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Mature Women Students' Experiences of Social and Academic Support in Higher Education: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

In the Widening Participation in Higher Education agenda, students' retention and success should be a matter of concern, since high students' attrition can negatively affect the reputation of institutions. Mature women students' juggling roles and academic study place them at a high risk of dropping out or successful completion. Using the guidelines for systematic reviews formulated by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre), this review set out to examine institution-based support systems that are available to mature women students and their experiences of the support systems. It found that very few studies focus on women only. In the studies that included mature women or focused on them, support from friends, tutors and administrators emerged crucial in their stories of progression and successful completion, though this was not systematically administered. Overall, institution-based support was not an important source of support, as in most cases, students had no knowledge about it. The paper recommends the provision and systematic administration of institution-based support for mature women students and regular evaluation of such a system.

Keywords: mature women students, higher education, academic, social, support, progression

1. Background

Many changes have occurred in higher education systems worldwide over the last few decades. One of these is the large increase in student enrolment. UNESCO records show that from a global enrolment figure of 68 million in 1991 and 132 million in 2004 (UNESCO, 2006), some of the recent available figures indicate that 26% of the age cohort of tertiary students are enrolled globally, which translates into about 150.6 million (UNESCO, 2009b). According to the statistics, this is roughly 53% increase over that of the year 2000.

These increases have however, not been uniform across the regions. The most dramatic gains have been recorded in upper middle and upper income countries. In countries such as Great Britain, Canada and Germany for example, a tripling of enrolment figures led to unprecedented increases, and lack of adequate facilities to take in the increases brought about the opening of alternative institutions such as polytechnics and specialized institutes. In low-income countries too, tertiary-level participation has improved but only marginally from 5% in 2000 to 7% in 2007. By the year 2009, Sub-Saharan Africa was recorded to have the lowest participation rate of 5% in the world (UNESCO, 2009).

Until the current trend of mass enrollment, Higher Education (HE) used to be an elitist and male-dominated institution. According to Hinton-Smith (2012b), it was ‘designed for educating a privileged minority of young, white western men without disabilities or without the constraints of employment or dependents’ (p. 4). Now, it has become heterogeneous, admitting previously untargeted groups such as working class or poor students, the ethnic minority, women, students with disabilities, adults and those possessing non-standard entry qualification (Assie-Lumumba, 2000; HEFCE, 2002; Hannum & Buchmann, 2004; Dei, 2005; Morley, 2005), albeit in disproportionate numbers. Other characteristics of HE participants include: being the first generation in the family to access HE, having family commitments and having special needs (Hinton-Smith, 2012b). The shift has been attributed to ‘economic and business dynamics, social and intellectual developments, lifelong learning and new technological developments’ (Middlehurst, 2001, p. 3). Scott (1998) describes the mass system as inclusionary in the sense that it is for everyone, and so has a more diverse student body though the elite institutions as well as the old links between university education and the formation of national elites continue to exist.

In some high-income contexts, the demand for traditional students in HE is decreasing because of increasing students’ fees, and HE institutions are interested in attracting new student groups (Padilla-Carmona, 2012). For Hinton-Smith (2012b), incorporating previously untargeted students, often called non-traditional participants with all their different circumstances and needs into the mould created for the ‘bachelor boy’ model of the traditional university is equivalent to placing square pegs in round holes.

Non-traditional students are a heterogeneous group with diverse experiences and unique needs (Edwards, 1993; Reay, 2003). Those with particular challenges such as mature students, and those who are most likely to drop out need HE support most. A prominent theme in the literature on mature students is what Woodfield (2011) reports as ‘narrative of disadvantage’ (p. 410, cited in Woodfield, 2012) because they find themselves under more financial and caring constraints, they are more isolated and understand and fit the HE system less well. This is especially more of the case with mature women students who often bear the burden of primary caring responsibilities, and have to juggle these various roles in addition to their work and HE study (see Edwards, 1993; Reay, 2003; Woodfield, 2012 and Hinton-Smith, 2012a for stories of European women). Across Africa, a Ghanaian writer purports that women perform many more roles than men in the domestic, conjugal, occupational, maternal, kinship, individual and community domains (Dolphyne, 1991). Although men perform similar roles (Hagan, 2004), the fact remains that in most of these domains, women have a larger share of

duties, especially when they are married. It is not surprising therefore that in the Ghanaian context, expressions of difficulty and struggle are recurrent in mature women's description of their HE experiences (Adu-Yeboah & Forde, 2011).

