 3 (non-compulsory) hours per week on campus.
- 47% of respondents are employed for 15 or more hours per week.
- 20% are employed for more than 30 hours per week.
- 48% indicate that they have carer responsibilities – with 11% specifying



more than one area of carer obligation.

Significant numbers of respondents do not have the advantage of cultural familiarity with academic and/or online learning environments.

- 52% of respondents are first in family to attend university.
- 22% have low SES postcodes.
- 84% of respondents were aged 25 and over.
- 30% of participants indicated that they were unaware of available services.

Mature age students see themselves as a “distinct cohort with needs specific to their age group” (Terblanche, 2012).

Respondents were very clear about what they wanted, as was shown in both the qualitative and quantitative data:

- 74% of respondents want information provided **prior to** academic sessions.
- 85% prefer information delivered via email.
- 82% want blended (both online and face-to-face) access to services and information.
- Students want:
 - More information about university expectations, academic pathways, services, and assistance.
 - Practical recognition of their complex circumstances.
 - To be alerted in advance about e-learning and academic skills training and have these flagged as important.
 - Support services to be available outside office hours.

Recommendation priorities:

The appointment of a permanent full-time UWS Mature Age Student Officer.

To coordinate, evaluate and maintain targeted mature age student programs, scholarships, workshops, websites, events, e-newsletter, publicity and

publications; as well as facilitating ongoing communication with students and staff.

Continuation of the Mature Age Student Starting-out & Introduction to e-Learning Workshops.

Funded and promoted as a joint program with the UWS Counselling and Library staff, these workshops (held prior to academic sessions), have a proven record of success:

- Attendance has increased by 205% - from 52 mature age students attending in 2009, to 159 mature age students in the Autumn session of 2012.
- 100% of attendees would recommend the workshop to their peers.
- 97% reported sustained or increased confidence in navigating the UWS online systems as a result of attending this workshop.
- The use of current students as guest speakers consistently rated favourably in evaluations and fosters an expectation that students have something valuable to offer.

The average GPA of students attending 2009/2010 MAS Starting-Out Workshops was 4.49 compared with the average GPA of 3.69 for the 2010 general MAS population.

Public acknowledgement of mature age students' successes through scholarship grants and media exposure - particularly in the Greater Western Sydney area.

“No single influence is more powerful than social proof, seeing someone else succeed at the thing you might have initially believed you could not do.” (De Becker, 1997, p.247).

Future focus

Targeted strategies, implemented by multiple departments across UWS, are proving effective. It is now critical to maintain this momentum through the provision of a full time, dedicated mature age student staff position; to consolidate these gains and coordinate future strategies to recognise and retain this significant sector of the UWS student population.

According to the *AUQA Cycle 2 Supporting Materials February 2011* (p123),

“The extensive improvement work now being put into assisting first year transition, support and retention for mature aged students is justified given that retention for this group is stable and comparatively low ...”

Overview

The Mature Age Student Equity Project (MASEP) was initiated as part of a response to findings in the UWS Students at Risk Project 2007/2008, (Campbell, 2008) identifying mature age commencing students as being among those most at risk of early withdrawal, failure or poor performance.

The research component of the MASEP was designed to give a snapshot of the circumstances of mature age students enrolled at UWS in 2010; with a particular focus on the relationship these students have with existing student support services. In addition, the research process was intended to provide mature age students with an opportunity to give their feedback as active participants in the research and, in accord with this aim; an electronic copy of this report is being made available to students through the Mature Age link in the UWS Campus Connection online discussion site, (www.uws.edu.au/matureage).

In the course of this research we have participated in and benefited from interdepartmental collaborations with colleagues who also have an interest in exploring the mature age student experience at UWS, for example:

- The portion of this report concerning mature age students' engagement with information communication technology (ICT) has been incorporated into a joint UWS Office of Learning and Teaching/Charles Darwin University flexible delivery project report, (Armitage, Campbell & Welsby, 2011).
- Since a significant and growing number of mature age students are articulating to higher education at UWS through alternative pathways, such as vocational education and training (VET), research generously shared by UWS/VET Relationships manager, Janelle Davis and her colleagues has been most helpful in developing a better understanding of the characteristics and needs of mature age students at UWS, (Davis, Catteral and Yang, 2011).

Any student at UWS who has had a break of a year or more between secondary school and university is considered to be a mature age student. In 2010, thirty nine percent (39%) of the students enrolled in UWS fell into this category; 84% of these were aged 25 and over.

This MASEP research study is based on 770 mature age students studying at UWS who responded to an emailed survey in October 2010. This was followed by a focus group and individual interviews conducted between December 2010 and March 2011.

While these students represent a highly diverse demographic, we did find circumstances common to most mature age students that were not generally experienced by school leavers; circumstances that could have a significant impact on their successful transition to university. These fall broadly into three areas:

- A lack of continuity in formal study, familiarity with online learning, and peers who are also studying.
- Non-negotiable commitments as breadwinners and/or carer responsibilities.
- A sense of insecurity about their 'right' to be at university, sometimes referred to as 'impostor syndrome', (Martins & Anthony, 2007).

The qualitative and quantitative data also revealed that mature age students at UWS are generally focused, clear about their goals, and committed to achieving them; they are resilient, spirited, and willing to rise to challenges. Early, targeted

assistance is effective and appreciated. This resonates closely with findings from Davis, Catterall and Yang's 2011 research into VET/Pathways students transitioning to UWS. However, there is a low uptake of university sponsored opportunities for mature age students to meet, socialise, or attend free workshops in academic and study skills.

The following findings from this study give a broad snapshot of mature age students enrolled at UWS in 2010. Consideration of their circumstances could shed light on gaps between the way that services are offered and the realities and limitations in the lives of mature age students.

- 33% of respondents were studying part time - 67% full time.
- 47% of students work 15 or more hours per week.
- 48% indicate that they have carer responsibilities - 11% of those specify more than one area of caring responsibility.
- 20% of respondents travel for more than an hour each way to reach their campus.
- 28% indicated that they speak a language other than English at home.

Reflecting the percentages of students in the general population of UWS:

- 52% of respondents indicated that they are the first generation in their families to attend university, and
- 22% of respondents have postcodes that fall into the low SES band.

Mature age students are time poor and many spend the bare minimum of time on campus, limiting their exposure to information regarding student support services that might be available. Many also lack the confidence and time needed to explore online to look for help that they may not even know exists. Our study showed that 30% of participants were unaware of available services in spite of extensive advertising efforts on the part of the university.

When asked how and when they would most like to receive information about UWS services;

- 74% indicated that they would like to receive this information before the academic session commences (50% indicated Orientation and 40% during the session. Respondents could select multiple options).

- 85% of respondents indicated that they would prefer to receive this information via email.

Survey respondents indicated overwhelmingly (82%) that they prefer blended – online and face-to-face access to information and services.

The mature age students who participated in this research made it clear that they wanted:

- Recognition of their circumstances and responsive institutional flexibility.
- Clear and timely information about:
 - University expectations and academic pathways,
 - Services and assistance
- Support services available out of office hours.
- More eLearning training that is advertised well in advance and flagged as important to their studies – most mature age students are digital migrants and Information Communication Technology (ICT) is a source of great anxiety for some.

Recommendations in this study are grounded in suggestions made by the mature age student participants in the research, and on their current ‘coal face’ experiences of studying at UWS. These aim to address issues students face in the following areas:

- Sense of belonging
- Institutional flexibility issues
- Ensuring awareness of eLearning bridging programs
- Academic advising
- Raising awareness of services and resources
- Perceptions of services
- Making social connections
- Scholarships

The development of a mature age student webpage on the UWS website - www.uws.edu.au/matureage has been an important step towards public recognition of the significant number of MAS studying at UWS. This report goes on to suggest that the addition of a bi-monthly (MAS@UWS) e-newsletter containing

information about services available, social activities and peer contributions would also go a long way toward addressing several of the issues raised by participants.

Provision of services out of business hours is becoming an increasingly pressing issue across the tertiary sector, (McInnis & Hartley, 2002, p.xiii; Grebennikov, 2009, p.7). Students participating in our research suggested that Student Support Services could follow the example of the UWS 'Online Librarian' and provide an online Support Services 'Concierge' for students to contact by email or phone; during, or after hours, with their enquiries. Many of our mature age student respondents reacted negatively to being told to simply "find it on the web".

This reflects the 2011 American Express Global Customer Service Barometer (2011, p. 10) finding that Australian consumers significantly prefer resolving issues with a 'real' person - on the phone (90%) or face-to-face (85%).

From 2007 to 2011, UWS has seen significant improvements in the retention, progression, and satisfaction rates for mature age students:

- From 2007 to 2011, the **retention rate** of students aged 25+ improved by 4.5%, from 72.1% (2007) to 76.6% (2011); ¹

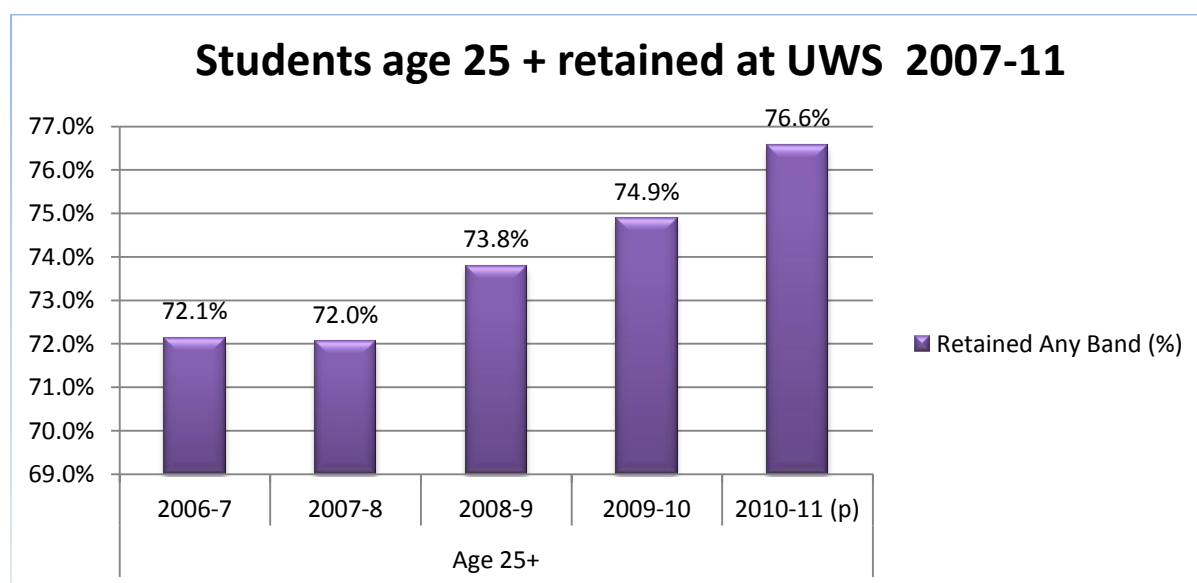


Figure 1: Chart of students age 25+ retained 2007-11

¹ Source - UWS Office of Strategy and Quality.

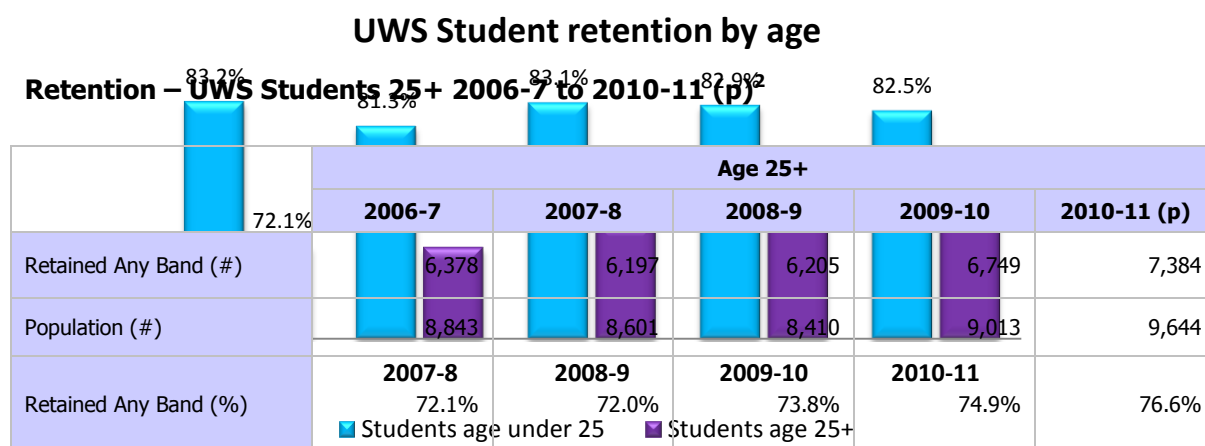


Figure 2: Table of students age 25+ retained 2007-11

(Population (#) refers to those students eligible to be re enrolled in the following year. From this the calculation has been made to work out how many of these students are retained.) (Butcher, 2012)

Figure 3: Retention by age 2006 - 2011

While still well below the (2011) 82.5% retention rate of students under 25 years of age, this improved mature age student retention has resulted in an (adjusted) financial benefit to the university of over 4.3 million dollars from 2008-11.

Retention Rate					
	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Students Aged <25	83.2%	81.3%	83.1%	82.9%	82.5%
Students Aged 25+	72.1%	72.0%	73.8%	74.9%	76.7%

² '(p)' indicates preliminary figures - unlikely to change significantly from time of writing.

Retention Rate – Percentage Change on Previous Period				
Change on Previous Year (% Change)	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Students Aged < 25	-2.28%	2.21%	-0.24%	-0.48%
Adjusted Figures				
Adjusted Retention Rate	70.45%	73.59%	73.62%	74.54%
Adjusted # of Retained Students	6,060	6,190	6,632	7,189
Number of Actual Students Retained in excess of Adjusted Retention Rate	136	15	112	207
Number of Actual EFTSL Retained in excess of Adjusted Retention Rate	82	9	67	125
Increased Revenue per Year Due to Improved Retention Rate (\$)	\$1,252,404	\$137,839	\$1,030,034	\$1,906,667

(UWS Info & Analysis, 2012 - See Appendix 1 for notes.)

As these figures show, staffing costs in maintaining programs, website and services targeting the 39% of the UWS student population who are mature age students, as well as for the student population in general, represent a significant investment in the retention of students at UWS.

Commitment to these resources not only contributes to retention, but to making the “student’s experience of University positive, enjoyable and enriching”, (Reid, 2011). The ‘ripple effect’ of a single student’s experience also has a powerful influence on that person’s community – Australian consumers will tell an average of ten people about a good customer service experience and an average of 23 people about a poor customer service experience, (American Express, 2011, p.16,17).

While student retention remains a key focus, “UWS is also committed to broadening educational and life opportunities for those traditionally underrepresented in higher education”, (Grebennikov, 2009, p. 2), and UWS is justifiably proud to be recognised for its “clear and strategic focus on advancing its mission for the benefit of the people of Greater Western Sydney” (Cycle 2 AUQA Audit, 2011).

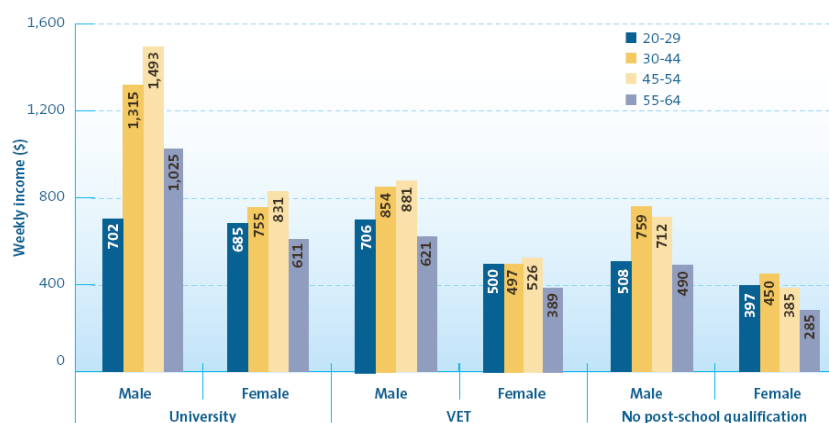
The individual and community benefits of these opportunities can hardly be overstated as can be seen in the 2008 AMP.NATSEM Income and Wealth Report

estimate: “Over the working lifetime of a university graduate the financial gain generated from income is more than \$1.5 million or 70 per cent more than those whose highest qualification is Year 12,” (Payne & Percival, 2008, p.1). And, writing for Economic Society of Australia, Clarke & Leigh (2011) estimated that having more than twelve years of education increased life expectancy by four to six years, (Clarke & Leigh, 2011, p. 352).

Figure 4: Average weekly total incomes for men and women, by age & highest qualification, 2003-2004. (Payne & Percival – AMP Media Release, 2008, p.4)

Seeing and hearing students as part of the solution...

This UWS Mature Age Student Equity Project report has featured as much as possible, direct quotes from mature age student research participants to explain their circumstances, issues and suggestions. These are our experts in finding ways to refine, improve and develop student support services and, to enable, empower and engage mature age students as valued members of the UWS lifelong learning community.



Source: ABS Household Expenditure Survey Confidentialised Unit Record File 2003-2004

Improving retention – why do mature age students need additional, targeted and appropriate, strategies?

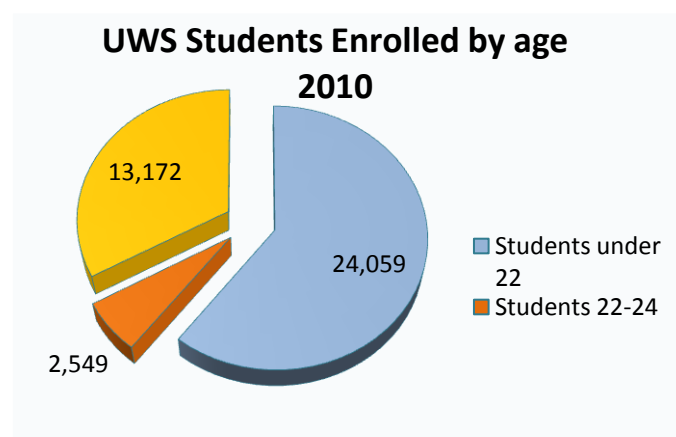
1.1 'A distinct cohort with needs specific to age and experience'³

The UWS Students at Risk Project 2007/2008 (Campbell, 2008) identified mature age commencing students as being among those students most at risk of early withdrawal, failure or poor performance. In response to these findings and subsequent recommendations, the Mature Age Student Equity Project (MASEP) began in February 2009 to; identify issues facing mature age students (MAS); audit existing programs; and trial strategies. Addressing those issues with a view to improving success and retention rates, enhancing the quality of experience and engagement for these students as well as identifying any institutional gaps in service.

1.1.1 Mature age student population at UWS – numerous and diverse

- Of the 2010 UWS student population, 39% were aged 22yrs or over – i.e. those most likely to be non current school leavers.
- Of the 2010 UWS student population, 33.1% were aged 25 or over and counted as “Mature Age Students” in statistics from the UWS Office of Strategy and Quality.

Figure 5: 2010 MAS enrolled at UWS.



³ Terblanche, C. 2012. Cited in Woodward, S. 2012. Mature aged students 'forgotten'. *Campus Review*. 23rd January, 2012.

<http://www.campusreview.com.au/blog/news/mature-aged-students-forgotten/>
Retrieved 07/05/2012

1.1.2 A rose by any other name...

The problem of terminology is a recurring theme and an area of some confusion both in the community and in the tertiary sector. There is often uncertainty and inconsistency as to the minimum, defining age of a mature age student. There is also ambivalence about the term “mature”.

At UWS, for administrative and enrolment purposes, a mature age student is any student who has had a break between secondary and university studies. The term used for students who are thus returning to learning is “non-current school leavers”, (UWS Marketing, 2011).

The UWS Office of Strategy and Quality collect data for students under or over 25, (UWS Pocket Profile 2010. p4). Many staff at UWS are still unclear as to the precise definition of a mature age student and, descriptions of “over 21” or “25 or over” are often heard.

Despite the sometimes age-ist aversion to the term “mature”, or the banter that occurs around notions of maturity, most people understand a mature age student to be one who is returning to formal study; usually at a tertiary level. As this is the common conception we have chosen to use this terminology throughout the project and research process. The data we will primarily be referring to in this report is provided by the 770 survey respondents who were aged 22 or over at the time of the 2010 survey, as well as the information kindly shared by MAS in the focus group and interviews.

1.1.3 Diversity and similarities

As MAS comprise nearly 40% of the 2010 UWS student population, it is to be expected that these students represent a highly diverse range of profiles and circumstances: ages vary from 22 years to students in their 70s, students dealing with varying degrees of disability, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, low SES students as well as students who are relatively financially well off, single parents and those caring for aged or disabled relatives, students familiar with computers and those just learning

the basics, postgraduate students, and ones who have not written an essay since the 1960s.

In spite of this enormous diversity there are circumstances common to most MAS that are not generally experienced by school leavers. These can have an adverse effect on the mature age student's university experience and, in many cases, may directly contribute to the early withdrawal of these students from their studies.

These common circumstances fall broadly into two categories:

- lack of continuity, and
- non-negotiable priorities and commitments.

1.1.4 Lack of continuity

- *Social continuity* – delayed entry students generally do not have a group of peers who are attending university. They may experience misunderstanding or resistance from friends and family. They may feel their age in comparison to the younger students and worry that they are 'in the wrong place', that they are impostors or frauds who have no rightful place in a university (Martins & Anthony, 2007, p58).

"I am the first in my family to go to university and my friends think I am crazy and want to know why I am wasting my life with all this stress." (UWS 2007 Mature age student).

- *Continuity of study environment* – MAS, having had a break from formal study, find a very steep learning curve as they enter the tertiary learning environment. Many have never written an academic essay, developed and given a presentation, or known how to put together a literature review.

"I thought that after working full time I'd have no trouble with a study routine but the academic requirements are so different and I don't know who to ask for help." (UWS 2007 Mature age student).

- *Digital continuity* – The university online learning environment is unique and takes some adjustment for all students. However, for

MAS, the digital world is often unfamiliar territory; most of these students have not grown up with computers and are slow to adapt. They are easily overwhelmed by tasks, such as downloading a podcast, online submission of assignments, or working with software like Turnitin.

“I also had very little experience on the internet so I found using everything online very difficult especially without a handbook.”
(UWS 2010 Mature age student).

1.1.5 Non-negotiable priorities and commitments

MAS are generally extremely time poor, (Campbell, 2008). They have more non-negotiable commitments and less flexibility than most school leavers.

“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard “well we expect uni to be the first priority” that is a ridiculous statement, of course it isn’t, putting food on the table and a roof over your head is the first priority and that means work and family.” (UWS 2010 Mature age student).

“What I need as a mature age student is some institutional sympathy... unlike younger people at Uni, we have kids waiting at the School gate, families to be breadwinners to, or a mortgage over our heads.” (UWS 2010 Mature age student).

“...when older you tend to accumulate more responsibilities. I have had an extremely difficult year barely able to cope but I did not want to be perceived as a problem student in my first year. Survey respondent (S).

Students who have delayed their entry to university and those returning to learning frequently express a lack of confidence that has been referred to as “Impostor Syndrome” (Martins & Anthony, 2007, p58). This syndrome is epitomised through; societal and internally driven voices saying, “I am not really smart enough to be here”, “I don’t belong here”, or “someone is going to find out I can’t do this and I’m going to be asked to leave.”

Associate Professor Rosemary Clerehan from Monash University suggests, “in order to engage the hearts and minds of these students... it is necessary to acknowledge such realities,” (Clerehan, 2003, p72).

1.2 Mature age students’ strengths benefit the university

While MAS are often “poor” in free time, disposable income, academic computing/writing skills, or self confidence, they frequently come to their studies “rich” with commitment and willingness to learn, life experience, focus, and maturity. With a relatively small amount of assistance, these students are significantly more likely to report enjoying their courses and display generally higher levels of commitment and sense of purpose in their studies (McInnis & Hartley, 2002).

The majority of UWS first preferences have come from MAS and, while younger students may start at UWS in order to complete their studies elsewhere, MAS are more likely to complete their degree at UWS (Whibley, 2008).

Considering that close to 40% of the students at UWS are not school leavers there is considerable financial and moral imperative to ensure that the retention and overall satisfaction rates for these students continue to increase, particularly given “the UWS commitment to opening up educational and life opportunities for those traditionally underrepresented in higher education,” (Grebennikov, 2009, p.2).

