Academic Culture that Enthuses or Intimidates

Mature-Age Commencers

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Abstract

The practices, values, and expectations of academic culture can worry mature-age commencers. A challenge for the academy is organising a fit between academic culture and the needs of mature-age students. A qualitative case study of four alternative entry programs for mature-age students found that program completers (n=25) value academic culture. The chance to experience academic culture produced 'academic', 'social', and 'attitudinal' outcomes for the students. Significantly, experiencing academic culture assisted over 90% of them to adapt to university life, improve their confidence, and interact with lecturers. Conversely, poor relations between academics and students and the marginalising of mature-age student needs disturbed them and they queried their attendance at university. In light of student outcomes and concerns, the academy needs to remain cognisant of, and sensitive to, the ways in which academic culture can encourage or inhibit mature-age students to participate in study.

Keywords: mature-age students; academic culture; academic, social, and attitudinal outcomes

University is an unknown experience for some mature-age (21 years plus) commencers. The disciplines, conventions, discourses, genres and expectations create an 'academic culture' in which students work. This new learning environment can challenge mature-age students' beliefs about their attitudinal characteristics, social practices and academic capabilities (see Cullity, 2005; Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite, & Godfrey, 2004; Kantanis, 2002; Ramsay, Tranter, Sumner, & Barrett, 1996). For instance, self-doubt about their ability to research, analyse, conceptualise and interpret knowledge leads them to question their attendance at university (Cullity). In addition, student uncertainty about lecture and tutorial communicative practices and formats can create anxiety for them (Cullity). Orientation and alternative entry programs aim to expose mature-age students to academic culture and address their academic, social and attitudinal concerns (Cullity; Abbott-Chapman et al.; Kantanis; Ramsay et al.).

Student fit to higher education

A challenge for the academy is organising a fit between academic procedure and the higher education needs of mature-age students. This is especially the case for socially and/or educationally disadvantaged (i.e., equity background) and unmatriculated mature-age learners. The conservative assumptions and values held by some academics can foster social power over students and perpetuate indifference to their learning needs (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lea, 1998; Lo Bianco, 2004; Street, 1996; The New London Group, 1996). Of relevance to this project is how academic culture can enthuse or intimidate mature-age students. This paper highlights the consequences of unmatriculated, return to study and equity
group mature-age learners experiencing academic culture; all of whom completed an alternative entry program and progressed to undergraduate study ($n=25$).

**Challenges experienced by mature-age students; assumptions held by academics**

Some mature-age students believe that their prior education and work experiences provide them with the necessary literacy practices to complete a degree. Undergraduate study, however, presents a new and different learning environment for them (McInnis, James, & McNaught, 1995). The practice of ‘critical’ research, reading, analysing, interpreting and communicating is what differentiates, in part, school-based literacy from academic literacy. Undergraduates explore knowledge to obtain “new ways of knowing” and to construct meaning from it (Lea & Street, 1998, p. 158). Literacy is “contingent” on the environment and discipline in which it is embedded, and each discipline will place specific literacy demands on its students (Lo Bianco, 2004, p. 70; Barton & Hamilton, 1998).

Not all students have an awareness of academic literacy. Their limited understanding of academic practice sometimes positions them as deficient learners (Clarke, Postle, & Skuja, 1997; Gale & McNamee, 1995; Ramsay, 1994; Webb, 1999). Webb suggests that cultural circumstances rather than intellectual capabilities disadvantage students who are first-generation to study. Similarly, it is claimed that universities have overlooked the notion that non-English speaking and equity background students have a different “language, literacy and cultural understanding” of study than do non-equity group students (Borland & Pearce, 2002 p. 103). Lea (1998, p. 157), in echoing these ideas, stated that mature-age learners can “struggle” to meet the demands of higher education.