It is important to note that accessing higher education is not only a matter of getting in but of staying in and graduating successfully (Noble, 2003) and qualifying for a graduate profession (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2012). HEIs have a responsibility not only for widening access but for showing more responsiveness to diversity and ensuring that conditions facilitate full participation and successful completion of the diverse clientele. HE-based support is a condition that promotes students' retention, progression and successful completion. This review searches the literature for research evidence on what provisions are made by HEIs for mature women students' successful progress, and how the women experience these. My aim is to use the findings to explore ways in which mature women's experiences in HE can be enhanced.

Tait (2000) defines support in the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) context as 'the range of services both for individuals and for students in groups which complement the course materials or learning resources that are uniform for all learners' (p. 289). In terms of the functions of support services, he considers support as cognitive (i.e., supporting learning), affective (i.e., ensuring a supportive environment) and systemic (i.e., effective administrative systems). In this connection, Tinto (2003) shows two types of support HE institutions should provide, which are academic and social.

In some EU countries, students' evaluation of support provided and received in HE has become one of the barometers of the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) success (Pelletier, 2003, cited in Bartram, 2008). Birkbeck College in the UK for example, where almost all the students study via part time mode has been ranked top in the country as a result of its student-focused approach and constant focus on student support, assessment and feedback, as well as peer mentoring and small class sizes facilitating personal interaction between staff and students (Hinton-Smith, 2012a).

This study employs Tait's (2000) and Tinto's (2003) conceptualization of support which relates to the cognitive (academic) and affective (social). The next two parts describe the methods employed in this systematic review and the studies that were selected for data extraction. This is followed by a discussion of the results, the conclusions drawn and the recommendations made.

2. Methods Used in the Review

2.1 Searching the Literature

This review followed the guidelines for systematic reviews formulated by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre). Since it focuses on mature women students' experiences of support in higher education, the search was limited to published papers of journals related to this subject. Documents were also limited to those published in English Language within the last ten years prior to this study, from 2004 to 2013. Twenty-six journals were hand searched for relevant articles.

Table 1. Hand-searched journals

Gender	Higher Education	Higher Education and/or Gender
Agenda	Higher Education	International Journal for
Feminist Africa Journal	Higher Education in	Educational Research
Feminist Review	Review	Compare
Gender and Education	Higher Education	Comparative Education
Gender Studies	Perspectives	Comparative Education Review
Gender Issues	Higher Education	International Journal of
Gender Forum	Quarterly	Educational Development
Gender and Development	Higher Education	International Review of Education
Women's Studies Int. Forum	Research and	British Journal of Sociology of
Women's Studies Int.	Development	Education
Quarterly	Higher Education	McGill Journal of Education
Women's Studies Journal	Studies	Journal of Southern African Studies

Table 1 shows the list of journals which were hand searched for relevant articles under the broad themes of gender, higher education and higher education and/or gender. Under the theme of gender, eleven journals were searched; six journals were searched under the theme of higher education, and nine were found under higher education and/or gender.

Additionally, the databases of the British Education Index, the Australian Education Index and ERIC were searched for potentially relevant studies since they contain resources on international education. The search terms were derived from the research questions, and included combinations of women, older, mature, adult, students, higher, education, academic, social, support, progression, experience, completion and retention. References of relevant articles were also searched for links to other materials. Lastly, searches of relevant books or book chapters were made in the catalogue of the Institute of Education, University of London where this study was undertaken.

2.2 Defining Relevant Studies: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Identified documents were subjected to the following inclusion criteria: (a) documents which reported provision of specific structured academic and (or) social support; (b) the target group was or included women students aged 25 and above; (c) the article provided data on the women's articulation of their experience of the support systems and (d) the study was published between and including the years 2004 and 2013. The search was not limited to any region or country.

