

**Admissions Indicators and Practices  
Leading to the Success of Mature Students**

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## Summary

The study was aimed at identifying mature student preparedness indicators besides high school grades that lead to BC post-secondary admissions success, and offering suggestions to advance mature student success.

Research literature recognizes that mature student admission characteristics differ from those that are used to measure traditional student success. Mature students require appropriate admissions policies and practices to address their characteristics and circumstances. Mature student subcategories (such as Aboriginal mature students, or mature student applicants with dependents, and with career and/or life experience) were identified to enable consideration of their characteristics in the admissions process. Some of the mature student preparedness indicators, such as the mature student applicant's English language proficiency, the match to the institution/ faculty/ program, and the applicant's ability to envision him/herself as a student were found to be more important than other factors.

Building upon the limited institutional research performed to date, new institutional research could further explore mature student preparedness indicators, as well as policies and practices which could create institutional and system barriers for mature students. Post-secondary institutions are encouraged to share best practices for mature students (e.g., in assisting mature applicants and students facing the life/ work balance challenge or self-confidence concerns) and to develop research and action plans with the aim of improving mature students' access and participation in BC's post-secondary system.

# 1. Introduction and Study Purpose

A 2013 British Columbia Council of Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT) research report suggested the need to continue research on mature students for the sake of ensuring access to post-secondary education (PSE) for adults and other categories of non-traditional students (McQuarrie, 2013). The 2013 report laid a basis for this study which investigates key elements of undergraduate mature student admissions in BC. The study objectives included the following:

- a) To review existing practices in assessing mature applicants for admission;
- b) To identify indicators of mature (non-traditional) student preparedness that are not related to high school grades;
- c) To identify subcategories of mature students that may require different means of assessment;
- d) To identify successful practices in creating opportunities for access; and
- e) To identify areas for future research and, if appropriate, the development of suggested practices

## 2. Study Methodology

McQuarrie (2013) found that “all 39 BC Transfer member institutions have a specific category for mature student admissions (30 institutions) or another admission category which could accommodate mature student applications (nine institutions)” (p.7). For purposes of this study, a mature student was defined according to each BCCAT member Institution's mature student admission policy.

Hypothetical mature student applicant profiles were developed to assess the indicators of mature student preparedness that are not related to high school grades. These profile characteristics were assessed through interviews with Registrars, Associate Registrars, Admissions Officers, Program/Faculty representatives and an Enrollment Planner of BC Transfer System (BCTS) institutions. In total, 12 individuals were interviewed who are involved in mature student admissions decisions or policies at 5 BCTS member institutions. The interview questions are attached as Appendix A. Certain characteristics for potential investigation were eliminated from the profiles as the result of the interviews (Table 1). The remaining mature student admissions characteristics leading to student success were used in a subsequent survey of Admissions professionals.

An on-line survey was developed to obtain the opinions of institutional personnel involved in performing mature student admissions decisions. The survey was administered to 39 BCCAT institutional members in early July, 2015. The survey invitations solicited responses from one Admissions Officer and one Program/Faculty representative involved in the admissions decisions of mature students at each BCCAT member institution. The Institutional Contact Person for BCCAT and/or Registrar were also invited to complete the survey. The initial survey

response to the August 14, 2015 submission date was very limited. The BCCAT Institutional Contact Persons or Registrars from non-participating institutions were contacted by telephone and/or email with survey reminders. The survey instrument is provided in Appendix B.

Table 1. Mature Students' Characteristics that Affect Success in Post-Secondary Education (the characteristics maintained in the survey are highlighted)

Mature Student Characteristics	Source	Confirmed for Use in Survey?
Types of mature students	Osborne, Marks and Turner (2004): <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Delayed Traditional: interest in subject, need credential, want stability;</li> <li>2. Late Starters: cathartic experience as stimulus, current opportunity, self-belief, altruism;</li> <li>3. Single Parents: need job to support family, want to be role model, enjoy learning;</li> <li>4. Careerists: improved career prospects, self-respect, interest in studying, employer support;</li> <li>5. Escapees: new career, better opportunities, better pay, change in direction; and</li> <li>6. Personal Growers: interest in subject, available opportunity, want to prove own capability to themselves.</li> </ol>	No
Gender	"...female mature students are more likely to get passing grades than male mature students." (Osborne et al., 1997)	No
<b>Age</b>	<b>"Older mature students tend to perform better than younger mature students..." (Cantwell et al., 2001)</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Canadian citizenship/residency status <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) citizen;</li> <li>b) permanent resident;</li> <li>c) immigrant;</li> <li>d) international student;</li> <li>e) out of province.</li> </ol>	Expert opinion. Citizenship/residency status of a student may affect her/his student success through a compound factor: they may have lower English language competency and ability to afford studies, and/ or barriers in recognition of their foreign credentials. Out of province students may have difficulty in transferring post-secondary credits to BC post-secondary institutions.	No
Socioeconomic (underrepresented/ disadvantages societal group)	"... students from lower social and/or economic classes, once enrolled, are as likely to perform as well academically as students from other backgrounds" (O'Shea & Stone, 2011).	No
<b>Aboriginal mature students</b>	<b>Researcher's observation.</b> <b>Aboriginal applicants may benefit from specialized support as an applicant during the admissions process and as a student.</b>	<b>Yes</b>

