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# Transitions and turning points: How first in female students story their transition to university and student identity formation

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# Transitions and turning points: How first in female students story their transition to university and student identity formation

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to explore how one group of students reflect upon their transition into the higher education environment. This qualitative research project followed one group of female undergraduate students as they moved through the first year of study. All of the participants were the first in their family to consider further education and each participated in four semi-structured interviews over one year. Drawing on the conceptual lens of 'turning points', the intent is to provide a 'close-up' analysis of the complex process of identity formation within the university landscape. By revisiting the students at various points over time, richly descriptive detail about what this undertaking means for those involved can be presented and the significance of these turning points explored in terms of their wider political implications.

## **Keywords**

student, university, transition, their, story, students, formation, female, identity, first, points, turning, transitions

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## **Title Page: Transitions and Turning Points: Using narrative inquiry to explore the first year of university study.**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is two fold being both to explore how one group of students narrate their transition to the higher education environment and also to highlight how narrative inquiry can further understandings about the subjective experience of attending university. Drawing on feminist standpoint theory, this qualitative research project followed one group of female undergraduate students as they moved through the first year of study. All of the participants were the first in their family to consider further education and each participated in four semi-structured interviews over one year. The focus of this discussion is both how the women story their transition to this environment and also, how this first year of study is narrated in terms of various turning points. By revisiting the students at various points over time, richly descriptive detail about what this undertaking means for those involved can be presented and the significance of these turning points explored in terms of their wider political implications.

## Introduction

This study is located within the fields of feminist scholarship and narrative inquiry as it seeks to describe and discuss women's experiences, using their own dialogue to express how they move through their initial year of study at an Australian university. Drawing on Alway's (1995) definition of feminist theory, this study places women at the centre of discussions, as the participants are 'the subjects of inquiry (the world is seen from their unique vantage points)' (p.211). Using narrative inquiry and including an all-female perspective enables an alternative viewpoint on what being a university student means for this particular cohort of women, many of whom are older with no one in the immediate family having undertaken university studies. In this way, the study provides insight into how the social world of the university is perceived and negotiated by those who may regard themselves as outsiders within the university community. As Thomas (2002) argues, anxiety about '...not fitting in and not being able to cope may be reinforced in families and communities where HE is not the norm' (p.8). Certainly for each of the older, married women in this study, attending university was regarded as atypical behaviour, as similar to the female participants in Edwards study 'other mothers did not do the sort of thing they were doing' (Edwards, 1993, p.144).

The research was conducted over one year (2006) at a small subsidiary campus of a larger metropolitan university, seventeen first-year female students were recruited at the commencement of the academic year and the researcher choose to 'journey' with the students as they moved through this first year. The research focussed on how individuals 'storied' this social world and offered participants a space to tell stories in order to disclose the 'dynamic quality of experience' (Graham, 1984, p.119). Interviews were conducted at four discrete points over the academic year, which were timed to coincide approximately with the beginning and ending of semesters. While each interview was semi-structured in nature, the following table reflects the broad themes that were covered:

### **Insert Table (1) here**

Narrative inquiry was chosen as a methodological approach in recognition of the significance of subjective experience when exploring social processes. This methodology also provides insight into the ways people enact their life on a micro, as opposed to a macro, level. Using interviews to draw out observations about participants' current activities combined with reflections on the past allowed a much 'richer understanding of the past-present relationship' (McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p.33) to emerge and arguably this depth was increased by the researcher engaging in multiple interactions with participants.

The broader study, which the data in this article was derived from, draws on the work of Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital as well as theories of cultural identity work (Hall, 1990; Cote, 2000). The term 'culture' connotes a diversity of experiences and ways of thinking, believing and feeling which are grounded within our social group affiliations; the values, customs and practices that individuals identify with are inextricably linked to a personal sense of social belonging. Brah (1996) identifies how there is no single or correct definition of culture instead it should be regarded as 'the symbolic construction of the vast array of a social group's life experience' (p.17). This is a dynamic concept that evolves over time, but the social practices that demarcate the differences between cultures are rarely unproblematic. Instead these practices need to be considered in relation to broader socio-political and economic factors, particularly in relation to the dominant power relations within society. Bourdieu (1986) contends that it is 'impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one introduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognised by economic theory' (p.241).

