

Making Sense of Part-Time Students' Transition into Higher Education: Recognising the Self, Family and Work

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Abstract

This paper argues that it is essential to make sense of working adults' transition into the university, more so, there needs to be clarity about the dominant understanding of transition when dealing with working students. The University of the Western Cape (UWC) has since its inception in 1960 offered evening classes to working students. This offering is currently under threat and the Division for Lifelong learning (DLL) has engaged in an action research process to investigate teaching and learning opportunities that are conceptualised and provided in flexible ways. Located in one of the three pilot sites of the action research, this paper explores the transition of a sample of Political Studies students as shared in interviews and other data collected. It considers the roles and influence of the contextual domains of work, family and self and examines the implications for mature students, their workplaces and the university. A sense-making approach is used to highlight discontinuities or gaps experienced by the students and the initial analysis reveals that attempts to support students may be constrained by prevailing conceptions of the trajectories of part-time students. Instead of the traditional, linear transition into higher education – normally associated with younger students – trajectories for mature students are less linear, more complex and include stop-outs and discontinuities within transitions.

Keywords: adult students; higher education; transition; learning pathways; sense-making; flexible learning; blended learning; part-time studies.

1. Introduction

The traditional trajectory of young students in higher education in South Africa is currently under sharp scrutiny and the general provision is considered to be inadequate in terms of quality, diversity and quantity. South Africa's participation rate in higher education (enrolment as a proportion of 20-to 24-year olds) of 17% is significantly lower than that of comparable middle-income countries. There is a proposal to increase the participation rate of young people between the ages of 18 and 24 from 16% (in 2011) to 23% by 2030 (DHET, 2012). Fewer than 50% of both undergraduate and postgraduate enrolled students graduate within regulation time and universities blame the school system for the under-preparedness of students. Recently a Task Team investigated the undergraduate curriculum structure and found that only one in four students in contact institutions graduate in regulation time, i.e. a three year degree and 48% graduate within five years. They propose the broadening of the curriculum to include learning that is professionally and socially important and this could be accomplished by extending the formal time of core first degrees. In addition, the proposed extended curriculum structure should be flexible to accommodate the range of students entering the university (Council on Higher Education, 2013).

Already, the increase in access to young school leavers without the concomitant resource allocation has resulted in the inability of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) to continue to provide access to 'non-traditional' working adults in some of its programmes. The large classes for young undergraduates, the necessary foundation/support programmes to assist under-prepared school leavers, recent demands to increase postgraduate study output and for academics to publish in accredited journals are related pressures influencing the decisions to limit undergraduate part-time studies for adult working learners. UWC has since its inception in 1960 offered evening classes to working students, however due to resource pressures and increased numbers of young students, new thinking was needed to reconceptualise the offering of degree programmes since the parallel delivery system - one full-time and the other part-time – is not sustainable. The use of the university facilities needs to be maximised by fast tracking flexible approaches to teaching and learning (Walters, Abrahams and Witbooi, 2011).

Subsequently, an action research project was launched to introduce lifelong learning opportunities that are conceptualised and provided in flexible ways.

The following questions channelled the sense-making exercise; what are prevailing notions of mature students' transition into the university? How do these notions manifest themselves on the part of the workplaces, the university and the students? Making sense of transitions of adult students will enable the workplace(s), the academy and the worker-students to understand how decisions, actions, policies, regulations, affordances, constraints and other mechanisms contribute to and are connected to eventual outcomes for the students. Focusing on students in one pilot site namely Political Studies, this paper firstly describes mature students in general terms, it explores different typologies of transitions, outlines the investigation and provides an analysis of the sense-making process.

