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Returning to Study in Higher Education in Ghana: experiences of mature undergraduate women

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ABSTRACT This study was based on the assumption that in Ghana, women who return late to higher education combine domestic and academic work and, in the process, experience tensions and difficulties in the face of cultural and academic prejudice. It employed an interpretive qualitative research approach via narrative interviews with eight mature undergraduate women from different socio-economic backgrounds in one public university. The intention was to explore their experiences and use the findings to make suggestions for institutional development and learning. The data was collected in May 2009 from a sample of first- and final-year women from the Departments of Sociology and Basic Education in one of the oldest public universities in the southern part of Ghana. The women students found academic work difficult and made reference to gaps in terms of their knowledge deficit, unfamiliar courses and teaching methods. Recommendations from the study include the formulation of an institutional policy on mature women students in particular, and non-traditional students in higher education generally, and the regular provision of professional development programmes for higher education practitioners.

Introduction

The important role higher education (HE) plays in the economic and social development of nations and individuals is well articulated in both international and national policy documents. The UNESCO (1998, 2009) reports on the World Conference on Higher Education, for example, attest to HE's viability and capacity to change and to induce change and progress in society, especially for the development of the African continent. The 2009 UNESCO report further adds that the public good of HE contributes to the eradication of poverty and sustainable national development. This point is further highlighted in a recent World Bank (2009) document, which stipulates that investment in human capital through quality-assured growth in HE is crucial for accelerating economic growth and reducing all forms of national and individual poverty, illiteracy and social inequality.

Research also suggests that participation in HE produces returns to the state from tax revenues generated by individuals' higher productivity, thus contributing to wealth creation, the development of civil society, democratisation, social security and peace (World Bank, 2002; Okolie, 2003; Hannum & Buchmann, 2004). Singh (2001) refers to this as the private and public good of HE: the knowledge and skills obtained in HE result in both the transformation of national economies and private returns to the individual through higher earnings, and improved individual social and economic status. These perceived benefits have led to an increasing social demand for HE, as well as to a diversity and heterogeneity in the composition of HE participants in both high- and low-income countries (Middlehurst, 2001; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

Unfortunately, the benefits that accrue from HE participation are not enjoyed by all. According to authors such as Assie-Lumumba (2000), Hannum & Buchmann (2004), Dei (2005) and

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Morley (2005), exclusivity in HE varies in respect of ethnic minority groups, the physically challenged, mature students (that is, those aged over 25 years), those possessing non-standard entry qualifications and women, among others. For them, this depends on the geographical, economic and cultural contexts. In the case of women, global statistics indicate that rates of HE participation are now slightly higher than for men. This is indicated by a Gender Parity Index of 1.08 in favour of women (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009). In North America and Europe, the UNESCO report further indicates that the female participation ratio is one-third higher than that for men, and in Latin America, the Caribbean and Central Asia, as well as the Arab States, females outnumber men or are equal with them. The situation is, however, not the same in sub-Saharan Africa, where the report points out that in 2007, there were 66 female students for every 100 males, or 1.5 times more males than females in HE. This is the lowest such ratio anywhere in the world (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009).

The reasons for women's under-representation and lack of meaningful participation in HE in Africa include cultural and political obstacles (UNESCO, 2009, p. 6), as well as negative experiences in HE which impede their successful completion (Morley & Lussier, 2009). The implication is that beyond simply gaining access to HE, women's meaningful participation and qualitative experiences are not given due attention (Morley & Lugg, 2009; Morley et al, 2010).

Women and Girls' Education in Ghana

In Ghana, women's participation in HE has recorded some noteworthy increases. From as low as 3630 in 1993 (Ghana Statistical Service, 2001), women's participation increased to 29,059 in the 2005/2006 academic year (National Council for Tertiary Education, 2006), compared with 11,302 and 54,729 men in the same years, respectively. Even though the national policy target is set at 50% for all categories of women, the most current figures from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics show that only 35% of women are enrolled in public universities and 41% in private universities (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2009).

Many obstacles impede Ghanaian women and girls' access to HE, including sociocultural and economic factors. Men and women are socialised to conform to socially constructed and 'appropriate' gender roles and cultural norms, resulting in the creation of gender gaps that disadvantage women, particularly in the education sector (Hannum & Buchmann, 2004; Bortey & Dodoo, cited in Boohene, 2005). For example, it is generally held that every woman 'grows up knowing that it is the woman who cooks the meals and generally sees to it that the house is clean and well-kept' (Dolphyne, 1991, p. 5), a role which does not require formal education to perform. Men, on the other hand, are supposed to be heads of households and breadwinners, and are assumed to provide for all household members, including their wives. Boohene et al (2005) write that many traditional households believe that men are the ones who need higher incomes and therefore access to HE, to enable them to discharge these responsibilities.