<b>Previous Academic Experience</b>		
a. length of time out of formal education system	“Some institutions have a minimum of time that the applicant has been out of full time studies prior to the date of application.” (McQuarrie, 2013).	Yes
b. stopout	The applicant was enrolled in post-secondary education but withdrew (McQuarrie, 2013).	No
c. admission through a bridging/foundation program vs other admission categories	“Students enroll in these programs to improve their confidence, transferable skills, or subject knowledge or because they believe that it is easier for mature students to gain post-secondary admission through these programs than by applying through other routes (Waller, 2006).” Mature students without a high school qualification who enter through a bridging program may not perform as well as mature students who enter through other forms of alternative admission (Cantwell et al., 2001).	Yes
d. admission through a bridging/foundation program leading to subsequent enrollment at same institution	Students entering post-secondary studies from a foundational or bridging program tend to have better academic performance when the program is offered at the same post-secondary institution they enroll in for subsequent study (Osborne et al., 1997).	Yes
e. admission through transfer from another PSI	Some BCCAT member institutions recommend that mature students “...also apply to your local college for their university transfer program.” (McQuarrie, 2013)	No
<b>English Language Proficiency</b>	<b>Researcher’s observation.</b> Post-secondary admissions practice of ensuring that mature applicants possess the minimal English language proficiency impacted success in the discipline or program.	Yes
Recency	Researcher’s observation. A substantial time gap, between the fulfillment of entrance requirements and the commencement of the related post secondary discipline or program, may result in an erosion of the applicant’s knowledge and/or skills.	No
<b>Balance of Work/Life: Ability to balance PSE requirements with work and life commitments</b>	<b>Davies and Williams, 2001; Reddy &amp; Moores, 2008; Ozga &amp; Sukhnandan, 1998; Osborne et al., 2004</b>	Yes

<b>Identity as Student</b>	<b>Being socialised as a student and the ability to identify herself/ himself as a student, raise their self-confidence and improve the mature applicant's likelihood of success in PSE (Lovell, 1980).</b>	<b>Yes</b>
Geographic Location at Time of Application	<p>Researcher's observation.</p> <p>Applicants from less populated, outlying geographic areas, when applying to large, urban institutions, may benefit from specialized support as an applicant during the admissions process and as a student.</p>	No
<b>Program Match</b>	<p><b>Researcher's observation.</b></p> <p><b>The degree of the 'match' or 'fit' between the applicant/student and the post-secondary discipline/program may affect student success.</b></p>	<b>Yes</b>

### 3. Subcategories of Mature Students Requiring Special Means of Assessment

A project objective was to identify subcategories of mature students who may require different means of assessment. The project's interview stage identified Aboriginal mature students as a distinct mature student subcategory, along with some others.

#### 3.1. Aboriginal mature students

The successful and equitable participation of Aboriginal students in BC's post-secondary education is an important societal goal. The provincial government and post-secondary institutions are striving to increase numbers of enrolled Aboriginal students and their academic success. The survey respondents were asked for their advice on admissions processes and practices which would lead to increased numbers of mature Aboriginal students successfully applying to an institution.

Survey respondents' comments reflected an extensive interest in this topic. They provided examples of current and suggested practices regarding prospective students, applicants and enrolled Aboriginal mature students, including

- Liaison and coordination with local bands regarding funding and timing of Aboriginal mature students during the admission process;
- Creation of a separate Aboriginal admissions process;
- An admissions process which enables Aboriginal applicants during the admissions process to upgrade their academic skills and knowledge, subsequently enabling them to gain admission;
- Connecting Aboriginal prospects, applicants and students to the institution's Aboriginal support services;
- Building consistent and enduring relationships with Aboriginal students before, during and after the admissions stage.

Institutional support for Aboriginal students and applicants was also mentioned as an important practice.

"We have a very strong Aboriginal Admission Policy which does complement the Mature Admission Policy well. All Aboriginal applicants (Mature or otherwise) are looked at on a case by case basis by the admissions office, faculty and often Aboriginal office as well. Aboriginal applicants are well supported through faculties and Aboriginal offices once they are at our Institution, and through the recruitment and admissions offices as a prospect... Aboriginal students are given priority registration for their year level as new to the University students. This is helpful if student has a family and will have greater options of timing for classes. Flexibility given to late applications and document deadlines." (Research-Intensive University respondent)



### 3.2. Additional mature student subcategories

Some mature students may have family responsibilities including dependents or other family members. They may be in full or part time employment. They may have extensive commitments complicating their academic scheduling, their completion of academic deadlines, and their integration into the academic environment. They may be immigrants, or English as a second language mature students, facing issues related to English language proficiency. They may face significant financial challenges forcing them to withdraw temporarily.

Many mature students are markedly different from the ‘traditional’ post-secondary student (e.g. in terms of age, length of time out of formal education, or previous academic background). However, mature student subcategories may also vary markedly requiring appropriate policies and practices to support their success.

The identification of mature student subcategories may be useful for preliminary discussion purposes. A limited literature review identified additional mature student subcategories, such as the following:

- a) Mature students with dependents,
- b) Employed mature students,
- c) Mature students with financial issues,
- d) Immigrant mature students, and English as a second language mature students, and
- e) Mature student applicants with career and/or life experience.

This “typology” of mature students could assist in developing policies and practices at the system and institutional levels to support mature student success during the admission process and enrollment stages. This would be developed in consultation with appropriate groups and institutions.

The survey responses support McQuarrie’s (2013) review of research literature which found that mature students possess diverse characteristics. Survey comments also follow van Rhijn and Poser’s (2013) suggestions that institutions should focus on the social integration of mature students into the post-secondary environment.

