ENGAGING ADULT LEARNERS:
HIGHER EDUCATION AND SELF-CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

Wendy M. Knightley
Institute of Continuing Education, University of Cambridge, UK

Denise M. Whitelock
Institute of Educational Technology, Open University, UK

Paper presented at AARE 2006, Adelaide

Correspondence address:
Dr Wendy Knightley
Research Officer
Institute of Continuing Education
University of Cambridge
Madingley Hall
Madingley
Cambridge
CB3 8AQ
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0) 1954 280274
Fax: +44 (0) 1954 280200
Email: wmk22@cam.ac.uk
Abstract

An integral part of learning is the development of academic self-concept. In the field of adult education, there is debate over the extent to which a function of education should be to raise personal as well as academic self-concept. This has resulted in andragogy with different emphases. The Open University in the UK (OU UK) has been successful in enabling adults to succeed in higher education, through engaging supportive teaching and learning techniques in its distance-learning courses.

This paper reports on findings from a study which tracked the changes in self-concept of mature women undergraduates who were returning to education after a gap of several years from formal learning. Quantitative and qualitative data were obtained through self-report questionnaires, Q methodology and interviews with women studying various distance learning higher education courses with the OU UK. Key results indicated that it is the participation in as much as the completion of courses that boost women’s personal and academic self-concept.

This is relevant to debates regarding the extent to which education and self-concept are entwined and the purpose of adult higher education. It also has implications for the way in which adult education is marketed and delivered.
Engaging Adult Learners: 
Higher education and self-concept development

Introduction

What personal gains are there for women who take up the challenge of returning to higher education (HE)? How do they engage with the learning experience? An issue for consideration by governments throughout the world is the promotion, extension and deepening of learning experiences for all members of society. This includes an emphasis on life wide as well as lifelong learning (Clarke, 2005). Certain current debates in education centre on making higher education more accessible, more relevant to and more enjoyable for everyone, but there is still an underlying focus on education for employment. In the UK, the main driver of the widening participation agenda for higher education (HE) is economic growth; and higher education is posited as a means of increasing personal, regional and national wealth (Watts, 2006). Governments are keen to link the personal, individual gains adults may accrue through upskilling, retraining and returning to education with broader economic and societal benefits (McFadden, 1995; Clayton, 1999).

However, an integral part of learning is the development of academic self-concept; and in the field of adult education, there is debate over the extent to which one function of education should be to raise personal as well as academic self-concept. In recent years there has been an increased focus on the wider benefits of learning (Schuller et al, 2005) i.e. beyond the enhancement of individual and national productivity; education has been linked with personal well-being (Hull, 2000) (conceptualised by Sen as the opportunity individuals have ‘to achieve outcomes that they value and have reason to value’ (1999:291)) alongside academic outcomes and the public good. With these multiple paybacks in mind, adults are being encouraged to return to education at all levels and particularly to gain university degrees.

Until recent years, going to university had been reserved for the elite minority who had benefited from an academic secondary education; undergraduates were disproportionately drawn from the middle and upper social strata (Woodward, 2000). However, recently the benefits of higher education have been endorsed for and to adults from diverse backgrounds; the promotion of equal opportunities has been a major objective for some British universities and colleges (Hyde and Kling, 2001). Mature, women and part-time students have traditionally been under-represented in HE, but recent initiatives, such as AimHigher (the UK government’s programme to widen participation) and Access to Higher Education (‘Access’) courses, mean that registrations in the late 1990s by non-traditional students increased compared to those by traditional students (Carney-Crompton, 2002) in the UK. Indeed, thirty percent of first-degree entrants in the UK in 2000/01 were over 21 years of age (HESA, 2002) - and thus classified as ‘mature’ students - and recent figures suggest that 56% of new entrants to UK universities are mature (personal communication, 26th October 2006). In addition, part-time (usually mature) students are the fastest growing cohort within the UK HE sector (Universities UK, 2006).
Of the 840,000 part-time students in UK HE, more than 20% are studying with the Open University (OU) (Hodges, 2006). Its open entry policy (i.e. no formal educational qualifications are required to embark on a degree level course) has broadened access to HE and engaged adults in learning in ways that full-time residential universities cannot do, by its part-time, flexible approach. Its style of teaching is called supported open learning, also known as distance learning. Distance learning means that students do not attend the institution but learn in their own time by reading course material, working on course activities, writing assignments and perhaps working with other students. OU students also receive support (by telephone, email and face-to-face) from a tutor and the student services staff at OU Regional Offices located throughout the country. A variety of media are used in the courses, such as audio and videocassettes and TV programmes, and print-based course materials. Students receive materials through the post and submit written assignments to their tutors in the same way. Recently, there has been a shift towards the appropriation of ICT, and now most of the OU’s 375 courses offer online services or use multimedia products in some way.