2. “Working Students” Transition into Higher Education

The working students referred to in this study are ‘adult learners’ who do not come to the university straight from school. They are generally older than the average student and the current legislative definition of a ‘mature learner’ is 23 years or older. The literature, both nationally and internationally, reveals the use of the terms ‘learner’ and ‘student’. For this study, the term ‘student’ is preferred to distinguish between a school ‘learner’ and a post-school learner – the latter being a student. These working students bring with them their adult responsibilities of economic sustainability, family and community commitments. They bring complex life experiences to the learning environments and their time is often very constrained. Most of them left full-time education for other roles such as parenthood, financial providers, care-givers or workers. The majority in this study are also first-generation university entrants, meaning that their parents never attended institutions of higher education. They speak many languages and English, the language of instruction, is often not their first language. Working adults’ decision to undertake part-time studies is influenced and informed by numerous factors. They need to ensure that work, family and finances support their decision. These factors will also have differential effects because, as Osman and Castle (2006) maintain, adult learners do not form a homogeneous group. Adult learners can be further distinguished by age, gender, ethnicity, employment status, and past educational experience, among others.

These factors affect the transitions of mature students into higher education and they are navigated differently by individual sets of students depending on unique circumstances at any given time. According to Coffey (2001), the pathways for adult students to their eventual outcomes are non-linear and in most cases unique. He states that the routes that individuals and social groups navigate through the education system and the outcomes of those educational experiences are much more complex and multifaceted. Here, there is agreement with Baruch (2006) who claims that the days of predictable, secure and linear careers are long gone. Instead, the organisational system is now in a mode of all change, all dynamic, total fluidity; making careers unpredictable, vulnerable and multidirectional. Other perspectives of adult transitions include that of development psychology and lifecourse sociology where it (transition) is viewed as a problem to be resolved and managed or transition is viewed as inevitable and continuous (Fenwick, 2013). Transition for developmental psychology describes the psychological processes and the individual’s internal adjustments made in response to a change. The bigger the change, the more intensive the transition and this will extend to the individual’s identity in relation to the changing environment (Heathcote and Taylor, 2007).

The life course perspective of transition highlights the potential of single life events to extensively influence future life course trajectories. It is guided by four principles, historical place, timing in lives, linked lives and human agency – with a caveat that the ‘context’ within which the transition occurs can determine how it affects an individual’s life trajectory (Langenkamp, 2011). A life course perspective is stage-like in that it proposes that individuals progress through a number of transitions in roles during their life time and each stage is distinct but follows from what had been before. These models of transition endeavour to describe how individuals respond to change, either in their own lives or environment. Those who view adult transition as a problem to be resolved depict it as ‘unsettling, disruptive, daunting, anxiety inducing and risky but also create normative assumptions about how best to manage them’ (Fragoso, Gonsalves, Ribeiro, Monteiro and Quintas, 2013). According to them, this takes away the positive effects of difficulty and the challenge (transition) becomes an opportunity rather than a problem to be managed. Fenwick (2013) points to alternate views of ‘career transition’ such as the ‘protean career orientation’ and the ‘kaleidoscope career orientation’.

The 'protean career' perspective describes individuals who are characterised as being values-driven and having a self-directed attitude. These individuals do not easily subscribe to external or organisational values and they are more proactive by nature. The essential elements of a protean career orientation, according to DiRenzo (2010) are a self-directed approach to career management where the individual takes personal control over career development; and a values-driven orientation where individuals pursue personally-meaningful values and goals – as opposed to socially-imposed ones. A closely related career orientation is the 'boundaryless career' orientation (Briscoe and Hall, 2006). A person with a high boundaryless career attitude will comfortably operate across organisational boundaries and sustain active relationships beyond organisational or disciplinary boundaries.

The kaleidoscope career orientation is another more recent model to illustrate how individuals think about and enact their careers. It is a career created on the person's own terms defined (as with protean) by his/her own values, life choices and limitations. Like a kaleidoscope, the career is dynamic and in motion: as life changes, the career can be altered to adjust to these changes rather than relinquishing control and letting others dictate its direction (Mainniero and Sullivan, 2006). They identify three parameters that navigate over a life span to create a pattern of an individual's life or career. They also refer to it as the ABC of a Kaleidoscope career. Just as a kaleidoscope uses three mirrors to create infinite patterns, individuals focus on three parameters when making decisions, thus creating the kaleidoscope patterns of their career. These parameters are, 'authenticity, balance and challenge' (Sullivan, S.E., Forret, M.L., Carracher, S.M., and Mainiero, L.A., 2009).