All the references of the articles were entered into the EPPI-Reviewer software once they had been located to make it easy to apply the processes of inclusion or exclusion, coding at the mapping stage and data extraction in the in-depth review. Forty-seven studies were identified for inclusion and exclusion. Thirty-nine were excluded on the basis of their focus on conventional-aged students only, for being theoretical papers, opinion/position papers or

analysis of non-traditional students' peculiar circumstances and recommendation of support systems for them. Some also addressed learning outcomes of a diversity of students in HE. Eight were found to be relevant for data extraction (see the Appendix).

2.3 Data Extraction Analysis

Five main code sets were developed for data extraction as follows: (a) How can the study be identified? (b) Description of study (c) Description of study sample (d) Description of support and (e) Assessment of quality of study. The specific characteristics the first code set sought to describe were: summary of the study, region and country, context and location and funding for the study. For the description of the study (the second code set), the research method employed, the methods of data analysis, conclusions drawn and justification for the study were described. In describing the study sample, age, class, ethnicity, sampling procedures and total number sampled were the areas of concentration. With regard to support, the aspects described were target group, year support started, type of support, students' experiences of support, persons providing support, training given to support providers and related costs. Lastly, the code set on quality of study looked at the quality of methods and analysis, ethical concerns and weight of evidence.

After data extraction, frequencies and reports were run on the EPPI-Reviewer software and findings synthesized.

2.4 Limitations

The review was carried out rapidly as part of a three-month fellowship programme at the Institute of Education, University of London in the United Kingdom. It must thus be noted that the short period of time affected the scope and detail of the review. The study was concerned with a small number of key texts, mainly academic journal articles and book chapters that were accessible from the Institute of Education print and electronic library. The study was also limited to the provision of support to mature women students and their experiences of support in HE to the exclusion of other issues related to gender and education. But for the short period of the review, searches of relevant studies could have been extended to specific regions, countries or contexts.

3. Findings

3.1 Description of Studies

Three studies were book chapters (Deprez & Butler, 2007; Field & Morgan-Klein, 2012; Padilla-Carmona, 2012) and the rest were journal articles. One study examined some three broad conceptualizations of support, contrasting a humanistic view with a more instrumental or therapeutic perspective (Bartram, 2009). Two studies examined academic and social relationships of students, one of which explored how academic and social integration takes place in students' first year of university entry (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) and the other (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2012) on how the social relationships of non-traditional students influence (help or hinder) their integration into the university community.

A further two studies (Deprez & Butler, 2007; Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal & Kilkey, 2008) reported the role of financial support provided by the state and higher education institutions for low-income women and mature student-carers respectively. One (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007) explored disabled and non-disabled students' perceptions of support, the nature and sources of support, effects of support on the students' experience of higher education and the rest (Benseman, Coxon, Anderson & Anae, 2006; Padilla-Carmona, 2012) reported on students' experiences of higher education and the factors that contribute to or hinder their successful completion of HE.

All the studies were conducted in high income countries (UK, New Zealand, Spain, USA). Three studies were conducted in urban/metropolitan locations and one in a well connected rural location while the remainder gave no information about the higher education institutions that were studied. Some institutions have some widening participation concerns, some do not. Clearly, there is a gap to the effect that very little information on the wide range of HEIs in different locations is provided.

Three studies gave details of their sources of funding out of which two were funding bodies concerned with HE teaching practices rather than research. The other, the Ministry of Education, Wellington, New Zealand was interested in the situation of ethnic minority participation in higher education. Two studies were small scale undertaken by the author and the others did not indicate this. This seems to suggest that the subject of mature women's participation in higher education and how they experience support may be a minor issue which may not be of interest to big funding councils.