The OU has around 150,000 undergraduates this year, about 70 per cent of whom are in full-time employment. The average age of OU students is 32 years (2005 figure), and more than half are women.

At the institutional level, understanding and accommodating the situational and dispositional needs of mature students is important in order for HE institutions to survive. However, at the personal level, for mature students, better academic accomplishments are coupled with higher self-esteem. This is especially the case for female mature students (Hyde and Kling, 2001). This issue of self-esteem is crucial, because it is an integral part of personal wellbeing and purported to be a pre-requisite for educational achievement. Indeed the construct of self-esteem is recognized ‘to be a major factor in learning outcomes’ (Lawrence, 2000, pxiii).

Entering HE as an adult means coping with periods of change that can have psychological consequences (Johnson and Robson, 1999). Whilst traditional-aged students may also face upheaval, the adjustments required by mature undergraduates can be considered more acute. Clearly, mature HE students do not compose a heterogeneous group, and it is difficult to generalize about their experiences; however, parallel to their academic journey runs one of personal discovery. This underlying theme of personal development, as well as the quantifiable outcomes of participating in education, is of interest, not least to education providers, policy makers and governments themselves. What is the impact on mature students’ self-esteem and sense of self during what can be a highly challenging experience within HE?

The limited research on part-time students’ engagement with learning led to an investigatory study. This paper reports this study into the impact of participating in HE on a group of female mature distance learners. It briefly outlines the sample and the research methodology; reports the findings and indicates the implications of these for policymakers and HE institutions. Firstly, it gives an overview of a concept fundamental to the learning experience: self-esteem.
**Self esteem**

Self-esteem is a complex psychological concept, difficult to define and challenging to assess (Pals, 1999) and to research (Rosenberg, 1979). Crudely, self-esteem relates to the value or worth people place on themselves; these ideas of value arise from two sources. Firstly, people make comparisons between what they would like to achieve and what they actually do achieve (James, 1890). Secondly, social interactions and the feedback received from significant others (Mead, 1925; Goffman, 1959) impact on how worthy people think they are. Therefore, self-esteem is constructed both individually and socially.

Understanding what underpins self-esteem and what causes fluctuations in its level are important for a number of reasons. For example, self-esteem has been shown to be linked with mental health (Battle, 1976; Aldridge, 2000; Hull, 2000; Millings Monk, 1999) (i.e. low self-esteem is associated to depression); and motivation and achievement are connected to levels of self-esteem (Dweck, 1986; Hinsz, 1997). There is also a growing body of evidence that suggests that confidence and self-esteem have important roles to play in the learning context (Eldred et al, 2005). Previous research has indicated the economic advantages to adults of returning to education (Woodley, 2001) but the non-financial returns are receiving greater attention. The current investigation adds to the debate surrounding these wider benefits of learning by giving a voice to a sub-group of one mature student community.

In the following discussions, the main research question that was addressed was: What impact does embarking on HE have on female distance learners’ self-esteem?