These alternate models speak directly to the notion of an all dynamic, fluid and unpredictable employment environment mentioned earlier. Here, more credence is placed in the ability of individuals to navigate uncertainty. Fragoso et al (2013) point to the influence of globalisation pressure. This includes the deregulation of labour markets, privatisation of state services, technological advances and changing employment patterns that all contribute to a transition model centred on reflexivity. The latter is 'a mediating link between structure and agency: this dialectic is between cultural habitus and institutional structures on the one hand, and the transformative power of individual action on the other' (Fragoso, et al, p.68). The study of Stevenson and Clegg (2012) on how adult learners orientate themselves to the future picks up this argument and they too question the notion of a 'neo-liberal subject who is able to create an individual trajectory in what are seen to be riskier employment futures requiring a flexible, dynamic, and future focused self.' They draw on the work of Archer (2007) who used reflexivity to formulate notions of 'self' leading to analytical categories of reflexives as 'communicative', 'autonomous', 'meta' and 'fractured'.

The reflexive identities are assigned as follows: 'Communicative reflexives' are people who work hard at 'staying put'. They seek comfort in the present, the known and accept the future as long as it is not too different from what they have always experienced. 'Autonomous reflexives' have an engaged orientation to the future and see it as being obvious, awaiting and open. Stevenson and Clegg (2012) maintain that current debates within higher education privilege 'autonomous reflexivity'. 'Meta-reflexives' are people who operate outside expected norms and standards and are generally oriented to a different set of values. They eschew upward mobility and self-aggrandisement. 'Fractured reflexives' are people who are unable to motivate themselves or imagine any stable project into the future. These reflexive identities are drawn from descriptions of 'possible selves', meaning future representations of the self. These possible selves may relate to what individuals or groups desire to become or those they wish to avoid (Stevenson and Clegg, 2012). Elaborated possible selves influence the actions and strategies used by the actors and provide direction and energy in the pursuit of their goals. However, their strategies and actions inevitably come up against situational or contextual barriers and their success depends on how they are able to cope with the environmental challenges.

In the South African context, access, equity and success for adult learners are predicated by inefficiencies and contradictions (Buchler, Castle, Osman and Walters, 2007). There is a limited understanding and according to Walters and Koetsier (2006) little consciousness in the national system of the needs of older students and what is required to support their success. Even for school leavers transitioning into higher education there has been a shift away from institutional evaluations of the first year experience driven by business models privileging performance indicators such as retention, achievements and progressions rates (Levy and Earl, 2012). They assert that supporting and facilitating effective transitions into and through higher education have become student oriented, professionalised and recognised as institutional core business.

In their study they used the voices of their students to surface an understanding of how best to attract and retain more diverse students into higher education.

This strengthens the conviction in this study that making sense of transitions of adult students, using their words, can enable the university, the workplace(s) and the students to understand how decisions, actions, policies, affordances and constraints contribute to and are connected to eventual outcomes.

3. Sense-making Approach

This study is located within a pilot site of an ongoing Action Research project aimed at exploring flexible provisioning for part-time studies at the University of the Western Cape. The action research draws on Ghaye et al. (2008) who have elaborated the approach into what is called participatory and appreciative action and reflection (PAAR). This approach encourages; (i) the development of appreciative insight, an understanding of the root causes of success and the sustaining of strengths-based discourses ; (ii) collective learning through interconnectedness; (iii) the acceptance of more pluralistic view of ways of knowing and; (iv) the use of a reflective learning framework.