3.2 Description of Participants

Four of the studies had participants of mixed ages (Wilcox et al., 2005; Benseman et al., 2006; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007; Field & Morgan-Klein, 2012) and more conventional-aged students than adults. Three focused on adults aged 23 (Deprez & Butler, 2007) or 25 and above (Alsop et al., 2008; Padilla-Carmona, 2012) who had dependent children. Other characteristics the empirical studies highlighted were ethnicity, sex and class. Only two stated the particular ethnic groups (e.g. as Pacifica groups: Benseman et al., 2006 and White British, Afro-Caribbean and Mixed ethnicity: Wilcox et al., 2005). Only one study focused solely on women (Deprez & Butler, 2007), and of the four studies that included a description of the participants' social class, only one added other indicators that suggested high, average or low-income groups (Wilcox et al., 2005) while the others only addressed issues of participants from low socio economic backgrounds.

Sample sizes ranged from 22 to 1000. Only one had a relatively large sample of 1000 participants (Alsop et al., 2008), followed by 144 (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007). These large surveys provided mostly aggregated data from the participants who were at best either described as Widening Participation (WP) or non-WP students and mature women carers. All the others were based on interviews with participants between 22 and 25 in number. Again, this shows that there is a big gap in surveying and doing in depth qualitative work over a longer time period with only mature women students as a category.

3.3 Quality of Studies

Studies that met the inclusion criteria for the review were also subjected to quality assessment. Indicators were developed and categorized into three main criteria which were used to rate each study. These are as follows: (a) methodological trustworthiness, which refers to the degree to which the reliability and validity of tools, research methods and analysis were addressed in the study, and the degree to which the authors' conclusions appear justified by the findings reported; (b) ethical issues relating to the conduct and reportage of the study and (c) the overall weight of evidence the study provides to answer the review question. This relates to the clarity of reporting, the appropriateness of the study design and the methodological rigor.

Generally, all the studies were small scale except Alsop et al. (2008) which had a sample size of 1000. Three of the studies employed qualitative methods only (Wilcox et al., 2005; Field & Morgan-Klein, 2012; Padilla-Carmona, 2012) and four used mixed methods (Benseman et al., 2006; Deprez & Butler, 2007; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007; Alsop et al., 2008). Although in all the studies, the authors' conclusions appeared justified by the findings reported, they demonstrated inadequate description of the research process, reasons for selecting particular groups of participants, and limited authenticity of instruments. For example, none of the studies indicated the validity and reliability of the data collection tools, methods and analysis. Only Benseman et al. (2006) revealed that the study was approved by a university research committee, without showing what the requirements were. Also, there was no justification for the research design, data collection tools and analysis used.

Again, all the studies except Jacklin and Robinson (2007) had different degrees of ethical issues concerning the conduct and reportage of the study. In Alsop et al. (2008) for example, there was an explanation on how the participants were recruited for the qualitative study, the conduct of the interviews and assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. However, in the quantitative data, no information was provided on the consent of the participants.

Similarly, in the other studies, not all aspects of ethical issues were addressed. Sometimes, the sampling procedure was not described, and there was no indication of the conditions under which the interviews were conducted and how long they took; participants' consent on recording the interviews was not indicated (Benseman et al., 2006). In Deprez and Butler (2007), assurance of confidentiality and anonymity was not indicated; data collection procedures were also not described and how the participants were contacted for their consent is unknown. In Field & Morgan-Klein (2012), sampling size and procedure were not described, and ethical considerations in data collection were not addressed. In Padilla-Carmona (2012), there was no description of how the participants were recruited, how their consent was obtained and assurance of confidentiality. The conditions under which the written narratives were obtained were also not described.

Lastly, I consider the overall weight of evidence the studies provide to answer the review question in terms of clarity of reporting, appropriateness of the study design and methodological rigor. With respect to these indicators, the ratings used were high, medium and low. All the studies were clearly, logically and coherently reported. The descriptive study designs, mixed methods and in depth interviews were appropriate for investigating students'

experiences. Nevertheless, all the studies fell within the medium level of trustworthiness for two major reasons.