**The power of academic culture to enthuse or inhibit student participation**

A concern for some researchers is that academic culture can inhibit rather than enthuse students to attend university. The issues of ‘power’ and ‘identity’ within education settings have been widely explored (see Fairclough, 1989; Gee, 1990; Giroux, 2000; Street, 1996; The New London Group, 1996). In particular, academic discourse may use technical markers or acronyms that have meaning to many but not all learners. Lecturers may ask students to ‘synthesise ideas’, ‘cite empirical work’, or ‘use the Harvard referencing format’. The unexplained use of academic language can disengage students from the learning process (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Street).

The use of academic terminology assumes that students have knowledge of these conventions (Street, 1996). Instead of a shared awareness of academic discourse there is a “gap between faculty expectations and student interpretations of what is expected in student writing” (Street, p. 103). The use of academic discourse without a common understanding creates a scenario of power by the lecturer over the learners. It limits, that is, student access to knowledge and practice. Gee, in citing the work of Paulo Freire, argues: “literacy only empowers people when it renders them active questioners of the social reality around them” (1990, p. 41).

Undergraduate writer identity is developed from knowledge about discipline-based discourses, genres and conventions. Students position themselves within and around text and develop an identity/a voice from which to communicate information (Gee, 1990; Giroux, 2000). Access to academic literacy provides students with a platform from which to present their ideas. Street (1996), however, indicates that students require guidelines about the writer identities available to them. For example, they may be unaware of whether to write in the first or third person pronoun, use a passive or active voice, or include personal reflections.
Students’ uncertainty about academic literacy practices arises, in part, from a lack of explicit guidelines available to them, Street (1996) and Lawrence (2000) claim. An unwanted outcome for the academy is student failure to succeed at university.

The purpose and design of alternative entry programs

Alternative entry programs (AEPs) aim to provide students with admission criteria to university and a first-hand awareness of academic culture. Mature-age students who did not complete the final year of secondary school, delayed their decision to attend university, or who come from an equity background participate in these programs. Alternative entry programs are a ‘social justice’ and ‘lifelong learning’ strategy (see Candy, Crebert, & O’Leary, 1994; Dawkins, 1988; National Board of Employment, Education and Training/Higher Education Council [NBEET/HEC], 1996).

Typically, AEPs are either study skills- or discipline-based courses. Many of these programs are conducted on-campus over a 13 to 14 week period, and some AEPs are held over an academic year. A limited number of AEPs are conducted externally. Specifically, study skills-based programs introduce students to academic research, writing and oral presentation practices. In some instances, staff embed these practices in knowledge that is taken from a course textbook. The text is purposefully selected as a platform from which to incorporate academic skills information. Other study skills programs ask students to select a topic of interest to them and, then, use the topic for assessment purposes. Discipline-based programs, on the other hand, teach either humanities or science subjects and embed academic practice within knowledge. Discipline-based courses include, for example, Introduction to Economics; and the Study of Earth Science. A simple search of Australian university web sites (conducted in 2002) showed that 13 of the nation’s 44 universities conducted AEPs for mature-age students. Eight of the AEPs target equity group mature-age students (e.g., students from a low socio-economic background, rural and isolated students, and students with a disability).

Criticisms and outcomes of existing alternative entry programs

Social scientists argue that AEPs that assimilate students into university life pay homage to the dominant/elite culture of higher education (Lawrence, 2002; McNamee, 1993). Researchers claim: if higher education is to achieve the objective of “social justice and equity” for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, academic culture needs to be challenged at a pedagogic level (McNamee, p. 37; Bull & Clarke, 1997; Gale & McNamee 1995; Lawrence, 2000). In citing the work of Benn, Lawrence (2000, p. 7) claims that academics need to explain the rules, “hidden agendas” and curriculum demands that are expected of successful undergraduates.

