BILL HUITEMA is the voice of a new generation — a generation of older students.
The 42-year-old, who left high school in Grade 9, is renegotiating his mortgage and taking a hefty termination package from his former employer, Lafarge Canada. This summer, he's back to school full-time at the University of Western Ontario with a view to becoming a teacher.
With jobs as a laborer and production supervisor behind him, he's also a veteran of part-time studies, in which he has maintained an A-average.
Today, he helps counsel the tide of older, adult learners — some of them graduating this week and next — who are gradually changing the look of Canadian campuses.
It's not quite a revolution, but data on university enrolment shows a clear trend of increasing participation in post-secondary education by students who fall outside the traditional 18-to-22-year-old set that still accounts for the bulk of undergraduates. Many of the new breed are women.
The need to serve this growing group and respond to the forces — primarily economic — that are bringing them to campus, is challenging some of the much-cherished assumptions universities have made about themselves in the past.
From 1978 to 1992, the rate of growth of students older than 25 was twice the rate for students 18 to 22 years old. The number of students older than 25 grew from 72,635 to 136,015 in Canadian universities in that period.
"One rarely hears the term 'non-traditional student' with regards to adult students any more," says Tom Guinsburg, dean of part-time and continuing education at the University of Western Ontario.
"They are now part of the recent tradition and, for the foreseeable future, they will be part of that, and there is no way the universities will be able to turn their backs on that."
But these learners come with their own needs, for retraining to deal with the real-life vagaries of the job market, for example.

See Changing Campus page A4