Firstly, as it has been hinted earlier, in all the studies, methodological rigor was often not fully met. This is with respect to inadequate description of the research design, validity and reliability of data collection instruments and analysis, processes of recruiting participants and obtaining data as well as certain ethical concerns which have been indicated earlier. Again, concerning reportage, when a wide diversity of non-traditional students was studied, interview quotes and discussions of the study did not show clearly which group of non-traditional students was being referred (e.g. Jacklin & Robinson, 2007; Padilla-Carmona, 2012). In this way, the mature students seemed to be homogenized. Male and female, first generation students, those from lower socio-economic strata, ethnic minorities, disabled, those pursuing different HE degrees, those with wide range of different life experiences were all given the same label as non-traditional. Consequently, there was not enough detail on any one particular demographic (race, ethnicity, family form, SES, etc.).

Again, with regard to the weight of evidence, all the studies partially answered this review's questions. For example, in Benseman et al. (2006), university staff reported on the availability of certain HE-based support structures and described how effective these were, but students claimed they were unaware of these and therefore had not experienced them. In Jacklin and Robinson (2007), mature women's experience of support was not addressed by the study. Again, of the studies that mixed both female and male young and adult students, recommendations made were applicable to all groups surveyed (Benseman et al., 2006; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007; Wilcox et al., 2005), thus making the problem of homogenization all the more pronounced. Many studies did not mention the specific or unique experiences of mature women students and this shows a further gap in the type of support that would be appropriate for this category.

These shortcomings notwithstanding, the studies provide evidence of the important role of different kinds of support for diverse groups of students in higher education, which the next section shows.

3.4 Types of HE-based Support

All the studies in this review made reference to a number of support structures as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2 shows the types of support the reviewed literature reported on. Most of them can be grouped into three major areas: strategies that relate to the cognitive or academic; those that relate to the social or ensure a supportive environment (Tait, 2000; Tinto, 2003) and those that explicitly or implicitly concern finance. Tutoring, relationship with tutors or lecturers and financial support were the most frequently researched. These do not however suggest participants' rating of these strategies. With regard to finance for example, the studies mentioned its availability and critiqued its accessibility in some cases rather than report participants' experiences of them. In the next section, mature women's experiences of HE-based academic and social support systems are described.

Table 2. Type of support reported in the literature

Type of support	Frequency
Academic advice/counselling/encouragement	3
Tutoring/tutorials	6
Academic literacy/writing	2
Student centers	1
Relationship with tutors/lecturers	6
Team/group assignment with peers	1
Mentoring	2
Student networks	2
Financial	5
Childcare	2
Other academic support	2
Other social support	2

3.5 Answering the Study's Questions

This review set out to find what has been reported in the literature about mature women students' articulation of their experiences of HE-based support. It has been indicated earlier that only one of the studies identified for this review (Deprez & Butler, 2007) focused on mature women as a distinct group. The others had narratives from both sexes as well as younger and older students. In some cases, few mature women students were included in the study, and again, very few narratives of this category were presented (Wilcox et al., 2005). In order to answer the study's questions however, only the identifiable experiences of the mature women students in the studies reviewed are presented.

3.5.1 How do Mature Women Students Relate to HE-based Support Systems?

3.5.1.1 Academic Support: Tutors and Tutorials

All the studies in this review mentioned the provision of tutorial sessions. However, only one (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007) indicated its duration through a narrative quote, stating that this is done for only about one hour a term, after which students could contact their tutors any time. The conduct of tutorials was not described in any of the studies. Nevertheless, students found the early introduction to a tutor and other members of the group very helpful.

Field and Morgan-Klein (2012), Jacklin & Robinson (2007), Padilla-Carmona (2012) and Wilcox et al. (2005) reported students' experiences of tutoring and suggested that not all mature women students considered tutorials important. While Field and Morgan-Klein's (2012) participants found it to be good for their academic progression, only one student in Padilla-Carmona's (2012) study perceived its full usefulness. Although the reason for this is not explicit, it can be deduced that the little time available to the women is juggled between many commitments. It is not surprising therefore that some considered lecture sessions more

important than tutorials or seminars. Generally, the tutorial session was either regarded as a problem-solving device or for establishing different kinds of relationships with teachers, and not as a mechanism for guiding learning.