1.3 VET/Pathways students

A significant and growing number of MAS are articulating to higher education at UWS through alternative pathways such as; vocational education and training (VET) and, colleges.

Based on qualifications from their VET studies, 2232 students were offered a place at UWS in 2010, and in 2011, 2437 received offers. Approximately 75% of these offers were taken up by MAS, (Davis, Catteral, & Yang, 2011).

As part of an ALTC award winning program, UWS research into this cohort of students by Davis, Catteral and Yang (2011) found that, contrary to expectations, students from the VET sector do not necessarily experience ongoing disadvantage resulting from early gaps in their academic skills and knowledge (Davis et al, 2011, PowerPoint slide 10), but rather, their research showed these students overall “to be resilient, and many welcomed the challenge of new social and learning conditions,” (Ibid).

Davis et al found that early (including pre-session) information and support is central to assisting the VET students’ successful transition to university and “UWS has acknowledged that it is the university’s responsibility to provide appropriate support when offering pathways and admission to VET students”, (Davis et al, 2011, PowerPoint slide13).

1.4 The need for targeted strategies for mature age students

After describing some of the pressures faced by MAS, a 2005 report carried out by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE), University of Melbourne, entitled *The first year experience in Australian universities: findings from a decade of national studies* recommended that, as “a result of these pressures, there continues to be a need for transition support tailored to the needs of mature age students” (CSHE 2005. p. 86).

In 2008 the *Students at risk project report and recommendations* (Campbell, 2009) identified several profiles of UWS students who were most at risk of early withdrawal. Those studying part-time or studying in the College of Business or the College of Health Science, and MAS were amongst these at risk students. The overlap of these at risk cohorts is also noteworthy as the proportion of part-time students is significantly higher among MAS. Management, Commerce and Health are disciplines with the greatest concentration of part-time students and MAS, (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2008).

From 2007 to 2010 there have been marked improvements in the retention, progression, and satisfaction rates for mature age students at UWS as the following figures show.⁴

- From 2007 to 2011, the **retention rate** of students aged 25+ **improved by 4.5%**, from 72.1% (2007) to 76.6% (2011);

This is still well below the (2010) 82.9% retention rate of students under 25.

- From 2006 to 2010 **progression rates** have remained around 86% with an **improvement of 1.6%**, from 84.8% (2008) to 86.4% (2010).

Mature age students in these years have consistently had a progression rates slightly higher than that of the general UWS population. **In 2010, the MAS progression rate of 86.4% was 2.6% above the UWS average.**

⁴ Statistics on retention, progression and satisfaction rates kindly provided by UWS Office of Strategy & Quality, and is based on data from UWS students age 25+).

- Overall **satisfaction rates**, based on the Course Experience Questionnaire regarding the students overall satisfaction level with the quality of their course, **rose by 5.8%** from 60.2% (2006) to 66.0% (2009).

In 2010, a change in the Course Experience Questionnaire layout resulted in a break in the series and significant increases in all satisfaction ratings. Due to these changes the 2010/11 increase in satisfaction rates for MAS (from 82.6% in 2010 to 83.2% in 2011) cannot be compared with that of the preceding years. However, in **“2009 the satisfaction rate for [students age] 25+ was 3.2% less than the UWS average and by 2011 this had dropped to only 0.9% less than the UWS average,”** (Butcher, 2012) indicating a significant improvement in MAS satisfaction rates relative to the overall UWS average.

While notable progress has, and is, being made there is still much room for improvement.

According to the *AUQA Cycle 2 Supporting Materials February 2011* (p123),

“The extensive improvement work now being put into assisting first year transition, support and retention for mature aged students is justified given that retention for this group is stable and comparatively low at around 76.9%”

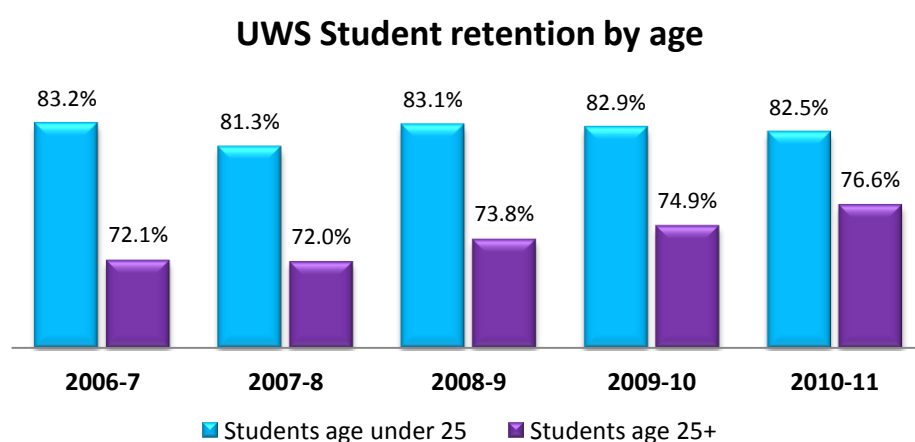


Figure 6: Retention by age - 2006-2011

The investigation

2.1. Aims of the study – Examining the relationships mature age students have with support services at UWS in 2010

Mature age students starting out at university frequently describe feelings ranging from lack of confidence through to anxiety about being ‘impostors’ in the higher education learning environment. (Heagney, 2008; Keating, Davies & Holden, 2006; Martins & Anthony, 2007). This is in spite of the considerable personal and cultural capital that they bring to their studies and to the university itself (Dawson, 2007).

Due to their often multiple and non-negotiable roles, MAS experience difficulties integrating into university life (Miller, 2006). These constraints make it difficult for MAS to access services provided by the university and, perhaps more concerning, limit the personal connections they make with other students and staff. Studies consistently show that social support is one of the most powerful predictors of student resilience, persistence, and success (Lawrence, 2002; Clulow & Brennan, 1996, as cited in Lawrence, 2002; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005; Kantanis, 2000, 2002; Stone, 2008; Dixon Rayle & Kuo-Yi Chung, 2007).

The University of Western Sydney provides targeted and effective services designed to enable students to gain the academic and life skills they need to successfully transition to university life. These bridging programs, workshops, and services offer opportunities for students to meet and make connections with fellow students. MAS who have utilised these services have described them as ‘invaluable’. However, there is a relatively low participation rate among MAS.

This ‘gap’ would indicate that there is a miss-match between the way that the services are being offered and the realities and limitations in the lives of MAS.

This study aims to better understand the circumstances, diverse needs, and issues of MAS at UWS in order to inform the design of more flexible, relevant, user-friendly

future and existing services (Catterall, Gill, Martins & Simeoni, 2003) with the following outcomes:

- Effective and sustainable strategies to enhance success and retention of MAS;
- Enhanced engagement and satisfaction of MAS; and
- Improved opportunities for feedback and communication with and between MAS.

2.2 Method

In order to capture a broad snapshot of 2010 MAS, a survey was carried out in October 2010 followed by a focus group in December 2010 and seven informal interviews with individual students between December 2010 and March 2011.

Collecting, analysing, and reporting on the needs and issues of such a diverse cohort of students presented some difficulties, particularly in the context of relating this data to the students' use and perceptions of the wide range of services available at UWS.

In order to build a meaningful and functional instrument, the survey was limited and divided into questions pertaining to:

- Demographic information including:
 - Age (grouped into 22-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50+)
 - Study load/level
 - Campus and time spent on campus
 - Travel time
 - Employment hours
 - Carer responsibilities
 - First in family
 - Language spoken at home
 - Level of social support from outside UWS
- Use of services
 - With options for short answer input.
- Social and academic networking within UWS
 - With options for short answer input.

The survey was followed up by a focus group and interviews providing students the opportunity to expand on matters regarding:

- Use and perceptions of UWS services
- Preferred timing and method of information advertising these services
- Importance and ease of making social connections
- Suggestions that the students may have for UWS and for new students

In addition, the UWS/CDU Flexible Delivery Project – (Office of the Pro-Vice Chancellor -Learning and Teaching) requested that students be given the opportunity to comment on their experiences in using information communication technology (ICT) at UWS. These questions focused on the following issues:

- Training in online learning used at UWS
- Aspects of ICT that work and those that could be improved
- The student's experience of compulsory online work
- Suggestions that the students may have for improvements in the online learning experience

The survey entitled, “*2010 UWS Services for Mature Age Students*” was sent by email with a link to Survey Monkey, in October 2010 to the 15,721 UWS students aged 22 or over. This age group was chosen as most likely to reach all students who did not progress to university directly from secondary school. It was accepted that a few school leavers may have responded but the overwhelming majority of respondents were students who have had a year or more break between secondary school and university.

Survey Monkey offered an effective platform in which to conduct, manage, and analyse results confidentially and securely.

The survey was sent out by email during the students Stuvac and no incentives/prizes were offered to encourage students to participate.

The focus group (conducted on 17th December 2011) involved 5 students, 3 male and 2 female. These students represented a wide demographic including;

- an indigenous student;
- a postgraduate PhD candidate who also works as a tutor at UWS;
- a student with a disability;

- three with family commitments;
- areas of study included Arts, Business and Science; and
- home campuses were: Bankstown, Parramatta and Penrith.

The seven interviews were held between 14th January 2010 and 25th March 2011 and were undertaken with students studying in:

- Law, Business, Nursing, Arts, Horticultural Science and Education at
- Penrith, Campbelltown, Hawkesbury and Parramatta campuses.

The students were keen to give voice to their experiences with several contacting us to give additional feedback. Two male students each offered an A4 page full of observations and suggestions. MAS have a lot to say and appreciated the opportunity to be heard. One student expressed this anonymously in the survey:

“Thank You for giving me this opportunity, Thank You to all the ones who are making my opinion heard.” (Survey respondent) (S)

Audio files from the focus group and interviews were transcribed and, along with the short answers from the survey, coded and filtered through the qualitative research software NVivo to identify themes and patterns.

2.3 Characteristics of the 2010 respondents

A total of 770 students responded to the 2010 survey which is approximately 5% of the 2010 UWS student population aged 22yrs and over (n = 15,721).

2.3.1 Gender

While more female students responded to the survey overall (60%), we noted that this response was close to the ratio of the total student population of UWS - 56% female and 44% male.

2.3.2 Study load

67% of respondents were studying full time (FT) and 33% part time (PT).

Of the undergraduate students, 70% were FT and 30% PT.

Of the postgraduate students, 56% were FT and 44% PT.

Study load/level

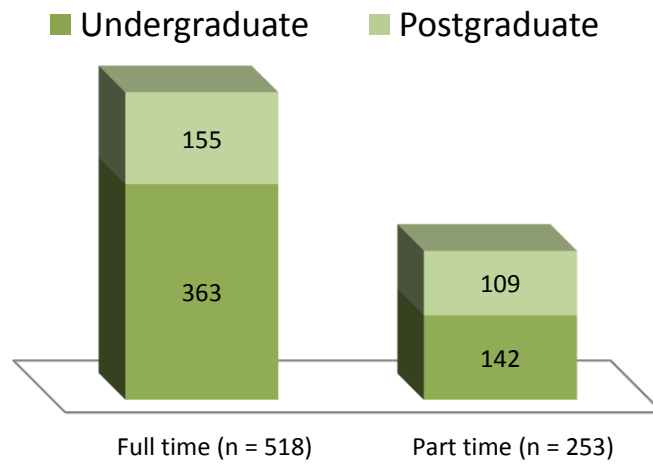


Figure 7: 2010 MAS study load and level

2.3.3 Multi campus spread

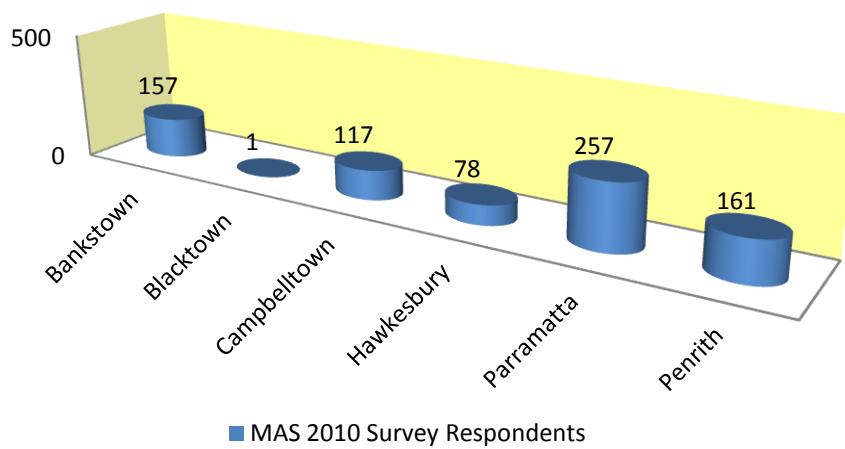


Figure 8: 2010 MAS respondents by campus

2.3.4 Language spoken at home

Twenty-eight percent of respondents speak a language other than English at home; of these, 57 different languages were listed as the main language spoken at home.

2.3.5 Postcode as socioeconomic status indicator

Though the use of postcodes as an indicator of socioeconomic status is acknowledged to be something of a 'blunt instrument', it is, without being too intrusive, all we have at this level of survey.

Twenty-one percent of the survey respondents have postcodes that fall into the 'low SES' band. This is a representative sample of the general population of low SES students at UWS, which is 22% (Reid, 2010).

2.3.6 First in family

Fifty-two percent of respondents indicated that they are the first generation in their family to attend university.

2.3.7 Level of perceived support from outside the university

Using a Likert-type scale (with 1 indicating no support and 5 being total support):

- 48% of students indicated that they experienced good to total support. (Levels 4–5).
- 30% of respondents felt that they experienced little or no support. (Levels 1-2).
- Average Likert rating – 3.26.

2.3.8 Travel

Sixty percent of the survey respondents indicated that they have to travel for more than half an hour to reach their campus. And 20% of these students travel for over an hour each way.

2.3.9 Paid and/or voluntary work

Twenty percent of students responding to this question indicated that they work and/or volunteer 30 or more hours a week in addition to their university studies.

Forty-seven percent of students are working 15 hours or more per week.

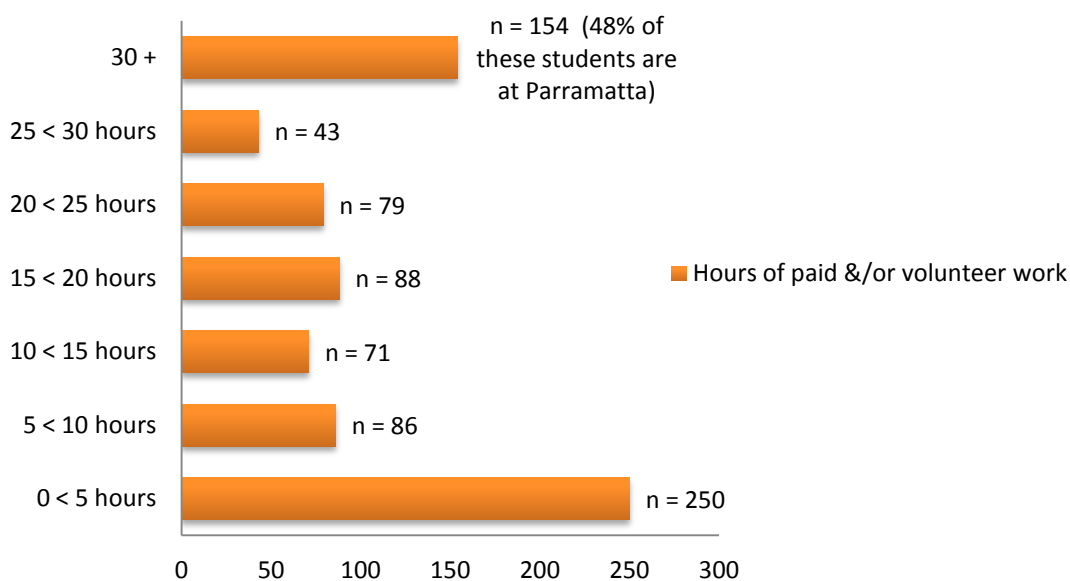


Figure 9: 2010 Hours of paid &/or volunteer work

2.3.10 Carer responsibilities

While 52% of respondents selected ‘N/A’, the remaining half of the students indicated that they do have carer responsibilities:

- Caring for children – 33%
- Caring for parents – 9%
- Caring for sick, aged or disabled relatives – 8%
- Caring for unspecified other(s) – 11%

Eleven percent of those students with carer responsibilities selected more than one area of caring responsibility.

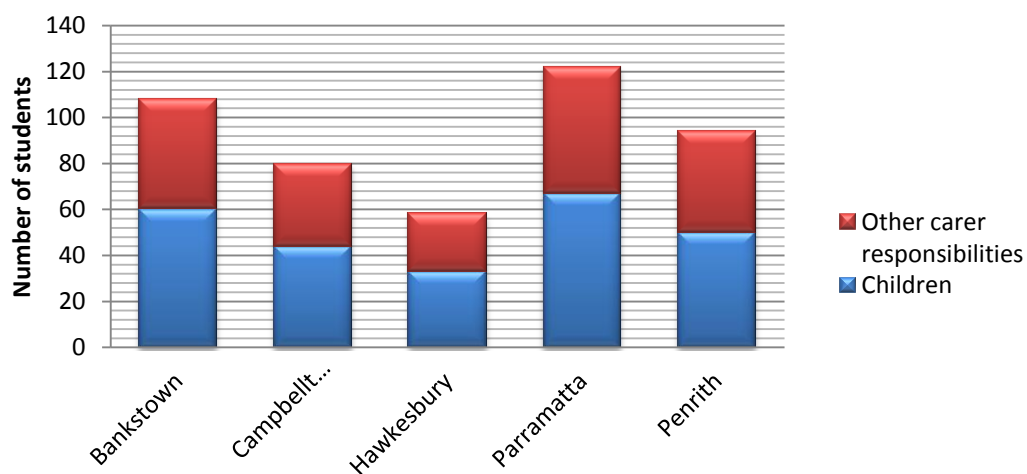


Figure 10: Ratio of respondent's carer responsibilities by home campus

Areas of focus and emerging issues

Mature Aged Students at UWS are not looking for special favours or easy paths to reach their goals. They accept the sacrifice and rigour required to attain a tertiary qualification while juggling the complexities of their lives. MAS need recognition of their circumstances and clear information, both about what is expected and what is available in the way of assistance. One MAS put it this way:

“Mature age students ... take responsibility for their own learning, they multitask and they get the results. MAS ... are at university because we want to be. We are not obliged to be, it is not expected of us, it is not because our parents said so or because our grades are high enough. Mature Age Students back themselves, believe they can, and take responsibility for their own learning. MAS are often the invisible group. We come to uni, attend classes, visit the library and leave. We juggle multiple important commitments as well as our obligation to our studies. Mature Age Students are resilient, intelligent, courageous students whose presence should be celebrated for what it is. The following through on a dream, a personal challenge as well as a professional one that we undertake because we want to, we stand up in the face of family pressure and self doubt and hold on to it regardless.” (Unsolicited email received 28/01/2011)

These observations resonate with the findings of Janelle Davis, Janice Catterall and Dai Fei Yang (2011), regarding MAS who come to UWS through VET/Pathways and were overall found to be ‘resilient and welcoming of the challenges’ (Davis et al. 2011, Ppt slide 10)

There are however, areas of difficulty that need attention. While these issues are magnified for MAS due to their often complex life circumstances, improvements in some of these areas are likely to be of benefit both to the university and to all students.

3.1 Access to services and information

Three groups of students stand out as disadvantaged in terms of their ability to access services available to assist students at UWS:

- Distance or external students;
- Students who are only on campus after hours or on weekends; and

- Students who are unaware of services despite extensive advertising.

3.1.1 Distance and external students

Most obvious are external students who, by the nature of distance cannot take full advantage of many services available to more local students. The following are typical comments made:

“I am an external student - I do not come into campus and your survey should be looking at the rate of mature students doing external studies and never coming [sic] to campus. Its a whole different phenomena and we require different support structures ... actually some support structure would be helpful that we can access from home.” (S)

“I am an external student that travels from North Queensland. So most of the services I cannot access and if they are online I havent been exposed to them.” (S)

3.1.2 Students working full time and/or studying in the evenings

Students who can only come to campus after-hours have limited or no access to the services of staff at Student Central as well as Support Services such as Counselling, Disability and Welfare. These students also have little or no opportunity to benefit from the academic and life skills workshops conducted during the academic session in office hours.

“I haven't used a lot of services because I am only on campus after hours and most services aren't available after hours to people in full time employment - who are often in greater need of the services because they have more on their plate!” (S)

“Evening students seem forgotten with activities falling between 9am and 5pm when we work” (S)

“All the sessions time were during work hours. It is very unfair. How about arranging some classes startin at 6pm or even on Saturday mornings? Especially the academic workshops.” (S)

While students feel strongly about missing out, it must be noted that AcPrep (Student Learning Unit) and the MAS Starting-out (Counsellors and MASEP staff) workshops are conducted pre-session and on weekends and evenings to try to accommodate these students. This raises the question about awareness and advertising of services.

3.1.3 Access limited due to lack of awareness of services

While there is an abundance of information regarding UWS support services available; online, through printed material and targeted events, a significant percentage of students indicated a lack of awareness of services that they might have found helpful. While not physically separated from relevant services, some MASs experience limited service access due to not knowing what to look for or where to find it.

Responding to the survey question: “If you did not use one or more of the [21 listed] services ... please tell us what prevented you from accessing them”, 30.5% of respondents indicated that they were unaware of the services, as pointed out by the following participants.

“i had no idea they existed until now! I have always felt lost at uws ... i would say that they need to be publicised more specifically.” (S)

“Many of these things would have perhaps been useful, but I didn’t actually know about them!” (S)

“I did not know about 95% of services were available to me.” (S)

“I had no idea of what was available to me. I was repeatedly stone-walled by various service departments at the university, I was constantly told to “refer to Vuws”. Not helpful and definetly very upsetting and time consuming when I should be focused on my studies.” (S)

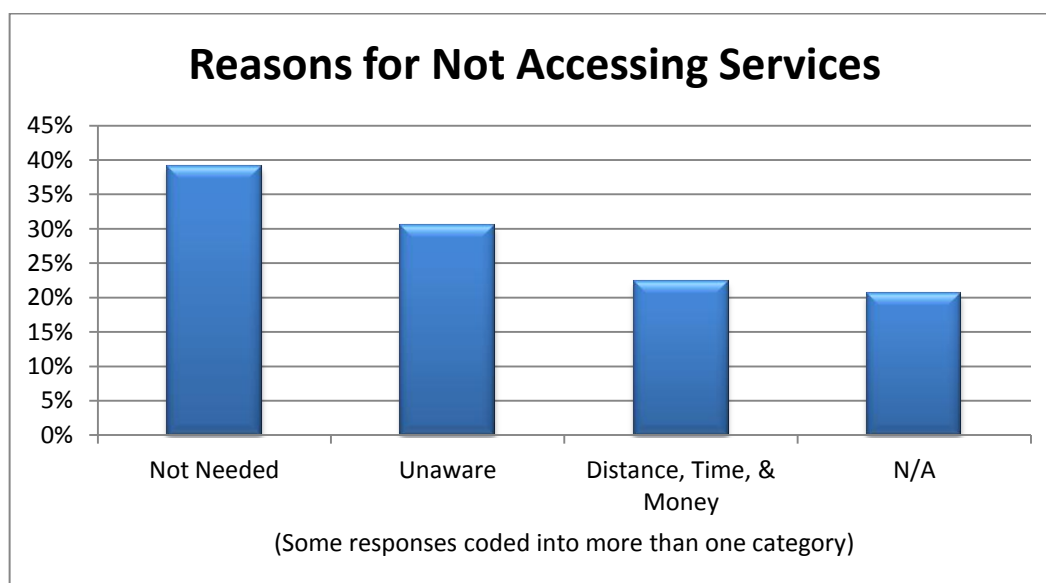


Figure 11: Reasons for not accessing services

(Chart by J. Herbert (2011) - qualitative data analysis – See Appendix 2.4)

3.1.4 Students' suggestions

Many students were pragmatic about their circumstances, appreciating the resources they have found and making thoughtful suggestions for improvements: (Bold print by the authors)

“Family care giving clashed with the times these sessions or services were available. I do very much appreciate the availability of online sources and access to services through the uws website and would like to see more of these, especially access like the online librarian broadened to other services such as student centres.” (S)

“we need that information say at least two even possibly three weeks before we start. So once - so perhaps once someone’s actually enrolled online, they perhaps get a package sent online like an online package, so that way they can sit at home and they can then work through it and well “Okay”.” (FG)

“just a one place like an online little space ... or something, where people could go and just see what’s going on, there’s a calendar associated with all events listed, there’s discussion going on, it’s just a yeah, an integrated space. ... ‘cause you’re juggling as you know, you’re juggling your life,” (FG)

3.2 MAS are looking for more consistent information delivery

The need for improved, accurate, and timely delivery of information emerges consistently through the survey, focus group, and interviews:

“That was the biggest thing for me and it still is, that there's not enough information. And I suppose in some ways it's not the right kind of information. When I first started and I wanted to find out, I really wanted to know quite some detail what it is going to be like. ... I read all the information that's online just about the courses. And then I emailed, it said if you want any further information email, so I emailed whoever it was and all they did was send me printouts of the information that was on the website. So I thought that was a total waste of time.” (Int.)