Existing gaps in the existing understanding of the transitions of the part-time students necessitated a methodological approach that would create an enabling process, an invitational environment, collaborative space, generate ‘appreciative insight’ in line with PAAR and facilitative within the context of the research project. A sense-making process that viewed participants as ‘centred and decentred; ordered and chaotic; cognitive, physical, spiritual, and emotional; and potentially differing in all these dimensions across time and across space’ as articulated by Dervin (1999), resonated with what was envisaged. A core assumption of sense-making is that of discontinuity. Discontinuity refers to gaps between entities, time and spaces; and as entities, individuals move through time and space dealing with other people, artefacts, systems, or institutions. It is the strategy that a person employs to bridge the gaps - making sense of – that is the central metaphor of the Sense-Making Approach (Spurgen, 2006).

Brenda Dervin is credited by Weick (1995), Duffy (1995), and, Ford (2004) as the originator of the sense-making approach. The approach however, draws on a range of theorists involved in sociological enquiry that sought to document everyday life using methods of ethnographic fieldwork and social surveys. Garfinkel (1999) used the term ethnomethodology as far back as 1967 to refer “to the investigation of the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life.”

Scott (2009) reports that ‘everyday life’ enjoyed an ‘absent presence’ in sociology in the early twentieth century when the emphasis was on the grand narrative and enabling or disabling schemas. She further points to the post-modern era of mass media and the rise of social movements such as feminism, civil rights and gay pride that brought questions of identity and lifestyle difference to the forefront of political consciousness. These in turn interacted with new developing theoretical perspectives of everyday life, such as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, structural functionalism and cultural studies. Dervin (2003) also outlines how a researcher is supposed to go about the sense-making process through the interviewing process. The sense-making interview, according to her, demands ‘minimal intrusions and namings’ of the world by the interviewer. She proposes open-ended questions focused on allowing the respondent to communicate his/her process and that the entire interview should be constrained to the central query. The respectful treatment of the participants’ views and contributions and the useful ‘assumption of discontinuity are central to its application in this study.

Since this study is located within a broader ‘action research’ project, as indicated earlier, there was a need to have more than a basic insight into the lives of the participants – Political Studies part-time students. This strategy is supported by Saldanha (2003) who suggests that it is critical to gather essential demographics, particular categories, or other descriptive qualitative data for future reference. A survey questionnaire was designed to obtain demographic data not generally available such as mode of transport used, access to technology, employment status, type of employment, and reasons for undertaking studies. The questionnaire provided an opportunity to explain the overall research project to the students present and to invite volunteers to participate in interviews and other research initiatives.

3.1 Following the sense-making process

In this study the focus was on the first year part-time undergraduate students only. The questionnaire instrument, designed to gather data about the first years, has subsequently been redesigned and modified for use with 2nd and 3rd year part-timers as well as full-time students.

During 2013, 36 part-time students were registered to attend. 27 Students were in attendance on the night the questionnaire was administered, 9 were absent. After completing the questionnaire the students were able to ask questions about the specific and general action research project and 8 volunteered to be interviewed at a later stage.

3.1.1 Findings from the questionnaire:

Of the 27 (100%) who responded, 63% are male and 37% female: 59% (16) indicated that they are single, 33% (9) married and 8% (2) divorced. The age-categories revealed were; age 18-25, 7%; age 26-33, 44%, age 34-41, 33%, and age 42-49, 16%. 85% are in full-time employ, 7% part-time, 1 person is self-employed and another, unemployed seeking work. The mode of transport used to travel to the campus was indicated as 77% using own car, 7% get lifts from others and 13% use public transport. The distances they stay from the campus were indicated as follows; 22% within 10km radius, 18% within 15km, 16% within 20km and 44% more than 20km from the campus. Twelve of them, 44%, indicated that they are paying for their studies, 18% have bursaries and 38% are being funded by their employers.

The following options were given as reasons for undertaking studies. Respondents could select any or as many as they deemed fit. The percentages indicate the 'popular choices'.

