

Getting older and wiser

by Ali Bell

The number of baby boomers studying at university has doubled in a decade, according to a recent Ministry of Education report.

The report says 30 per cent of tertiary education students are aged 40 or over, and many are studying certificate or diploma courses part-time.

It credits the high numbers of mature students to "New Zealand's relatively open tertiary education system, and diverse range of flexible learning options".

Katoanga Manuopangi, 55, is a grandmother and a student at Te Wananga o Aotearoa at Mangere.

She says she loves studying and is glad she didn't listen to those who doubted her.

"People at church said, 'Why do you want to go and learn? You're too old.' I said I don't care. It's not too late to learn."

Manuopangi wanted to improve her English and work skills to go back into the workforce, so enrolled in both an ESOL and Level I computing course.

She became motivated to study after watching her 32-year-old daughter on the computer.

"I thought 'how do you do that? Maybe I can learn to do that?' So I did."

"There are other students that are older than me," she says.

"I have recommended the computing course to friends – both of them are 53. There is a woman here who is 70 years old."

Manuopangi says teachers are welcoming, kind and encouraging.

"They're always on our side. I feel like I've been here a long time, in a really good way. But it's only been a year."

This can be in contrast to traditional tertiary institutions, where 40 plus students, despite their large numbers overall, can



HARD AT WORK: Auckland University's Brendan Laing is proud to be studying as a mature student.

feel marginalised.

However, Auckland University student Brendan Laing, 39, says he enjoys studying and doesn't feel "out of place".

"I guess I'm not really one of the crowd, but then there are a lot of crowds here. It is harder for me to learn new stuff because of my age."

A 40-year-old mother of two, who did not wish to be named, is a university student and tutor.

While she enjoys studying, she says she sometimes feels left out by younger students and is surprised 30 per cent of the university population is aged 40 or over.

"Where are they? I don't see them. Here it's almost like a sen-

ior high. I feel like I'm in the wrong place, with the wrong peer-group. I feel like I've missed the boat somewhere."

Older students can form different group and teacher-student dynamics, she says.

"Women lecturers and teachers treat me more as an equal. But with male teachers – particu-

larly if they are around my age – there tends to be more tension. They're often more dismissive."

In group work, she says she feels marginalised and believes she isn't respected by the younger students in her class.

"I feel they think I'm a liability because I'm older, although my grades are actually very good."

Rising number of dropouts causes concern

by Marc Checkley

Escalating debt, family pressures and poor course selection are being blamed for a high number of tertiary dropouts.

A recent Ministry of Education study shows only 39 per cent of students who began a tertiary qualification in 2000 completed their studies by December 2004.

More than 95,000 domestic students completed a qualification in 2003, a six per cent increase on 2002.

Enrolments in New Zealand's tertiary sector continue to rise but many factors affect their rates of retention.

For Louisa Fa'atele, 31, a change in family life and a student loan of more than \$60,000 saw her drop out of a history degree in 2004.

"I had six papers to go, but circumstances at home changed. So I had to start earning some money."

Fa'atele says the majority of her debt came from borrowing for living costs as she was not eligible for a student allowance.

"I think the Government should help out students more. It's not just about course fees. All students should be able to receive a living allowance. It would make

it a lot easier to concentrate on our studies."

Julie Prentice, regional manager of Student Job Search, is not surprised by the high number of students dropping out.

She says often this is due to students making wrong choices about what they should be studying.

"There's such a big push for continuing education. Many students go into tertiary study unprepared."

"In the beginning I was motivated and eager to learn... but student life is so jam-packed. You can lose yourself in that life."

She says there should be more "targeted assistance" for students to make choices that benefit them in the long run.

"It shouldn't be study for study's sake." Prentice adds that if the motivation is not there, study can take a backseat to life.

Fa'atele agrees: "I was pressured to go to university by my family but I didn't even know what I was going to study."

"In the beginning I was motivated and eager to learn. I was one of those who said I'd stay but student life is so jam-packed. You can lose yourself in that life – it happened to me. It is not for everyone."

Prentice says students should be encouraged to take a break before entering tertiary education.

"It's good to have a breather. Students can re-evaluate and also take on some practical work experience that can assist them in choosing the right kind of course to study."

"There's value in employment. If a student can keep applying their skills in a work environment even when studying it will give them an edge."

She says some tertiary institutions are adapting.

Figures released by AUT University show its retention and completion numbers are higher than the national average.

Fifty-six per cent of students who enrolled in a course in 2000 gained a qualification by 2005.

Retention rates were at 61 per cent, 11 per cent higher than the average from all universities.

John Carlson, director of Student Services at AUT, says these numbers are partly due to academic factors, plus a range of services supporting all areas of

students' lives.

Despite a high number of students not completing their studies, New Zealand still fares well on an international scale.

The ministry report shows that in 2003, 17 per cent of 25 to 64-year-olds had a degree.

This figure is the same as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average across 30 countries, though lower than the US (29%), Canada (22%), Australia (21%) and the United Kingdom (20%).

Prentice hopes this figure will increase as more universities focus on providing vocational or real-world skills.

"Tertiary is finally listening to employers. But there's still a lot of work to be done."

Students need to understand the value of both formal qualifications and industry experience, she says.

Fa'atele says it seems likely she will go back to complete her degree.

"I hope to go back next year. I'm thinking of doing a paper or two in the evenings after work. I don't regret leaving, I could have finished ages ago if I'd put my mind to it but I've still learnt a lot in the last two years."

"I wouldn't have been the person I am today if I'd stayed."