“Support groups or some similar entity to bring together mature students so they can support each other and build community would be helpful.” (Public College respondent)

“Important to help students feel a part of the campus - getting them involved. Their needs are often very personal and they need to be able to speak with someone.” (Private University respondent)

Mature student applicants with previous education, career and/ or life experience may have issues regarding recognition of their previous experience by post-secondary institutions.

“Prior Learning does not get enough attention in our province. Appreciating and valuing students experiences is a starting place. Not all prior experiences lead to a course challenge but when a student sees themselves as a valued member of

the college and each class, everyone benefits. We want to hear students' stories and their goals.” (Public College respondent)

“... Also, transfer options are quite limited. Many of our incoming students have a broad academic background that includes courses and/or complete programs from... other institutions. However, they cannot be admitted based on their performance in these programs. An example is potential adult students who are working as professional accountants, but completed their training and professional designations through institutions and programs that are not transferable to our institution.” (Research-Intensive University respondent)

The study of each discrete mature student subcategory will be an important step to understanding their characteristics, circumstances, and needs. Sharing of ‘best practices’ in addressing the needs of each specific subcategory of mature students would augment further development of institutional mature student policies and practices.

## 4. Indicators of Mature Student Preparedness Beyond High School Grades

The on-line survey resulted in the total of 43 responses from 23 institutions. The analysis of the survey responses and the mature students’ characteristics was conducted in consideration of a limited literature search regarding mature student success in Canada. Figure 1 summarizes the ranking of indicators of preparedness in admissions decision-making.

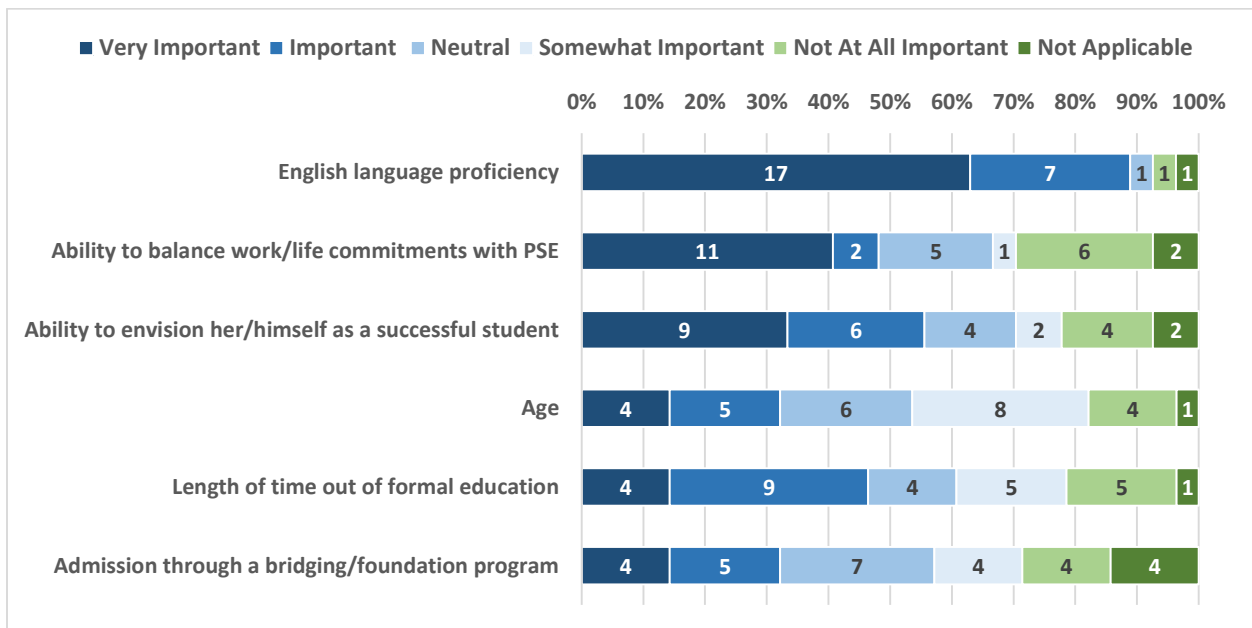


Figure 1. Importance of Mature Applicants' Characteristics on Admissions Decisions

### 4.1. English language proficiency

This study focuses on identifying indicators of mature student preparedness that are not related to high school grades. The English language proficiency factor may be evaluated through high school grades or other English language assessments. English language proficiency emerged as a key finding in this study. For purposes of this study, English language proficiency is treated as a fundamental core skill which is crucial in preparing students for post-secondary success.

English language proficiency is used in admissions decision making by most BC institutions, either as a specific or general mature student entrance requirement (McQuarrie, 2013). Eighty-nine percent (24 out of 27 responses) of the survey respondents rated this factor as ‘very important’ or ‘important’.

English language proficiency has been widely acknowledged as a critical post-secondary student success factor “intended to confirm that students have sufficient preparation to succeed in their studies” (Cooke, 2011, p.2). It is often discussed throughout the BC post-secondary

system. A common concern is that some enrolled students may not possess the English language skills to succeed despite having met the English language admission requirements. The reliance upon English language admission requirements and the appropriate use of English language proficiency assessments have been debated.

“... An example of narrow admissions policies is related to demonstration of English language competency. Many students who come to our Institution completed secondary studies (or partial or complete post-secondary studies) in a non-English speaking country, but have been living and working in English in Canada for years and are fluent speakers and writers. They are required to write the TOEFL when another kind of assessment would be more appropriate. In summary, admissions and transfer policies need to be much broader for mature students.” (Research-Intensive University respondent)

Cook (2011) also demonstrated that the variety of English language proficiency assessments may confuse prospective mature students and applicants, perhaps influencing their PSE participation.