The main areas that MAS raised regarding information delivery were:

- In regard to academic advising;
- Timely notification about programs and resources;
- Blended – online AND face to face access to information and services; and
- Academic staff needs to be better informed about resources and services.

3.2.1 Frustrations with academic advising

Academic advising was a major area of concern for students. Many were unsure of their options for study, units and course information until well into their degree. Most were unaware of whom to ask and even what to ask in finding out information about their course of study. Students wanted advice at the orientation level, as well as throughout the semester.

Mature aged students expressed confusion, frustration and anger about the inconsistency, unavailability or inaccuracy of academic advice at UWS:

“Is there someone I can talk to about the course I am doing ie course progression, subjects, someone who can look at what I have done previously and take it into account when designing a course to suit my specific needs - via skype preferably, and not just general stuff but specific to my circumstances” (S)

“i wish i had better counselling on what course is best for me or what units in my course are more suitable and have better futures. i didnt know about the

system of unit choices in my course and didnt choose the right or best subjects.” (S)

“That my course would not be running anymore and therefore I have to finish all my subject next year. Which is alot of pressure while working and having family commitments.” (S)

“I still cannot get a statement detailing the course fees.” (S)

“I bloody had a total dummy spit about my advanced standing in the end because it’s this whole planning thing. ... it was halfway through the first semester before I finally got my advanced standing by which time I had already enrolled in B..... which I really should have got credit for. ... So that made me really angry ... So that was really bad. I thought that was really, really bad that it was well past the census date before I, it was confirmed and I felt that it should’ve been sorted out.” (Int.)

3.2.2 Timely notification about programs and resources

In the survey, focus group, and interviews, MAS indicated overwhelmingly that they would like information about their courses, university life, services and resources prior to the academic session and then throughout the session as timely reminders. This request is reflected in research findings from the University of Western Australia mature age student project (Christensen & Evamy, 2011), and UWS VET transition papers (Davis, Catterall and Yang 2011).

In their book *Resilience Thinking*, Walker and Salt (2006) identify this stage, prior to the commencement of the academic session, from a systems point of view as being the ‘time with the greatest potential for change in the system’ (p.82).

In the ‘reorganisation’ phase of the adaptive cycle, students are reorganising their lives to commence or continue university studies. At this stage they are open to change and are most receptive, before being swamped by all the demands of their unit requirements. Mature age students are more inclined to think seriously about preparing for ‘what they are getting themselves into,’ being pro-active about information seeking, and planning in advance the first week of the academic session.

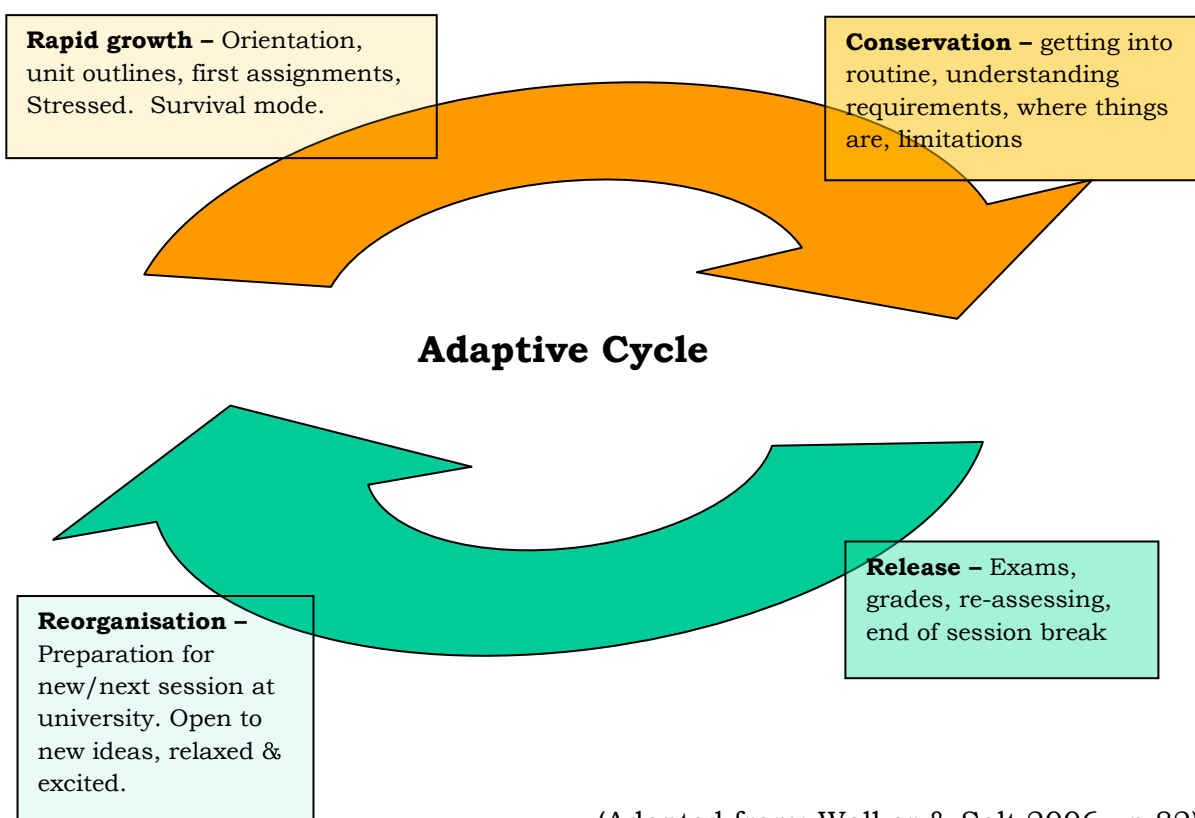


Figure 12: The adaptive cycle and receptivity to new information

Students made the following suggestions:

“It is better to receive information before the session starts to be able to plan and organise. Some programmes and workshops don’t give you enough notice so you are unable to attend”. (S)

“There are different times that services become more relevant, so the information should be available before the session starts and then consistently through the session so that it is brought to my attention when I need it. If there are specific courses or events then information about these should be given out at least 2 weeks in advance”. (S)

“And it needs to be distinct from all the other information that you might be sent as well, like there are various leaflets and booklets and so on, but there’s certain essential information like about vUWS, and where the student centre is, and what the library service offers, like that key orientation stuff and it needs to be labelled as clearly as that, that this is key orientation stuff, unless you read this, you’re not going to really be able to enjoy the uni experience, because this is key stuff”. (FG)

When survey respondents were asked: “What stages in the session would you most like to receive information about [UWS] services?” 74% indicated that they would like this information before the academic session commences.

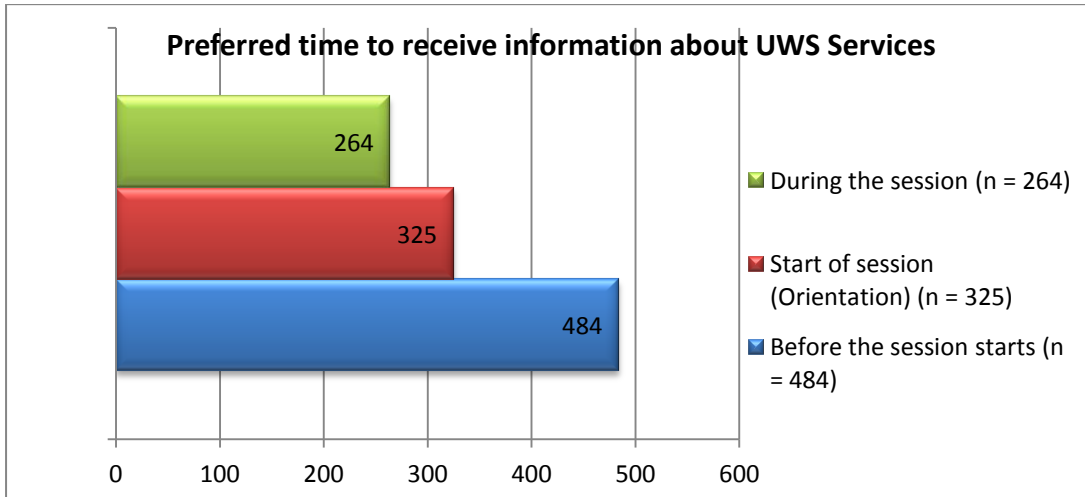


Figure 13: Preferred timing to receive information about services

3.2.3 Students prefer blended – online AND face to face access to information and services

Mature age students indicated with an overwhelming 82% response rate that they prefer a blended access to services at UWS.

While online facilities are very much appreciated by students who are time-pressured or studying externally, most students wanted to know that they could talk to a person if needed. One student remarked that while it is much quicker to find things online *“very often you can’t, you actually have to go and ask a person.”* And another spoke of the risk of loneliness when interactions are mainly online when they said: *“... but online you just a number.”*

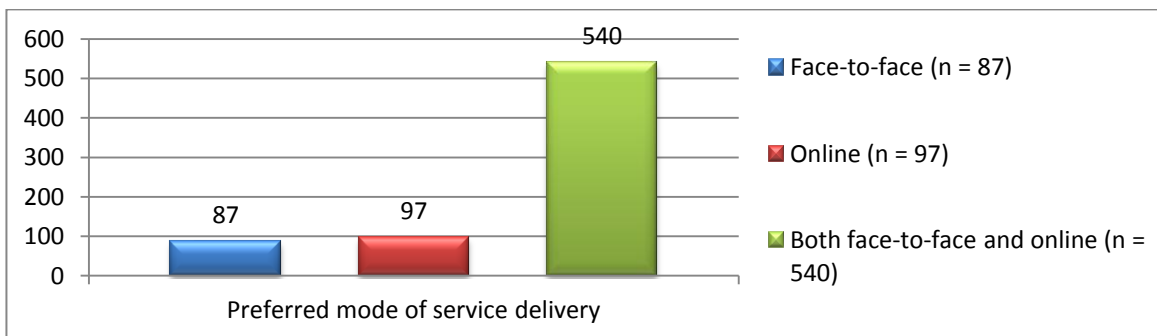


Figure 14: Preferred mode of service delivery

3.2.4 Academic staff need information about resources and services

Most MAS will interact primarily with members of staff who are their lecturers and tutors. In many cases these staff members are the first port of call for a student who is looking for assistance of some sort. Students would like it if these members of staff were more familiar with the range of services available at UWS as well as being more accessible themselves.

“a bit more support from the teachers & where to go for support when you have family issues that are impacting on study & life & when you do send an email to a teacher they either ignore the email with no advice given to the detriment of the student as this makes a depressed person even worse with the feeling that the University just doesn't care”. (S)

If new students received an information package and academic staff had access to the same package, either online or in hard copy, it could make the referral process much easier and more congruent from the student's point of view.

3.2.5 MAS expect more consideration and flexibility from UWS

In his 2009 institutional research and quality evaluation – *UWS Pressure points on retention*, Leonid Grebennikov recommended that:

UWS recognise that many of its students work in paid employment, often 35 hours or more a week, and are likely to keep doing so; and that carefully managing the expectations, study commitments, flexible learning designs (like the 6 week term model at Swinburne) and targeted transition support ... for such people is a key to their retention. The importance of these factors is increased if these people are also first in their family to study at university (at UWS it is reported that approximately half of its undergraduate enrolments fall into this category). Further, in order to improve retention of this large group of students it is recommended that the University seek to consistently increase the capacity for its facilities and services to operate outside of normal working hours. The existing services, academic literacy support programs and general facilities could, for example, be offered in evenings, weekends and/or electronically for 24/7 (Grebennikov, 2009, p7).

Grebennikov's 2009 recommendations for UWS echo a 2002 international study arguing for greater flexibility for MAS in higher education:

Most important for lifelong learners is a greater degree of flexibility of higher education learning opportunities designed to meet the needs of adult and other non-traditional learners (Scheutze & Slowey, 2002, p.323).

As Christensen and Evamy (2011) point out: "Scheutze and Slowey (2002) conceptualise this as [a] paradigm shift from an elitist educational model to a more equitable one that is characterised by an emphasis on "lifelong learning". This is a model far more in keeping with the realities faced by MAS in the 21st century where "major long-term studies of the first year experience (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005) clearly document a significant rise in the number of undergraduate students of any age who are – through necessity – employed for more than sixteen hours a week" (Christensen & Evamy, 2011, p.36).

The MAS studying at UWS couldn't agree more, as their words from the 'coal-face' reflect:

"What I need as a Mature Age Student is some institutional sympathy for people who say "I've got to have two/2.5 clear days a week to work", or "I can't take tutes that start before 10 or finish after 3pm" or "my financial burden to study is higher than for other students", and to have this recognised as a legitimate request since, unlike younger people at Uni, we have kids waiting at the School gate, families to be breadwinners to, or a mortgage over our heads." (Unsolicited email received 26/10/2010)

"a clearer understanding of how difficult it is to get to classes and to manipulate times to suit tutorials and still be able to look after your kids needs to be a high priority " (S)

"staff are unavailable and especially unsupportive of mature age students with commitments outside uni (I can't tell you how many times I've heard "well we expect uni to be the first priority" that is a ridiculous statement, of course it isn't, putting food on the table and a roof over your head is the first priority and that means work and family" (S)

“Youngsters have their school mates and friends and I am not, I feel very alone and need bit of support from lecturer. I understand they are also stretched as large student nos in the class, but being a mature aged student with job, family with kids, and other commitments, I need bit of compassion to achieve my last goal. thanks.” (S)

Forty-seven percent of MAS survey respondents work in paid or voluntary employment for 15 or more hours per week and 20% work 30 or more hours per week in addition to their university studies.

Forty-eight percent of MAS survey respondents reported having one or more people who are dependent on them for day to day care – children, elderly parents or others.

In 2008 the Bradley Review made recommendations regarding “the need to broaden the base of higher education qualifications in the population and the need for skills upgrading over the life cycle” (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008, p. 4), along with the urgent need to raise participation “from among groups which have traditionally failed to participate” (Ibid). In response, significant efforts are being undertaken across the sector to increase the participation of equity target groups in higher education. Consideration of the circumstances of MAS and a shift towards a more flexible approach toward the delivery of courses and services at UWS would seem to be a logical strategy to “support the achievement of the target to increase the proportion on students from disadvantaged groups to 20 per cent by 2020” (Ibid).

3.3 The “emotional” and social journey

In his UWS commissioned research for the Bradley Review, Grebennikov (2009) notes the importance of social belonging in ensuring that students are retained and engaged in productive learning:

Students’ sense of belonging to the university community, being linked into strong support networks, engaging with peers both in an out of class on projects or assignments, and for moral support. Such things are vitally important because learning is a profoundly social experience (p. 5).

One focus group student describes the importance of social connection in what is often (for male and female students) an emotional journey:

“It would be the emotional journey as well, because I actually found out that, you know, you’re so excited coming the first week you’re coming, and you get all this information, but then you’ve got to sort of access it and then you think, as you say, you’re worried you’ve missed something or not missed something. And I found at week three I was an emotional mess, because it was about week three it hit, and I just thought “I can’t cope, I can’t do this”, but I had encouragement and support from a variety of places, so that’s what I’ve got to do. So I would actually say there is actually an emotional journey, that is part of the process, but that would be different for different people, and how much they feel it, but I think that it does engage not just your head but your emotion, yeah, which is why we need the connection.” (FG)

Sixty-seven percent of survey respondents rated making connections with staff and peers as ‘Important’ and ‘Very important’. Of the 156 respondents who left additional short answers, nearly all commented on social networking as a high priority and necessary for productive study as well as a healthy lifestyle. However, a common theme among MAS is isolation and loneliness.

“Knowing someone else who is in the same situation as yourself that you can talk to can help dramatically, otherwise uni for an older person can be very lonely.” (S)

3.3.1 Obstacles to social connection for MAS

As previously discussed MAS are often severely limited as to the amount of time they can spend on campus. Many are working and studying in the evenings:

“i usually go from work to uni to home - there is not much opportunity for part time students cause all the facilities (like food / common areas) are locked up after hours” (S)

The logistics of travel and family commitments keep some students on a very tight schedule:

“my travelling time from Normanhurst to Bankstown is 1-1/2 hours by car and

2 hours by train and bus. Usually I have to rush home after lectures/tutorial in order to avoid the 5 pm traffic jam so as to prepare dinner for family” (S)

Age differences, commitments and modes of study all have an impact

“I felt isolated from my peers when I started studying both because of the age gap, and because of differing priorities. This was mostly self-imposed because I knew I was older but most other students didn't really notice. However, it would have been helpful to speak to other mature-aged students to hear their stories and to know that I wasn't alone.” (S)

“And sometimes it's so self-directed that you feel very isolated in amongst everything” (Int.)

“It is very easy to feel isolated during a PhD candidature” (S)

3.3.2 Online opportunities to make social connections

For many students in this study, online opportunities to connect have proved most practical.

“Online networking is very useful when forming study groups ... Making friends is also a good way of making university a lot more enjoyable. I may work full time and study on-line, but I am still enjoying a full university experience... even the social side of it.” (S)

“I enjoy going on to campus connection. Makes one realise you are not alone and motivating to see mature age students who have a lot happening in their lives but are still able to complete their education.” (S)

However, not all students were comfortable communicating online and some would just prefer to meet and talk face to face.

“i am concern that online activity is too public” (S)

“online you just a number” (S)

3.3.4 Mature age students would like a designated room/space

Many mature age students suggested that they would like a designated space/room be made available them to use. Suggestions regarding the provision of a MAS Common Room or area included the following rationale:

- MAS find it almost impossible to meet at fixed times and places (like the Drop-in groups arranged by the Counsellors) due to timetabling issues and external commitments. However they would be inclined to call into a MAS common room between classes and meet any other students who are there at that time.
- This group comprises almost 40% of the UWS student population and yet they often feel as though they don't belong at UWS.
- A designated space, with old-fashioned notice boards, projection screen and whiteboard could create an alternative information sharing hub (for those not as comfortable with finding everything online) as well as a venue for MAS lectures and social events.
- MAS regularly complain about how noisy it is in the Library and how hard it is to find a quiet place to sit down and study.

These are some of the students' comments:

"...a room like that, and a big noticeboard with all the latest events being put up there, and you've got a great space, you know, you've got a space where you actually as a mature age student feel like you belong on the campus. You've got a place you can go to to see what's going on, and you can sit down and meet whoever else is hanging around, because they're in between a lecture or whatever as well." (FG)

"I think there should be perhaps an area like this for mature age students, again using your key card to get in and out so that you know if you come in, have a coffee, you can use the microwave or whatever else. Then other people who are in here are people similar to yourself in the same situation so that way you can sit down and talk." (FG)

"I think if you had sort of like a focussed area where mature age students could gather, I mean, similar to the coffee shop, but perhaps rather than

meeting at a coffee shop meeting in a room similar to this and you know we have coffee, tea and sugar and stuff and you just make your own and so forth, do it that way.” (Int.)

“So, that’s why I think the common room type of thing would perhaps lead to more interaction.” (Int.)

“But, no, I think we need to do – find some ways for a common room for the mature aged students to have a chance to get together and, not saying the coffee thing down there is no good, it’s very good. But something a bit more concrete.” (Int.)

“A mature age student and staff common room that hosts occasional social gatherings and talks perhaps.” (S)

“A Mature age students room with a microwave, kettle etc somewhere to meet. Open to all persuasions & ethnicity etc” (S)

“I would recommend a comon room on campus (particularly Werrington South) with something like a hot water urn, sandwich press and microwave and chairs/tables. Somewhere to hang out between tutorials when it's raining” (S)

“Have a student room with a kettle and seating” (S)

“I would like to see a common room established at Hawkesbury Campus where students can make a coffee/cup of tea, eat lunch and generally interact.” (S)

“Should be a room dedicated to mature age activities such as small group session, that has some amenities (coffee etc) i.e. an overt endorsement of mature age students” (S)

“I think this is a most important aspect of the MAS experience. We tend not to fit into other groups or to seek them out. We are usually on campus for shorter periods and use that time wisely. A drop in centre where MAS could get a

cuppa, sit in silence, stress out, chat and just generally use would be invaluable. Somewhere where there were staff and students who used the room regularly in both a formal and informal way. A designated MAS area would let MAS students know that they are important to the university and are valued. As it is now, there is very little for MAS, and no place where we can go that is tailored to our needs.” (S)

3.4 I.T & e-Learning - MAS perceptions and experience

Computer technology has become an intrinsic part of tertiary education. However, while school leavers take this for granted, MAS are more often 'digital migrants' and are inclined to experience a lack of confidence in tackling online tasks.

To gain a better understanding of how MAS are coping with and relating to computer technology and e-learning at UWS, the transcripts from the MASEP focus group, interviews, and survey short answers were examined for patterns and themes, then analysed using direct quotes from students where possible.

While none of the questions in the survey directly related to the student's experiences with information technology (IT), many students specifically mentioned I.T. issues in their short answer responses. Students were encouraged to discuss their I.T. experiences during the focus group and the interviews.

3.4.1 Themes and patterns

The main issues identified by the students were nearly always interrelated and multifactorial as this connection/frequency diagram shows:

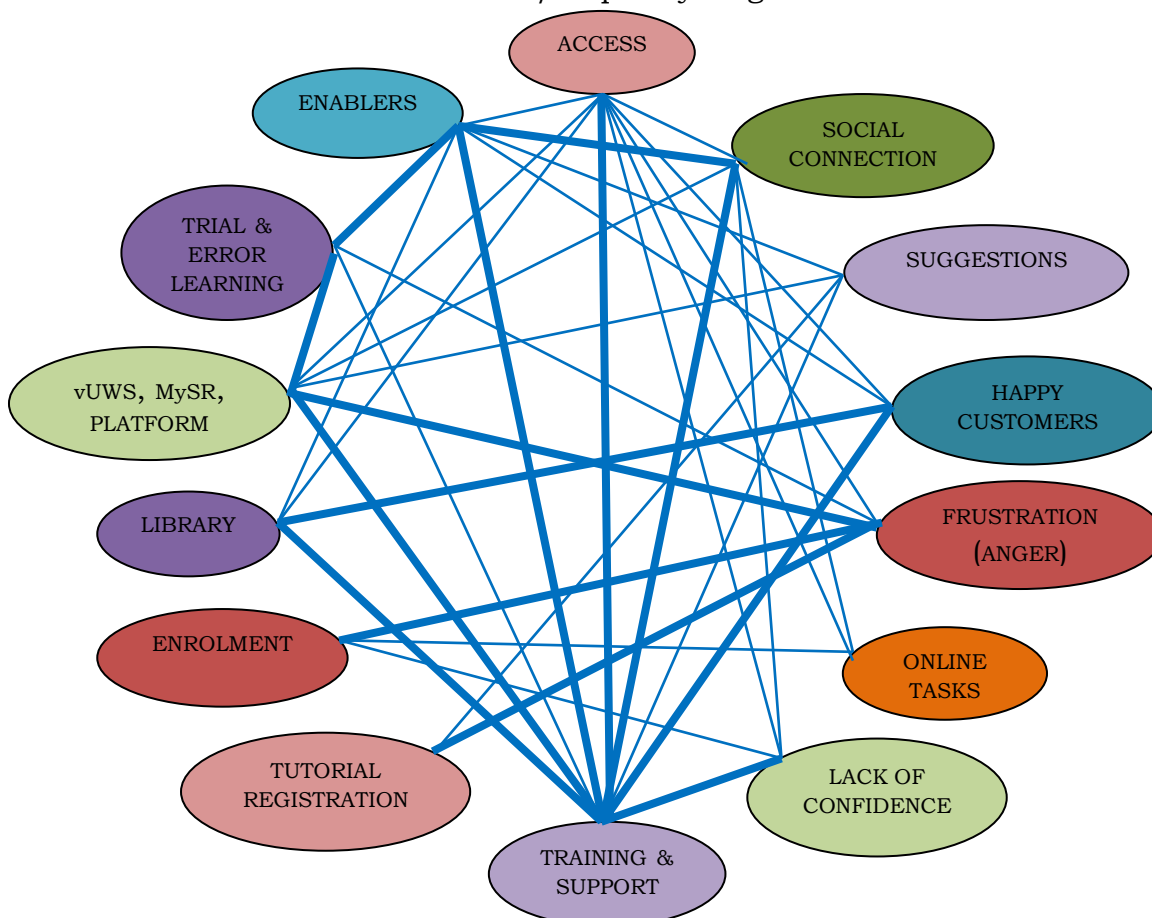


Figure 15: Frequency of students' comments, linking themes

However, the following categories emerged:

- Perception and emotion:
 - Mature age students often lack confidence in use of computer technology and,
 - Experience significant initial difficulties and lack of awareness of assistance.
 - Many experience anxiety and feelings of isolation and inadequacy;
 - Most online orientation is done by trial and error.
 - Frustration and anger is common.
- Training and support
 - Most MAS indicate that they would like more information about online learning prior to the commencement of the teaching session, and
 - That this information needs to be better advertised and flagged clearly as important to their studies.
- Access issues:
 - Students with limited time due to non-negotiable family, work or carer responsibilities
 - External/distance students
 - Students in evening classes unable to access assistance out of office hours
 - Lack of awareness of assistance available.
- Administrative aspects:
 - Enrolling on line
 - Tutorial registration
 - Navigating - MySR, Platform Web and vUWS
- UWS Library
- Social aspects:
 - Making social connections by attending training workshops
 - Making academic and social connections online
 - Assisting other students with computer issues

- Sharing suggestions and expertise

3.4.2 The “emotional journey” – initial lack of confidence

While most MAS express initial (and sometimes on-going) doubts as to their ability or right to be at university, this general lack of confidence is particularly noticeable in MAS who have not grown up with computer technology.