**Sample**

This opportunity sample comprised 31 women, entering HE as part-time distance learning undergraduates with the Open University in the United Kingdom. Demographic information was collected via a short questionnaire. The students were aged between 25 years and 51 years, with an average age of 39 years. They all identified themselves as “white”. Thirteen women worked part-time, 11 were in full-time employment and 5 had dependent children. Eight were single parents, and 17 described themselves as married or living with a partner. Whilst 10 had qualifications at level 2 (A levels, usually gained in year 13 at age 18), 6 of the women had no qualifications and 15 had qualifications at level 1 (General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs), usually gained in year 11 at age 16) or below. Of the 31 women, 8 withdrew from their studies before taking the end of course exam.

**Methodology**

The methodology of the research was such that initial measures of self-esteem, taken when the women were starting their OU course in February (the pre-test), were compared against further measures taken six months later (the post-test). This second phase was carried out once the courses had finished, in October. This timescale was adopted to match the cycle of the OU’s academic year and in an attempt to understand
how an educational intervention (the OU course) could impact upon learners’ self-esteem. The withdrawals also participated in the second phase of the investigation and provided insightful comparative data.

Quantitative and qualitative data were obtained through self-report questionnaires, Q methodology and interviews. Briefly, the women completed Battle’s Self-esteem Inventory (SEI) (Battle, 1986), an uncomplicated self-administered questionnaire comprising 49 items ranged across four scales (Personal, Global, Academic and Social self-esteem scales), by placing a tick in a ‘yes’ (agree) or ‘no’ (disagree) column. This generated quantitative data, a numerical ‘measure’ of the women’s levels of self-esteem.

The women also carried out a Q Sort (Stephenson, 1936; Stainton Rogers, 1991), where statements typed on individual cards, relating to self-esteem (and incorporating items which the SEI overlooked regarding significant others and motivation (Coopersmith, 1967; Dykman, 1998)), were rank ordered according to their importance to each woman. The Q sorts were intended to give idiographic – or individual, personalised – perspectives on the way in which the women’s self-esteem or self-perception changed over the duration of their course of study.

The women also completed an Ideal Self Inventory (ISI) (Norton, 1995). This technique linked to the notion of self-esteem being derived from the comparisons made between desired and actual performance (James, 1890), or between perceived real and ideal selves (Button, 1988; Boldero, 2000). Participants are asked to think of ten traits which comprise their ideal self, and then the corresponding ten not-ideal traits. Participants then rate themselves on each pair of traits along a seven-point continuum, where seven equals the ideal, and one equals the not-ideal. This means that a profile of specific traits that are important to each individual participant is generated, together with a numerical measure of how each participant rates themself on their own scale. In this study, ‘scores’ were converted to percentages.

Finally, the women were interviewed. (Tobias, 1998). The more relaxed format where the women’s own views and comments guided the interview (Burman, 1994) was chosen, rather than a rigid structured interview approach. Cohen and Manion (1985) suggest that interviews are a way of validating data collected by other research methods, and these qualitative data were a means of triangulation with the quantitative data from the SEI and ISI. Approximately 15 questions were asked, relating to motivation for embarking on HE at this stage in the women’s lives; the influences of and impact on significant others regarding the women’s return to education; and the women’s impressions of how the current education experiences had affected them personally.

The women completed all three tasks and were interviewed, in their own homes, at the beginning of their course and again six months later at the end of their course, whether or not they had withdrawn from their course. An in-depth discussion of the research instruments is beyond the scope of this paper; for a fuller appreciation of the benefits and drawbacks of this mixed methodology approach for researching education and self-esteem, please see Knightley and Whitelock (2007).
Results

The quantitative data (from the SEI and the ISI) both suggested a similar trend. According to SEI measures, the women’s levels of self-esteem increased over the period between them starting their OU course in February and its completion in October.

Table 1. Pre- and post-test levels of self-esteem as measured by the Self Esteem Inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Self-esteem Level</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very High</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Low</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Increases in self-esteem scores were statistically significant.

