THE SECOND-CHANCE JOURNEY… or… “HOW DID THESE OLDIES GET TO BE UNI STUDENTS?”

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Social Work

Faculty of Education and Social Work
The University of Sydney
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Author’s Declaration

This is to certify that:

i. this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Social Work Degree

ii. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used

iii. the thesis does not exceed the word length for this degree

iv. no part of this work has been used for the award of another degree

v. this thesis meets the University of Sydney’s Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of this research

Signature: ……………………………………………………………………………………

Name: ………………………………………………………………………………………

Date: ………………………………………………………………………………………
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Undoubtedly, I owe my greatest thanks to my family for their loving support and faith in me. Those who know me well also know that I am blessed with so many loving family members that I can’t possibly name them all, but all have played their part in cheering me on to the finish-line. However, there are three family members whom I do especially need to name. Firstly my mother, Elizabeth, who was the first mature-age student I ever knew. She started undergraduate studies the year after my three siblings and I left home and rapidly progressed to achieving her PhD. As a respected academic now for many years, she is an inspiration to all who know her. Secondly my husband Peter, who is by my side in everything and this has been no exception. Last but by no means least, our daughter-in-law Kimberly, who faithfully and patiently transcribed each interview for me and in the process, became so inspired by the stories that she became an Open Foundation student and is now embarking upon undergraduate studies.

And so, another inspirational story begins....
Abstract

This doctoral thesis presents the findings of a qualitative research project which examines the impact of university study on a group of twenty female and male mature-age students at the University of Newcastle, Australia, who have entered university via a non-traditional pathway. The students who are the subject of this thesis are in the second to final years of their undergraduate degree programs and have all faced significant hurdles in gaining university entrance and persevering with their studies. The majority have come from lower socio-economic backgrounds with little, if any, family history of higher education and little positive experience of prior study. Postmodern feminist theory has primarily informed this research, using a narrative method to gather the data, analyse the results and present the findings. This thesis describes the experiences of the twenty individuals, derived from their individual narratives. As such, it gives voice to their stories: their triumphs and achievements as well as their struggles. It examines the gender issues that are at work in the shaping of their experiences, including the ways in which gender affected the type and extent of help and support on which they could rely. It highlights the transformative nature of these experiences for each of the students in this cohort, as well as potentially the next generation, and makes some tentative connections between these individual experiences and the experiences of the wider mature-age university student population. The narratives that individuals tell are socially and culturally located. Hence it is likely that the experiences of these twenty students may reflect, at least to some extent, the experiences of other mature-age students within a similar culture. The findings of this research also highlight the important role that higher education institutions can play, not only in widening access to higher education, but also in encouraging and assisting students, from a diverse range of backgrounds, to participate fully in higher education and achieve their goals.
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Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis is essentially about a group of twenty women and men who decided to undertake higher education studies when they were all well into their 30s and 40s, and one even in his 50s. All of them were embarking upon a ‘second-chance’ journey, a term often used in the literature in relation to mature learners (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001; Giles, 1990; Rinne & Kivinen, 1996). Either they had never before contemplated university as an option, or having previously considered it when they were younger and maybe even briefly started it, for all sorts of reasons the time had not been right for them to continue down that path. It would even be true to say that, for some of these students, this was in fact more of a ‘first-chance’ journey, as never before in their lives had they the opportunity, let alone the means, to go to university.

While it was not one of the criteria for selection of the participants, none of these twenty students had a parent who had been to university. Whether they had done well at school or not, most had received little encouragement to view themselves as capable of university studies or to consider a university education as important. Expectations of their parents and friends did not generally include the possibility for most that they would or could seek a university education. This thesis examines how they made the decision to go, what made it possible for them to do so at this stage in their lives, what helped and hindered their studies and how their lives changed and are continuing to change as a result. All, when interviewed, were in the second to final years of their undergraduate degree programs at the University of Newcastle, Australia and 19 of the twenty 20 had entered university via an enabling program run by that University, known as the Open Foundation Program. The research is qualitative and has been primarily informed by postmodern feminist theory. It uses a narrative method to elicit the individual stories, to analyse them and
then to describe the journey of these twenty students, based upon their own individual narratives about their experiences.

The thesis is divided into nine chapters. The following chapter presents a review of the literature around mature-age students in higher education both in Australia and internationally. It includes the background to some of the relevant current issues within the higher education sector, such as widening access and participation in general and, in particular, the need to improve access and participation for the identified equity group of low socio-economic status (SES) students. Previous research into the mature-age experience is also discussed and gaps identified.

An exploration of such research indicates that there was a flurry of activity in researching the mature-age experience through the late 1970s to mid-1990s, as widening of access began to become a priority for higher education institutions worldwide. Such research mostly focuses on the female experience, due to the fact that equity measures to widen access opened the gates for more women of all ages to enter university (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2004). Finding similar studies on the male mature-age experience was more of a challenge, with the majority of studies being conducted by female researchers about the female experience. This is perhaps not surprising, as there has never been a time when men have not been well represented in university settings. However, this male representation has overwhelmingly consisted of white men from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds and there is now a growing interest in research into reasons for low participation of males from lower SES or ‘working class’ backgrounds (Golding, 2006; McGivney, 1999a).

The growing global movement to address inequality of access and participation in higher education from the late 1990s up to the present time (Skilbeck, 2006a) has also seen an increase in international research that focuses more broadly on students, both female and male, from socially and
economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This has coincided with an interest in mature learners, with research into adult education in general, whether community based or through more formal institutions, becoming more prevalent. Such literature provides valuable insights into gender and identity issues for mature-age students, including the different ways in which their lives can be transformed through education.

The methodology used for this research is explored in the third chapter, which also provides an overview of the how, where and why this particular thesis developed. It provides ‘the story behind the stories’ and is intended to bring the research project alive through the descriptions of the setting, the participants, the theories, the method and the process of talking with and listening to the students. Included also is a description of the process of analysing and interpreting the individual narratives, in order to produce a cohesive whole without losing the sense of hearing the students speak for themselves.

From the fourth chapter through to the eighth chapter, the main body of the thesis is presented. It is in these five chapters that the findings from the analysis of the narratives are documented and, as such, form the actual story of the participants’ journey. Each chapter has been written to explore in more detail a different stage or aspect of their journey as mature learners. The individual chapters are divided into sections which introduce particular themes that emerged directly from the participants’ stories; each section begins with some broad description and comment about their experiences, which are then illustrated with direct quotes, so that the students’ voices are central throughout.

The journey itself begins with Chapter Four, with the students’ reasons for coming to university, their expectations and, perhaps most significantly, what it was that made it possible for them to come at this time in their lives. As well as important institutional measures such as the Open Foundation Program,
there were influences and encouragement from a number of different sources, all of which played their part in making it possible for these mature learners not just to consider going to university, but to actually make it happen. How they managed some of the initial transition issues is also explored, such as reactions of others, coping with the early days and dealing with the anxiety associated with something so new and different.

Chapters Five and Six explore the many sacrifices which all of these students had to make, as well as the impact of these sacrifices not only on themselves but also on others around them. Such sacrifices mainly centre around time and money, with interesting gender differences emerging regarding expectations, use of time and ways of coping. Gender issues are further highlighted in the examination of the constant juggling involved overwhelmingly for the women as they find ways to combine their studies with the important relationships in their lives – partners, children and elderly parents – as well as with paid work. The expectation that women will be ‘carers’ first and foremost sits uneasily with the need for autonomy and independence as students. For the men, this is revealed as being far less problematic even though their primary role as ‘breadwinner’ presents challenges for some as they juggle paid work and study. Particularly for the men with female partners, their stories reveal that they are more likely to receive both practical and emotional support at home, such as through privileged study time. Significantly, none of the men are expected to take primary responsibility for the needs of other family members.

The story continues with an exploration of the students’ resilience and persistence in the seventh and eighth chapters, examining the factors contributing to their persistence and the main sources of help and support through difficult times. The discussion then moves on to the transformative nature of their experiences as students, in terms of their own identity, vision for the future and potential impact upon generations still to come. The ninth and final chapter brings the story to a close in summarising what has gone
before and concluding with a number of recommendations for action, aimed primarily at education providers and policy makers but also relevant to all who have a role to play in higher education, including students.

Throughout this thesis, the individual voices of these twenty mature-age students – their experiences, challenges, difficulties and triumphs – can be clearly heard. Narrative theory informs us that the stories which individuals tell are, to a significant degree, products of the social and cultural times and places in which they are told (Elliott, 2005; Ewick & Silbey, 1995). It is therefore likely that the experiences of these twenty students are reflective of the experiences of other mature-age students within a similar time and culture. Hence, this thesis offers a powerful insight into the second-chance journey of the mature learner in Australia at this particular time. As such, it has a place in helping to inform higher education policy and institutions on ways to better attract, teach and support mature learners in order to maximise individual student success and further the broader societal goals of widening access and improving participation rates in higher education. In so doing, the educational outcomes for a higher proportion of the population can arguably be improved.
Chapter Two: The Second-Chance Journey: Mature-Age Students in Higher Education: A Review of the Literature

Introduction

Mature-age students make up a significant proportion of the higher education population. Approximately 40% of the total domestic student population at all Australian universities is aged over 25, 27% is aged over 30 and 12% over 40. Around 20% of all commencing university students in Australia each year are aged over 25 (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008, p. 9). Most Australian universities define a mature-age student as someone who enters university over the age of 21 and not immediately following full-time secondary studies (Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite, & Godfrey, 2004; Cantwell, Archer & Bourke, 2001). However, most research with mature-age students is with the over 25 age-group. It is also important to recognise that a considerable proportion of mature-age students are entering university in their 30s, 40s and 50s, with even a small proportion (0.5%) aged in their 60s (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008).

Historically, the numbers of mature-age students at Australian universities have been increasing since the 1970s, when an international agenda of widening university access and participation reached Australian shores (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Karmel & Woods, 2006). The 1960s saw the beginnings of the widening access agenda with the decision of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to develop the concept of "lifelong education" (Bagnall, 2006, p. 25). In the early 1970s UNESCO published a number of reports which advocated the need to encourage and widen access to post-compulsory education (Longworth, 2004, p. 7). According to Clancy and Goastellec (2007) the numbers of students enrolled globally in post-school education, including the higher education.
sector, increased almost four-fold between 1970 and 2000. “One of the defining features of the closing decades of the 20th century has been the massive growth in post-compulsory education” (p. 136) mainly driven by “economic priorities, linked to technological change, globalization and increased international competition” (p. 137).

The impetus for widening access to higher education continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with an increasing emphasis on trying to reduce the barriers for those who, traditionally, had fewer opportunities to undertake higher education studies. With the publication in 1996 of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report “Lifelong Education for All” and its notion of large-scale participation in formal tertiary education, there was a further acceleration internationally “towards mass and universal participation” (Skilbeck, 2006a, p. 117) including participation by older students. For example, between 1970 and 2000, the greatest increase in participation in the United States (US) higher education sector was among students aged over 30 (Douglass, 2005, p. 94). Australia was certainly not left behind in this trend, with a 2003 OECD report (cited in Karmel & Woods, 2006) indicating that it had a particularly high level of mature-age student participation in education and training: “the participation rate among the 40 and over age-group is over three times that of the average for OECD countries” (Karmel & Woods, 2006, p. 141).

**Equity Measures to Increase Access and Participation in Higher Education**

Some of the major debates internationally around mass participation in higher education are increasingly related to issues of equity: “widening access to higher education to previously under-represented groups” (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 137). Clancy and Goastellec’s comparative research (2007) amongst 27 OECD countries demonstrates that “even when access is
massified, inequalities are reproduced within the higher education structure” (p. 138). Despite efforts by each of these countries to introduce equity measures to increase university participation by under-represented groups “very large inequalities persist in all countries, even in Scandinavian countries, which have perhaps made most progress” (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 152). Indeed, Rinne and Kivinen’s (1996) research into adult education in Finland reports that “the influence of money on educational choice has by no means disappeared” (p. 190). Within Australia certain groups, formally identified in 1990 as equity target groups (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990) have been recognised as not enjoying the same levels of higher education access and participation as does the rest of the population. The five groups defined as equity targets are: people from lower socio-economic backgrounds; people from rural and isolated areas; people with a disability; people from a non-English speaking background; women in non-traditional areas of study and higher degrees; and Indigenous people (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008).

One of the effects of equity measures to improve higher education access and participation has been to encourage more mature-age students to enter university, often via an alternative entry program. Such programs “provide mature learners with admission criteria to university and introduce students to academic culture, including the practices and expectations of study” (Cullity, 2006, p. 177). In the words of Robert Cantwell and colleagues (2001) “the changing demographic profile of many universities has been reflected in the increasing presence of mature-aged students on campus and the increased acceptance of non-traditional qualifications allowing entry to undergraduate programmes” (p. 221). In fact, the recruitment of mature-age students is currently identified as one initiative to improve overall participation of students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008, p. 5).

Again, this is by no means unique to Australia. British universities for example have, since the mid-1980s, “been paying increasing attention to the

Chapter Two: The Second-Chance Journey
recruitment and retention of mature students” (Blaxter, Dodd, & Tight, 1996, p. 187) as a way of increasing overall levels of participation in higher education. The introduction of access courses in further education colleges in the United Kingdom (UK) has meant that “older applicants and those with non-traditional entry qualifications make up an increasing share of many university intakes, especially in the new university sector” (Reay, 2002, p. 398). Similarly, Ireland recognises that increasing the participation of mature-age students “is important for our dual interests in equity and sustainability” (Healy & Slowey, 2006, p. 365) and specifically targets “mature students” through measures introduced by the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007, p. 141). The Dublin Higher Education Authority also clearly identifies the importance of mature-age participation in helping universities to meet their equity agendas (Fitzpatrick Associates & O’Connell, 2005).

In terms of increasing participation of mature-age students, Australia is ahead of many other OECD countries, along with Finland, New Zealand, Sweden and the UK, with over 10% of 30 to 39 year olds enrolled in formal education, compared with the OECD country mean of 4.8: “the figures suggest that these countries offer more chances for adults to return to education” (Schuller, 2006, p. 9). Mature-age students in Australia are more likely to enter university via an alternative entry program, as many have come from backgrounds and situations which did not allow them the opportunity to complete high school or to achieve the qualifications necessary for university entrance (Cantwell, et al., 2001). Additionally, women are more likely than men to enter university later in life. In the over 35 age-group of university students, women outnumber men nationally by almost two to one (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2004) and a greater number of women than men enrol in mature-age alternative entry programs (Cullity, 2006, p. 182). Perhaps it is not surprising that equity measures aimed towards women and students of lower SES have had particular impact upon mature-age participation. These measures are explored in more detail in the following pages.
**Equity measures for women**

Equity programs which higher education institutions in Australia have been required to implement since the 1980s have had some success in improving women’s access to and participation in higher education. Prior to the 1980s women were significantly under-represented in higher education. A 1975 report to the Australian Schools’ Commission on “Girls, Schools and Society” (Bacchi, 1999, p. 15) reported that, at every level, girls received less education than boys. In addition, the report found that the subject choices of girls and boys at school perpetuated sex divisions in the labour market. For example, the under-representation of women in science and maths subjects, particularly in higher education, was seen as a concern in that it led to unequal opportunities in the paid work force. This resulted in an emphasis upon encouraging girls into non-traditional study areas.

Other western societies were reflecting similar concerns. Canada’s 1967 Royal Commission on the Status of Women (Bacchi, 1999) highlighted the under-representation of girls in educational institutions. In Britain, the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 was applicable to education, and focused on ending sex discrimination in the kinds of subjects and courses offered to students (Bacchi, 1999). Louise Morley’s (2003b) research into equity in higher education in Commonwealth countries indicates that some developing countries have also put in place various equity programs to try to increase the participation of women, such as quota systems for women in India and access programs for women in Uganda. However, change has been slow in these countries. For example, women’s participation at the University of Dar es Salaam, Uganda moved from 22.2% in 1979/80 to only 23.8% in 2000/1.

In Australia, a number of measures have been introduced over past years to try to address gender inequalities in education. The Australian government in 1990 formally identified women as an equity group in the higher education sector, introducing equity measures and targets to improve women’s representation in non-traditional fields of study and postgraduate courses (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1990). The objective
was to improve the balance of women’s participation in higher education, particularly in relation to engineering, business studies/economics, science, architecture and agriculture, as well as research and higher degrees.

An analysis of equity groups (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2004) for the period 1991-2002 reported that women had made progress in all areas of study, including at postgraduate levels. However, the most recent data indicates that they are still significantly under-represented in their access to and participation in non-traditional areas such as engineering, information technology and architecture. “Women are now over-represented in most fields, but not in all and certainly not at higher degree level” (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008, p. 15).

It is interesting to note that, as the access, participation and performance of women and girls in education improved, concerns began to be raised from the early 2000s onwards about the performance of boys (Trent & Slade, 2001) and the access and participation of men in non-traditional areas of study (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2004). To quote Ann Pheonix (2000):

> Concerns have been voiced in many countries about figures that indicate that girls are now gaining more qualifications than boys (including in Australia, some Caribbean countries, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, Scandinavia, the United Kingdom and the United States. (p. 97)

Headlines in British newspapers proclaimed “Girls Win all the Way from Primary to University” (Clare, 2002) and “Boys Lag Behind Girls in Literacy” (Editorial, 2002b). In Australia, extensive attention was paid to the fact that girls were performing so well, with the implication that this was at the expense of boys. Concern was so great that a House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education was established by the federal government to examine the problem. The committee’s report, “Boys, Getting it Right” (2002), was released to newspaper headlines such as that in the *Adelaide Advertiser*, “Landmark report finds signs education system is failing” (Maiden, 2002) and
in *The Canberra Times*, “Report urges action to reverse the decline in boys’ education” (C. Jackson, 2002).

*The Australian* (Editorial, 2002a) said that the report:

... sounds a timely warning. From early in their schooling through to university, the educational performance of boys is slipping. The gender equity strategies that have allowed girls to thrive at school have neglected boys’ educational needs. If the trend continues society will pay a heavy price (p.10).

As Carol Bacchi (1999) says, “‘Men’ and ‘boys’ are portrayed as ‘losing out’ because of the attention paid to ‘women’ and ‘girls’. The assumption is that the battle for ‘girls’ has been won, that ‘girls’ have had their day, and now it is time to turn attention and resources to ‘boys’ ..” (p. 125). Even the language used in the media was reflective of this attitude of boys and girls competing against each other for academic achievement, such as an article in *The West Australian*: “Boys have fought back in the tertiary entrance results to wrest some of the top spots from the girls” (Hewitt, 2002).

A similar concern about male participation has been raised in the higher education field. Morley (2003b) finds that “in Western Europe and the Caribbean, there is now considerable concern about failing boys and the possibility of the feminisation of the higher education system, as disaffected young men become more socially excluded” (p. 17). Morley describes the “backlash” and the “moral panic” that can accompany the success of gender equity programs that increase women’s participation and achievement in higher education, with another example being the “worry now in Malaysia .... that in higher education, women are now outnumbering and outshining men in undergraduate studies” (p. 19). Morley has named this process “the equity paradox” whereby the value of the ‘elite’ domain is diminished “if under-represented groups demystify the process and gain access” (p. 19). In drawing upon Bourdieu’s (1990) social reproduction theories of education Morley contends that, as part of the process by which “the elite constantly find
new badges of distinction for themselves...in the context of feminisation, the educational under-achievement of men and boys is the latest badge of distinction” (Morley, 2003b, p. 19).

In the hype surrounding these concerns rather less attention has been paid to another side of the picture, which a number of submissions to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education (2002) tried to point out. One such article, “Education – Class Ceilings: How Schools Limit Girls” in *The Age* (22 May, 2002), cites the following from the Victorian government submission:

> If a comparison is made of the success experienced by boys and girls after leaving school, a very different picture emerges. Leaving school early has been found to be more detrimental to girls than it is to boys. The average weekly earnings of young males are higher than the average weekly earnings of young females. Many women remain in low-paid jobs with little or no prospect of advancement to the most senior positions, and women still only earn 66 per cent of the male wage. (Russell, 2002, p. 4)

**Equity measures for low SES students**

There is considerable evidence that, once enrolled, students from low socio-economic backgrounds do just as well academically as do medium and high SES students across all age-groups (Archer, Cantwell, & Bourke, 1999; Cantwell, et al., 2001; Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008). However, the problem of access remains, with low SES students remaining under-represented in university populations worldwide (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). “People from low SES backgrounds participate below representative levels across most international higher education systems” (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008, p. 5).

One of the earliest and boldest attempts in Australia to increase low SES participation occurred in 1973, with the abolition of university tuition fees by the Whitlam Labor government. This led to an acceleration of enrolment in...
higher education across all age-groups with the most noticeable increase in
the 30 and over age-group. This measure also had the effect of encouraging
female participation, particularly amongst the mature-age cohort. The trend for
women to enter higher education continued throughout the 1980s and by
1991, 55% of all new students were women, with the largest increase in
female student participation occurring in the 25 and over age ranges
(Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1993). Free university
education provided an opportunity for many women who, as lower income
earners than men and/or financially dependent upon a male breadwinner, had
not previously been in a financial position to undertake university studies.

The introduction of enabling programs as a particular type of alternative entry
program for university began as another equity measure targeting the low
SES equity group: “They emerged, as part of the move from the late 1970s
onwards, to expand opportunities to wider constituencies of learners” (West,
1995, p. 136). Enabling Programs were designed as entry courses to
university, not in themselves higher education courses but ones that could
lead to higher education entry (Chadwick, 2007). This also had the effect of
increasing both mature-age and female participation, with a higher proportion
of women than men enrolling in such programs (Ramsey, Tranter, Sumner, &
Barrett, 1996). Research suggests a number of explanations for this, including
the fact that more girls than boys have in previous generations been early
school leavers (West, Hore, Eaton, & Kermond, 1986) and also that adult
males from low SES backgrounds may be inclined to hold negative
perceptions about higher education for men (Golding, 2006; McGivney,
1999a). These will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

With the introduction of the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) by
the Hawke Labor government on 1st January 1989, free university education
ceased (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1993). Research
indicates that the introduction of HECS in its original form was not
initially a deterrent to university participation, even amongst low-income
groups (Chapman & Ryan, 2003). However there is some evidence to suggest

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that the changes which the Howard coalition government made to the HECS system in 1997 disadvantaged mature-age students (Andrews, 1997). The changes effectively increased the amount that students were liable to repay as well as lowering the income threshold at which the repayments would begin. Andrews (1997) estimated that there was a 10% reduction in university applications from mature-age students due to the 1997 changes.

While the income threshold was increased as part of the 2004 Nelson Higher Education Reforms (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004), this was accompanied by a further increase in fees. The Philips Curran (2003) report on higher education says that there is “international evidence suggesting that disadvantaged groups are more debt averse, even when loan repayments are income-contingent” (p.5). Hence it is likely that an increased HECS debt may deter many students from low SES backgrounds from undertaking university study, particularly mature-age students who are more likely to have other financial and family responsibilities.

Another factor impacting upon mature-age students entering education is the growth of neo-liberalism over the past two decades, which has seen a tightening of the criteria in relation to welfare benefits, including government assistance for students (Wilson, 2000). This potentially impacts most heavily upon women. Within the breadwinner/carer model of the welfare state (O’Connor, Orloff, & Shaver, 1999; Thomson, 2000; Weeks, 2000) any government assistance for students is means-tested against the breadwinner’s income, the effect of which can deny those female students who are financially dependent upon a male breadwinner any independent means of financial support. In addition, the caring responsibilities expected of women means that mature-age female students are also more likely to be managing the competing demands of child-care and family obligations, further reducing their capacity for financial independence and hence independent decision-making regarding study options (Weeks, 2000).
Despite the equity measures introduced, as in other countries relatively little progress has been made in Australia in improving the higher education access and participation of people from low SES backgrounds overall. While the approach to defining SES by postcode has limitations (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008), it is nevertheless widely recognised that those from low SES backgrounds are significantly under-represented in Australian universities:

The share of university places for people from low SES backgrounds – approximately 15 per cent of places, compared with a population reference point of 25 per cent – has remained virtually unchanged for 15 years despite the overall expansion of access to higher education during that period. (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008, p. 2)

Throughout the second half of 2008, Australian universities were eagerly awaiting the findings of the Bradley Review of Higher Education – a review instigated by the federal Labor government, led by Kevin Rudd. Released in the final weeks of the year, the review findings may prove to be highly significant for both mature-age and low SES access and participation. Its recommendations include the need to increase the proportion of 25 to 34 year-olds with undergraduate degrees from the current level of 29% to a target of 40% by 2020, as well as increasing the proportion of low SES students to 20% (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008).

It is within the mature-age cohort entering university via alternative entry programs that the largest proportion of low SES students is found (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008, p. 26). A mature-age student entering university via such a pathway is typically from the low SES group, did not complete high school and is the first in the family to come to university (Abbott-Chapman, et al., 2004; Cullity, 2006; Kavanagh & Stockdale, 2007). As such, these students are often described in the literature as ‘second-chance students’ (Cantwell, et al., 2001; Giles, 1990).
Research into the Mature-Age Student Experience

Having succeeded in gaining entry to university, what then is the experience of such second-chance students? A search of the literature on the mature-age student experience over the past 20 to 30 years reveals that much of it focuses exclusively on the female experience from a feminist theoretical perspective. This is perhaps not surprising in the context of the increase in women’s participation in higher education in general, particularly in the mature-age cohort, combined with the “second wave of feminist epistemology and methodology” (Fonow & Cook, 1991, p. 1) that developed over this period.

A number of qualitative and quantitative studies were undertaken over these decades in the US, the UK and Australia, looking specifically at women’s experiences of formal education. Some research has examined the female experience across all ages while some has focused specifically on the female mature-age experience. It is therefore worth devoting some time here to the feminist perspectives which have informed much of this research.

Gender constraints on women as students

Much of the feminist research into the student experience indicates that males are more confident about their academic achievements and more likely to receive privileged time for their studies within their work, family and social situations. For females, time for study is not privileged in the same way, but is fitted in with their caring responsibilities of home, family and, in many cases, also paid work to supplement the family income. Feminist literature and research in this area highlight the gendered practices in the lives of the students and those around them, including the institution in which they are studying.
For example, Sandra Acker’s (1994) interviews with mature-age students in Britain revealed many examples of “the gendering of academic practice” (p. 70). She admits that “without a feminist perspective, I would have been unlikely to have initiated this hunt for gender” (p. 69). Acker’s interviews revealed differences between the sexes in terms of their attitudes and concerns about family relationships, with female students making much more frequent mention of partners and children than did male students. Also, male students tended to display more self-confidence than the female students. “More often women seemed to distance themselves from their achievements” (p. 65) while the male students tended more often to “show few self-doubts and high self-confidence” (p. 66). This is supported by Kerstin Shands (1998) who says that it should “not come as a surprise that women...students distrust their intellectual capacity more often than men and feel less at home in [higher education]” (p. 145).

The issue of women’s lack of confidence in their intellectual abilities is also explored in a study by Mary Field Belenky and colleagues (1986) that began in the late 1970s and interviewed 135 women who were recent graduates or current students in formal and informal educational settings. The women were of different ages, class, ethnic backgrounds and educational histories. Ninety were drawn from six formal educational institutions while 45 were drawn from the informal educational setting of family agencies which provided parenting education programs. The purpose of the research was to “explore with the women their experience and problems as learners and knowers as well as to review their past histories for changing concepts of the self and relationships with others” (p. 11). Some of the women reported that particular male teachers or lecturers treated them as intellectually “incapable” (p. 44) and many saw their male classmates as being the ones more likely to speak up in class and to receive praise from lecturers, while they themselves struggled to find the confidence and the words to speak up. “Even if I have it straight in my head, it’s very difficult for me to talk” (p. 51). However, once the women became more aware of their capacity for “knowing”, there was a growing sense of excitement and confidence about their capacity for intelligent
thought. “I really felt, for the first time, like I was really in college, like I was – I don’t know – sort of grown up” (p. 192).

While most of the women reported instances of being “treated as if they were stupid” (Belenky, et al., 1986, p.194) in both the formal and informal educational settings, a number of the women who attended one of the informal education institutions – a public health clinic for mothers and children – reported a very different experience. “Mothers who used the clinic were astonished to discover that members of the staff, nearly all of them women, believed in them” and “given confirmation, they felt they could do ‘just about anything’” (p. 195). When staff treated them as capable of learning and knowing, the women experienced a sense of relief, confidence and energy. The kind of teacher whom women found most helpful and of whom they spoke most highly was what Belenky et al. refer to as a “midwife-teacher” who draws out knowledge, rather than depositing it, as does a “banker-teacher” (p. 217). These teachers tended to be female and to “focus not on their own knowledge (as the lecturer does) but on the students’ knowledge” (p. 218). This teaching style is referred to as part of a “connected teaching” (p. 214) approach which, they argue, is better suited to women’s ways of knowing and learning.

Within the formal educational institutions of universities and colleges, many of the women behaved as “received knowers” (Belenky, et al., 1986, p. 37), that is, learning through listening to the “authorities” rather than engaging in discussion and seeing themselves as capable of constructing knowledge themselves. Many of the women who were interviewed had not yet learned that they were “capable of intelligent thought” (p. 37) and hence relied upon others – mainly male teachers – for the answers. Belenky et al. (1986) suggest that this is in part a product of the lack of female role models in leadership positions, with “few or no women as senior tenured faculty” (p. 44). These observations are consistent with those of other researchers such as Cobbin (1995) and Morley (1994) who contend that within the hierarchy of educational institutions, at all levels, there is a predominance of men in senior, decision-making positions and a predominance of women in positions of
lesser responsibility, often providing the clerical support to the males in power. This serves to “reinforce the construction that men are naturally suited to positions of authority” (Cobbin, 1995, p. 312).

A number of other qualitative studies of this period also highlighted the difficulties that female mature-age students were encountering in returning to education. For example, Arlene McLaren (1985) in her study with 48 women at a small adult education college in the UK in the 1970s, describes the “enormous odds against which some had to struggle to maintain their roles as students” (p. 144) mostly related to the demands of children, male partners and domestic responsibilities. Australian studies by Joan Martin (1988) and Susan Kelly (1987) highlight the difficulties for women in combining the roles of student/wife/mother, especially as most of the women in both studies received little, if any, practical or emotional support from their partners. In some cases there was active hostility from male partners as well as a number of marriage breakdowns. The issue of male partners feeling threatened by the woman’s return to study was one that arose in both studies. Many men seemed to be fearful of losing their traditional role of breadwinner and their dominance in the relationship (Kelly, 1987). For a number of the women, their studies were trivialised or treated in a patronising manner by partners while for others, the level of intolerance towards their studies by their partners was a contributing factor in the relationship ending. Both also found that women continued to carry the bulk of domestic and parenting duties at home, despite their study load. As a result, their participation in any personal leisure time was even more curtailed. Study time was seen as their personal time and to take any further time for leisure would have been unthinkable. “Because time is generally very limited, it seems that women students often withdraw from activities outside the home, such as involvement in political or social groups [and] it is her personal time for sleep, exercise and relaxation that is most affected” (Martin, 1988, p. 193).

Similar findings in more recent research indicate that despite the greatly improved access to higher education for women that has occurred over the
past 30 years, the problems and hurdles faced by mature-age female students have persisted over time. Christina Hughes (2002), in analysing the achievements of feminism since the 1960s, finds that “it is women’s responsibilities in terms of the family that appear to be the most resistant to change” (p.33). Much feminist research has demonstrated that care for others is overwhelmingly seen as women’s work. Carol Gilligan’s work (1987) on women’s moral development led her to conclude that a sense of responsibility towards others heavily influences the decisions that women make. “Women not only define themselves in a context of human relationships but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care” (Gilligan, 1987, p. 67). Gilligan maintains that this impedes a woman’s sense of herself as an independent being, to the point where independent acts are perceived as acts of selfishness. Making the decision to go to university – an independent act in itself – requires therefore a considerable degree of resistance to these ways of thinking. It is perhaps not surprising that “often a return to school creates significant role strain and feelings of guilt, inadequacy and self-blame over difficulties in handling multiple roles” (Rice, 1989, p. 552).

Madeleine Leonard’s (1994) research with 23 mature-age female university students in Ireland, for example, found that many family relationships were strained by the women’s return to education (p. 170). Not one of the women in this study who were living with a husband or male partner were receiving the level of practical, financial and emotional support that they would have liked from him and many faced active hostility. Some partners resented the financial expense, even when her own earnings were being used to finance her studies, while others resented the time spent away from the household and household tasks. Emotional support from husbands and partners was only forthcoming if her studies did not impinge on other aspects of family life. It was dependent “on not having their lives disrupted by their wives returning to study” (p. 171). Some husbands and partners regarded her studies as a pastime and resented any financial expense upon what was perceived as her ‘personal needs’, which included her educational expenses, hence reducing her studies to the status of a hobby. Even where there was overtly stated
support for their studies, this “rarely translated into practical help” (p. 171). Overall, one-third of the women “met with considerable resistance from their husbands over their decision to return to education” (p. 172).

This multiplicity of roles and the sense of role conflict is highlighted by Rosalind Edwards (1993) in her research with 31 mature-age female students during 1988 and 1989, from a number of polytechnic colleges and universities in the UK. This research illustrates the multiple tasks which women undertake when combining study with the care of their families, the lack of support they generally receive from male partners and the self-doubt that can ensue. While some of the women reported a growth in confidence that enabled them to demand equality in their relationships – leading in many cases to conflict and, at times, separation – many others felt guilty about their studies taking time away from their domestic responsibilities. They worked doubly hard to ensure that their studies affected their domestic life as little as possible. There were significant levels of verbal and physical abuse by male partners as well as many instances of “almost total lack of domestic and emotional support” (Edwards, 1993, p. 117). Edwards also alludes to the ways in which the women’s time was not their own and that the demands they faced from others could not be accurately measured by linear notions of time. Hughes (2002) differentiates between “male time and female time” (p. 133), with ‘male time’ being linear, clock time and ‘female time’ as time given up to the demands and needs of others. She and other writers such as Karen Davies (1990), David Knights and Pamela Odih (1995) and Lois McNay (2000) contend that society places a different value upon men’s time and women’s time, with men’s time being seen as more valuable and productive.

Other examples of more recent studies are those by Scott, Burns and Cooney (1993), who surveyed over 200 women from a range of Australian universities, and by Susan Smith (1996) who interviewed 20 women studying at further and adult education institutions in the UK. Both studies reveal high levels of hostility from partners, as well as difficulties juggling the multiplicity of roles and responsibilities of home, children and partner. In a number of cases these
were significant factors in the decision to terminate their studies. Lisa Wolf-Wendel and Kelly Ward (2003), in their analysis of the restraints of gender on female academics, talk about “the gendered expectations of family obligations and the ongoing disparity with which women take on the ‘second shift’ through maintenance of children and home” (Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003, p. 113). Female students are also subject to gendered expectations and encounter similar difficulties in their academic studies as do female academics in their paid roles. A number of other feminist writers, such as Sandra Jackson (2000), contend that the term “academic” equates to “male”. As a result, she tells us that “women’s voices in education are devalued and marginalised” and that “for many women, academic study appears to have little connection with their lives” (Jackson, 2000, p.281).

Yet, despite the difficulties for women in returning to study, such research also reveals that going to university or college is “a significant instrument of change” in their lives (McLaren, 1985, p. 171) even though they have to battle the odds to get there in the first place and then succeed academically. Leonard (1994) comments that a number of women experienced a sense of empowerment through their return to education, although this did not necessarily change their day-to-day responsibilities: “I’m more independent in my head now even if I go through the same motions” (Leonard, 1994, p. 173). Edwards (1993) also found that the majority of women in her study felt more confident since going to university or college: “They were listened to, and what they had to say accorded greater weight than it had been when they were ‘just somebody’s mum’ or ‘the woman behind the typewriter’” (p. 148). Similarly, both Kelly (1987) and Martin (1988) found that confidence and self-esteem generally rose amongst the women, as well as employment opportunities, even though the women paid a heavy price in terms of other aspects of their personal lives.

**What do we know about men as mature-age students?**

But what about the men? What do we know of their experiences as mature-age students? Undoubtedly there is much less published research to be found
which examines in-depth the experience of male mature-age students, particularly from the 1970s through to the 1990s. However, one significant and much-quoted Australian study (West, et al., 1986) surveyed both female and male students aged 25 and over at a number of Australian universities and Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs), prior to the amalgamation of CAEs with universities in the late 1980s.

Four types of mature-age students were identified: early school leavers (left school prior to gaining higher education entry qualifications), recyclers (upgrading qualifications and/or changing careers), returners (previously started a degree program, left and now returned) and deferrers (completed school, gained entry to higher education but deferred until now). The predominance of female respondents in the early school leavers and recyclers groups reflected the educational disadvantage of females in the two previous decades, in which girls tended to leave school earlier and/or to gain lower qualifications (such as certificate or diploma level qualifications in teaching, nursing and so on) than did boys.

Perhaps not surprisingly the early school leavers group had a high proportion of low SES students. The deferrers and returnees were much smaller groups with nearly half of the respondents studying part-time. The two main reasons given for choosing part-time study were family and work, with more women than men citing family commitments and more men than women citing work commitments. In all groups, students reported an impact on relationships with some relationships ending and some new ones beginning. Many of those who were married or in defacto relationships at the start of their studies reported an “enriched relationship” (West et al., 1986, p.58) while a number of others reported problems in the relationship as a result of their studies. Of the latter, most stayed together, while a small proportion separated. Interestingly, relationships were more likely to experience problems where the occupation of the female student, as a result of their studies, changed sufficiently to become higher in income and/or status than that of their male partner. This supports the findings of previously discussed research indicating the
difficulties that some male partners experience when there is a shift in the balance of power in the relationship from the traditional male breadwinner/female carer model. “While the balance of male identity depends upon a masculinist/feminine demarcation that associates loss of power with loss of masculinity, combining education with family life... will never be easy for women” (Edwards, 1993, p. 158).