Table 1: Reason for undertaking studies

Reason: n=27	No.	%
To be better skilled at current work responsibilities	17	63
Develop skills for workplace promotion opportunities	16	59
Requirement as part of employment contract	2	8
As preparation to search for better opportunities	12	44
To improve my business	1	4
To improve myself - personal growth	8	30

Since an aspect of the flexible provisioning involves technology, the questionnaire included items related to access the students have to different types of technology that is, off-campus. Most, 59%, have access to a desktop computer – exclusively for own use; 13% have access but it is shared with others, 11% have limited or inconvenient access and 8% have no access at all. The exclusive use of a laptop computer is enjoyed by 51% of the respondents, 11% share a laptop with others and 38% have no access to a laptop computer. 33% indicated that they have access to broadband or wireless networks but the rest do not have access off-campus.

Most of the participants (89%) are enrolled for the B. Administration degree; the others are doing the B. Commerce degree. They provided the following job descriptions that represent what most of them are currently employed as: Office Administrator, Administration Clerk, Admin Officer, Finance Officer, Executive Personal Assistant, Supervisor, Data Capturer, Debtors Clerk, ICT Officer, and Director (self-employed). They work for the City, the Province, Parliament, the Police, at the Universities, a few private companies, and one has his own business.

3.1.2 Interview process (es) and findings

When the questionnaire was administered, individuals were requested to volunteer and avail themselves for more in-depth interviews. The entire group – those present – was assured that the interview would be confidential, they would receive a list of questions before-hand and that the interviews would occur at their places of work at a mutually agreed time. Eight (8) people volunteered and provided their contact details. One student did not respond to repeated requests to set up an appointment, resulting in only seven (4 Males and 3 Females) interviews being conducted. They will be identified as M1 to M4 and F1 to F3 hereon.

The first question, or rather the invitation to share their reasons for embarking on further studies, without asking 'why', allowed respondents to decide where and how to start their narratives.

I have always wanted to be a medical doctor, since I was a little girl growing up in the rural Eastern Cape. In our village the doctor was the highest qualified person and he was very caring, he helped lots of people. That was what I wanted to be ...[F1]

Well, for personal development, but I am aware that there are better opportunities and better paying jobs here at the university. I want to make use of those opportunities. If I don't get it here but I am qualified, I can go somewhere else. [M1]

I want to empower myself because education wasn't in the foreground for my family when I grew up. My parents didn't finish school and my eldest brother was the first to finish matric. My children must look up to me as an example. [F2]

I was told by my manager that I had to do something about my qualifications. The company wants to develop staff and give them opportunities – I would not have bothered if he had not approached me – and they are paying as well. [M2]

[F1] started her narrative by sharing her dreams and aspirations as a child growing up in a rural village where there was no access to electricity and she and her siblings had to fetch water for daily consumption. She continued her story by linking ongoing study and the improvement of her qualifications to that of putting her in a better position to serve her community – her community being the poor and marginalised. [M1] is more forward looking and aware of available opportunities, be they within his current environment or elsewhere. [F2]'s retrospection spurs her on to correct a past wrong by 'foregrounding' the importance of education for the sake of her children. [M2] on the other hand seems externally motivated and is going along with the unfolding staff development policy at work. More interpretation of the sharing will follow later in the next section but at this point it is important to highlight the different starting points the respondents selected. When asked about the challenges they faced as part-time students they shared the following;

Time constraints, man, I struggle to handle the deadlines. I have to steal time from my sleeping time. I cannot be seen to slack off at work to focus on my assignments and it is almost as if the guys at work, all the guys man, are watching me. You see, some of these older guys will never study, they are too old. Now they see this youngster doing his degree at a university. I have to pull my weight at work otherwise they complain. [M3]

Traveling to campus is my biggest problem. The public transport is terrible. I am late for class most of the time. Sometimes I just go straight home, ja, I skip class. [M2]

My job requires me to travel, not often but I end up missing classes then I must catch up and I don't understand the work. I cannot say no to the field trips, I like the work and the professors appreciate having me on the trips. My one colleague is very jealous because I get complimented about my work all the time. [F3]