Although the Ghanaian education system is structured to serve girls and boys equally, girls' education is hindered by certain cultural beliefs and practices, such as the expectation that they will help with household chores and family businesses, as well as be given away in early marriages (Stephens, 2000; Pryor & Ampiah, 2003; Akyeampong et al, 2007). Sometimes, there is the fear that a girl's marriage prospects will diminish if she obtains an HE equal to men or of a higher level than men. Even when they are enrolled, research indicates that girls in many ways experience schooling differently from boys. Dunne & Leach (2005) found that, in general, teachers had greater expectations for boys and thus gave them more attention and intellectual challenges than they did girls.

Secondly, research shows that the socio-economic status (SES) of families influences the type and level of education females receive. For example, Stephens (2000) points out that in rural areas in Ghana, poverty determines who receives education in the family, with preference being given to boys rather than girls. The strong implication is that females from rural areas may not access HE as easily as their urban counterparts. Morley et al (2009) also found that Ghanaian females from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds tended to attend elite secondary schools, normally in urban areas, and had easier access to HE, while poor, rural and older females were either under-represented or absent from HE institutions. This situation partly explains why females (or males,

for that matter) who might have missed the opportunity to access HE earlier, and are still interested, do so for the first time later in their lives as adult or mature learners.

The Mature Student Route to Higher Education in Ghana

In Ghanaian HE institutions, the term 'mature student' is used to refer to students who have no experience of HE and enter into undergraduate programmes later in life, unlike their counterparts who enter HE directly after full-time schooling. Mature students are those who are admitted into undergraduate programmes at the age of 25 and above. Their entry requirements are normally varied and differ from those of school-leavers, with some having accrued significant life experiences either in the labour market or a domestic setting.

The mature student route to HE in Ghana is one widening participation strategy which provides the opportunity for adult students to access HE through the full-time, campus-based model. In Ghana, all five public universities offer this opportunity. This study focuses on mature women in one of the oldest public universities in the southern part of Ghana, the first university to officially admit mature women students. At its inception in 1974, two groups of students were admitted into two academic programmes: the Bachelor of Arts (Education), with 90 students (84 men and 6 women), and the Bachelor of Education, with 53 students (45 men and 8 women), making a total of 129 men and 14 women. At present, the mature student route still records a lower enrolment rate for women, in spite of the government's policy framework that targets a 50-50 enrolment ratio for males and females to ensure gender parity in HE (National Council for Tertiary Education, 2006). The likely explanation is that few women access HE through this route and/or that the policy works only at the level of direct entry to HE and not the mature student route.

As hinted at earlier, there is evidence that certain sociocultural and socio-economic factors impede females' participation in education – not only in HE, but at all levels of education – making some drop out along the way, even at the HE level. In the HE institution under study, mature women's participation is decreasing, especially in the Faculty of Education's Primary Education Department, where they are normally clustered. Table I shows the enrolment trend since the 2005-2006 academic year.

Year	Group	Male	Female
2005-2006	Total	247	83
	Primary Education Department	68	33
2006-2007	Total	309	98
	Primary Education Department	73	39
2007-2008	Total	249	76
	Primary Education Department	71	26
2008-2009	Total	158	54
	Primary Education Department	18	6
2009-2010	Total	215	64
	Primary Education Department	21	8

Table I. Mature students' enrolment at one public university in Ghana
(the figures are from private correspondence with a senior officer in charge of admissions).

This report was taken from a doctoral study on mature women students in Ghana which was sponsored by the research project 'Widening Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania: developing an equity scorecard' (WPHEGT), funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Department for International Development (DFID). A finding from the WPHEGT study, presented in an equity scorecard, showed that most of the mature women students were from poor backgrounds and at high risk of dropping out of HE (Morley et al, 2010). Their rate of withdrawal was also much higher than that of other students in the cohort, and the percentage achieving second-class degrees was lower than that of their cohort for five academic programmes studied, including Education. This suggests that they possibly face problems in their HE life which affect their retention and successful completion.

Given the above indicators, it was the intent of this study to explore and understand the qualitative experiences of mature women students in HE. The authors' interest in mature women

students does not in any way suggest that mature undergraduate men do not suffer some of the disadvantages of adult learning. Rather, it serves as a reflection on their personal experiences as full-time teachers and part-time distance doctoral students.