However, West et al. (1986) further found that completing a degree also had a highly successful impact on the individual, in terms of personal satisfaction, communication skills, values, attitudes, academic interest and ability, leadership skills and self-esteem. Women appeared to have been particularly impacted upon, with these changes being greatest for the early school leavers group, which had a predominance of females. Results also indicated significant increases in occupational level and in happiness and satisfaction with work, for both females and males. Once again, these changes appeared to have been greater for females than for males. In particular there was substantial movement into the workforce by those previously involved entirely in “home duties”, with 75% of this group having moved into paid employment and over 50% into professional occupations. So while the focus of this study was not specifically on gender, nevertheless gender issues emerged with female mature-age students being shown to be substantially more affected than male mature-age students in terms of changes and outcomes.

In keeping with the shift in emphasis over the past ten to fifteen years towards improving higher education access and participation amongst low SES groups, there has recently been more research focusing on mature-age students, both female and male, specifically from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These include a number of US and UK studies examining class, race and/or ethnicity in the context of higher education participation. In contrast with earlier research, gender, while recognised and discussed, is less likely to be the main focus. One particular UK study is that by Diane Reay (2002) who conducted in-depth interviews with 23 mature students, eight of whom were male and fifteen female, attending an inner
London further education college. Seventeen in the sample were from “manual working class backgrounds” (p. 400), eight were from minority ethnic backgrounds and nineteen were the first in their families to aim for university. This study explores the issue of class inequalities of access to education as well as the difficulties involved in “the transition to higher education. They are trying to negotiate a difficult balance between investing in a new improved identity and holding onto a cohesive self that retained an anchor in what had gone before” (Reay, 2002, p. 430). Reay concludes that equity measures to improve access have not yet managed to change the “deeper more impenetrable” (p. 415) structures in society which mitigate against the easy movement of working class students into the middle class culture of higher education.

Kathleen Lynch and Claire O’Riordan (1998) also examine class barriers in higher education in their much larger study of 122 people across a number of different educational institutions in Ireland. While the focus of this study is not specifically on mature-age students, but students of all ages including some still at school, a small number of mature-age students were included. The issue of social class created difficulties and hurdles in many ways across all ages and for women and men alike. These included economic barriers and, perhaps more significantly, “the sense of being an outsider, of being treated as inferior” (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998, p. 471) within the educational environment. The authors conclude that there are “a number of ways in which economic, cultural and educational institutions interact to promote inequality through a series of procedures and processes in families, communities, schools and colleges” (Lynch & O’Riordan, 1998, p. 474). They also mention additional gender-specific difficulties which emerged for both male and female mature-age students. For women, lack of adequate child-care was reported as a gender issue, while for men there was some evidence that “the peer group culture among working class men was more hostile to prolonged participation in education than among women” (p. 468).
Veronica McGivney’s (1999a) research into adult participation in further education and training in the UK supports this particular finding in relation to working class male attitudes towards education. McGivney (1999a) contends that:

Men’s attitudes to education are bound up with the traditional role they have been socialised into expecting and wanting, and into which many are still locked by male cultural norms and values.... [including] a strongly held conviction among men in some working-class communities that it is appropriate for women to take part in education but not for themselves (p. 133).

Similarly, Barry Golding’s (2006) research with men in rural Australia indicates that men in these predominantly low socio-economic areas are “much less likely to become involved in... adult learning” (Golding, 2006, p. 189). Marguerite Cullity’s (2006) research examining the outcomes of alternative entry programs for mature students in Australia also concludes that, as such programs attract considerably more women than men “these programs need to explore ways to improve male student participation and completion rates” (Cullity, 2006, p. 194). Such research appears to indicate that, amongst the lower SES mature-age student group, the under-representation of men is, at least in part, related to gendered ideas about identity. Further exploration of the relationship between education and identity for both women and men may be useful at this point.

**Education and Identity**

Many would argue that undertaking further study is less of an identity issue for men, in that it is congruent with the historical and traditional view of a man’s identity for him to be a ‘scholar’, whereas this is not the case for a woman. For example, Jane Mills (1989) in her search for historical definitions and categories for women found that the only definition for a woman as a scholar that she could find was the term “bluestocking” (p. 30). Terms such as
‘scholar’ and ‘student’ historically referred only to men. Mills tells us that, from the early nineteenth century onwards, bluestocking was used derisively to describe “any woman who displayed signs of learning” which was itself perceived as “unnatural” (Mills, 1989, p.31).

The history of the term bluestocking is interesting in itself. It appears to date from a period between about 1750 and 1790 in England, when a group of “active upper-middle-class women decided to banish cards from their drawing rooms, insist on learned conversation, and create their own salons” (Bodek, 1976, p. 187), this at a time when education for women was socially unacceptable. Even amongst the upper classes the education of women “was often grievously neglected or was merely superficial, as schooling in fashion and manners” (Ferguson, 1985, p. 7). The English salon, modelled after the French, became a place in which a woman could more acceptably “sharpen her wits and gather around herself other educated women and men” (Bodek, 1976, p. 185). Initially, bluestocking members were both women and men. In fact, Katelyn Ludwig (2006) claims that the term bluestocking was derived from the blue stockings worn by Benjamin Stillingfleet, an intellectual and a scientist, who was invited by Elizabeth Vesey to one of her salon meetings in the late 1750s. Blue stockings, in contrast to black, indicated less formality. Bodek (1976) tells us that “Bluestocking coteries were, in fact, rather informal in dress; however the word meant witty or learned people of both sexes” (p. 187). ‘To wear your blues’ hence became a metaphor for intellectual discussion. Bodek (1976) also draws attention to “the ingenuity of women, who, when excluded from the educational mainstream created an alternate route which satisfied their desire to learn, while at the same time camouflaged their activities behind the acceptable role of hostess” (p. 186).

As the group developed, it became exclusively a women’s group where “female intellect and wit helped to demolish old ideas about the inferior social place and mental capacities of women” (Ferguson, 1985, p. 8). In the context of the strong prejudice against educating women and hence against women of intellect, the word bluestocking therefore began to take on a derogatory
connotation. “By 1782 ‘Bluestocking’ referred to a learned, pedantic lady” (Bodek, 1976, p. 187), and was by no means intended as a compliment. While the term connoted masculine traits of intelligence, it also implied “feminine use of wile and guile” (Mills, 1989, p. 31), and women known as bluestockings were generally regarded with suspicion. Despite this, many of the women involved in the group continued with their informal education and between them published a number of literary works. Moira Ferguson’s (1985) collection of works of early British women writers contains many examples of works of poetry, fiction and literary criticism from the bluestocking circle, by female “social reformers” (p. 9) such as Sarah Robinson Scott, Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Anne Radcliffe who, amongst others, wrote extensively of women’s oppression. From the bluestocking circle also came “the first fiction of resounding intellectual success by a woman” (Ferguson, 1985, p. 35), Fanny Burney’s *Evalina*.

As such, the bluestocking circle, with its message to women to “be assertive, take the lead, wait for no man, write, create, be vocal, do not flinch from flouting custom” (Ferguson, 1985, p. 21) is now often regarded as an important predecessor of more recent feminist movements, with the term being reclaimed by later feminists as one meaning a woman of intellect, who challenges the social conventions of her time and fights for women’s rights to education (Bodek, 1976; Ferguson, 1985; Ludwig, 2006). Hence, the term is now generally associated with “the long honourable history of battles over fundamental political issues that engage women today” (Ferguson, 1985, p. 32).

Indeed, such issues do continue to be of significance to women’s educational experiences. Sandra Jackson (2002) for example, maintains that women continue to be denied full citizenship within higher educational classrooms, due to the “invisible pedagogies and mythical discourses” (p. 75) that operate to devalue women and women’s contribution within higher education institutions:
Within the public sphere of the university... being included intellectually and culturally can mean conforming to traditional male-defined and patriarchal definitions of culture and intellect. To succeed in higher educational institutions, women may have to take on men's way of knowing, unable to develop their own. (p. 68)

Other writers such as Gayle Letherby (1994) contend that “the dominant view in our society is that a woman’s primary function is motherhood” and that “social attitudes encourage women to measure their own self-worth in terms of the capacity/desire to mother” (p. 526). Kate Figes (1994) discusses the lack of support and encouragement given to mothers who take on another role, such as paid worker or student even though “women are capable of more than one role at a time” (p. 76). She points out that, for fathers, it is expected that men will have significant roles in addition to fatherhood, hence they are not faced with these conflicts. However, “it is rare for the traditional roles to be completely reversed: only in 3% of families does the father take primary responsibility for children” (p. 94). The gendering of identities in which women are framed as carers and men as breadwinners (Lister, 2000; Orloff, 1996; Weeks, 2000) or even “'man-the-soldier' and 'woman-the-mother'” (Weeks, 1996, p. 72) can therefore significantly inhibit women with family and caring responsibilities from taking on the demanding additional role of student.

Judy Giles (1990) writes of her own experiences as a wife and mother on her journey through higher education, beginning with an Open University foundation course and progressing to completing a PhD, and the effects of this upon her identity. “My self-image is more confident but also more fluid – it can shift from seeing myself as ‘Dr Giles, lecturer and teacher of students’ to ‘Judy, part-time secretary, housewife and mother’ (p. 2). She also talks of her struggles with self-doubt as she began to question her previous sense of identity. “For years... I saw my social role as primarily domestic, dependent and deferential” and of feeling “split between the two worlds I inhabited, the world of home and the world of college” (p. 3). Jan Pahl (1989), in her study of money and marriage, found that men continue to be defined as the...
breadwinner even when a woman contributes “a higher proportion of her earnings to housekeeping” and that as a result, the husband “still feels justified in spending more than his wife on leisure” (p. 170). For many women therefore, justifying the use of family income on her own education is a huge challenge in itself.

However, there is also evidence to indicate that becoming a student is not necessarily more congruent with a man’s identity, unless he is also white and from a more privileged socio-economic background. Iris Marion Young (1990) argues that “dominant cultural imagery continues to identify [white middle class men] as the paradigm professionals” (p. 140).

McGivney (1999a) also tells us that in the UK education system:

Some male groups are significantly underrepresented in all forms of post-compulsory education and training, notably those with fewest qualifications and skills, early school leavers with a history of exclusion or poor school attendance, manual workers, older men, some black minority groups. (p. 131)

McGivney’s (1999a) research indicates that, for many men within such groups, learning is viewed as “a process that ends on leaving school” (p. 133). Adult learning is seen as a “feminine rather than masculine activity” (p. 133) and “as humiliating and a step back rather than a step forwards” (p. 134). McGivney argues that the low educational aspirations of men from lower SES backgrounds are, to a significant degree “the result of socially constructed ideas of masculinity and perceptions of the interdependence of masculinity and work” (p. 134). Amongst these cohorts, the identity of man as breadwinner conflicts with the identity of man as student. Similarly, Madeleine Arnot (2002) notes that “hyper-masculinist identities” (pp. 260-261) are not compatible with study and learning. This theme of the masculine identity inhibiting men from undertaking adult learning is further developed by Barry Golding (2006). He argues that men feel excluded from adult education programs which are “typically oriented towards women’s needs” (p. 189). As
such, he argues that “a service that is not identified as being specifically for men is unlikely to attract a large number of men” (p.199) and that, to attract more men into adult learning it is important “not to have services delivered in a physical environment primarily for the use of women and children” (p. 199).

This labelling of women’s spaces and pursuits as being incompatible with those for men seems to be simply another version of stereotyping female as inferior and also somehow threatening to male identity. A study by Zoë Morrison and colleagues (2005) on gender inequality at a British university found that “activities or spaces where women predominated were often viewed as negative, inferior, marginalised, and even mysterious” (p. 153). On the one hand activities and places for women were devalued (such as women’s sports, women’s colleges) and on the other hand women were excluded from the higher status activities and places which were reserved for men, such as elite sport, male only colleges and some social groups. Such findings have echoes of Bernice Sandler’s (1999) descriptions of the “chilly climate” (p.1) within the work-place and the classroom where there are “everyday inequities through which women are treated differently because of their gender... creating an environment which is indeed chilly – an environment that dampens women’s self-esteem, confidence, aspirations and their participation” (p. 1).

Instead of perpetuating such stereotypes and beliefs by creating separate spaces for men to learn, unpolluted by women and children, McGivney (1999a) supports the argument for encouraging change within male culture, by promoting learning “as a normal and acceptable male activity from an early age” and encouraging “more participation by men in the care and upbringing of children” (p.135). Keeping men away from women and children in separate learning spaces would do nothing to change “the persisting belief that childcare is the exclusive responsibility of women” (McGivney, 1999a, p.135). Indeed, such research with men seems to indicate that it is the same enduring and limiting descriptions of male as breadwinner and female as carer that can
make adult learning problematic for both men and women, particularly those from lower SES backgrounds.

Other literature supports the view that socio-economic factors, including social class and race, affect the extent to which mature-age study impacts upon identity. Arguably this is likely to be the case for both women and men, although the effect of mature-age study upon male identity is less well understood, simply because the available literature has overwhelmingly been written by women about women. Valerie Walkerdine (1990) for example describes the contradictions she experienced as a female working class student in the UK:

*I felt split, fragmented, cut off from that suburban semi, where I couldn’t tell my mother what was happening. Where nobody knew what academic work was (and where it would have been better to announce that I was going to produce a baby, not a thesis). I felt, in the old place, as in the new, that if I opened my mouth it would be to say the wrong thing. Yet I desired… to produce utterances which, if said in one context, would not lead to rejection in the other.* (p. 162)

While some of the contradictions that Walkerdine (1990) describes are related to gender – such as it being more acceptable to produce a baby than a thesis – others are related to family background and social class. Similarly, Gail Paasse’s (1998) Australian case study research with two female mature-age students demonstrates the different impact upon identity as a result of social class. While both gained in confidence and developed a new perception of themselves, one felt “split between her identity as working class and her identity as an educated person” (p. 104). The other, who identified herself as middle class and mixed with a number of university educated people within her family and social circle, felt no such tension or contradictions. Another example is that of bell hooks (1994) who, in talking about her own experiences as a black, working class student at an American university, says “We were encouraged, as many students are today, to betray our class origins” (p. 182). Now, as a university professor, she empathises with the
difficulties many students encounter in negotiating “the contradictions between the behaviours necessary to ‘make it’ in the academy and those that allowed them to be comfortable at home, with their families and friends” (p. 182).

It is therefore important to acknowledge that, while considerably more attention has been paid to women than men in the literature on the mature-age student experience, socio-economic factors, as well as gender, play a significant role in both the male and female experience of education. In the words of Barbara Merrill (1999) “the mature student experience has to be placed within the context of their biographies” which include “the forces of gender and class” (p. 204).

**Implications for Higher Education Institutions**

The impact of higher education on mature-age students appears to be profound, yet confusing, perhaps especially so for those who are from lower SES backgrounds, which often also means they are the first amongst their families and friends to enter university. In particular, there is a wealth of research to indicate that mature-age female students continue to face particular difficulties and challenges as they struggle to balance their domestic roles with their studies. The traditional roles of women as carers and men as breadwinners mitigate against independent study and achievement for women, while at the same time there is some compelling evidence that men may also be inhibited from further education by the constraints of these same roles.

In addition, despite the growth of equity measures which encourage mature-age student participation in higher education, the dominance of white middle class male culture within higher education institutions can be an alienating one for women, as well as for men from lower SES backgrounds. These students experience confusion and contradiction as they struggle to span the two different cultures of home and university.
While it may often be assumed that education is an agent of social change, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that, on the contrary, education is an agent of social reproduction. Given the persistence of the under-representation of low SES students at universities internationally, despite many years of equity policies to address this, it can be argued that the higher education system continues to reproduce the inequalities of previous decades. More efforts are required by policy makers, educationalists and higher education institutions in order to effectively widen participation in an equitable manner to increase the diversity of higher education students, across age, gender and socio-economic background.

The research project described in the following chapters adds to the existing literature on the experiences of mature-age students, both female and male. It supports previous findings in relation to the types of struggles they face, yet also the transformative effects upon their lives as individuals. In addition, this research provides further evidence for the argument that the broader higher education equity agenda can effectively be furthered by measures designed to attract mature-age students to university and to assist their entry, participation and academic success.
Chapter Three: Steps in the Process: The Story 
Behind the Story

Introduction

There is a riddle that I’ve been told a couple of times now on the university campus where I work. It’s a variation of another quite similar riddle so it may sound familiar to others reading this. It goes something like this:

A university student is admitted to hospital following a car accident. There is a young intern on duty, who takes one look at the student and says: “I can’t treat this patient – I’m not allowed to treat immediate family members. This patient is my....... 

The listener must try to guess the relationship. So what does the listener usually say? “Brother? Sister! .... No? ....Well, what about nephew or niece? Or cousin? Or could it be son or daughter?”

Those who have just read the previous chapter will, of course, be able to guess that the answer to this particular riddle is “mother” – although fortunately for the impact of the riddle, not many people think of this.

For this riddle to be considered witty, clever or surprising, it relies upon a common perception of university students as being essentially young, more the age-group of sons and daughters than that of mothers and fathers. Stories about university students are usually stories about young people on the brink of adulthood. Indeed, before I began working at a university, I too had only a very limited understanding of the existence of mature-age students, let alone their experiences. My own experience had been that of entering university straight from high school as an 18 year old in the early 1970s, when there were relatively very few mature-age students on Australian university campuses. I had grown up in a family which had emigrated to Australia from
England in the mid-1960s, from what would have been regarded as the British ‘upper middle class’ and in which going to university was seen as the normal thing to do. As the youngest of four children, there was an expectation that I would follow in my older siblings’ footsteps by going to university as soon as I finished school. Gender was not an issue as far as education was concerned – my sisters and I were strongly encouraged to aspire academically, as was my brother. I had very little understanding of the social and economic pressures preventing so many others from having the opportunity to even consider university as an option.

I therefore had no real exposure to the world of the mature-age student until I started working as a university counsellor in the mid-1990s; this, despite the fact that my mother had returned to university the year after I had begun my undergraduate degree. At that time, in the mid-1970s, mature-age students on university campuses were relatively unusual and my mother met few others within her own age group; yet I was not so very surprised by my mother’s return to university. I had always thought of her deferment of university studies, which she first began as a young school-leaver in the late 1940s, as simply the result of an early marriage and four children in quick succession, rather than the more complex mix of gender and other factors that can limit individual choice. It was only much later that I developed a better understanding of the extent to which my mother’s choices had been limited, as a wife and the mother of young children, and why her encouragement of her children’s academic achievement had therefore been so strong.

It was not until I started working as a university counsellor in 1994 that I began meeting and hearing the stories of many different mature-age students, whose numbers by then were growing on university campuses. Even today, despite this continued growth over the past 20 to 30 years, mature-age students still lack visibility in a general sense. The following pages describe the development of a research project in which other stories are told, stories which give greater visibility to mature-age students and their experiences; hence this chapter tells the story behind these stories.
Every story has a beginning, a middle and an end (Elliott, 2005; Ewick & Silbey, 1995): this one begins with my growing interest in hearing the stories of the experiences of mature-age students at university, how it was that I was exposed to such stories and how my admiration grew steadily for what these students were achieving in the face of many other pressures and demands. The story continues with my decision to conduct formal research, so that these ‘other’ student voices could have a wider audience and perhaps even exert some influence on higher education practices. What then follows is a description of how and why I chose the methods by which to conduct this research; how to seek the participants, engage more closely with their stories, explore the various possibilities of meanings within them and ultimately present the voice of these students to others in the public domain.

**How Did It All Begin?**

The idea of conducting formal research to explore the experiences of mature-age students arose directly from my interest and experience as a student counsellor within a university setting. For the previous ten years I had been providing a counselling service to students at the Central Coast Campus of the University of Newcastle in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. This Campus has a particularly high proportion of mature-age students. Through my professional work I had been hearing the personal stories of many of these students. Their stories were overwhelmingly ones of courage in the face of adversity. Most had faced significant challenges and difficulties in their journeys towards becoming university students and in their efforts to continue with and succeed with their studies (Stone, 1999, p. 15). Female mature-age students were over-represented, both amongst the student population as a whole and amongst those using the counselling service. Therefore, I became more familiar with the women’s stories. However, the men’s stories that I did hear also tended to be ones of struggle, determination and courage. The
difference was often that they talked of more support from their families, female partners and work-places.

Undoubtedly, mature-age students face a range of hurdles in returning to study, particularly at the higher education level, and the personal stories of those seeking assistance through the counselling service bore this out. Women with whom I talked in my role as a counsellor often seemed to be particularly disadvantaged, as they struggled with balancing their roles of wife, mother and student, often with little confidence in their academic abilities and little support from partners and families. In many cases their studies were regarded as secondary to their other responsibilities or indeed, almost as a kind of personal leisure activity. However, despite this level of struggle, another common feature amongst these students, both female and male, was the strong sense of personal achievement, a growing confidence and a new sense of identity and purpose. No matter the difficulties, it was all worth it. As a counsellor, I was privileged to hear these stories and to witness the changes that occurred in their own sense of themselves, as a direct result of being at university.

Through this process of talking with many mature-age students in a counselling setting, I began to wonder to what extent the stories of those presenting at the counselling service were reflective of the experiences of mature-age students in general. I was aware that it could be helpful to higher education institutions to have a clearer understanding of the particular issues facing mature-age students, in order to appropriately support these students to succeed and graduate. I also hoped that enhancing the visibility of these students and their achievements would highlight the importance of equity programs which encourage mature-age access, participation and success in higher education.

In the process of searching for other relevant literature, I found that some significant qualitative work with female mature-age students stood out, mainly from the 1980s and 1990s (Edwards, 1993; Kelly, 1987; Leonard, 1994;
Martin, 1988; McLaren, 1985; Smith, 1996). As discussed in the previous chapter, the interest in such research at that time coincided with the increase in women’s participation in higher education internationally over these two decades (Cobbin, 1995; Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1990; Morley, 2003a; Phillips Curran, 2003). I could find no similar research exclusively on the male mature-age university experience and there also appeared to be relatively few studies which looked at the mature-age university experience of both women and men. One of these is the large scale quantitative study by Leo West and colleagues (1986) described in more detail in the previous chapter, which provides some valuable insights into different types of mature-age students.

With most of the research being at least 10 to 20 years old and much of this looking exclusively at the female experience, it seemed timely for some contemporary research into the mature-age experience of both women and men to be generated.

The Place

The University of Newcastle is located on the east coast of Australia in the state of NSW. It has an enrolment of approximately 28,000, with students mostly located at its two main campuses, one in the city of Newcastle itself and the other about 80 kilometres south on the NSW Central Coast. As a regional university it attracts a high proportion of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In fact, amongst Australian universities it has the highest proportion of students from the identified equity group of low SES, with a participation rate of 27.88% of students from this group, compared with averages of 13.94% for NSW and 15.55% for Australia (The University of Newcastle, 2008, p. 42). As a result it has a strong equity focus on supporting low socio-economic students of all ages.
The main campus at Newcastle is located about 160 kilometres north of Sydney and has an enrolment of around 22,000 students. The smaller campus is located in an area of the NSW coast-line known as the Central Coast, approximately half-way between Sydney and Newcastle. The Central Coast Campus first began in 1989, beginning with an enrolment of 50 university students, and then expanding over the following years to the present enrolment of approximately 4,000. As demonstrated by Australian census data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2001; 2006) the Central Coast region of NSW is an area that is economically and socially disadvantaged, with higher than state average levels of unemployment, families in receipt of government welfare payments and low income earners. Local council census data reports (Forrest & Howard, 2004) show that this region has considerably lower university participation rates than the state average (2.5% compared with 4.6% for NSW and 5.4% for Sydney) and that it has a much lower proportion of residents who have completed a university degree (7.6% compared with 13.5% for NSW and 16.4% for Sydney).

The Central Coast Campus was established at a time of international widening of participation in higher education. In Australia, from the late 1980s in particular, women and students from low SES backgrounds were being encouraged through national equity programs to enter university (Department of Education, Employment and Training, 1990). This continued into the late 1990s, with a range of equity funding incentives to encourage universities to expand their operations into areas where traditionally participation in higher education had been low (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999). Into the relatively disadvantaged area of the NSW Central Coast, the arrival of a university campus brought with it opportunities which had not before been possible for many sections of the community. This was particularly the case for mature-age students and young people from lower income families. With the expansion of university courses and places over the subsequent years, these opportunities have increased. As a result of many of these factors, the student body of the Central Coast Campus has included, from its inception, a high proportion of mature-age students and students from...
lower SES backgrounds, many of whom are also the first in their families to go to university (Stone, 2004).

However, it is also important to note another factor that impacted upon the demographic mix of the Central Coast Campus, well before it officially existed. Since 1981 the University of Newcastle’s Open Foundation Program had been offered in the Central Coast region, operating as evening classes out of a local high school. An agreement was established with Macquarie University, located in the north-west of the Sydney Metropolitan area, that it would accept Open Foundation as an entry qualification to its distance undergraduate programs (Smith, B. 1987). With the opening of the Central Coast Campus, there already existed a pool of Open Foundation students keen to enter university studies in the local area.

Josephine May (2005), in relating the history of the Open Foundation program, describes the program as “a pathway for adults to re-create their future” (p. 59) and indeed there appeared to be no shortage of mature-age students keen to do just that in the Central Coast region, just as they had been doing in Newcastle since the inception of Open Foundation at the University of Newcastle in 1974. May (2005) tells us that, from an initial intake of 40 students, numbers grew rapidly to an intake of 224 by 1978, with no sign of decreasing. With the expansion of the program to the Central Coast, numbers have continued to grow to the present figure of around 1800 Open Foundation students each year enrolling across the two campuses (May, 2005, p. 61).

As mentioned in the previous chapter, while most Australian universities define a mature-age student as anyone over 21, a significant number of mature-age students are aged in their 30s, 40s and 50s, who have not been in any formal education for perhaps 15 to 20 years or more. These mature-age students face a range of hurdles in returning to study, particularly at the higher education level and many have entered university via an enabling or other type of alternative entry program run by the university (Bourke, Cantwell, &
Archer, 1998; Cullity, 2006). “Many universities have in place an enabling program of some kind which enables otherwise ineligible persons to meet the entry requirements of an undergraduate degree” (Bourke, et al., 1998, p. 1).

In order to meet the definition of an enabling program under commonwealth funding guidelines, the program of study must be one that is designed purely and simply to lead towards higher education entry. It must not of itself lead to any other educational award or qualification (Chadwick, 2007). On the basis of their results in an enabling program, students can apply for a place in a university degree program. Cullity (2006) tells us that “13 of the nation’s 44 universities conduct alternative entry programs (AEPs) for mature students” (p. 177). Indeed, as the previous chapter describes, many enabling programs are directed specifically towards mature-age students, who are often amongst the most disadvantaged in terms of access to university, with many having had little positive experience of study behind them and a sizable proportion coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with little if any family history of higher education (Abbott-Chapman, et al., 2004). “Non-traditional modes of entry give them a second chance” (Cantwell, et al., 2001, p. 221).

**The People**

I chose to conduct research with students who had entered undergraduate degree programs via the University of Newcastle’s enabling program for mature-age students, known as the Open Foundation Program. This program has been shown to be particularly effective “both academically and from a social equity perspective” (Bourke, et al., 1998, p. 9). Amongst students who complete the program there is a high rate of continuing education (Cullity, 2006) and a level of retention and academic achievement at undergraduate levels which matches that of traditional-entry students (Cantwell, et al., 2001). I also wished to interview students in their second to final year of undergraduate studies, as they would be more likely than a commencencing
student to be in a position to reflect upon and consider their individual experiences and what these experiences had meant to them.

The participants therefore were 20 mature-age students in the second to final year of their undergraduate studies at the Central Coast Campus of the University of Newcastle, 19 of whom had entered their program of study via the Open Foundation Program. One male student had entered university through the process of ‘recognition of prior learning’ in which the university takes into account prior work, educational experience and qualifications. I chose to interview this particular male volunteer as I had hoped to interview a mixture of male and female students roughly proportionate to the mature-age student population as a whole. All the students who volunteered to participate were aged over 30. The ratio of females to males in the student population aged over 30 at the campus was almost exactly 3 to 1. By choosing to include this male student I would be able to interview 15 women and 5 men, a representative group, at least in terms of gender. I was therefore reluctant to turn away a willing male volunteer especially as this particular student met all the other criteria for the research. I decided that the importance of having all 20 as former Open Foundation students was in this case outweighed by the importance of trying to achieve a representative balance of male to female students in the sample.

In order to conduct research with University of Newcastle students, it was necessary to seek ethics approval from the University of Newcastle’s Human Ethics Committee, as well as that of the University of Sydney. Once both these approvals were granted (Appendices 1 and 2) the research could begin.

The main objectives of the research were: to hear the stories and explore the experiences of women and men along their journey as mature-age university students; to gain more understanding of the factors that contributed both positively and negatively to this journey; to discover the extent to which their journey had been a transformative one for themselves and possibly others around them; and to consider how institutions may better encourage and
support mature-age students to enter university and succeed with their studies.

From my experience of talking with mature-age students and my reading of other available literature (Edwards, 1993; Kelly, 1987; Leonard, 1994; Martin, 1988; Morrison, 1996; Paassee, 1998; Reay, Ball, & David, 2002; Smith, 1996; West, et al., 1986) I anticipated that factors such as gender, family support, friendships, confidence and previous experience of study may each play a significant role. I also strived to remain open-minded to other possibilities and other significant factors for each individual. I was keen to use a narrative approach to the research, to listen to each individual’s story and to the meanings that each ascribed to their experiences, without imposing upon them a set of preconceived ideas (Elliott, 2005). In this way, I hoped to be able to compare and contrast the rich and detailed stories of individual mature-age students, both male and female, and to find any common threads or themes.

The Theories

This research is informed primarily by postmodern feminist theory. In the words of Anna Yeatman (1994) “feminist theorising has introduced into postmodernism the politics of voice and representation” (p. 13). While postmodernist theory emphasises the meanings that are attached to events through language and discourse (Alvesson, 2002), feminist theory makes visible the ‘excluded other’ (Yeatman, 1994).

To expand on this a little further, postmodernist theory argues that reality is socially constructed, that it is “as much constructed in talking and writing as it is ‘out there’ “ (Rice & Ezzy, 2000, p. 22). Postmodernism postulates that the meanings and understandings given to events and situations are culturally and temporally situated and therefore constantly liable to change, as a result of the political forces of oppression and power within the particular culture.
(Alvesson, 2002; Rice & Ezzy, 2000; Yeatman, 1994). The generation of knowledge is “an historically specific and contingent activity” (Yeatman, 1994, p. 20). Concepts such as truth and reality are represented and indeed determined by the particular political practices within a society. These practices are in turn reinforced by the “dominant discourses” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 152), or the prevalent stories or narratives within a particular culture and time, which are themselves a representation of those same social and political practices. Therefore there is no fixed or pre-determined truth – “certainty must be regarded sceptically, if not rejected outright” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 4) – but only the ‘truth’ that is representative of the dominant practices and discourses within a particular society. “The worlds we study are created, in part, through the texts that we write and perform about them” (Denzin, 1997, p. xiii).

An essential feature of postmodernism is the method of deconstruction of texts and narratives to reveal alternative meanings which have been suppressed or hidden by dominant discourses. “Postmodernism questions traditional assumptions and deconstructs them; that is, it shows the ambiguity and contextuality of meaning” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 52). Through this process of deconstruction, other meanings, other stories, other explanations are revealed, with the potential to give voice and recognition to subjects and experiences previously subordinated to the point of invisibility. “Aspects that have been repressed to the limit of non-existence are elicited through deconstruction to be central; thus the marginal is transformed into the principal” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 154).

Some writers argue that postmodernism is politically neutral, even conservative, concerned with deconstructing the dominant discourses to allow for multiple interpretations yet not taking a particular position (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Yeatman, 1994). “Does focus on the text obscure enduring oppressive institutions and practices?” (Olesen, 1994, p.165). In fact, Ewick and Selby (1995) ask us “to consider the extent to which narratives may actually be complicit in constructing and sustaining the very patterns of
silencing and oppression” (p. 205) that may be revealed by a deconstructive, postmodern approach to sociological research. In contrast, a number of writers (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Olesen, 1994; Rice & Ezzy, 2000; Smith, 1987; Yeatman, 1994) credit feminist theories with having “politicised the research process” (Rice & Ezzy, 2000, p. 18) by actively challenging the dominant political practices and power structures. By challenging conventional research methods that have been developed from the dominant male perspective, feminist theorists have advocated methods that allow women to talk about their own experiences from their own perspective (Harding, 1987; Oakley, 1981; 1992; Smith, 1987; 1996). Feminist approaches also demonstrate that texts can be studied from the female perspective, revealing very different stories and meanings (Swindells, 1989) and indeed that human behaviour can also be understood very differently (Gilligan, 1982). Feminist research acts to legitimize and prioritise the experience of the person being studied – in particular to legitimise women’s knowledge and to prioritise “women as knowers” (Olesen, 1994, p. 160). “The only way of knowing a socially constructed world is knowing it from within” (Smith, 1987, p. 92).

Feminist research also highlights the political and ethical aspects of sociological research in general and draws attention to the process of reflexivity, where the researcher is intrinsically and significantly connected with the research process and outcomes (Rice & Ezzy, 2000). Fonow and Cook (1991) describe reflexivity as “the tendency of feminists to reflect upon, examine critically and explore analytically the nature of the research process” (p. 2). While reflecting upon the research process is not exclusive to feminist scholars – fieldwork and ethnographic studies may also be reflective in nature for example – Fonow and Cook (1991) make the point that “feminist epistemology carries this tradition of reflection one step further by using it to gain insight into the assumptions about gender relations underlying the conduct of the enquiry” (p. 2).
What results from the interrelationship between postmodernist and feminist theories has become known as postmodern feminism, a deconstructive orientation in which minority or subjugated voices are privileged (Olesen, 2005; Yeatman, 1994). It seeks to question and challenge existing social and political practices, including the structures of power. “Science... is dismembered as a culture to reveal its practices, discourses and implications for control of women’s lives” (Olesen, 2005, p. 247). It is where “a politics of representation comes together with a politics of difference” (Yeatman, 1994, p. 14). Gender relations and the social, cultural and political discourses on men and women are therefore inevitably sources of interest and enquiry for postmodern feminist research (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). Such discourses are recognised as being culturally located and hence variable over context and time. Postmodern feminism would argue that “there can never be a [sic] feminist science, sociology, anthropology or epistemology, but only many stories that different women tell about the different knowledge they have” (Harding, 1987, p. 188). Indeed, hearing the many stories of different women was to be an essential feature of the research that I was undertaking.

However, there are also many stories that different men tell which are another valuable source of information on gender relations and gendered cultural discourse. Feminist theorists such as Joan Alway (1995) point out that feminist research, while concerned primarily with gender issues, is also concerned more broadly with understanding oppressed groups. Seeking male as well as female perspectives leads to a more thorough exploration of the experiences of such groups. Postmodern feminism also argues that there is value in “the combination of different gender-relevant experiences and attitudes” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 219).

Certainly, current feminist educational thinking “takes as central the intersecting forces that shape the educational experiences of women and men” (Weiler, Weiner, & Yates, 2000, p. vii). My intention, through this research, was to explore and examine some of these forces and their effects on a group of female and male mature-age university students. Taking a
postmodern feminist perspective would assist me to examine the ways in which women’s and men’s engagement in study was interpreted both by the students themselves as well as by others around them and to what extent their experiences were affected and influenced by gender. It would also enable me to examine the discourses that surround mature-age study, the ways in which these discourses are different for women and men, the extent to which they were being challenged and whether any alternative discourses had become available to these students through their experiences of being at university. I was particularly interested in exploring whether any shifts in perception and identity had occurred, allowing for the deconstruction of dominant discourses and opening up space for alternative discourses to emerge. For example, to what extent would these women and men question the taken-for-granted assumptions about gender roles? Had their experiences as students affected the ways in which they viewed themselves and the ways they expected others to view them? To what extent did culturally formed sex roles influence their behaviour and attitudes towards their studies?

In exploring such questions, this research also draws upon some elements of a number of other theoretical approaches, including phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and hermeneutics. Carol Becker (1992) for example, tells us that “phenomenologists study situations in the everyday world from the viewpoint of the experiencing person” (p. 7). This is indeed what I was intending to do, to “examine in detail the taken-for-grantedness of people’s life world” (Rice & Ezzy, 2000, p. 15), at least in relation to their experiences as mature-age students. Symbolic interactionism views human behaviour and, to some extent identity, as being socially constructed through interaction with others. “The meaning is constructed [sic] in social interaction” (Woods, 1992, p. 338). Symbolic interactionism contends that people make sense of their world via shared symbols, the meanings of which are socially constructed. “Human beings act toward the physical objects and other beings in their environment on the basis of the meanings that these things have for them” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 124). I was interested in exploring the world of mature-age students and understanding the sense that they made of their world and
themselves within it, and how this was influenced and constructed by their interactions with others, particularly within the university setting.

Hermeneutics, on the other hand, argues that it is possible to interpret human action as one may interpret a text, with the possibility of multiple meanings emerging. For example, Paul Ricoeur (1988) suggests that self-identity is created through the telling of a story, or narrative, about one’s life and experiences. The story itself will inevitably affect the way in which a person perceives and understands events, which then in turn reinforces the story and hence the self-identity. If certain events challenge the story, then shifts in the story may occur, leading to the development of a new story and a subsequent shift in self-identity and so on. In listening to the stories of mature-age students, I was seeking to be alert to the multiple meanings within them and to the ways in which their experiences and their stories impacted upon their self-identity and vice versa.