The statements above highlight the disjuncture in the work and study lives experienced by the participants. While [M2] raises the issue of transport as a major challenge, it should be added that he has a similar problem with getting to work. He lives very close to the university and travelling to and from his workplace requires changing modes of public transport, a train and bus or taxi. When asked what support, if any they get from/at work;

Support? My supervisor demands 150% from me. She is completely threatened. I am not allowed to talk about studies. She feels it is unfair that the university is paying for my studies. I can't wait for her to retire. [F3]

Our company policy does not allow you to access private emails. All private emails are blocked and all websites visited are monitored centrally. I cannot access the university website from here. I try to get emails on my cell phone but it is difficult. [M2]

We have a formal policy regarding study leave. I come in earlier so that I can leave early to get to class on time and we get 10 days per annum to attend class and another 10 for study and examination purposes. [M4]

I get help with tuition fees, but not books but I discovered you can claim some expenses if you need to buy something for your studies. But sometimes it is very stressful you know. Because you sign that document for the bursary but if you fail you have to pay the money back. So after a few years you decide not to study anymore and then you still earn the same money but now they deduct that 'loan' from your pay and you get less. It's a gamble. But I will succeed. [M1]

By chance and not design, all the volunteers interviewed are being funded by their respective employers. The same company that encourages staff development and invests financially in the process has a formal policy that limits the ability of staff to engage with their development. The financial incentive at the beginning of the studies can become a financial burden if the student does not succeed. The interviewees were also asked to reflect on the effects on family life.

My children (two daughters) have busy schedules. I used to be able to assist with lifts and things. Now my husband and others must jump in. I also miss supporting them when they perform in their sports or other school activities. [F2]

I worry when my children are sick. At least, I now have medical aid but I am always stressed when one of them is ill. My brother works shifts, so sometimes he is there to look after them but it is very stressful. [F1]

The two respondents reported 'a loss' at least in desired connection with their children. It is also ironic that [F2] is engaging in further education to be an example to her children but in the process has to disengage from the educational process of her daughters. The male respondents generally indicated that they manage to work around family concerns and the other female is single with family living in a different part of the country. Asked about how they cope with and manage their studies, they responded as follows;

Sam (not his real name) and I know each other, we met during another course. He always makes sure that I get the notes and I get to know about assignment deadlines etc. [F3]

To tell you the truth, I steal from my sleep time. I find myself working late at night into the early mornings. It works for me because I am very involved in church activities and other extra-mural events. I read as much as possible before and after the lectures. [M3]

We sometimes get together before assignments on a Saturday on campus and we work on assignments together. It helps because we are equally confused sometimes and we know and understand different things and we put our heads together. [F1]

My colleagues at here at work know what is required. I can easily talk to them about what is required. Sometimes they will read my essays before I hand them in. I am covered there. [M1]

The coping mechanisms shared here include various forms of communities of practice where support is sought and provided among each other. One respondent is fortunate to be located on campus and can seek assistance while another manages to find time within a busy schedule.

4. Making Sense of the Sharing

Each narrative had a different starting point. For some, the historical significance of present endeavours is obvious and the current activities are aimed at an envisioned alternate future. They do however point to articulated 'gaps' or 'discontinuities' as suggested by Dervin (1989, 1999, 2003) and the pursuit of further studies is an attempt to fill the gap or bridge into a better future. The act of studying on the other hand is creating other discontinuities such as spending less time with family and children, dealing with stress within the work environment and working under pressure to fulfill coursework requirements. The latter can be construed as expected sacrifices in the journey embarked on by part-time students who have to juggle work, family as personal challenges in order to reach their final destination. Those who best manage the challenges will succeed. This 'journey' metaphor however, reinforces the linear pathways created by universities, where it is the primary responsibility of the student to navigate the standard set curricula that will lead to graduates enjoying highly successful lives in an equally accommodating social, economic and political environment. On the contrary, as evidenced by the different starting points in the narratives, the transition of the participants reveal involvement in an 'expedition' requiring huge effort, through unfamiliar terrain, getting little support from workplaces beyond providing the fees, and engaging with higher education institutions who for the most part provide support services that target and favour younger learners straight from school.