Criticisms of study skills-based AEPs suggest that these courses compensate students for their limited understanding of academic culture (Clarke et al., 1997; Gale & McNamee, 1995; McNamee, 1993). Study-skills workshops it is claimed (Ramsden, Beswick, & Bowden, 1986) foster a ‘surface’ as opposed to a ‘deep’ approach to learning (see Biggs, 1991; Gibbs, 1992). Ramsden et al. argue that academic skills courses provide students with practical strategies to complete short-term learning or assessment work. On the other hand, deep learning occurs when students engage in “the task appropriately and meaningfully” and where students implement “appropriate cognitive activities for handling it” (Biggs, p. 16). To encourage students to develop deep learning practices (i.e., critical, conceptual, and reflective thought), Ramsden et al. contend that discipline- and academic skills-content should be embedded in disciplinary knowledge.
Contrary to the concerns of some researchers, empirical evidence suggests that the literacy/academic skills component of AEPs has assisted mature-age learners to participate successfully in undergraduate study (Cullity, 2005; Abbott-Chapman et al., 2004; Archer, Cantwell, & Bourke, 1999; Murphy, Cobbin, & Barlow, 1992; Rutledge & Blackford, 2001). For instance, a review of the Unistart program (a non-compulsory academic literacy course for alternative entry mature-age students) shows that students improved their academic confidence, developed research and writing skills, and formed peer support groups. Abbott-Chapman et al. (p. 168) concluded that Unistart participants had: “better retention patterns and were more likely to have ‘satisfactory’ academic records than [alternative admission students] who did not attend the Unistart program.”

The link between student confidence and participation at university

Alternative entry program research consistently shows a link between increased student confidence and their attendance at university (see Cullity, 2005; Archer et al. 1999; Broughton & Merley, 2003; Clarke, Bull, & Clarke, 2004; Murphy et al. 1992; Rutledge & Blackford, 2001). Program educators state the importance of creating an environment that addresses attitude alongside learning (Cullity; Archer et al.; Broughton & Merley). Archer et al. claim that mature-age students’ “successful performance on a task involves a complex interplay of cognitive, self-regulatory, motivational, self-evaluative, affective, and environmental variables” (p. 32). Archer et al. suggest that lecturers need to consider these variables when teaching AEP mature-age learners.

Academic culture can enthuse or intimidate some mature-age students. This paper shows how mature-age student enthusiasm to participate in higher education increased when they had first-hand experience of both the academic and social practices of university life. Their increased awareness of higher education consequently advanced their confidence to study. Shown within this work is the notion that two co-dependent variables (i.e., ‘practices’ and ‘students’) combine to create an environment in which students develop a working understanding of academic culture and the confidence to succeed at university. The paper argues that the APEs for mature-age students provide a relevant means of gradually immersing students in academic culture and thereby developing students’ academic, social and attitudinal characteristics, understanding and capabilities to succeed in undergraduate study.

Method

The work outlined in this paper is taken from a project that examined: ‘the nature and outcomes of alternative entry programs to university for mature-age students’ (Cullity, 2005). A qualitative case study approach was used to explore the research topic (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). Research boundaries included AEPs that:

- are conducted for Australian mature-age students.
- assist mature-age students to obtain admission to university.
- are organised by Australian universities.
- each program has been conducted for five or more years.
- students selected to participate in the study successfully completed the university’s 2000 or 2001 AEP and were currently enrolled in undergraduate study.

Seven AEPs met the research criteria. Each program manager received a letter seeking permission to include the AEP in the study. Four managers responded favourably to this request. The universities that participated in the study included three research-intensive and one vocationally-oriented university. Three of the universities are located in capital cities and
one is situated in a regional centre. A snapshot of the four universities shows that the three research-intensive universities conducted discipline-based programs and the vocationally-oriented university conducted a study skill-based course. In addition, three of the AEPs targeted equity group and unmatriculated students, and the remaining program targeted return-to-study and unmatriculated students. In respect to students’ demographic backgrounds, a formal analysis of student circumstances and study histories was not available from the universities.