The following questions arise in considering a possible correlation between ‘a mature student applicant’s English language proficiency ‘and mature student success.

- Are potential mature student applicants confused by the many variations of English language proficiency assessments in BC?
- What are the success rates of mature students admitted through various English language proficiency?

The result of this study reinforces the conclusions and recommendations in previous BCCAT research (Cooke, 2011) that addresses BC English language proficiency. It is suggested that renewed efforts are made to advance the research on implication of English language requirements.

#### **4.2. Ability to balance work/life commitments with PSE requirements**

Mature students may have extensive non-academic responsibilities such as children and/or other family members. They may have extensive employment obligations due to established career goals. They may face significant personal financial challenges.

A mature student’s ability to balance work/life commitments with post-secondary education requirements was rated as ‘very important or ‘important’ by 48% of survey respondents (13 out of 27 respondents). The survey results are consistent with the results of McQuarrie’s (2013) literature review and recent Ontario results (van Rhijn et al., 2013), indicating that the multiple commitments may require matures students to enrol part-time, or withdraw from their studies.

The ability to balance work/ life commitments was, however, typically not regarded as a decisive factor in admission decisions – at least at the institutional level – although they may be a focus of advising and support services:

“As long as a mature student meets the academic entrance and language requirements we welcome them to our Institution. As part of the Admissions process we don't touch on their ability to balance their other commitments alongside their studies; this would be something the advising or program area would touch base on.” (Teaching University respondent)

Institutional policies, structures and practices may or may not support mature applicants and/or students with these work/life/education balance challenges. Forty-six percent of respondents (11 out of 24 respondents) indicated that their institutions or programs do not have any dedicated practices in place to support mature student success.

The following questions arise in considering a possible correlation between a mature student's ability to balance work/ life commitments with post-secondary education requirements:

-How do BC institutional and system policies, structures, and practices support applicants to prepare for their work/ life/ education balance challenges as enrolled mature students?

-What are the success rates of BC mature students facing work/ life/ education balance issues?

The survey ratings, respondent comments and a limited research literature warrant further research into the work/life/education balance factor. Institutions may find that enhanced efforts to support mature students facing the challenge of balancing commitments holds considerable benefit for these students.

### **4.3. Ability to envision her/ himself, during the admissions phase, as a successful future student**

Is it reasonable to expect that mature student applicants are confident in their abilities to succeed academically if they have fulfilled all institutional and program admission requirements? Some literature sources claim that this is not so. Stechyson (2010) highlighted a typical mature student confidence concern of doubting their abilities to keep up with the studies. The low self-confidence may lead to high stress levels (Saunders & Bauer, 1998, cited in Coniglio et al., 2005).

Over a half (56%) of the survey respondents rated the mature student applicant's self-confidence as 'very important' or 'important'. Further, there is recognition that mature students may have tools for dealing with challenges that younger students may have yet to develop.

“...(our mature students) have the benefit of the maturity and confidence of their years. And, if they struggled initially in post-secondary studies (e.g. lack of attention to their studies, health issues, extenuating circumstances) they are now aware of what contributed to their lack of success, have overcome those challenges, and now know what they need to do to succeed.” (Research-Intensive University respondent)

Connecting the mature student with the institution can create potential positive influences on self-confidence.

“Relationship building is key. ...With at least one person at the college making phone contact in the first semester with the student ... to reassure, and to answer questions. Since we are an online program with teleconferencing in only some courses, anecdotally, students have told me that instructors who phone them before class starts to start building a relationship, and who call mid-term or if they seem to be getting off track, make an impact in their success and confidence.” (Public College respondent)

The following questions arise in considering the correlation between a mature student applicant's self-confidence and mature student success.

-What is the impact of a mature student applicant’s degree of self-confidence during the admissions stage and while enrolled?

-What can institutions do to increase the self-confidence of mature students beginning at the admissions stage and continuing at the enrollment stage?

In light of the strong positive survey ratings, respondent comments and research literature related to this factor, further research of this factor is warranted. Given the importance of the factor, PSE institutions should continue to foster, or initiate, relationships with mature student applicants and students to address self-confidence concerns.

#### **4.4. Age**

A mature student’s age is often used in many institutions as a primary criterion in designating an individual as a mature student applicant. Earlier BCCAT research has found, however, that member institutions’ age requirements for mature student admission typically begin at a much younger minimum age than may be expected<sup>1</sup>. (McQuarrie, 2013).

Although the mature student’s age factor was identified for investigation in the survey, it received limited support (32%) as a ‘very important’ or ‘important’ factor. The following comment from a public college survey respondent may typify the opinions of other respondents who rated this factor as neutral, somewhat important, or not at all important;

“Age is only important so much as the student's ability to perform the work.”

Many mature students are appreciably older than their ‘traditional’ post-secondary student counterparts who enrolled directly from high school. Mature students also are very likely to bring a wider variety and depth of life experiences to their post-secondary education. The longer the length of time out of formal education, the more likely the mature student applicant has increased responsibilities such as children, and other commitments such as employment.

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<sup>1</sup> Most BC Transfer System institutions with mature student policies applied those policies to applicants as young as 16 to 25 years.

Consequently the age of a mature student may implicitly influence other related factors. These factors may include length of time out of formal education, self-confidence, and the ability to balance work/life responsibilities with education commitments.

#### **4.5. The length of time out of formal education**

Some BCCAT member institutions use an applicant's length of time out of formal education as a criterion to qualify an individual as a mature student applicant (McQuarrie, 2013). Typically this would include individuals who have been out of secondary or post-secondary education for a minimum of 2 or more years.