Therefore, adopting an essentially postmodern feminist perspective, while incorporating some elements of other relevant theories as discussed above, would enable me to be alert to many different layers and meanings within the stories of the female and male mature-age students, thereby gaining a greater understanding of their journey, the factors that contributed positively and negatively to this journey, both personal and institutional, and the extent to which their journey had been a transformative one for themselves and possibly others around them.

The Method

I chose to use a qualitative, narrative method of research for this study in order to explore these types of issues in depth. While quantitative research methods would have enabled me to elicit information from a larger number of students, for example by conducting a large survey (Denscombe, 2003), I was more interested in obtaining the individual, detailed stories of a relatively small
number of students than in obtaining more general information from a larger number. Quantitative research methods would have also enabled me to approach this study with a set of concepts and theories to test (Bryman, 2001). However, rather than starting with particular concepts, I was looking for meanings that emerged from the personal stories of the students themselves, hence using a narrative approach. “One of the significant ways through which individuals make sense of and give meaning to their experiences is to organize them in a narrative form” (Mishler, 1986, p. 118).

Jane Elliott (2005) talks about “first-order narratives and second-order narratives”, with first-order narratives being “stories that individuals tell about themselves and their own experiences” (p. 12). Second-order narratives she describes as “the accounts we may construct as researchers to make sense of the social world and other people’s experiences” (p. 13). I intended to gather first-order narratives from students, from which I could construct a second-order narrative that would give meaning to their experiences. I chose a qualitative research method of in-depth interviewing in order to facilitate this process.

By taking a narrative approach I was also choosing a method consistent with the underlying theoretical perspectives of this research. Arguably, narrative methodology is underpinned by similar epistemological convictions to postmodernism. For example, Ewick and Silbey (1995) contend that narrative method is underpinned by “the epistemological conviction that there is no single, objectively apprehended truth... the epistemological [sic] claim that there are multiple truths is based on the recognition that knowledge is socially and politically produced” (p. 199). Similarly, Jerome Bruner (1990) tells us that narrative methodology examines “how protagonists interpret things” (p. 51). Catherine Riessman (1993) describes a narrative method of research as also being “well suited to studies of subjectivity and identity... including symbolic interactionism and feminist studies” (p. 5) while, according to Douglas Ezzy (1998), “a combination of symbolic interactionist thought and Ricoeur’s hermeneutics” (p. 251) has been a major theoretical influence on the
development of narrative method. Ricoeur (1988) describes the way in which the stories, or narratives, that people tell of themselves and the events in their lives both construct and reinforce their identity. The narrative identity is not fixed in time, but both socially and temporally located. "The self of self-knowledge is the fruit of an examined life… one clarified by the cathartic effects of the narratives, be they historical or fictional, conveyed by our culture" (Ricoeur, 1988, p. 247).

The depth and richness of detail that narrative research can provide makes it possible to examine dominant discourses, the taken-for-granted assumptions impacting upon people’s lives and the meanings that they ascribe to events and other aspects of their lives. Narrative is a means by which people make sense of their lives. It “transforms a mere succession of actions and events into a coherent whole in which these happenings gain meaning” (Polkinghorne, 1997, p. 13). This approach would also assist me to notice and understand any shifts and changes in the students’ self-identities over their time of being at university. “There is a close relationship between the stories we tell and hear and who we are… our stories are the cornerstone of our identities” (Andrews, Sclater, Squire, & Tambouka, 2004, p. 112).

Narrative method can also allow minority or otherwise oppressed voices to be heard, through giving space to their individual stories and privileging their perspective. The spotlight can be turned on the social, cultural and political practices, which support the silencing and oppression of these voices. Narratives can therefore also have “subversive or transformative potential” (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 199). For postmodern feminist research, the gendered nature of experience is particularly of interest. The personal narratives of a group of women and men can reveal much about “the construction of a gendered self-identity, the relationship between the individual and society in the creation and perpetuation of gender norms, and the dynamics of power relations between women and men” (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 5).
Pioneer feminist qualitative researchers such as Ann Oakley (1981; 1992), Helen Roberts (1981), Dorothy Smith (1987) and Elliot Mishler (1986) draw attention to the imbalance of power in the traditional interviewer/interviewee relationship and advocate the need for a much more respectful and collaborative approach to interviewing. Using a narrative method of research is one way in which power can be redistributed, at least to some extent, through the collaborative nature of story-telling and listening. “Allowing respondents to provide narrative accounts of their lives and experiences can help to redress some of the power differentials inherent in the research enterprise” (Elliott, 2005, p. 17).

In search of stories

In-depth qualitative interviews were therefore conducted with the 20 participants. One interview was conducted with each student using a semi-structured interview schedule to explore the issues discussed. This approach is consistent with a narrative method, as well as with the theoretical underpinnings of the research, in that it allows the participant to tell their own story, allows meanings to be uncovered through discourse, provides rich descriptions of the world of the interviewee and enters into the other person’s perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Gillham, 2000; Knight, 2002).

Mishler (1986) points out that in order to elicit stories or narratives from interviewees, they need to be:

...given some room to speak....We are more likely to find stories reported in studies using relatively unstructured interviews where respondents are invited to speak in their own voices, allowed to control the introduction and flow of topics, and encouraged to extend their responses. (p. 69)

Oakley (1981) believes that “the use of prescribed interviewing practice is morally indefensible” (p. 41) when a feminist interviews women. She contends that a prescribed interview schedule places the interviewer in the position of undue power; directing where the interview goes, deciding what is relevant
and what is not, prohibiting interviewees from asking questions and from elaborating on their experiences and, in short, prohibiting interviewees from telling their own stories in their own way. Oakley in more recent times has questioned the dichotomy between qualitative and quantitative research methods in relation to conducting feminist research (Oakley, 1992). However, she maintains that allowing and encouraging interviewees to tell their stories is nevertheless a vital part of feminist research – “the knowledge [sic] demand for quantifiable data that ignores subjective standpoints must be combined with the understanding [sic] to be obtained by attention to subjective narrative” (p. 345).

I therefore chose to use a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 3) consisting of a number of themes and questions to explore, aimed at eliciting participants’ stories about their experiences. Open questions were used to invite participants to begin their stories and then expanded upon by the use of additional probing questions and verbal encouragers. These were used to assist and encourage the development of the participants’ stories, rather than to deflect or direct the flow of the narratives. Not all questions on the interview schedule were necessarily asked of all participants, as a number of them were simply for the purpose of clarification should they be needed. Most of the participants expanded sufficiently on their experiences for me not to need to ask every question as it was written on the schedule. As with all stories, the order of events varied in the telling, so the questions that I asked, as well as the timing of them during the interview, also varied depending upon the direction taken by the participants. I was mindful of Norman Denzin’s (1989) description of an in-depth interview in which “the phrasing of the questions and the order in which they are asked are altered to fit each individual. Open-ended interviewing assumes that meanings, understandings and interpretations cannot be standardised” (p. 42).

In wanting to elicit the kinds of stories which “the standard survey interview ‘suppresses’” (Mishler, 1986, p. 69) I aimed to design the interview schedule to be flexible enough to ensure that “alternative avenues of enquiry that might
arise during the collection of … data are [not] closed off” (Bryman, 2001, p. 317). Susan Chase (2003) talks about the need to ask simple questions that clearly relate to life experiences in order to elicit narratives from participants, while Hollway and Jefferson (2000) highlight the need to ask questions relating to specific times and situations in order to invite a narrative response. The semi-structured interview that I used therefore, was arranged around particular themes, which were designed to “not so much direct questions as to remind interviewers [i.e. myself] of the topics that need to be covered” (Rice & Ezzy, 2000, pp. 59-60). I asked simple, straightforward questions around these themes which took the participants chronologically through particular times in their life as a student, as well as asking them about specific situations that they had encountered during their student life. Riessman (1993) reminds us that “narrativisation tells not only about past actions but how individuals understand those actions, that is, meaning” (p. 19). I therefore needed to ensure that there was space in the interview process for such understandings and meanings to emerge. Through this approach I aimed to achieve the type of interview as described by Mishler (1986) in which “both questions and responses are formulated in, developed through, and shaped by the discourse between interviewers and respondents” (p. 52).

My professional background as a social worker and around 30 years experience in counselling was of great assistance to me in conducting these interviews. Gary Partington (2001) describes a study where the quality of the data generated was directly linked to the skills of the interviewers. He stresses “the importance of empathy and rapport, listening and questioning, restatement, clarification and persistence” (p. 1). These are all skills in which I have extensive experience due to my professional work, so this assisted me to conduct interviews that generated narrative data sufficiently descriptive for the purposes of detailed analysis.

**Inviting participants**

‘Opportunity sampling’ and ‘snowballing’ (Bryman, 2001; Knight, 2002) methods were used to recruit the twenty mature-age student volunteers
needed for this research. I advertised the need for subjects through a number of email channels, including an email to the Mature-age Students’ Association (one of the Student Union clubs and societies); an email to the coordinator of the Student Mentor Program (an peer support program which uses student volunteers); an email to the coordinator of a careers e-list to students; as well as emails to a number of academic and general staff, asking them to mention it to their students. In addition, a flyer about the research and calling for interested participants, was produced and distributed to key points around the campus (Appendix 4).

The emails and flyers called for expressions of interest from mature-age students in the second to final year of their university studies, who had entered university via the Open Foundation Program. The information stated that a postgraduate research student was interested in interviewing them about their experiences of being a student and that this information may help to inform universities about better ways to support and assist such students. Those who expressed interest were given a more detailed information sheet (Appendix 5) which provided further details about the research, the interview process, storage of data and the need for their informed consent. Those who consented to be interviewed were asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview (Appendix 6).

Given the time consuming nature of the interviews, I was aware that I could encounter some difficulties recruiting this number of students. However, my experience in my professional work as a counsellor at this same campus led me to be hopeful. I had worked on a number of other programs and activities involving the need for volunteers from amongst the mature-age student cohort, such as orientation workshops for new mature-age students and student mentor programs, and had not previously encountered too much difficulty in finding sufficient volunteers for such programs. In fact, mature-age students seem particularly interested in helping other students and being involved in campus activities, and generally report how much they enjoy the experience. My past experience with mature-age students had shown me that
they enjoy the opportunity to “tell their story”, perhaps because for so many of them it is a story of courage and strength and they are rightly proud of their achievements in gaining university entrance and succeeding with their studies.

Hiller and DiLuzio’s (2004) description of the qualitative interview being “a collaborative, meaning-making experience involving both the interviewer and the interviewee” (p. 2) is relevant here. They emphasise that, even though the researcher and the aims of the research drive the interview, the focus of it is still the interviewee – it is “a meaning-making occasion that centres on the interviewee” (p. 4). “By talking and listening, we produce a narrative together” (Riessman, 1993, p. 11). As such, the interviewee can find this to be a powerfully rewarding experience. In their research examining the motivations of interviewees for volunteering, Hiller and DiLuzio (2004) found that many were motivated “by the desire to verbalise a profound personal experience” and that “one of the rewards or benefits of participating in the study was the opportunity to talk about an experience that had great personal impact” (p. 7). This is consistent with the willingness which I encountered amongst mature-age students to assist with this research, which allowed them the opportunity to share their experiences, a process that can be described as “event validation” (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004, p. 8) in that their experience is validated and legitimized by the research interview and indeed by the research itself. Perhaps, in the words of David Engel (1993) “retelling the stories is a way to triumph over the particularities of historical time” (p. 797).

There was initial interest from 14 students, 13 of whom met the criteria and consented to be interviewed. From this, a snowballing effect occurred and the sample size increased as these students talked to others about participating. Rice and Ezzy (2000) point out that snowball sampling can be useful when there are existing networks that connect the potential subjects of the research. This was certainly the case at this relatively small campus, where students connected with each other on a regular basis in classrooms, library, cafeteria, student associations and other student activities. Rice and Ezzy further
suggest that it is a particularly appropriate method of sampling when social connections and friendships are at least part of the focus of the research. The students’ social connections on campus were indeed of interest to me, in terms of understanding the role that friendships and connections with fellow students may play in the overall student experience. So while relying upon the social contacts between students to recruit additional participants “cannot possibly claim to produce a statistically representative sample” (Elliott, 2005, p. 324), nevertheless this method was appropriate and effective for this research.

It is certainly the case that one of the implications for opportunistic and snowballing methods of sampling is that the research findings are less likely to be able to be generalised to a wider group. However, under the circumstances it would have been difficult to recruit this sample other than by calling for volunteers through as many channels on campus as possible, including the students’ social networks. So, while the findings from such a small sample of this nature cannot be widely generalised, nevertheless the stories of the women and men in this sample provide a valuable insight into the experiences of this particular group.

It is also important to keep in mind that these students’ narratives may reflect, to some extent, the experience of others in similar circumstances. Chase (2003) for instance, argues that narratives are not just stories about individuals, but can be a means of understanding more about the wider community of which these individuals are a part. Elliott (2005) claims that each individual narrative:

> tells us something about the cultural framework in which individuals make sense of their lives [and that] narratives produced by a relatively small sample of individuals may produce evidence that is considered to provide an understanding of the intersubjective meanings shared by the whole of a community. (p. 28)

As described, this sample was essentially a self-selecting one. As discussed earlier, it appeared to be slightly more difficult to recruit male students than
female students, which led to my decision to exercise some flexibility in the criteria in order to include a fifth male student. Apart from the fact that there are more mature-age female students than male students at the campus, there may be other reasons for such a study attracting more women than men. A number of feminist researchers (Oakley, 1992; Olesen, 1994; Riessman, 1993; Smith, 1996) have drawn attention to the willingness of women to participate in research that is aimed at “giving voice to previously silenced groups of women” (Riessman, 1993, p. 8). Susan Smith (1996) for example found that in her research with mature-age female students she was welcomed with an exceptional warmth and willingness by the women she interviewed. “The warmth with which I was received extended beyond what could be polite or customary” (p. 64). Smith attributes this, at least in part, to the “perceived relevance of the study to the women’s lives” and the desire that they expressed to “help women in the future” (p. 64). For women who have experienced much of their lives as “uncared for carers” (Reay, et al., 2002, p. 17) – a concept to be explored in more depth throughout the following chapters – the opportunity to tell their stories, to have their voice heard and understood, as well as to help others, are perhaps powerful reasons to volunteer to participate in such research.

In order to introduce the readers of this research to the participants, I have included a description of each in Appendix 7, including information on sex, age, marital status, numbers and ages of children where applicable, which degree program they are studying, year of study and other relevant background information. Names have of course been changed to preserve anonymity. The participants were all from a similar ethnic background – white anglo-Australian – which reflects the relatively homogenous ethnicity of the Central Coast region of NSW.

Listening, talking and recording

The interviews were conducted in my office in the Student Support Unit at the Central Coast Campus, at a time convenient to each participant, mostly during normal working hours.
At the time of conducting the research, I was no longer working in a counselling role. My position had changed to one of management within student services and I had moved to a different office from the one I had previously used for counselling. However, being a small campus, many students would have been aware that I was a former counsellor. I therefore made it very clear in all publicity that I was undertaking this research as a doctoral student, not as a counsellor. Hiller and DiLuzio’s (2004) study found that interviewers were at times cast “in the role of ‘therapist’” (p. 7) and that interviews are often opportunities for participants to talk about personal feelings which can provoke “unresolved feelings” and hence be quite “cathartic” (p. 8). Given that I had been known as a counsellor at the campus over some years, it was important that participants understood that the interviews were not counselling sessions. In order to make the distinction between the roles of researcher and counsellor quite clear, any student who had seen me for counselling within the prior two years was excluded from the research.

On the other hand, the advantage of my having counselling skills was that I was able to attend appropriately to the emotional content of the interviews. Given that the interviews asked participants to tell their stories, some experienced quite deep levels of emotion during this process and some tears were shed in the reliving of challenging, distressing and/or uplifting moments. As an experienced counsellor I was able to respond appropriately and empathically without confusing the roles of researcher and counsellor.

It is also important at this point to mention again the notion of reflexivity, which recognises the part that the researcher plays in the narrative process. As the interviewer, I was the audience for the participants’ narratives and, as such, an influence in the formation and construction of the narrative. In the words of Elliott (2005), “discussions of reflexivity are especially prominent amongst those who situate themselves within feminist methodology” (p. 155) with an emphasis on making the power differential explicit. In addition, Mishler (1986) cautions researchers to be mindful of the “effects on the production of a
narrative, the respondent’s ‘story’, of the interview as a particular context and of the interviewer as questioner, listener and coparticipant in the discourse” (p. 82). I therefore needed to be as open and aware as possible about the ways in which my own background as a university staff member, a counsellor, a woman and a mature-age student, may influence the story-telling process.

Prior to the interviews each participant provided me with their signed consent form and were informed that they were free to withdraw their consent at any time, in which case any data relating to them would be destroyed. In the event, all were happy to continue. The interviews were tape-recorded, with the participants’ consent and each interview took between 75 and 90 minutes. I also took some notes during each interview, in case of any unexpected problems with the recording and as an aid to the later transcription of the tapes. Three interviews were conducted as pilot interviews in May/June 2006. These pilot interviews revealed no problems with the interview schedule, so no changes were made to it and these three interviews were included in the main sample.

**Analysing and interpreting**

Each tape was transcribed as soon as possible following each interview. Following transcription, the data was subjected to a process of narrative analysis (Bryman, 2001; Elliott, 2005; Mishler, 1986; Riessman, 1993) to assist me to derive themes and concepts from the data. Narrative analysis focuses on both content and form of the narrative (Lieblich, 1998). How the story is told can be just as important as what is said. “Analyses focus as much on the ways in which story-tellers…. shape what is conveyed as on what the content of those stories tells us about people’s lives” (Elliott, 2005, p. 42).

By attempting to analyse the data as it was generated, on an ongoing basis following each interview, data collection and analysis occurred “in tandem” (Bryman, 2001, p. 390) as much as possible. Content and form analysis allowed patterns to emerge through such means as identifying similar
phrases, relationships between variables, patterns, common sequences, commonalities and differences, allowing some generalisations to be drawn from the data. As described by Mishler (1986) “the challenge is to identify similarities across the moments into an aggregate, a summation” (p. 13). Using a narrative analysis approach to the data also helped to ensure that the focus of the analysis was on the interviewee’s perspective and the meanings which they themselves ascribed to their experiences.

For these reasons I also chose not to use a computerised data processing package. Such software can be useful in keeping track of codings and then retrieving all the data that has been coded into certain categories. However, the risk in relying on computerised analysis is that data can become too easily separated from its narrative context and hence the sense of it can be missed or distorted (Knight, 2002). Hollway and Jefferson (2000) describe a reflexive approach to the analysis of qualitative data, in which the researcher needs to ask herself questions around what is being noticed, why is this being noticed, how this can be interpreted and how can she know that this is the correct interpretation? Indeed, can there be such a thing as a ‘correct’ interpretation? These were questions I found of great help in my analysis of the data as they kept reminding me of my own role and the role of the particular theoretical stance behind the research in the construction of the “second order narrative” (Elliott, 2005, p. 12).

Following the example of a number of significant narrative researchers (Andrews, et al., 2004; Elliott, 2005; Mishler, 1986; Personal Narratives Group, 1989; Riessman, 1993) I took an interpretive approach to analysing the data. In the same way that the narrator interprets the world around them in order to construct a particular narrative, so does the listener/researcher interpret the narrative in order to seek to understand the contextual meanings within it. “Narratives are interpretive and, in turn, require interpretation” (Riessman, 1993, p. 22). So from the collaboration between interviewer and researcher a joint production emerges, in order that the stories can be heard.
One of the difficulties in trying to represent the spoken word in text is that of capturing the way the words are actually spoken. How one “brings the quotation to life and gives it the feel of spoken rather than written text” (Elliott, 2005, p.52) affects the sense of the story that is being told. In transferring verbatim quotes to the page, I have used punctuation to try to simulate the emphasis that the respondents gave to their spoken words. For example, I have used dots and dashes for pauses, question-marks and exclamation-marks where tone of voice indicated the need, and underlining where particular words were emphasised by the respondents. In this way I hope that the reader, with a little imagination, will be able to ‘hear’ the words of the participants, rather than simply read them.

This chapter has told my story, the story of why I chose to conduct this particular research and how I went about it. It has also described the theoretical influences, my choice of methodology and how the research process developed from that point on. Although this chapter can therefore be read as a story in itself, it is also just the beginning of a much longer and richer story which continues over the following chapters. The next chapter leads into this longer story by introducing the reader to the voices of the twenty women and men who are the main protagonists. Each has a story of their own to tell and each story begins at the beginning; the beginning of their journey into university and towards a future transformed.
Chapter Four: The Story Begins – “How did these oldies get to be uni students?”

Introduction

Returning to formal study after a significant gap in time is a major challenge for anyone to undertake. In this and subsequent chapters, the reader will be introduced to the voices of twenty women and men who decided to embark upon such a journey. In their own words they take us through this journey from the very beginning, to the current stage each one has reached and then on to their vision of their future.

Each chapter represents a different aspect of their journey and is divided into sections which introduce particular themes arising directly from the participants’ stories. Each section begins with some description and comment, drawing out commonalities, differences and particularly significant experiences contained within the stories. These are then illustrated by direct quotes from the participants which, to use Elliott’s (2005) terminology, are part of the first-order narrative, which is the participant’s own story in their own words. Through the discussion that follows, a second-order narrative is constructed. This is essentially an interpretation of the possible meanings within and behind the participants’ stories, based on other relevant literature and research as well as the theoretical perspectives as discussed in the previous chapter.

This chapter will explore the journey’s beginning, how and why these twenty women and men made the decision to undertake formal study at university level, how they implemented this decision and the immediate impact that it had upon themselves and those around them. Initial feelings and reactions, expectations and previous experiences of study will also be described and discussed.
The following chapters will continue the students’ stories, exploring the subsequent stages of their journey; the longer-term challenges and adjustments; the effects on their relationships; how they have managed to stay and succeed; changes in their identity; and their vision of a future still to come.

**Who are they?**

Of the twenty participants, fifteen are women and five are men. At the time of the interviews, eleven were studying full-time and nine studying part-time. They ranged in age from 32 to 52, with the median age being 40. Nine were married or living with a partner, with the remainder being separated, divorced, widowed or never married.

All but one of them are parents, whose children at the time of the interviews ranged in age from 7 months to 26 years. Eight of the women and three of the men were single parents. All eight women and one of the men were the primary carers of their children, while the other two men saw their children regularly even though they didn’t live with them. There were 49 children in total amongst the 19 parents. Ingrid, who was divorced, had six children who were aged between 21 and 13. Bob, married, had four children aged 9 to 15, while Mandy, also married, had five children aged 6 to 15. Four of the participants had only one child, five had two, and six had three. Thirteen of the parents had teenagers and/or young adults living at home, while nine of them had primary school age children, sometimes in addition to their teenagers and young adult children. None of the parents had toddlers or preschoolers, although one parent, John, had a very young child – the baby of 7 months.

None of the participants have a parent who attended university and only three have a sibling who went to university before them. Nineteen of them entered university via the University of Newcastle’s Open Foundation Program. Six were in their final year of their undergraduate degree program with the
remainder in varying stages of their degree. All had completed at least one year of undergraduate study. Degrees being studied included Herbal Therapies, Teaching, Arts, Management, Science, Social Science, Psychology, Architecture and Nursing. Most of the women were studying in the traditionally ‘female’ degree programs of Arts, Teaching, and Nursing and three of the five men were studying in the traditionally ‘male’ areas of Management and Science. However, one of the women was studying Architecture (in which there is an under-representation of women generally) and two of the men were studying primary teaching, in which men are considerably under-represented. In addition, two of the women were studying Herbal Therapies while one was studying Psychology. While both are science-based degrees, and could therefore be seen as traditionally ‘male’, these degree programs are also routes into traditionally female “caring professions”. Hence, within this cohort, the extent to which gender influenced study choices and, in turn, whether gendered roles were being reinforced by the choice of study, is not clear-cut.

While the above provides a summary of the group of participants in general, a more detailed table of “who’s who” – with some identifying details altered – can be found at Appendix 7.

Reasons for Coming – “What was I going to do with myself?”

Why did these students decide to come to university? And why at this point in time? The stories of the students interviewed for this research indicate that, for the majority of them, there was some catalyst for action, an event that had occurred which then led, directly or indirectly, to the decision to study. Other researchers have had similar findings. Sarah O’Shea (2007) mentions “some sort of recent catalyst” (p. 42) that often precipitated the decision to study. McGivney (2006) describes the path back into study for adult learners as being “often serendipitous” (p. 85). McGivney’s research in this area highlights a number of factors that are influential in adults returning to formal study,
including reasons such as “because others in their circle are doing it” and “because of the need to deal with an immediate situation in their life (life transitions, illness, redundancy, bereavement, divorce)” (p. 85). These kinds of serendipitous factors were certainly present for many of the participants in this study.

*My son started kindergarten and I thought I could either go and get another boring office job or I could do something that I actually want to do…* (Fiona, 35)

*It was all around the same time I lost my job, split up with him and thought “Okay”!* (Anne, 36)

*I got a redundancy from the bank and I was thinking what was I going to do with myself?* (Evan, 44)

For some of the participants, it was a long-term dream that they had not been able to fulfil in the past…

*I was a bit peeved that I didn’t put enough effort into going to Uni and so it was always in the back of my mind that I wanted to go to Uni and do a degree…* (David, 52)

*It was never a question of if I would, it was when I would…* (Helen, 33)

*I always wanted… to go and study… and I wasn’t encouraged to do that… It has always been a yearning…* (Mandy, 38)

*I think I always knew I had the potential but it was only a thought for a long time…* (Penny, 32)
...while for others, it was something completely unexpected, in that they had never previously imagined that they might go to university, nor that they even had the capability to do so.

*Never in my wildest dreams... I knew I was capable of something but uni was just over my head... I just thought it was all beyond me...*  
(Carol, 44)

Clearly it sometimes also came as a surprise to others who had known them in the past.

*I saw one of the guys from school and he asked what I was up to and I told him I was at uni... he said oh bullshit! He didn't believe me. I never thought about uni. Never actually thought outside of where I was...*  
(Virginia, 36)

For some, a lack of knowledge about university had previously limited their awareness of this possibility.

*It was just through talking to people that made me aware... I'd probably be doing TAFE. I think I needed to do something but it wouldn't have been necessarily uni, because I wouldn't have thought I was good enough...*  
(Linda, 40)

So why now? And why not before? Chapman, McGilp, Cartwright, De Souza, and Toomey (2006), in their research in Australian rural communities, identify the following barriers that impede participation in education for adults: personal and societal barriers; financial barriers; geographic barriers; management barriers; and vision, mission and identity barriers. For the respondents in this study, the major factors for all the respondents that appeared to have stood in the way of furthering their education could perhaps be classified as personal and societal barriers as well as vision, mission and identity barriers.
Specifically, what a number of the women identified, was the lack of encouragement from family as well as a sense of not being “smart enough”. This echoes the findings of McLaren (1985) in her research in the 1970s with female mature-age students enrolled at a small adult education college in the UK. McLaren found that most of the women had left school by 16 as a result of parental and societal attitudes about education not being important for girls, “most parents expected their daughters to marry young and to find a conventional job” (p. 46). Thirty years later, the women in this study described similar experiences.

*My family life, as it was, was, like, get out and get a job...* (Tina, 38)

*I left school in 4th form. It wasn’t even the thing to do the HSC back then – maybe just go out and do a trade – get a job...* (Carol, 44)

*Well my mother didn’t encourage me to get my HSC, in fact she told me I wasn’t smart enough, so I joined the workforce when I was sixteen...* (Mandy, 38)

*I had been told for so long that I wasn’t very bright...* (Helen, 33)

For some of the respondents, it was a case of unhappy memories of school which had inhibited them from considering further study. Golding (2006), from his research with male adult learners, believes that “it is men who have had the least positive formal learning experiences – particularly at school – who are most at risk and are less likely to … embrace any form of institutional, adult and community or formal learning” (p. 176). However, Lyn Tett (2000) in her study of male and female mature-age working class students at a small university in Scotland, found that “all of the students were negative about their own school experiences” (p. 186). She also found interesting gender differences between the male and female descriptions of their school experiences. The men in her study tended to attribute their negative experiences to the teachers’ dislike of them for being too rebellious or argumentative, while the women were more likely to attribute their negative
experiences of school to pressure at home, through family responsibilities and expectations.

Similarly, the difficulties with school experienced by some of the women in this study also related to family responsibilities and expectations. Life and its obligations simply got in the way of their being able to continue at school.

_I had wanted to be a teacher when I left high school but my father had died between year 10 and year 11 and Mum said I can’t afford to buy your year 11 uniform, do you mind getting a job, so that was the end of that..._ (Nerida, 49)

_I started my HSC but I fell pregnant so… I started doing it by correspondence… but I couldn’t concentrate..._ (Anne, 36)

_I had to drop out [of uni]… I had a 3 month old child and I couldn’t do it…_ (Helen, 33)

Negative school experiences were reported by a number of the other women and men, for less specific reasons.

_I didn’t like school… I moved around a lot of the time so I didn’t really develop any close relationships…_ (Anne, 36)

_No good. I didn’t like it. I also have no HSC. I had bad school experiences..._ (Katrina, 42)

_End of year 9, things just went downhill from there… I went on to Year 11, dropped out half-way through… I just lost it with school…_ (Bob, 41)

**Expectations about University – “What I had seen on TV shows”**
One of the participants had direct prior experience of studying for a degree at university and two had diploma qualifications. Paul had begun university straight from school but had left after a year. Amber had completed a diploma in industrial chemistry immediately on leaving school and Mandy had gained a diploma in adult education through a College of Advanced Education prior to having her five children.

The others had no previous direct contact with higher education, although eight of them had a member of their close or extended family who was at or had been to university. The remaining nine had no family experience of this at all. Interestingly, none of the twenty participants had a parent who had been to university. As a result, the majority did not really know what to expect. Two of the men had expectations that were derived from film and television depictions of university life:

*Probably from what I had seen on TV shows...* (Evan)

*I always thought uni was like Cambridge – studying, toasting marshmallows... debating... like ‘Chariots of Fire’ – running around the quad – stuff like that...* (David)

Some of the women expected it to be more like school:

*I thought the lecturers would be more like school teachers...* (Fiona)

*I thought it would be a bit more like High School...* (Penny)

Many were taken by surprise at the relative lack of formality and the friendliness of people, both other students and staff:

*I thought that it was going to be a lot more ‘pomp and circumstance’... it’s more relaxed and everybody is just so approachable...* (Ingrid)
I didn’t really expect lecturers and everybody to be so open and approachable... (Bob)

Generally, there was a sense that the reality of coming to university had been less daunting and the process of studying far more enjoyable, than they had anticipated. Taking Katrina as an example, she began her studies with great trepidation, thinking that she “had to know everything”. Now, she finds life at university:

…very different. I don’t know everything, and I don’t have to, and I really enjoy just digging into one area and finding things out myself… (Katrina)

Inspirations and Influences – “Maybe I could do it too!”

“People who act as influencers, catalysts or change agents – are hugely important in leading others into learning” (McGivney, 2006, p. 87). This appeared to hold true for many of the participants in this study. Sources of influence and inspiration included parents, friends, partners and teachers. Several reported that a close family member had been a powerful influence on them in making the decision to return to study. For Bob it was his wife:

….so I spoke to my wife... so she said go and get educated... she found out all the information and I made it by 3 days... my wife pushed me... (Bob)

For Anne it was her father:

If anyone has influenced me to go to Uni it was probably him… (Anne)
For Penny it was her uncle, the only member of her extended family to have a university education:

    My uncle is a chemist and I've always been motivated by him, from an early age. I've always looked up to him... (Penny)

For others, such as Tina and Linda, it was a friend who had been a key influence:

    I have a friend who was doing uni at the time. Different degree… but I saw her doing it with her family and I thought well maybe I could do it too... (Tina, 38)

    My best friend who lives in Brisbane, she’s done this degree before … and she’s sending me all her stuff... (Linda, 40)

For one of the women, her son was the catalyst, although not in the way one might have expected:

    I was trying to arrange to get him [son] into uni and he wasn’t interested and I thought ‘well bugger you! If you’re not interested, I’ll go to uni... (Nerida, 49)

Some were inspired by a recent experience of other formal study to think about going on to university. For many, recent experiences of formal learning had been much more positive than their school experiences.

    I found a Wyong TAFE course called CEW [Career Education for Women] and they were fantastic… she [teacher] said if you want to go to uni you should do it, because you can... (Carol, 44)

    I started off doing the CEW course and right from that course I wanted to go to university.... (Anne, 36)
I loved it! [TAFE Diploma] It was a real culture change… and ever since then I sort of had a yearning, looking for something… (Mandy, 38)

I’d enjoyed learning massage… and I guess I finished that and thought, well, I want to do more and wanted to keep learning now… (Rachel, 47)

These findings are again similar to those of Tett (2000) who found that all in her study were “able to give positive examples of learning which had taken place at a later point in their lives” (p. 187) as well as those of McGivney (1999b). McGivney’s research indicates that adult learning in community settings “often starts people with no qualifications or experience of post-school education on a continuing learning path by helping them to become confident and successful learners” (p. vi). She points out that most often the “‘onward and upward’ progression to structured formal learning was unplanned and unanticipated” (p. vii).

The importance of providing easy access to adult education classes in local communities therefore cannot be over-estimated. As demonstrated by the stories of the participants in this study, such learning opportunities played a highly significant role for several of them, in building their confidence and stimulating a desire to progress further on their educational paths.

What Made it all Possible? – “Open Foundation… the best thing in the world”

Coming to university at this time was made possible for these mature-age students by the presence of alternative entry programs, with nineteen of the twenty participants having undertaken the Open Foundation Program, run by the University of Newcastle as an enabling program for mature-age students.
Once again, there was for many a serendipitous element to their introduction to the idea of doing Open Foundation.

For Grace, there was a sense of hearing about it just in time:

\[ I \text{ opened up the local paper and it had the Open Foundation… and it was closing day on the Friday so… I went straight down and that was it. My husband came home and said what did you do today and I said I went and enrolled in uni! } \]

(Grace, 47)

For Fiona there was a chance encounter:

\[ I \text{ saw this lady that I used to live next door to… on the campus on that Open Day and she said you have to do Open Foundation. It’s the best thing in the world…} \]

(Fiona, 35)

For Linda, who was working at the coffee shop on campus and heard about Open Foundation from some of her regular customers, there was a sense of being in the right place at the right time:

\[ \text{And then finding out about Open Foundation… I’m thinking, how did these oldies get to be uni students? } \]

(Linda, 40)

Once they had made the decision to return to study, whether through Open Foundation or through alternative entry directly into undergraduate studies, each of the participants then experienced varying reactions from their partners, families and friends.

**Reactions of Others**

*Partners – “He found the transition difficult”*
For the men and women who were married or living with partners at the time they began their studies, there was considerable variation in the initial reactions of partners. Amongst the men, Evan had separated from his wife since starting his studies and, looking back, he found it hard to judge her initial response, as the difficulties in the marriage and the separation had overshadowed this.

\[
\text{It's hard to say if she was supportive or not, because towards the end she wasn't, which was disappointing... (Evan)}
\]

However, both John and Bob, the other two men with partners, had experienced extremely encouraging and supportive responses from their wives. John counted himself as particularly fortunate in that his wife was an English teacher:

\[
\text{I was really lucky because I had my wife really supportive, right behind me all the way... (John)}
\]

Bob’s wife was also “fully supportive” of his decision to study, even though this meant leaving his job and studying full-time.

Of the nine women with partners at the time of beginning their studies, four had experienced some initial degree of negativity and resistance from them. While in two cases this had been at least partially resolved, for the other two women, who had since separated or divorced, it was perhaps indicative of other more serious problems in the relationship.

\[
\text{He was horrified... extremely negative... (Amber)}
\]

\[
\text{He found the transition difficult. I needed to rely on him and anything he needed or wanted, I was there – and now it was my turn... (Helen)}
\]

The issue of male partners feeling “threatened and excluded” (Wilson, 1997, p. 358) by the woman’s return to study is one that has arisen in much of the
research over the past two decades into the mature-age student experience (Edwards, 1993; Kelly, 1987; Leonard, 1994; Martin, 1988; Wilson, 1997) and will be explored further in Chapter Six. Such research has found that many women in particular often receive little or no support from their male partners in their decision to take up studies. This may be expressed in ways such as trivialising – “let her have her head so that she could get it out of her system” (Martin, 1988, p. 146) – active criticism, or passive resistance.

Edwards (1993) concludes that the reasons lie in the “disturbing power balance effects” (p. 119) of a woman taking up such an independent pursuit and the fact that “male identity… associates loss of power with loss of masculinity” (p. 158). This explanation is supported by West et al.’s (1986) research with female and male mature-age students, which found that:

Relationships were more likely to experience problems where the occupation of the student, as a result of their studies, changed sufficiently to become higher in income and/or status than that of their spouse/partner. This was particularly the case amongst female students. (p. 61)

However, not all male partners were initially negative or discouraging. For example, Katrina and Tina both had partners who had been to or were at university and each of them received encouragement from their partners in their decision to study. Katrina’s husband was terminally ill at the time of her beginning her studies, yet despite this he “was supportive as much as he could be”. Tina’s partner was a university student, “he was okay because he had been going on the same sort of way as me”.