There is also an example of an autonomous reflexive, as shared by Stevenson and Clegg (2012), who has analysed the constraints and options available and identified the pursuit of further studies as the most logical action to attain future objectives. Being based at the same university where the studies are offered, supports the decision, minimises the risks and enhances the chances of success. The different modes of reflexivity, communicative, autonomous, meta-and fractured, do not comfortably accommodate the individual who appears to be externally motivated to engage in further studies.

The fact that he has made the decision and is engaged in the activity, with a penchant to skip classes if the transport system lets him down, point to a kind of 'deferred/referred- reflexive' where the locus of control, the agency and accountability are external. The skipping of classes is also not the habit of only one student. The 75% class attendance during the administering of the questionnaire can be considered exceptional as the average attendance for part-time classes ranges between 40% and 50%. Part-time students skip classes generally to balance work/family demands with the academic challenges associated with studies.

Those attending, more often than not, arrive late and some have to leave early because of their transport arrangements. These mature students also do not all have exclusive access to desktop or laptop computers and only a third have access to internet services. Most of them live more than 20 km from the campus but their desires to improve their skills and chances of promotion have influenced their decision to embark on further studies, with a good proportion making use of funding provided by employers.

Workplace policies related to individual or group further studies differ and students negotiate the policy affordances and constraints as best they can. One can expect workplace policies to be in line with national strategies and policies. The plethora of skills strategies (S.A. NSDS I to III), sector wide initiatives and various general economic policies have failed to galvanise both the public and private sectors toward a desired economic growth. Some analysts believe that it is the lack of consensus that is causing a paralysis in policy implementation, particularly within higher education. The national skills development strategy (S.A. NSDS III, 2010) for example promotes the building of partnerships and improved linkages between universities, colleges, SETAs and employers. It promotes training to meet the needs of both the public and private sectors and calls for an increased collaboration between university research and industry.

The investments in employees should go beyond the funding of studies. Some companies recognise this and offer regulated study leave for those engaged in further studies. Where this is not the case, the part-time student enters the university as an individual in pursuit of personal gain, completely delinked from his/her employment sector. The employers on the other hand can claim that they are in compliance with national policy by making the necessary resources available to students who must apply in their individual capacity. These individual students have to rely on 'hard work and dedication' and 'determination and confidence' (February and Koetsier, 2007) to ensure success in their studies. If past trajectories of part-time students are considered (Watters, Koetsier and Walters, 2007) then 42% of the current students will fail to complete their studies.

One 'sense' that is emerging from the sharing is one of a lottery. The lottery spinning balls image represents a maelstrom experienced by part-time students as they attempt to balance the competing demands of work, family, studies and personal lives. As with the lottery, success with studies is possible, it depends on the individual efforts. The emergence of this 'sense' is supported by Fenwick (2013) who critiques the notion of transition as a journey or pathway where the systemic elements are perceived as stable and static. This idealised view of a journey moving gradually forward to a predetermined destination is contrasted with newer models such as the 'the protean career as a mindset rather than a journey', the latter being more capable of addressing the multiplicity and unpredictability of the unfolding work life; or the 'kaleidoscope career constituted through unrelated internal and external changes influencing the individual'. Transition then becomes an everyday event, rooted in the complexity of the biographies of the participants and the challenge is to reconceptualise existing notions so that change, challenge and risk can have a positive impact on people (Fragoso et al, 2013).

Despite the challenges of limited access to computer and online facilities and distances they have to travel, leaving out the 'barriers' referred to earlier, these students made the decision to continue their studies at university. It can be argued that the 'elaborated selves' and how the students view their 'future selves' are the sustaining elements influencing their actions and strategies as they negotiate the multiple contextual barriers within and outside the university. The students also reveal a resilience that turns most challenges such as; work related travel, involvement in extra-mural activities, conflict at work and family commitments on its head. Some of them operate outside the value system of their companies by pursuing personal goals that will satisfy their future or elaborate selves. Their reflexive strategies translate into coping strategies where they reach out to each other for support and enrichment. There is an expectation that as mature learners the part-time students are more responsible, more capable, more motivated and more dedicated than full-time, younger learners (Hui-Chin Chu, 2008; King, 2008; Stevenson and Clegg, 2012).