Looker and Lowe (2001) demonstrated that the time out of formal education may be a prime determinant in attending and succeeding in post-secondary education. Older students returning after time away from education saw reductions in attendance and completion. Extended absences from formal education may also influence the mature student's self-confidence, their beliefs in their study abilities, and their ability to integrate into the academic environment (van Rhijn & Poser, 2013).

Survey respondents rated the importance of a mature student applicant's length of time out of formal education in admissions decisions. Forty six per cent (46%) of respondents rated this as 'very important' or 'important'. It seems intuitive that the longer a student is absent from formal education, the more likely the student's academic competencies and skills may require updating.

"I think there is a difference between a student who is only 2 years post high school graduation versus 10 years, and finding a way to differentiate types of mature students would be helpful in the research." (Teaching University respondent)

The following questions arise in considering a possible correlation between length of time out of formal education and mature student success as an applicant and as an enrolled student;

- What is the extent to which length of time out of formal education is used as a factor in mature student decision making?
- Is there a direct correlation between length of time out of formal education and mature student success?
- Are enrolled mature students with recent formal education more successful than mature students who have been out of formal education for a substantial period?
- How do variations in length of time out of formal education influence mature student issues such as self-confidence, integration into the academic environment, and adequacy of academic knowledge and skills?

The length of time out of formal education factor appears to be a noteworthy criterion used in mature student admissions decisions. The survey ratings, respondent comments and a limited research literature warrant further investigation into this factor to determine if and how it affects mature student access and success.

#### **4.6. Admission of a mature student through a bridging/foundation program**

The academic knowledge and competencies of some mature student applicants may require upgrading in order to qualify for post-secondary admission. Their study skills and habits may also require improvement. Many institutions offer bridging/foundation programs to enable mature students to fulfill their academic entrance requirements and to improve their academic skills and practices. For example, Thompson Rivers University's Department of University and Employment Preparation offers opportunities to complete pre-requisites, to complete adult basic education diplomas and various bridging and entry-level courses (biology, business, chemistry, computing, English, math, psychology, physics, science, social science...) that accommodate adult learners (Thompson Rivers University, 2016).

Completion of a bridging/foundation program may also assist in preparing the applicant by raising their self-confidence and post-secondary socialization, and self-identification as student (Lovell, 1980, cited in McQuarrie, 2013). On the other hand, the success of mature students through bridging/ foundation program may be affected by non-academic factors (e.g., family or employment) (McQuarrie, 2013). Mature students completion rates may be lower than rates for students admitted through traditional admissions means.

Only thirty-two per cent (32%) of respondents rated the admission of a mature student through a bridging/foundation program as 'very important' or 'important'.

The following questions arise in considering a the admission of a mature student through a bridging/foundation program;

- What are the success rates of mature students admitted through bridging/foundation programs in BC?
- How do these success rates compare to the success rates of other mature students who have not been admitted through a bridging/foundation program?
- Are there lessons to be learned from bridging/foundation programs that could improve the success of other mature students admitted without completion of a bridging/foundation program?

Institutions possess finite research capacities and prioritization of research issues is very important. The survey ratings and respondent comments are inconclusive and the value of further research into this factor is unclear.

#### **4.7. The 'match' or 'suitability' of the mature student applicant to the Institution/ Faculty/ Program**

The match or suitability of applicants to the institution/ faculty/ program is considered by many institutions. Almost half of the respondents (44%; 12 out of 27 respondents) considered the match/ suitability as part of the admissions decision-making. This consideration goes beyond having met the required academic pre-requisites for admission. However, when match or



suitability is used in admissions decisions, 92% of respondents indicated that the “match’ or “suitability” was ‘very important’ or ‘important’.

Use of the match or suitability factor in admissions decisions may assist the applicant and the institution/ faculty/ program. The applicant may be assisted by receiving pre-enrolment program information, by ensuring an alignment of their career goals with the program outcomes, and by receiving ‘work/ life/ post-secondary education balance’ advice. These practices also likely increase the applicant’s self-confidence during the admission stage.

The match or suitability factor may assist the institution/ faculty/ program to admit the candidates most suited in terms of commitment, motivation, career aspirations and aptitudes. The institution/ faculty/ program may also advise applicants about program design and demands, and provide information about graduate and career outcomes. This theoretically leads to improved student retention and to improved outcomes such as employer satisfaction with graduates. However, this factor may be more applicable for focused programs (e.g., career-oriented programs), and less so for general education programs.

Use of the match or suitability factor may involve evaluation of subjective information such as portfolios, questionnaires, essays, letters of intent, references, and personal interviews.

“The programs are very focused and career-centric. An intensive interview process is designed to determine a student's fit with the types of programs offered at the Institution. Student match is incredibly important as the expectations and delivery of the programs are based on these criteria and there are few opportunities to pursue a different direction once the program begins.” (Private Career College respondent)

“Our mature applicants are asked to submit a letter of intent with their application for admission. More than the letters of reference and resumes that are also requested, I feel like an applicant's letter of intent is key as it can offer insight into the applicant's preparedness and likelihood of success. Applicants who have a clear goal in a particular area of study and have done their research about the appropriate degree program come across as being much more prepared and engaged in their future studies. An applicant who takes the time to put together a thoughtful letter is more likely to be admitted, and I expect, more likely to succeed as well.” (Research University respondent)

The following questions arise in considering a possible correlation between match or suitability of the mature student applicant to the institution/faculty/program and mature student success.

