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Jumping the box, the demographic trends and perspectives of non-traditional-age undergraduate students: a mixed methods approach

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Abstract

This mixed methods study makes five distinct arguments. Firstly, based upon a review of the literature, it is argued that there is a lack of hypotheses development and testing on non-traditional-age students (NTASs), defined here as 25 and older, in countries from Africa (amongst others) which may contribute towards the development of a comprehensive theory of adults' participation in education. Secondly, it is argued that fewer undergraduate NTASs enrolled at two public South African universities than had traditionally been the norm. This argument is premised upon the symbolic life course perspective. Also, the bivariate and multivariate analysis of anonymised, student demographic data – sourced directly from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) and Stellenbosch University (SU), comprising two purposive samples: (1) undergraduate NTASs' enrolments over a period of two decades: 1994–2014 (*n*=54 737); and (2) the total number of undergraduate student enrolments (TUSEs) for two years only: 1994 and 2014 (*n*=61 023) – across seven variables (year of enrolment, age, institution, gender, race, home language, and academic discipline).

Thirdly, from the perspective of self-determination theory (with reference to human capital theory), it is argued that NTASs are predominantly extrinsically motivated to enrol at university later in life, as opposed to intrinsically motivated. Fourthly, from the perspective of social identity theory, it is argued that NTASs conform to the notion of self-enhancement, which refute contrary claims in the literature. Fifthly, from the symbolic (deinstitutionalised) life course and structural lag perspectives, it is argued that there is lack of suitable peer- and academic support available at the institutional level to certain cohorts of undergraduate NTASs, as opposed to NTASs as a whole. The last three arguments are premised upon quantitative and qualitative survey data collected from undergraduate NTASs at Wits and SU. The two forms of data – comprising a purposive sample of undergraduate NTASs who were 25 and older at the time of enrolment (*n*=364) – were analysed separately (bivariate and thematic analyses) across six variables (age, institution, gender, race, relationship status, and commencer/returner). Results from the two survey data sets were then triangulated with the results from a systematic review of 10 published studies from three regions (Northern America, Australia and Southern Africa) to develop and test three hypotheses: motivation, experience, and social support. The hypotheses results elucidate the extent that respondents' perspectives were similar or different according to the above-mentioned six variables.

Keywords: Higher education; adult participation; non-traditional-age students; mature students; adult learners; age norms; symbolic life course; demographic trends; motivations; experiences; social support; pragmatism; mixed methods.