Nor were they the only women to receive encouragement from their partners. Carol, Linda and Mandy also reported that their partners were supportive of their decision. Even Nerida, who had talked about her husband’s initial discomfort with her going to university, commented that, nevertheless, he was very supportive in his own way:
He has supported me 110% entirely – that’s his way of dealing with it. He would say to other people, I support my wife, she goes to uni... and I went... “Fine”! (Nerida)

Mandy’s husband “was very supportive and thought it was great”; while for Linda:

I said I really don’t want to go back to work and he said ‘well don’t’ and I said ‘I’ll do Open Foundation’... he’s lovely like that... very supportive and I’m lucky in that way... (Linda)

It might be tempting to surmise that these positive and encouraging responses from male partners are indications of changing times and changing expectations in relationships in the twenty-first century – to think that maybe this is an indication that a greater proportion of relationships are achieving more of a “level, equal footing” (Edwards, 1993, p. 153) between partners, compared to the 1980s and 1990s. However, in Leonard’s (1994) research into the experiences of female mature-age students at university in Belfast, she reports that “in a third of cases, women met with considerable resistance from their husbands over their decision to return to education” (p. 168). Within this study the proportion was even higher, at four out of nine, indicating that in reality perhaps little has changed.

The women within this cohort continued to struggle with the inequality of expectations, in terms of the multiple demands on their time and the expectation that they should put others’ needs before their own, as will become more apparent over the course of the next few chapters. As Leonard (1994) also found in her research, even where partners were described as supportive “this emotional support rarely translated into practical help” (p. 167). The amount of practical help and support that women received, or failed to receive, from partners will also be explored in a later chapter.

Children – “They loved it”
Many of the participants commented on the supportiveness and positive attitude of their children when they decided to return to study, across all ages. Some reported that their children were initially wary about the changed state of affairs:

“At first they weren’t very understanding because of the change”
(Virginia)

...or fairly uninterested:

“They were alright; I suppose not really fussed about it, not either way. Just wondering how it was going to affect them probably…” (Tina)

...but overall there were positive reactions:

*My youngest loved it … the thought of me becoming her teacher…*  
(Evan)

*They loved it. The year I did Open Foundation my son was doing his HSC…*  
(Virginia)

*My daughter was very supportive, as was my son…*  
(Amber)

This positive response from children was very important to these students, in that it appeared to validate their decision to return to study and to mitigate some of the guilt that they felt about having less time to spend with them. This is similar to the findings in other research. For example, O’Shea (2007) describes the positive effect that this kind of affirmation from children can have on mature-age students in terms of their confidence in their decision and their ability to take on this new challenge. The importance of this affirmation from children may well be a significant factor in what appears to be a contradiction, that despite the fact that “children are usually seen as an impediment to learning” (Kember, 1999, p. 115) there is also an indication
from other research that having children appears to be a powerful motivator for mature-age women returning to study (Leonard, 1994; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998).

**Family and friends – “What are you doing that for?”**

The reactions of parents, siblings and friends were generally described as being fairly positive, even if they did not always fully understand the decision and the reasons for it. As mentioned previously, none of the parents of this cohort of students had been to university and most of these students were the first in their families to do so. Not surprisingly, it was therefore very difficult for many family members to fully comprehend the choice to go and what was involved. For these family members and many friends, it would have been difficult to relate to or identify with the choice being made, let alone have an understanding of what actually went on at university.

She [mother] knows I’m doing teaching but she doesn’t quite understand it all … I guess my Mum’s happy but she has no idea what I’m doing… (Penny)

They [siblings] think its good but they don’t understand where it goes when you leave… (Virginia)

I think at that stage my parents still wondered why are you doing that – it’s only a passing fad… they couldn’t work out what I was doing it for… (Rachel)

A few of the blokes, when they found out what I was doing just sort of laughed, but in a friendly way. When they realised I was sticking with it and wanted to do it they were great… (Bob)

Some parents were described as vicariously enjoying seeing their son or daughter achieve what they themselves might have been able to do under different circumstances.
Dad was glad when I decided to go to uni... he has always been pretty academic but he's never done anything about it... (Anne)

She [mother] went to school until she was 15 and her family wasn't able to finance her any further and she did really well and she was sort of living a bit vicariously through us… (Grace)

Not all experienced such encouragement at the start however. Three of the women and one of the men experienced some level of parental disapproval.

My mother’s from the old school so she was like – oh, what are you doing that for… (Carol)

My parents were like – can’t you just focus on your family – can’t you just be happy with that – what are you doing this for – how are you going to find the time… (Mandy)

While Anne’s father (quoted previously) was very supportive about her going to university, her mother “…sort of didn’t understand why I would want to do that and she wanted me to concentrate on earning money…” (Anne).

In contrast, John encountered disapproval from his father:

... he said it’s a waste of time, you’ve got a good job, what are you doing? (John)

Yet his mother was very supportive:

Mum thinks it’s good but Mum would probably think anything I did was good... (John)
Arguably, these reactions may be indicative of the discomfort some parents may experience when their adult children challenge the male and female role stereotypes to which the parents subscribe. McGivney (1999a) describes the gendered nature of education in which “men see their primary role as that of worker” (p. 64) and, amongst male manual workers, “education continues to be seen as the province of young people and women, while work is seen as the rightful province of men” (p. 65). Birrell (as cited in Cullity, 2006) also observes that the values regarding appropriate career choices held by working class communities are powerful influences on education choices. For John’s father, a skilled tradesman all his working life, the decision of his son (also a skilled tradesman) to go to university at this stage of his life, may well have seemed quite incomprehensible.

For different yet related gender reasons, some of the mothers of the participants perhaps struggled to understand why their daughters would want to go to university while they had homes, jobs and/or families that were already keeping them very busy and should be their priority. This is perhaps an illustration of what Leonard (1994) refers to as a “continued adherence to ideologies of gender stereotyping which results in women having to engage in an endless juggling act of trying to balance home, family and university commitments” (p. 176). Parents from more traditionally working class backgrounds may well have wondered why their adult children could not be satisfied with their lot in life, as they had been.

Generally, and perhaps unsurprisingly, participants received the most supportive and encouraging reactions from those family members and friends who had some understanding and/or experience of further and higher education themselves.

My friends were qualified as teachers and accountants and that sort of thing so they were excited and pleased… (Rachel)
My sister had done a teaching degree before and she was positive as well... (Fiona)

They said great, excellent, you should always have done this; you are really smart, you should do this... (Helen)

My father got very close to a degree...between my sister and I we have a few technical college things...they were all ‘good on you, having a go and getting stuck in’. Mum and Dad understood why I wanted to do it – it was good! (Paul)

The Early Days – “I was brand-new and it was frightening”

Their memories of starting University were mixed. For many it was an anxious time – particularly for a number of the women. Much of previous research into the mature-age student experience indicates that women generally tend to be less confident than men in the academic environment (Acker, 1994; Shands, 1998). This appeared to be the case for many of the women in this study.

First 6 weeks were a nightmare... very overwhelming... I was close to just giving it all away... (Katrina)

It was scary... I really felt out of my depth... (Ingrid)

I’d sit in the car for 45 minutes... I couldn’t get out of the car... I was brand new and it was frightening... (Amber)

Several of the women mentioned the emotional adjustments that they also needed to make when they first began their studies. Anne, for example, found some of the expectations of the classroom particularly challenging, such as the social interaction and having to give class presentations:
Lots of emotional changes – out of the comfort zone type stuff. Speeches and things – really daunted me. Learning to trust fellow students and learning not to trust them as well… learning to judge. I didn’t learn a lot of social skills at school. I was a bit of a loner, so, yes… (Anne)

Rachel voiced what she considered to be the experience of many mature-age students, the pressure of their own high expectations exacerbated by not wanting to take too long to achieve the goal:

As a mature-age student you feel the pressure that if I don’t get this right now, time is ticking away and I’m not going to get it done in time… it’s that sense of, you’re not a twenty-year-old coming in… (Rachel)

Both Rachel and Anne were, like the majority of the participants, the first in their families to participate in higher education. O’Shea (2007), in her research with female students who are the first in their families to enter university, found that “for many of these students, commencing tertiary studies initiated feelings of anxiety, unfamiliarity and self-doubt” (p. 41). There is evidence that students who lack the role models of family members who have been to university inevitably find it more stressful adjusting to and “comprehending the different cultural and academic expectations of university life” (O’Shea, 2007, p. 44). In addition, mature-age students place considerable pressure on themselves to achieve, feeling highly responsible for their own success or failure, adding further stress to an already stressful situation. For example, Reay and colleagues (2002) in their UK study researching the experiences of those students who withdrew or took leave from their studies, found that “it is the newly arrived working-class, minority and female cohorts who blame their own personal and educational inadequacies for their inability to make the transition to HE” (pp. 14-15).

However, for some of the women the excitement outweighed the fears.
The first day I walked in and feeling just excited, oh all this knowledge… it felt good! (Grace)

This mixture of feelings is similar to Leonard’s (1994) description of the women in her Belfast research when they recalled their experiences of starting university, “most students stated that they felt nervous and apprehensive, but this was tinged with elation that they had actually made it” (p. 166).

In contrast, the men’s memories of starting indicated that they had felt reasonably confident. However more worries were expressed about financial concerns.

There were no real difficulties…. I really, really enjoyed it… (John)

There was no real fear. I guess the only apprehension was can I afford to come? (David)

The biggest one was giving up work and not having an income... (Bob)

McGivney (1999a) tells us that “as men see their primary role as that of worker, the perceived value of education depends on the extent to which it assists them in obtaining and maintaining employment” (p. 64). Tett (2000) believes that men enter higher education for more “instrumental” (p.189) reasons than do women, in terms of more focus on getting a job, improving their career and increasing their income, with particular triggers being events such as redundancy and unemployment. It is perhaps not surprising that Bob and David, both used to being the family breadwinners, were apprehensive about the financial implications of full-time study. Interestingly, John was not giving up work, but was continuing to work full-time as well as studying, with the aim of gaining a degree for more secure employment. Bob was also seeking more secure employment for the future and David had started his studies after being retrenched.
What emerged from the stories of all of the participants, both women and men, was that while the initial anxieties were intense at the time, in retrospect these feelings were fairly short-term. Each quite quickly overcame the worst of their doubts and fears and began to make the adjustments in their lives necessary for the continuation of their studies. However, for each of these students there were further significant adjustments ahead. These will be explored in the following chapter which focuses on the longer-term changes and challenges which the students experienced as they continued through the next stages of their journey.
Chapter Five: Tales of Sacrifice – “Lots of giving up”

Introduction

All the students interviewed had faced substantial longer-term challenges in the process of combining their new lives as students with their existing responsibilities as parents, partners and employees. Meeting these challenges often required considerable amounts of personal and financial sacrifice. Previous research has identified a range of challenges that appear to be common to mature-age students as a group. Abbott-Chapman et al. (2004) for example, found in their research with mature-age students at the University of Tasmania, that “mature-aged students face particular challenges in terms of family and employment pressures and demands which compete with studies, and also financial problems associated with giving up full-time employment” (p. 114). Similarly, McGivney’s (1999b) research with older learners in the UK revealed that “practical problems such as costs and domestic commitments are the most commonly cited barriers to progression” (p. 70).

The stories of these students revealed similar challenges, including financial struggles, difficulties with organising and prioritising, dealing with changes in relationships with partners and children, balancing the needs of study with the needs of others and, in general, not enough hours in the day to do all that needed to be done. This chapter highlights the sacrifices that this cohort of students were making, particularly in the areas of time and money, in order to pursue their studies. Lack of time meant that there were sacrifices being made on a daily basis in terms of leisure time, social life and even time to sleep. Tight budgets meant that there were also many financial sacrifices involved. For all the students interviewed for this study, life was a constant juggling act.
The Tyranny of Time – “Stealing a few more hours in the day”

**Time as a gendered construct**

Mature-age students who are juggling a range of other responsibilities are inevitably “time poor” (Reay, et al., 2002, p. 9). Fitting study in amongst work, child-care, domestic responsibilities and any possible social life requires a “complex negotiation of time” (Edwards, Hanson, & Raggatt, 1996, p. 213). A number of feminist writers contend that this is even more complex for women than it is for men, as a result of gendered expectations. These expectations place a different value on ‘men’s time’ and ‘women’s time’, with men’s time being seen as more valuable and productive while women’s time is time given up to the demands and needs of others (Hughes, 2002; McNay, 2000). Similarly, Morrison (1996) talks about the “gender-laden and time-consuming nature” (p. 214) of a woman’s role, in which time is “‘collective’ time which others, for example, their families, have a right to lay claim to” (p. 214).

Certainly, from the stories of this group of students, time appeared to be perceived and used differently by the women and the men, thus emerging as a gendered construct. For the women, one of the major challenges was finding enough time for the family, in particular their children, as well as finding time for their studies. Much of the literature indicates that this is a particular problem for women who are studying. Acker’s (1994) interviews with mature-age students, female and male, found that the female students made many spontaneous references to children and partners while “men did this very rarely” (p. 64). Similarly, all the women who were mothers in this study made many unsolicited references to their children while telling their stories and describing their experiences, in particular describing the challenge of making sure that they still gave their children enough time now that they were studying, as well as continuing to meet their household domestic responsibilities.
I had to make sure that all of their needs were met and the house was looked after... (Rachel)

The men mentioned their children much less often and usually only in response to a direct question about them. The exception was Bob, studying full-time with a wife who was working and four children.

Time for the family is a big one... trying to find time for the kids and the family. They don’t always come number one, which is really wrong... (Bob)

Unsurprisingly, none of the men mentioned housework at all, while for many of the women with young children, it was a source of stress to them that they no longer had the time to maintain the house in the standard that they would have liked.

I had to let go of the housework... now we crunch around on rice bubbles and food... I’m finding it quite frustrating – the mess... (Mandy)

Vacuuming every day doesn’t happen any more and I don’t mop the floor every two days... (Helen)

Child-care was certainly another issue that was exclusively mentioned by the women, including the logistics of fitting study in around the care of young children. Sometimes this meant having less sleep.

I stay up later reading. I wait until he [son] has gone to bed before I do any work because it’s just too hard when he’s around... wants attention, needs to be fed and so on.... (Fiona)

...try to steal a few more hours in the day... bags under my eyes... (Tina)
…having long, long nights, some nights it could be 2 or 3 am…
(Katrina)

Other times it meant assignments had to be put on hold…

I was trying to do assignments and I would have kids sick… have the kids home sick and the plans would go out the door… (Mandy)
…challenging to try to find enough time to do the assignments and do all the running around. It’s pretty much me that does all that sort of running around – kids things… (Tina)

…or outside child-care had to be organised.

I had to get child-minders… I used to drop them off at a friend’s place in the morning and she would take them to school… (Ingrid)

So it was in the stories of the women in particular that emerged the greatest difficulties in meeting the demands of study, housework, children, partners, and also at times paid work.

People talk about keeping all the balls in the air… I’ve always had so many things on the go all the time, juggling the balls and keeping everything happening… (Amber)

These stories are consistent with the considerable body of research which refers to the multiplicity of women’s roles (Rice, 1989; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003) and which demonstrates the ways in which female mature-age students are “caught up in a constant balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money” (Reay, et al., 2002, p. 10). Scott, Burns and Cooney (1996) in their research into reasons for discontinuing study amongst mature-age female students found that “the weight of family responsibilities” (p. 240) was the most common reason.
In contrast, the stories of the male participants revealed that time for their studies was privileged, in that it was allocated special significance and kept separate from other demands. While the female students worked hard to tailor their study time around other responsibilities at home, including their children, partners and other home and family responsibilities, there was evidence in the stories of the male students of female partners tailoring their activities around male study time. For example, Bob’s wife – now the family breadwinner since Bob gave up work to study full-time – tailors her work around his study hours.

*Any work my wife is doing she has tailored it around my hours…* (Bob)

On the other hand, Grace, Anne and Rachel’s comments indicate the ways in which they ensure that their study hours do not impinge on family time.

*I finish everything by 4pm, I pick my husband up at 4.30 and after that it’s dinner time...* (Grace)

*I always make sure I’ve got weekends free...* (Anne)

*I had to make sure that my classes fitted in with what the girls were doing...* (Rachel)

It should also be noted that none of the men had the primary responsibility for child-care. For the men therefore, finding time for study was not regularly complicated by the need to care for dependent children as it was for the majority of the women.

*When I get home from work... I have something to eat and then I’m straight into the study...* (Paul)

In contrast, all of the women with young children had the primary care of the children in addition to their studies and in some cases also in addition to part-
time jobs. Clearly, for the women in this study, the demands on their time were indeed multiple.

*I started this new job a couple of weeks ago. It started on a Monday so I had an assignment due on that Monday which I’d already got an extension for and so I just had to stay up until I finished – up to 3am so I finished it, and that’s becoming the norm…* (Tina)

One of the women, Katrina, had been through a particularly difficult time, in that her husband had been very ill and died in the second year of her studies. His illness was a precipitating factor in her decision to study.

*My husband was very sick and he wasn’t able to function and I needed to get things sorted out and needed to be a bread winner…* (Katrina)

During her studies, Katrina not only cared for her husband, who had frequent hospital admissions – “since he was diagnosed he had been in hospital about three times a year” – but also managed to keep up with her studies and attend to the practical and emotional needs of her children. As a relatively recent migrant, Katrina had no other family to whom she could turn for assistance, nor did she have a secure income other than government assistance and a small equity scholarship, which provided money for books and some other expenses.

*I think I was too scared to stop [studying] because I’m on a scholarship and I didn’t want to lose that… but I must say last semester was extremely hard… I was so late with my work and my children were going to counselling and other things…* (Katrina)

This quote and the one below from Katrina’s story demonstrate how precarious and stressful this balancing act often felt.
I found it very difficult last night, she was in tears [7 yr old daughter] … and I put my time away to finish my essay, so inside I wanted to get things done… It’s a big conflict because we had a lecture and a presentation this morning… (Katrina)

Anxiety over taking time away from children was present for a number of the other women as well.

Just I do feel like a bit of a failure from having to push the kids aside a lot… at the moment my son is going through some issues at school… and you have feelings, is that because of me? – is it all my fault… (Tina)

Some of the women talked about ways in which their expectations of their partners and children had changed, in that they expected them to help with domestic chores more than previously. This was however often another source of frustration. Mandy, with five children, had asked her husband to help with the washing, but…

…it’s getting on top of me now, simply the fact that I can’t find anything. He does the washing now but nothing gets put away… (Mandy)

Helen had expected more help from her husband, but the marriage ended not long after she began her studies, so she had to ask for more help from her children.

I had to get my husband to help more around the house. The children to begin with didn’t have a lot to do, and it wasn’t until the marriage broke up that the boys got chores… (Helen)

Susan Smith (1996) in her interviews with women returning to study found “scant evidence… that husbands did help occasionally with household chores and child-care but this was placed in the context of doing their wives/partners
Similarly, the interviews for this current research revealed that the notion of “male as breadwinner, female as homemaker” (Smith, 1996, p. 68) was alive and well in this group of participants.

**Making time fit — “All this other stuff needs to be done”**

Finding ways to ‘fit more in’ to their limited time often meant trying to develop specific time management strategies. Once again, this appeared to be easier for the men and for the one woman in the group (Carol) who did not have children.

_I did have to learn when my best time was to study and stick to it. I get the course outline, I see when things are due and I try to write them all in somewhere and then just knock them off one at a time…_ (Carol)

_Discipline with allowing time. That’s the changes that I’ve had to make. When I get home from work I don’t just have some dinner and sit down in front of the telly… you have to be disciplined with that. I’ll actually draw myself a little diary up. I’ll say, ok, Monday night and Tuesday night I’ll study that subject…_ (Paul)

However, most of the women, particularly those with young children, tended to struggle more with traditional time management strategies.

_I find it really hard to focus on assignments and study when all this other stuff needs to be done. Distracting!_ (Mandy).

Marlene Morrison (1996) points out that the “linear time schedules” often encouraged as effective time management strategies for students, “may be neither rational nor efficient for all humans, specifically those assigned caring and domestic roles” (p. 212). Her study of mature-age women undertaking part-time adult education courses revealed that the women learnt “to weave college and study times into a complex web, in which domestic-related/child-care time remains dominant” (Morrison, 1996, p. 223).
Certainly, what emerged from the stories of the women who had the primary responsibility for child-care and household domestic duties, was that they had all found ways of managing time that were not based on traditional linear models of time planning. On the surface, these may have appeared chaotic – staying up till 3 a.m. to finish assignments; missing a lecture to complete work; reading a text while feeding children or while waiting in the car to collect them from school – yet these strategies enabled them to fit study time into their fractured, interrupted days, in which their time was largely taken up in meeting the demands of others.

Morrison (1996) suggests that institutions could offer more support to mature-age students by adopting a perspective where “fragmented time is considered positively rather than negatively” (p. 231) rather than perceiving the individual woman as the problem. Her suggestions include more grouped learning experiences within and beyond the classroom, rather than the primary emphasis on fixed lecture times, as well as “flexible learning systems, drop-in support networks, rolling programmes, workshop activities” (p. 230). Also, due to the blurring that many women experience between study time and leisure time, it is important that “if study time is replacing leisure time it needs to be seen as meaningful, enjoyable and purposeful” (p. 230) with implications for content and teaching style.

The stories of the mothers with young children in this cohort indicate that greater acknowledgement and appreciation of their innovative time management strategies, along with more flexible learning strategies, would be well appreciated.

Given that these students have been invited to join the tertiary education enterprise, it is beholden on the institutions that enrol them to be aware of their likely difficulties and to explore ways, where this is possible to ameliorate these. (Scott, et al., 1996, p. 252)
Loss of leisure time and social life – “No free time”

Giving up gardening, giving up reading, giving up sewing, giving up relaxing, giving up going out with family visits, giving up socialising, giving up clothes, giving up spending money on anything, giving up having holidays. Lots of giving up!” (Nerida)

This theme of “giving up” or “sacrificing” their personal leisure time, including time for a social life, was a recurrent one throughout the stories. While this was particularly true of the women, some of the men also talked of sacrifice of time for leisure and social life.

There is no ‘free time’ on weekends… (Virginia)

I just don’t catch up like I used to with people – people at school who sit around drinking coffee and morning tea… that doesn’t exist any more... (Penny)

I had to sacrifice so much just to do it... (John)

These findings are similar to those of many other studies of mature-age students (Edwards, 1993; Leonard, 1994; Martin, 1988; Morrison, 1996; Reay, et al., 2002; West, et al., 1986), in which the stories reveal a level of sacrifice of personal time for leisure and friends. At best, personal time is considerably reduced, at worst it becomes non-existent. As previously indicated, gender emerges as an issue here. Women with caring responsibilities tend to be at the more extreme end of the spectrum, putting family and domestic responsibilities first, study second and themselves last. With such limited time at their disposal, it is not surprising that many women end up with no personal or leisure time at all. “The primacy of family life is unquestioned and the needs of the self are subordinated, even denied, until family responsibilities have diminished” (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p. 187).
Certainly, for the women in this study who had young children, leisure time was virtually non-existent, except when integrated with child-care or study activities, such as having an occasional coffee with fellow students, or taking a few minutes to chat socially to the baby-sitter when collecting children. As noted by Richard Edwards et al. (1996), “when coordination between areas [work, domestic responsibilities, study] broke down or became problematic, study time moved into leisure time” (p. 219).

In contrast with the women’s stories, the stories of four of the five men indicated that they still managed to find some personal and leisure time, albeit in some cases reduced.

*I’m heavily involved with the scouting movement ... I think it’s pretty important that you don’t give up everything for the sake of uni...* (Bob)

Similarly, Paul still managed to find time to participate in the amateur theatre group to which he belonged:

*...still went to rehearsals two nights a week and managed to do a few shows and all that sort of stuff...* (Paul)

Only one of the men indicated that he had made very significant sacrifices in terms of personal and leisure time, John, married with a young baby, working full-time as well as studying full-time, described the way in which his studies had intruded into “every little tiny facet of your life” with no time left for any leisure or social activities:

*I used to get calls from mates to go fishing, and I couldn’t. I couldn’t do stuff I used to do...* (John)

As with many of the women, John’s is a gendered story. His story revealed that he felt highly responsible as the primary earner and breadwinner of the family, hence his decision to continue to work full-time as well as study full-
time. His responsibilities within this role and the time constraints involved in this double full-time work load allowed no room for the type of leisure activities that he had pursued prior to coming to university.

**Full-time or part-time study – A gendered decision?**

It is interesting as well to note the pattern of study amongst those interviewed. It would perhaps be reasonable to assume that, where there are two parents living together with young children, it would be easier for one of them to study full-time than if they were a single parent, based on the premise that two parents can more easily share the child-care and domestic load than one. However, for the women with young children within this group it appeared to be the opposite, with fewer of the married women studying full-time than those who were not married.

Eleven of the women had young children. Of these, six were studying part-time and five full-time. Of the six women studying part-time, four were married. Of the five women who were studying full-time, only one was married, leading to the supposition that marriage, rather than children, could be a deterrent to full-time study. Perhaps this is not so surprising when seen in the context of ‘men’s time’ versus ‘women’s time’, as previously discussed. If men’s time is regarded as more important, to take priority over women’s time, which is essentially time for others, then married women are indeed likely to find that they have less time for themselves, not more, than do single women. As Gunnarson and Ressner (as cited in Morrison, 1996) identify, “the time that she is able to use… is adjusted to other family members’ needs of time. The time she needs for herself and her own interests is often given very little, if any, space” (p. 214).

This is also consistent with other research, such as that by Jan Pahl (1989) which indicates that men are accorded more power in relationships due to their breadwinner status. Similarly in Susan Smith’s research (1996), amongst the female mature-age students she interviewed, many were dominated by their male partner’s demands due to his relative economic power. “Due to the
power they wielded economically, they placed heavy demands on their wives/partners to fulfil their traditional roles” (Smith, 1996, p. 69).

In contrast, marriage did not appear to be a deterrent to full-time study for the men. Three of the five men were studying full-time and two were studying part-time. The two who were studying part-time were divorced or separated, while of the three who were studying full-time, two were married. For the men, it was the issue of earning the family income and financially supporting children that was the main determining factor in whether full-time or part-time study was being undertaken, as illustrated earlier in the example of John, married with a young baby, studying full-time and also in full-time employment:

I didn’t give up my work, I still have a mortgage and I’m still working… generally 35 hrs a week minimum on top of studies… (John)

Paul and David had both chosen part-time study in order to enhance their work skills and career opportunities while maintaining full-time employment, and continuing to contribute to the financial support of their young children. Bob and Evan had both made a decision to change career paths, complete their degrees as quickly as possible and get back into the work force into more satisfying, more secure and better paying positions.

Arguably then, gendered expectations had played a significant role in the decision to study full-time or part-time. For the women, the considerations were primarily around having enough time to care for partner, children and home. “At the heart of the complex relationship between women and part-time education lies the relationship between women and the family and time dimensions of each of its members” (Morrison, 1996, p. 213). For the men, the considerations were related to having time to continue to work and provide financial support to their families, or to get back into the paid workforce as soon as possible. This reflects other research with male mature-age students, which indicates that “men appear to be more single-minded, focussed and
practical in their motivation to learn, seeking to further specific goals and particular interests” (McGivney, 1999a, pp. 7-8).

This is not to suggest that the women were unconcerned about the need to earn money – a number of the women in this study were also working part-time – nor that the men were unconcerned about having time for partners and children. It is more a question of their different priorities and situations, influenced by the traditional roles of women as carers and men as breadwinners.

Persistence of Traditional Gender Roles

So how is it that such traditional gender roles continue to thrive amongst this cohort despite the strong feminist challenge to these roles over at least the past 30 years? Linden West (1995) in her research with mature-age female students makes the point that many of the students in the cohort that she interviewed would have been influenced in their growing up by the:

- popular culture in the 1950s and early 1960s [with] the family as the central unit of society [and] the idea of a woman’s contribution to society as being in the family… to put others before self… [and] please other people, husbands and children. (p. 14)

What is interesting is that many of the women who are the subject of this current research would have grown up a decade later, through the late 1960s and 1970s – a time of considerable social change and challenge to traditional perspectives on the role of women. Yet there appears to have been little impact upon these traditional gender roles.

There is some evidence to indicate that the adherence to more traditional views of women’s and men’s roles is linked to lower educational, economic and employment status (Chapman, et al., 2006; Giles, 1990; Leonard, 1994; McGivney, 1999a, 2006; Paasse, 1998; Scott, et al., 1996; Tett, 2000; West,
et al., 1986). Such evidence includes the findings of both West et al. (1986) and Scott et al. (1996). Women in West et al.’s category of ‘early school leavers’ who returned to study were found to be particularly burdened with family and domestic responsibilities whilst Scott et al. found that “partners’/ex-partners’ low levels of education and low status jobs were both associated with women’s reports of lack of support” (p. 244), with a strong relationship between education and occupation. They contend that “lower social class is linked to more conservative beliefs about sex roles… which offers an explanation for lack of family support for the mother’s study” (Scott, et al., 1996, p. 249).

As previously discussed, this cohort of students, prior to entering university, were predominantly from lower educational backgrounds and, particularly for the women, lower status employment. Hence, this may be a partial explanation for the strong adherence to traditional gender roles in their family lives. However, it could also be argued that there are broader forces at work here, in the form of government social policy (Thomson, 2000; Weeks, 2000) in which “the Australian welfare state has been constructed around families, with a silent but entrenched gendered division of labour” (Weeks, 2000, p. 55). Wendy Weeks argues that since the early days of welfare state legislation women have been and continue to be denied equal citizenship in a social and political sense. Weeks (2000) contends that Australian welfare state legislation was initially framed on “the male citizenship role of breadwinner and paid worker while women were relegated to citizen-mothers” (p. 58) and that despite certain victories for women over the years such as the sex discrimination legislation of 1984 and the 1988 National Agenda for Women, these alternative agendas were “overtaken by the pro-family agenda of the conservative Liberal-Coalition government” (p. 66). As a result, “the late 1990s are marked by a resurgence of ‘pro-family’ policy approaches which re-enshrines women as wives and mothers first, citizens second” (Weeks, 2000, p. 69).
Similarly, Jane Thomson (2000) argues that while feminism has had some brief influence upon social policy in Australia during the late 1980s in particular, overall “social policy has taken inadequate note of the centrality of gender” (p. 83), the effect of which is to privilege the position of male workers and to maintain the perspective that child-care is the exclusive responsibility of women. While the intent of the 1988 National Agenda for Women was to encourage joint participation of women and men in both paid work and domestic responsibilities, Thomson (2000) presents evidence that this has not been achieved, with women still more likely to be paid less than men, occupy casual jobs, bear the responsibility of juggling work and child-care, as well as carrying more of the domestic load in general. “The supposition that men have taken up increasing domestic responsibilities as women have taken up paid work has not proved to be the reality” (Thomson, 2000, p. 89).

As Thomson (2000) points out “the model of male breadwinner is no longer the norm” (p. 84) yet it is a model that clearly persists in social and welfare policy and continues to have a profound influence not only on gender roles, but also in relation to family finances, as will be seen in the following pages.

**Money Troubles – “Having to budget very tightly”**

Managing financially was the next most frequently mentioned challenge after that of managing time. Other evidence, such as Ozga and Sukhanadan’s (as cited in Reay, et al., 2002), tells us that “one of the main reasons for mature students’ non-completion at university level is the greater financial and family pressure they experience relative to their younger counterparts” (p. 15). Financial stress was mentioned as a significant issue by almost all of the women.

*I think the toughest thing overall is just the financial situation because I’ve only been able to work part-time, and wanting to be a good mum and have time for the girls…* (Rachel)
"I’ve been having to budget very tightly... I think they [children] are probably just sick of budgeting for so many years..." (Penny)

"Less money, crappier shoes [laughs]... that’s the big impact, less money..." (Linda)

Finances were also mentioned as significant by those amongst the men who were no longer working full-time.

"The finance thing has been the major factor..." (David)

"Financial adjustments is a big one..." (Bob)

The loss of income for men, who are used to being the family breadwinner, can be a particularly difficult adjustment. A North Yorkshire study (as cited in McGivney, 1999a) of men and further education found that, for men:

- Being a student (as your main occupation) is not seen as a desirable, high status activity for older men... A further factor was the perceived pressure on men to ‘put bread on the table’... Men who were not seen as fulfilling this role of being ‘a good provider’ were seen as running the risk of attracting social disapproval, or worse, pity. (p. 66)

Little wonder perhaps that the financial adjustment was a major concern for those men who had foregone, or at least curtailed, the family breadwinner role in order to study, nor that two out of the five men interviewed were continuing to work full-time as well as studying.

For the single mothers, most had had many years experience at managing on a very limited budget – "I have always been a single parent in a way and I always managed to survive" (Anne) – although this survival was not made any easier by the recent ‘welfare to work’ federal government legislation (Wilson, 2000) which has seen parenting allowances become more difficult to access –
“Because my daughter turned 16 the money I was getting from Centrelink [government welfare agency] almost halved…” (Virginia).

Such changes in legislation reflect the growth of neo-liberalism within the breadwinner/carer model of the welfare state (O’Connor, et al., 1999) favoured by the federal Liberal/National coalition government, led by John Howard, which at the time of this study had been in power in Australia for the previous decade. Under this model, married women who are studying are particularly affected, having difficulty “obtaining government financial support, scholarships or welfare benefits because it is assumed that their partners will support them” (Scott, et al., 1996, p. 251). The 2007 report on student finances from the Centre for Study of Higher Education (CSHE) (James, Bexley, Devlin, & Marginson, 2007) in Melbourne, also found that female students were “more likely to be financially dependent on someone else [and] more likely to have a budget deficit, less likely to have savings for an emergency and less likely to have paid HECS or full-fees up front” (p. 2).

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the tightening of criteria in relation to welfare benefits over this decade, including government assistance to students, has resulted in high levels of financial stress amongst the student population. The CSHE report (James, et al., 2007) into student finances also tells us that an estimated 12.8% of students in 2006 were “regularly [going] without food or other necessities because they could not afford them” (p. 2) and that around half of the students surveyed “had annual budgets that were in deficit [and] often worried about their finances” (p. 2).

This situation is not unique to Australia. For example, mature-age students in the UK similarly struggle financially if they are not in full-time employment themselves or being supported by a partner in full-time employment. Reay and colleagues (2002) in their study of working class mature-age students make the point that, despite the fact that “the UK policy rhetoric of commitment to widening access to higher education has identified mature students as playing a pivotal role” (p.5) the financial realities mean that mature

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students with a limited income also have limited opportunities to participate in higher education, the effect of which is to “reproduce past educational inequalities” (p. 5). The single mothers were at the greatest disadvantage financially, with similar issues emerging to those discussed in this chapter. “Issues surrounding paid work, time to study and childcare were inextricably enmeshed with what were often precarious financial situations” (Reay, et al., 2002, p. 10).

The different stories of these students indicate that managing very limited time and money were significant challenges for all, requiring considerable personal and family sacrifice. The ways in which each experienced these challenges and the consequent sacrifices that were made, were at least in part reflective of gendered expectations. Interestingly, despite the level of sacrifice being made by these students, in all cases their stories indicated this was overall being made willingly – albeit not without stress and strain – in order that a greater gain may be achieved. This theme of sacrifice versus gain will be explored in more detail in Chapter Eight.

Another very significant challenge that emerged from their stories was the impact that going to university had on their relationships with partners, children, families and friends. The following chapter continues to explore the challenges facing these students on their higher education journey in the context of their close relationships.
Chapter Six: Study and Relationships – “Constantly trying to juggle”

Introduction

Undertaking university studies inevitably had effects upon the various relationships in the lives of the men and women interviewed. In turn, their relationships impacted significantly on their studies, for better or for worse. This chapter explores the interaction between study and relationships that emerged from the participants’ stories, the ways in which each was affected by the other and the impact of gender on this complex mix.

For many of the students, changes and adjustments in their close relationships proved to be the biggest challenge of all. It was also clear that support, whether offered in practical terms or on an emotional level, was an important part of their relationships. Indeed, the quality of the relationship was often defined in terms of the perceived level of support that it offered. Hence, this chapter further explores the issue of support within their close relationships. The various types of broader support available to and used by this particular group of students will then be examined in more detail in Chapter Seven.

The Significance of Support

A number of researchers make distinctions between various types of social support, which are commonly classified as practical support, informational support and emotional support (Darlington & Miller, 2000; Isaksson, Lexell, & Skar, 2007; Ringdal, Ringdal, Jordhoy, & Kaasa, 2007). Practical support is usually viewed as “instrumental aid, tangible” (Isaksson, et al., 2007, p. 23) and as task-focused assistance. Examples of such practical support relevant to this cohort of mature-age students might include assistance with tasks such
as caring for children, transport, housework or household repairs, as well as financial assistance. Informational support could include advice and information about university procedures, academic issues and availability of resources and services.

Emotional support is less easily defined, as the enacting of it may vary greatly depending upon the relationship and the situation. What constitutes emotional support is very much in the eye of the beholder. Perhaps an apt description is that by Ringdal and colleagues (2007) who describe emotional support as involving “verbal and non-verbal communication of caring and concern… believed to reduce distress by restoring self-esteem and permitting the expression of feelings” (p. 62).

There is general agreement amongst researchers about the significance of social support of all types, with evidence that, in the words of Isaksson et al. (2007, p.24) it is “positively related to life satisfaction”. Research by Darlington and Miller (2000) reveals that, within families, “more adequate support is related to more intimacy and less conflict” (p. 72). It also demonstrates “the importance of receiving support that is appropriate and adequate for an individual’s needs” (p. 66) and that it is the quality of support, rather than the quantity, which “is crucial in predicting family wellbeing and family functioning” (p. 74). Other research also demonstrates that social support “leads to motivation, which enables participation in occupation” (Isaksson et al., 2007, p. 28), a finding perhaps particularly relevant to this cohort of mature-age students and their participation in higher education.

Not surprisingly then, the stories of these students indicated that their motivation for their studies and their sense of satisfaction within their relationships were influenced by the level and quality of support they felt they were receiving from others.
Women’s Relationships with Partners

As discussed in the previous chapter, the women who were living with a male partner generally did not receive much support from him in a practical sense, although some indicated that they experienced a level of emotional support. For instance, Anne, whose partner was also studying, felt that although she did not receive much practical support — “he’s not the supportive type” — the common bond of studying had brought them closer together.