When the women completed the ISI in October, they rated themselves on their pairs of traits nearer the ideal-self end of the continuum, compared to in February, resulting in higher percentage scores. A selection of women’s results is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Ideal Self Inventory results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Val</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results are interpreted, following Norton’s (1995) instructions, as indicating that at this later time the women had more positive self-concepts or increased self-esteem.

Analysis of qualitative data from the ISI revealed underlying themes. Whilst the women demonstrated concern with academic issues, other foci were intrapersonal skills and traits, interpersonal traits, as well as employment issues. However, a particular priority for 15 (half) of the women when considering what constituted their
ideal-self was the notion of increased confidence. This notion of confidence appeared in the first or second pair of traits generated by 13 of these women; clearly the issue of confidence, whether in the learning context or more broadly was salient for these women.

This focus on confidence was mirrored in the interviews. The women were able to talk very easily about their engagement with their learning experience within the format of the semi-structured interview, and it was from the interviews that a good deal of insight into the impact of returning to HE on self-esteem was gained. Utterances were coded according to a specially devised scheme, and inter-rater reliability was 0.79. The women spontaneously linked learning with self-confidence as these examples show:

Doing this course will help me gain more knowledge and confidence. Jane

It would help my confidence no end, if I could see the course through to the end. Pat

A slightly different but revealing emphasis was apparent in the post-test interviews. Comments relating to change and development, or personal growth, were especially salient.

It has changed the outlooks (sic) of how I see people, how I see life, everything. It has made me feel I am as good as everybody else, I have changed enormously; I have moved on. Clare

In the past I went in to a situation in the role of a single parent, now I go in as role of student, as someone with brains... I am feeling more grown up now than I did in my twenties and early thirties... Tina

This course has really opened my eyes up; I am happier than I was... I feel more intelligent, more whole as a person. Sally

For these three women (above), utterances coded as personal growth accounted for more than a quarter of their talk, with nearly 40% of Sally’s comments being related to personal growth. Women who said less, in quantity terms, were just as perceptive in their comments about the ways in which they had developed personally and positively over the duration of their studies.

However, a quarter of the participants in this study (eight of the 31 women) withdrew from their OU course part-way through. Were the results for this subgroup quantitatively and qualitatively different?

Withdrawers
The engagement with the learning experience of the women who withdrew provided a unique reference point against which to compare those students who had completed their course. The results for these withdrawers were also revealing.
Although four of the women who withdrew showed no change to their level of self-esteem, as measured by the SEI, the remaining four returned higher scores (and by implication, had increased self-esteem) at the post-test stage compared to when they first completed this task. According to this measure, their level of self-esteem was not adversely affected following withdrawal.

A comparison of withdrawers’ and completers’ pre- and post-test ISI scores indicates that the withdrawers on average showed smaller increases in their levels of self-esteem. However, one of the women, Jane, showed the highest level of self-esteem of the group as a whole (31 women) at the pre- and post-tests (see Table 2) on this measure. According to the ISI, her self-esteem increased slightly in the post-test, and she remained the highest ‘scorer’ for the group overall at the ISI post-test. Two other withdrawers did not show increases on their ISI scores; however, none showed a decrease in score and, by implication, not a lower level of self-esteem or poorer self-concept at the time of the post-test. One woman showed the greatest increase in score between the pre- and post-tests for the group as a whole on this measure. There was no qualitative difference in the types of traits generated by the women who withdrew.

The themes emerging in the interviews were re-examined to see if there was a qualitative difference between the topics raised by withdrawers and completers. There was very little divergence between the two groups. These are comments typical of the women who withdrew:

- *I feel a bigger person. It was a positive experience; it has made me search out for more.* Bev, withdrew after 4 months

- *Doing the course has given me more confidence…it changed, generally, my attitude, opening my brain up and starting to make it tick properly.* Liz, withdrew after 5 months

- *My confidence increased…I had actually proved something to myself…It had a very positive impact on me.* Val, withdrew April

More than a quarter of the utterances in the post-test for both groups were coded as relating to personal growth or confidence. However, whilst the completers talked more than the withdrawers about personal growth, withdrawers talked more than completers about confidence.