The study employed an interpretive qualitative research approach via narrative interviews with eight mature undergraduate women from advantaged, average and disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds in a public university. It was hoped that the findings would lead to appropriate and culturally specific suggestions for institutional development and learning, and also fill the gap in the domestic literature on this subject, which is currently non-existent in the Ghanaian context. The remainder of this article is divided into five sections that address the following: (1) a summary of the literature on the experiences of mature women students in HE; (2) the methodological framework, which includes the research design and procedure for data collection; (3) a presentation and discussion of the findings; (4) conclusions; and (5) recommendations.

How Mature Undergraduate Women Experience Higher Education

In both high- and low-income countries, studies have employed the constructs of age, SES (for example, Reay, 2003; Buchler et al, 2004; Mulugeta, 2004) and gender roles (Edwards, 1993; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Buchler et al, 2004), and the effect of these on mature students' HE completion (Bolam & Dodgson, 2003; Buchler et al, 2004). The discussion that follows presents some of the research evidence on this.

Mature Age and Higher Education

In discourses on HE participation, age becomes an important concept because it is normally used to define groups of learners as being 'traditional' or 'non-traditional', and thus seemingly legitimised by their age to be in HE or not possessing the full status of an HE participant. In studies on mature students, descriptions extend beyond age to include different and varied entry requirements and characteristics, such as life experiences either in the labour market or a domestic setting, being married (or not) and having a family (or not).

Some writers have indicated that traditional students are associated with youthfulness and academic brightness, while mature students are associated with old age, invisibility, marginalisation and a positioning as 'other' in social relations (Maguire, 1996; Morley & Lussier, 2009). In Maguire's (1996) study, the constant repetition of 'young and bright' by her older women participants in reference to the younger students seemed to be in binary opposition to 'old and dull'. It portrayed that the women perceived themselves as academically weaker than younger students because of the difference in their age. Sometimes, lecturers consciously or unconsciously signalled that mothers in HE were incapable of excellent academic performance because of their domestic responsibilities (Edwards, 1993). In Edwards' (1993) study, this assumption was proven wrong, as some of her mature women students performed better than some of their younger counterparts.

Wilson (1997) also found that the age gap between mature students and younger students led to feelings of isolation and being on the fringe. In addition, Richardson & King (1998) proposed that mature students may be confronted with problems related to adjusting to the traditional academic environment and may exhibit fewer skills in coping with the academic environment, in spite of their experience in meeting life's demands.

In all these examples, the characterisation of mature students appears to be full of norms, apparently because of some of their common characteristics. Older age is sometimes wrongly associated with academic dullness and formal knowledge deficit, and, thus, is constructed as incompatible with higher academic pursuits. However, evidence from some of the studies conducted in the United Kingdom demonstrates that older age means more life experiences to draw upon in HE work (Edwards, 1993; Richardson & King, 1998; Tett, 2000). This finding is endorsed by Wilson (1997) and Richardson & King (1998), who contended that older students' life experiences, such as having worked, brought up a family, learned about time management, worked under pressure and met deadlines, could serve as advantageous by making them more confident about what they expect in HE. This suggests that older students can exhibit approaches to learning

which are more desirable than those of younger students. The discussion that follows presents some research findings on the experiences of mature women students in HE with regard to SES and gender roles.

Socio-economic Status and Higher Education Participation

In both high- and low-income countries, some of the research findings on women's schooling seem to indicate that HE access and participation is for the socio-economically advantaged, who have all the time and encouragement to concentrate on their studies, and not for poor students (David et al, 2009; Morley et al, 2009, 2010). Some studies that have been conducted in African countries suggest that the SES of a family is highly correlated with school enrolment and the persistence of daughters, and that females who come from economically advantaged families are more likely to enter and remain in high school and beyond (Hyde, 1993; Stephens, 2000; Mulugeta, 2004).

In Ghana and Tanzania, for example, the WPHEGT study (Morley & Lugg, 2009; Morley et al, 2010) of under-represented groups in HE found that for the more socio-economically privileged students, their families carefully managed their entry into HE and supported them through it. For socio-economically disadvantaged students, however, financial constraints made their HE life most challenging. These findings were also reported in Adu-Yeboah & Nti's (2007) study of Ghanaian teachers' views about their chosen route to HE. The challenges are even greater in the case of rural women students (see Mulugeta's 2004 Ethiopian study), who face double constraints in the sense that they come from poor families, have to undergo all the village (farming) life and also suffer from all the inadequacies of the education system, thus making their HE studies even more difficult.