“Computer, internet research skills. These are essential for study, but many mature aged students are not comfortable with the technology and our induction into the research system was awful. It was rushed and assumed a high level of existing knowledge.” (Int.)

Many students expressed anxiety about navigating the online systems and worried that they might ‘push a button and it will all go wrong’; that they might break or lose something important. This anxiety with IT often prevents MAS from exploring and discovering the online links that may be essential to their studies or, at least helpful in their transition to e-learning.

“So it can be hard to ask then too, for me to deal with my anxieties, I really do need that, just that list of things I need to do, so I don’t not enrol in some crucial thing and miss out on a whole year or something, you know, because it’s that anxiety too. It’s that anxiety of missing something.” Focus group (FG)

“When I first started, I didn’t even receive a start package explaining how everything works. I also had very little experience on the internet so I found using everything on line very difficult especially without a handbook. eg; about units, enrolling, staying on campus etc.” (S)

When it appears that younger students do not have any difficulty navigating the online systems, MAS can feel isolated and reluctant to ask for assistance.

“The online experience. As a mature student this is a new study environment I’m specifically talking about tutorial registration and how to find the info, use of a VIEWS site and some of the helpful information on the library site. You do find this out eventually, but mature students often don’t have a buddy to ask, unlike many of the first year students, and family often don’t have any idea.” (S)

However, one MAS spoke about the value of having participated in the MAS Starting-out workshops that are run by the Counsellors:

“ [The] support that was given in terms of encouragement, the giving you information before you started about what were some tips about going through university so, and talking about some of the computer usage such as, you know, logging on and things like that. So it was all about how education’s changed, and there was that networking. ... so you’ve got that sense about not being isolated, you got that sense of being part of a group very early. So even though you’re going to go off and do your own individual course, you at least started with "Well I’m not the only lone bunny in the university", ...”
(FG)

This student’s comments demonstrate the benefits of pre-session training in orienting new MAS within the e-learning environment as well as providing the beginnings of the social networking that is “a crucial aspect of increasing student retention” (Christensen & Evamy, 2011, p. 6).

3.4.3 Training and support

The students described a very ad hoc exposure to training in their transition to e-learning at UWS. One student had attended the MAS Starting-out workshop that includes a one hour, hands-on experience in the computer labs. A few spoke of the excellent online programs or navigation guides that are increasingly available to students.

Their most common response to how they learnt to use the online systems at UWS was by trial and error:

“I sat at home some nights for hours and hours trying to work out which button do I push, and if I push it what will go wrong.” (FG)

“You really have no idea and, as I said, I basically learnt by clicking on an icon and hoping for the best.” (Int.)

“I click on everything, ‘cause I know you can’t break a computer unless you throw it out the window. So I just click on everything to find how it works, and that’s one of the things that got me through, but other than that, a lot of

people don't have that confidence with a computer, they think "Oh no I'm going to break something"... (FG)

Some students found themselves informally teaching others:

"If you've got no idea, you've still got no idea, and then to start from scratch in a software you've never seen before, like, they've just assumed everyone's technology able, especially mature age students, ... because I had industry experience I got lucky, but I've had to teach half my class how to use it, and they're not all mature age students." (FG)

3.4.4 Frustration and anger

Students spoke and wrote with some passion about their frustration with aspects of ICT they engaged with at UWS:

"It took me three weeks to work out the website and by then I was well behind in the study. Didn't know ... that there were [s]tudy sessions available to me until well into the semester." (S)

"... thing about UWS is the fact that there's just like, you know, yeah, "Come along, come, come, come", and then "Oh you're a student, you belong over there, and you got to work it out for yourself, 'cause this is self-directed learning, and if you don't, well oh too bad", you know." (FG)

"the whole thing is so cumbersome and trying to find the right bit of information. And often when you, especially when you log on to like the students, that main student page, there's so many different bits of information in different places and if you do one of those things you just actually happen to click on something that you don't normally, you find the bit of information that you need but you can never find your way back again because everything's under a different heading and you that you need to know." (Int.)

"How to use the bloody computer system at UWS - even now I cannot re-enrol for 2011" (S)

3.4.5 Information that is available, but under utilised

There are increasing amounts of high quality information, instruction, and training available to facilitate the transition of new students to e-learning at UWS.

These are some examples:

- The **Education Technology Program** offers students both workshops and online tutorials to help them to become familiar with the online learning systems at UWS. It is available from the Student Learning Unit web pages:

http://www.uws.edu.au/student_learning_unit/slu/education_technology_program_etp

- There are **online interactive viewlets** available from the introductory vUWS page:

<http://tdu.uws.edu.au/viewlets/navigatinginvuws/navigatinginvuws.htm>

- The **Mature Age Students Starting-out workshops**, run prior to Spring and Autumn sessions, feature an hour long Introduction to e-Learning that includes hands-on experience in the computer labs:

http://www.uws.edu.au/currentstudents/current_students/getting_help/mature_age_students

- When students log on to their vUWS site they can find **E-learning Student Support** automatically appears in their Course List. Opening this link gives them access to comprehensive instructions on how to navigate the Blackboard learning system:

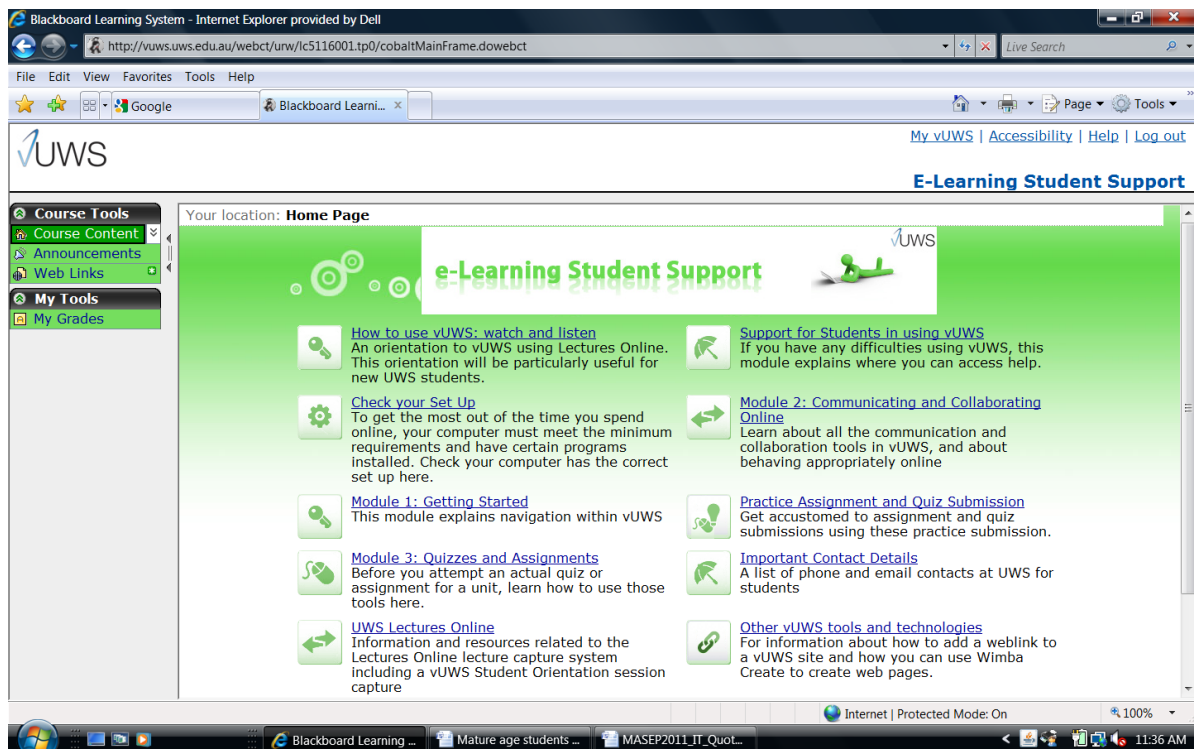


Figure 16: Example of e-Learning support available to all students on their vUWS pages

These comprehensive and excellent orientation tools have been of use to some students:

“I attended all the post grad seminars and completed all the online programs and these were very helpful.” (S)

“But the actual support you get when you ask the questions is actually very good, yeah.” (FG)

“I have settled in and coping well with my studies. Thank you so much for the workshop. It has been very useful to me in settling in with my studies.... The I.T. skills were very useful especially on getting started on vUWS. Once the classes began it was easy for me to navigate vUWS with no problems at all ... I will definitely recommend it to my peers.” (Email received 11/08/2010)

However, not all students are aware of these programs or how valuable they are in adapting to e-Learning at UWS:

“There was an online tutorial that came out on how to use vUWS, and it was something I parked on my desktop, and I was always going to go back and have a look, but never did.” (FG)

“You do not always understand how technology may relate to your subject until an assessment has been set. Then you need to learn how to use it. Otherwise you do not listen as you do not understand its relevance at the start or before the session starts.” (S)

Large amounts of time, money and resources go into advertising the support that is available, and yet this is still often contained within the ‘silos’ of each department’s purview; creating the potential for this information to be lost, unavailable or overlooked by many students.

3.4.6 Students’ suggestions

“Often we don’t know what we need until we find it – the Uni needs to make it easier to find.” Student observation. (Moore, 2009)

The MASEP research found that students are more than willing to share observations and suggestions as to how the ICT system at UWS can be improved:

“The support at uni is not advertised very well” (S)

One student advised:

“So I’ve sort of, you know, when it comes to technology side, I think they need more direct links and more, you know, PRESS HERE, you know, a big arrow flashing going, ‘Hey guys’, you know, that sort of stuff. I think for the first, you know, as the first experience of it, that’s sort of what it needs to be, very, very obvious.” (FG)

While another suggested:

“I think there should be a day, like not the first week of university, like the week before or even two weeks before, so new students – it doesn’t matter what age group, all students can come in and spend, you know, five or six hours with people who know, and yes, so use the library training room where they’ve got - it’s all linked up, and you know, teach people how to use it and how to – and what they need to access, and video, and how to use it and how.” (FG)

“I said, “Well what’s vUWS?” When I went to the orientation, no-one put it in front of me, and so I had to then find vUWS and find my subjects and go in, and it was really a - it’s how I’ve learnt everything here, just this bit, bit, bit, bit, bit way of learning. If there was one comprehensive orientation thing I could kind of give us a bird’s eye view.” (Int.)

“... we need that information say at least two even possibly three weeks before we start. So once - so perhaps once someone’s actually enrolled online, they perhaps get a package sent online like an online package, so that way they can sit at home and they can then work through it ... “ (S)

“If you get that after you’ve enrolled – so completing your enrolment, if it’s sent to you “Now that you’ve finished this, you’ve got to watch this, and this’ll be sent to you or you can click here and you can go...” (S)

3.4.7 I.T. Skills Cafe – Pre-session introduction to e-learning at UWS

Students in this study have consistently recommended pre-session information and instruction in the online learning systems at UWS.

As part of the MASEP and in cooperation with the UWS Counsellors’ pre-session MAS Starting-out workshops, a hands-on introduction to e-learning (‘IT Skills Cafe’) has been conducted with over 240 new MAS attending since the autumn session of 2010.

Evaluations from these workshops have shown high levels of student satisfaction, with:

- 74% reporting an increase in their overall confidence resulting from the workshop and,
- 100% of those responding indicating that they would recommend the workshop to others.

Follow-up tracking showed the average GPA average of students who attended the MAS Starting-out workshops to be 4.49, which compares favourably with the 3.69 Average GPA of the general 2010 UWS MAS population.

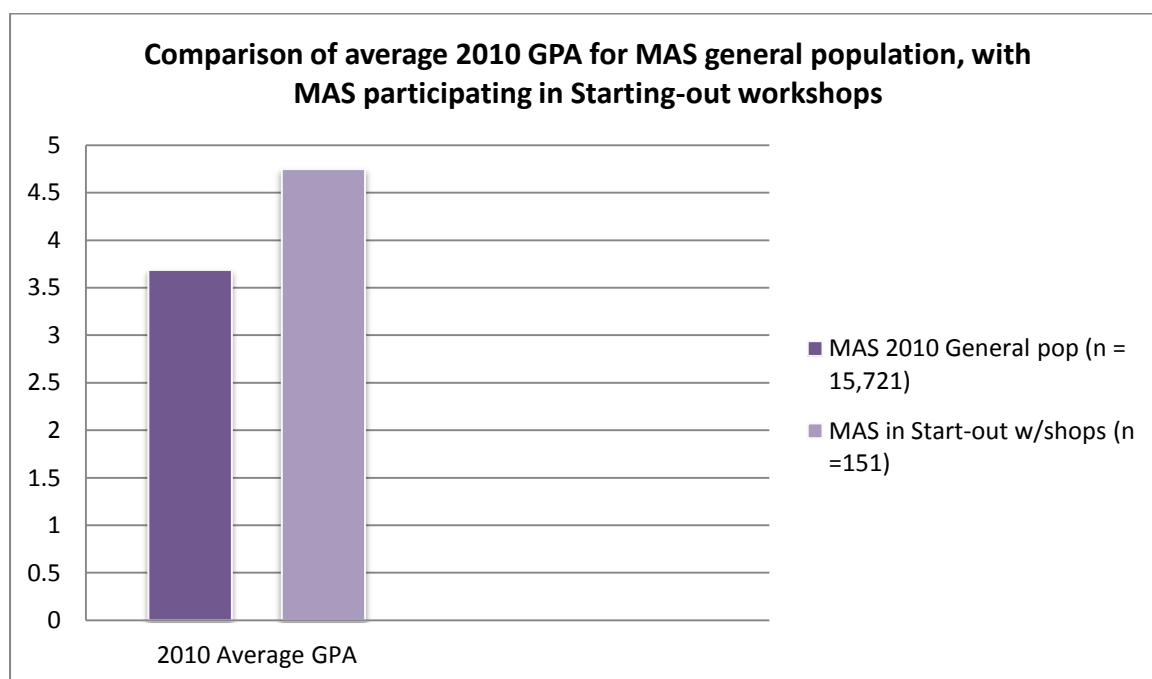


Figure 17: Comparison of average GPA - General pop MAS with MAS in start-out workshops

One student wrote in reply to a follow-up evaluation of the ongoing usefulness of the I.T. skills workshop:

“I have settled in and coping well with my studies. Thank you so much for the workshop. It has been very useful to me in settling in with my studies.... The I.T. skills were very useful especially on getting started on vUWS. Once the classes began it was easy for me to navigate vUWS with no problems at all ... I will definitely recommend it to my peers.” (Email received 11/08/2010)

3.4.8 Access:

Access emerged as a significant issue that impacted on many students’ adjustment to the UWS online learning environment.

Most obviously external and distance students were more reliant on online communication and services and less likely to be able to participate in workshops or benefit from social interaction and knowledge sharing with other students.

“I am an external student ... So most of the services I cannot access and if they are online I haven’t been exposed to them.” (S)

Perhaps less obvious, were access issues pertaining to the use of computers on-site at UWS. In the survey answers to the question: “What are some things you wish you had found out sooner?” twelve students wrote that they did not know about the

location or existence of some of the computer labs, sometimes until their second year at UWS. Several students were depending on the computers in the Library to get their work done.

“Sometimes the computer systems were all being used which made it difficult to use them, some people had to wait in line.” (S)

For some students the opportunity to discover training and support services by taking the time to ‘click-on-everything’ is not an option, either due to time pressures, commitments or not having a computer at home.

“I am rushed when here using the computer/internet etc. so don't spend much time checking these kinds of things.” (S)

3.4.9 Online administrative experience

“And that whole online menagerie of three different systems and all that - and actually once you get your head around it it's easy, you've got MySR, vUWS, and you've got platform web. Sweet as. But when you first look at it you get - where's the connection?” (FG)

3.4.9.1 Enrolling online

Students consistently mentioned online enrolment and tutorial registration as areas of frustration and confusion. Many MAS describe the online enrolment process as being both difficult and further shaking their confidence.

“Back then I think it was called “Seven easy steps” and it wasn't. By the third step I was ripping my hair out. I think I looked at - ended up skipping, looking at the seventh step and realised what I should have done and “Oh, that's what they meant.” (Int.)

“How to access all the enrolment information on the uws website. I.e. how to do tutorial registration, pay fees and generally find out what's going on. I felt that when I was in my first year (2009) I was left to my own devices. I had no

idea what to do, and through persisting I got there. I had rang up the student centre numerous times as well during this time and found that they seemed to keep passing me on to somebody else, and not giving me any solutions and this became frustrating.” (S)

“Um, oh the student centre of course. I mean last year they saved my life when I was trying to enrol. I got so confused. The circle that I was [in] was getting smaller and smaller and I was getting dizzier and dizzier. So Paige came in and saw them, took about two minutes and "There you go. You're enrolled". (FG)

3.4.9.2 Tutorial registration

The tutorial registration process is also an area that causes deep concern, especially for students with children, carer responsibilities and/or inflexible work commitments. The rather brutal first-come-first-served registration system is nearly always a shock to new students, with many describing how the tutorial they need in order to pick children up from school etc is filled within seconds of the tutorial registrations opening. They then have to take their case to their lecturers with very mixed results – some are happy to make allowances while others are rigid, insisting that university studies should be first priority.

“staff are unavailable and especially unsupportive of mature age students with commitments outside uni (I can't tell you how many times I've heard "well we expect uni to be the first priority" that is a ridiculous statement, of course it isn't, putting food on the table and a roof over your head is the first priority and that means work and family)”. (S)

“I would like to see enrolment in tutorial/lecture timetables at least 4 - 6 weeks ahead of the commencement of the semester. We MAS have to deal with other commitments (work, morgage, children, elderly parents).” (S)

“.. however, one last criticism is the tutorial registration process because the IT system doesn't seem to handle this well. The groups fill up within a minute of being available and when you miss your first preference the system can freeze for a long time making your second preference just as hard to get into.” (S)

“... and then there’s the tutorial enrolments, and then - I couldn’t figure all that stuff out, you know.” (FG)

Students persistently asked for and suggested that there be a consistent policy to pre-allocate places in tutorials to accommodate students with extenuating circumstances.

“You can judge them on their merits, then you can pre-fill those classes. So, instead of saying you’ve got thirty five slots in this class, this class has only got twenty spots because we’ve already got fifteen in there, and that will take the workload off these guys that are copping all these phone calls, filling out forms or whatever ... But purely from an administrative point of view, it is so much easier to pre-allocate spots.” (Int.)

3.4.9.3 vUWS, MySR, Platform web - “the whole menagerie”

While students generally seem to come to an understanding about how the online systems interrelate, these descriptions encapsulate some of the confusion in the early stages:

“vUWS seems to be – vUWS seems to be separate from MySR, so when it comes to enrolling – this is my experience when I first – you’ve got, you’ve found yourself to the MySR site, and then you – or MyUWS, and then and in My Student Records, and you got the enrolling, but there was no – even though vUWS is there, it doesn’t tell you about it.” (FG)

“So but that is what I’m saying, on that enrolment it’s almost like that they’re separated, and there’s no connection. And even when you have an IT problem, if the IT problem is with vUWS and you go to the IT, they say, “Oh we don’t do vUWS”. (FG)

Students frequently expressed frustration with the lack of standardisation in the way that academics use vUWS. There were complaints about the use of online quizzes that were set to mark for U.S. spelling, or that incorporated the lecturer’s inaccurate spelling as the ‘correct’ answer.

“So I typed in exactly as it was, but she had, in her answers she had spelling mistakes, so that was seen as if mine was a mistake. So and meanwhile I’m thinking “I should get maybe 76% at least” and as it was I ended up getting

quote "thirty something". So I would have got a fail if I didn't stand up for myself. And she wasn't answering my concerns about this so again I went over her head and mentioned this. And other things, putting things in the wrong order meant it was the wrong answer, which is pathetic." (Int.)

This student concluded his comment by adding: *"...everything online, it's too dangerous if not done properly."*

3.4.10 Library

Students frequently describe the Library staff in glowing terms such as: "absolutely brilliant", "very helpful" and "lovely".

When they are familiar with the online resources offered by the Library – particularly sourcing journals, students speak very positively about the online library experience. However 23 students who responded to the survey question: "What are some things you wish you had found out sooner?" said that they would have liked to become more familiar with the Library and its services, as these examples show:

"How to use the library, how to use Vws in all its capabilities. I still do not believe in my 3rd year that I have learnt all that it offers. ... It would be great to be told about services and then a few weeks later a workshop on how to use them in the first year." (S)

"How to use the library website properly, first year didn't know at all about the library website and the access to journal articles." (S)

Again we see similar issues of students not being aware of the range of services (online or otherwise) that are available to assist them.

3.4.11 Social aspects of ICT affecting MAS

As Grebennikov points out, "learning is a profoundly social experience" (2009, p.5) and MAS generally value the networks they develop at UWS.

"Well I think it helps you to have a sense of belonging and to feel like there is someone else that's going along the journey with you, and I think that is what, you know, life I suppose is about, you know. And so like people who don't

make it a priority, they're the ones that are missing out, you know, like I think, you know, like it doesn't mean that you have to live in someone else's pocket, but it's just someone that you can turn to when things are – when you just think "Oh uni's crap, I'm not going to do this anymore, I'm going home", you know." (Int.)

Introductory workshops were seen as an opportunity to start making these connections:

"so you've got that sense about not being isolated, you got that sense of being part of a group very early. So even though you're going to go off and do your own individual course, you at least started with "Well I'm not the only lone bunny in the university", (FG)

It is interesting to note that while some prefer face-to-face interaction, the MAS in our study were generally positive about the use of online discussion forums. This was largely because of commitments that severely limit the discretionary time these students can spend on campus outside lecture and tutorial hours:

"So yeah, I like both, but like I think the online is a lot more comfortable I suppose in a way, because you can, you know, type away and do it at your leisure, you can do it at one o'clock in the morning if you want to, and you know, when you're doing your assignment or something." (Int.)

"Online discussion boards allow people to vent, express their emotions, opinions, point of views, without the added pressure of social restrictions. share each other the ideas as online community and discuss our issues together to find suitable solutions ... Just being able to relate." (S)

"Online networking is very useful when forming study groups and often these study groups. Making friends is also a good way of making university a lot more enjoyable. I may work full time and study on-line, but I am still enjoying a full university experience.... even the social side of it." (S)

While students suggested that an online forum is made available for MAS to use, this facility already exists as a discussion link on the Campus Connection site. A link to this site is automatically uploaded to the student's vUWS course list

however, students are still not aware of this opportunity and the discussion site for MAS is under-utilised.