Each institution was sent a student package which included: letters that outlined the purpose of the study, student consent forms, and return addressed and stamped envelopes. For privacy reasons, ex-AEP student names and addresses were withheld from the researcher. On behalf of the researcher, each program manager purposefully selected 30 ex-AEP students and addressed and posted the package to them. Also, the program manager distributed project information to staff and asked them if they would like to participate in an individual interview. A response from six students and two staff at each university was considered sufficient to obtain the relevant data. In total, 25 students and 10 staff were interviewed (n=35).

Project data was collated and analysed over a two year period. The data was obtained by conducting document analyses, direct observations, face-to-face interviews and member checks (see Merriam, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Patton, 1990). Data categories were coded thematically (Ezzy, 2002) in response to the research question. The inquiry findings were used to construct a framework that reveals, first, the relationship within and between AEP characteristics; and, second, the outcomes of the AEPs for mature-age students. This paper describes ex-AEP students’ outcomes from having experienced academic culture.

**Results and discussion**

The project findings show that the chance to experience academic culture produced ‘academic’, ‘social’ and ‘attitudinal’ outcomes for the mature-age learners. Table 1, following, illustrates these results. The table is derived from a thematic analysis of student interviewee data. The themes are organised to show individual academic, social, and attitudinal factors; and, multiple factors that elicited outcomes for the students. The themes are ranked in order of frequency of response. Results suggest that introducing mature-age learners to academic culture assisted them to engage actively and confidently in study. The results discussed in this paper were revealed by 75% or more of the students; namely: ‘adapt to university life’; ‘improve confidence to study’; ‘talk to lecturers and find out what they expect’; ‘research information, go beyond the question’, and ‘prepare assignments’. In addition, the paper describes institutional and staff practices that discouraged the students from studying at university (i.e., denying students access to electronic facilities, and dismissing student worries).

Specifically, some lecturers’ dismissive attitude to student concerns occurred in undergraduate courses. Whilst all other findings presented in this paper discuss AEPs for mature-age learners, some student participants compared the inclusive approach of AEP lecturers to the dismissive attitude of some staff who teach in undergraduate programs. The difference in these pedagogic approaches was considered relevant to this project and is discussed in this paper.
Table 1: The Main Academic, Social, and Attitudinal Outcomes of Introducing Mature-age Students to Academic Culture

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mature-Age Student Outcomes</th>
<th>The Four Universities, and Mature-Age Student Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experiencing academic culture assisted students to:</strong></td>
<td>Lake ( (n = 7) )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic, social and attitudinal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adapt to university life</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitudinal</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve confidence to study</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relax more and enjoy study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social and academic</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk to lecturers directly and find out what they expect</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Academic</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research information and go beyond the question</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare assignments (essays, reports)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frame an argument</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience lecture and tutorial [formats]</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look at different topics [within a discipline]</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question, challenge and defend ideas</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand knowledge</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Back up information with references</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discuss issues and socialise with other students</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Lake, Port and Central universities conducted discipline-based alternative entry programs and Hill University conducted a study skills-based program)

**Student outcomes from experiencing academic culture**

**Adapt to university life: Attitudinal outcome**

Regardless of whether students participated in a discipline- or study skills-based AEP they valued the opportunity to explore academic culture and, as a consequence, ‘adapt to university life’. Significantly, all of the mature-age students \( (n=25) \) stated that participating in an AEP assisted them to familiarise themselves with the social, academic and attitudinal demands of university. The AEPs, for instance, represented “a stepping-stone”, a transition phase, from which to explore university life and their academic capabilities. Unlike other admission procedures (e.g., Special Tertiary Admission Test, portfolio), an AEP enabled the mature-age learners to experience university and prepare for undergraduate study. In particular, the students emphasised the benefits of participating in lectures, tutorials and workshops; discussing knowledge and issues with staff and students; and interacting on-campus with peers. In the words of one student:

[The program provided] opportunities everywhere: in having those courses: opportunities in teaching you how to write an essay, opportunities in interacting
with the lecturer ... understanding the way a class works. Just having the opportunity to understand was the biggest thing for me in all respects. So now, when I walk into a tutorial for the first time I feel very comfortable about walking in. I know what I’m to expect .... It gives you a sounding board — it gives a ground, it gives you something to work with and from you can say.