The situation is slightly different in South Africa, where most mature students study on a part-time basis. Available figures indicate that in 2003, about 90% of mature students were employed (Buchler et al, 2004), and some received additional financial support from their employers. Therefore, some students' stories of HE participation gave indications that their work status placed them in a better financial position than mature students in full-time HE and in other African contexts. In high-income countries, too, there are stories of financial difficulties among mature students/women. In a study conducted in a socio-economically excluded geographical area in the northern part of England, for example, Tett (2000) found that all the participants in her study shared similar social characteristics, such as poverty, which contributed to their lack of academic qualifications and difficulties with HE work. Her study was consistent with those of others, including Bolam & Dodgson (2003) and Leathwood & O'Connell (2003), who all indicated that poverty is the cause of non-traditional HE participants' inability to obtain academic qualifications. Similarly, in an urban area in the United Kingdom, Reay (2003) reports that the participants who were from a working-class background were caught between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money. In most cases, their HE work suffered as a result.

The findings reported above draw attention to the fact that not all mature women students in HE are from poor economic backgrounds. However, very little information was found in the literature about the situation of socio-economically advantaged mature women students. Reay (2003) reports that, in the case of such students, the financial support they receive from their families allows for the delegation of both childcare and housework to cleaners, nannies and childminders. Consequently, they do not experience the financial struggle which characterises the typical narratives of poor students.

Mature Students' Higher Education Participation and Gender Roles

In many high- and low-income countries, women have the sole responsibility for caring for children, elderly parents, and other family relations and partners (Prah, 2002; Blickenstaff, 2005). In some cases, women who embark on HE studies have to combine all these competing demands with their academic work, and this puts a strain on their student life and their relationships. In the United Kingdom, for example, Edwards (1993) and Baxter & Britton (2001) note that in these juggling roles, fragmentation or compartmentalisation of the self occurs, which results in considerable stress on family commitments and relationships. In some cases, the women

experience feelings of guilt, which also leads to the erosion of self-esteem and confidence in the realisation that they are unable to devote the same amounts of time previously given to their role of wife, partner or mother (Bolam & Dodgson, 2003; Reay, 2003).

Although some women receive support from their families and/or partners, as indicated by Baxter & Britton (2001), others report subtle and sometimes overt unpleasant changes in their spouse's attitudes to them because of their decision to engage in HE (see, for example, Edwards, 1993). Some relationships even break down. For some, support from partners is defined as not opposing their decision to enter HE, rather than facilitating their time as a student. In such cases, women have to devise strategies for managing and juggling their different responsibilities, and ensuring that their new role as a student does not impinge too much on established relationships within the family.

The picture is no different in the African context. In many African countries, including Ghana, it is believed that HE disrupts hegemonic age-related marriage and motherhood norms (Morley & Lugg, 2009). According to Boohene et al (2005), it is also commonly held in Ghana that the best time for a woman to have children is between the ages of 26 and 28. Kwapong's (2007) study of participants' experiences in a distance education programme in Ghana, for example, found that most of the participants (70%) were married. She also found that it was the women who encountered the most difficulties, with frequent trips to learning centres for tuition and combining house management with their studies and the demands of their career. The situation, according to her, affected the females' academic work since they lacked the time for personal study and for participating in group study.

Also, in Nigeria, Idogho (2011) reports that many mature students have a family, and many have children or ageing adult relatives for whom they are carers. According to him, studies have consistently found that time management (balancing academic studies and other social and family commitments) is the highest-ranked concern of mature students. In these circumstances, married women tend to have greater needs than men in the balancing act. Consequently, the limited amount of time available to them to interact with peers and other faculty members leaves them feeling isolated and disconnected. In view of the foregoing evidence about women's HE experiences in the international literature, this study sought to understand the nature and causes of the tensions Ghanaian women experience in HE, and the ways in which cultural and academic prejudice in Ghanaian society intensifies the tensions.

Research Design

Methodological Approach, Data Collection and Analysis

In order to understand the interpretations individual women students give to their experiences of HE, and how their lived experiences in the different socio-economic and sociocultural contexts of Ghanaian society might facilitate or impede their present lives as HE students, it was important to know how these students had lived their lives in these contexts. With this intent, we found the qualitative approach to be the most relevant philosophical choice, since the social reality under investigation is subjective and resides with the individual participants within the study. The life history narrative method, as a retrospective account of an individual's thoughts, intentions and hidden or silenced life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Goodson & Sikes, 2008), was also considered to be the most appropriate for this study. It must, however, be noted that the doctoral study from which this report was taken compared the differences and similarities in the participants' childhood and adult life experiences over a period of time, but this report presents only their HE experiences.

