

**Session: D****Parallel Session: 4.1**

Research Domain: Learning and Teaching in Post-Compulsory and Higher Education

**Patricia Gouthro**

Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

**Reshaping Policies and Programmes: Addressing the Needs of Mature Women Students in Higher Education in Canada**

Drawing on a three year qualitative research study funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) this paper explores challenges and strategies to support mature women students in Canadian universities. While some attention is paid to access and diversity issues, gender is often not a central concern in shaping policies or programmes in higher education. Drawing upon a critical feminist framework, this paper develops some recommendations for future policy and programme development in higher education in Canada.

This study involved twenty interviews with "key informants" – individuals in administration in universities or the post-secondary policy sector, and forty life history interviews with mature women university students who self-identified as "lifelong learners". Participants came from four provinces across Canada, and diversity variables such as age, race and culture, marital status, sexual orientation, and ability were considered, as well as different academic fields, institutions, and programmes.

Life history interviews explored the factors that impact upon women's decisions to continue on with higher education at different stages throughout their lives. Key informant interviews were designed to obtain early involvement of potential policy makers in the research to encourage engagement with the issues and create a more receptive audience interested in reviewing results. Initial results reveal that women continue to face multiple challenges and barriers in accessing higher education at different life stages. Women are still primary caregivers for children and the elderly, and often decide to postpone education, choose local or part-time programmes, and explore distance or compressed course options to accommodate gender differences in responsibility. Minority women face additional challenges around language barriers, subtle racism, and poor access to institutional forms of knowledge. Many women raise concerns around financial support, employment possibilities, and age discrimination. Some women question how academic culture dismisses women's learning in the homeplace. As one participant said, women should be able to enter academe without having making excuses; "I'm sorry I was at home with my kids...as if that's an embarrassment".

***A Critical Feminist Analysis***

Current discourses in adult and higher education note globalisation has created a more competitive and individualistic climate for lifelong learning. Individuals are expected to determine their own unique learning trajectories to situate themselves in the most competitive position possible, while reduced government support for universities results in a stronger influence of the marketplace in higher education (Gouthro, 2002). Field (2003) argues the emphasis on individualism offsets government responsibility for the mandate of lifelong learning, and leads to a more fragmented, competitive approach. Feminist scholars such as Jackson (2003) and

Gouthro (2002) note current programmes and policies often fail to consider social and gender factors that impact upon women's opportunities for lifelong learning.

*Reshaping Policies and Programmes in Higher Education*

There is a continued need to take gender into account when developing policy and programmes in higher education to create inclusive learning opportunities for mature women students. Additional financial and caregiving supports, flexible delivery options, and a shift in institutional culture that validates women's contributions and life experiences needs to be addressed.