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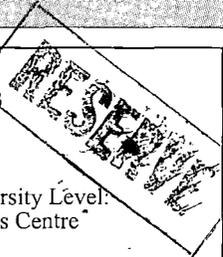
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A COMPARISON IN PERFORMANCE BETWEEN MATURE ENTRY STUDENTS AND TRADITIONAL (A-LEVEL) ENTRY STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

The degree results of Business Studies and Law students who had entered the University of Zimbabwe through 'mature entry' between 1990 and 1999 were compared with those of students who had entered university through the traditional A-level entry route. These students were matched for sex and the subjects studied. No significant differences were found for age or sex. The conclusion drawn from these results is that since there was no interaction between the two variables of mature entry and 'traditional entry', there is no difference in performance between mature entry students and (traditional) A-level entry students at the University of Zimbabwe.

Introduction

Since independence in April 1980, changes in educational policy at the University of Zimbabwe encouraged the increase in the number of students who enrolled into various programmes without the pre-requisite traditional qualifications, which are often three A-level passes. The policy of mature entry encouraged those people who had had at least five years experience in the field related to the degree programme in which they wished to be enrolled to enter university without the three A-levels and were aged at least 30 years, if male and 25 years, if female. However, before being accepted for study they had to sit an examination, which determined whether or not they would cope with the programmes being offered.

The mature entry examination consisted of:

- (i) Problem-solving tasks e.g. mathematics tests;

- (ii) English comprehension and grammar tests;
- (iii) General knowledge tests;
- (iv) Memory tests, and
- (v) Essay writing.

Once satisfied that the students would cope well in the programmes, which they intended to pursue, the mature students (after passing the entry examinations) would then be granted the opportunity to register for their respective degree programmes.

Studies conducted in Britain by Lovell (1980), Bromley (1988), and Salthouse (1989) suggest that older (mature) people do not perform as well as those of traditional student-age on measures such as problem-solving tasks, memorising, and I.Q. performance.

However, while the above tasks may be important at school level, they need not necessarily be of great importance at university level since tertiary education is not just about memorising details but also involves exercising judgement and using analytical, critical, and independent thought. According to Coleman (1990) the latter qualities increase with age. In addition, mature students have their own experiences of the real world acquired from their respective places of work.

As the demand for higher A-level entry qualifications at the University of Zimbabwe increased in the mid-1980s (such as 10 A-Level points or above), due to limited number of places on the degree programmes on offer, mature students who had completed one or two A-levels but could not make the required points became disadvantaged. It was in view of this that a decision was reached that people with previous educational experience or who had participated in some form of study prior to entry to university should, therefore, not necessarily be at a disadvantage. According to Hartley (1986), previous educational experience can influence the effectiveness of new learning and the greater the relevant prior learning, the more easily new information is integrated.

Other studies carried out in the 1970s and 1980s on the performance of mature entry students in higher education have provided positive results. For instance, Hopper and Osborn (1975) found that mature students at Birkbeck College (University of London) did almost as well as traditional students.

Woodley (1984) looked at the performance of mature students and traditional students in all British universities and found that mature students who graduated were just as likely to gain a good degree, as were traditional students although there was a slightly higher dropout rate for the mature students.

More dramatic findings were reported by Lucas and Ward (1985) who found that at Lancaster University mature students were twice as likely as younger students to gain a first or upper second class degree and were only half as likely to gain a third class pass.

There is, however, evidence showing that the performance of mature students declines as they get older. Lucas and Ward (1985); Smithers and Griffin (1986); Walker (1975); Woodley (1984) all found the best results in the 25 to 30 age group but differences began to appear between mature and younger students as the mature students increased in age. They also found that things become a little more difficult for students in their late 60s and 70s.

This study assessed the performance of mature entry students compared with that of the traditional entry ones studying in two areas: Business Studies and Law at the University of Zimbabwe by examining archival data collected by the University's Student Admissions Office over a 10-year period from 1990 until the end of 1999.

Method

According to the University of Zimbabwe, a mature student should be someone aged at least 30 years, if male, and at least 25 years, if female. The lower entry age for females is in line with the affirmative action policy, which was adopted by the University in 1996. To be a mature entry student one must also have at least five O-level passes which include English Language and Mathematics in addition to at least five years' working experience.