Instead of a single, overall narrative which would produce large volumes of irrelevant data sets, Flick's (2002) episodic-narrative method was adopted. It is a narrative interview approach whose central element is the periodic invitation to the interviewee to present narratives of relevant meaningful experiences and concrete situations in order to obtain the most relevant information. This is done based on the research questions, with the aid of interview guide questions concerning the situations to be recounted, rather than the entire narrative of the life history. Six key areas of the participants' lives which were considered relevant to the study were developed – namely, their location (rural or urban); early childhood and schooling experiences; family background and attitude towards education; personal lives; HE experiences; and, finally, the influences of these on

their HE participation. As noted above, this article reports on their HE experiences only. The analysis began with a narrative description of individual stories. This was followed by a thematic analysis, comparison of the cases according to the thematic areas as well as the isolated ones, and then the identification and grouping of participants according to the common or isolated themes (Creswell, 2003).

Research Locale and Participants

One of the public universities in southern Ghana was the site for this study. This institution was chosen because of its widening participation strategies, which provide a number of access routes, including the mature student programme. The accessible population consisted of all the mature undergraduate women at that university, from which a sample of eight women was selected for the study. Non-random, purposive sampling (Merriam, 1998) was adopted to ensure that the background of the group was socio-economically and culturally diverse, given the nature of the subject under investigation.

The criteria developed for the selection of participants included biographical data such as age, different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (through the definition of their parents' socio-economic backgrounds), as well as the level of study in HE. Through the administration of a questionnaire made up of 12 open-ended items, the participants were selected from two departments in the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Social Sciences (the Department of Basic Education and Department of Sociology, respectively), where mature students are known to be clustered.

The target population was 65 mature female students, 50 of whom were in the Department of Basic Education and 15 of whom were in the Department of Sociology. In the Department of Basic Education, 7 were in Year 1, and 43 were in Year 4, while of the participants in the Department of Sociology, 9 were in Year 1 and 6 in Year 4. A sample of 8 women above the age of 25 at the year of entry was selected for the study, based on the expression of their willingness to participate. It was also agreed that in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms would be used. Each participant was then interviewed individually three weeks before the end of the academic year (May 2009), in order to obtain the four years of experiences of the participants in their final year, and the one year of experiences for those in their first year.

Results and Discussion

Characteristics of Participants

The age of the participants ranged from 30 to 46 years. Three were aged between 30 and 40, while five were between 40 and 46. Five were married with children, two were single parents and one was single. The minimum length of break between leaving school and resuming full-time education was 6 years and the maximum was 14 years. Two of the participants in the Department of Sociology were policewomen, one was a secretary and the other a teacher. All the participants in the Department of Basic Education were teachers.

The participants' fathers had had more education than their mothers, as is also highlighted in the literature (Shabaya & Konadu-Agyemang, 2004). Four of the participants' fathers had continued their education beyond middle school: two had Master's degrees, one finished his studies at secondary school level and the other was a trained teacher. Of the remaining four, two had had no education and the other two were middle school graduates. Five of the mothers had had no formal education, two were middle school leavers and one a primary school dropout. With regard to the history of HE in their families, only two of their fathers had had a university education. Also, only one participant had brothers who had had a HE. All the spouses of the five participants who were married had had a university education. However, all the participants were the first generation of women in their families to come through HE.

Tensions and Conflicts

Evidence from this study shows that in Ghana, women's roles as carers and nurturers of the home and their children do not change when they embark on HE. Adjoa Kom's story attests to this. According to her, her father had motivated her to aspire to HE studies, and she had nurtured this dream since she was in secondary school, but now, as a married HE student, her spouse's attitude seemed to make her life difficult:

> He [her husband] was expecting me to do my normal cooking at home. In fact, it wasn't easy. We were then introduced to these new courses; I was confused and when I got home I couldn't study. In fact, the beginning wasn't easy for me.

She further lamented:

> He doesn't get time for the children, even doing their homework; from job to town, so everything was left on me. Even apart from my learning, I have to assist the children in their homework because he might not be in the house. When he comes back, too, after eating, he relaxes on the sofa and he sleeps.

She was the only participant in this study who lived with her husband and children and commuted to the university daily. Her description of her husband's attitude towards domestic support is typical of many Ghanaian men, educated or not. This tendency is often attributed to the socialisation processes that assign them as heads of households with control over everything in the home (Dolphyne, 1991).