**Discussion**

The quantitative data suggest that most participants showed increases in their self-esteem over the duration of the study. For example, no participant returned a lower post-test self-esteem score. Increases in self-esteem levels as measured by the SEI and ISI ranged between modest and remarkable, and this was the case for those women who withdrew from their studies as well as for those who completed their course. Such numerical data satisfies those who place great store on the quantifiable and measurable aspects of educational research, but figures cannot give the whole picture. Whilst the statistics suggest that there were positive shifts in the women’s self-esteem over the duration of the study, these data do not give insight into any causal
relationship between the learning experience and changes in self-perception. The qualitative data is more illuminative in this respect, but also not without its drawbacks.

It has already been suggested that self-esteem is a difficult concept for experts themselves to measure and articulate; a further complexity is that participants and researchers frequently may not have a shared understanding of concepts under investigation or discussion. The women in this study appeared to conflate self-esteem with self-confidence, confidence being a familiar word in their vocabulary and a concept more easily understood and expressed. This finding suggests that further investigation into the relationship between confidence and self-esteem and how the notion of confidence itself can be articulated and measured may be one possible way forward in this area of research.

In addition to highlighting issues of increased, or increasing, confidence, participants also referred to other aspects of their self-concept. The women spoke of the necessity to reconcile their changing perceptions of themselves as wife, mother and student with the traditional model of a woman’s role (as domestic organiser, facilitator and supporter) that they had been brought up with. It appeared some women were trail blazing against the culture of their upbringing and families of origin. In some cases this caused intergenerational discord, with some women having to justify their studying and the perceived neglect of their primary responsibilities (for their families) to their own mothers. Although this meant uncomfortable internal conflict for some, successful adaptations to include coping with the additional demands of studying, further fuelled positive feelings towards the self.

The women’s enthusiasm for studying, acknowledgment of their own academic and organisational abilities and perceptions of their own personal growth were immense. Even if they were unable to articulate more precisely what they meant, the women spoke fulsomely of increases in self-confidence and of personal development. For some women, the engagement with higher education had indeed been a transformational event. The qualitative data suggest that, while the stated purpose of embarking on HE was economically driven, increasing self-confidence was an intrinsic goal for many of these women. For others, engaging with HE had resulted in unexpected but nonetheless welcome intrapersonal outcomes.

A further very important consideration, identified particularly by the women who completed their course, was personal growth of a more general nature. This difference in emphasis between the completers and withdrawers is perhaps a crucial one, indicating that starting a course of study assists confidence, but it is the completion of it that brings greatest benefits in personal growth terms.

The quantitative data could not explain for any associations between the learning experience and changes in self perception. In the interviews, however, the women spontaneously suggested reasons for changes in their self-esteem, attributing these to participating in HE.

*Studying with the OU has given me so much, it has just opened everything up.*
Claire
A year ago I would not have thought that the course would have done much other than give me some knowledge… it is because of the OU… it has given me so much, this change of attitude inside you. Trish

Although the women in this study appear to have engaged with learning initially for instrumental reasons, their reports link their experiences directly to the broader purposes and values of adult education. Whether the women withdrew from their studies or completed, they valued the learning experience highly and had received considerable benefit on a personal level.

This is another important finding from this study. Data indicate that it is the participation in as much as the completion of education courses that boost women’s personal self-concept. The women who withdrew from their course nonetheless showed increases in their self-esteem (as measured in the SEI and ISI). They also spoke very positively about their experiences of studying and the impact it had had on them personally, and they did not see their early withdrawal in any way as a failing. This has implications for the emphasis on arresting rates of attrition – should students be retained at all costs, and for whose benefit is it that such students be persuaded to see their course through? Additionally, this raises questions regarding the meaning of ‘success’ in education and who defines it. The women who withdrew from their course still saw the truncated experience as a successful one. Again this brings into focus the issue of quantitative outcomes in education – How many? What grades? – rather than emphasising the quality of the experience, and the value to and the wider benefits of learning for the individual.