The mature-age learners appreciated the chance to explore academic culture. An unexpected finding was the emphasis they attributed to understanding the social interactions that occur on campus and during class. The interviewees were keen to belong to, and engage with, the university community. Mature-age student desire to participate actively in university life is significant as it suggests that the students perceived higher education as both a social and a learning process — the learned and the lived experiences. Mature-age learner awareness of higher education reflects the critical literacy notion of ‘learning as a social practice’ as proposed by Gee (1990) and Lea and Street (1998).

Reduced anxiety, and improved confidence to study: Attitudinal outcome

The most common anxiety experienced by the mature-age students was ‘self-doubt’ about their academic capabilities (n=15). Student interviewees suggested that time away from study, poor final year of school results and/or demeaning comments from associates created a scholastic nervousness for them. Significantly, 13 of the interviewees (52%) indicated that anxiety about their academic capabilities was the main barrier to them attending university. Students revealed:

I hadn’t been to school for eighteen years and I knew I had potential in that I was interested in study but the fear of: ‘Oh, I can’t do this, this is too rigorous, too onerous, I will be too poor,’ was really nicely sort of alleviated, all those fears, by doing [the program].

[The program helped my] personal confidence I think, because when I was at school I really thought that I was a failure and I never thought that I would get to university or I never thought that I would be here or get in. So I guess in that sense it gave me confidence to keep going to get a degree.

Student worries were lessened by exposure to the social and academic aspects of university and, also, the staffs’ willingness to listen to their concerns. The relationship between student attitude, exposure to academic culture, and positive interactions with staff indicates a link between the learners’ improved confidence and their opportunity to explore university.

Mature-age learner attendance in an AEP represented a way for the students to “try out” higher education and/or a means to improve their confidence to study (n=24). As shown in Table 1, the interviewees emphasised the role of an AEP in increasing their confidence and self-worth. Mature-age student desire to test their academic aptitude, to acquaint themselves with academic practice, and to improve their confidence reveals the importance mature-age students attributed to developing their academic, social and affective selves. The finding suggests, as stated by Archer et al. (1999), a complex interplay between, for example, students’ cognitive, attitudinal, and environmental circumstances. In the words of an AEP participant:

[The program gave me] a sense of achievement a personal sense of achievement in that you feel better about yourself or a sense of academic achievement that I am academically equipped to do uni from an academic point of view.
Talk to lecturers and find out what they want

The mature-age learners’ active participation in class was pivotal in acquainting over 90 per cent of them to the nature of academic discourse \((n=23)\). The students recognised that a question and answer approach was not typical of undergraduate lectures. They valued, however, the opportunity, within an AEP, to experience lecture and/or small group discussions, query knowledge, examine academic practices, and have their concerns answered. In addition, written and verbal feedback from lecturers assisted students to gauge their academic aptitude. Staff attitude to students also assisted in alleviating their anxious state. Mature-age student awareness of their capabilities provided them with “the confidence to get through [the program]” and participate in undergraduate work, a student suggested. In the words of another mature-age learner: “He went into the fine details, he gave us time to talk to him about it”. The opportunity to experience academic study, to communicate ideas and receive information highlights the significance of exposing AEP students to academic discourse and classroom practices. These opportunities are important to mature-age students developing an awareness of academic procedures and improving their confidence. Project findings mirror the revealed dynamic interaction that occurs between student attitudinal and academic development (see Archer et al. 1999).