Maame's desire for HE studies was born when she stayed on a university campus with her uncle, a university lecturer, to attend teacher training college. Her experience as a mature student was different from that of her counterparts because she had to live on campus with her children (who were two and four years old) while her husband lived and worked in another city. She therefore hired the services of a childminder who attended to the children daily. However, she had some duties to perform each morning before the childminder came:

> In the morning, you have to get the kids ready for school ... I couldn't learn in the morning. Sometimes I am even late for lectures. After lectures, you must prepare something for them before they come. Sometimes, I don't even wash my utensils. I leave them, then when I go back after lectures, I wash them, prepare supper, get ready for my squad [children].

In such circumstances, the consequences are not surprising. Maame revealed that after all these chores, she got so tired that studying became difficult: 'The little time you have to study – you are already tired. If you don't take care, you will even sleep.'

In modern economic and social reasoning, the importance of women's education is in relation to how their use of the knowledge acquired helps to improve infant mortality, keep children in school and, most importantly, empower them to become income-generators, thus increasing the economic power base of the family (Forum for African Women Educationalists, 2001; Hannum & Buchmann, 2004). As such, rationales for women's education have been couched in terms of their instrumental role in development, which explains the well-known slogan: 'If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman, you educate the whole nation' (Ephson, 1969, p. 5). These assumptions seem to suggest that women should only have an education in order that others will develop (children, the home, society, etc.), as though they do not have any entitlement to education in their own right.

In order to succeed in HE, all the women in this study had made arrangements at home prior to their HE participation which should have facilitated their new academic roles. They either employed helpers or got family members to take care of their homes while they embarked on further studies. This notwithstanding, some of them encountered what they found to be insurmountable demands and pressures that threatened their academic pursuits. Once in HE, they saw that in spite of the role of their caregivers, they still had to combine HE work with some domestic commitments. Koutuma, for example, described the despair she experienced on being told about her child's illness at a time when she could not abandon her lectures and quizzes (class tests) to go home and see to him, and her divided attention due to this impossibility: 'Sometimes they call you – your son is not well – and you can imagine, you are thinking, you have assignments, a quiz to write, a whole lot of things coming up.'

These stories reveal the plight of typical Ghanaian women who want to satisfy their personal desire of participating in HE, to obtain the economic, social and intellectual gains that accrue from HE participation, and, at the same time, are obliged to adhere to their culturally assigned duties as mothers and wives. The difficulties and tensions arise because of the gendered division of domestic labour, which makes it very difficult for women to combine their private and public domains (Morley & Lugg, 2009). What can be gleaned from these experiences is that in culturally embedded societies (like Ghana), where women's cultural roles are so deeply internalised, it may be difficult to realise the economic and social benefits of women's HE participation if certain cultural norms (for example, the woman being the sole caregiver, nurturer, homemaker, etc.) remain.

Academic Work

Most of the participants described the academic work as difficult and made reference to gaps in terms of their knowledge deficit as a result of new/unfamiliar courses they had to take, such as Information Retrieval and Communicative Skills. Koutuma failed in Phonetics in the first semester of the first year when she was still trying to adjust. But for her husband's insistence, she would have quit. Similarly, Naana said this about her first university quiz:

> I remember the first time we did a quiz; it was Com Skills [Communicative Skills]. I had two out of ten, and I said 'Oh!' When I went back to my hostel, I wept and I asked myself if I could go through ... I really struggled, because it wasn't easy for me.

For Adjoa Kom, it was her inability to recollect, memorise and retain information, and in Krambaa's case, 'it was not easy' because she did not 'have a sound mind'. For her, the difficulty she found in the academic work was attributed to her preoccupation with many other commitments (including her private business activities), rather than the length of break from school, a condition which she thought was different in the lives of younger students. She felt that academic work was manageable since '[t]he quizzes that we've been writing, the young ones and us, the difference [in terms of scores] is not much'.

A number of factors made the participants' first year in the university academically challenging. The first had to do with the lack of institutional structures that could have allayed their fears and anxieties, and prepared them adequately for academic work. With regard to lecture sessions in this connection, Koutuma said: 'people who are grown-ups [referring to her and other mature students] and we were all mixing with them [younger students]'. This statement reflected her view that returning students are not at the same level of intellectual ability as the younger students, who come to the university straight from secondary school. Moreover, she seemed to hint that they were less well prepared academically than younger students, who were familiar with and used to note taking, essay writing and examinations.