*I think it’s helped support it [relationship with partner] because we are both studying.* (Anne)

Similarly Tina described her husband as “actually very emotionally supportive” even though she was not able to rely on him for much practical assistance. Indeed it was surprising how little support most of the women asked for and expected of their male partners and how grateful they were for very small changes. Only when partners actively objected or interfered with their studies did there appear to be any negative effects on the relationship. It seemed that as long as their partners did not actively object, they were described as “supportive”.

Susan Smith (1996), in her interviews with women returning to education, refers to “unpacking” (p. 66) the notion of support. Even though many of the women she interviewed described their partners as supportive, later questions revealed that there were “preconditions of their husbands’/partners’ support” (p. 67). In unpacking this concept of support Smith concluded that partners were described as supportive, that is, as not actively objecting or disrupting, as long as “there is no change in the division of labour in the home….. his time is not encroached upon either for his work or leisure [and] …. the lives the children are not disrupted” (p. 67). Similar observations have been voiced by Leonard (1994), who found that a supportive attitude from male partners was dependent “on not having their lives disrupted by their wives returning to
study” (p. 171), and that, even where there was overtly stated support for the women’s studies this “rarely translated into practical help” (p. 171).

Interestingly, Reay et al.’s (2002) interviews with mature-age female students revealed “a subtext of women as ‘uncared for carers’ “(p. 17). Perhaps, for many women, lack of caring/support for themselves and their own pursuits is such an everyday experience, that they accepted it unquestioningly. This may help to explain these apparent contradictions noticed by other researchers such as Wilson (1997) who describes “the woman who praises her family for their tremendous support but found the family difficulties….. magnified because of her going to university” (p. 364).

Two of the women in this cohort however encountered such active resistance from their partners towards their university studies that they felt they had to make a choice between staying in the marriage or staying at university.

*He wasn’t too happy with it, he made things difficult for me and I had to borrow the neighbour’s car just to get here... you know, I was the wife at home, dinner on the table, house was always clean – the house is never clean now! It got to the point where he would be drunk on the days that I was at uni... it got beyond a joke...* (Helen)

*He made it like I was cheating young people out of opportunities... and then added I was too old to play this game successfully... his opinion was it was time for me to sit back and knit and wait to be a grandmother...* (Amber)

In both these cases it was active interference, rather than lack of support, that resulted in Helen’s and Amber’s decisions to end their marriages in order to be able to continue at university.

Some of the women’s stories revealed that the basis for the resistance they encountered may well have been that their return to study was perceived as a threat to their male partners’ position in the relationship.
When I did think about it a few years back, it was probably one of the reasons why I didn’t pursue…. He seemed threatened by it all and I left it at that… then every now and then I think he feels threatened that I might find a better lifestyle… He did say that one time, ‘oh, you won’t want to be married to an old coal miner’… (Grace)

I think it was a big slap to his pride and ego… only in the last two years has he felt comfortable with the fact that I’m not going to get a degree in leaving! (Nerida)

As noted in previous research with mature-age students (Edwards, 1993; Hayes & King, 1997; Kelly, 1987; Martin, 1988; Morrison, 1996; Paasse, 1998; Tett, 2000) a woman’s decision to return to study can be a significant challenge to the traditional male/female roles in relationships; this can be “not just threatening to the women’s relationships, but somehow threatening to their partners personally” (Edwards, 1993, p. 155). Certainly, some of the women’s stories in this particular study revealed a change in the power dynamics in the relationship and indeed in the family as a whole. A number of the women described a growth in confidence in their own knowledge and opinions, as a result of their studies, which inevitably brought about a change in their perceptions of themselves in relation to their partners.

Some of the beliefs I’ve held….I used to rely on ‘Today Tonight’ or whatever and that’s total crap… I get a little bit frustrated with him sometimes because he still thinks the same… (Linda)

I feel like, all of a sudden, I’ve got a brain… my opinion is worthy. I no longer feel like I’m on the back foot. He’s a very bright man and talented – so I no longer feel like I’m a dummy… I probably don’t have as much respect for him as I once had, because now I know I’m more confident and say what I think… (Mandy)

Such quotes indicate that the traditional hierarchy within the family is being questioned, even challenged, as these women begin to view their own
opinions as worthwhile and no longer inferior to those of their husbands. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the women were very willing to be understanding of their partners’ feelings, to tailor their own behaviour in order to avoid overt conflict and to stress the positives in their relationships. One example is that of Linda:

*We just try and cool off on the political debates... we have a good relationship on other levels so it doesn't matter so much...* (Linda)

Also Grace, who has previously mentioned that her husband felt threatened by her studies, keeps the peace by watching her words – “I'm very careful with what I say”.

Implicit in their stories was a willingness to accommodate their partners, but also there appeared to be an underlying sense of not feeling entitled to take time for themselves, to spend time on their studies or to choose a role other than that of carer within the family. Included in this was a readiness to take responsibility for others’ feelings. Once again, these women are the “uncared for carers” (Reay, et al., 2002, p. 17), taking care of feelings, being careful not to upset anyone else in the family and feeling responsible for any disruption, however slight, that is perceived to be related to their studying. There are strong similarities here to Susan Smith’s previously mentioned study (1996) in which she found that “patriarchal values towards women’s role in the family” (p. 68) created a situation where women “expected to receive little emotional support [and] had to judge their husbands/partners’ moods before broaching the subject of returning to study” (p. 70).

One striking difference was in the story of Carol, who was in a relationship with a female partner and had no children. Carol’s partner had also studied as a mature-age student and understood exactly what was involved. Household tasks were shared, there was an understanding of the need for time for study and the sense of equality in the relationship came through strongly. A number of factors appear to have played a part in this, including no children to be cared for, a common understanding of university study and what is involved,
but also perhaps the fact that this same-sex relationship was not subject to the pressure of the patriarchal values as described above by Smith, in the same way as were the opposite-sex relationships.

**Men’s Relationships with Partners**

Three of the five men interviewed were married at the start of their university studies. One had since separated, while the other two were still married. While the sample of men is very small in this study, it is nevertheless interesting to note that the expectations of the three married men of their partners, in relation to their studies, were quite different from those of the female students. The men appeared to take it for granted that their partners would support their endeavours both in a practical and an emotional sense. Their expectations of the level of support they should receive were very high, perhaps sometimes unrealistically so. For example, although Bob openly and warmly praised his wife for her supportiveness, he also mentioned that there had been times when the marriage had gone through a difficult patch because “she doesn’t understand what I’m going through”. Bob would have liked to have been able to talk more about his studies and other aspects of university with his wife and found it frustrating at times that she didn’t understand.

_I was a bit down, struggling with pressures, trying to explain to her what I was going through at uni… and she would say, you will be alright, I believe in you, you will do it. It’s not what I wanted to hear…. _ (Bob)

While Bob’s frustrations are understandable, his comments indicate a very different level of expectation of the relationship than those of the female students. Given the experiences described by the women it seems likely that responses of “I believe in you, you will do it” from their partners would have been perceived by them as enormously supportive, rather than indicating a lack of understanding.
Evan, now separated from his wife, described how his studies had impacted upon what had previously been seen as his responsibilities around the house.

> My studies impacted because things were being neglected and it was a chore for me to get up off the computer and go and clean the pool and mow the lawn – those sort of things got left... (Evan)

Again, this is in striking contrast to the way in which the women made often quite superhuman efforts to maintain the household in the usual way and combine their domestic responsibilities with their studies. Rather than trying to maintain the usual patterns and avoid upsetting anyone else in the family, as was evident in the stories of the women, Evan described how he would:

> …get in a bad mood when I was interrupted…. My daughter made me a hat one day which said 'leave me alone, I'm studying'... (Evan).

While Evan and his wife did separate after he had started studying, Evan did not believe that the reasons for the separation could be attributed to the effects of his studies on the relationship, nor to any particular lack of support from his wife for his studies. It appeared that Evan and his wife had not been close for some time and he had initiated the separation when he formed a new relationship with a woman he met at university:

> It probably would have happened anyway. I think the big thing was I met somebody that I clicked with... (Evan)

John, married with a young baby, working full-time and studying full-time, clearly had very little time to spend on anything other than work and study. While this had taken its toll to some degree on his relationship – “it has put a lot of strain on us, especially this year once we had our son” – nevertheless he felt that he still experienced a very high level of support from his wife, which had enabled him to continue to combine the two very demanding roles of student and breadwinner:
John’s wife appeared to be carrying every other responsibility in relation to home and child, in order that John could continue to work and study. This indicates an exceptionally high level of joint commitment to one partner’s university studies, to an extent not demonstrated in any of the women’s stories.

Paul, who had been divorced before starting at university and was not in an ongoing relationship, nevertheless had some observations about the importance of a supportive partner.

I talk to a few guys who are doing uni and they talk about having supportive spouses who let them have a bit of time just quietly, so that they can have half a day on Saturday or whatever it may be… and the guys who struggle are the ones who don’t have that support and I think that’s pretty important if you are with your spouse… (Paul)

Once again, this highlights the difference between the men and the women in relation to the level of support they feel they can reasonably expect from partners. No doubt it is a reality that both men and women will struggle with their studies without the kind of practical support that Paul describes. The difference is that the men expected to receive this – and did – yet in some cases wanted more, while the women tended to expect less, to receive less, yet to value highly whatever little support they did receive.

The internal conflict that many women face as mature-age students is movingly articulated by Judy Giles (1990), in writing of her own experiences and her lack of confidence when first encountering the world of higher education. Giles’ descriptions of her attempts to reconcile the “two worlds” of home and college and her efforts to conform “to the role of ‘good’ wife and mother” (p. 358) would be well-recognised by the women in this study. With
the benefit of hindsight, from a position ten years further on and a doctorate achieved, Giles (1990) is able to provide an understanding of this:

Irrationally, I believed that if I did not cook, clean and wash to certain standards, I would lose, or have taken from me, the wonderful opportunities I was beginning to glimpse… it was the start of an exploration into why I as a woman could collude for so long with the constraining and limiting ideology of domesticity. (p. 359-360)

The stories of the men and women in this study indicate how a similar level of collusion, albeit unwittingly, with dominant ideologies of women’s and men’s roles in domestic relationships, have shaped the expectations that each holds of the other. As with Giles, many of the married and partnered women discussed here appear to be in the process of undergoing a profound change in understanding, as well as a growth in confidence, which has already led to some shifting of power in their relationships and, in some cases, to separations.

Relationships with Children – “More quality time than quantity”

As mentioned in Chapter Five, and in line with Acker’s (1994) research discussed previously, women talked far more about children and families than did the men, making many unprompted references back to their children throughout the interviews. This is perhaps not surprising given that in all cases they were the primary care-givers. Reay et al. (2002) have also noted that mature-age female students “integrated their education, directly and indirectly, into their everyday lives with their children” (p. 11).

When the men were prompted to talk about any changes in their relationships with their children since starting their studies, they expressed no real concerns and indicated that there had not been any significant changes or difficulties.
The single fathers in particular made sure that their studies did not interfere with weekend time with their children.

*I only see the children on weekends, so when I do see them I try very hard not to have to study…* (Paul)

*I’ve tried to make sure that I studied hard during the week so that there was time for my son and daughter at the weekend… it all just fitted in…* (David)

Evan’s relationship with his children had changed significantly, but he attributed this to the recent marital separation rather than his studies:

*It’s just the fact that I’m not there… they are probably affected by that more so than the study…* (Evan)

However, as ‘weekend fathers’, they were able to study relatively uninterrupted by family commitments much of the time, and hence able to plan their study time more easily around the children’s visits.

Amongst the women, mention of relationships with children was spontaneously made time and time again throughout their stories. This was clearly of paramount importance and a matter of significant concern to all those who were mothers. Their stories revealed that they worked continuously and conscientiously to develop measures and strategies to ensure that their children did not unduly miss out on their time and attention. The end result was that in most cases they perceived any effects of their studies on their relationships with their children, as positive on balance. While they had less time to give to their children, there was a sense that the quality of time had improved. There was also a sense that, not only had their children developed more independence themselves, but also were more willing to perceive their mothers as independent beings, rather than someone just at the beck and call of children and family responsibilities. With this came more respect.
They started to not see me just as a mother, but more of a person... we’re more equal. Before they looked down on me and were up above me with their father and I was the object of ridicule – ‘oh silly old Mum’... (Nerida)

I think that they are looking up to me more... I think it’s probably for the better... more quality time than quantity... (Penny)

This outcome also validated the women’s decision to study.

I think parents should have other things in their lives other than just children so.... (Anne)

There were also a number of observations about their children now being more actively engaged in learning, with some comments reflecting a sense of self-pride that, as more educated mothers, they could offer more practical help and encouragement over their children’s school work. This has similarities with research by Reay et al. (2002), which found that women undertaking access courses in the UK “saw themselves as role models for their children” (p. 11).

As soon as I started my study her attitude towards her homework changed. She studied more, went to the library... it was great... (Mandy)

I don’t think my second son would have gone to uni, had he not seen me putting in the effort. And my daughter, well she would have just played... she was a social butterfly. Now they will come to me and say ‘can you read it and tell me where I’m going wrong’ – and I type it up and they say ‘that sounds just like a lecturer!’... (Nerida)

With them watching me read all the time, they’re kind of improving themselves at school, and I will just talk about things with them... (Penny)
Another change that emerged from the women’s comments about children could perhaps best be described as a shift in attitude about their children’s education, described in varying ways:

*I don’t force the issue of school because I don’t want him to not want it… I would be more encouraging for him to get a higher education if he’s interested – so I just say things like ‘I hope you want to do this when you leave school’, because it’s opened my eyes – even if it’s something basic – just to get a bit of education…* (Linda)

*I guess the way it’s changed my view… I’d like them to go on to uni, but it’s allowed me to relax a bit with the whole HSC [matriculation exams] thing and saying they must achieve… I’ve even said to them ‘look, I’d like you to get some tertiary education, but if you don’t get there straight away it’s ok… you will be able to come in some other way’. … There is so much pressure for the kids to achieve and if you stand back and look at it, it really doesn’t have to be that way…* (Rachel).

Perhaps simply by being more familiar with higher education, knowing what is involved, what options there are and that it is achievable via a number of different routes, had led not only to a greater understanding of the value of higher education and the pathways to entering, but also to more confidence and a more relaxed attitude about their children’s educational futures.

**Relationships with Extended Family – “This is my time”**.

A number of the women made reference to effects upon their relationships with extended family members, particularly parents and parents-in-law, their sense of responsibility towards them and feelings of guilt over not having as much time for them.
I don’t get to spend much time with them… my parents… sometimes I have to say ‘I can’t talk to you today, I’ve got this assignment to do. She doesn’t really handle that well. She thinks it’s ok because of what I’m doing, but she feels a bit lonely, as I was always her confidante… (Anne)

Our relationship [with parents-in-law] isn’t as warm because we haven’t been going and seeing them and haven’t just seen them and spent time with them… and relationships take a bit of time… (Tina)

A concern about ageing parents – “Mum is getting older – she’s 85…” (Carol) – was also a relatively common theme, articulated in the women’s stories rather than in the men’s, providing another example of the gendered experience of women. “Women are often responsible for caring for other family members beyond the nuclear family, such as elderly parents” (Scott, et al., 1996, p. 235). In some cases, these women were helping to look after elderly parents with serious and ongoing health problems. Finding the time to care for them as attentively as they felt they should, was particularly challenging. For example, Grace had spent “seven years looking after Mum and Dad and putting my life on hold” and had to find ways to take a step back from this once she started her studies, even though she felt selfish and guilty about doing so:

I was very selfish in the fact that when I started Open Foundation… after Dad died… I thought ‘this is my time’ and I talked to Mum about it – I felt so guilty and feeling like I was abandoning her… (Grace)

Not surprisingly, Grace still put her studies and a much-needed holiday on hold to care for her mother when she was ill.

I had my exam in November and I took Mum to the doctor and her heart was so bad… so I had Mum with me all through the holidays and it was really, really difficult. I didn’t feel rested at all. We had to cancel our holiday and everything… (Grace)
Mandy is another example. She was caring for both her parents and this was impacting significantly on her studies:

She [mother] had a stroke in January this year, and about 2 months later she was back in hospital. I was in a lecture and no-one could get in touch with me and she had a suspected heart attack and I was told you had better come down, it's not looking good... I was back and forwards to Canberra which was taking up time... and my father – another reason why I had to drop back from full-time – he needs a hip replacement – they are both in their eighties – so now he is scheduled for surgery. I think a lot depends on how Dad comes out of this surgery... I may even have to defer depending on what happens...

(Mandy)

Virginia’s father also had poor health, which similarly impacted on her studies.

My Dad being sick... it's been two years... an ongoing battle with pain management for him... (Virginia)

Nerida and Rachel had to deal with the death of a parent, in both cases after a long period of illness. Both indicated that they had been the main carer amongst their siblings, which seemed to exacerbate other problems in family relationships, adding to the strain.

It’s awful to lose a parent but my mother was dying of diabetes, we knew she was dying... I think the way my siblings have treated me in the past 12 months has been unforgivable... there was so much scheming, swindling and trying to get rid of the executors of the will... really rotten, horrible stuff... (Nerida)

My Dad died in the semester break earlier in the year... I’ve got two older brothers... but I was the one to help with the funeral and everything, and they left that to me... (Rachel)
Despite the difficulties, it was interesting the extent to which the women tended to minimise the problems, or to see the positives rather than focusing on the negatives. For example, Mandy, who had been travelling up and down to Canberra (a distance of some four to five hours’ drive each way) to visit her unwell mother, comments “it didn’t impact too much”, yet Mandy had changed to a part-time load largely because of her parents’ ill health and was contemplating the possibility that she may need to defer altogether to care for them. Grace, looking after her mother with cancer nevertheless regarded herself as “very, very fortunate” that her mother was still alive. There was also a tendency to view their university studies as something positive, rather than an added hindrance, at such difficult family times.

_I wonder how well I would have been able to do that [organize father’s funeral] had I not had the time here at uni… at uni you are able to put your life over there for a moment and be able to just focus on what you need to do…_ (Rachel)

This minimising of the difficulties is consistent with an acceptance by these women that they are naturally expected to take on carer responsibilities for family members. This acceptance of the gendered expectation that women will carry the primary caring role in the family can deny women a sense of entitlement to personal time, including study time. In Linden West’s (1995) research with adult learners, West refers to “a gendered oppressive conditioning” of women, in which “her husband is the bread winner and the public person while she is cast, and casts herself, in the role of carer and supporter of him as well as the rest of the family” (p. 140). West contends that the stories of the female students with whom she spoke were “partial and highly selective… reflect[ing] the oppressive norms of their time, about the role of women or the purpose of education” (p. 141).

As such, minimising the difficulties and the impact of university on their caring role perhaps enables many women to continue at university without too much self-censure and indeed, censure from others. As long as family responsibilities are given priority, and the potentially competing responsibilities...
of study are not overly interfering with family obligations, then study can be seen as acceptable. Hence, there is every reason to be selective in what is revealed, to downplay difficulties and to manage a double load with cheerfulness and little complaint.

Contrast this with Bob’s recommendation to other students, in which the term selfish has very different connotations:

\[
I \text{ always tell mature aged students to basically… be selfish. Make sure you have time for yourself. Make sure you rope off an area in your house that’s yours… Give yourself time if you are fair dinkum about it…} \]

(Bob)

For Bob, being selfish is about giving oneself permission or entitlement, whereas for Grace, quoted earlier, being selfish is about not fulfilling one’s duty to others, and therefore a cause for guilt. While Bob’s advice is no doubt very sensible, this advice would be virtually impossible to follow for those women with family responsibilities, given the gendered expectations under which they are living their lives.

**Relationships with Friends**

For both the women and the men, some friendships had changed as a direct result of their studies. In many cases this was simply because of lack of time to spend with their friends.

\[
You \text{ don’t see some of the friends as often…} \quad (Anne)
\]

\[
I \text{ used to get calls from mates to go fishing and I couldn’t… couldn’t do the stuff I used to do…} \quad (John)
\]

Some friends were understanding of this:
I see less of them and they understand that…it gets to the point where I go ‘I can’t see you for the next 8 weeks… got exams coming up – and they are fine… give us a call when you’re finished… (Virginia)

In other cases there was a sense of growing apart from old friends:

There are a few friends I don’t keep in contact with anymore and this will probably sound a bit conceited, but it’s… I’ve grown as a person, or just outgrown them. Two different paths… (Bob)

For some, this was a significant loss:

The other friends that I had that weren’t quite as close have drifted off. It’s quite sad. There is one in particular – I spent a day with her through the holidays and I was really bored… I felt really terrible… I felt sad about that… I will try to keep the friendship but the closeness is not the same… (Carol)

Other researchers, such as Laura Rendon (1998), note the phenomenon of students who go to university from non-traditional backgrounds, feeling like the ‘odd one out’ amongst their family and circle of friends. She found that non-traditional students at American colleges “spoke of loss. They talked about the emotional discomfort involved in separation from family and friends…. how difficult it was… to relate to friends who chose not to attend college” (p. 2).

The more positive side however was that all the participants had developed new friendships, to varying degrees, at university. Some had more friends than before, with the new friendships tending to be very significant and constituting an important part of their overall support network.

I have more friends now because of uni…. Those friends I’ve met, we help each other… (Fiona)
Now that I’ve come to uni I’ve made more friends… (Linda)

Nor were new friends limited to other mature-age students:

…now we older ones get invited to their 21st birthdays and that’s nice! (Virginia)

The importance of friendships with other students and its significant impact on the students’ persistence and resilience at university is something that will be discussed further in the following chapter. Meanwhile, the themes that have been explored in this chapter include the ways in which the women’s and men’s university studies have impacted upon close relationships, how these relationships have impacted upon their studies and the effects of gender on this balance between the two.

So how do the students cope with these changes in their lives? How do they deal with these effects? What are their most significant sources of help and support and from whom do they receive this? These are all questions which the following chapter will explore and discuss.
Chapter Seven: Staying and Succeeding – “Pig-headed and determined”

Introduction

As the previous chapters have demonstrated, all the students interviewed had multiple responsibilities, combining their studies with home, family and work demands. As well as this, many were struggling financially and were also extremely time poor. Scott et al. (1996) in their research into reasons for mature-age students discontinuing their studies, found that family responsibilities, work responsibilities, practical difficulties, financial difficulties and hostility or lack of support from family members, in that order, were the top five reasons cited. Those found to be facing the strongest pressure to discontinue were mature-age women with children, due to the combination of “role overload” (p. 251) from the weight of family, work and study responsibilities combined with a lack of support for their studies from within their immediate family. Given that all twenty of the mature-age students being discussed here had been studying for at least two years – some for four or five – it was remarkable that they had been able to keep going.

Certainly, personal commitment played an important role in this, with each of the student’s stories indicating enormous determination, combined with the development of genuine enjoyment of their studies and love of learning. Even though nearly all of them referred to times when they had felt like giving it all up, every one of them expressed a commitment to completing their undergraduate studies and achieving their goal; for some this meant the prospect of more study once this degree was complete. Sheer determination was indeed a significant factor for most in their persistence.

*I don’t want to give in half-way and I want to see it to the end…* (Paul)

*I don’t like to give up – definitely not!* (Fiona)
Probably if I wasn’t so pig-headed, determined, I might have given up…
(Grace)

I didn’t want to give up… I don’t think I’ve ever given up on anything in my life… (John)

It would be a waste of all that time I have already invested… that’s what keeps me going… (Tina)

Combined with this determination was a genuine love of and desire to continue learning.

I love it… I get a buzz… just the environment, the books and the knowledge… (Ingrid)

I enjoy it… I like to write but it doesn’t always come easy, but I’m happy when I finish what I do… (Carol)

My love of learning… (Nerida)

The knowledge that will come out of it… the overwhelming thing for me is that I want to learn… (Paul)

However, determination and love of learning can only go so far. There is considerable evidence from research, over many years, to suggest that support from others, both on and off campus, plays a major role in student persistence and retention. Examples include: students who withdraw before completion are less likely to have formed a significant relationship with someone on campus (Tinto, 1993); supportive relationships with others enable students to cope better with the study demands of higher education (Ostrow, Paul, Dark, & Berhman, 1986); those students who enjoy positive relationships with others are more likely to perform well academically and persist with their studies (Multon, Brown, & Lent, 1991); and first year students who experience low levels of support from others are more likely to encounter...
difficulties in adjusting to college life (Demakis & McAdams, 1994; Halamandaris & Power, 1999; Newland & Furnham, 1999).

Much of the more recent research into student retention, amongst all ages, continues to point to the significance of practical help and support, both on and off campus, in encouraging students to stay and progress (Abbott-Chapman, et al., 2004; Couvillion Landry, 2002; Krause, 2005b; McInnes, James, & Hartley, 2000). For example, Skilbeck’s (2006b) “superior conditions of learning” (p. 52) include the importance of learners feeling supported “by colleagues, family, employers etc” (p. 52). Also, Coffman and Gilligan’s (2002) research found that “students who are satisfied with their supportive networks indicate higher levels of life satisfaction than students who are less satisfied with their supportive networks” (p. 152). In fact, according to Skahill (2002/2003) “the most important criterion for staying in college is the student’s social support network” (p. 39). Similarly, Rendon’s (1998) work with mature-age and other non-traditional students in American colleges indicates the importance of “validation, when faculty, students, friends, parents and spouses made an effort to acknowledge these students and what they were trying to achieve” (p. 3).

So how were these students feeling supported and validated? What assistance, if any, were they receiving to enable them to develop and maintain the resilience required to succeed and progress with their studies? Their stories revealed a number of sources of assistance; fellow students, lecturers, university support services on campus, as well as family and friends off campus.
Help and Support On Campus

Lecturers – “Better than good”

Every one of the twenty students interviewed made some reference to the help and support that they received from their lecturers and in the majority of cases this was a spontaneous and extremely positive reference.

_The lecturers and tutors are better than good – they’re approachable, you feel confident with them. You’re not just being fobbed off. They are really quite wonderful…_ (Nerida)

_The lecturers… you could approach them at any time and they were more than willing to help and stuff…_ (Rachel)

_I have had good access to my lecturers and they have been terrific… I must give a rap to every lecturer I’ve ever had – I don’t think I’ve ever had a bad one…_ (John)

_The lecturers are very understanding and very supportive…_ (David)

While some had experienced one or two lecturers whom they had not found so helpful, these were seen as the exception.

_The majority are very good; there are just the odd ones that… ‘why are you doing this?’… some of them put up barriers sometimes… very rare…_ (Grace)

_Most of the time the lecturers are good…_ (Katrina)

_99% of them are very good. We’ve had the odd one that is really there just ticking boxes… but by and large the vast majority of lecturers are very good…_ (Paul)
For many of the women with family responsibilities having a supportive lecturer, who was willing to give extensions for assignments at times of family difficulties, had made a crucial difference.

*Most of our lecturers have been great. If you are having an issue they’ll give you extra time… certainly understanding of mature age students…* (Anne)

*The lecturers are all very empathetic and happy to work with me in terms of getting extensions…* (Mandy)

Two of the women expressed gratitude to particular lecturers, who had provided a high level of understanding and support during family and personal difficulties.

*There have been two lecturers on this campus that have walked me through the most difficult times…* (Amber)

*There are a few lecturers I think that in any point in the future, if there was ever a point where they would ring me and say ‘I need you’, I would drop whatever it was that I was doing and I would do it…* (Helen)

Clearly one of these lecturers was renowned for his understanding amongst other mature-age female students, as indicated by the following quote from Helen.

*My God… [lecturer’s name] has seen me cry so many times that poor man! We actually sat down and discussed… myself and some of the girls… and they would say ‘I was in there last week’ and someone else would say ‘I was there too’, and we’d say, ‘that poor man, he had to listen to us wailing women constantly… He’s been great, very understanding – God bless him… .* (Helen)
The importance of supportive teaching staff in the success of adult learners has been identified in a number of other studies with mature-age learners (Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998; McGivney, 1999b; Rendon, 1998; Scott, et al., 1996). A recent Australian research project (Chapman, et al., 2006) identified “good practice exemplars” (p. 157) amongst adult education programs in rural Victoria. The researchers found that the “dedication of the teachers and the care they extend to participants” (p. 158) was one important and noticeable element that contributed to the success of the programs and the participants. Adult learners were “treated with respect and given a voice, which increase[d] their sense of belonging and being a valued member of the group” (p. 158). Even more recently, a major survey into factors influencing student engagement that was conducted in 2007 across 25 Australian and New Zealand higher education institutions (Coates, 2008) demonstrates that student engagement with the institution is strongly linked “to perceptions of academic support” (p. ix). This is consistent with the earlier findings of Rendon (1998) who describes the validation that students receive when teachers engage in “seemingly simple acts, like calling students by name, praising their work, and providing encouragement and support” (p. 3).

Such research findings are borne out by the stories of all the students in this cohort. The care and support that each had experienced from the majority of their lecturers – some to a very significant degree – appear to have been extremely important factors in their persistence and successful progression through their studies.

**Campus support services**

In addition to the assistance they received from academic staff, many of the students had found the university services very helpful. Other research into adult learning environments stresses the vital role of institutional support services in the success and progression of mature-age students. Skilbeck (2006b) identifies “a range of support services” as one of the key factors which contribute towards “good practice” in adult learning (p. 63). Similarly, McGivney (1999b) outlines a number of factors that facilitate educational
progression for adult learners, which include “support mechanisms that help people overcome any obstacle that might have prevented them from engaging in formal learning” (p. vii).

Some students felt that just about every service on campus was supportive and encouraging.

*Library, IT – all the services…* (David)

*Here I find the librarians, the ladies in student support are fabulous, the book shop, the cafeteria…* (Mandy)

*…in the shop… the library woman…. I think just everyone who is here generally….* (Nerida)

However, specific support services such as personal counselling, careers advice, disability support, learning support and student loans were mentioned as being particularly significant sources of help, again mostly by the female students. Some of the women had accessed the counselling service for help and support with home, family and personal issues:

*I went and saw one of the counsellors… there was a lot of tension … and I went and talked to someone and just let it all out and had a big cry and I was under so much work load – with full time, and the seams were starting to come apart a little bit ….  (Grace)*

*When I got to the point that I wanted to give it up I spoke to student support and – I don’t know why I didn’t do that before, but I just didn’t – and I had some counselling and … that was excellent, releasing fear and anxiety…*  (Katrina)

One or two saw a counsellor on a fairly regular basis:
Usually, if it goes on for a week or two [feeling stressed], I’ll come and get some counselling… (Anne)

Some had accessed counselling in addition to other services:

I got lots of support from [disability officer]… and a counsellor and just a bit of help with the time-management… I took [learning support adviser’s] course… essay writing. It showed me how to set things out… (Virginia)

Three of the women, including Virginia quoted above, revealed that they had a disability. All three had sought support from the disability service on campus. Virginia suffered from pain in her hand and wrist, Grace had suffered permanent physical damage from a workplace injury before starting her studies and Helen had a diagnosis of dyslexia. All spoke positively of the support they were receiving, indicating that the various adjustments and accommodations that had been put in place through the disability service had made a crucial difference to their being able to maintain their studies and pass assessments and exams.

I remember sitting my first [computing] exam and realised I couldn’t actually read off a computer screen… so I broke down in tears when I realised that, and went to see the disabilities officer… (Helen)

They have been great…. Exam time I put in for special consideration to sit separately so I can get up and walk and that sort of thing and to have an ergonomic chair during that time… (Grace)

Talking options over with a careers counsellor was also mentioned as being helpful.

Careers… helpful when I made the decision to switch studies… (Carol)
Many of the women had also sought help from learning support services, for practical skills such as time management mentioned previously by Virginia and also for bridging courses and general academic skills such as essay writing.

*My main help has been [learning support adviser]. I went to her workshops early in the piece and I’ve also got some books and a couple of other essay writing books, so I get help that way…* (Penny)

*I did the referencing course, I did the ‘How to Write Essays’… very helpful, particularly the referencing one because… I was, like, ‘what the hell is this?!* (Amber)

**Financial support**

As mentioned in Chapter Five, many of the women and the men were struggling financially. Financial difficulties are common to a large number of Australian university students, as evidenced by a recent report commissioned by Universities Australia (James, et al., 2007) on the state of student finances, which found that “during 2006 many Australian university students were in stressful financial situations and many found it difficult to support themselves week-to-week” (p. 1). The report found that such financial stress leads to students taking on an increasing amount of paid work in addition to their studies “simply to afford basic necessities, transport, textbooks and other study materials” (p. 2).

Two of the students in this cohort talked about having sought assistance from the student loans service, which provided relatively small, short-term, interest-free loans to students as well as small hardship grants:

*I must say, the student support here… I had a loan and a one-off payment – and that was fantastic. The support here has been great…* (David)
My husband having passed away and it was a big expense as well … and I was really desperate for a loan, to help me out… (Katrina)

James et al. (2007) found differences in the way in which male and female students access this type of financial assistance in Australian universities, with female students “more likely to have taken out a repayable loan in order to study than were male students; however male students with loans had borrowed much larger amounts” (p. 2). So it seems that, while they may use this type of service differently, it is an important source of practical support to both female and male students, assisting them to continue their studies despite their sometimes precarious financial situations.

Formalised peer support

Another source of support mentioned by several of the students was the peer mentoring program that existed on campus and how helpful this had been to them when they first started. This was a program whereby other students volunteered to take a peer mentoring role with new students, to help them to get to know the campus, find their way around and begin to feel familiar with university life.

One of the mentors… an inspiration… (Carol)

We had [student mentor's name] and another lady… you could email them and they would point you in the right direction… (Virginia)

Virginia and several others were now volunteer student mentors themselves and found the experience of doing this greatly rewarding, in that they enjoyed helping other students and felt more connected to others.

I love doing it… I really enjoyed doing it with the international students this year, and they still come up and say hi and ask how things are going… (Virginia)
I joined the mentor program… I like to help people… most of my group are mentors (Evan)

I do mentoring, so I know what services are available. I was a student mentor this year… I did the student mentor training… it was really good, and I was a mentor last year… (Grace)

The role of such programs in which “older students are encouraged to guide first year students through the college maze” (Couvillion Landry, 2002, p. 7) is now recognised internationally as being one that contributes significantly to student engagement and retention (Coffman & Gilligan, 2002; Dearlove, Farrell, Handa, & Pastore, 2007; Erskine, 2000; Krause, 2005b; McInnes, et al., 2000; Stone, 2000). “Student Mentoring Programs, also known as Buddy Systems or Peer Support Programs, can enhance the social orientation of students, assisting their transition into the life of a tertiary institution” (Stone, 2000, p. 55). McGivney (1999b) also identifies support for transition through mechanisms such as peer mentoring as being of significant help to adult learners as they make the adjustment to a new learning environment. “‘Buddy’ or mentoring schemes based on a particular personal relationship have helped a number of individuals settle into institutional-based programmes… a vital component in encouraging learning continuation and progression is group or peer support” (McGivney, 1999b, p. 68-69).

The high level of institutional support experienced by the students in this cohort may well have been a significant factor in their engagement with the university and hence their continuation with their studies. However, their stories also revealed an even more important source of support – their fellow students.

Friends and peers on campus – “We support each other”
Above all, the students talked about the support, friendship and assistance they received from fellow students.
The girls I’m with – our little study group that we made in Open Foundation – I made some friends there and we’re all doing the same degree and we formed a little group and we support each other… (Linda)

My friends here at uni are just amazing… I’ve met some real friends here, friends that I will have for the rest of my life… (Helen)
First off, my friends. If we don’t understand something we talk among ourselves… (Fiona)

She [friend at uni] and I stumbled through both of our fall-overs and if one of us is down we talk about it to each other… (Amber)

It was not only the women who reported this. The men were equally positive about their network of fellow students on campus.

The support is from my peers here at uni, and there is quite a network that we use and we ring each other up and ask things like ‘do you understand this essay question?’ Sometimes I’ve changed my whole perspective from that conversation… the best is your friends… (Bob)

Probably first of all fellow students – we talk… (David)

Probably more [help] from students… (John)

McGivney’s (2006) research into adults’ routes back into learning suggests that many return to study “because of a wish to meet other people” (p. 85). For a good number of these students however, the idea of coming to university in order to meet new people or make friends did not appear to have been part of their thinking as they began their studies. Most indicated that they had expected to be so busy that they would not have time to make friends. The women with children and family responsibilities, in particular, were already trying to fit their studies into very busy schedules, as has already been discussed. However, once at university, they began to be part of the
community of other students and, within this community, mutual support and friendships developed. The degree to which this building of peer networks could be aided, or inhibited, through different teaching approaches in class was described by some of the students.

*We had this group of ten [project group in class] and this core ten people are really my best friends at uni now…. (Evan)*

*Last year we had lots of group work and five in a group, and without them it wouldn’t have worked… but this semester there has been no emphasis on group work or cooperation… Oh it’s been really hard, because that support base wasn’t there and, like, even though we were doing the same subjects, we would be doing them differently and it was really hard to call on them….. (Fiona)*

The importance of ‘in-class’ mechanisms for building social interaction has been demonstrated in previous studies such as that by Coffman and Gilligan (2002) in which they found that “in the classroom, faculty may further promote social interactions and support among students by designing assignments and class activities that encourage communication, interaction and cooperative learning among students” (p. 63).

‘Out-of-class’, yet formal activities, such as the student mentoring program mentioned previously, also played a part in the development of lasting supportive relationships with other students.