3.4.12 Summary and recommendations for MAS and information technology at UWS

Mature age students start out at university with a wealth of life skills and experience. They do not however, always see themselves as confident adult learners with much to contribute to the UWS learning community. Most are digital migrants and the online learning environment is like a foreign land complete with foreign language and customs.

The majority of the students in the MASEP study expressed a desire to have more information, clearly presented and, preferably, well before the commencement of their first teaching session. Of the responses to the survey question: “What stages in the session would you like to receive information about ... services?” - 74% responded that they wanted this information before the session starts.

They wanted more I.T. training that is also advertised well in advance and flagged as important to their studies.

Students who are taking evening classes or are studying externally were often upset by the lack of after-hours service and support. One student suggested that support services could be available in a similar way to the “Online-Librarian”.

Students require more flexibility from the university. In a time when great effort is being made to extend tertiary education to under-represented groups and when the numbers of MAS are steadily increasing (39% of 2010 UWS students were mature age), flexibility is becoming an extremely important issue. The tutorial registration process will need to accommodate the time constraints of students with external, non-negotiable commitments.

‘You can’t prioritise a tutorial when you have children waiting for you at the school gate.’ (UWS 2010 MAS.)

The MAS who have been part of this study have been very generous with their participation, observations and suggestions. A significant proportion (45% of the survey respondents) indicated that if given the opportunity, they would like to pass on their knowledge and experience to newer students. This is a considerable and

willing knowledge base that the university could mobilise to assist in the orientation of new students in the basics of finding their way around the online learning systems at UWS.

Paid student I.T. guides could operate from each Library and Student Central office to assist new students to navigate the system (or to refer students to services that might be able to assist in more complex matters) as these last examples demonstrate:

“I prefer face-to-face interaction. At least on my first day, I tried to get hands-on help with the computerized tutorial registration. The student centre were crowded with people. When it is my turn, they just ask me to find a computer and logon by myself. Finally I caught the attention of a volunteer worker at the Christian Bible Ministry table and she personally took me to the computer room and spent 25 mins with me to get me through all those registration.” (S)

“I am a bit of a mentor to some of the other students at the Urban Research Centre - more by just being there and available for questions, which I warmly welcome and encourage (that is, I don't make them feel they are wasting or using up my time).” (S)

Future directions

“Thank You for giving me this opportunity, Thank You to all the ones who are making my opinion heard.” (Survey respondent, 2010)

Mature age students at UWS have a lot to say. When the 2010 UWS Services for Mature Age Students Survey was sent by email to all UWS students, age 22 years and over, the number of responses impressed and delighted us. Due to a series of delays we sent it out at what we considered to be a particularly bad time – Stuvac, when students are anxious and studying for exams. 770 students responded and then we had students volunteering to be part of the focus-group and interview follow-up.

The short answer options in the survey were extensively used by MAS– some left comments of over 300 words. Some apologised, saying that they did not know where else to give vent to their frustrations. There were ‘brick-bats’ and ‘bouquets’ and there were many, many suggestions about how things could be improved. While many students were unhappy about aspects of their UWS experience, some generously shared comments about the things that have made their time at UWS both worthwhile and enriching:

“However, a large proportion of staff at the university are amazing!! Their talent and knowledge is diverse, creative, innovative and world class. Many of the programs UWS offers are unique and colleagues of mine studying at other universities throughout Australia and overseas don't have many of the opportunities I've been offered (Thesis writing circle - amazing; the workshops - brilliant; research retreats - again, brilliant!!). These are just unheard of elsewhere.” (S)

“I'm very interested to the way our university making the atmosphere so beautiful, sometimes I wish I will study for as long as I can to stay around in such a lovely place.” (S)

This report would be very poor indeed without the hundreds of MAS voices that contributed to the body of knowledge that is the MAS experience at UWS in 2010. Their voices matter.

Not all issues MAS raised could be addressed but there are recurring themes that have emerged and, in relation to these, we would like to highlight some suggestions that the MAS have offered. Improvements in several of these areas would not only benefit MAS but the general student population of UWS and indeed Greater Western Sydney.

In their article explaining the University of Western Australia's successful MAS program - *MAPs to Success Project*, Christensen and Evamy (2011) describe two-fold benefits:

- a) Enhancing student retention by providing ongoing academic and social support in a flexible and personalised manner and,
- b) Reducing the potential harm of underprepared students incurring a personal and/or financial cost through over-enrolling or failing to withdraw before the HECS census date. (Christensen & Evamy, 2011, p42)

As UWS shows similar leadership in the sector, 'acknowledging that it is the university's responsibility to provide appropriate support when offering pathways and admission to VET students, (Davis, Catteral, & Yang, 2011) the ripple effect of positive word of mouth advertising flows out to the friends and families of UWS students in the Greater Western Sydney area. A tertiary qualification is only part of the story; a university's standing in the community rests largely on how its students feel about their time there. No doubt these MAS would not hesitate to recommend UWS to their peers:

"Also I want to give my support and my respect to the University of Western Sydney, for the great support they provide for the students." (S)

"I'd suggest all those student learning, 'cause they're really good. I've used the pass courses, I'm from Parramatta campus, and our library's got computers in the quiet area. So it's awesome," (S)

As is to be expected not all the respondents in the MASEP study were as happy as these students, and not all aspects of UWS work smoothly enough to merit such praise. The MAS were quick to point these out, sometimes angrily and with much passion but frequently with constructive ideas for improvements.

The MAS observations and suggestions fall into the following categories:

- Sense of belonging
- Institutional flexibility issues
- Academic advising
- Raising awareness of services and resources
- Perceptions of services
- Making social connections
- Scholarships

4.1 A sense of belonging – MAS@UWS – an e-Newsletter

A bi-monthly e-newsletter, along with existing services, web pages, events and signage will help to reassure mature age students that they are ‘in the right place’. This study has shown that most MAS have little free time on campus to meet and associate with others in a similar situation. A visible physical and online acknowledgement that UWS has and values MAS goes a long way toward dispelling the ‘Impostor Syndrome’ experienced by nearly all MAS.

It is proposed that this bi-monthly e-newsletter be sent to all enrolled students over the age of 22, with an option to opt out if the students do not wish to receive the newsletter. Because it can be emailed to students as soon as they are enrolled it would be an effective way of letting students know about services before the academic session commences as well as a follow up reminder at mid-session.

4.2 Need for institutional flexibility

Given the recommendations of the Bradley Review (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), and the significant efforts being undertaken to increase the participation of equity target groups in higher education, a shift towards a more flexible approach toward the delivery of courses and services is necessary. UWS acknowledges the complex and non-negotiable commitments of many MAS and is taking steps to make reasonable accommodations to assist in areas such as childcare. As of the 2012 plans are underway to develop a childcare centre at Parramatta campus and a new centre at Bankstown. This will mean that there are some childcare facilities on each of the UWS campuses.

Further steps to make service delivery more flexible and accessible were discussed and encouraged by MAS in our study.

4.2.1 Online ‘conciierge’

Many students complained that they did not have access to services and resources available to other students because they were studying externally or in the evenings with restricted opportunities to use services in office hours (see sections 3.1.1; 3.1.2 of this report). One MAS who is making good use of online resources suggests an extension of this:

“I do very much appreciate the availability of online sources and access to services through the uws website and would like to see more of these, especially access like the online librarian broadened to other services such as student centres. “ (S) (See also section 3.1.4)

An online ‘conciierge’ who is thoroughly familiar with the workings of the university could give students a much better idea of who to contact with various issues and, perhaps just as importantly, the terminology to use to facilitate the communication.

4.2.2 Extended open hours

As tertiary education continues to become a greater part of Australian life, UWS will have to look at extending staffing for all services beyond regular office hours. (3.2.5)

4.1.3 Explicit recognition of MAS non-negotiable responsibilities

As universities internationally move ‘from an elite to a mass system of higher education’ (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002), there is growing recognition that, for most MAS, university cannot be their first priority. MAS have to plan and prioritise around their often many responsibilities.

This issue comes up regularly around issues of the first-come-first-serve tutorial registrations, last minute timetable changes and lack of coordination between the mid-session break and school holidays.

Regarding the tutorial registrations, several students suggest a consistent policy for pre-allocating positions for students with disabilities or carer responsibilities. While many staff are individually obliging in this respect, others are less flexible. (3.4.9.2; 3.2.5.)

“So, instead of saying you’ve got thirty five slots in this class, this class has only got twenty spots because we’ve already got fifteen in there, and that will take the workload off these guys that are copping all these phone calls, filling out forms or whatever ... But purely from an administrative point of view, it is so much easier to pre-allocate spots.” (Int.)

4.3 Ensuring awareness of eLearning bridging programs

Students in this study have consistently recommended pre-session information and instruction in the online learning systems at UWS. For many students I.T. issues are the source of much anxiety. (3.4.3.)

As part of the MASEP and in cooperation with the UWS Counsellors’ pre-session MAS Starting-out workshops, a hands-on introduction to e-learning (formerly ‘IT Skills Cafe’) has been conducted with over 240 new MAS attending since the autumn session of 2010. (3.4.7) (www.uws.edu.au/matureage)

For more comprehensive tutorials enabling new students to get the most from the UWS online learning environment students are introduced to the Education Technology Program. www.uws.edu.au/slu

Evaluations from these workshops have shown high levels of student satisfaction and subsequent success and it is strongly recommended that these programs continue and are more widely promoted.

4.4 The need for better academic advising

Many students were very unhappy with problems associated with academic advice they had sought or found to be incorrect or unhelpful. This was an area that gave rise to a great deal of anger and frustration as students cope with the personal and/or financial costs of making the wrong decisions. Many students we deal with did not even know where to find the name of their course coordinator. (3.2.1)

4.5 Raising awareness of services and resources

Extensive efforts have and are being made to let all students know about the services and resources available to them. These efforts can be considered successful as 70% of our respondents indicated that they did know about these services. However this begs the question; what else can be done to inform as many

as possible of the remaining 30% of MAS who stated that they were largely unaware of the large range of services. (3.1.3.)

Students suggested:

- That they would like to receive information at least two weeks prior to the start of the academic session, (3.1.4.) as part of a hardcopy or online package that could be also given to academics.

- With the information clearly flagged as important:

“And it needs to be distinct from all the other information that you might be sent ... certain essential information like about vUWS, and where the student centre is, and what the library service offers, like that key orientation stuff and it needs to be labelled as clearly as that, that this is key orientation stuff, unless you read this, you’re not going to really be able to enjoy the uni experience, because this is key stuff.” (FG) (3.2.2)

- Reminders also need to be regular throughout the session as students become more familiar with requirements and needs. (3.2.2)

4.5.1 Perceptions of services

Some MAS seem to be unaware of the range of services offered by Welfare and Counselling in particular. Occasional shop-front days might help to dispel some of the stereotype assumptions made about these services:

“Also I am uncertain how to go about approaching places like counselling service. I feel that I would be considered a failure if I don’t work things out for myself.” (S)

“Student Welfare – didn’t know what their role was,, who to ask, where to go etc.” (S)

“Counselling – I didn’t know where to go, where the counsellor was or how I could see them, privacy issues, cost etc.” (S)

4.5.2 Successful programs needing a higher profile

Quantitative evidence from the survey showed that 74% of the MAS would like information about services and resources before the session starts, along with reminders on commencement and throughout the session. (3.2.2)

Current pre-session workshops run by the Student Learning Unit and Counsellors - AcPrep, Unistep and the MAS Starting-out and Introduction to eLearning workshops - are measurably successful but need more effective promotion. (3.4.7.)

“Unistep should be better promoted. Many of my connections arose out of Unistep.” (S)

“Without Unistep and the other students I would have been totally lost during my first semester. An orientation kit would have reduced my anxiety” (S)

A vibrant promotion, perhaps as an extension of Week O and with a greater focus on inviting students to ‘skill up for uni’, could take place around two weeks before the session starts. Combined with an enrolment package clearly flagging crucial information and a series of workshops both in and out of office hours, new students might be more inclined to come onto campus early and become more familiar with the services on offer. MAS particularly are inclined to make the effort, when clearly directed, to prepare in advance. (3.2.2)

- The student diary was strongly endorsed and online access to a comprehensive “What’s on” calendar was also suggested as ways to maximise students’ awareness of services. (3.1.4)

An overwhelming majority of MAS indicated that they would like a blended delivery of services – with both online and face to face options available. (3.2.3)

4.5.3 Student Guides

Forty-four percent of the MAS survey respondents indicated that they would like to pass on their knowledge and experience to new students. In conjunction with the Mates @ UWS program run by Welfare, and with similar structure and training to the award winning PASS program, paid student guides could be of great assistance to new students. Located in the Libraries and near the Student Central offices, they could help new students with the basics of eLearning, vUWS, MySR etc as well as giving friendly survival tips. Like the orientation assistants, but available through to Census date, they would also have a working knowledge of the

university and be able to refer students to the right person in more complex matters. (3.4.12)

“I prefer face-to-face interaction. At least on my first day, I tried to get hands-on help with the computerized tutorial registration. The student centre were crowded with people. When it is my turn, they just ask me to find a computer and logon by myself. Finally I caught the attention of a volunteer worker at the Christian Bible Ministry table and she personally took me to the computer room and spent 25 mins with me to get me through all those registration.” (S)

4.6 Facilitating social connection on campus and in the community

4.6.1 Family friendly events on campus

Forty percent of survey respondents indicated that they would find it useful to have family friendly social activities on campus early in the session.

4.6.2 Online discussion forums – Campus Connection

Many of our respondents suggested that an online discussion forum for MAS would be useful. They were obviously not aware that such a forum already exists on Campus Connection despite the fact that at times this has been automatically uploaded to their vUWS course list--some students have mistakenly thought this referred to the Connect retail group.

The discussion forum for MAS is buried quite deep in the Campus Connection site – requiring a log-in, identification of the ‘Discussions’ button on the sidebar and scrolling down to reach the MAS discussion thread. This presupposes that students understand the purpose of Campus Connection, that they know to look for the ‘Discussions’ link and that they are comfortable ‘talking’ online.

A suggestion from one of the students in the focus group is particularly apt:

“when it comes to technology side, I think they need more direct links and more, you know, PRESS HERE, you know, a big arrow flashing going, ‘Hey guys’, you know, that sort of stuff. I think for the first, you know, as the first experience of it, that’s sort of what it needs to be, very, very obvious.” (S)

4.6.3 MAS Drop-in groups or a designated MAS common room

While continued efforts by staff to facilitate MAS Drop-in groups have met with little success, students who do attend appreciate the opportunity to meet and get to know other MAS. Attendance rates however are minimal despite repeated enquiries from MAS for this service. The reasons so few students attend are partly lack of awareness but primarily timing issues: clashes with lectures or tutorials, students not on campus on Drop-in days and the pressure of external responsibilities limiting on-campus social time.

MAS consistently ask for a designated space/room to:

- Get away from the noise
- Make a hot drink and use a microwave
- Meet other students making use of the facility between classes
- Post notices about events, second hand books or recommended workshops
- As a venue for lectures, workshops or social events

This does seem to be a reasonable suggestion; to create a connective hub for the 40% of UWS students who, as mature age students, are increasingly looking for a quiet place to study and talk. (See section 3.3.4)

4.7 Scholarships

Scholarships are an important way to assist students and also to celebrate the achievements of students at UWS.

Existing scholarships for MAS are very limited as is the criteria for application. For example, students who are studying part time can not apply for the MAS equity scholarship. We have received frequent and sometimes bitter complaints about the scholarship application process for MAS:

“ 'cause this scholarship I've got now to do the summer research project, um when I applied for that I didn't get any reply. I sent my application off and then I sent another follow up to say, look have you got the application? Still didn't hear anything. And then I wanted to know when I would find out because if I didn't get it I was gonna have to find more work.” (Int.)

One student waited almost a year before hearing if her application was successful; even with added correspondence from student support staff. As she said; ‘I’m

applying for the equity scholarship because I desperately need the money. If my application has not been successful, I need to know as quickly as possible so that I can organise my life.'

4.7.1 Proposed MAS achievement 'mini' scholarships

Although single large scholarships can make an enormous difference for individual students, a lot of good can be done with a series of smaller, merit based scholarships that would assist MAS with their student expenses.

Ten \$500 scholarships would not only be of some help to the recipients but would make very good publicity in the community with press releases and photos of local MAS who are achieving great results. This would recognise the efforts and the place of the MAS, as well as benefitting the university and the community. It would be \$5000 a year very well spent.

4.8 MAS project staffing

The spread of MAS issues across almost every department at UWS would necessitate the engagement of at least one full time staff member dedicated to coordinating the MAS project:

- Working and liaising interdepartmentally on MAS related concerns,
- Promoting and facilitating introduction to eLearning workshops & programs
- Collaboratively designing, implementing and evaluating programs,
- Maintaining and updating the UWS web pages for MAS
- Meeting and working with MAS both in person and online,
- Compiling and sending the MAS@UWS bi-monthly newsletter
- Participating in promotional events and.
- Coordinating the production and distribution of literature, resources and information to students and schools within UWS.

4.9 A snapshot of what 'widening participation' might look like

As more students (of all ages) find their experiences at UWS to be rewarding and fulfilling, more of their associates will consider the option of studying for a tertiary qualification at UWS. This is an especially powerful effect when MAS are involved; when older brothers and sisters return to study; parents, uncles and grannies,

bingo and rock-climbing partners, a new groundswell towards lifelong learning emerges in the community - where tertiary education goes beyond 'widening participation' to get a degree, and becomes an accepted part of most people's lives.

There is, and will continue to be, an increase in the need for continuing higher education, not only because of the trend toward a knowledge-based economy and society, but also because participation in higher education will result in a greater demand for continuing education (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p323).

In their article, *Participation and Exclusion: A comparative analysis of non-traditional students and lifelong learners in higher education*. Schuetze & Slowey (2002) offer a snapshot of what universities in the near future could look like:

(See Figure 19 on next page)

Figure 18: The organisation of higher education from traditional to lifelong learning modes

Traditional mode	Lifelong learning mode
<p>Restricted access</p> <p>Admission only with academic credentials</p> <p>For the young only</p> <p>Selection for excellence</p> <p>Undergraduate-centred</p> <p>Full-time studies</p> <p>Campus/classroom based, on-site studies</p> <p>Linear studies with final examinations</p> <p>Discipline oriented, curriculum-centred organization of studies</p> <p>Degree studies</p> <p>Focus on initial higher education</p> <p>Non-diversified system of higher education</p> <p>Question: What university did you attend?</p>	<p>Open access</p> <p>Assessment of prior learning</p> <p>For young and adults</p> <p>Learning opportunities for all</p> <p>Wide range of programs</p> <p>Full-time and part-time learning</p> <p>Also off-campus/distance studies, self-learning</p> <p>Module-based curriculum, credit system</p> <p>Problem(-solving) & competence-oriented, student-centred organisation</p> <p>Degree and non-degree studies</p> <p>Including continuing higher education</p> <p>Diversified system of higher education</p> <p>Question: What did you learn at your university?</p>

(Adapted from S. Yamamoto (2001).

(Schuetze & Slowey, 2002. p322)

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Appendix – 1:**Mature Age Student Retention – Financial Benefit Analysis**

Retention Rate					
	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Students Aged <25	83.2%	81.3%	83.1%	82.9%	82.5%
Students Aged 25+	72.1%	72.0%	73.8%	74.9%	76.7%

Retention Rate – Percentage Change on Previous Period					
Change on Previous Year (% Change)	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	
Students Aged < 25	-2.28%	2.21%	-0.24%	-0.48%	

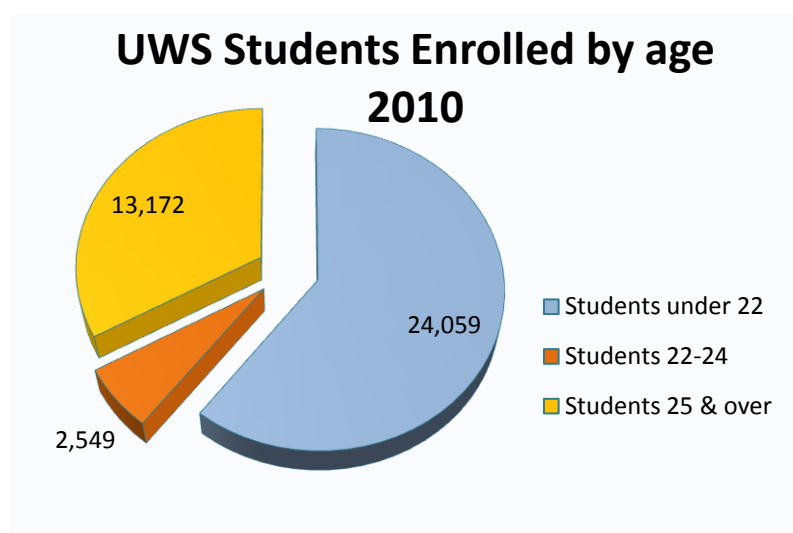
Number of Mature Age Students Retained & Mature Age Student Population					
Actual Figures	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11
Actual # Students Retained (>=25)	6,354	6,196	6,205	6,744	7,396
Mature Age Population Number of students (>=25)	8,817	8,601	8,411	9,008	9,644
Actual Retention Rate (>=25)	72.1%	72.0%	73.8%	74.9%	76.7%
Adjusted Figures					
Adjusted Retention Rate	70.45%	73.59%	73.62%	74.54%	
Adjusted # of Retained Students	6,060	6,190	6,632	7,189	
Number of Actual Students Retained in excess of Adjusted Retention Rate	136	15	112	207	
Number of Actual EFTSL Retained in excess of Adjusted Retention Rate	82	9	67	125	
Increased Revenue per Year Due to Improved Retention Rate (\$)	\$1,252,404	\$137,839	\$1,030,034	\$1,906,667	

Notes

1. Adjusted Retention Rate - Assumes year on year percentage change in mature age retention rate = year on year percentage change in <25 years old retention rate. The result is the retention rate that would have occurred had the change in mature age retention rate followed that of the <25 years old retention rate trajectory.
2. USE WITH CAUTION- For a true comparison, one would need to compare the changes in UWS mature age retention rates against changes in mature age retention rates across the university sector. Unfortunately this information is unavailable.
3. All dollar figures are in 2011 dollars (i.e. figures have not been indexed).
4. Weighted average revenue per mature age EFTSL (\$ p.a. in 2011): \$15,273.
5. Cluster data for 2011 was used to calculate revenue per EFTSL for all years and therefore is indicative only. The dollar value of payments for each cluster is determined by government policy each year and therefore payments may vary from year to year beyond inflation adjustments.
6. Number of Students/ EFTSL – (1.66) As source retention data is based on student numbers while revenue data is based on the number of EFTSL per cluster, student numbers in excess of adjusted retention rate have been adjusted to EFTSL in order to allocate revenue accurately. 2011 data has been used to calculate the adjustment ratio and then applied across previous years. Therefore, output should be considered indicative only as it assumes that the ratio of student numbers: EFTSL in previous years is equal to 2011. While this assumption appears to be valid, actual numbers may vary from this assumption.
7. Source data provided by UWS Information and Analysis Unit
Prepared July, 2012

Appendix – 2:**Mature Age Student Equity Project 2010-2011 - Statistical findings summary.****“Access without support is not opportunity”**

(Tinto, 2007)

1.1 2010 UWS Student demographic of non-current school leavers

39.5% of UWS students enrolled in 2010 did not come directly from secondary school.