**Conclusion**

This varied emphasis on quantity or quality in education is fundamental. It is highly relevant to debates regarding the extent to which education and self-concept development are entwined and especially to the purpose – and worth to the individual – of adult higher education. Economic imperatives have driven educational policy, but one principle of education is to help citizens participate in the public arena (Parker, 2003); it is becoming recognised at both national and regional levels that engaging adults in learning and increasing access to higher education has an important social function. There is also a crucial personal, or psychological aspect; as Sen (1999) points out, there is more to wellbeing than being well off. The quality and nature of the experience of learning – i.e. the appropriateness to the individual and their engagement with learning – are central (DFES, 2006). The OU’s distance learning style of course delivery was clearly highly appropriate for the women in this study, enabling access to and engagement with learning. Their judgements about the personal worth of the learning experience may have been partially based on how their levels of confidence had increased (Calder, 1993). Clearly the factors within the learning experience that contribute to self-esteem merit further investigation; these should also acknowledge the social goals of the participants (c.f. Urdan and Maehr, 1995).

This study highlights the important role of a particular type of course delivery (e.g. part-time, distance learning) in enabling adults to access and succeed (on their terms) in higher education. Andragogy and means of course delivery are key topics for
research within this field. Not only is HE attracting increasing numbers of mature students, but policy developments have implications for the nature and format of HEIs themselves. The means of course delivery are changing and evolving, with concomitant shifts in students’ engagement with and experiences of formal education. Distance learning has been part of the HE scene for more than a quarter of a century, but electronic media, or information and communications technology (ICT), are being increasingly used alongside print-based forms of teaching and learning. In an era of rapid technological and social change, learning for adults and throughout life are increasingly necessary for individuals wishing to gain, change or progress in employment (Clayton, 1999) and, as this investigation has demonstrated, for personal, psychological wellbeing. What implications does this shift in the means of course delivery have on mature students’ engagement with and experience of HE, on perceptions of self, and on their self-esteem?

A renewed emphasis on encouraging younger people to gain HE qualifications also has significance for mature students’ sense of self and on their self-esteem. Similarly, the diversion of funds away from part-time students (who are predominantly adults re-entering education) may have a knock-on effect with regard to mature learners’ perceptions of their value or status as students – on their self-esteem – and the worth of engaging with learning. These three changes, the emphases on ICT, on conventionally aged students, and on the reduction in finance for part-time students, present prosaic challenges for mature students, as well as potentially producing additional assaults on their identity and self-esteem (Wheeler and Reid, 2005; Edirisingha, Hill and Heaton-Shretha, 2005).

Because of the diversity of these policy developments, researching the quality of mature students’ engagement with learning and the impact of entering HE on self-esteem is crucial. The results from this study suggest that women who take up the challenge of returning to education stand to gain not only in intellectual (and possibly economic) terms but also increase their self-esteem and may demonstrate personal growth of a more holistic nature. This sample’s engagement with the learning experience was wholehearted and was associated with enormous worth and benefit to them. These findings contribute to debates surrounding the purpose and value of adults’ engagement with learning; to policies and practices; and to discussions regarding the tensions between objective, quantifiable and subjective, qualitative approaches in educational research.

References


Button, E. J. (1988) *SELF-GRID: A systematic methodology for the personal construct exploration of self-image.* (Department of Psychiatry, University of Southampton)


Clayton, P. M. (1999) *Access to vocational guidance for people at risk of social exclusion* (Glasgow, University of Glasgow)


James, W. (1890) *Principles of Psychology* (New York, Holt)