Research information/go beyond the question, and prepare for assignments

The opportunity to examine knowledge enhanced the students’ awareness of academic culture \((n=20)\), especially their understanding of research and critical thinking skills. Within discipline-based courses, in particular, students studied knowledge and implemented academic procedure. The most beneficial aspects of discipline-based programs were the chance to critically examine knowledge and to discuss and debate issues, the students stated. The nature of this interactive teaching and learning environment provided students with an opportunity to realise the importance of deep learning; to obtain a “good grounding” and understanding of academic practice; to gain an “insight as to what an [undergraduate] course would be like”; and, to learn to consider other people’s points of view, they revealed. Similarly, a staff member explained: the main task of a discipline-based AEP is to “confront them with academic culture” and “enthuse them” to study.

A student echoed these sentiments:

Yes [the course] did help me find out more about [Economics], yes and, also, it taught me how to learn as well at a university level. It taught me how to find information and go beyond the question and so forth and look at other questions that I hadn’t even considered. And yes, it helped me get more subject matter, but it helped me to expand my knowledge of learning, if you will—the process of learning.

The ideas advanced by staff and students add weight to the relevance of embedding academic practice within knowledge (see Biggs, 1991; Gibbs, 1992; Ramsden et al. 1986). This is especially the case if students are to value and implement deep learning practices.

Unlike the discipline-based programs, the content of the academic skills APE is founded on the notion that: “the best way to learn is to do” rather than “listening to theory”, a lecturer stated. Drawing from adult learning principles, staff argued the need to “empower” students if they were to develop as self-directed and independent learners. Staff attributed student success to an increased awareness of academic practice and, also, pedagogic support. An AEP lecturer commented that the skills-based program emphasised writing and oral presentation procedures to advance students’ academic confidence and success at university. The students echoed staff beliefs and the learners claimed that the “scaffolded approach” to teaching and
learning enabled them to write drafts of their assignment work, meet individually with lectures, and develop the confidence to study at university.

A dilemma, however, for staff was whether to include discipline-based knowledge in the program or to encourage students to complete a bridging course (e.g., Introduction to Mathematics). A limitation within the skills-based program is its focus on humanities-oriented genres (e.g., argumentative essay), a staff member commented. Nonetheless, program staff claimed that student and staff anecdotal feedback and the results of University-wide tracking surveys show the program achieves its aims: ‘to develop student writing and presentation practices, address learner confidence, and empower students to undertake academic study.’

The argument that AEPs aim to assimilate learners into a dominant/elitist culture (Lawrence 2002; McNamee 1993) was not revealed by the students. On the contrary, the mature-age learners appreciated the nature and rigour of higher education, and they were eager to study within this new and distinctive environment. The mature-age students chose to participate in higher education and they worked towards meeting the demands expected of them. This finding suggests that the students perceive higher education as ‘a culture’ with specific norms, practices and values; a culture within which they chose to study. In part, mature-age students undertook an AEP to acquaint themselves with university life. This finding suggests that the outcome of AEPs is mature-age student familiarity with rather than assimilation into academic culture.

**Unwanted challenges for mature-age students**

The students also revealed some unwanted challenges of higher education. Aspects of university that unsettled them were, first, the limiting of AEP student access to electronic resources; and, second, the dismissive attitude some undergraduate lecturers showed to student worries. These intimidating aspects of academic culture stemmed from the way in which an institution and members of the academy revealed power over, and an indifference to, the concerns of mature-age students (see Cullity, 2005; Lawrence, 2000; Giroux, 2000; Street, 1996; The New London Group, 1996). For example, one university denied the AEP students access to electronic resources. It was due to this marginalising of student needs that a mature-age learner questioned his belonging to the university. The student bemoaned:

> My identity: I found I was trapped in the no-man’s land personally. I didn’t know if I was part of the [University] community itself, or I mean we weren’t obviously; we weren’t doing a degree and so forth and scholars in the true sense of the word but we weren’t really the general community. I don’t know where we fitted in.