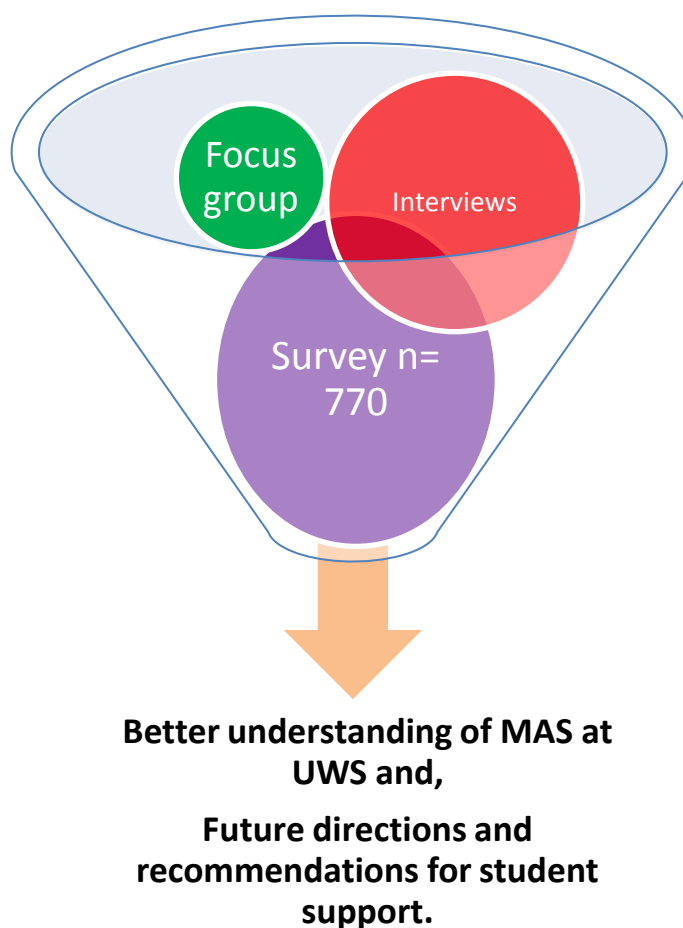
Proportion of Mature Age Students enrolled at UWS in 2010	Percentage of UWS students	Number of UWS students
Students under 22 (enrolling directly from secondary school)	60.4%	24,059
Students aged 22 – 24	6.4%	2,549
Students aged 25 & over	33.1%	13,172

Total - mature age students at UWS in 2010 (students who have not enrolled directly from secondary school)	39.5%	15,721
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1.2 Research method:

In order to capture a broad snapshot of 2010 MAS, a **survey** was sent by email to 15,721 UWS students aged 22+ in October 2010. There were 770 responses to this survey. This sample represents 1/5 of the 2010 mature age student population of UWS.

A **focus group** of 5 mature age students was conducted in December 2010 followed by seven informal individual **interviews** between December 2010 and March 2011.

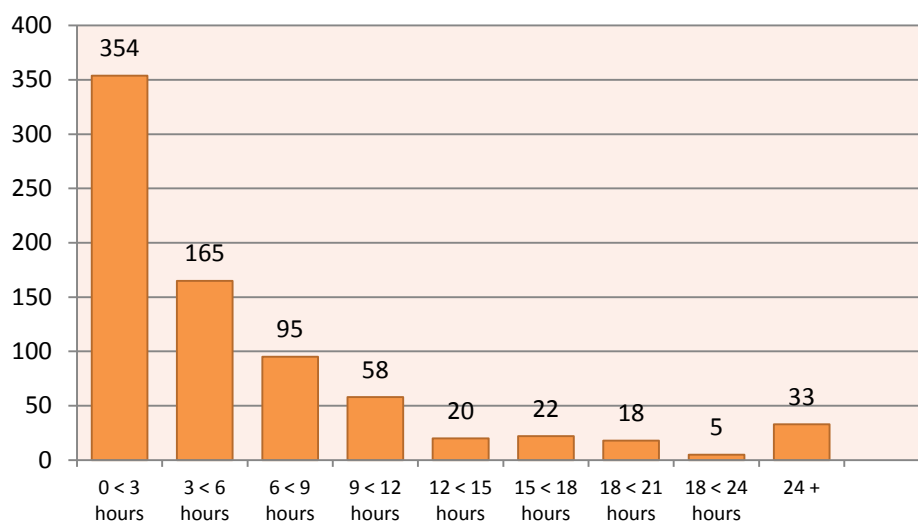


(HREC Protocol number H8245)

1.3 Summary of statistical findings

1.3.1 Discretionary time on campus is particularly limited for MAS

Hours per week spent on campus but NOT in tutorials or lectures



Hours per week spent on campus but not in tutorials and lectures	Hours	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
	0 < 3 hours	354	45.9%
	3 < 6 hours	165	21.4%
	6 < 9 hours	95	12.3%
	9 < 12 hours	58	7.5%
	12 < 15 hours	20	2.5%
	15 < 18 hours	22	2.8%
	18 < 21 hours	18	2.3%
	18 < 24 hours	5	0.6%
24 + hours	33	4.2%	

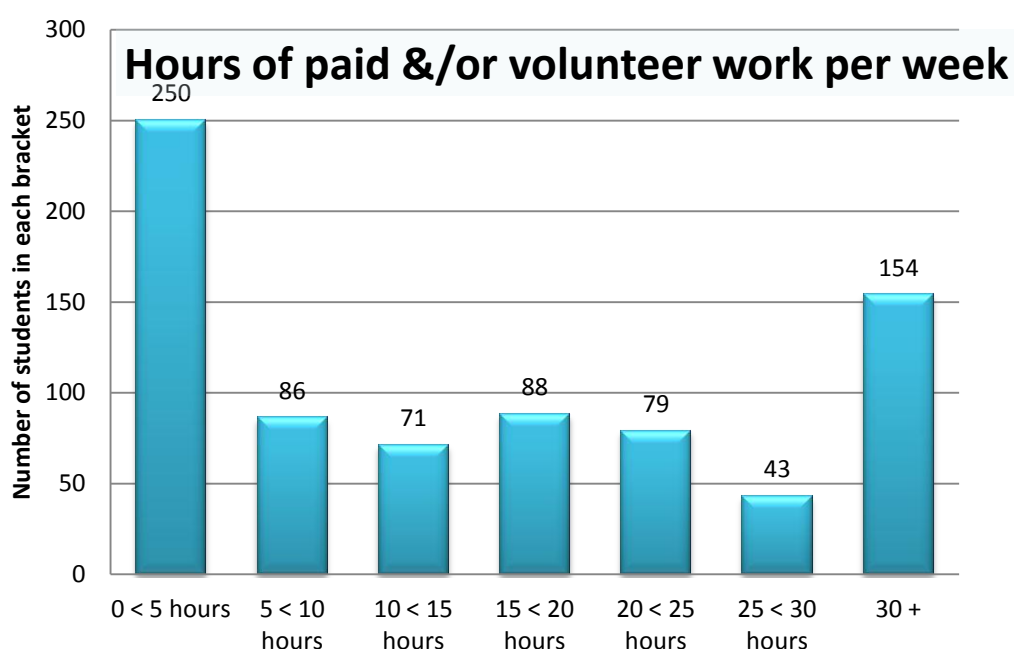
Just over fifty two per cent (52.3%) of survey respondents indicated that they **are first in their families to go to university** - that is; with neither parent attending university.

These students often have no one outside the university to turn to for help or information. And frequently encounter negative attitudes or lack of understanding about the nature and requirements of university study.

Mature age students consistently report that they ‘feel like frauds’ at university, an experience that has come to be known as **“Impostor syndrome”**. (Martins & Anthony, 2007, p. 57).

This can make it even more difficult to find and/or ask for needed assistance or develop supportive peer groups both inside and outside the university.

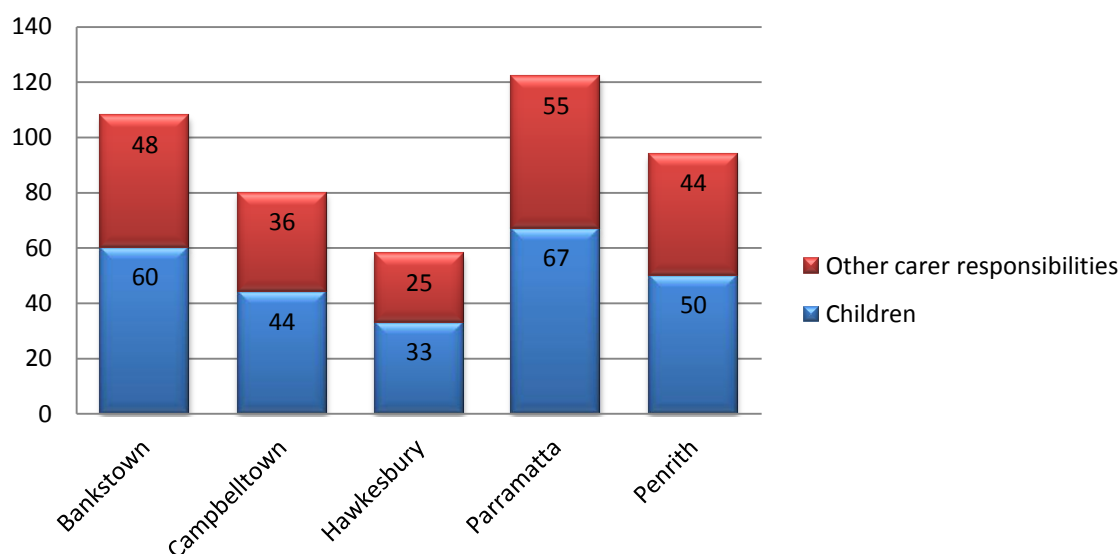
1.3.2 Mature age students are ‘time poor’ - this is usually due to their non-negotiable responsibilities and obligations.



Hours of paid &/or volunteer work	Hours per week	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
	0 < 5 hours	250	32.4%
	5 < 10 hours	86	11.1%
	10 < 15 hours	71	9.2%
	15 < 20 hours	88	11.4%
	20 < 25 hours	79	10.2%
	25 < 30 hours	43	5.5%
	30 + hours	154	20%

1.3.4 Carer responsibilities take priority in mature age students' time management.

Ratio of respondents with carer responsibilities - by campus



Survey respondents responsible for child care – by campus

	Number of carer respondents per campus	As a percentage of respondents from each campus
Bankstown (n=157)	60	38.2%
Campbelltown (n=117)	44	37.6%
Hawkesbury (n=78)	33	42.3%
Parramatta (n=257)	67	26.0%
Penrith (n=161)	50	31%
Total responses all UWS campuses (n = 770)	254	32.9%

Respondents with carer responsibilities other than children – by campus

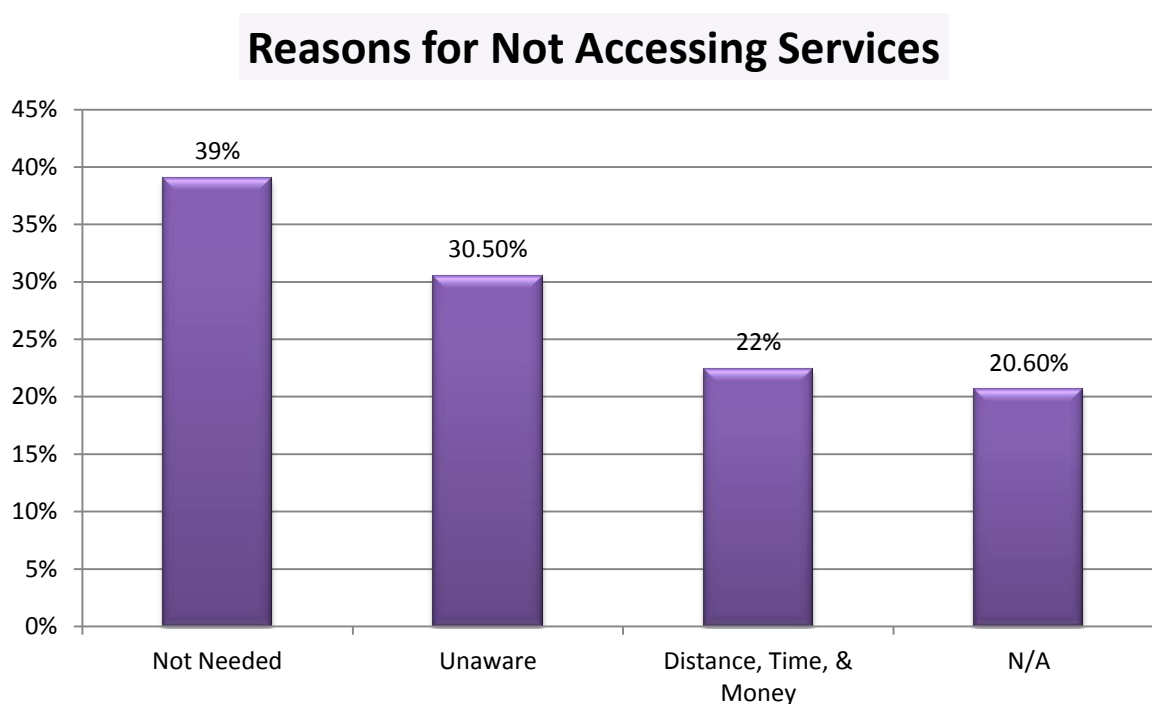
	Number of carer respondents per campus	As a percentage of respondents from each campus
Bankstown (n=157)	48	30.5%
Campbelltown (n=117)	36	30.7%
Hawkesbury (n=78)	25	32.0%
Parramatta (n=257)	55	21.4%
Penrith (n=161)	44	27.3%
Total responses all UWS campuses (n = 770)	208	27.0%

1.3.5 Other reasons why mature age students are not accessing support services.

When asked to give a short answer to the question: “If you did not use one or more of the (21 listed) services... please tell us what prevented you from accessing them?” Just over thirty percent (30.5%) of the 655 qualitative responses received, mentioned that they were unaware of the services.

It should be noted that close to 70% of respondents did not mention lack of awareness as a reason for not accessing support services. This may be due, in no small part, to the extensive work done by the UWS Student Support Services - Programs Unit, to promote and raise the profile of support services available to students generally.

Analysis and coding of this qualitative data (Herbert, 2011) indicated the following reasons and percentage ratios for not accessing support services:



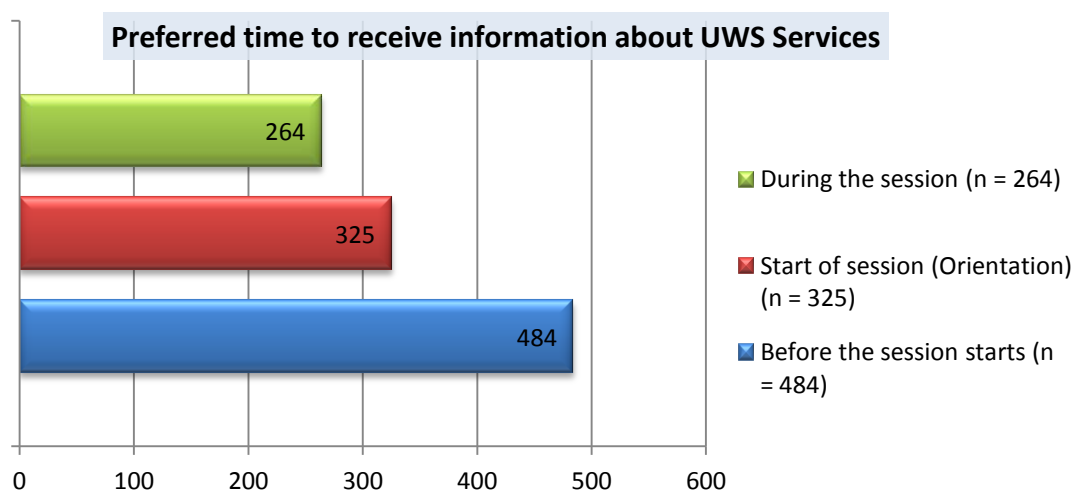
(N.B. - Some responses coded into more than one category)

1.3.6 Survey respondents gave clear indication of preferred method and timing regarding delivery of information about support services.

Preferred timing of information about support services

When asked; “What stages in the session would you most like to receive information about these services?” A significant majority - 74% of the 655 responses to this question - indicated that they would like to receive this information before the academic session commences.

(This was not a mandatory question - 115 participants chose to skip this question. The remaining respondents [n = 655] could select multiple options)



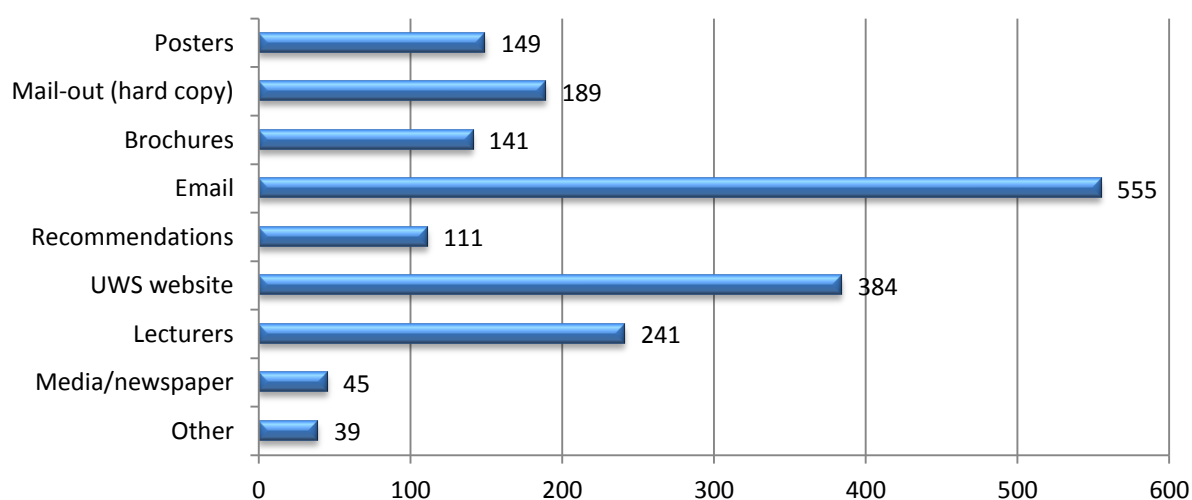
Preferred timing to receive information about UWS Student Support Services		
	Number of respondents	Percentage of total responses to this question (n = 655)
During the Academic Session	264	40.3%
Start of Session (Orientation)	325	49.6%
Before the start of the Academic Session	484	73.9%

Preferred method of receiving information about support services.

When asked how respondents would like to receive information concerning the nature and availability of support services; 84.7% indicated “email” as their first preference.

(This was not a mandatory question - 115 participants chose to skip this question. The remaining respondents (n = 655) could select multiple options.)

Preferred method of receiving information about support services



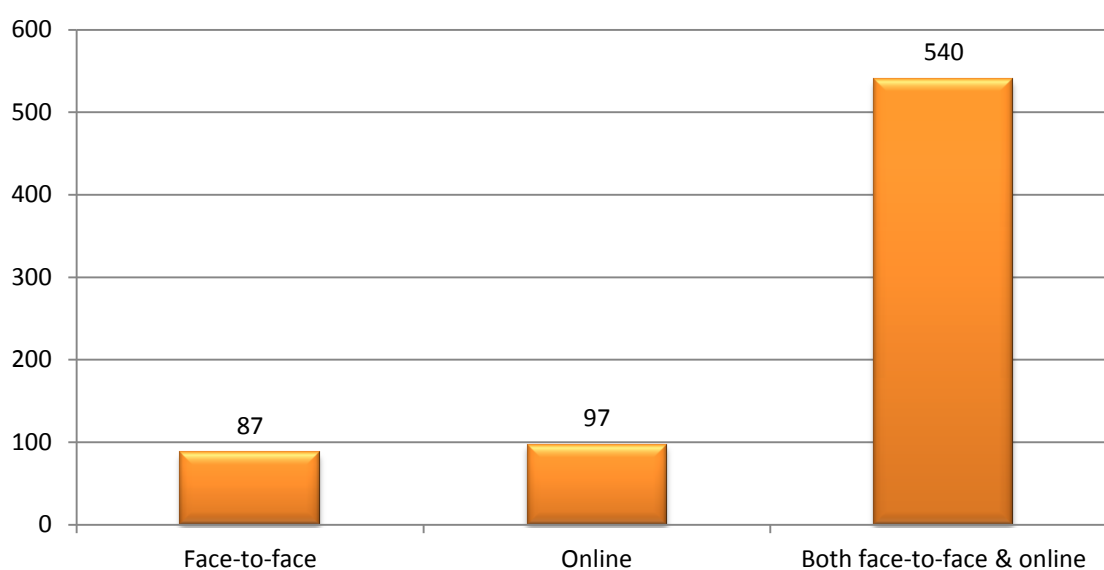
Preferred methods of receiving information about support services		
	Number of respondents	Percentage of total responses to this question (n = 655)
Posters	149	22.7%
Mail-out (hard copy)	189	28.9%
Brochures	141	21.5%
Email	555	84.7%
Recommendations	111	16.9%
UWS website	384	58.6%
Lectures	241	36.8%
Media/newspaper	45	6.9%
Other	39	6.0%

Respondents would prefer to access 'blended' – face-to-face AND online services at UWS.

Mature age students responding to this survey overwhelmingly indicated that they would prefer both face-to-face and online access to services at UWS.

(This was not a mandatory question - 115 participants chose to skip this question. The remaining respondents (n = 655) could select multiple options.)

Preferred method of service delivery



Preferred method of service delivery		
	Number of respondents	Percentage of total responses to this question (n = 655)
Face to face only	87	13.3%
Online only	97	14.8%
Both face-to-face and online	540	82.4%

1.4 Recommendations summary

As this study shows, mature age students make up close to 40% of the enrolled students at UWS. While they contribute much in the way of life experience, maturity and a clear sense of purpose, they often lack confidence and have to fit their studies around complex commitments and responsibilities. The effects of these circumstances can put these students at greater risk of early withdrawal fail from UWS.

UWS has excellent and, in some cases award winning, student support services. Due to the nature of their often complex lives, a significant number of mature age students are either not aware of, or not accessing, services that are available to them.

It is suggested that a bi-monthly e-newsletter be emailed to all non-current-school-leavers on enrolment - with a function to 'unsubscribe' if desired.

An e-newsletter specifically for mature age students (not just an add-on in Campus Life nUWS) would be a targeted, cost effective way of addressing some of the issues raised by mature age students in this study, such as:

- Recognising mature age students as a significant part of the UWS learning community.
- Promoting a sense of belonging.
- Just-in-time delivery of:
 - a welcoming message,
 - information about services before the academic session commences,
 - and updates during the session.
- Creating a means to advertise student initiatives and support peer groups.
- Encouraging student voice and contributions.
- Advertising student support services, workshops and events.
- Featuring peer achievers.

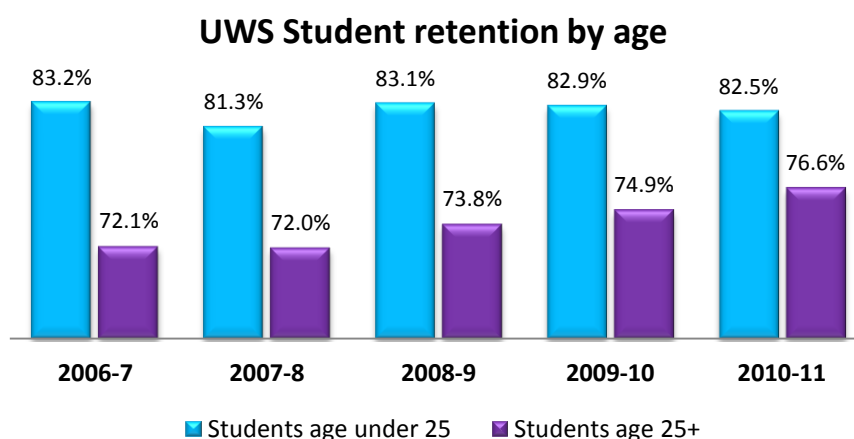
A staff member would be required to:

- Create and coordinate this e-newsletter

- Maintain and improve the existing UWS mature age student information page - www.uws.edu.au/matureage - (2,297 page views in January 2011)
- Respond to student and staff enquiries emailed to the matureage@uws.edu.au address.
- Attend both public and internal UWS events to answer prospective mature age student enquiries and ensure that UWS is seen as a university that recognises and welcomes mature age students.
- Facilitate the Introduction to e-Learning sessions at the Mature Age Student Starting-out workshops.

Expenses involved in targeted, strategic programs and services for mature age students are both acknowledged and justified as the AUQA Cycle 2 Supporting Materials February 2011 document notes (p. 123):

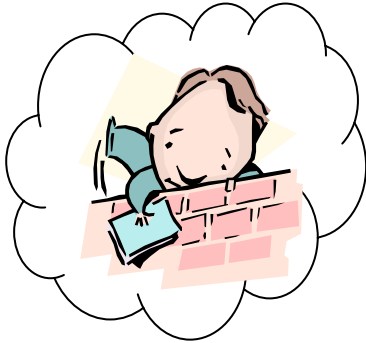
“The extensive improvement work now being put into assisting first year transition, support and retention for mature aged students is justified given that retention for this group is stable and comparatively low at around 76%”



(Source: UWS Office of Strategy and Quality.)