A very important indicator of students' perception of tutorials is tutors' relationship with them. This was determined by their accessibility, approachability and disposition. Mostly, students' experiences of these were mixed. In some cases, students' impressions were positive, where some tutors were described as helpful, sympathetic, empathetic, accessible and approachable, taking questions at the end of lectures or meeting students informally over tea to discuss their performance (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007). Their appraisive support was also perceived to be good. Some showed sympathy and in some cases provided more flexible models to help students meet the requirements of the course (Padilla-Carmona, 2012). This occurred on an individual basis rather than across-the-board.

Some however, did not treat non-traditional students differently. They transmitted the feeling that university requirements are the same for everyone and that it is the student who must adapt. Their stereotypical behaviors and language use were sometimes intimidating, thus, making it difficult for some students to understand tutorial sessions or articulate their ideas (Wilcox et al., 2005; Field & Morgan-Klein, 2012). Some were not available, and when they were, rushed through the tutorial sessions (Wilcox et al., 2005; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007).

3.5.1.2 Academic Schedules

The next point which is crucial to mature women's academic work in HE is the timing of some academic activities and timetabling for lectures. They also reported staff responsiveness to their requests for timetable and other details about their courses (such as location) well in advance of the start of the semester, to enable them organize childcare and other commitments. In all the studies in this review, the early morning and late afternoon scheduling of lecture sessions and other academic activities were mentioned as a major problem for women with school-age children because of before and after school childcare. When these activities were not rescheduled, some women had no other option than to miss them for a whole semester, as the childcare commitment was most important. Therefore, they found flexibility on the part of the department and individual staff most crucial in facilitating their studies.

It is also worth mentioning that the tutors/lecturers and administrative staff were flexible in granting extensions to deadlines or dealing with the women's absences to enable them look after sick children or other relatives. Flexibility with mode of submitting term essays by post, e-mail or other means, informing students by telephone or e-mail when classes were cancelled to avoid wasted journeys to the university, among many others were also considered beneficial to the women (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007; Alsop et al., 2008; Field & Morgan-Klein, 2012). In some cases, this happened only when students' non-traditional status (e.g. being disabled or old) was observable. Additionally, distributing course lecture notes on-line regularly was found to be very good since students could read them prior to the lecture session (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007).

3.5.1.3 Academic Counseling

Only three studies mentioned academic counseling and advising, and two provided evidence on mature women's experiences of them, though these were not uniform across the studies. While in Field and Morgan-Klein (2012), advice from lecturers about academic writing resulted in some mature students' retention, in Jacklin and Robinson (2007), students claimed they did not obtain this much-needed service for their dissertation and reading references.

The evidence shows that the main kinds of support that students found most important were obtainable through counseling and advice, if these were available. These included having someone to talk to about program expectations or workload; reassurance that they are capable of doing the work; having someone to motivate them to do the work; obtaining help with essay writing; financial advice; and advice about university procedures (Jacklin & Robinson, 2007). As is evident in Benseman et al. (2006), students sometimes lacked knowledge about what support services were available, where they could be obtained and how to access them.

3.5.1.4 Social Support: Personal and Interpersonal Relationship with Friends

Another important dimension of HE-based support is social support in the form of students' networks or support groups and relationship with classmates or age mates. In Jacklin and Robinson (2007), majority of the students overwhelmingly rated personal and interpersonal aspects of support as the most important to them, with friends being most frequently mentioned as the most important source of support. This is similar to Padilla-Carmona's (2012) participants' perception of relationship with classmates as very important.

Also, mature students as a group constituted a support network in some cases and formed ties with other (traditional) students who were not of their age category but shared their experiences, interests, aspirations and outlook (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2012). Wilcox et al. (2005) for example suggested that when halls of residence were allocated in accordance with students' preferences in terms of the personal outlook of the room-mate, it could serve to enhance students' compatibility and mutual support.

Study groups also constituted a support mechanism for mature women students, and in Padilla-Carmona (2012), most of the participants indicated a preference for teamwork because it was perceived to be more satisfying since according to them, they learned from their peers and learned much more than in traditional lectures where there is no such relationship among students.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Mature women students' juggling roles and HE study place them at a high risk of dropping out or completing their studies unsuccessfully (Adu-Yeboah & Forde, 2011). Students' retention and success in higher education is an issue of concern in HEIs across the world, especially in the context of widening participation for under-represented student groups, increasing student diversity and educational quality assurance and accountability processes (Crosling, Heagney & Thomas, 2009).