*I’m very fortunate to have hooked up with a lady who was my mentor when I first started, and she was doing Social Science, and we have ended up in the same class and she is great… (Carol)*

Other informal activities on campus contributed to the development of friendships as well. The importance of the campus coffee shop and cafeteria was stressed by quite a few.
Don’t disregard the coffee shop. It is the best place. You can’t really go home and talk about a lot of theories and academic terms at home, so that here, at the coffee shop, of course you can talk about it and it’s not out of place… (Bob)

Talking to the girls in the café [as a place to get support]… (Nerida)

Jocey Quinn (2005) tells us that “the notion of learning community has assumed an important position in discussions about the education of adults” (p. 4). Research that Quinn (2005) conducted with second year women students at two higher educational institutions in the UK revealed that, for these women, connection with other students was of enormous importance to their sense of identity as university students; “a re-imagining of the self with and through others” (p. 13) and that “where they are given the opportunity of meeting together” (p.15) there develops what Quinn refers to as “an imagined learning community” (p. 5) – ‘imagined’ in the sense that, through connection with others, there is space “for dreaming new possibilities and sharing them with others” (p. 14). Quinn talks about the particular importance of these imaginings for women who are “staking claims to the learning community” (p. 12), from which they, as women, have been traditionally excluded.

However, as previously described, all twenty students under discussion here came from family backgrounds where neither parent was university educated and all entered university through a different path than the usual route for school-leaver entry. In this sense they can be regarded as non-traditional (Abbott-Chapman, et al., 2004) and therefore traditionally outsiders in what was once regarded as “cloistered communities” (Quinn, 2005, p. 5) for the elite. Rendon (1998) talks about non-traditional students as being:

students who do not consider themselves college material, ranging from students who didn’t make good grades in high school to… single mothers and fathers coming back to college… students who have been told they will never amount to anything, students who have lived in poverty and who are the first in their family to attend college. (p. 2)
One or other of these descriptions would fit each of the women and men in this study. Similarly, Sarah Mann (2001) likens the experience of non-traditional students to that of being “a stranger in a foreign land” (p. 11). Perhaps then, for the men as well as the women, the forging of connections with others on campus was an important part of navigating “the new land of the academy” (Mann, 2001, p. 12) and establishing their identity as university students.

Open Foundation Program – “The best training you will possibly get”

Participants openly sang the praises of the Open Foundation Program, through which all but one had entered university. Their stories revealed that Open Foundation had been particularly effective at welcoming them into the learning community, encouraging lasting friendships and providing them with a highly supportive environment in the very early stages of their studies. This may well be due to the intended “enabling ethos” (Kavanagh & Stockdale, 2007, p. 4) of the program, which, as such, is designed to be an equity program. As discussed in Chapter Three, Open Foundation is an enabling program for adult learners, designed to enable entry to undergraduate degree programs at university for “students who, for reasons such as poverty, gender discrimination and early school leaving, did not have the opportunity to enter university directly after high school” (Cantwell, et al., 2001, p. 221). As is usual for an enabling program “few or no questions are asked about prior educational experience or results, with entry... being open to all” (Bourke, et al., 1998, p. 2). Enabling programs are therefore designed to provide “both the subject-specific knowledge and the generic study skills that are required for effective studying in higher education” (Hayes & King, 1997, p. 8) as well as “support and encouragement from staff and other students” (Archer et al., 1999, p.50).

In order to assist students to learn and understand what is required for university study, more assistance and support in areas such as essay writing and study skills is provided within the course curriculum than would be usual
in undergraduate studies. With the recognition that the majority of students may be coming from backgrounds where there is little familiarity with higher education, there is also a greater emphasis on helping students to get to know each other, to encourage questions and discussion, to feel comfortable with the lecturer and to participate in class. Keryl Kavanagh and Ruth Stockdale (2007) describe the values of the Open Foundation Program in these terms:

The teaching methodology values mistakes on the principle that we all learn as much from getting things wrong as getting them right. All staff, both administrative and academic have a ‘support’ mentality and a desire to ‘make a difference’ in the learning outcomes of our students. This attitude is also encouraged among students, by promoting the idea of study groups and developing ‘buddy’ links with other members of the class. (Kavanagh & Stockdale, 2007, p. 4)

There is also evidence to indicate that those students who have completed Open Foundation are more motivated and better prepared academically when entering undergraduate studies than those who have not, with “higher mastery goals and lower academic alienation… greater confidence in problem-solving, planning and self-appraisal” (Bourke, et al., 1998, p. 1).

Certainly amongst this cohort of students Open Foundation was credited with encouraging the development of supportive relationships.

*I would say a major support [is] from other Open Foundation students who come to uni, and our friendship has continued… (David)*

*My friends that I met in Open Foundation and have gone all the way through… we have very similar evolution stories… and we have come here to make a difference in our lives… (Helen)*

As well as building friendships, Open Foundation had also provided them with important preparation for the rigours of academic study ahead.
I’m a big advocate for Open Foundation… that’s the best training you will possibly get coming to uni… (Bob)

I think because of being in there [Open Foundation classes] the transition was a lot smoother… (Carol)

I’m really glad I did Open Foundation… it was a good preparation… (Grace)

Much of this preparation was very practical, for example equipping them with necessary skills in essay writing and research.

It taught you how to structure essays or it taught you how to research work… (David)

In Open Foundation they give you a kind of head start… it was an excellent preparation. I’d never written an academic essay before in my life and… [lecturer’s name] was fantastic… (Katrina)

Others mentioned the importance of the supportiveness of their lecturers and the relaxed atmosphere of Open Foundation classes.

The lecturers being approachable with questions… everyone was there for the same thing I guess… it was just relaxed, easy-going… (Virginia)

This kind of preparation was an important part of building their confidence as university students.

I certainly became more confident through Open Foundation, but it wasn’t until I had done a few assignments and essays and things for the degree that I realised the true worth of Open Foundation… (Mandy)

Research into enabling programs in Australia and the UK (Archer, et al., 1999; Hayes & King, 1997) indicates “the relative success of non-traditional entry”
(Cantwell, et al., 2001, p. 233) for students who enter university via an enabling program, as well demonstrating that “mature age students from enabling programs perform to an equal level of mainstream entry students” (Cantwell, et al., 2001, p. 222). This is despite the challenges that they face as mature-age students with multiple responsibilities and many coming from backgrounds where university study is not the norm. Certainly, the stories from the students in this study indicate that this particular enabling program provided them with a head start and truly ‘enabled’ them to continue with their studies into degree programs.

*I think that if I had of gone into Uni straight from school I would never have got this far…* (Fiona)

*I think it would have been difficult without doing Open Foundation – very difficult…* (Grace)

McGivney’s (1999b) work into informal and community based learning in the UK, indicates the value of educational opportunities that are open to all, free and locally based. She found that participation in this type of learning, particularly by those “who are educationally, economically and socially disadvantaged” (p. vi), leads to “progression… personal progression, social progression, economic progression and educational progression” (p. vi). According to McGivney (1999b), amongst those who progress from informal community based learning to formal higher education studies:

Very few of the people involved would have considered entering formal education programmes without prior engagement in informal learning. It was the positive learning experience in a familiar local environment that had stimulated new interests and enthusiasms and motivated people to continue learning. (p. vii)

Open Foundation, while a more formal educational program than those discussed by McGivney (1999b), was certainly viewed by the students in this study as a positive learning experience which had directly encouraged and motivated them to continue learning. Another point of interest is that while
none were previously familiar with studying at the campus, all the students lived in the local area of the university and would have been familiar with its presence, very likely having passed by it many times before actually entering as students. One of the students previously worked in the campus cafeteria, so was very familiar with the environment from that perspective. None of them had to step too far out of their local area to attend. The experience of informal and community learning indicates that the locally based nature of the campus may also have been a factor in their decision to come and to stay.

Help and Support Off Campus

While relationships have been discussed in some depth in the previous chapter, it is worth also mentioning here the specific assistance that the participants talked about receiving from friends and family members outside university.

Help from partners – “I’m not getting a lot of practical support”
Consistent with the findings discussed in the previous chapter, the only three students who named their partners as being a major source of help and support were the two married men plus the one woman who was in a same-sex relationship. John’s wife was a teacher, so was particularly encouraging and helpful with his academic work.

She encourages me every day. She’ll proof read all my stuff, and her being an English teacher she’s just helped me so much… she understands… (John)

Bob attributed his decision to study to his wife’s encouragement and support from the very beginning.

I said, I think I would like to be a primary school teacher… it’s something I’ve always been interested in and I think I would like to do.
She said “do it” … I said “I’m not educated” so she said “go and get educated” … and she was the one who actually applied to Open Foundation… ’cause I thought I had no hope of getting into it. She found out all the information… (Bob)

Carol’s female partner who had also been a student was described as very understanding and always willing to help.

My partner’s great – she’s been through the same thing… (Carol)

Interestingly, two of the women named their male ex-partners as being very helpful in terms of giving practical assistance with the children of the relationship.

I’m in contact with their father, who is a great help… he has a lot to do with them [children] and he’s quite happy that I’m doing it [studying]… (Penny)

Their dad is good so quite often they [children] would go to his place so I’ve have weekends that I’d be able to get things done… (Rachel)

Given that eight of the women in this study were married or living with a male partner, it seems quite staggering that none of these eight indicated that they could rely on significant practical assistance from their partners. In fact, it seems that women could expect to receive more practical help from the father of their children if they were no longer in a relationship with him. Yet, in the context of the gendered nature of domestic work (Davies, 1990; Gatens & MacKinnon, 1998; Knights & Odih, 1995; Oakley, 1992; Orloff, 1996; Weeks, 2000) and the acceptance – by the women as well as by their partners – of the traditional role for women being primarily one of service to their families, perhaps it is not so surprising.

Tina, for example, married with three children, engaged in part-time work and part-time study, laments the lack of help she has in the home:
…if I could I would probably get somebody in who could whiz around the house for me, once a week, and that would be a big help… (Tina)

Tina appears not to have thought, let alone resented, that this may not be necessary if her husband were to share this domestic load. As Tina’s story continued it emerged that she also feels responsible for inconveniencing her husband by not having enough time to keep the house tidy:

_I think it’s frustrating for my husband as well, because there are things lying around and I think he’s learned to cope with that. Before he was a lot fussier… he’s realised how much worse it can actually get_…. (Tina)

While Tina is happy that her husband has learnt to cope with things lying around she clearly does not expect him to pick things up; this continues to be solely Tina’s responsibility. As Connell (1987) says “gender is, above all, a matter of the social relations within which individuals and groups act” (p. 9). The social relations dictated by gender amongst this group of students unfortunately resulted in a dearth of practical assistance in the home from male partners. Tina admits – “I’m not getting a lot of practical support” – and nor was she alone with this.

**Help from other extended family – “More practical help”**

Extended family members were, for some, an important source of practical support and assistance. Consistent with the pattern of women as carers, more often than not female relatives were the ones called upon for practical help, mainly mothers, mothers-in-law and sisters. The single women in particular reported a great deal of regular practical help with children from their female relatives. In fact, ironically, it appeared that the single parents had more regular and practical support than did those who were living with a male partner.

*My mum lives two streets away, so does my sister, so I get a lot of help from them… my sister’s a bit of emotional help for me but my mum’s*
more of a…. she’ll get the children off the bus if I’m late or something. She’s more practical help. My sister would be up there with the best of my help, and also my mother-in-law. She’s a great help… (Penny)

I’ve got my family… if she needs to do something [16 yr old daughter] and I can’t do it, then I just ring one of my sisters and they come and do it for me and… we’re pretty close… (Virginia)

Mum and Dad take him [7 year old] to school and pick him up and stuff like that. He’s their only grandchild and he’s very much doted on… (Fiona)

None of the women who were married or living with a partner mentioned receiving any practical help from family. Whether it is more acceptable for single mothers, rather than those who are married or living with a partner, to ask for and accept this kind of practical help from family, is something that perhaps needs more exploration.

In contrast, with Bob’s wife back at full-time work while he was in full-time study, the family received a great deal of help from his mother. The family had undergone a major adjustment, in that Bob’s wife was at home full-time with the children, before Bob had left work to study to be a teacher. Now that Bob’s wife was working, his mother had stepped in to help look after the children.

All their lives, up to a couple of years ago, they have had Mum there… and now…. Nanna has moved recently… about 12 months ago… just down the road and that’s been a great help ‘cause we know we can just send them [4 children] down there of a morning or they can go there of an afternoon… (Bob)

This level of practical help and support for Bob’s study from the two women in his life, his wife and his mother, is a complete contrast with the women’s stories. While this is only one story of only one man, it is still interesting that this is completely at odds with the experiences of all the women. It stands out
as such an exception that it is worth comment, particularly as it so consistent with the prevalent gendered expectations of the man as breadwinner and the woman as carer. Bob, as the breadwinner, is not expected to take on the full role of carer, even when he is no longer actually the breadwinner. His wife, in contrast, still carries her caring role with her even when she takes on the responsibility of being the breadwinner. What she is not able to do, due to being at work, is picked up by another female relative. While there is no suggestion that Bob spent no time at all caring for his children and/or his wife, the difference is that he was not expected to take this on as his full responsibility and certainly not to shoulder this alone. Help in the form of his mother was brought in to fill the gap left by his wife.

The breadwinner/carer model is one that is deeply ingrained, not only in our social interactions but also in welfare state legislation internationally (O’Connor, et al., 1999). One of the results of this, in the words of Ann Orloff (1996) is that:

Women do not choose between paid work and unpaid housewifery (including mothering) as exclusive activities – they can choose to be stay-at-home wives and mothers only or combine paid work with their domestic work. Nowhere in the industrialised West can married women and mothers choose not to engage in caring and domestic labour (unless they are wealthy enough to purchase the services of others). The core aspects of the sexual division of labour remain: women perform most domestic work whether or not they work for pay, while men do very little domestic work. (Orloff, 1996, p. 87)

Even while Bob is not earning, he is still treated as the breadwinner. These few years are only temporary; he will complete his degree, become a teacher and get back to being the breadwinner. In the meantime, his studies are accommodated by women, in a way that none of the women’s studies were being accommodated by men.

Another interesting difference emerged from an aspect of Helen’s story. Helen, also a single mother, mentioned her father as being very willing to give
practical help. Helen’s parents were separated and Helen was somewhat estranged from her mother, but close to her father, and would ask him for help with the children when she needed it.

*My dad tries extremely hard... I have a sick child at the moment and I had to leave a lecture yesterday because I had a call from the school and my father is helping... he’s a dad and dad’s don’t always get it ... but I think Dad has always tried and he always does his very best...*

(Helen)

It is interesting that “Dad”, for all the help he provides, is regarded as second-best, “he’s a dad and dads don’t always get it” – with the implication that a mum would “get it” more easily, yet Helen’s own experience was of a mother whom she did not regard as supportive.

*My mother and I had quite a serious altercation and I hadn’t spoken to her in some time but I recently started to speak to her again. My biggest fear I think with her is... because she is a big controlling person... very much like [Helen’s ex-husband] was... I just don’t want the relationship to become what it had become... and at the moment it’s at a distance and slowly.... It’s always been about Mum... how it affects her...* (Helen)

Despite the lived experience of a father who is helpful and supportive and a mother who is not, the persistence and pervasiveness of the social and gendered construction of mothers as natural carers – and fathers as being not suited to caring – influences Helen’s view of her father’s help, even in the face of day-to-day evidence to the contrary. Perhaps this also helps to explain why Bob was so well looked after, from the belief that “he’s a dad and dads don’t always get it”.

Chapter Seven: Staying and Succeeding

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Help from friends – “A bit of a rock for me”

Also consistent with the status of women as carers, was the help and support that the women in this study received from other women, in the form of friends and neighbours, who were not at university. Some of the mothers without partners particularly relied upon these friends for emotional support and practical help.

*My neighbour across the road… it was just one of those moments when you click with someone and she has been a bit of a rock for me… even through the break-up she had been my sounding board….*

(Helen)

*I have another friend…. She takes my children every Sunday… ten till five… If I didn’t have her I would definitely not be able to carry on…*

(Katrina)

The women with children who were married or living with a partner also spoke of the practical and emotional help and support from their women friends. Anne talked about the emotional support she would receive from her “best friend”. Mandy spoke of “a couple of girlfriends who will look after [son] if I needed to come up here…”

Tina mentioned a particular friend who “has been through uni and she has kids and she’s been great… she’s just there…”

Only one amongst the twenty, Ingrid, who was divorced with five children, mentioned a male friend who was relied upon for help and support.

*I have a very, very dear friend… that would have to be him [who is the most helpful person]…*  
(Ingrid)

None of the men mentioned friends off campus as being of any particular help to them. Perhaps the kind of help offered to the women by other women –
mostly help with children and emotional support through difficult times – was not the kind of help that the men needed. As previously discussed, most of the men were either receiving ‘care’, both practical and emotional, from female partners and/or did not have full-time responsibility for children. Britton and Baxter’s (1999) study of mature-age students indicates that male students display an “underlying individualism and self-centredness [which] relates more clearly to men’s greater autonomy and lesser responsibility for the day-to-day care of others” (p. 190). Certainly the men in this study tended to see themselves as quite self-sufficient, generally autonomous and individually focused upon a particular goal. As a result they had not tended to seek much help from others outside the immediate family.

I know that the uni has a lot of facilities available but I have never had to use them…. I have been very focussed in knowing where I’m going…. (Evan)

I don’t know that I’ve called upon a lot of support… I think I’ve been fairly self-motivated and self-driven about it…. (Paul)

I’m an independent sort of fellow …. (Bob)

McGivney (1999a), in her study of men in adult education and training, refers to the “dominant masculine identity [which has] traditionally been constructed as something which is superior to femininity” (p. 56). Seidler (as cited in McGivney, 1999a) identifies that part of conforming to “what constitutes appropriate masculine behaviour [is the importance of] keeping face in front of your peers and not showing any signs of weakness… not wanting to connect to parts of themselves that can leave them feeling exposed and vulnerable” (p. 63).

Hence, help-seeking behaviour is also gendered in nature, with many men reluctant to show apparent weakness by seeking help and women traditionally being both the givers and receivers of help, in the public domain as well as the private. In the public domain of the welfare state for instance “women are
overrepresented as users [of services] and providers” (Lister, 2000, p. 29) and are less likely than men to be economically independent. “Economic dependence is the price many women have to pay for the hidden dependence of their families and partners upon them for care and servicing” (Lister, 2000, p. 31). Men therefore traditionally receive care and support from women within the family, while for women “evidence suggests that the significant others upon whom [women] depended were also the ones who made the most demands upon their available time” (Morrison, 1996, p. 220). The implication of this is that if women need care and support for themselves they are more likely to find this outside the immediate family, from other women.

Gender differences in the availability, access to and use of different sources of help and support are apparent throughout the discussion in this chapter. Yet it is clear that all the students, men and women alike, were being helped and supported in their studies in a number of significant ways. Their own perception of the difference that this help had made, as well as other research into student persistence and retention, strongly suggests that the help and support they were receiving was a major factor in their being able to stay and succeed at university.

Interestingly, there was a sense in the women’s stories that some were beginning to challenge traditional gender prescriptions, along with a growth in independence.

*I think it’s about time for Australian women to actually consider themselves of value and we have a right!* (Nerida)

*I’m a bit more assertive, especially with my husband… We have some good debates and I don’t hold back…* (Grace)

This growth in independence and how it was affecting their longer-term view of themselves will be further explored in the following chapter, along with discussion about shifts and changes in identity for both the men and the women as a result of their being at university.
Chapter Eight: Shifts and Transformations – “My thoughts about myself have changed”

Introduction

For this group of mature students, being at university had brought about significant personal changes in terms of their view of themselves, of others and of the world around them. These changes included an increase in confidence, knowledge and skills; new understandings; finding a new sense of achievement, purpose and fulfilment; becoming more socially aware; and a growing desire to continue learning.

This chapter will discuss the shifts and changes in self-identity that were described by these students, including the ways in which their view of their future had changed.

Confidence and Social Skills – “I’m a lot more confident – more outgoing”

A number of studies have demonstrated the link between academic achievement and an increase in confidence, particularly amongst mature-aged learners (Abbott-Chapman, et al., 2004; Giles, 1990; McGivney, 1999b, 2006; Scott, et al., 1993; Wilson, 1997). A similar link emerged from the stories of the participants in this study.

*I’ve gained confidence… I feel happier – I guess self-esteem. I feel like I’m going somewhere. I’m achieving a goal…* (Penny)
I see myself as probably more confident... You have to step up and do presentations... years ago I would have had palpitations and sweats. Now it's a piece of cake... (David)

A number of the women in particular described how this extra confidence had led to recognition and development of their social skills.

I've gained confidence and to me that was a big thing, because I wasn't a confident person. I've gained a lot of skills and consolidated a lot of skills, but I didn't even realise that I had people skills.... (Rachel)

I'm a lot more confident – more outgoing... I'm the social secretary of the group.... (Fiona)

This development of confidence and social skills is not limited to those mature-age students at university but is consistent with research findings in relation to adult education in general, such as McGivney’s (1999b) research in which she found that adult community education led to “improved personal and social skills” (p. vi). Similarly, Chapman et al. (2006) identify the ways in which education amongst mature-age learners “assists in promoting deeper levels of personal wellbeing [and] social connectedness” (p. 163).

The concept of ‘wellbeing’, and the effect of education on the wellbeing of mature students, is mentioned in much of the literature on adult education. For example, Schuller (2006) talks of the way in which “education can act to enable people to sustain their wellbeing, to maintain it.... in the face of the strains and stresses of everyday life” (p. 16), while Skilbeck (2006a) also mentions the “personal wellbeing” (p.126) that results from adult education programs. Clearly, the process of learning, whether in formal higher education settings or in less formal community adult education settings, is one that is a significant catalyst for personal growth and change in adults.
Internal Transformations and Self-discovery – “I’m a different person totally”

Certainly there was evidence in the narratives of these students that they were undergoing significant personal growth. While this was the case for all, gender differences emerged in the ways in which this was described. The personal growth and change described by the men was often couched in terms that reflected an addition to existing skills.

*I don’t think I have a higher or lower opinion of myself but I knew I was a skilled boat builder – this has just added to my skills...*  (John)

*I’ve always been socially aware, but I think probably more so now...*  (David)

*Confidence.... My people skills have always been good but just to be able to practice has been good...*  (Evan)

Comments about personal growth were sometimes linked with a sense of increased status or respect from others.

*I have grown as a person.... I’m a lot more tolerant... I feel like I have got a bit more respect...*  (Bob)

In contrast, the women seemed more often to report significant internal transformations which were not related to specific skills development, nor to how others may view them, but were essentially personal.

*Feeling fulfilled, completely filled the void...*  (Grace)

*Coming to uni I sort of bloomed....Much more outgoing...*  (Fiona)
My thoughts about myself have changed. I understand myself better...

(Linda)

McClaren's (1985) study of mature-age female students found that higher education was “a significant instrument of change” (p. 171) in the lives of the women she interviewed. This has been supported by a number of other studies (Edwards, 1993; Kelly, 1987; Martin, 1988). Other research (Britton & Baxter, 1999; Tett, 2000; West, et al., 1986) also indicates that while there are significant changes in identity for both men and women in higher education, the change in identity for women is particularly profound. Britton and Baxter (1999) for example, tell us that “men and women tell different stories, which reflect not only differences in their life experiences but also different understandings of the self” (p. 192).

For many of the women in this study, a process of self-discovery was taking place, a sense of finding out who they really were and of what they were capable. Many had been, in the past, very familiar with defining themselves according to the views of those around them, including partners, parents and children – but were now beginning to define themselves differently, according to these new discoveries. Part of this was discovering their intelligence.

I suppose just knowing that I think I can do it, whereas when I first started out I wasn’t sure... a little bit of confidence about ‘I’m not dumb’… (Tina)

I’m not dumb as I was told for many, many years at school… (Katrina)

I feel like I’m intelligent. I was writing a description of myself for something a while ago and I regarded myself as an intelligent, attractive woman that is capable and confident and can hold an intelligent conversation, whereas maybe three years ago I wouldn’t have regarded myself that way… (Mandy)

This process of self-discovery through education is not confined to this particular group of students. For example, Reay et al. (2002) talk about “the
almost magical transformative powers of education” (p. 402) that are revealed in the stories of the mature-age female students they interviewed, while Paasse (1998) found, in her research with mature-age women in education that “women experience a shift in their identity with exposure to new and different discourses” (p. 105).

Another aspect of this shift in identity amongst the women was the development of a greater sense of personal agency, independent achievement and the possibilities this opened up for further independence.

I guess the nice thing is that I know I created that [self-growth] by myself and it’s not like someone has given it to me. No-one could have achieved that for me… I’ve done that… (Rachel)

Self-sufficiency and independence for me… I don’t want to have to rely on any government department or any other person for financial support. I want to be able to do it myself… I suppose that’s it. A freedom and independence… (Helen).

As discussed in previous chapters, the social construction of women as carers places them in a position in which they are expected to take responsibility for others. Prioritising others’ needs and wishes above one’s own is not conducive to the development of autonomy and independence. “Women’s lived experience, which is more focused on care and concern for others, is at odds with the individualistic self” (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p. 190).

Cantwell & Mulhearn (1997) suggest that motivation for study is, for many women, “most likely to be linked to a desire for enhanced self-agency” (p. 6). Interestingly, their research with women enrolled in the University of Newcastle’s Open Foundation Program, found that “identity regeneration… changing significant aspects of their identity and self-concept (p.26)” was a significant motivation for many of these women to begin their studies. “As a vehicle for self-growth, the ‘idea’ of university study was very appealing to these women” (Cantwell & Mulhearn, 1997). Even within the first year of study
in an enabling program, Cantwell & Mulhearn (1997) found that amongst the group they interviewed, “all women appeared to experience a significant growth in personal identity and insight” (p. 27).

Indeed, a growth in personal identity and insight was evident in all of the women’s stories in this particular study. Anne for instance, talked of having developed “a sense of self… a stronger sense of self-focus”. Penny also had developed a different view of herself.

*I do see myself differently. I think I’ve learned that I can do anything the next person can do and it’s just a matter of applying myself… and also I don’t care so much what people think of me.. I’m just not so aware of it…* (Penny)

These words echo those of Giles (1990) who, writing of her own experiences of mature-age study, finds that she is now “able to believe, as once I was not, that my opinions are as valuable and valid as anyone else’s” (p. 358). Many of the other women in this study were also beginning to experience a similar belief in themselves.

*I sort of see a rise in myself, and in my personal respect… of what I am capable of…* (Helen)

*I value myself, which is an easy thing to say but a hard thing to do. If everything fell apart tomorrow I would be alright…* (Nerida)

Some were finding these changes almost too difficult to believe.

*I feel like… it’s just too surreal… am I supposed to be this person? Am I really good enough to do this?* (Ingrid)

Rendon (1998) observed amongst the students with whom she interacted in the American College system that, for non-traditional students in particular, “going to college was not a normal passage; it was an event that changed
their lives” (p. 2). This certainly appeared to be the case for the women in this study.

*I have never looked back… it has changed my life…* (Helen)

*I recognise more things about myself now…* (Tina)

*I’m a different person altogether…* (Nerida)

One of the ways in which their lives had changed was demonstrated by the extent to which many were beginning to challenge traditional expectations and to discover that “the social roles assigned to us are alterable by education” (Giles, 1990, p. 7). West (1995) suggests that when a woman chooses to enter university studies as a mature-age student, this decision often includes an element of rebellion against the traditional expectations for and attitudes towards women, including negative evaluations of their abilities as well as limited occupational and educational opportunities. Other research has also found that study, for mature-age female students, can be “a means to discover new roles for themselves” (Scott, et al., 1998, p. 237), resulting in the development of “an identity beyond that of wife and mother [and] the belief that university allows the expression of that identity” (p. 237).

Quinn’s (2005) research with women from low socio-economic backgrounds at university talks of “women carving spaces in order to resist and rebel” (p. 12). For the women in Quinn’s research, university represented a place of resistance to the life from which they had come; a life typified by poorly paid and unsatisfying jobs and economic insecurity. For them, university was “a hard won freedom” and a means of “resistance to a destiny shaped only by supermarkets, call centres and lonely train stations” (p. 12).

Interestingly, this theme of resistance appears also in feminist literature on women and leisure (Wearing, 1996, 1998; Wimbush & Talbot, 1988), which discusses the notion of leisure as a form of ‘resistance’ for women against the traditional female role of wife, mother, housewife. Wearing (1998) points out
that, “the freedoms provided by the sphere of leisure can result in a greater autonomy for women” (p. 49). Indeed, other research findings indicate that for many mature-age women, study time is equated with “leisure and/or a sense of fulfillment” (Morrison, 1996, p. 219). While the parallels between leisure and study are perhaps not apparent at first glance, this can depend upon how leisure is defined. Sargent (1996) quotes an Oxford English Dictionary definition as “opportunity afforded by freedom from occupation” (p. 196). In similar ways, the freedoms provided by study can, at least temporarily, liberate women from their usual occupation as carers.

The fact that the first time in 15 years I can just get in the car and drive up and get lost in books and research... independence. And it’s something of mine. I don’t have to share it with [husband] and the children, they don’t have to be here, they don’t have to have anything to do with it... (Mandy)

In similar ways to leisure therefore, study can be one way for women to gain freedom from their usual occupation and gain some legitimate time for themselves, albeit to engage in another form of occupation. Morrison (1996) however found that “choosing to view... study as leisure time was not without its problems” (p. 220). As one of the women in Morrison’s study points out, “when my husband does things, it’s his enjoyment, out of work, and he classes this [her studies] as my enjoyment, but it’s hard work as well... it’s a real struggle sometimes” (p. 220).

It was clear from the men’s stories that, for them and those around them, such as partners, study was by no means equated with leisure, but as real and tangible work, with the clear purpose of advancing their paid work opportunities. Much of the research into men’s engagement with education as mature-age students indicates that “work is a key motivator for men and that those who engage in education and training do so largely for practical and employment-related reasons” (McGivney, 1999a, p. 131). As found by Karmel and Woods (2006) in their research with older learners, “for men, it is more about a strategy for maintaining engagement with the labour market” (p. 146).
Certainly in this study, each of the five men was focused quite clearly on the end result of a ‘more marketable’ qualification.

_The qualification will make me more marketable… make me a better product in the market place… the employment market place…_ (Paul)

There was a sense of excitement for some about new and more stimulating career prospects.

_In two years I’m going to be a teacher and I’m going to be a bloody good one!_ (Bob)

_To get a position or to gain employment with a job that will be stimulating…_ (David)

The importance of security of employment and financial security was also explicitly articulated.

_I don’t see there being any shortage of jobs for me when I finish…_ (Evan)

_I want to finish this and get a job with fair wages and security…_ (John)

So for the men, while their stories also revealed significant personal growth, particularly in the area of confidence, there was a sense of role enhancement as workers and breadwinners. This contrasts with the women, who, as previously discussed, were discovering real possibilities of some role change. Their role was changing from that of financially dependent carer, with little personal freedom, to that of student, worker, breadwinner – and still carer – but with an increase in personal freedom and the prospect of more financial independence in the future. However, despite these differences, there were also many shared experiences for these men and women as a result of being at university.
A Different Way of Looking at the World – “My eyes have been opened”

Evidence suggests that for mature-age students engaging in education, there is not only an increase in knowledge, but also an increase in understanding (Beck, 2006; McGivney, 1999b, 2006; West, et al., 1986). “Their interests widen and they often identify a desire for more information or new skills” (McGivney, 2006, p. 88). This often leads to “more active citizenship” (McGivney, 1999b, p. vi) in terms of heightened interest and involvement in community, social and political interests and activities, as well as an increase in “intellectual interests, social liberalism, altruism, feminism and life satisfaction” (West, et al., 1986, p. 64).

It was indeed the case that, for the participants in this study, the process of coming to university had ‘opened their eyes’ to the world around them. All indicated a growing awareness, a different and broader vision, in how they viewed life and society, including history, current events and politics.

*My eyes have been opened... even Aboriginal issues for example... in the past you go by what people have told you or what your family think, and it’s a bit of an eye-opener... so the things I’m exposed to, I’m gaining knowledge which is making me think differently about things...*  
(Penny)

*I’m a lot more tolerant... more of an open mind to things...*  
(Bob)

*I can understand myself... I found out that I was a racist conservative white person. I didn’t want to be, but I was...*  
(Linda)

*You see things in a different vision...a different vision of things... I have a broader view... about different viewpoints of other people...*  
(David)

Some were finding this new awareness quite confronting.
I’ve gained a sense of awareness. I used to, like, go walking around with my head up my arse before, but now it’s like, oh, I wish I could go back there, because everything is so confronting! (Fiona)

I can’t look at a TV show anymore… I deconstruct everything! I can’t read a newspaper – I know what’s behind the headlines. I know who is pushing the buttons. I can’t listen to the politicians, I can see all the power play and all the crap and all the nonsense that’s going on in the world… I can see all the injustices… (Nerida).

Most also expressed a real sense of excitement about these discoveries, including the illumination of ‘shades of grey’ that were not apparent to them before.

Because you are better educated you’ve got a wider range on what’s happening in the world and how things work and that makes you a better person… it’s like a light… and there are lots of shades of grey… (Virginia).

I’ve learnt to see shades of grey… there was only ever black and white and I had very little concern… no, I had concern but I didn’t know how to articulate the concern… so I ignored the concerns about the human condition… and this course, and three lecturers in particular, have opened my eyes to the human condition and how it plays out, and that’s just been… Whoa! (Amber).

In the following quote, John eloquently describes the way in which even university looks different to him, now that he is part of the place, and how his understanding of what it means to go to university, and even who goes to university, has changed.

Yes well, I’ve never been the sharpest tool in the shed… I don’t even pretend to be now, but I always had this vision of uni being this place of all these smart people, and in reality it’s not… it’s a place where people
work hard... And coming from my background and trade background there was this prejudice against uni types, and generally I would say, especially in this male dominated work force, and you have this perception of what that is, and it's really smart people and they know all this smart stuff... and I was guilty of that, and I guess.... just that realisation that uni is full of all these.... these brilliant people.... but the reality is that it's a lot of normal people, working bloody hard. I guess that was a bit of a shock to me... (John)

John’s experience is perhaps a reflection of “the process of cultural transformation” (Beck, 2006, p. 107) that adult learners undergo, in moving from one culture (in John’s case a trade background) to what is seen as the very different, even foreign, culture of university and finding out that it is possible to be part of that culture also. In doing so, John’s initial views of the university culture modify and adapt as he gains a different understanding of university and finds familiarity within it.

There was also a sense of real exhilaration for many of the participants about the acquisition of so much knowledge and the impact that this had made upon them.

Lots of knowledge.... I look at how I think now compared to before and I think... it’s like when you learn something, you get so revved up and you want to go out and change the world... (Carol)

I think I have just gained heaps of knowledge... uni studies opens up an entire world of knowledge... just the amount of things you need to know and can know, and it’s all around you... (Katrina)

Just that it's, I guess, satisfied my enjoyment of learning... I just really like learning new things... (Paul)

For some, with the learning had also come a philosophical shift in priorities, with a decrease in focus on material and financial concerns.
I’m not worried so much about material things any more, and the need to hang onto all these material things and collections… (Mandy)

Now, money is not the important factor. I have coped on not a great deal and have been able to survive and also provide, so money is not the critical factor… (David)

I just see more… money isn’t everything… (Penny)

Instead, there was more awareness of the importance of other less tangible aspects of life.

A term I heard the other day was ‘social wealth’. I feel like my social wealth has increased – so I like that term… (Bob)

[Awareness of] social justice, women’s rights… instead of just taking everything for granted… (Carol)

Important things like friendships, friendships that are totally genuine… family, friends and health… now I can go out and apply that to everyday life … (David)

I really appreciate a Sunday afternoon with my husband. I appreciate being able to stay outside in the fresh air and sunshine…. and I don’t know if I used to do that… (Nerida)

Being Looked at Differently – “How much you have changed!”

Not only were they seeing themselves differently, but others were starting to see them differently as well. There was an awareness that others had begun to notice an increase in confidence in them, in some cases even before they realised it themselves.
Last year I’d been voted in as the President of the Softball Club, and I think that people saw a confidence… and they had confidence to put me in that role because of that. So obviously there are people out there who see things that you can’t often see yourself… (Rachel)
A lot of people say that I seem to have a bit more confidence… (David)

Some received direct feedback from others about how much they had changed, which reinforced their own pleasure in the changes.

When I started Open Foundation I bought my books off a lady, and every time I see her now, she’s like, ‘oh I can’t get over how much you’ve changed! When I first saw you, you came in with this mousy look and asked for your books, and now when I see you, you’re everywhere, doing everything!’ – and it’s great! (Fiona)

Children were mentioned as noticing changes and responding positively.

I think that they [children] are proud… (David)

They [children] started to not see me as just a mother, but more of a person… (Nerida)

Also friends – My best, longest friend… the one I was telling you about…. she’s very proud of me… (Linda)

For Paul, the changes were being noticed at work by senior staff, with positive results.

I was only chatting recently to the CEO about very strategic things, and I think he was quite enjoying the fact that he could bounce some strategies with one of the operational guys rather than just talking to the board members… (Paul)
Mandy, coming from quite a traditional family background and doing a non-traditional course of study for women, experienced mixed reactions, from men in particular, both socially and within her own family.

*I joined a surf club last season to row surf boats and I found it very interesting that three men involved in the surf boat side of things... they are all single and live at home with their mothers – all arrogant, all chauvinistic.... once they learnt that not only was I going to uni but I was doing architecture, their attitude has changed... because I'm not just the pretty chick with the good boobs.... and they are freaking out that I've got a brain!* (Mandy)

Some friends and family members seemed particularly threatened by Mandy’s new ‘status’ as a university student in a male-dominated field of study.