Program staff also questioned this practice. Staff suggested that denying students access to electronic facilities hindered students’ on-line research and assessment work. The mature-age students chose to orient themselves to academic culture, participate in university life, and belong to the university community. The unwanted challenge came from the administrative arm of the University when it denied students the chance to be active members of the University community.

A lack of social/communicative relations from undergraduate lecturers also disturbed some mature-age students and caused them to query their attendance at university. One student, for example, indicated that, in undergraduate classes, some lecturers dismissed students’ questions. This practice contrasted sharply to the students’ AEP experiences where staff were keen to address student concerns. One student explained:

> And one thing that I do want to say about those [AEP] lecturers that I noticed was there was a couple of students who asked the most tangential/ridiculous questions and both of those lecturers who took the course never failed to answer the questions respectfully and um, yeah, never shamed the students. Whereas
sometimes in the Law faculty, somebody just has to have their cap on backwards or something and they get short-shrift….I was absolutely aghast at the way that the [Law] students were spoken to…. I wish all of uni could be like it was back then [in the AEP course].

The student’s experience reflects the idea that lecturers’ values and practices can enthuse or intimidate students and discourage them from participating successfully at university (see Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Lea, 1998; Lo Bianco, 2004; Street, 1996; The New London Group, 1996). The values and practices of the academy, that is, have a direct effect on student involvement in study and their notion of self-worth. McInnis et al. (1995) revealed the link between positive staff and student communication and student desire to remain at university. This interaction may involve a simple comment from a lecturer: ‘hello, how is your study going?’ (McInnis, personal communication, 1997).

Implication

The purpose of AEPs for mature-age students is not to submerge them in academic culture as one might soak a cloth in water. The role of AEPs for mature-age learners is to recognise the mature students’ attitudinal, social and academic characteristics and concerns and, then, create an AEP learning environment that is sensitive to student characteristics and develops their understanding and capabilities to study. As illustrated in the Figure below, gradual immersion rather than submersion in academic culture makes explicit the practices, values and expectations of academic culture. An immersion approach respects the students’ desire to participate at university; enables them to experience, question, understand and join in university life; undertake academic study; and create a learning environment that enhances students’ social, academic and attitudinal growth.

Figure 1: Gradual immersion of mature-age student characteristics into academic culture
Conclusion

University study is a new experience for many unmatriculated, return to study, and equity group mature-age students. Academic culture presents a challenging learning environment for them. The chance to participate in an alternative entry program introduced a group of mature-age students to academic culture. The paper shows how mature-age learners’ increased awareness of university social practices, disciplines, conventions, discourses, genres and expectations elicited academic, social, and attitudinal outcomes for them. The outcomes, illustrated in Table 1, show the consequences of these mature-age learners experiencing academic study. These results are significant as they support AEP staffs’ beliefs about preparing mature-age students to the rigours of university life.

Research which examines the effectiveness of university preparation courses focuses on academic outcomes rather than social and attitudinal consequences (see Ramsden, 1988; Ramsden et al. 1986). This inquiry reveals a complexity of issues that affect mature-age learner readiness to study. In particular, the project shows how mature-age student preparation for undergraduate work occurs at an attitudinal, academic, and social level. An understanding of these issues highlights, for AEP personnel, the co-dependent nature of ‘student’ attitude and awareness of higher education ‘practices’ to their engagement in academic study.

Students’ increased opportunity to explore higher education suggests that introducing them to academic culture assisted the mature-age learners to: adapt to university life; improve their confidence to study; talk to lecturers and find out what they expect; research information, and go beyond the question; and prepare assignments. The information indicates that the students show a willingness to participate in, what is for them, an academically, socially, culturally, and personally challenging learning milieu. The students valued the chance to explore knowledge, construct meaning from their learning, and belong to the university community. The programs provided a way for them to experience the demands of university life.

Mature-age student opportunity to explore academic culture reveals a dynamic relationship between students experiencing university life and their increased confidence to participate in undergraduate study.

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