Withdrawal from HE leads to loss of life chances for students, financial implications for

students (and their families) and for society and the economy through the loss of potential skills and knowledge. Moreover, the reputational fall-out of low student retention and high student attrition figures can be damaging for institutions (Yorke & Longden, 2004; Quinn et al., 2005; Crosling et al., 2009). Therefore, HEIs have a responsibility not only for widening access, but for showing more responsiveness to diversity and ensuring that conditions facilitate full participation, retention and successful completion of the diverse clientele. A study of HE-based support systems that are available to mature women students in higher education is thus crucial in order to identify good practices and highlight lapses for remediation.

One point worth noting in this study is the fact that all the studies identified for review were conducted in high income countries. This shows a big gap in relation to middle income and low income countries, especially as it is evident that some of the biggest HE expansion is coming from these contexts. This seems to suggest the lack of information on how HEIs in middle and low income countries are handling the wide diversity of HE participants, and how the participants progress through HE in this era of massification and globalization. It is also evident that there is very little information in the literature on the wide range of HEIs in different locations, as the studies identified were conducted mostly in big cities and towns.

Next, out of the forty-seven studies identified in the initial search and 8 selected for in depth review, only one focused on mature women only, and the rest mixed both female and male, young and adult students, making aggregated recommendations for all groups surveyed (Wilcox et al., 2005; Benseman et al., 2006; Jacklin & Robinson, 2007). It must also be noted that all the studies reviewed were medium-rated in terms of its trustworthiness and weight of evidence with regard to the review's questions. Aggregating data on all categories of non-traditional students generally and homogenizing mature women particularly in medium-rated surveys fails to project the peculiar circumstances of any category of non-traditional students for evidence-based policy. It also shows a gap in surveying and doing in depth qualitative work over a longer time period with only mature women students as a category.

Also noteworthy is the discovery made about sponsorship of studies on this subject and the location of such studies. The fact that the studies were quite small, and were also small scale and give only fragments of the picture seems to suggest that the availability and administration of HE-based support systems for women in higher education or mature women for that matter may be a subject which may not be of research interest to big funding councils. In some advanced countries where women outstrip men in higher education, and where mature students constitute the majority of the HE population, there is the tendency to assume that their over-representation implies their smooth progression through HE. There is thus the tendency to overlook mature women's juggling roles and their great need for HE support.

These lapses notwithstanding, a key finding of this review is that support from friends, tutors and administrators is crucial in mature women's progression and successful completion of HE. Overall, HE-based support does not emerge as an important source of support, and in some cases, students even lack knowledge about them. Thus, the literature on institutional support

for this group is still quite small. Probably, the support may not be systematically administered, or are not significant either because it is too limited or too partial. According to Padilla-Carmona (2012), it may be because support is provided as a 'problem-solving device rather than with a more preventive, needs assessment-based approach' (p. 238). Moreover, there does not seem to be any evaluation of the different kinds of support available to HE participants to ascertain their effectiveness and improvement.

Mapping the way forward in the current context of widening participation agenda, higher education institutions should find it important to provide, systematically administer and monitor support mechanisms for identifiable groups of HE participants that are most at risk of dropping out or that struggle through HE. Large scale and (or) longitudinal studies with some in depth qualitative work would give a good picture of how institutions not only widen access but also make meaningful participation and successful completion of HE possible for non-traditional students generally and minority groups such as mature women.

It should also be important to know through research how higher education institutions in middle and low income countries cater for their wide diversity of HE participants with regard to HE-based support. It is equally important to know whether different kinds of HE are more or less supportive of mature women students in different disciplines and pedagogic approaches, and what levels of administrative, academic and financial support are observable in different contexts and institutions. Other missing themes in the literature that would require investigation relate to whether women and men as mature students have different or similar needs; and whether there are opportunities for participation in decision making regarding what would best meet their needs.