*I also think there is a little bit where people are threatened now, particularly this one girlfriend and maybe my sister... and Paul’s father is a builder as well, and he was quite miffed that I got into architecture. He was like, how could a ditz like you be doing architecture?* (Mandy)

Sandra Jackson (2002), reminds us that “women’s exclusion from public spheres has meant that men alone had access to the resources that allowed them to become socially respected and acknowledged intellectuals. As a result, men have claimed authority to speak for all” (S. Jackson, 2002, p. 68). In stepping not only into the domain of higher education, but also into what has been, and continues to be, a male-dominated field of study (Cobbin, 1995), Mandy is indeed exercising her “right to challenge, to transgress, to offer new possibilities” (S. Jackson, 2002, p. 68). Grace also described similar experiences to Mandy.

*I have to say that I have learned to be very careful with what I say to people. When they find out I’m doing psychology, it seems I’m drilled, and I have to say “I’m learning, I can’t analyse people”, and my friend who is doing psych as well is finding the same thing, and so I’m getting*
a bit cagey… especially with my friend’s husband. He will have little
digs at me, which I found really hard at first… I found I didn’t
understand why… a bit hurtful… (Grace)

So, along with the process of challenging and “fighting their way into men’s
public spaces” (S. Jackson, 2002, p. 68) comes:

“a variety of reactions that tend to oppose the process… Adult learners
do not live in a vacuum; they are part of a culture. The changes
wrought by the process of education act as a challenge to that culture”.
(Beck, 2006, p. 107)

Hostile reactions experienced by both Mandy and Grace indicate the extent of
the discomfort experienced by others around them in response to such a
challenge, particularly amongst those who hold traditional views about the
roles of men and women.

This discomfort in response to change was also experienced by some of the
participants themselves. As mentioned in Chapter Six, there was a realisation
for some that they were no longer ‘fitting in with the crowd’ as they used to do
in the past.

And another thing too – and I hate being like this, but when I’m around
the mothers at school I just can’t stand it! It’s like they’re not as
interesting to me anymore. Like, they are talking about “Home and
Away” [commercial TV soap drama] and things that I’m not interested
in. I’m only just noticing it… (Penny)

In saying that she “hates being like this”, Penny clearly indicates her mixed
feelings about the changes she is experiencing. Giles (1990) warns mature
female students that, in her own personal experience, “education may both
clarify, confuse and complicate” (p. 4). It is perhaps not surprising therefore
that, despite the overwhelmingly positive experiences described by the
participants, some negative changes were also part of the process for many.
Negative Changes – “The gains definitely outweigh the losses”

Virtually all the participants, female and male alike, mentioned the loss of time and money as being the most significant change for the worse since becoming a student. Interestingly though, despite the struggle, each one seemed to agree that the positives outweighed the negatives. In fact, there was a general tendency to minimise or dismiss the impact of any negatives, in most cases because they felt they had come too far to go back, or in the words of Anne “the alternative is to go and work at Coles and I really don’t want to go back there…”

Words such as “just” and “only” were used time and again to preface what, under other circumstances, would probably be regarded as significant losses or negative experiences. For example (underlining indicates author’s emphasis):

*Just* money and house… . (Anne)

*Only* time and money…. (Bob)

There were some financial losses, but they would be the *only* ones… (Mandy)

[Free time] *would be the only loss*… (Paul)

*I think just the time*… (Tina)

Many denied experiencing any real negatives, or none that they would consider worth mentioning.

*Obviously none that I feel*… (Amber)
I don’t see many downsides. I have people say “I’d love to do what you’re doing” and I say “Do it!” I don’t think there are many losses. (Bob)

I can’t think of a lot of things that I would consider as losses…. even the time…. (Rachel)

Even the ending of significant relationships was not viewed negatively.

Even the breakup of the marriage… I don’t see that as a negative… (Evan)

There have been people who have fallen by the wayside, relationships, like with my husband… I don’t know that I count them as losses… I class them as cutting off fat! (Helen)

Certainly, amongst this group of students there was an overwhelming sense that, in the words of Virginia “the gains definitely outweigh the losses”. This was also reflected in the way in which this group of students perceived their future. There was a strong belief amongst all of them that this would be substantially better than it would have been, had they not come to university.

**What’s Ahead – “A brand new start”**

As discussed in Chapter Three, all the participants came from family backgrounds where neither parent had gone to university. With the attainment of higher education qualifications, all were looking ahead to a significantly different life from that of their parents and a better life than the one they had before.
A brand new start... I've got this ten year window of opportunity before my children start marrying and having children. Because I got married and had a child straight away, because my husband's ten years older than me, this is my time... (Nerida)

Financially I think my future will be better than what it would have been – and personally I think... because it has given me more confidence, and I doubt whether I am going to lose that... I won't lose it again.... (Fiona)

There is considerable evidence that higher education “tends to launch people on a career that involves high labour force participation as well as higher wages and lower unemployment rates” (Karmel & Woods, 2006, p. 140). Certainly, for the male respondents in particular, work and career goals were a major focus. Paul, for example, was looking ahead to more opportunities to climb the career ladder in his workplace, which was funding his degree.

I think that having the degree will help me leap-frog a bit and it will change my outlook... I already think differently about the way things are done in the business and I can already talk to the CEO on a higher level than I was able to before... and our company doesn’t have a dedicated HR Manager and I want to push my barrow for that, and my degree will back me up... (Paul)

John, who had maintained his role as breadwinner throughout full-time studies, was looking forward to being an even better provider for his wife and child, and hopefully more children.

I want to make the most of this next 20 years.... really capitalise but maintain a really profitable lifestyle. In terms of our relationship, make a few more kids, and be able to financially support that, and have the security to know that [my wife] can have 10 years off work and I’ll be able to support her in the correct manner.... and it would be really,
really great to spend some money on my wonderful wife, and buy her lots of things she’d like… (John)

Money and career were not the only important factors for the men. John, for example, in the above quote, stresses the importance of his relationship with his wife. He then goes on to talk about the importance of his own health. John was looking forward to being able to leave the shipwright industry and work in a healthier environment, again for the benefit not only of himself but also his family.

I think it will be very beneficial. I think the health aspects… for my health it’s a definite advantage…. just to be out of those chemicals and dust…. health is a big one… hopefully I’ll be around for a few more years and see my kids grow up. That’s a big motivating factor … (John)

Bob was looking forward to a different pace of life from that of his previous life as a truck-driver and an improved quality of life with his family.

I will have a nice comfortable life coming up. Part of the reason I left trucks in the first place and came to uni, and part of the reason I was sick of what I was doing was that I was a workaholic I guess. I knew nothing else. So I worked 12 hours a day, six, seven days a week or more. Then I got into scouting and realised I was missing out on my kids and different things, and thought, there is more to life than work… (Bob)

David was more concerned about gaining interesting work than in earning a high salary.

I’m not looking for the dollar but something stimulating, and in any field… that’s more important than money… (David)

There was also mention of the sense of achievement that they would have upon completion of their degree and the public recognition of that through the graduation ceremony.
I will be up on the podium with my friends in 2008… (Bob)

I can’t wait for the day when I can wear the funny hat and have a degree and I guess there is a certain amount of prestige about it… (Paul)

For some of the women, their future was still to be determined.

I’m not sure where I’m going to end up… I have no idea… (Carol)

I’m still kind of unsure where I want to go… (Fiona)

I haven’t got a firm plan… I don’t know how to narrow it down or what job I can do… (Penny)

Similarly, Lyn Tett’s research (2000) found that “the difference having a degree would make was… gendered” in that their ambitions were “much more instrumental for the men whilst the females had less specific ambitions” (p. 189).

However, this was by no means the case for all the women. As demonstrated by Karmel and Woods’ (2006) research with older learners, women who undertake formal study “find that obtaining an educational qualification is an effective way of getting back into the labour market” (p. 146). Similarly, the study by Scott et al. (1998) of female mature students found that women whose personal circumstances are difficult, whether financially or personally, can find that study is a successful way to “remEDIATE their life circumstances” (p. 237). “Gaining a tertiary qualification… gives a woman access to more prestigious jobs and thus much increased earning power” (Scott, et al., 1993, p. 328).
Most of the women in this study were indeed looking forward to remediation of financial pressures through increased earning capacity and, as a result, a better quality of life.

*Much better! Get a proper car – something that doesn’t make a noise as it drives! I’ll be able to buy a house eventually. Before, you just kind of pay your bills… I guess better opportunities for my children and just having a reliable car and having money to live on that’s more stable and just things like that…* (Penny)

*A good income for me and my husband… I would like to be a registered psychologist and so that’s what I’m aiming for – and get an internship somewhere and register…* (Grace)

*Hopefully I’m able to secure a job which will pay more and therefore economically be able to support my children better that I would have been able to originally…* (Katrina)

*Better… I’m looking forward to it… I think I know I’ll get a job out of the Social Sciences and I’m quite willing to move to the country…* (Linda)

*I’ll have more money; I won’t have Centrelink breathing down my neck…* (Ingrid)

So for the men and the women alike, a future in which there was greater “economic resilience” (Chapman, et al., 2006, p. 163) was very important.

Many of the women also expressed excitement about their dreams and plans for the future and the sense of a different life ahead.

*We do actually want to go overseas… do something a bit just… totally different. Just experience something really different. Africa or somewhere I suppose… somewhere where they need assistance, maybe just for a few months… an aid worker or something… we will*
have a nursing degree and a teaching degree, which perhaps would set us up for something like that… I hope that we can do something like that… (Tina)

I've got a ten year plan… more than likely be in my own house… I don't know what job…. Just depends where it takes me… (Virginia)

I think my future is going to be much brighter than the past. I'm much more confident… far more confident… I have an ability to focus on goals I haven't had before. … (Mandy)

Such quotes also illustrate that, running through the women’s stories was a recurring theme of a vision of a more independent future, in contrast with the relative lack of prior opportunities for independence in their lives. As discussed in previous chapters, the juggling of demands between home and family impact heavily on women and place significant barriers in the way of their being able to find and enjoy either personal or financial independence (Edwards, 1993; Giles, 1990; Leonard, 1994; Martin, 1988; West, et al., 1986). For these women, university qualifications were the key to a different life altogether.

There’s about a hundred doors [opening up]... totally different... (Amber)

Interestingly, one of the doors that was opening up for many of these mature students, both male and female, was that of further study once they had completed their current course of study. For most, this desire to continue learning was quite unexpected, although research indicates that this is a relatively common outcome of adult learning (McGivney, 1999b, 2006; Skilbeck, 2006a). This group of adult students had generally entered university as a means to an end, not necessarily expecting to actively enjoy the process, yet many had discovered that learning in itself has its own pleasures.
First I thought I want to get this degree and then launch into my business... but now I’m more than happy to plod along and be a perpetual student. It’s going to take longer to get the degree but I will probably enjoy the process a lot more... (Mandy)

I’m loving it... I’m enjoying the journey.... (Linda)

As a result, quite a number were contemplating further study in the future, if not definitely then at least giving it some serious thought.

I would like to continue and do the Masters in Pharmacy... (Helen)

Thinking of coming back and studying again.... loving the study... (Evan)

Some were clearly feeling that they would miss being at university.

I just love it and I don’t want to go... I’d like to keep studying... (Fiona)

After uni finishes I’ll probably have so much time up my sleeve I won’t know what to do... I’ll probably do a PhD! (Paul)

Women were particularly conscious of the difficulty of ‘fitting in’ yet more study.

I would dearly love to have done my Masters... it’s just not possible... it would take up too much time... (Grace)
I’d like to do Honours, but again I’ve got to see how that fits in... maybe work part-time or nearly full-time and do Honours part-time... (Rachel)

Clearly though, a number of students in this group felt that they were destined for “involvement in further learning in different places and at different levels” (McGivney, 1999b, p. vi).
The Next Generation – “A different culture in our family”

The changes that these students envisaged for the future were not limited only to themselves. Achieving their university degree was overwhelmingly seen as the start of a new cycle that would have a profound influence on their children.

*I’ve now started a new cycle and my children can start too… the girls have been exposed to all of that and they will continue it now… it’s like breaking a vicious cycle.*  (Rachel)

*They will certainly see that there are opportunities there, whereas maybe if we hadn’t thought about going to uni they probably wouldn’t have thought about it…*  (Tina)

They saw themselves as important role models for their children, encouraging them in their studies.

*The kids are definitely taking their studies more seriously. I was really surprised by that – just by seeing me do it…*  (Ingrid)

*The kids are benefiting already… just by seeing me doing my studies or learning… they are already trying harder at school – particularly the eldest doing high school…*  (Bob)

*A positive role model, and to see that I’m doing something and furthering myself… and one of my sons is going to uni… and the other son, he would like to go to uni…*  (Grace)
They were aware that their children would have some understanding of university and what it can offer, in a way that was not available to them when they were growing up.

_He knows the library, he can see what study can do for you, and I’ve got friends now who’ve got degrees so he knows that if you want to get on, that piece of paper is important…_ (David)

_I think that they will definitively not be scared to study, because they are here in the uni environment… such a familiar place…_ (Mandy)

_I know the fact that their mother has now got a degree and I’ll have a degree… that certainly has made them think, hey, this is the thing to do…_ (Paul)

Many expressed a hope that this would encourage their children to aim higher, and to know that they have more options, including university.

_I’m hoping that it will show him that he… can aim for higher… I want to be a positive example… do the hard work and you will get somewhere…_ (Fiona)

_I can encourage him to become more educated or just being more encouraging to make better of himself than he might have chosen…_ (Linda)

_I think it’s opened her mind up a lot because she said that a lot of her friends aren’t going to uni… but she said that she wants to go…_ (Virginia)

Some expressed the desire and the intention to give their children more than they received themselves, in terms of provision of education and other educative experiences.
I’ll be able to provide a better life for my children and better education…

(John)

My goal is to give them more options to help them… if they want to go and study I could buy their books or something… things like that…

(Penny)

The relatively modest, yet heartfelt goals expressed below by Helen reflect the extent to which she can see new possibilities for her children, almost within her grasp.

I would love to be able to take my children to more things, and take them to a concert and stuff like that. As a child I never went to the theatre with my parents and the closest we got was when we went to the State [movie theatre] to see “Indiana Jones” and I will never forget it as long as I live… but you know, I’ve never taken my children to the theatre… and that would be really nice… and those things would now be extravagances, but I would really like my children to experience that – that’s where I see my future… I think I see this degree – and hopefully the Masters afterwards – I see them as stepping stones to being able to give my children more variety…

(Helen)

Hence not only individual transformation but transformation into the next generation was taking place, with the real possibility of “lasting change that has an impact, not only on the individual but also on communities in an ongoing basis” (Beck, 2006, p. 107).

I guess now there’s a different culture in our family…

(Rachel)

This chapter has explored the ways in which, for these mature-age students, not only has university been “a significant instrument of change in their lives” (McLaren, 1985, p. 171) but, amongst those with children it has also been an agent of generational change. The stories of these twenty women and men, who have come to university as second-chance students illustrate the
transformative nature of their experiences in higher education. The growth in confidence, the increase in opportunities for the future and the sense of dreams and ambitions being achieved, were common to all of these students. In addition, the possibility for generational change, in terms of the likelihood of their children’s participation in higher education, appears very strong.

The following and final chapter will bring together the major themes in the previous chapters, summarise the key findings and draw some conclusions about the overall impact of higher education on this particular group of students, as they travel along their second-chance journey. The implications for higher education institutions, in terms of providing opportunities and encouragement for mature-age students in general, to enter university and succeed with their studies, will also be explored.
Chapter Nine: And so the Story Concludes: But with a Message for the Future

Summary of Key Findings

Research into participation levels in higher education in Australia tells us that “mature age students from identified equity groups... suffer demonstrable educational disadvantage” (Abbott-Chapman, et al., 2004, p.7). We also know that “the success of mature-aged non-traditional entry appears independent of socio-economic background” (Cantwell, et al., 2001, p.233). Despite more than a decade of equity measures, nationally and internationally, to improve the participation and academic success in higher education of students from lower socio-economic background across all age-groups, these students are still significantly under-represented worldwide (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008). In contrast, students from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds are over-represented in enabling and other alternative entry programs, through which a majority of mature-age students enter university (Blaxter, et al., 1996; Cullity, 2006; Kavanagh & Stockdale, 2007). Supporting and encouraging mature learners to enter, participate and succeed in higher education is therefore of vital importance in furthering the equity agendas of universities.

As well as furthering broad long-term equity agendas however, there is another important reason to encourage mature-age university entry and academic success: that is, the benefits to the individual student, brought about by exposure to and involvement in the university learning community. From the stories of the twenty women and men, featured throughout the previous chapters, who have come to university as second-chance students (Cantwell, et al., 2001) have emerged findings of particular significance in increasing our understanding of the mature age experience in higher education. Five key findings, of specific importance to this study, are discussed below.
Key Finding 1- The power to transform…

The transformative power of engagement with higher education is well illustrated within the students’ stories. Their stories reflect that, for each one of them, university had been, and was continuing to be, a truly transformative experience. Improvements in confidence, self-esteem, social skills, self-awareness and awareness of the world around them were considerable. Being at university as part of a learning community and expanding their knowledge had led these students to think very differently in a number of significant ways. The women in particular were developing a greater sense of personal independence and autonomy as they challenged the more restrictive aspects of their gendered role. Women and men alike were looking forward to a different life, a better life, one with better work opportunities, a more comfortable and secure financial situation, achievement of career goals and, for many, further study. For all, there was a sense of dreams and ambitions being achieved.

… for this generation and the next

The students with children were keenly aware of the positive influence that their studies were having upon their children and the likelihood that their children would consider university as an option for their own futures. Many of the students saw themselves as role models for their children and as parents who would encourage and support their children into higher education, now that they knew the value of it for themselves. A new cycle had begun, which would have potential ramifications for their children, their grandchildren and future generations to come. In Rachel’s words, this was the beginning of “a different culture” in their families.
Key Finding 2 - Importance of pathways

The accessibility of an enabling program in the form of Open Foundation, with no tuition fees on a university campus in the local area, emerged as a major factor influencing the decision of these students to enter higher education. This finding supports previous research demonstrating that the provision of inexpensive, local access to education encourages adult learners, particularly those from lower SES backgrounds, to engage in further education and to want to continue learning (McGivney, 1999a, 1999b, 2006; McLaren, 1985; Reay, 2002; Skilbeck, 2006b). It also reinforces the premise that the expansion of free, locally-based programs which provide pathways into higher education will assist and encourage greater numbers of mature-age students, including those from lower SES backgrounds, to contemplate the possibility of going to university and to take the first steps towards this.

Key Finding 3 - Influence of gender

Taking a postmodern feminist approach to the deconstruction of the participants' stories revealed significant gender differences in the experiences of the women and the men in this cohort. The role limitations of women as carers and men as breadwinners (Lister, 2000; Orloff, 1996; Weeks, 2000) were evident throughout their stories and had shaped their experiences according to their gender. Their stories also lent support to previous research findings identifying aspects of masculine identity which deter men from engaging in adult education and taking time away from their primary role as breadwinner (Golding, 2006; McGivney, 1999a). Certainly, the men in this study were keenly focused upon finishing their studies in order to improve their work situation and perform their breadwinner role more effectively.

The women, on the other hand, struggled with combining their studies with the gendered role of carer, in many cases carrying a double or even triple load of child-care, housework and paid work along with their studies. This was most clearly demonstrated in the ways in which they struggled with the lack of time
to manage the competing demands. While the men were able to structure their time in a more linear fashion, setting aside particular stretches of time for their studies, the women’s time for study was more fragmented and fractured, melded in with other responsibilities such as caring for children and other various domestic duties. Their stories revealed the interrupted nature of any study time and the virtual impossibility of having dedicated, privileged and uninterrupted time for study on a regular basis. Those with children, as well as those caring for ageing parents, consistently put family responsibilities first, yet still managed to succeed at their studies through artful juggling and often loss of sleep. Some of the women had needed to reduce their study load in order to manage to continue with their studies at all.

In terms of support from family and friends, the stories of this cohort of mature-age students exposed quite starkly how little help and practical support the women in this group were receiving at home from male partners. The men with female partners, on the other hand, enjoyed a very high level of practical and emotional support from their partners. Interestingly, those women who were single, separated or divorced were more often able to rely upon practical help from other family members, friends and even from ex-partners. Amongst this group the expectation of a woman’s primary role as ‘carer’ was strongest amongst those who were living with a male partner. There were however indications in the women’s stories that some were beginning to question or challenge this dominant view of male/female roles, with subsequent effects on relationships, including two women who had ended their marriages. This provides support for evidence which suggests that education encourages less conservatism and more open-mindedness to other possibilities, including different ways of conceptualising gender roles (Giles, 1990; West, et al., 1986).
Key Finding 4 - Value of support

The importance of support from academic staff, university services and, above all, fellow students, was highlighted dramatically throughout all the stories of this group of women and men.

…and from academic staff
Support and encouragement from academic staff appeared to be readily forthcoming and was highly valued amongst this group. As mature-age students with many other conflicting responsibilities, they greatly appreciated any efforts made by lecturers to show understanding of their circumstances and a willingness to be flexible, to better accommodate their needs. The presence of particular academic staff, who gave them time to listen to their needs, had made all the difference to a number of them, in terms of encouraging them to get through the tough times and to continue with their studies. This reflects other research into student experience in general (Krause, 2005b; O’Shea, 2007; Rendon, 1998) which clearly demonstrates that “student and staff interactions are one of the most important characteristics of high quality learning” (Coates, 2008, p. 8), particularly for non-traditional entry students.

…and from university services
University support services had been widely used, predominantly by the women, and had been of significant practical assistance, through financial support, disability provisions, career advice, learning support, and also emotional assistance such as personal counselling. Easy and free access to such services is clearly also of high importance in terms of supporting students to stay and succeed. While one or two of the men had accessed financial support, the predominance of women using support services is consistent with a general trend for women to be over-represented in their use of support services, again a gendered identity issue of men being reluctant help-seekers (Lister, 2000; McGivney, 1999a).
…from peer mentors
Reference was made in many of the students’ stories to the value of the peer mentoring service on campus. This formalised network of linking continuing students with commencing students had assisted many to settle in more easily to university life and to meet other students. Some had developed lasting friendships as a result of being peer mentored with a group of other commencing students and several had gone on to become peer mentors themselves. Research into student engagement points to the value of such programs in supporting students to feel a sense of belonging within the learning community (Couvillion Landry, 2002; Kift, 2005; Krause, 2005a; McInnes, et al., 2000). This had indeed been the experience of this cohort, both through being mentored and providing mentoring to other students.

…from fellow students
The stories revealed that, above all, friendships with fellow students played an extremely significant role in persistence and resilience. Many had formed close friendships with other students and all found support in sharing academic and/or personal concerns with their peers on campus. This may have taken the form of talking over an essay topic, working together on a group project or catching up over a cup of coffee in the cafeteria. In whatever context, these interactions were of enormous support and importance. Aspects of their stories revealed the helpful role that the institution can play in encouraging and supporting such interactions through ensuring that group work is part of the curriculum, organising time in class to talk and share work with each other and providing peer support programs such as the one discussed above. There is now considerable evidence to support the importance of student-to-student interaction for student engagement and academic success (Coates, 2008; Coffman & Gilligan, 2002; McGivney, 2006).
Key Finding 5 - Financial struggles

Emerging from the stories of nearly all the students, women and men alike, was the very difficult financial situation that most were facing on a day-to-day basis. Inadequate financial support for these mature learners was compounded by difficulties in the way such support is structured within a gendered, neo-liberal welfare state model (Lister, 2000; O'Connor, et al., 1999; Weeks, 2000). Under this model, the women with male partners were receiving little if any financial support for their studies and loss of income, while single parent benefits were reduced based on ages of children. Men who had given up paid work in order to study full-time were struggling with reduced incomes, yet still trying to meet their breadwinner responsibilities. For all, making ends meet was a daily challenge.

Where to From Here? Implications for the Future

While it would be a mistake to generalise the experiences of these twenty women and men too widely, nevertheless many aspects of these narratives are consistent with other research findings in the field of adult learning. It is also reasonable to assume that the stories of this group of individuals are, at least in part, reflective of the culture within which they are living their lives. Individual narratives tell us something of the wider community in which the individual is situated (Chase, 2003; Elliott, 2005). Hence, in coming to the end of this particular story about one group of mature-age students at university, it is possible to recognise some wider implications for education providers, policy makers and all who have a role to play in higher education, including students. It seems clear from the individual stories of these students, as well as other related research, that educational institutions have a vital role to play in developing greater awareness of “the relevance of lifelong learning to student personal and/or vocational well-being” (Cullity, 2006, p. 185). The narratives of this student cohort provide a valuable insight into the particular factors which have helped and hindered the progress of their ‘second-chance
journey’ and into some possibilities for the future. To complete this story therefore, I offer some recommendations for action, based upon the experiences of the women and men whose voices have informed this research.

Firstly, in order to attract more mature-age students into higher education, there is a need to expand the provision of appropriate, free and easily accessible enabling programs. Broadening the availability of such programs across the higher education sector is one important strategy to attract more mature learners and assist them to enter university, hence further widening access and participation. Enabling programs such as the Open Foundation Program play a highly significant role in assisting mature learners to enter university. Equally importantly, they provide support for mature learners, academically and socially, in making a successful transition to higher education.

Currently, Australian institutions can apply for commonwealth grant scheme funding in order to provide enabling programs, with the funding agreement between the particular institution and the Australian government limiting the number of places which can be funded (Chadwick, 2007). An important step towards greater accessibility of higher education for mature-age students would be to expand this funding to increase the number of free, open-entry places in enabling programs around the country. Adult education research tells us that mature learners are more likely to enter formal education when it is local and affordable; therefore offering a greater number of free enabling places at as many institutions as possible has the potential to significantly increase the number of mature-age students, particularly those from lower SES backgrounds, entering university. The recent Australian report, “Participation and Equity”, from the CSHE (2008) identifies that rural and isolated areas in particular have low participation rates in higher education. It is therefore imperative that enabling programs are offered locally across rural areas and not only at city institutions.
This same report also points out that “low SES participation in Australian higher education is an issue of access rather than success once enrolled” (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008, p. 4). Once students from low SES backgrounds are enrolled, they are likely to do as well academically as others. Measures which encourage access for these students are therefore of vital importance to the higher education access agenda. Governments and institutions genuinely seeking to widen participation in higher education need to heed the recommendation to encourage and enhance “mature-age pathways for people who have not undertaken the conventional linear school-university pathway” (Centre for Study of Higher Education, 2008, p. 8).

Another significant barrier to higher education access is a financial one. The financial implications of going to university can be an overwhelming deterrent, particularly for mature-age students and other students from lower SES backgrounds. Those who leave paid work or move to part-time work in order to attend university are disadvantaged financially, certainly over the period of their studies. Government assistance for students is clearly inadequate, with around 50% of students having difficulties managing financially and close to 13% often unable to buy enough food (James, et al., 2007). If higher education institutions are therefore serious about improving access and participation across all socio-economic groups, there needs to be considerable lobbying of governments to urge the provision of more adequate and appropriately targeted government financial support for students of all ages. Recent articles in Campus Review have stressed that “it is imperative for Australia to both broaden access and increase participation in tertiary education” (Harris, 2008, p.1) and have urged “better financial support for students, and a shift in social attitudes to widening participation… to help disadvantaged communities to reimagine universities as “places for them” rather than places for the wealthy” (Bexley, 2008, p.3).

The dual imperatives of widening access and improving financial support have been most recently recognised in the findings of the newly-released Bradley Review of Higher Education in Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008) with its recommendations to...
increase low SES participation and to significantly increase government financial support to disadvantaged students. Although it is too early at the time of completing this thesis to see how the government will respond, it is nevertheless encouraging to hear such strong recommendations, which are validated by the stories of the students within this thesis. Without adequate financial support for students, targeted towards those least able to afford to go to university, and without sound measures to attract and retain students from all backgrounds, the goal of continuing to broaden higher education access and participation amongst those who are socially and economically disadvantaged will continue to be elusive.

A third and equally important point is that the stories of these twenty students indicate a need for teaching styles which take into account the particular situations of mature-age students and demonstrate an understanding of the gendered nature of the challenges which female and male mature learners face. Flexibility around issues of study time and assessment tasks, as well as classroom strategies which encourage interaction between students, teachers and other students, have all been demonstrated as being of key importance in encouraging and supporting such students to succeed with their academic endeavours. Teachers who encourage interaction with other students, who are more inclined to be flexible about assignment dates and who are willing to listen to the needs of individual students, were the ones most highly valued and viewed as inspirational amongst this particular cohort of students. There was mention of a number of academic staff who understood the various pressures with which these mature-age students were dealing, including issues around child-care, family needs and lack of structured time. This type of support had contributed significantly to the resilience and persistence of these students through difficult times. Indeed, the stories of these students indicated that some of them would walk over hot coals for these particular lecturers; such was the level of gratitude towards them for their patience and understanding.

In order to enhance the academic achievement of mature learners therefore, higher education institutions need to demonstrate a firm commitment to the
effective teaching and learning of this cohort. It is important that strategies are developed to better equip academic staff to understand the particular learning needs of mature-age students, and the teaching styles which suit these needs. Staff development and training forums, in which academic staff are assisted to develop effective teaching styles for mature-age students, are but one way to begin this process. Teaching styles which demonstrate a level of individual flexibility and an understanding and respect for the many other demands that these students have upon their time – as well as for the innovative and sometimes unusual study habits they adopt in order to get their work done – are ones that mature learners appreciate. Equally important are classroom methods which connect students meaningfully with their lecturers and with their peers. By adopting and promoting such teaching strategies, institutions can maximise the potential for mature learners to fully engage with the learning community and succeed at their studies.

The final recommendation relates to the provision of counselling and other support services. At the beginning I talked about my experience as a university counsellor. I mentioned also my curiosity about the extent to which the experiences of those mature-age students presenting at the counselling service were reflective of the experiences of mature-age students in general. Having now listened to and engaged with the stories of these twenty students, it seems that the stories which I heard as a counsellor were indeed quite reflective of the wider mature-age student population, in terms of the challenges that they face and their overall courage, often in the face of considerable adversity.

Their stories also highlight the importance of free, well-resourced, easily accessible support services on university campuses. These services are very important potentially for all students, but for mature-age students they are absolutely vital. Personal counselling in particular provides such students with an opportunity to talk through the challenges and difficulties, as well as the confusion associated with changes in self and identity, helping them to overcome obstacles, understand the changes and to build a positive sense of their “new” self. External crises in their lives, as well as crises of confidence,
are all too common amongst mature-age students, as demonstrated within these particular stories. The availability of counselling services on campus can help to ease these crises considerably, so that the student can find ways to manage them along with their studies, rather than being defeated by them.

Other services such as career advice, disability services, learning support and emergency financial assistance also emerged from these stories as making a significant and positive difference to these students, assisting them to continue at university even through particularly difficult times. Also important were specific transition programs such as peer mentoring and other orientation activities which helped to build a sense of engagement and belonging, early in their exposure to the unfamiliar and often overwhelming university environment. As demonstrated in their stories, choosing to become a student mentor themselves later on, was something that was also valuable to a number of these students, in further engaging them with the university community. The ongoing provision of a range of well-resourced support and transition services is therefore another way in which institutions can demonstrate their commitment to engaging, supporting and encouraging students from all backgrounds and of all ages to stay and succeed at university.

These recommendations for action are derived directly from the voices of the twenty students who participated in this research, within the context of other current literature and evidence in the field of adult learning and higher education access and participation. My intention in bringing these narratives to the page is to bring mature-age students into the spotlight, rather than leave them lingering in the shadows. Mature-age students are already entering higher education in significant numbers and as such constitute a highly important cohort. Yet, these mature learners remain largely unrecognised and unacknowledged for the different and important contribution that they make, not only to the classrooms and other learning and social activities of individual institutions, but also to the wider national and international higher education access agenda.
In making the recommendations above, I am advocating for a change in higher education for the future: a future in which the importance of attracting, supporting and retaining mature-age students is better understood; a future in which the term “student” is widely recognised as one that applies equally across all age-groups; most importantly, a future in which greater numbers of mature learners have the opportunity to consider higher education as an option and to receive the institutional assistance and encouragement to enter, stay and succeed. In so doing, these students assist universities to move closer towards being places of equal access and opportunity, as well as of greater diversity. In the process, the students themselves are exposed to experiences which have the capacity to transform their lives, individually, socially and economically, as well as potentially those of future generations.

In the words of Linden West (1995):

A university may represent a space to understand self and others somewhat better and to revise a personal narrative as part of the process of rebuilding and constantly reshaping a life. Supportive people and institutions seem to be crucial in the struggle to tell new stories and construct a more authentic self in the process. (p.147)
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Appendices

Appendix 1 – University of Sydney ethics letter

The University of Sydney
NSW 2006 Australia

27 March 2006

Dr Z Weber
School of Social Work and Policy Studies
Faculty of Education and Social Work
Education Building – A35
The University of Sydney

Dear Dr Weber

Title: Experiences of mature age students in higher education (Ref. No. 9076)
PhD student: Miss Cathy Stone

Your application has been noted by the Executive Committee of the Human Research Ethics Committee and has ratified your study to cover the PhD student, Miss Cathy Stone.

In considering the ethical content of the study, the Committee acknowledges the right for you to proceed under the authority of the University of Newcastle HREC.

It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to provide a copy of the Annual Report that is submitted to the Area Health Service every twelve months for the duration of the study and a final report on the completion of the study. The first Report will be due on 30 April 2007.

The responsibility for complaints by participants about the research process will remain with the University of Newcastle HREC.

Yours sincerely

Gail Briody
Senior Ethics Officer

Cc: Miss Cathy Stone, 63 Copacabana Drive, Copacabana NSW 2251
Appendix 2 – University of Newcastle ethics approval certificate

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Certificate of Approval
for a research project involving humans

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applicant</th>
<th>Dr Zita Wibhor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chief Investigator/Project Supervisor</td>
<td>First name in application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-Investigators/Research Students:</td>
<td>Ms Cathy Stone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Title:</td>
<td>Experiences of mature age students in higher education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In approving this project, the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) is of the opinion that the project complies with the provisions contained in the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans, 1999, and the requirements within this University relating to human research.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Details of Approval</th>
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<tr>
<td>HREC Approval No:</td>
<td>H-187-0206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date of Approval:</td>
<td>15 February 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approval valid for:</td>
<td>3 years, or until project ceases, whichever occurs first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progress reports due:</td>
<td>Annually</td>
</tr>
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15 February 2006
Approved subject to a satisfactory response to issues identified by the Committee.

10 March 2006
Response received and accepted. Approval confirmed.

Signed for the Committee: [Signature]

Ms Susan O'Connor
Human Research Ethics Officer

Appendices
219
Appendix 3 – Interview schedule

Interview Schedule

(not to be handed to respondents but used as a guide to the areas I need to cover with each person in face-to-face in-depth interviews)

I’d like to talk with you about yourself and your experiences since undertaking your studies. Everything you say will be treated confidentially and are purely for the purposes of research. This research may be of help to other students in the future and to educational institutions in understanding some of the issues facing mature age students.

Name:
Age:
Address:
Marital Status:
Number of children and ages (if applicable):
Year of doing Open Foundation:
Full-time or part-time Open Foundation:
Year of starting undergraduate studies:
Program of study:
Full-time/part-time:
Year of study:
Occupation prior to beginning studies:
Partner’s occupation (if applicable):

Starting your Studies

Could you tell me a little about your reasons for beginning your studies? (ie. Doing Open Foundation, then continuing into undergraduate studies)

How did you make the decision to become a student? What/Who influenced you in this decision? How did you make the decision to continue into undergraduate studies?

How did others around you react to these decisions? Eg. partner, children, family, friends

Can you tell me about any anxieties/fears/doubts that you had about undertaking these studies?

At the time of starting your studies, had any other members of your family gone to university? Any friends?
Can you tell me a little about your experiences of previous study? Eg. school, TAFE.
What memories do you have of previous study?

What was it like starting Open Foundation? Did you face any difficulties initially and how did you cope with these?

What was it like beginning undergraduate studies? How similar to/different from Open Foundation did you find it? How did you cope with any difficulties?

**Changes and Adjustments**

Can you tell me about some of the changes and adjustments you have had to make since beginning your studies?

How has being a student affected your relationship with your partner? Your children? Your family? Your friends?

What kind of help or support do you get? (eg. from partner, children, family, friends etc)
What other help, support do you get? From whom? Is it enough or would you like more? (please expand).

Tell me about any other changes that you have made in your life/lifestyle to accommodate your studies?

How have your friends/family reacted to these?

**Gains and Losses**

What do you think you have gained from becoming a student? (eg. independence, confidence etc)

Have there been any losses? (eg. time, relationships, work, financial)

How difficult/demanding would you say your life as a student has been and continues to be?

Have you ever thought of leaving your studies? Why? What has kept you there?

Many mature age students do not always enjoy what they are doing and at times have some ‘negative’ thoughts about aspects of their lives. Please could you describe any ‘negative’ feelings that you have or have had from time to time, about yourself, your studies, your home/family circumstances etc.

How have you coped with these feelings?

Who/what has helped you? Eg. family, friends, other students, lecturers, other university support services etc.
Sources of help/support

Who or what have been the the most helpful people/experiences/situations to you as a student, in terms of helping you to feel more confident and positive about yourself and your studies?

The least helpful?
From whom or where have you sought help/advice/support about your studies?

What has been your experience of this?

Who or what else do you think could be or could have been helpful to you?

To what extent have you felt supported/assisted/helped by the university? Eg. lecturers, student support services such as learning support, counselling, careers services etc.

Have you encountered any institutional problems? How have you attempted to deal with these?

What advice or suggestions would you have for new mature age students that you feel could help them in their adjustment to their studies?

What advice/suggestions would you have for the university that you feel could help it to be more responsive to the needs of mature age students?

Past and Present

Can you tell me a little about your background? eg. family, educational experiences growing up, educational aspirations within family, parents’ occupations and educational background.