- What are the success rates of mature students when match or suitability is considered as part of the admissions process?
- How does this success rate compare to mature student admissions decisions in which match or suitability is not considered?
- Are there lessons to be learned for other admissions decision making in which match or suitability is not considered?

- How do institutions and programs ensure that applicants are considered consistently and fairly in evaluating subjective information in match or suitability admissions decisions?

The survey ratings and respondent comments indicate that the match or suitability factor is 'very important' or 'important' when it is used in admissions decisions. The survey ratings and respondent comments warrant further research of this indicator.

## 5. Institutional Research on Mature Student Success

A desire to obtain useful admission-related research results has been a long standing Canadian theme. Writing about changes to admission policies and practices in Canadian universities which facilitated non-traditional student enrolment, Darling (1985) reported that no reliable information was available on the numbers of admitted students, their academic performance or evaluation of mature student policies. Challenges confronting mature students were also investigated in recent Ontario studies (van Rhijn and Poser, 2013; van Rhijn et al., 2015).

The current project also indicates that there appears to be very limited institutional research on mature students in BC. Eighty percent (20 out of 25 respondents) of survey respondents indicated that they were not aware of such research conducted at their institution, although respondents perceived benefits of such research.

Of the five cases where some institutional studies were carried out, one assessment was internal, and another report was inconclusive and could not be used for policy or decision-making. One more informal study developed student profiles for advising students applying to specific programs. The remaining two studies highlighted previous academic experience of mature applicants/ students, and their maturity and confidence as good predictors of post-secondary success.

“Our research has shown that mature students with prior academic training generally perform better than mature students who have not had such experiences. Success rates tend to increase based on the recency of such experiences. Prospective mature students are required to take a standardized test to determine their "ability to benefit" from the education offered by the Institution. Our data shows a positive correlation between higher scores on this test and subsequent success within the academic program.”  
(Private College respondent)

The following questions arise in considering the value of research attempting to correlate mature student applicants' characteristics to their subsequent success or lack of success.

- Is such research feasible?
- Would this research lead to useful outcomes?
- Would inter-institutional comparisons prove useful?

- Is it possible to create a future research framework which would enable inter-institutional comparisons?
- Would comparisons between different types of programs prove useful? For example, those that use or do not use match or suitability.
- Is it practical to assume that these research findings would improve or lead to new evidence-based mature student admission policies and practices in BC?
- What would result from the investigation of policies and practices which create institutional and system barriers to mature student applicants?
- The admissions stage is a part of an interdependent enrolment process. Should research also investigate the mature student as a prospective student and applicant, and as an enrolled mature student?

Mature student admissions policies and practices should be developed and implemented on the basis of evidence. Otherwise policies and practices, while well intentioned, may fail to address key issues. The limited extent of research performed to date and the respondent comments underscore the importance of additional research. This research needs to investigate mature student subcategories as these applicant subcategories may require unique mature student admission policies and practices. Institutional research should also consider investigating policies and practices which create institutional and system barriers for mature students (prospects, applicants and enrolled).

Potential next steps in institutional research could include:

1. Discussing this study's findings with those survey respondents who have indicated an interest in further information and/or discussions.
2. Encouraging those BCCAT institutional members with existing institutional research on mature students to share their research and the resulting changes to policies and practices. Cross-institutional comparisons of mature student success rates may lead to improved mature student admission policies and practices.
3. Creating opportunities for 'cross disciplinary', evidence based reviews of mature student admissions and enrolled student policies and practices. These discussions could include advisors, admissions staff, faculty/instructors, and student services personnel involved in the development and implementation of mature student policies and practices. The participation of mature students is also encouraged.
4. Investigating current policies and practices which create institutional and system barriers for mature students (prospects, applicants and enrolled).

Given the increasing trend in mature students' post-secondary participation, revisiting institutional research on mature students appears an opportunity that can inform policies and practices.

## 6. Successful Practices in Creating Opportunities for Access and Existing Practices in Assessing Mature Applicants for Admission

The study's interviews, survey and the limited literature review provide a perspective of mature student access to post-secondary education and the practices utilised in assessing their application for admission.

### 6.1. Access

The existence of institutional mature student policies provides access for many adult learners who would be disadvantaged in PSE otherwise. However, there can be confusion and challenges caused by the variation of institutional policies and practices among institutions, if a mature student applicant is applying to multiple institutions. Issues of equity in assessment of mature student applicants stem from the use of different admissions criteria and inconsistencies between eligibility, and admissions requirements and assessments (OUSA, 2012). Researchers reinforce the concept that inconsistent Ontario admissions policies and practices create problems for mature students (van Rhijn et al., 2015).

McQuarrie (2013) also reports a wide range of mature student admission eligibility and admissions policies among BCCAT's member institutions. A specific example of variation is demonstrated in the BCCAT English language proficiency requirements study (Cooke, 2011). Such variation may confuse potential and actual mature student applicants. Institutions also need to adapt their admissions policies to enable mature applicant access, which may have a progression different the pathway of students coming directly from high school.