Some of the participants also attributed their emotional anxiety to the institutional procedures for dismissing students who failed in a number of courses, a practice which, according to them, generates a lot of tension in students. On this issue, Koutuma said: 'You go to lectures, you don't understand anything, then what are you doing here? Is it not better you drop out than the school to sack you?' Additionally, she hinted that lecturers did not seem to appreciate their difficulties, but threatened and intimidated them on first contact with them:

> when we went for African Studies, too, and Mr X ... was teaching us, the first day he came in he started intimidating us. He said if you don't do well he will sack you. He always talked for us to see ourselves to be stupid.

Yet, according to her, some lectures were difficult to comprehend, and so, like Naana, she felt intellectually lost and thought that the teaching method was problematic.

These stories reveal some of the institutional practices and prejudices that act as barriers to mature students' successful participation in HE. Firstly, they present HE practitioners as stereotypes, 'conducting business as usual', as though the HE arena is still for the elite, young and bright. Such practitioners are shown to be insensitive to, and intolerant of, students who are victims of the inadequacies of the education system in underserved areas or those (adults) returning late to HE and combining other commitments with HE work. Academic progression and dismissal

standards are applicable to all, irrespective of the different clientele and the varied entry characteristics or behaviour.

Secondly, the women's stories point to lecturers' adherence to traditional teaching methods in spite of modern technological advancement and the new composition of HE participants. On this issue, Grace & Gouthro (2000) argue that the competing responsibilities and different dispositions that mature women bring with them into HE institutions necessitate the kind of teaching methods that they call 'participatory pedagogical approaches', which connect to their lived experiences. Grace & Gouthro (2000) corroborate hooks' (1994) view that pedagogical approaches should emphasise teacher responsibility and locate teacher authority within a teacher–learner interaction that highlights cooperation, collaboration and sharing. In this way, classrooms become sites of participatory learning rather than places where learners are passive recipients of incomprehensible knowledge which is disconnected from their experience.

These pedagogical approaches are also highlighted in the ESRC's Teaching and Learning Research Programme (see, for example, David et al, 2009) on evidence-informed pedagogic principles, which include taking account of the personal and cultural experiences of learners and promoting their active engagement in the teaching and learning process. This responsibility resides with educators, whose institutional roles, power and authority (Grace & Gouthro, 2000) empower them to create such a learning environment.

Socio-economic Status and Higher Education Experiences

The data from this study shows that some participants' socio-economic advantage served to construct their HE experiences differently from the socio-economically disadvantaged, as was also found in Tanzania (Morley & Lugg, 2009; Morley et al, 2010). Six out of eight of the participants in this study were on study leave with a salary, while two were dependent on other sources of funding for their HE. All the five married women had some financial support from their husbands in addition to their salaries. Their stories typify the situation of women who are socio-economically privileged.

Koutuma is an example of the socio-economically advantaged. She had a prestigious life in the university due to her husband's social standing and its associated privileges, and these, according to her, facilitated her progression through HE. Many times through her narrative, she mentioned how well her husband took care of her whilst she was in HE – renting a fully furnished single room in a relatively prestigious hostel for her, visiting her and spending time with her at weekends. She added: 'Whenever I vacate, he comes to pick me up. I've never gone home on my own.' Although she owned a car, she did not like to use it on campus. Similarly, Maame's husband's financial support enabled her to rent a two-room house on campus for herself and her children, unlike many other women with families.

Although divorced, Krambaa's and Akua's narratives suggested their advantaged SES, as they talked about the businesses they were engaged in which supported them through HE. Both of them revealed that they owned cars, but whereas Akua used hers on campus, Krambaa did not. For all these women, their struggles in HE related to the academic work rather than to financial difficulties.

In both Adjoa Kom's and Maimuna's cases, there was an indication that the financial support they obtained in HE was minimal. Maimuna, for example, lived in the cheap, overcrowded university dormitory which accommodated six students in one room, with its associated inconveniences like younger students entertaining their male visitors and late-night calls by younger students which lasted for many hours and disturbed her sleep. Unlike the other married participants, Maimuna was financially incapable of renting private accommodation, and therefore had to cope with these inconveniences. Naana, who was single and without a child, also expressed similar concerns. For financial reasons, she even had to share her private accommodation with her younger brother. Incidentally, she was the only participant who hinted that, due to financial constraints, she could not buy educational materials and had to share with her friends, which, according to her, contributed to her poor grades in some courses.