What prior experience/knowledge did you have of formal study? How has this impacted upon your current experience as a student?

What were some of your expectations about going to university? Where do you think these expectations came from?

How similar to/different from these expectations have you found the reality?

What is your view of yourself, both as a student and as a person in your own right?

How do you think others (eg. partner, friends, family, children, lecturers, fellow-students) view you?

Future

How do you see things going for you in the future?
Tell me a little about your future plans eg. when degree is finished, work, family goals etc.

How do you think your future will have changed as a result of your studies?

What do you think might be the impact of your studies on the futures of those close to you? Eg. partner, children etc

**Other life events and difficulties**

In the last 12 months:
Has anyone in the family been ill?

Has anyone close to you been admitted to or left hospital?

Have any relatives or close friends died?

Have you had any bad news about an illness or chronic health problem (yourself or close family/friends)?

Are any relatives or close friends a worry to you for any other reason?

Have you had any housing worries?

Any money worries?

Any other crises or difficulties (re close friends, relatives, self)?

Has anything else important, upsetting or exciting happened to you or a close relative or friend?
Mature Age Student Volunteers
Needed!!

Are you a mature-age student in the second or third year of your degree at the Central Coast Campus of the University of Newcastle?

Did you do Open Foundation before starting your degree?

If you answered YES to these questions, would you like to participate in a research study about the experiences of mature age students?

We are seeking a number of mature-age students to assist us in conducting research study about mature age students and their experiences at university.

This research is being conducted by a postgraduate student from the University of Sydney and will help to inform universities about better ways to support and assist mature age students.

If you think you may be interested please contact Cathy Stone in the Student Support Unit (4348 4060) and leave your name and contact details. Cathy will contact you to explain more about the study and to see if you would like to participate.

Thankyou for your support!!
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT
Research Project

Title: Experiences of Mature Age students in higher education

(1) What is the study about?

The study is exploring the experiences of mature age student in higher education.

(2) Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being conducted by Cathy Stone, who is a postgraduate student at the University of Sydney and will form the basis for the degree of Doctor of Social Work at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Dr. Zita Weber.

Cathy Stone was previously employed as a Counsellor at the Ourimbah Campus of the University of Newcastle. However, she is undertaking this research in her capacity as a research student, not as a Counsellor. Please note that, to avoid any potential conflict of interest for Ms. Stone, students who have received counselling from Ms. Stone within the past two years are not eligible to participate.

(3) What does the study involve?

The study is a qualitative research project which explores the experiences of male and female mature age students, as a result of going to university, and how they manage any resultant changes in their lives. In-depth interviews will be conducted with 20 students, using a semi-structured interview schedule. All the subjects will have entered university via the Open Foundation program (an equity program for mature age students to qualify for university entry) of the University of Newcastle (UoN) and be in the second or third year of their undergraduate degree program at the Ourimbah Campus of the UoN.

Types of questions which participants will be asked include: information about their age, marital status etc; family background; reasons for undertaking study; any difficulties encountered; experiences of combining study with other demands in their lives; and any other significant life events and difficulties during the time of their studies.
The interviews will be held in a confidential setting, within the Student Support Unit at the Ourimbah Campus. All contact with participants will be kept confidential with anonymity assured. Names and potentially identifying information about participants will be changed in any reports or documents in order to preserve anonymity. Audio tapes, transcripts and any other hard copy documents will be stored in a locked cabinet at all times and only accessed by the researchers. Any electronic files and documents will be password protected on the researchers’ PC, to which no other person has access.

Interviews will be recorded on audio cassette and then transcribed for the purposes of analysis. Participants do not have to answer any questions which they choose not to and they may ask for the recording to stop at any time. Participants may review the recording and/or transcript of the interview and may edit or erase anything they have said.

(4) **How much time will the study take?**

Each student will be interviewed once, with the interview lasting approximately 60-90 minutes.

(5) **Can I withdraw from the study?**

Being in this study is completely voluntary - you are not under any obligation to consent. You are free to withdraw at any time.

(6) **Will anyone else know the results?**

All aspects of the study, including results, will be strictly confidential and only the researchers will have access to information on participants. A report of the study may be submitted for publication, but individual participants will not be identifiable in such a report.

All participants are welcome to receive a copy of the report outlining the results of this research. Those who would like the results to be sent to them need to supply an address to which results will be posted or some contact no. or email so that they can receive notification of where they can collect a copy of the results.

(7) **Will the study benefit me?**

Perhaps not directly, although you may find it beneficial to reflect upon your experiences as student.

Benefits may include the opportunity to ‘debrief’ about and reflect upon your experiences. Risks include the chance that some participants may experience some short-term level of emotion and distress in reflecting upon negative or upsetting experiences. Should any participant be in need of and desirous of ongoing assistance, referral can be made to the counselling service with the participant’s consent.

(8) **Can I tell other people about the study?**

Yes
(9) **What if I require further information?**

When you have read this information, Cathy Stone will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Cathy Stone on 02 4348 4033 or cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au or Dr. Zita Weber on 02 9351 6896 or z.weber@edfac.usyd.edu.au.

(10) **What if I have a complaint or concerns?**

Should you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or you have a complaint about the manner in which the research is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308, telephone 02 49216333, email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au. Please quote HREC Approval No. H-187-0206.

In addition, any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact the Manager, Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on (02) 9351 4811.

*Dr. Zita Weber*…………………………………………………………………….

*Ms. Cathy Stone*…………………………………………………………………….

This information sheet is for you to keep.
Appendix 6 – Participant consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, ........................................................................................................, give consent to my participation in the research project

Name (please print)

TITLE: Experiences of Mature Age Students in Higher Education

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher(s) now or in the future.

4. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential and no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

Signed: ..............................................................................................................................

Name: ..............................................................................................................................

Date: ..............................................................................................................................
### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDENTS

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Listening to individual voices and stories – the mature-age student experience

Cathy Stone
University of Newcastle, Australia

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative research project, part of a doctoral thesis, which examines the impact of university study on a group of 20 female and male mature-age students at the University of Newcastle, Australia, who have entered university via a non-traditional pathway. These students are in the second to final years of their undergraduate degree programs and have all faced significant hurdles in gaining university entrance and continuing with their studies. The majority have come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with little, if any, family history of higher education and little positive experience of prior study. This paper gives voice to their stories – their triumphs and achievements as well as their struggles – and highlights the important role that publicly funded institutions can play, not only in widening access to higher education, but also in encouraging and assisting students from a diverse range of backgrounds to participate fully in higher education and achieve their goals.
This paper describes a 'work in progress' — a research project exploring the experiences of women and men along their journey as mature-age university students. The research will form the basis of a doctoral thesis which the author is undertaking with the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney.

The research is qualitative, primarily from a narrative perspective, and has involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 mature-age students in the second to final years of their degree program at the University of Newcastle, Australia, having entered university through a non-traditional pathway. Eighteen of the students entered university via the University of Newcastle’s Open Foundation Program, one entered via the STAT (Standard Tertiary Aptitude Test) and one achieved university entrance through RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning).

How did it all begin?

The idea of conducting formal research to explore the experiences of mature-age students arose directly from my interest and experience as a student counsellor within a university setting. For the previous ten years, I had been providing a counselling service to students at the Ourimbah Campus of the University of Newcastle. This Campus has a particularly high proportion of mature-age students, mostly female, and through my professional work I had been hearing the personal stories of many of these students (Stone 1999). Their stories were overwhelmingly ones of courage in the face of adversity. Most had faced significant challenges and difficulties in their journeys toward becoming university students and in their efforts to continue with and succeed with their studies. Female mature-age students were over-represented, both amongst the student population as a whole and amongst those using the counselling service. Therefore, I became more familiar with the women's stories. However, the men's stories that I did hear also tended to be ones of struggle, determination and courage. The difference was that they usually talked of more support — from families, from female partners and from workplaces.

Undoubtedly, mature-age students face a range of hurdles to overcome in returning to study, particularly at the higher education level, and the personal stories of those seeking assistance through the counselling service bore this out. Women with whom I talked in my role as a counsellor often seemed to be particularly disadvantaged, as they struggled with balancing their roles of wife, mother and student, often with little confidence in their academic abilities. Many had little support from partners and families. In many cases, their studies were perceived as being secondary to their other responsibilities or, indeed, as a kind of 'leisure' activity. However, despite this level of struggle, another common feature amongst these students, both female and male, was the strong sense of personal achievement, a growing confidence and a new sense of identity and purpose. No matter the difficulties, it was all worth it. As a counsellor, I was privileged to hear these stories and to witness the changes that occurred in these students' sense of themselves, as a direct result of being at university.

Through this process of talking with so many mature-age students, in a counselling setting, about their experiences, I began to wonder to what extent the stories of those students presenting at the counselling service were reflective of the experiences of mature-age students in general. I was aware that it could be helpful to higher education institutions to have a clearer understanding of the particular issues facing mature-age students, in order that they can be most appropriately supported to enter university, succeed and graduate.

The setting

As a regional university, the University of Newcastle attracts a relatively high proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds at both of its two main campuses. The Ourimbah Campus in particular has a high proportion of mature-age students
from low socio-economic backgrounds. The University as a whole has a strong equity focus on supporting its low socio-economic students of all ages. It is located on the east coast of Australia in the state of New South Wales and has an enrolment of approximately 24,000 students, mostly located at two main campuses. The larger campus caters for around 18,000 students and is located within the city of Newcastle itself, about 160 kilometres north of Sydney. The smaller campus hosts around 3,500 university students and is located at Ourimbah, about halfway between Sydney and Newcastle, in an area of the coastline known as the NSW Central Coast.

The majority of Australian universities define a mature-age student as any student aged 21 or over. However, a significant number of mature-age students are aged in their thirties, forties or even fifties, who have not been in any formal education for perhaps ten to fifteen years or more. Cullity (2006) tells us that ‘without an alternative entry route to university, university is not possible for some adults’ and ‘to re-address this concern ... 13 of the nation’s 44 universities conduct alternative entry programs (AEPs) for mature students’ (p. 177). These alternative entry programs include specific enabling programs (Cantwell, Archer & Bourke 2001) which are designed to help prospective mature-age students gain university entry requirements. Those students without the necessary pre-requisites to apply directly for entry into a degree program at university (for example, those who did not matriculate from high school at the required standard) can apply to undertake such an enabling program.

Universities can apply to the (former) Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training for funding to assist them to run enabling programs (Chadwick 2007) but it is up to the University to decide whether to charge fees to the students. On the basis of their results in the enabling program, students can apply for a place in a university degree program. Mature-age students who enter university via enabling programs are often amongst the most disadvantaged, with many having had little positive experience of study behind them and a sizable proportion coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds and little, if any, family history of higher education (Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite & Godfrey 2004, Cantwell et al. 2001).

The Open Foundation Program at the University of Newcastle is one such enabling program and has the following features. It is for persons aged 21 and over; successful completion of the program can qualify students for University entrance, based on their results; students must take a total of four courses (subjects) which can be studied full-time over one semester or part-time over two semesters. There are no fees and it is open to all who wish to apply (Cantwell et al. 2001, Cullity 2006). Approximately 66% of Open Foundation students are female and it has a very high success rate. Over 90% of those who completed the program in 2006 were offered a university place for 2007 (University of Newcastle 2007).

Due to the fact that it has no fees and specifically targets mature-age students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the Open Foundation Program is regarded as an important equity program for the University of Newcastle (Cantwell et al. 2001). Cullity (2006) talks about enabling programs offering mature-age students a ‘second chance’ at education. The experiences of the group of students interviewed for this research indicates that, for many, it is more of a ‘first-chance’ – or, indeed, the first real opportunity they have had to consider undertaking higher education.

Who are the research participants?
A brief summary of the 20 women and men, all of whom are in at least their second year of undergraduate study, is as follows:

- 15 female and 5 male
- 11 full-time and 9 part-time
• Age 32–52, median age of 40
• 9 married and living with a partner
• 19 have children, 26 years to 7 months
• 11 single parents
• None have parents who attended university
• 17 are the first in their family (of origin) to attend university.

It was not a criterion of the research for participants to be ‘first-generation’ university students, but given that nearly all of them came through the Open Foundation Program, coupled with the strong equity focus of that program, perhaps it is not surprising. Cullity (2006) tells us that ‘a closer portrayal of AEP students comprises adults who come from a low socio-economic background, left school prior to completing Year 12, are the first-in-the-family to study and are either in paid employment or recipients of social security benefits’ (p. 178). Cantwell et al. (2001) also demonstrate that the Open Foundation Program does indeed function as an effective equity program, providing opportunities for students who come from a background where university study is not the norm.

While the analysis of the interview data for this research is still at a very early stage, a number of themes have begun to emerge, tentatively classified as:

• Beginnings
• Challenges
• Resilience
• Identity
• Future

**Beginnings**

Why did they come?

Why did these students decide to come to university? And why at this point in time? For the majority of the students, there was some catalyst for action – some event that had occurred which then led, directly or indirectly, to the decision to study. Other researchers have had similar findings. O’Shea (2007) mentions ‘some sort of recent catalyst’ (p.42) that often precipitated the decision to study. McGivney (2006) describes the path back into study for adult learners as being ‘often serendipitous’ (p.85). Her research in this area highlights a number of factors that are influential in adults returning to formal study, including reasons such as ‘because others in their circle are doing it’ and ‘because of the need to deal with an immediate situation in their life (life transitions, illness, redundancy, bereavement, divorce)’ (p.85). These kinds of serendipitous factors were certainly present also for many of the participants in this study:

My son started kindergarten and I thought I could either go and get another boring office job, or I could do something that I actually want to do ... (Fiona, 35)

It was all around the same time I lost my job, split up with him and thought ‘Okay!’ (Anne, 36)

I got a redundancy from the bank and I was thinking, what was I going to do with myself? (Evan, 44)

For some of the participants, it was a long-term dream that they had not been able to fulfil in the past:

I was a bit peeved that I didn’t put enough effort into going to Uni, and so it was always in the back of my mind that I wanted to go to Uni and do a degree. (David, 52)

It was never a question of if I would, it was when I would. (Helen, 33)

I always wanted... to go and study... and I wasn’t encouraged to do that... It has always been a yearning. (Mandy, 38)

I think I always knew I had the potential but it was only a thought for a long time. (Penny, 32)
For others, it was something quite unexpected:

Never in my wildest dreams ... I knew I was capable of something, but uni was just over my head ... I just thought it was all beyond me. (Carol, 44)

I saw one of the guys from school and he asked what I was up to and I told him I was at uni. He said, 'Oh bullshit!' He didn't believe me. I never thought about uni. Never actually thought outside of where I was. (Virginia, 36)

It was just through talking to people that made me aware ... I'd probably be doing TAFE. I think I needed to do something, but it wouldn't have been necessarily uni, because I wouldn't have thought I was good enough. (Linda, 40)

So why now? And why not before? Chapman et al. (2006), in their research in Australian rural communities, identify the following barriers that impede participation in education for adults: personal and societal barriers, financial barriers, geographic barriers, management barriers, and vision, mission and identity barriers. For the respondents in this study, the major factors for all the respondents that appeared to have stood in the way of furthering their education could perhaps be classified as personal and societal barriers as well as vision, mission and identity barriers.

Specifically, what was identified by a number of the women was the lack of encouragement from family as well as a sense of not being 'smart enough'. This echoes the findings of a study conducted in the 1970s by McLaren (1985), with 48 female mature-age students enrolled at a small adult education college in the United Kingdom. McLaren found that most of the women had left school by 16 as a result of parental and societal attitudes about education not being important for girls: 'Most parents expected their daughters to marry young and to find a conventional job' (p.46).

Thirty years later, the women in this study described similar experiences.

My family life, as it was, was, like, get out and get a job. (Tina, 38)

I left school in 4th form. It wasn't even the thing to do the HSC back then - maybe just go out and do a trade - get a job. (Carol, 44)

Well, my mother didn't encourage me to get my HSC, in fact, she told me I wasn't smart enough, so I joined the workforce when I was sixteen. (Mandy, 38)

I had been told for so long that I wasn't very bright... (Helen, 33)

For some of the respondents, it was a case of unhappy memories of school which had inhibited them from considering further study. Golding, from his research with male adult learners (2006), believes that 'it is men who have had the least positive formal learning experiences - particularly at school - who are most at risk and are less likely to embrace any form of institutional, adult and community or formal learning' (p.176). However, Tett (2000) in her study of male and female mature-age working-class students at a small university in Scotland, found that 'all of the students were negative about their own school experiences' (p.186). She found interesting differences between the male and female descriptions of their school experiences. The men in her study tended to attribute their negative experiences to the teachers' dislike of them for being too rebellious or argumentative, while the women were more likely to attribute their negative experiences of school to pressure at home, through family responsibilities and expectations.

Whatever the specific reasons, both the men and women in this study commonly reported negative school experiences:

I didn't like school ... I moved around a lot of the time so I didn't really develop any close relationships. (Anne, 36)
No good. I didn't like it. I also have no HSC. I had bad school experiences. (Katrina, 42)

End of Year 9, things just went downhill from there ... I went on to Year 11, dropped out half-way through ... I just lost it with school. (Bob, 41)

For others, it appeared to be a case of life simply getting in the way:

I had wanted to be a teacher when I left high school, but my father had died between Year 10 and Year 11 and Mum said, 'I can't afford to buy your Year 11 uniform, do you mind getting a job?', so that was the end of that. (Nerida, 49)

I started my HSC, but I fell pregnant so ... I started doing it by correspondence ... but I couldn't concentrate. (Anne, 36)

I had to drop out [of uni] ... I had a 3 month old child and I couldn't do it ... (Helen, 33)

Inspirations and influences

'People who act as influencers, catalysts or change agents are hugely important in leading others into learning' (McGivney 2006, p.87). This appeared to hold true for many of the participants in this study. Sources of influence and inspiration included parents, friends, partners and teachers:

I found a Wyong TAFE course called CEW [Career Education for Women] and they were fantastic ... she [the teacher] said, 'If you want to go to uni, you should do it, because you can.' (Carol, 44)

So I spoke to my wife ... she said go and get educated ... she found all the information and I made it by three days ... my wife pushed me. (Bob, 41)

I have a friend who was doing uni at the time. Different degree ... but I saw her doing it with her family and I thought, well, maybe I could do it too. (Tina, 38)

For one of the women, her son was the catalyst, although not in the way one might have expected: 'I was trying to arrange to get him [my son] into uni and he wasn't interested and I thought, 'Well, bugger you! If you're not interested, I'll go to uni'.' (Nerida, 49)

For many, recent experiences of formal learning had been much more positive than their school experiences. Some like Carol, quoted above, were inspired by a recent experience of other formal study to think about going on to university:

I started off doing the CEW course and, right from that course, I wanted to go to university. (Anne, 36)

I loved it! [TAFE Diploma] It was a real culture change ... and ever since then, I sort of had a yearning, looking for something ... (Mandy, 38)

I'd enjoyed learning massage ... and I guess I finished that and thought, 'Well, I want to do more and I want to keep learning now...'. (Rachel, 47)

These findings are again similar to those of Tett (2000) who found that all in her study were 'able to give positive examples of learning which had taken place at a later point in their lives' (p.187).

Coming to University – what made it all possible?

Coming to university was only made possible by alternative entry programs – and, in the case of 18 of the 20 participants, it was specifically the University of Newcastle's Open Foundation Program. Once again, there was for many a serendipitous element to their introduction to the idea of doing Open Foundation.

For Grace, there was a sense of hearing about it just in time:

I opened up the local paper and it had the Open Foundation ... and it was closing day on the Friday so ... I went straight down and that was it. My husband came home and said, 'What did you do today?', and I said I went and enrolled in uni! (Grace, 47)
For Fiona, there was a chance encounter: 'I saw this lady that I used to live next door to... on the campus on that Open Day and she said you have to do Open Foundation. It's the best thing in the world.' (Fiona, 35)

For Linda, who was working at the coffee shop on campus and heard about Open Foundation from some of her regular customers, there was a sense of being in the right place at the right time: 'And then finding out about Open Foundation ... I'm thinking, how did these oldies get to be uni students?' (Linda, 40)

An anxious time...

Their memories of starting University were mixed. For many it was an anxious time – particularly for a number of the women:

First six weeks were a nightmare ... very overwhelming ... I was close to just giving it all away ... (Katrina, 42)

It was scary ... I really felt out of my depth. (Ingrid, 48)

I'd sit in the car for 45 minutes ... I couldn't get out of the car ... I was brand new and it was frightening. (Amber, 49)

Similarly, O'Shea (2007), in her research with first-in-the-family female students, found that 'for many of these students, commencing tertiary studies initiated feelings of anxiety, unfamiliarity and self-doubt' (p.41). However, for some, the excitement outweighed the fears: 'The first day I walked in and feeling just excited, oh all this knowledge ... it felt good!' (Grace, 47, married)

The men's memories of starting indicated that they had felt reasonably confident and any worries were more about financial concerns:

There were no real difficulties ... I really, really enjoyed it. (John)

There was no real fear. I guess the only apprehension was, can I afford to come? (David)

The biggest one was giving up work and not having an income. (Bob)

Much of the previous research into the mature-age student experience indicates that women generally tend to be less confident than men in the academic environment. Acker's research with mature-age students in the UK (1994) found that male students tended to 'show few self-doubts and high self-confidence' (p.66). This is supported by Shands' research (1998) which found that female students tended to 'distrust their intellectual capacity more often than men' (p.145).

Challenges

The major difficulties and challenges described by the participants can be classified as: financial struggles; lack of time; difficulties with organising and prioritising; dealing with changes in relationships with partners and children; and balancing the needs of study with the needs of family, home, partners and children. Abbott-Chapman and colleagues, in their research with mature-age students at the University of Tasmania, found that 'mature-aged students face particular challenges in terms of family and employment pressures and demands which compete with studies, and also financial problems associated with giving up full-time employment' (Abbott-Chapman et al. 2004, p.171).

Similarly, for all the students interviewed for this study, life was a juggling act. Finding enough time and enough money were constant challenges for most:

Financial adjustment is a big one ... but when it comes to the kids, trying to find time for the kids and the family. They don't always come number one which is really wrong. (Bob, married, 4 children)

I think the toughest thing overall is just the financial situation, because I've only been able to work part-time, and wanting to
be a good mum and have time for the girls. (Rachel, divorced, 2 children)

I've been having to budget very tightly ... I think they [the children] are probably just sick of budgeting for so many years. (Penny, single, 2 children)

Because my daughter turned 16, the money I was getting from Centrelink almost halved ... (Virginia, single, 1 child)

For some of the women who were living with a partner, their growth in confidence in their own knowledge and opinions led to a change in the dynamics of their relationship:

I get a little bit frustrated with him sometimes because he still thinks the same ... so we just try to cool off on the political debates. (Linda, married)

I probably don't have as much respect for him as I once had, because now I know I'm more confident and say what I think. (Mandy, married)

The pressure on some relationships when women in particular return to study has been well-documented in previous research. Many men can feel 'threatened and excluded' (Wilson 1997, p.358) resulting in an 'almost total lack of domestic and emotional support' (Edwards 1993, p.117). Leonard (1994) also describes how a third of the female mature-age students she interviewed met considerable resistance from their male partners over their decision to return to study.

Two women in this study had encountered considerable resistance from their partners, to the point where they had chosen to end the relationship:

He wasn't too happy with it; he made things difficult for me and I had to borrow the neighbour's car just to get here ... you know, I was the wife at home, dinner on the table, house was always clean – the house is never clean now! It got to the point where he

would be drunk on the days that I was at uni ... it got beyond a joke. (Helen, now divorced, 2 children)

His opinion was it was time for me to sit back and knit and wait to become a grandmother ... (Amber 49, now divorced, 2 children)

One of the men had also separated, due to long-term issues combined with his finding a more compatible partner at university: 'It probably would have happened anyway [marriage break-up]. I think the big thing was I met somebody that I clicked with.' (Evan, now separated, 3 children)

In contrast, some of the participants found that their studies had affected their relationship in positive ways. 'While families can provide strain, they also ... provide support' (Wilson 1997, p.358). Anne, Bob and Nerida are examples of this:

I think it's helped support it [relationship with partner] because we are both studying (Anne)

Probably affected for the better. My wife is very supportive, always has been. (Bob)

I appreciate what my husband does for me, and I don't know if I used to do that. (Nerida)

However, for all of the participants in this study, life was a constant juggling act – some juggling a combination of the demands of study and paid work:

I didn't give up my work, I still have a mortgage and I'm still working ... generally 35 hours a week minimum on top of studies. (John, married, one child, studying full-time)

When I get home from work ... I have something to eat and then I'm straight into the study. (Paul, divorced, 3 children, studying part-time)
The women in particular were juggling the demands of study, housework, children, partners – and, at times, also paid work:

I started this new job a couple of weeks ago. It started on a Monday, so I had an assignment due on that Monday which I'd already got an extension for, and so I just had to stay up until I finished – up to 3am so I finished it, and that's becoming the norm. (Tina, married, 3 children, studying part-time)

I had to let go of the housework – what a shame! Now we crunch around on rice bubbles and food ... I'm finding it quite frustrating – the mess. (Mandy, married, 5 children, part-time study)

The juggling of life beyond uni was huge at times ... it all came down to me. I was the one running the house, so I had to make sure all their needs were met and the house was looked after. (Rachel, divorced, 2 children)

Feminist literature refers to the multiplicity of women's roles and the 'gendered expectations of family obligations and the ongoing disparity with which women take on the "second shift" through maintenance of children and home' (Wolf-Wendel & Ward 2003, p.113). Other research into the mature-age student experience finds that 'often a return to school creates significant role strain and feelings of guilt, inadequacy and self-blame over difficulties in handling multiple roles' (Rice 1989, p.552).

Quotes such as the ones below demonstrate this sense of role strain, guilt and self-blame which was evident in the stories of many of the women in this study:

I found it very difficult last night, she was in tears [7 year old daughter] ... and I put my time away to finish my essay, so inside I wanted to get things done ... It's a big conflict because we had a lecture and a presentation this morning ... (Katrina, widowed, 2 children)

Just I do feel like a bit of a failure from having to push the kids aside a lot ... at the moment, my son is going through some issues at school ... and you have feelings, is that because of me? is it all my fault? ... (Tina, married, 3 children)

Other feminist writers perceive that society places a different value on 'men's time' and 'women's time', with men's time being seen as more valuable and productive (McNay 2000). Hughes (2002) talks about 'male time and female time' (p.133) with 'male time' being linear, clock time and 'female time' as time given up to the demands and needs of others. Certainly amongst the participants in this study, it appeared to be the case that, in general, study time for the men was very much 'taken for granted' with wives and partners tailoring their activities around male study time. In contrast, the women tailored their study time around other responsibilities at home, including their children, partners and other home and family responsibilities.

For example, Bob's wife – now the family breadwinner since Bob gave up work to study full-time – tailors her work around his study hours: 'Any work my wife is doing, she has tailored it around my hours' (Bob, married, 4 children, full-time study).

On the other hand, comments from Grace, Anne and Rachel indicate the ways in which they ensure that their study hours do not impinge on family time:

I finish everything by 4pm, I pick my husband up at 4.30 and after that it's dinner time. (Grace, married, 3 children, part-time study)

I always make sure I've got weekends free. (Anne, living with partner, 2 children, full-time study)

I had to make sure that my classes fitted in with what the girls were doing. (Rachel, divorced, 2 children)
Resilience – what helps them to keep going?

Help and support

Students reported receiving help and support from a number of sources – particularly lecturers, support services on campus (such as counselling, learning support, careers advisers, student mentors), partners, children and their own parents.

My Mum lives two streets away, so does my sister so I get a lot of help from them. (Penny)

The lecturers are more approachable, they have more time for you. (Virginia)

I found her [lecturer] very, very supportive ... when I hit that point and said, 'I can't do this', then ... I spoke to student support. (Katrina)

The student support here ... has been great. (David)

However, above all, the students talked about the support, friendship and assistance they received from fellow students:

The girls I'm with – our little study group that we made in Open Foundation – I made some friends there and we're all doing the same degree and we formed a little group and we support each other ... (Linda)

My friends here at uni are just amazing ... I've met some real friends here, friends that I will have for the rest of my life. (Helen)

First off, my friends. If we don't understand something, we talk among ourselves. (Fiona)

She [friend at uni] and I stumbled through both of our fall-over and if one of us is down we talk about it to each other. (Amber)

It was not only the women who reported this. The men regarded their network of fellow students on campus as just as important:

You have to form your little 'cliques' because it's vital ... and it's reciprocal, too. We had this group of 10 [in a class exercise] and this core of ten people are really my best friends at uni now. (Evan)

Probably first of all, fellow students – we talk. (David)

Probably more [help] from students. (John)

Determination to achieve the goal

Sheer determination was a significant factor for many in their persistence with their studies, despite the obstacles previously discussed.

I think the overwhelming thing for me is that I want to learn and I don't want to give in half-way and I want to see it to the end. (Paul)

I don't like to give up – definitely not! (Fiona)

Probably if I wasn't so pig-headed, determined, I might have given up. (Grace)

I didn't want to give up ... I don't think I've ever given up on anything in my life. (John)

It would be a waste of all that time I have already invested ... that's what keeps me going. (Tina)

Love of learning

A genuine love of and desire to continue learning was another factor expressed by a number of the students:

I love it ... I get a buzz ... just the environment, the books and the knowledge. (Ingrid)

I enjoy it ... I like to write, but it doesn't always come easy, but I'm happy when I finish what I do. (Carol)

My love of learning. (Nerida)
The knowledge that will come out of it ... the overwhelming thing for me is that I want to learn. (Paul)

A growth in independence

A number of the women in particular cited a new independence in their lives that increased their determination to continue with their studies.

The fact that the first time in 15 years I can just get in the car and drive up and get lost in books and research ... independence. And it’s something of mine. I don’t have to share it with [husband] and the children, they don’t have to be here, they don’t have to have anything to do with it. (Mandy)

The thought that when I go overseas I can get work ... and I’m not going to be on the dole ... and have my own home. (Virginia)

Feminist literature on women and leisure (Wearing 1996 & 1998, Wimbush & Talbot 1988) discusses the notion of leisure as a form of ‘resistance’ for women against the traditional female role of wife, mother, housewife and a means of achieving some level of independence from the restrictions of these roles. Wearing points out that ‘the freedoms provided by the sphere of leisure can result in a greater autonomy for women’ (Wearing 1998, p.49). While it is highly debatable whether university study can be called a ‘leisure’ activity, it was certainly the case that, like leisure, study had provided some of these women with time to themselves. For a number of the female participants in this study, going to university appeared to have provided them with a means of ‘resistance’ which enabled them to develop some legitimate independence from the confines of the traditional female role.

Identity

All the participants in this study reported some changes in their view of themselves since undertaking university studies. Many also reported changes in others’ perceptions of them. Generally speaking, the women seemed more often to report changes that appeared to be significant internal transformations, such as:

Feeling fulfilled, completely filled the void. (Grace)

Coming to uni, I sort of bloomed ... Much more outgoing. (Fiona)

I’ve gained confidence ... I feel happier – I guess self-esteem. I feel like I’m going somewhere. I’m achieving a goal. (Penny)

I feel like I’m an intelligent, attractive woman that is capable and confident and can hold an intelligent conversation. (Mandy)

My thoughts about myself have changed. I understand myself better. (Linda)

I’m a different person totally. (Nerida)

While the men also reported changes that appeared to reflect significant personal growth, this was more often couched in terms that reflected an addition to existing skills and a growth in status or respect from others:

I don’t think I have a higher or lower opinion of myself, but I knew I was a skilled boat builder – this has just added to my skills. (John)

I see myself as more confident ... I’ve always been socially aware, but I think probably more so now. (David)

I have grown as a person ... I’m a lot more tolerant ... I feel like I have got a bit more respect. (Bob)

Confidence ... My people skills have always been good, but just to be able to practise has been good. (Evan)

I think I just know a bit more ... I’m a bit more ‘full of it!’ (Paul)

McLaren’s study (1985) of mature-age female students found that higher education was ‘a significant instrument of change’ (p.171) in
the lives of the women she interviewed. This has been supported by a number of other studies of women as mature-age students (Edwards 1993, Kelly 1987, Martin 1988). Studies of both female and male mature-age students (Britton & Baxter 1999, Tett 2000, West, Hore, Eaton, & Kermond 1986) also indicate that while there are significant changes in identity for both men and women in higher education, the change in identity for women is particularly profound. Britton and Baxter (1999) for example, tell us that ‘men and women tell different stories, which reflect not only differences in their life experiences but also different understandings of the self’ (p.192).

When asked about any losses they had experienced as a result of being a student, virtually all the participants, female and male alike, mentioned time and money as being the most significant losses. Interestingly though, for all the struggles, each one seemed to agree that the gains outweighed the losses:

Because the alternative is to go and work at Coles, and I really don’t want to go back there. (Anne)

Only time and money. I don’t see many downsides. I have people say, ‘I’d love to do what you’re doing’ and I say ‘Do it!’ I don’t think there are many losses. (Bob)

That’s the wonderful thing about uni, that it opens you to this world that never ends. (Penny)

Future

The male participants were all very certain of their future:

I will have a nice comfortable life coming up. (Bob – Teaching)

Get a position or to gain employment with a job that will be stimulating. (David – Management)

I shouldn’t have any problem getting a job ... I don’t see any shortage of jobs for me when I finish. (Evan – Teaching)

Get a job with fair wages and security and super ... really capitalise ... (John – Science)

The qualification will make me more marketable. (Paul – Management)

For some of the women, their future was still to be determined:

I’m not sure where I’m going to end up ... I have no idea. (Carol – Arts)

I’m still kind of unsure where I want to go. (Fiona – Social Science)

I haven’t got a firm plan ... I don’t know how to narrow it down or what job I can do. (Penny – Teaching)

This is consistent with other studies of mature-age students such as Tett’s research (2000) with ‘working class’ students in the United Kingdom. She found that ‘the difference having a degree would make was ... gendered’ in that ambitions were ‘much more instrumental for the men whilst the females had less specific ambitions’ (p.189).

However, in this study this was not the case for all of the women:

I would like to be a registered psychologist and so that's what I'm aiming for – and get an internship somewhere and register. (Grace – Psychology)

Hopefully, I'm able to secure a job which will pay more and therefore economically be able to support my children better than I would have been able to originally. (Katrina – Teaching)

Also, even though some of the women did not articulate the specifics of their future, there was a strong sense for many of knowing what they wanted in a broader sense:

Self-sufficiency and independence for me. I don't want to have to rely on any government department or any other person
for financial support. I want to be able to do it myself. (Helen – Herbal Therapy)

I’ll have more money, and I won’t have Centrelink breathing down my neck. (Ingrid – Teaching)

Perhaps it is not surprising that there was this recurring theme of the hope and desire for an independent future, given the relative lack of prior opportunities for independence in the lives of many of the women. Edwards (1993) in her study of mature women students showed that the juggling of demands between home and family impacted heavily on women and placed significant barriers in the way of their being able to find and enjoy either personal or financial independence.

Also emerging strongly through the stories of both the women and the men in this study was a sense that, through the completion of their studies, personal dreams would be realised:

I will be up on the podium with my friends in 2008 ... we’ve got dreams and plans ... (Bob)

Sense of purpose, learnt something and can use it to help other people. (Anne)

I can’t wait for the day when I can wear the funny hat and have a degree, and I guess there is a certain amount of prestige about it. (Paul)

There’s about a hundred doors [opening up] ... totally different. (Amber)

Just experience something different. Africa ... something entirely different out of Australia. Aid worker or something. (Tina)

The changes that they envisaged for the future were not limited only to themselves. All of them viewed a different future, to varying degrees, for those close to them, particularly their children:

The kids are definitely taking their studies more seriously. I was really surprised by that – just by seeing me do it ... (Ingrid)

I’ve now started a new cycle and my children can start too ... the girls have been exposed to all of that and they will continue it now ... it’s like breaking a vicious cycle. (Rachel)

I’ll be able to provide a better life for my children and better education. (John)

They will see that there are opportunities ... whereas, maybe if we hadn’t thought about going to uni, they probably wouldn’t have thought about it. (Penny)

For these mature-age students, not only has university been ‘a significant instrument of change in their lives’ (McLaren 1985, p.171) but it seems likely that it has, in many cases, been an agent of generational change. The children of these now university-educated men and women may indeed be more likely to consider continuing into higher education than they might have otherwise, through the positive example of their parents’ achievements.

Conclusion

Research into participation levels in higher education in Australia tells us that ‘socially and educationally disadvantaged mature learners remain some of the most under-represented students in the higher education community’ (Abbot-Chapman et al. 2004 in Cullity 2006, p.184). We also know that ‘the success of mature-aged non-traditional entry appears independent of socio-economic background’ (Cantwell et al. 2001). It is therefore of enormous importance that opportunities are created to enable such students to enter university and to succeed. Alternative entry programs and in particular equity-based enabling programs such as the Open Foundation program create such opportunities.

The stories of these 20 women and men, who have come to university as ‘second chance’ students (Cantwell et al. 2001) illustrate the
transformational nature of their experiences as students. The growth in confidence, the increase in opportunities for the future and the sense of dreams and ambitions being achieved, were common to all of these students. In addition, the possibility for generational change in terms of likelihood of participation in higher education appears very strong.

Public institutions have a vital role to play in developing greater awareness of the relevance of lifelong learning to student personal and/or vocational well-being (Cullity 2006, p.185) as well as putting into practice programs which provide opportunity and encouragement for ‘non-traditional’ students to enter university. Research into mature learners also indicates the need to consider mature students as individuals with separate social, educational, personal and vocational experiences (Cullity 2006, p.189). Hence it is of equal importance that institutions provide specific programs and ongoing support to enable such students not merely to enter university, but to find the encouragement to help them stay and succeed.

References


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