“Policies and processes tend to be 18-to-22 year old centric. Mature students are required to submit transcripts that are often many years old and do not indicate current capabilities. Admissions processes need to be revised to take these factors into account.” (Research University respondent)

### 6.2. Practices

Effective existing or potential mature student admission assessment practices include the following examples:

- a. Recognition of life experiences through Prior Learning Assessment;
- b. Use of the 'match or suitability' of the mature student applicant to the institution/faculty/program;
- c. Flexible and customized practices for Aboriginal applicants;
- d. Bridging foundation programs and transfer arrangements between institutions;
- e. Use of alternative means of entrance requirement assessment in place of high school grades;
- f. Institutional and faculty/program information sessions to educate and inform prospective mature students about admission;

- g. 'Early' orientation sessions offered after the applicant has been accepted, and before beginning studies, to provide the accepted student with information about the program and about important support services such as financial aid, etc.;
- h. Scheduling of classes and services to accommodate working and adult students unable to use the services during regular business time;
- i. Creating opportunities for mature students to communicate with peers and advisors, and to participate in social life on campus.

Use of these practices may vary between institutions. Some institutions may have experience which could assist other institutions striving to assist mature students. While reducing all variations in mature student admissions policies is not feasible given the diversity of BC post-secondary institutions, maintaining and sharing an inventory of mature student admissions assessment practices could be helpful for BC post-secondary institutions.

## 7. Conclusions

Mature student participation and success in post-secondary education is increasingly viewed as important for the learner and for the Canadian society. Mature students (prospects, applicants and enrollees) require appropriate admissions policies and practices to address their characteristics and circumstances. While mature students differ from traditional students in many ways, differences may also exist between various mature student subcategories, such as Aboriginal mature students, or mature student applicants with dependents, and with career and/or life experience. These subcategories may require different approaches in admissions decision-making, which could be developed in consultation with appropriate stakeholders.

The study outcomes indicate that the match or suitability of an applicant to the post-secondary institution plays a major role in admissions decisions. The results of this study also reinforce the conclusions and recommendations of prior BCCAT research (Cooke, 2011) addressing BC English language proficiency. This outcome suggests making renewed efforts to advance research in the area of applicants' and students' English language proficiency.

The length of time out of formal education, the mature student self-confidence and the ability to balance work/ life commitments appear to be noteworthy criteria used in mature students' admissions decisions. The survey ratings, respondent comments and a limited research literature warrant further investigation into these factors to determine their influence on mature student applicants' success. On the other hand, applicant's age is a factor that cannot be considered without links to other factors in admissions decision-making.

Building upon the limited institutional research performed to date, new institutional research could further explore mature student preparedness indicators, as well as policies and practices which create institutional and system barriers for mature students (prospects, applicants and enrollees). Post-secondary institutions are encouraged to share best practices (e.g., in assisting mature applicants and students facing the life/ work balance challenge or self-confidence

concerns) and to develop research and action plans with the aim of improving mature student access and participation in BC's post-secondary system. It is also important that mature student participants or their representatives bring their perspectives to these discussions.

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# Appendix A. Questions Used in the Interviews

## Interviews with Associate Registrars – Admissions Officers/ Program Assessors

### Project Purpose

The purpose of this project is to identify student success indicators in the assessment of mature students for admission to post-secondary programs.

### Project Objectives

The objectives of this project are:

- a) to review existing practices in assessing mature applicants for admission;
- b) to identify indicators of mature (non-traditional) student preparedness that are not related to high school grades;
- c) to identify subcategories of mature students that may require different means of assessment;
- d) to identify successful practices in creating opportunities for access; and
- e) to identify areas for future research and, if appropriate, the development of suggested practices.

### Hypothetical Mature Student Applicant Characteristics

Osborne, Marks and Turner (2004) identified six types of mature students and the factors that positively influenced each type's decision to undertake post-secondary study and reasons for pursuing further education.

#### 1. Mature student types

1. Delayed Traditional: interest in subject, need credential, want stability;
2. Late Starters: cathartic experience as stimulus, current opportunity, self-belief, altruism;
3. Single Parents: need job to support family, want to be role model, enjoy learning;
4. Careerists: improved career prospects, self-respect, interest in studying, employer support;
5. Escapees: new career, better opportunities, better pay, change in direction; and
6. Personal Growers: interest in subject, available opportunity, want to prove own capability to themselves.

These may provide insights regarding mature student motivations for post-secondary studies and preparedness of these applicants.

Do you have any comment on these categories re mature student motivations?

Do you have any comment on the preparedness of these categories?

## **2. Gender**

Research has shown that "... female mature students are more likely to get passing grades than male mature students (Osborne, Leopold & Ferrie, 1997)."

Do you think that gender is related to student success?

## **3. Age**

Do you think that a mature student applicant's age is important as it affects student success? Should there be a minimum/maximum eligibility age requirement?

## **4. Canadian citizenship/ residency status**

- a) citizen;
- b) permanent resident;
- c) immigrant;
- d) international student; and
- e) out of province.

Do you think that a mature student's citizenship status is important in affecting student success?

## **5. Socioeconomic (underrepresented/ disadvantaged societal group)**

Do you think that a mature student socioeconomic status is important in affecting student success?

## **6. Balance of Work/Life: Ability to balance post-secondary education requirements with work and life commitments**

Do you think that the ability of mature student applicants to balance work/life commitments with post-secondary education requirements is important in affecting student success? If yes, do you measure that? How?

## **7. Aboriginal applicants**

Do you think that being an aboriginal student is an important characteristics in affecting student success?

## **8. Previous academic experience**

- a. length of time out of formal education system

Do you think that the length of time out of formal education is important in affecting student success? If yes, how so?

b. stopouts

Do you think that a mature student having stopped out of post-secondary education is important in affecting student success?

c. admission through a bridging/foundation program vs other admission categories

Do you think that a bridging/foundation program is important in affecting student success?

d. admission through a bridging/foundation program leading to subsequent enrollment at same institution

Do you think that a bridging/foundation program to subsequent enrollment at the same institution is important in affecting student success?

e. admission through transfer from another post-secondary institution

Do you think that admission through transfer from another post-secondary institution is important in affecting student success?