Sample

The departmental records of students who entered the university between 1990 and 1999 were obtained from the University Admissions Office. From the list of mature entry students in two Faculties, Commerce and Law, 51 students were taken from each faculty. These were then matched with traditional entry students who entered university in the same year as the mature students. They were also matched in terms of sex and the subjects studied. In the Faculty of Commerce 28 male students and 23 female students were used as the

mature entry sample while 32 male students and 19 female students were from the Faculty of Law.

Procedure

From the departmental records, each of the targeted student's final degree classification in each degree programme (Bachelor of Business Studies and Bachelor of Laws Honours) was recorded. In order to facilitate the data analyses each degree class was converted into a score e.g. first class = 5, upper second = 4, lower second = 3, third = 2, pass = 1, and fail = 0.

Results

The distribution of the degree classes for the mature and the traditional entry students for each degree programme were averaged to give the overall mean scores as shown in Tables 1 and 2 below:

Table 1

Mean Scores Obtained by Mature Versus Traditional-entry Students in the Faculty of Commerce

	Mature Students	Traditional Students
Male (N=28)	3.38	3.50
Female (N=23)	3.42	3.56

Table 2

Mean Scores Obtained by Mature Versus Traditional-entry Students in the Faculty of Law

	Mature Students	Traditional Students
Male (N=32)	3.47	3.51
Female (N=19)	3.39	3.57

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the data obtained. This data indicates very small non-significant differences between the subgroups.

An analysis of variance was conducted to determine and confirm these differences and the following results obtained:

Table 3

Analysis of Variance to Compare Traditional and Mature Entry Results

Source	D.F.	S.S.	M.S.	F.
Mature Entry	1,98	49,59	49,59	0,42
Traditional Entry	1,98	57,53	54,31	1,21
Mature vs. Traditional	3,92	49,27	16,74	0,01
Error	33,20	64,86	8,37	-
Total	41,08	222,25	-	-

**F is not significant $p < 0,01$*

The above analysis supports the findings of previous research by Woodley (1984) and Hartley (1986) that mature students perform as well as traditional A-level students at degree level.

Table 4

Degree Classes As A Function of Age of Mature and Traditional Students in Both Faculties of Commerce and Law

Degree Class as a Function of Age

	N	1st	2.1	2.2	3rd	Pass	Fail	Mean Score
Mature Students	102	2	42	54	4	0	0	3.42
Age Cohort								
25 - 30	52	2	22	26	4	0	0	3.08
31 - 35	30	0	18	12	0	0	0	3.60
36 - 40	18	0	4	14	0	0	0	3.22
41 - 50	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	—
51+	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	3.00
Traditional Students	102	0	62	34	6	0	0	3.56

Discussion

There was no evidence to show that traditional students perform better than mature entry ones in both the Faculties of Law and Commerce.

However, as seen from Table 4 above, there was a serious restriction in the range of degree classes awarded. There were only two (2) first class degree classes awarded and ten (10) third class degrees among 204 students. Thus the differences reported depend almost entirely on the 2.1 and 2.2-degree classification categories. The poor differentiation in the criterion measure could have contributed to the non-significant findings. It seems that the lecturers in these two faculties are resistant to give first class degree awards and third class passes or, alternatively the students are neither very bright nor very dull respectively.

Another issue to consider is the fact that, although the mature and the traditional students were matched each year, there may have been changes over time. Some of the changes noted during the compilation of data from departmental records showed that before 1996, only applicants aged 30 years of age or more were eligible for consideration as mature entry students. This policy changed for females in 1996 through the Affirmative Action policy, which reduced the age for female mature entrants to 25 years. However, caution was exercised when matching the female mature entry students with their traditional entry counterparts as it was made certain that the age difference between the two categories was at least five years.

In a ten-year period, it is also possible that the students in both faculties between 1990 and say 1995 could have been studying slightly different courses from those who enrolled after 1995. Regrettably, no information on change of syllabuses was available. However, this consideration, while to some extent important, does not seriously affect the outcome of this exercise since the assessment and degree classifications in both faculties have remained constant over the 10-year period.

While inspecting the data in the first five years and then in the second five years, it was not possible to detect any changes over time in the overall pattern of results.

Regrettably although the above findings are encouraging from the point of view of mature students they do not seem to assist university administration

and lecturers to understand the differences between mature and traditional students as it is not known whether students with vastly different experiences use the same routes to arrive at the same degree class.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that further research into this area is needed in order to identify the different groupings of mature students and their particular needs. There is need to know whether a 30 year old mature student should be treated the same as a 60 year old student. One fact though, emanating from this study is that it does not really matter how the student gets into university. What really matters is how he or she gets out. Careful selection at entry point is all that is required.

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