These findings show that for economically disadvantaged women students, poverty and poor accommodation shaped the amount of space and time available for their studies, whereas in the

case of more economically advantaged students, money became the power used to negotiate extra space and time for their studies (for example, by renting a private apartment and paying for childcare). In other words, a better SES contributed positively to the ability to cope academically, while sometimes a worse SES affected some students negatively.

Conclusions

Three conclusions are drawn from the findings of this study. The first relates to the nature of the tensions women experience in their pursuit of HE and fulfilment of their domestic roles. Although they initiate various living arrangements depending on their marital status, relationships and economic power in order to succeed in HE, what they, and others, perceive to be their singular cultural responsibility (i.e. domestic chores and childminding), coupled with stereotyped HE practices which do not recognise their peculiar circumstances, exacerbates their difficulties. Therefore, if HE practitioners' stereotypical attitudes and society's cultural expectations and norms remain fixed in Ghanaian society, it may be difficult for mature women to succeed in HE, and impossible to realise the economic and social benefits of their HE participation.

Secondly, the different levels of difficulty the women participants encounter with their academic work could be attributed to the inability to recollect, memorise and retain information due to preoccupation with other (domestic and/or business) commitments, and unfamiliar courses and teaching methods, rather than the length of break from school. The women's academic challenges, frustrations and tendency to drop out of HE are, in the main, the result of: (a) the lack of institutional structures to offer academic and social support services; (b) the absence of participatory pedagogical approaches that identify and connect to learners' experiences; and (c) feelings of frustration resulting from failure, threats and intimidation from lecturers, while combining studies with domestic roles. In such cases, depending on the motivations (either their self-motivation or the motivation of others) that bring them into HE, some tended to have a greater likelihood to drop out than others.

Lastly, the women's HE academic and social lives may be easy or difficult depending on their socio-economic position, which often determines the type of accommodation they are able to rent and their ability to pay for educational resources and on-campus childcare services, thereby avoiding regular trips home to check on their family and children. In this case, economic power shapes the amount of space and time available for studies, with the more economically advantaged possessing the wherewithal to negotiate extra space and time for their studies, while the disadvantaged suffer the consequences of such deprivation. Therefore, the conclusion is that socio-economic advantage facilitates mature women's engagement with HE.

Recommendations

The mature women's stories of struggle with adjustment at their first entry into HE work and during their entire lives in HE suggest the need for HE policies for instituting and strengthening certain academic and social support structures, such as tutorial and counselling sessions on first entry into HE and in the course of their HE studies. It also calls on HE institutions to prepare and regularly retrain practitioners to be able to recognise difference among the current heterogeneous HE constituents, and to show sensitivity and responsiveness to their diverse needs. Knowledge and awareness about adult students' peculiar circumstances must be used to develop measures of flexibility for their academic work, and academic and social counselling support services.

It is important that HE institutions become conscious of the different kinds of cultural capital such as knowledge, dispositions and attitudes that non-traditional students and, indeed, all students bring with them into HE (Grace & Gouthro, 2000; Tett, 2000). Moreover, in today's heterogeneous HE context, research findings from some high-income countries make a case for the use of evidence-informed pedagogic principles, which include taking account of the personal and cultural experiences of learners and promoting their active engagement in the teaching and learning process (David et al, 2009). Grace & Gouthro (2000), for example, suggest that since knowledge production requires a collaborative effort from both teachers and learners, there is a need to move away from

traditional lecture methods to participatory pedagogical approaches that also connect students' lived experiences with knowledge production.

The role of the university teacher is implied, and it is recommended that s/he creates a teacher–learner interaction that highlights cooperation, collaboration and sharing. In this way, it is expected that classrooms will become sites of participatory learning, rather than places where learners are passive recipients of knowledge through intimidation. For this to work, there is need for the provision and rehabilitation of teaching and learning facilities/resources, which also calls for the identification of other sources of funding tertiary education, in view of the financial complexities that face the education sector budget and HE financing.

Finally, it is crucial that HE institutions formulate policies which incorporate all the issues that have emerged from this study which concern mature students' HE lives, and those of under-represented groups for that matter. These would include academic support structures, social matters such as accommodation, and how, as well as where, to obtain financial assistance (for example, corporate bodies and financial institutions that grant student loans). HE institutions' engagement with the issues raised by the findings of this study should help to mitigate the struggles that mark many mature women's HE experiences, and those of other groups of students whose stories are yet to be told, and help them to mediate the demands from the private and public spheres, and progress through HE more easily. Widening participation strategy should not be viewed as a tool for HE commercialisation or for complying with international and national policies for the purpose of HE inclusion, but more importantly as a vehicle for realising the academic potential of under-represented groups.

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