## **9. English language proficiency**

Do you think that English language proficiency is important in affecting student success? We're assuming that admitted students have met English language requirements

## **10. Recency**

Do you think that a substantial time gap, between the fulfillment of entrance requirements and the commencement of the related post-secondary discipline or program, may result in an erosion of the applicant's knowledge and/or skills and thus affect subsequent student success?

## **11. Identity as student**

Do you think that a mature student applicant's ability to identify as a student, and their confidence in their ability to succeed, impacts mature student success?

## **12. Geographic location at time of application**

Do you think that the geographic location of a mature student, at the time of application for admission, affects their student success?

## **13. Program match**

Do you consider the degree of a 'match' or 'fit' during the admission process, and does it affect mature student success?

**14. How do you verify the skills and competencies of mature student applicants?**

- a. Resume,
- b. References,
- c. Specialised evaluation/assessment (e.g. interview)
- d. Work experience
- e. Personal statement
- f. Transcripts
- g. Prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR)
- h. Completion of a Bridging or Foundations program

Identified by the researcher. The researcher has observed that in some institutions the admissions decision maker may be a faculty member/instructor, or a program/faculty staff member. Does this affect the admissions decision making process i.e. do faculties/programs make more admissions decisions based wholly/partly on subjective reviews of applicant characteristics/factors than do admissions staff?

**15. Do you have successful practices in creating opportunities for mature student success?**

## Appendix B. Survey Instrument.

### BCCAT Mature Student Admissions Study

Thank you for your interest in sharing your experiences in mature student admissions at your institution. We greatly appreciate your assistance with this project. BCCAT has identified that mature students are defined differently at different post-secondary institutions, but little is known about mature students' success. The purpose of this research is to investigate success indicators that are key in the admissions decision-making for mature students. This 10-15 minute survey enables you to provide your perspectives on admissions decision-making for mature students at your institution. For purposes of this survey, a mature student is defined according to your Institution's mature student admission policy. The survey is answered by clicking on radio buttons and short answer text box responses. You can back up and change your answers on the previous page by using the "Back" button on the screen. Please do not use the "Back" button in your browser. Your participation is completely voluntary and your responses will be kept confidential. No personally identifiable information will be associated with your responses. The identity of institutions will also be protected. You may skip questions or exit the survey at any time. Please complete the survey only once before August 14, 2015. Results of this study will be published in aggregate format by BCCAT on the website [www.bccat.ca](http://www.bccat.ca). If you have any questions about this survey or this research project please contact Anna Tikina ([atikina@bccat.ca](mailto:atikina@bccat.ca); 604-412-7680). By clicking on "Next" at the bottom of the page, you consent to participate in the survey.

#### 1. Your Post-Secondary Institution

#### 2. Your involvement in mature student admissions decision-making

- Admissions Officer
- Program/Faculty representative
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### Factors Affecting Mature Students' Success

3. From your admissions experience, how important are the following factors in admissions decisions for mature students?

	Not at all Important	Somewhat Important	Neutral	Important	Very Important	N/A
A mature student applicant's age	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A mature student applicant's length of time out of formal education	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Admission of a mature student through a bridging/foundation program	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A mature student applicant's English language proficiency	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A mature student's ability to balance work/life commitments (family, employment, etc.) with post secondary education requirements	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A mature student applicant's ability to envision her/himself, during the admissions phase, as a successful future student	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

4. Please provide additional details/ comments on the above factors affecting mature students' success

**"Match for Institution" in Admissions Decision-Making**

**5. Apart from academic entrance requirements, is the "match" or "suitability" of the mature student applicant to your Institution and/or Faculty and/or Program considered as part of the admissions decision making process?**

- Yes
- No

**6. How important is the "match" or "suitability" as a factor affecting admissions decisions for mature students?**

- Very Important
- Important
- Neutral
- Somewhat Important
- Not at all Important
- N/A

**7. Please provide additional details/ comments about the "match for Institution" approach in admitting mature students' and their success.**

### **Institutional Research on Mature Students Success**

**8. Has your Institution/Faculty/Program researched the correlation of mature student applicants' characteristics, skills and academic competencies, to their subsequent success or lack of success as mature students?**

- Yes
- No

**9. If you answered 'Yes', please briefly describe the research and conclusions on mature students success at your institution.**

**10. If you answered "Yes", who is the best person to contact for more information about this research?**



**Practices to Support Mature Student Success**

**11. Does your Institution/Faculty/Program have any practices in place to support mature student success?**

- Yes
- No

**12. If you answered 'Yes', please describe practices utilised by your Institution/ Faculty/ Program to specifically support mature student success.**

**13. Please suggest any potential/ desirable practices to support mature student success.**

**14. The successful participation of Aboriginal students in post-secondary education is an important goal. Some mature students are Aboriginal. Please provide your insights and comments regarding admissions processes and practices which would lead to increased numbers of mature Aboriginal students successfully applying to your Institution.**

**15. We have asked for your opinions regarding the importance of pre-selected mature student applicants' characteristics, and admissions indicators and processes. Please suggest any other mature student applicants' characteristics, skills and academic competencies, and/or admissions processes/ practices, that you feel are important in promoting mature student success.**

If you wish to learn more about the study, or further discuss mature student success, please leave your contact information. Your contact information will be kept strictly confidential.

**Your Name and Title**

**Your Phone Number**

**Your Email address**