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Appendix

Studies used for Data Extraction

Author(s)/Title	Summary
Alsop, R., Gonzalez-Arnal, S., & Kilkey, M. (2008). The widening participation agenda: the marginal place of care	Journal article: It reported the role of financial support provided by the state and higher education institutions for low-income women and mature student-carers respectively. The study used mixed methods with a sample size of 1000 adults aged 25 with dependent children. Type of support participants experienced were academic (tutorials, flexibility of the department and individual staff, knowing timetables and other details about their courses such as location in advance to be able to organize childcare) and financial (childcare grant, parents' learning allowance, discretionary fund administered by universities, e.g. adult dependants' grant).
Bartram, B. (2009). Endpiece: student support in higher education: understandings, implications and challenges	Journal article: It examined three broad conceptualizations of support, contrasting a humanistic view with a more instrumental or therapeutic perspective.
Benseman, J., Coxon, E., Anderson, H. & Anae, M. (2006). Retaining non-traditional students: lessons learnt from Pasifika students in New Zealand	Journal article: It reported on students' experiences of higher education and the factors that contribute to or hinder their successful completion of HE. It used mixed methods with 15 students of mixed ages who completed their HE studies and 15 who did not complete. The participants were more conventional-aged students than adults. The particular ethnic group studied was stated as being Pasifika. Type of support reported included academic/social (tutorials, good relationship with tutors/lecturers, mentoring); financial (supplementary government grants and childcare grant) and family-based programs.

<p>Deprez, L. S. & Butler, S. S. (2007). The capability approach and women's economic security: access to higher education under welfare reform</p>	<p>This is a book chapter which focused only on women. It reported the role of financial support provided by the state and higher education institutions for low-income women and mature student-carers respectively. The study focused on adults aged 23 and above with dependent children. It used mixed methods with 65 participants. The support systems the women related to were academic/social (advice/counseling/encouragement, student networks, students' support groups) and financial (state-funded student aid programme, known as Parents as Scholars; HEI financial aid Childcare; State-provided childcare service, etc.</p>
<p>Field, J. & Morgan-Klein, N. (2012). The importance of social support structures for retention and success</p>	<p>This is a book chapter. It examined academic and social relationships of students, and how the social relationships of non-traditional students influence (help or hinder) their integration into the university community. It used only qualitative methods with participants of mixed ages among whom were more conventional-aged students than adults. The types of support described were academic/social (advice/counselling/encouragement from lecturers, tutorials and provision of timetable prior to the start of the semester, good relationship with helpful, approachable and accessible tutors/lecturers).</p>
<p>Jacklin, A. & Robinson, C. (2007). What is meant by 'support' in higher education? Towards a model of academic and welfare support</p>	<p>Journal article: It used a sample of 144 participants to explore disabled and non-disabled students' perceptions of support, the nature and sources of support and effects of support on the students' experience of higher education. The participants were of mixed ages and also there were more conventional-aged students than adults. The study used mixed methods. The support students mentioned as helpful were academic/social (advice/counseling/encouragement, tutorials, academic literacy/writing, student centers, relationship with tutors/lecturers, mentoring) and financial advice.</p>
<p>Padilla-Carmona, M. T. (2012). Widening participation in Spanish higher education: will the current reform promote the inclusion of non-traditional students?</p>	<p>This is a book chapter. It used qualitative methods only to report on students' experiences of higher education and the factors that contribute to or hinder their successful completion of HE. The study focused on 23 adults aged 25 and above with dependent children. The type of support reported were academic/social (tutorials, relationship with tutors/lecturers, team/group assignment with peers, student networks) and financial (government grant and other financial aid).</p>

<p>Wilcox, P., Winn, S. & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). 'It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people': the role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education</p>	<p>Journal article: It explored how academic and social integration takes place in students' first year of university entry. The study used qualitative methods only with participants of mixed ages (22 in number) among whom were more conventional-aged students than adults. The particular ethnic groups studied were stated as White British, Afro-Caribbean and mixed ethnicity. Support systems described included academic/social (tutorials, relationship with tutors/lecturers and allocating halls of residence in accordance with students' preferences, e.g. paring with quiet or lively classmates to enhance compatibility).</p>
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