Appendix – 3. The Mature Age Student Equity Project – initiatives and outcomes

How can we improve the MAS experience at UWS?



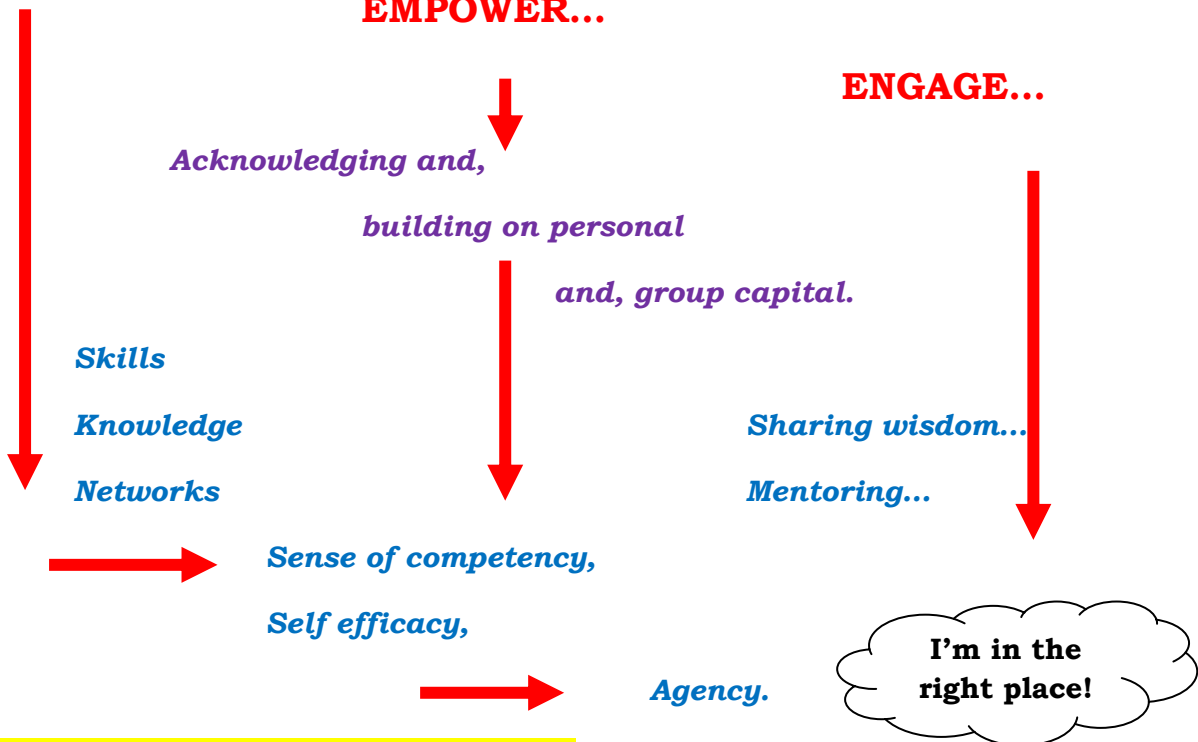
The Impostor Syndrome:

‘What if they find out I don’t really belong here?’
(Martins & Anthony 2007)

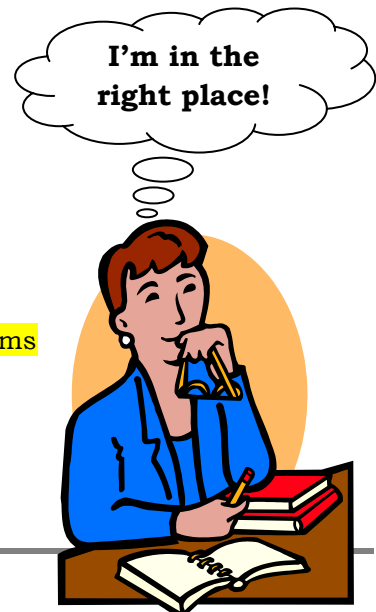
ENABLE...

EMPOWER...

ENGAGE...



The MASEP 2009/10 research project is situated in the first stage of the ‘Enable, Empower, Engage’ action plan. Through feedback from mature age students it asks how UWS can assist more MAS to access the student support/assistance programs that are designed to give new students the ‘Skills, Knowledge and Networks’ they require to persist and succeed.



UWS Mature Age Student Equity Project

This summary briefly outlines some of the outcomes from initiatives undertaken by the Mature Age Student Equity Project in partnership with staff from UWS Student Support Services, Communications, the Student Learning Unit, UWS/VET Transitions, the UWS Student Law Association, UWS Library Staff, academics from Schools of Education, Law and Nursing as well as the many students who generously shared their time, wisdom, enthusiasm and cooperation.

2.1 Increased online profile for MAS on the UWS website

Working with the UWS Communications team (Academic Registrar's Office), a concerted effort was made to give mature age students a visible online web presence on the UWS website with the following results:

2.1.1 Search results 2008 - 2010

2008 – 2010 results from a UWS search using the search term 'mature age students' showed a 459% increase in the number of results that contained information that students could use to access relevant information and assistance.

- 2008 = 22 results – primarily archival and policy links.
- 2010 = 123 results – primarily information about workshops, MAS Peer Guide, mature age entry etc

(Primarily information about workshops, MAS peer guide, mature age entry, etc)⁵.

2.1.2 MAS information webpage on the UWS site

Development of a dedicated UWS information webpage with a 'friendly url' for easy access and remembering: www.uws.edu.au/matureage

- Average page views – 816 per month (since June 2010)
- 2,297 page views in January 2011⁶ prior to beginning of 2011 Autumn session.

⁵ Comparison between searches undertaken and printed in 2008 and 2010.

⁶ From a monthly report on this web page undertaken and sent by Google Analytics to a.scott@uws.edu.au and c.watts@uws.edu.au.

2.1.3 Campus Connection – Online discussion forum for all UWS students

Campus Connection - MAS e-Buddies pilot program.

- There was a 62% increase in activity on the Campus Connection student forum site since the introduction of the MAS e-Buddies program in the six months of the 2010 Autumn Session⁷.

2.2 MAS face-to-face ‘shop-front’ and event information tables.

Mature age student information tables were set up at UWS events i.e. UWS Open Day, Course Decision day, Orientation and Student Services Market days. These are well received by students who readily self identify as ‘mature age students’.

- Average interactions with students - between 45 – 85 interactions per day.

Stand alone MAS ‘shop-front’ information tables were trialled on Kingswood and Bankstown campuses in 2009 and 2010. This approach invited MAS to sit and talk with MASEP staff in the covered foyer areas of these campuses and many students made use of the opportunity to say hello, ask questions, celebrate receiving a good mark or generally touch base.

- During the academic session interactions would average between 15 – 20 per day.⁸

At these ‘shop-fronts’ students were invited to be on a MAS mailing list to be informed about MAS events and resources. Reminders were sent out regarding study skills workshops run by the Student Learning Unit as well as workshops conducted by the Counsellors in managing issues such as time management or exam stress.

To evaluate the effectiveness of this approach the average GPA of students was tracked over the following year (with individual results de-identified) and it was found that:

⁷ Statistical analysis from website reports sent to Erin Mitchell - UWS Counsellor and moderator of Campus Connection.

⁸ A tally using a handheld ‘clicker’ is kept for each day that the MAS information table is in operation.

- The average GPA of the 43 students who registered their interest in 2010 was 4.75, comparing favourably with the average GPA of 3.69 of the general population of MAS at UWS.
- Some examples of unsolicited emails from students who had used the MAS ‘shop-front’ facility:

*“Thank you very much for the message. I appreciated. For some people like me will need that as honey. Thank you! See you in uni. ...”
07/04/2009*

“As the semester comes to an end I would just like to let you know how pleased I am that the uni has seen the need to create a position specifically to address the needs of Mature Aged Students. Just knowing that we are recognised as a group that doesn’t fit the standard uni students’ image goes a long way to helping retain us as a student group. ...” 29/05/2009

“... I just wanted to say thank you for this morning. I feel so much better about my study after chatting with you. It doesn’t seem quite as overwhelming and just a little bit ‘do-able’ now, and that is enough for now. Thanks for the motivation. ...” 12/09/2010

‘Shop-front’ visibility of services is extremely effective and we recommend the continued use of this marketing tool.

- It also provides an opportunity for Equity Staff to make connections with mature age students & other equity groups,
- Opportunity to distribute relevant publications and information,
- As well as providing a human face that is very much appreciated by students.

2.3 UWS Peer Guides

The UWS Peer Guide series is designed to be a forum for students to pass on their often hard-won understanding of university life, culture, study strategies and other ‘survival tips and hints. The Peer Guides are intended to empower the contributors while enabling the new students to benefit from the more senior students’

experience. The informality of the tips and hints is complemented with information about relevant UWS services and events.

The original booklet, *A Guide to University Life for Mature Age Students* (2009) enjoyed a strong uptake from school offices, counsellors offices, student centres and information stands. This publication has been re-branded as the *Guide to Starting out at UWS* (2011) and made available to all commencing students.

The *UWS Peer Guide for Mature Age Students* (2010) is in its second edition as part of a proposed Peer Guide series. The second in this series, the *UWS Peer Guide for First in Family* (2010) has followed. These UWS Peer Guides are available in both electronic and hard-copy versions:

- The UWS Peer Guide for Mature age students:
http://www.uws.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/170784/UWS_Peer_Guide_for_mature_age_students_0311_FINAL.pdf
- The UWS Peer Guide for First in Family:
http://www.uws.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0017/151163/UWS_Peer_Guide_for_first_in_family_students_0910.pdf

Sylvia-Irene De Silva and her colleagues gathered more than 200 suggestions from UWS mature age and first-in-family students using social networking sites, UWS Campus Connection forum, face-to-face at information tables, mailing lists and personal connections as UWS alumnus.

- Students are keen to share their tips and hints on how to endure, persist and thrive while studying at university.
- This has the added effect of giving these students an opportunity to feel that their contributions are valued as part of the UWS learning community.

Future Peer Guides are proposed for:

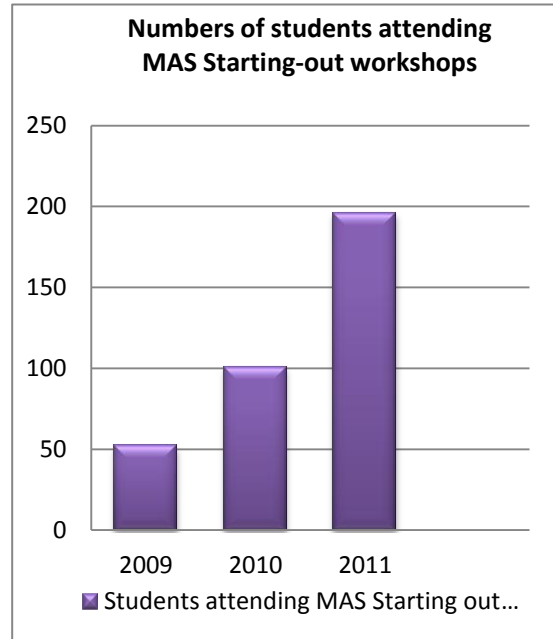
- Students enrolled through alternate pathways to UWS – VET, UWS College etc,
- students from N.E.S.B.,
- those studying in non-traditional gender roles,
- students studying on a budget (Low SES),
- indigenous students and,

- Students with disabilities

2.4 MAS Starting-out Workshops.

These workshops have been a stand-out success.

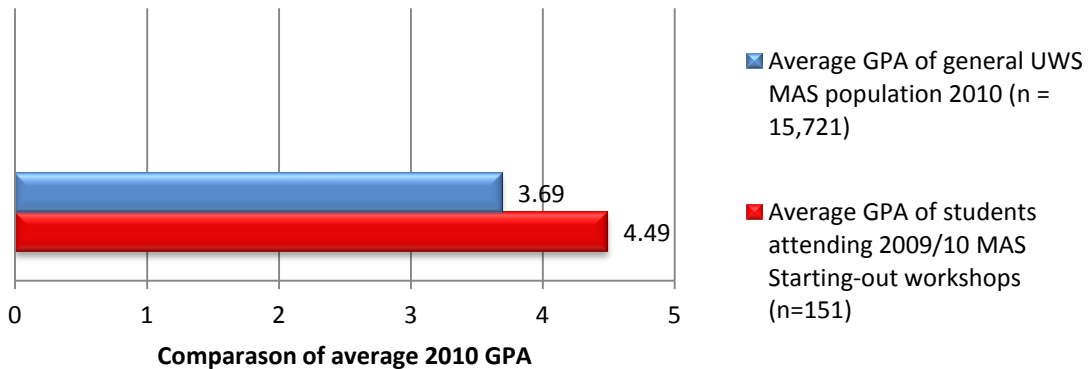
Attendance has increased by 337% - from 52 new mature age students attending in 2009 to 196 attending the pre-session workshops on all campuses in February 2011⁹.



- Feedback from student evaluation is consistently positive with particular expressions of appreciation for the volunteer panel of experienced students who share their experience at the workshops.
- One of the student panel at Penrith in February 2011 shared this comment:

“This is the fulfilment of a dream of mine; when I came to the Starting out workshop in my first year and saw students on the panel I said to myself, ‘I am going to do that one day’. And here I am!” 19/02/2011

Follow-up tracking of GPA results from the students who attended the Mature Age Starting-out workshops showed these to be significantly higher than the average GPA of the general 2010 UWS MAS population.



⁹ Statistics for MAS Starting-out workshops from student evaluation sheets uploaded to Survey Monkey.

While this comparison may be influenced by these being the type of students who actively seek assistance, it is important to acknowledge that the assistance must be available for them to access.

2.5 IT Skills Cafe - Introduction to eLearning

A successful pilot program involving 34 students was conducted in 2010. Student evaluations were very positive with the majority of students reporting increased confidence in using the online systems at UWS¹⁰.

Follow-up feedback from students contacted 3 weeks later indicated that the material presented in the workshops continued to be useful and that they would recommend the I.T. skills workshops to new students.

Examples of comments received:

“I have settled in and coping well with my studies. Thank you so much for the workshop. It has been very useful to me in settling in with my studies. ... The IT skills were very useful especially on getting started on vUWS. Once the classes began it was easy for me to navigate vUWS with no problems at all ... I will definitely recommend it to my peers.” (Email received 11/08/2010)

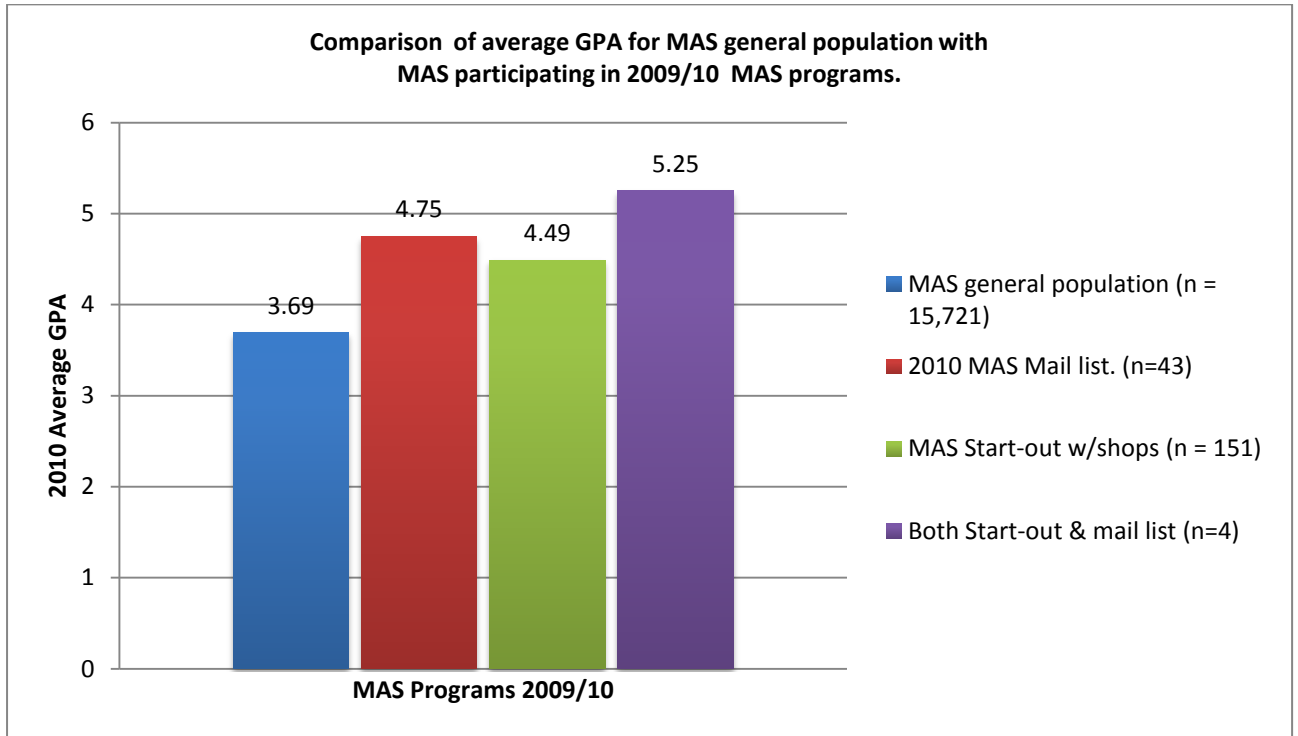
“Yes, it’s very helpful to start my distance mode learning ... I would strongly recommend to my peers who want to start study as mature age.” (Email received 16/08/2010)

In February 2011 the Introduction to eLearning session was up-scaled and incorporated into the Mature Age Student Starting-out workshops in February 2011. Again evaluation feedback was overwhelmingly positive:

- 100% of those who responded said that they would recommend the Intro to eLearning workshop to their friends.
- 99% reported sustained or increased confidence in navigating the UWS online systems.

¹⁰ Student evaluations from IT Skills Cafe workshops uploaded to Survey Monkey.

2.6 2010 GPA comparison shows better than average results for students participating in MAS programs.



Appendix - 4:

NVivo analysis of qualitative data from MASEP 2010/11 research.

The short answers from the MASEP '2010 UWS Services for Mature Age Students' survey and transcripts from the subsequent focus group and interviews were analysed using the qualitative data analysis software program NVivo.

This analysis was undertaken by James Herbert, PhD Candidate in the UWS School of Social Sciences and kindly provided by the office of the Pro Vice Chancellor (Learning and Teaching).

This is a copy of the summary of that analysis, delivered 16/08/2011:

3.1 Computer Technology

MAS reported varying quality experiences with the use of IT services. This tended to be attributed to the ability and interpersonal skills of the person they happened to get on the day. One student noted that they thought IT was not effective due to changes in staff. Amongst the main criticisms the students had, they noted that help with particular types of software (Word, Excel, PowerPoint) and some UWS systems were not in IT's mandate. In particular, the inability of IT to help with vUWS or online enrolments problems was highlighted. Some felt IT staff were not good at explaining things in clear language, that they often gave up in hard cases, and could sometimes be rude.

3.1.1 Online Learning

Experiences of online learning were predominantly positive where it was suited to the subject and applied well by the academic staff. It was noted that there were variations in the ability of staff to use vUWS and administrate online learning and that online learning tended to suit some subjects, but not others. One student gave the example of contributing to a writing blog which they found to be an excellent experience, while another talking about the same activity found it a confusing experience.

'Turnitin' was a point of contention for some students, noting that the system could often be unreliable and inconsistent in terms of how long it could take to process assignments. One student admitted regularly submitting an earlier draft to 'Turnitin' to make sure they would have a receipt available. Some students thought the system worked well but needed an accompanying focus on helping students understand plagiarism, as well as some leniency related to the inconsistency in the processing of assignments.

Some of the online learning features students thought were particularly useful was statistical reports about their performance in assessments, online lectures (noting that they weren't as available as in previous semesters), discussion boards, quizzes and assessments. Being able to do group assignments through online exchanges, and online assessments were identified as being particularly important for MAS who could arrange these things around their other responsibilities.

Problems were observed with a number of different types of online learning. The timeframe for entering in answers for online quizzes was identified, that some MAS would have trouble thinking of the answers and typing them in fast enough. This was resolved for this particular student by the lecturer emailing them a set of the questions so they could work in a offline document before submitting. Students reported finding ways around the quiz systems: being able to re-enter their answers after finding out they were wrong (although this may be a feature of the quiz the student was not aware of). Some students reported frustration with online quizzes, that they would sometimes not work, or that would be so prescriptive to the point that if the lecturer had misspelled a word, entering in the correctly spelt word would constitute an incorrect answer. This in particular was a reoccurring problem in some writing assessments due to the use of American English (as opposed to U.K. or Australian) in the online environment, meaning sometimes incorrect spelling, grammar, and punctuation had to be used. One student did not like working with online quizzes as there was no opportunity to clarify language use with the lecturer, while another reported being concerned about losing work entered into text boxes while doing online assessments.

Some students were dubious about the motives of moving to online learning suggesting that doing it to cut costs was not acceptable. One MAS questioned the belief staff had that students wanted online learning. Observing some of the problems with online learning countered against its benefits, one student observed

that a combination of online, tutorials, lectures, and readings tended to produce the best learning. One student wanted to have the paper copies of the material available online in order to avoid having to do work online.

3.1.2 vUWS, Platform Web, mySR

MAS experiences of the core systems for students at UWS were overwhelmingly negative, they were commonly described as clunky, convoluted, inefficient and hard to navigate. Students talked about regardless of their experience with computers or the support they received, ultimately using and navigating the systems required the hands on experience of experimenting with how they all worked. A number of students who felt they had very strong computer skills (including a few who themselves worked in IT) said they found the system complicated and very difficult to use. Particularly for MAS, there was a real demand for a more intuitive and logical way of getting information and services from UWS.

One of the issues frequently highlighted was the lack of clarity around the nature and role of each of the different systems. Students reported that all the names and terms for the different parts of the system were confusing and hard to navigate. One student described these systems as being many applications that are 'bolted together'. vUWS in particular was identified as being hard to use and not well linked to other systems. A calendar hidden somewhere in this system was highlighted by another student as an example of the difficulty involved in working these systems. Email was also identified as problematic to find and access, although it was noted that a separate login was no longer required for student email.

Enrolling online was described as a long and complicated process requiring multiple windows open with unit information. It was observed that the system often dropped out during peak times, and that enrolling often required a lot of duplication. One student suggested that a dropdown menu ordered by unit name rather than unit number would be helpful.

vUWS in particular was talked about as a system that students needed to learn, one student talked about intending on going back and learning vUWS. It was suggested that new students should be encouraged to learn and get familiar with vUWS, and that pre-loading it with some material might be a good way for students to tinker with its workings. Lecturers and course coordinators tended to be the point of access for vUWS problems, although it was noted that due to the different

views in this system for students and lecturers they were sometimes unable to help. One student observed that it can take a long time to be able to access unit materials and that the earlier this information was available the better in terms of planning schedules and planning the purchase of text books.

3.1.3 Training and Support

Mature age students reported that there was a common attitude that students are responsible for the use of online systems and an expectation that they navigate these systems themselves. For those that did access help, some found that the training had a very steep learning curve and assumed a high level of existing knowledge. Others reported that they got a lot out of technology training even with a sound understanding of computers. Academic staff were identified as sometimes not responding to emails and requests for help with vUWS.

vUWS was highlighted as an area where there was a need for better training and introduction due to its integral role in online learning. It was thought to be problematic that the students' only real experience of this system begins when classes start.

Students made a variety of suggestions around improving training and support, that open source support services could play a role (Google & YouTube), and that help between students tended to be the best way to get problems resolved.

3.1.4 MAS Website and Online Communications

Students discussed the use of discussion boards and online chat through the MAS website. It was thought that these resources were of particular use for MAS who could do these things at their leisure. The general hope was that online communications, which MAS thought acted as a good starting point as people were often more open and honest, would lead into real life social connections but this often did not happen.

3.1.5 Lack of Confidence

While many students directly indicated that they had confidence in using computers, others were concerned about some of the assumptions of competency with types of software and applications that may not be in every MAS' skill set (e.g. advanced Word and Excel operations). Competency with computers was highlighted as being essential for studies, but some MAS lack skills and are often intimidated and hesitant about the online environment and interacting with UWS systems.