Whatever the veracity of the expectations, in reality, the part-time students must cope with more responsibilities, more demands, more pressure and more contextual concerns than their younger counterparts. They have less access to available support services, are subject to the same psychological, physiological, and sociological challenges and often also carry the economic burden of other family members.

The conditions sketched above call for innovative teaching and learning approaches that allow personalisation, encourage self-direction and offer variety. Cornelius and Gordon (2009) suggest that personalisation can be achieved by providing flexible learning outcomes, addressing individuals learning styles, maintaining engagement and helping students to use their time optimally.

Flexibility involves providing students with options about what, where, when, why and how they engage with their own learning. They acknowledge that working students are extremely diverse in terms of their needs and preferences and they differ in their ability to be self-directed. In the face of this diversity in self-directedness they propose a blended model of course design that combines the benefits of both face-to-face and online methods. A blended learning approach also encourages communities of inquiry (Edginton and Holbrook, 2010) and can build on a coping mechanism, that of seeking out fellow students as a mode of support. This support can be built into the course design through online discussion forums that promote reflective activities.

The flexibility of a blended model will allow resources to be visited and revisited at times convenient to the student. However, if the workplace and home environments are all consuming and completely restrictive in terms of students' ability to engage with their studies while they occupy those spaces then this will impede the benefits of the flexibility inherent in the blended curriculum model. The quality of student engagement, be it face-to-face or online will be affected by intended outcomes for the mode of engagement, the relative ease with which the mode can be accessed and navigated as well as the how the particular learning style of the student is accommodated within the selected mode. If an online mode is to be extensively used then access to desktop or laptop computers and broadband facilities should be seriously considered. Similarly the ability of the student to use the selected learning tools will affect the quality of engagement with the available resources. Levy and Earl (2012) report on their work with young undergraduate students but their insight that 'successful student transition to university depends upon their capacity to master the meta-skill of self-management', is instructive for mature students entering the university. In order for supportive measures to be effective and efficient, the university needs to understand the transition experience of mature students. It should realise that access without support is not opportunity (Tinto, 2012) and there should be a healthy balance between challenge and support.

The multiple forms of transition call for universities and workplaces to be equally dynamic and to note that there are many types of change associated with the transitions and varying degrees of impact. Individuals differ in vulnerability to transitions and there can be several outcomes, depending on circumstances.

5. Conclusions

The part-time students in this study, as mature learners, engage in further studies for varied reasons. Access to further studies had been facilitated by financial support from their employers. However, the forever shifting education and training policy environment, generates levels of uncertainty, shifts institutional foci and re-allocates or limits resources that affect these students directly. On the other hand, these students decrease or limit their own engagement with their studies by skipping class or being affected by lack of access to transport, technology, and supportive environments at home and at work.

The current affordances offered by both employers and the university relate to the principle of access. The employers provide the funding and the university structures its programme so that the employees can be accommodated. Workplace policy can be transformed by an acute awareness of multiple, possible challenges faced by mature students embarking on further studies. The university on the other hand should similarly focus on teaching and learning strategies that will facilitate engagement, enhance the learning process, and enable success for the mature learners. The flexibility of when, what, where and how students engage can be incorporated into blended models of curriculum design and combine the advantages of both face-to-face and online methods.

The adult learners should also be made aware, through a reflective process, of the challenges, their own abilities, of available resources and their limitations.

Making sense of the transitions of mature learners is an important step in the problem analysis process for considering flexible provisioning for this group of learners. Existing discourses of transition should be interrogated and reframed as collective, emergent and multidimensional. Collective responses to transition are required involving the university, the workplace and the working student. Together they can encourage the ability to live with ambiguity and multiplicity.

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