3.2 Library

Overall, MAS had positive things to say about the Library, just that they wanted more from the experience. Many students remarked that the Library was a noisy, crowded place that tended not to be conducive to study. While quiet areas existed, on some campuses these areas did not include computers. Library staff were talked about very positively, as being very obliging and helpful, although a few students felt they looked down on them or were sometimes rude. One student noted that Library staff sometimes struggled with computer related issues.

Some of the students wanted more detail than the Library tour offered and wanted more specific help using the Library website and finding journal articles. The students appreciated the inter-library loans system that saved them from having to venture to other campuses, that there was a librarian available from each school who was able to be of more effective help, and the Online Librarian. The Online Librarian in particular was something that was identified as possibly being of value in other areas such as Student Central. The need for a dedicated law library was mentioned by one student due the amount of time law students had to spend there.

3.3 Academic Skills/Preparedness

Much of the feedback about the university bridging courses were very positive, although the MAS had some suggestions for the types of things they would like to see included. AcPrep provided students with a basic overview of academic literacy, some material to refer back to, and served to link together initial groups of MAS who were starting university. Technology training was also mentioned as being particularly useful. One student felt that Unistep didn't reflect the current course content and requirements. Others talked about wanting more in-depth instruction from AcPrep. A few students felt that they did not need any help preparing for university, that they had a viable skill set from work or previous study.

A student identified university language as being particularly difficult and problematic for MAS and would have liked to have seen something to help deal with that. Effective note taking and reading, defining plagiarism, a focus on referencing and finding journals, and more detailed help on essay writing were identified as being needed as a part of bridging programs. Students suggest that the courses should be available before semester starts in order to reduce the stress and workload of students, particularly those vital for study. It was also suggested that

some of these courses should be linked into the induction for MAS rather than simply suggesting that these are available as a resource.

For those that didn't attend bridging courses, they identified not being able to find courses available on the days or campuses they wanted. Courses clashed with classes, were held on Saturdays or after school, or were cancelled. As well covered in a later section, a major reason for not accessing services as the lack of awareness of specific services, this was the case of bridging courses as well.

It was acknowledged that particular attention was shown to MAS in the orientation and preparation process, although it was observed that migrants and international students need a lot more help in turning their conversational English into written essays. One student was cynical about the lack of support available for struggling students, suggesting that accepting students without the core skills to undertake university study and getting them past the census date was a business strategy.

3.4 Awareness of Services

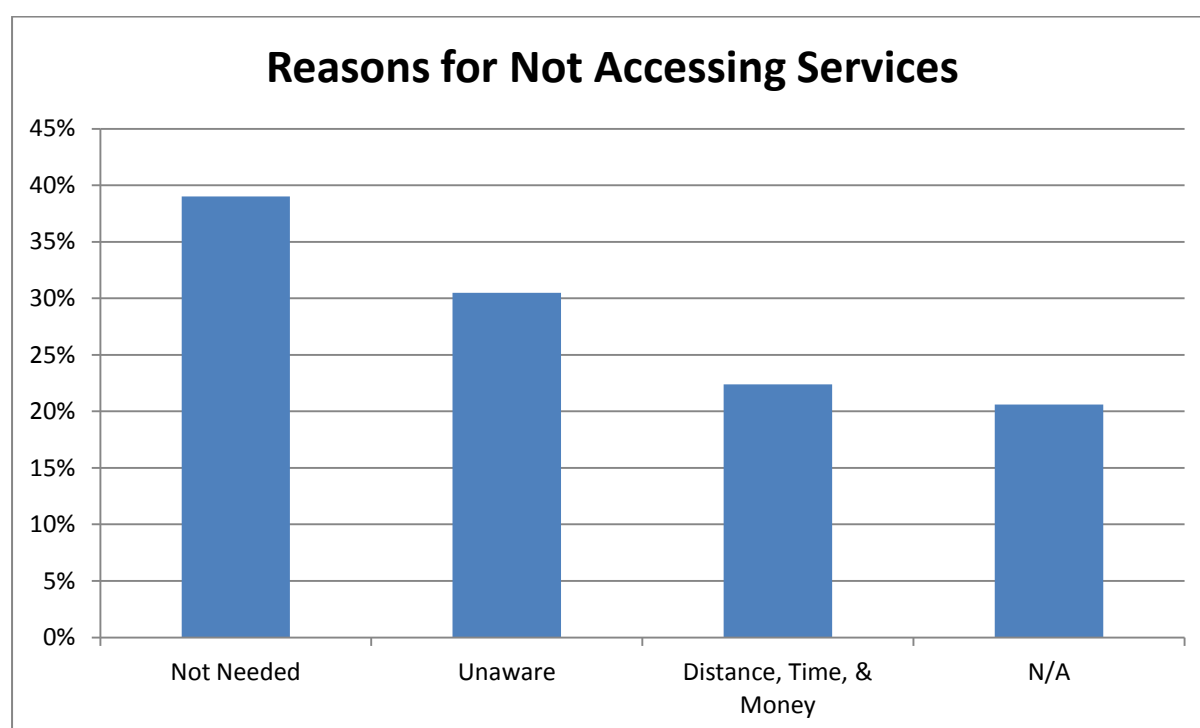
Students indicated a very low awareness of services, not receiving any information about services, the lack of a visible contact person to talk to about services, and not knowing if they were eligible for services. MAS found that they tended to not find out about services until after they would be useful to them.

Six hundred thirty MAS provided a valid short answer response to the question¹¹ "If you did not use one or more of the services in the previous 3 questions, please tell us what prevented you from accessing them". These services included:

- UniStep Academic Literacy, Unistep Mathematics and Statistics, Academic Preparation (AcPrep), International AcPrep;
- Careers and cooperative education, chaplaincy, counselling service, disability service, student welfare service, First Year Central (FYC), MAS drop in, student centres, study and life skills;
- Badanami Indigenous Student Services, bridging programs and academic workshops, campus security escort, International Student Services, IT services, library, orientation, Starting-out information nights, student welfare.

¹¹ Invalid responses included responses that were not related to the question or the meaning could not be reasonably inferred.

The participants responses were coded for comments related to the services not being needed, not being aware of the service, indicating issues to do with distance/time/money preventing them for accessing them, and 'n/a' which in the context of the question meant they did access the services. Participants could be coded in more than one category. Thirty-nine percent (n=246) of the respondents indicated that they felt they did not need these services, 30.5% (n=192) said not being aware of services prevented them from accessing them and indicated distance, time, and/or money to be issues in accessing services, while 20.6% responded n/a or indicated they did access these services.



There was a sense that across the university there were problems with communication and that there was a tendency to expect students to work things out for themselves. The online environment for services was described as being confusing and difficult to navigate, or 'information overload'. A student reported constantly being told to refer to vUWS, but found the way information was laid out to be unhelpful. One person who had used MAS services said they had only stumbled on the website by accident. In terms of the physical promotion of services, students wanted the way to access services to be more visible around the university. They noted that particular services and functions in the university could be faceless and it could be difficult to know who to contact or where (physically) to go.

MAS suggested a variety of tactics to successfully promote services. They felt the orientation and awareness of services should start from the point of accepting the offer of a university place, providing opportunities for students to get involved in workshops and support services even before their studies encroach on their time. It was suggested that there is key information which needs to be forefront, that there should be some prioritisation of the types of services that are promoted to ensure there is not an overload of information. For students that struggled with computers, there was still a need for physical resources (e.g. flyers and notice boards), not just a reliance on online sources in promoting the awareness of services. In terms of online learning, besides making the portal easier to navigate, one student suggested a shared calendar with events built into it by school or college, therefore students received invitations to events directly relevant to them. Awareness of services amongst academic staff was also mentioned, that lecturers and tutors should be a key source of referrals to support services given they tend to have a sense of the academic requirements of students. Shared knowledge amongst MAS was also important, not only in the sense of supporting students and making them feel part of the university, but in sharing the knowledge of accessing and utilising the resources of the university.

Where students were aware of services they often felt they were not in need of these specific services, but often they were glad they were available. MAS talked about having skills from the workplace and previous study which meant they really didn't need to access many services. While some students indicated that they felt comfortable accessing services and would have no problem doing so when it was needed, others indicated some discomfort with the idea. One student said they didn't want to be perceived as a problem, others said it was sometimes hard to ask for help, and that they were used to sorting out problems themselves. Assistance tended to be available to people with a high level of need, one student felt that this meant that people who were just struggling didn't get much attention. Counselling and Welfare in particular were identified as services that could be embarrassing or difficult to access due to a kind of stigma around that kind of help. Some talked about services being for people that should not be at university, or that funds for services should be diverted into better facilities for all students. This may suggest MAS may be resistant to accessing services due to their values about seeking and receiving help.

3.5 Assistance with Course Choice, Requirements, Enrolment

MAS had mixed feelings about the assistance they received in terms of the administrative side of courses. While some described positive experiences of being helped by student central, students were often critical of some elements of the service. After attempting to enrol electronically, one student found it much easier to deal with Student Central in person to get help enrolling. Another student talked about applying for 'misadventure' through Student Central and feeling quite positive about the level of support she experienced.

While some described Student Central as helpful and friendly, others were quite scathing about the service offered, suggesting it can be cold, rude, and unhelpful. It was observed that Student Central and the international student office could sometimes take a long time to process requests. The lack of responsiveness by email was one issue, but most frequently mentioned was the sense that they always passed the buck, failed to take responsibility to help, and had to divert them to other people to get the answers they need. It was observed that one solution to this might be to have a general, concierge type person who could direct students appropriately, with a student observing that knowing the process and the place to go to for help was important.

A number of students suggested they would like to have information about units and enrolments much earlier in order to be able to plan around them. MAS noted that the information provided about the units tended to be fairly cursory descriptors that offered little information about the types of assessments, workload, or even if the unit would require a prac or placement that would represent a significant impost on time for students. One student observed that if they knew more about their workload earlier, they might have been able to keep their job. The need for informed advice about units was highlighted by students, particularly access to unit coordinators and academic staff who have a more intimate knowledge of what the unit involves. One student reported that while student services were supporting and willing to help, they were limited in what they were able to do for her because the semester hadn't started. Earlier access to unit outlines/learning guides was suggested. Even securing tutorials was a significant issue for some, requiring they plan around the times they are required to be at university.

There were a few specific areas where MAS indicated that they wanted more information, particularly unit choices, career paths, and cross institutional studies. Students wanted advice that took into account their specific aims (e.g. to finish earlier, particular career paths, to choose units that gave them a well-rounded understanding of a subject). A few students raised wanting academic staff to be involved in advising on courses, although previous attempts to access them for this had been mostly unsuccessful. One student indicated that they wanted a space for MAS to ask ‘silly’ questions about tutorial registration, finding information, vUWS, and the Library, that they didn’t feel comfortable asking such questions in a context where everyone seemed informed and aware of what was going on.

Advanced standing and scholarships were two areas of assistance that were highlighted as being particularly problematic, advanced standing particularly so for MAS. A few students talked about experiences of applying to have their previous studies, work-based learning, and experienced credit towards their degree, but found the process underwhelming. Students talked about difficulty in finding out about applying for advanced standing, not getting a response from their application, being diverted when looking for answer, not being part of the process and discussions, and ultimately not receiving credits until after the census date. This last issue was particularly common, with students remarking the process took a long time and there was often inadequate communication about progress. Students had to enrol in the units they were applying for exemptions for, spent time undertaking them, and costs for textbooks and attending classes that ultimately they did not have to do. Even worse, a number of students did not hear back about this exemption until after the census date, where presumably the costs of the unit were added to their HELP liability. It was not clear if these students were ultimately charged for these units they were eventually granted exemptions for. One student had a difficult experience applying for a scholarship, noting that the scholarships office could only be contacted by email, with no phone number and no name to refer to. They experienced difficulty getting their application acknowledged, ultimately having to get someone else within the university to make numerous calls to the scholarships office just to get an acknowledgement that the application had been received.

Changes in the availability of units and the lack of communication about these changes were a problem for students. Having to do unrelated units to finish a degree, or to have to structure their studies around finishing particular units

before they were shut down were the result of what some students felt was the ‘chop and change’ nature of the university. One student didn’t realise a unit wasn’t being run until they attempted to enrol in it and the unit didn’t appear.

While some students felt that the university was far too generous in handing out leaves of absences, others felt that there was a lack of consideration and compassion for MAS in this process. One student detailed that they thought leaves of absence needed to be reserved for what they saw as ‘legitimate reasons’ to do with caring for children, illness, and family difficulties rather than merely not wanting to study at that point in time. Other students felt that there was a lack of recognition of the circumstances of MAS in this process, one mentioned needing contact with a MAS support worker or advocate to help them with this process, other directly said they felt a particular school did not deal fairly with MAS as opposed to other groups in terms of special considerations and flexibility. One student felt that the expectations in terms of the documentation expected to support obtaining special consideration was unrealistic.

There was a sense that the administrative side of the university was often blamed for anything that went wrong, often diverting responsibility from academic staff.

3.6 Peer Support and Mentoring

3.6.1 MAS Designated Space

Regarding the prospect of MAS designated space, the students reflected on their experiences of using the Library, that it was often noisy and crowded, the quiet areas existed but there were not always computers in these quiet areas. The library in particular was mentioned as a place where MAS would like to have a dedicated area where they could do their work away from noise and disruptions.

Experiences of using some of the existing spaces tended to highlight some of the reasons the students wanted MAS designated space. They found some quiet areas for working messy and poorly kept, some of the general areas noisy and uncomfortable. One MAS talked about preferring to be in a tea-room than being out in general areas as all the young people tended to make them feel uncomfortable. A student reflected that they thought that facilities in general, including those for MAS had declined over the last 10 years since the end of compulsory student unions.

Some of the features students thought particularly important in MAS space were access to a kitchen, tea and coffee, hot water, a microwave and a place to change nappies and care for children. It was thought that MAS designated space should be a clean, comfortable, safe environment that allowed MAS to meet and get to know each other in a different social context. The creation of this space also served a role in making MAS feel like they belong on campus and that there was consideration for their needs separate from the general student body. All this said, one student felt that support services should be directed into better facilities for all students, rather than for groups of students.

3.6.2 MAS Groups

MAS groups were discussed as being important to building social connections and having a sense of fitting in at university. However many students talked about inevitable difficulties in arranging a time and date to meet up, that inevitably whatever was decided would never end up suiting everyone. Most students said they were unable to attend groups due to them being on at inconvenient times, at distant campuses, or even during lectures. Some were proactive in trying to make such groups work but found they were poorly attended. One student observed that MAS tend not to hang around on campus unless having to wait between a lecture and a tutorial, as they had other responsibilities at home. Some students talked about being unaware of the groups, while one suggested they were shy about attending.

Other students talked about assembling more informal groups of MAS through group work assignments, or through their normal interactions at university. The types of things wanted from these groups were mentoring, guidance in terms of careers, and a network of people to draw on when things got difficult. PASS was mentioned as possibly being a good template for MAS study groups, as they found these groups helpful. One student suggested that having designated space might be helpful in fostering connections and making such groups sustainable.

3.6.3 Social Connections

Many students reported finding it difficult to build social connections on campus. This was primarily due to having work or other responsibilities that limited the time they were able to spend on campus socialising. Studying part time, not having much time, not having many tutorials, and limited time between classes were suggested as making building social connections difficult. These reasons tended to

result in the perception that MAS tended to not have a very wide social group. Some MAS felt as though the main student body were cliquy and uninterested in knowing and talking to them, and tended to prefer building connections with other MAS. One person felt they had trouble making connections as they appeared much younger than they actually are. Another felt that students tended to only mix amongst their own ethnic and racial groups and that this was part of the university being an unfriendly place.

Prompted by one of the short answer questions, students reflected on their social connections with staff. Some reported positive connections with lecturers and staff, but for the most part MAS felt that they had very limited social connection with staff. They reported staff being hard to approach, not opening to building connections with students, only on campus when they needed to be, or otherwise just too busy to build connections with students. One student said that tutors had been instructed not to engage with students in order to avoid inconsistencies in the information provided. Another noted that because of the power differential it was important for staff to make the move to build connections with students. A MAS who was a post-graduate student reported limited opportunities to meet other post-grads, only meeting people at seminars due to everyone working at home. One post-grad student noted that networking was part of the degree experience they were looking for and found it lacking.

Dedicated space for MAS was suggested as a way to build connection between students, with some noting that previous lunchrooms or kitchens tended to foster social connections. Others reflected on their own experience in forming connections with other MAS informally and through group work. Online discussions were suggested as a useful starting point for fostering real-life social connections. One MAS reflected that it took them a while to get used to the idea of meeting people on campus and forming connections with them, while another felt well prepared to network and build social connections with a variety of people due to previous experiences at work.

One MAS reported experiencing social connections with cafe staff who were closer to her age than other students. Another had experienced losing contact with study friends due to falling behind, the people she had formed connections with were no longer in the same classes.

Students talked about the importance of these social connections in terms of both the practical things they got out of connections with other students, but also a sense of belonging. Connections were important in order to be able to form study groups with other MAS, do group work with other MAS who were more reliable than other students, to have extra source of information, being able to talk through course content, to act as a point of comparison to their own performance, for the exchanging of ideas and course advice, and to begin building networking skills. This connection also meant being a resource or a source of information to others. Having social connections were also suggested as being important for where things went wrong or when help is needed. One student suggested that students that networked together tended to do better in their work.

Encouragement, support and getting a sense of belonging at university were also discussed as other reasons for seeking social connection. This was particularly so for MAS, who can feel isolated within the university. Connection could also help to make studying and dealing with academic staff less daunting. Networking and making connections were also seen as being part of the university experience, making the process of study more enjoyable and relaxing in addition to some of the more practical benefits discussed.

3.7 Complex Priorities and Commitments

The issues discussed by the MAS were complex and intertwined commitments of caring (for children and elderly parents), work, finances, volunteer work, and housework. These commitments sometimes resulted in acute period of stress and demands on their time, such as family crises. Overall it was felt that the combination of children, work, and in some cases an unsupportive partner made the MAS experience at university extremely challenging. The selection of tutorials were highlighted as a particular issue, that these had a significant impact on how they planned their lives, work, and care for children. Having this information early on was raised as important for planning around, but also some special consideration in selecting tutorials and making changes. One student reporting being able to make changes by 'guilting' staff based on her carer obligations, although she felt that it should not have to be that way.

Issues to do with childcare were raised by a few MAS, particularly the need for childcare on particular campuses, for childcare to extend to all hours that tutorials

run, and that campuses lack a place to change a nappy or heat up a bottle. One student identified pracs as being particularly demanding in terms of having to find childcare. One suggestion around childcare issues was localised groups and studying parents based on geographical areas, with some social activities to get them all acquainted. This would serve to foster social connection as well as resolve childcare issues. MAS wanted to find out how other students handled the same pressures, and thought it important that the realities of these pressures be emphasised to new MAS.

A few MAS felt the university's approach to their commitments demonstrated a lack of support and understanding. Specifically they felt they should be given time to fulfil their other commitments and their studies should be flexible enough to accommodate this. One student noted that they had been told on several occasions by lecturers that university should be their first priority, while this was never likely to realistically be the case. Another student noted many complex problems going on at home in making the point that she was having trouble putting together appropriate documentation to apply for exemptions.

It was observed that MAS have non-negotiable responsibilities, often in a way that school leaver students did not. There was a sense that younger people may find fitting study into their lives and making it their priority much easier, accordingly some MAS expressed some exasperation with other students' excuses for not coming in or their need to apply for exemptions. Students reflected on how much better they might be doing if they did not have so many other commitments, and that they might have been able to spend more time socialising and engaging in the university experience.

Financial commitments were identified as a main reason for MAS dropping out, that their financial situation becomes untenable due to the time needed to take off for study. The lack of assistance and support for the loss of income while studying was contrasted with the support people received while learning a trade. One student mentioned rising tuition fees, and the feeling of being cheated in having to keep paying increases while gradually approaching completion.

Some specific issues were mentioned in relation to balancing career commitments. Like other commitments, arranging tutorials around work was difficult, and early notice of tutorial times was thought to be helpful. There was a sense that working

full time while studying resulted in limited social connections and finding university to be an isolating experience. One student reported finding it useful to take a few weeks off before the semester began, observing that some MAS kept working right up until start of semester. A few students complained of the lack of support for full-time workers attending uni, although one suggested doing both at the same time could have its benefits.

3.8 Need for Flexibility and Consideration Concerning Timetabling

MAS talked about some of the difficulties around long commutes to campuses, and of attempting to schedule as many classes on one day as possible. Timetabling was of great concern for some students, with some talking about problems with clashes between lectures, tutorials, exams, and pracs. A student mentioned a situation where five core units clashed on one night. Students who had begun taking classes at night at their home campus found that they sometimes ran out of units offered in this mode and they had to make arrangements around attending other campuses, or attending classes during the day. One student in particular identified tutorial allocations meaning they had to attend class at 10pm, drive an hour home and start work at 7am, which was untenable.

As discussed previously, there was a sense that the situation of MAS made it imperative that they be given special consideration in selecting and changing tutorials. A pre-allocation system was suggested for people with work and caring obligations that should be judged based on the needs of the person. It was suggested that this would reduce the workload in changing tutorials. It was noted that most lecturers were usually fine with changing tutorials informally, so just showing up to a different tutorial and just explaining the situation. Regarding the many demands on MAS, including work and study and travel between them, one student observed that if someone was made to do what MAS commonly do it would be illegal.

3.9 Access

Students across a number of campuses remarked about how difficult it was to get around and find particular buildings. Poor signage and maps only having building numbers were mentioned as being part of the problem. MAs reported frequently getting lost on campus and finding it stressful to find things for the first time.

For some MAS, particularly those with physical limitations, the size and geography of some campuses made it difficult to get around. Werrington and Kingswood in particular were mentioned, with hills and long walks from where the bus stopped.

Mature age students mentioned difficulties getting on campus both by public transport and parking. Particularly for some of the campuses distant from the metro area, public transport was problematic, requiring multiple busses and trains, and indirect routes. For other campuses parking was a problem, namely Parramatta.

Many similar issues were discussed in reference to barriers to accessing services. Distance, time, conflicts with lectures and tutorials and cost were often mentioned. The distance some students travelled to get to campus was highlighted, some expressed an unwillingness to travel to campus just for a session that may or may not be of use to them. That many students study externally was also highlighted, which limited their ability to find out about and access services in any way except for online. The general lack of time available for MAS was frequently mentioned, it was suggested that the earlier in the semester the better in terms of offering academic workshops. Many students reported clashes with lectures, tutorials, clinical placements, pracs, along with their work and caring commitments. The times students would like to see services available highlighted the difficulty of scheduling such services; full time workers wanted services available 6pm-9pm and on weekends, while MAS caring for children indicated a preference for services during school and daycare hours. Some of the other barriers to accessing services mentioned included having difficulty contact people directly about the service, having limited computer skills and limited time to read through general emails about services.

3.10 Students Suggestions

3.10.1 For UWS

- More units with PASS, in particular a mature age PASS.
- Pre-allocation of tutorials for people with caring and work restrictions on the tutorials they can attend.
- Reminders of where to access information about MAS support.
- Essay writing workshops for MAS run before semester starts.
- MAS Facebook page.

- Concierge or general inquiry person who can direct people to appropriate services or person to address questions. Important that this person should take ownership and responsibility of inquiries.
- An online calendar with due dates for assessments that updates automatically.
- A dedicated MAS space that is clean, comfortable, with a kitchen, tea, coffee, microwave, and a noticeboard. A space that will be conducive to socialising.
- Youtube walk-through of some of the university's IT systems.
- System of assessing student needs in order to direct them to appropriate assistance and workshops.
- Co-operative childcare system where parents got childcare in exchange for providing childcare.
- Parent groups organised by geographical area that assists in setting up arrangements for caring for children.
- A resource to help MAS deal with some of the terms and language used at university.
- Special recognition of the leave and exemption requirements of MAS with children and work commitments.
- Early enrolment and earlier information about units and what they will involve.
- Something to reducing stigma around accessing counselling.
- Diary for new students that has all services and internal ads.
- Work on the language used in some of the IT systems.
- Focus on services for external MAS.
- The 'Online Librarian' service could be extended to other types of admin such as Student Services.
- Used the experiences of other MAS to put the message out that university accessible.

3.10.2 For New Students

- Get involved in PASS and other academic assistance.
- Try get an understanding of how all the different components work (library, admin etc).
- Think about how to manage your personal commitments.
- Don't leave things to the last minute.
- Build skills in writing and note taking before starting.

- Don't get intimidated by the young people.
- For help with most things, try to get it from fellow students who have worked things out themselves.
- If you don't know something feel free to ask.
- Attend orientation.