In articulating the nature of cultural capital, Bourdieu questions the concept of individual educational giftedness and instead points to class based factors as a precursor to success in the education system. Individuals enter this system with different types of cultural capital and knowledge, which is based upon their social background. Hence, educational success is not necessarily a result of natural abilities but rather relates to the 'affinity between class cultural habits and the demands of the educational system or the criteria which define success within it' (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p.22). This systematic inequality is played out throughout the education system, individuals endowed with the requisite and accepted forms of capital, experiencing success which ultimately helps to guarantee their positionality within the social order, perpetuating a class based system.

Closely linked to the concept of culture is that of identity, this is an equally ambiguous term to define. Hall (1990) explains how identity 'is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think' (p.222); instead this is a continual evolving concept that defies precise definition. The term 'cultural identity' which seemingly indicating a singularity of purpose, a collective 'one true self' (Hall, 1990, p.223) does in fact hide the underlying differences and political underpinnings such as positionality entails. Neither culture nor identity is composed of essential traits but instead represent constructions that are powerful in their ability to exclude some and empower others.

The identities and cultural practices available in certain environments do not necessarily fit existing selves and in some cases, may contradict the established self. This can be the case for

students who are the first in their family to enter the higher education context; their particular cultural and learning identities may not match the identity positions available leading to a loss of 'taken-for-granted realities and associated identities' (Scanlon, Rowling & Weber, 2007, p.224). Indeed, research on older students or those deemed as non-traditional, has indicated how returning to study can result in fundamental redefinition and questions around existing identities (Pascall & Cox, 1993).

These women's stories of transitioning to university reflect these wider cultural considerations as well as indicating how individuals made sense of their experiences. By focusing on the narrative content of these stories, the study highlights connections to wider political contexts. The data derived explored many facets of this university experience including hurdles the women faced, strategies employed to succeed and also public and personal changes that this experience engendered. This article will focus on how the women explored the transition to this environment and particularly how this decision to come to university and the ensuing academic experiences can be analysed as significant 'turning points' in their lives.

### **Conceptualising transitions and turning points**

Change in life course has been named in a variety of ways including transitions, turning points, branching points and life-markers (Ronka, Oravala & Pulkinen, 2003). However, what each of these terms essentially describes are 'periods or moments of life, [where] past decisions are reevaluated, new role expectations are confronted and changes in lifestyle are considered' (Ronka et al, 2003, p203). This article draws upon the categories of transition and turning points to conceptualise the arrival and persistence of a particular cohort of students at university. In relation to this research, transition in education is defined as a form of movement that involves revisions in identity and agentic affiliations, as Ecclestone (2009) further explains:

...transitions combine turning points, milestones or life events with subtle, complex processes of 'becoming somebody' personally, educationally and occupationally. (pp 12-13)

Turning points also result in some type of reorientation. This reorientation can both constrain or open-up opportunities as well as initiate change both on an individual level and also more broadly in relation to others. Cappeliez, Beaupre and Robitaille (2008) further define turning points as being dispersed throughout life but often concentrated at particular life stages, but acknowledge that there are different definitions of what a 'turning point' constitutes. Drawing on the work of Wethington (2003) and also, Clausen (1995), Cappeliez et al (2008) highlight how turning points can lead to changes in individual perception about self-identity, life significance and self-concept.

The narratives of the women presented in this article indicate how both the decision to come to university and the subsequent academic experience resulted in such renegotiations. Adopting a narrative inquiry approach enabled this study to explore human action in a situated sense. Plummer (2001) identifies how personal life history brings a more human element into social inquiry and social change. Such subjective experience is often missing from more quantitative research, which cannot explore data in the embodied sense, represented in the actual words of participants. As Narayan and George (2002) point out narratives do not only represent other 'worlds, whether imagined or remembered' but also provide 'a way of artfully arranging words for social and political consequences in the immediacies of this world' (p.819). The following section further explains the rationale for adopting a narrative inquiry approach and how this assisted in revealing the transitions and turning points articulated by the female participants.

### **Narrative inquiry**

...individual memories, while idiosyncratically interesting, have the potential to illuminate cultural myths, dominant memories and public histories. In telling their story, individuals are involved in the process of making their own history, and speaking back to and co-constructing public or collective histories. (McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p.41)

The objective of narrative analysis is not to establish universal truths but rather this approach invites the reader on a journey of interpretation that evokes possible readings, justified by reference to both narrative discourse and also researcher reflexivity. For Graham (1984), narrative enables women's stories of experience to remain complete rather than being delineated around a question and answer framework, permitting access to the everyday life of women.

As a researcher, I endeavoured to articulate and represent the subjective experience and everyday situations of women, while simultaneously identifying and analyzing the structures and forces that shape these experiences and situations. As such, this study is informed by feminist approaches in that it attempts to negotiate alternative ways of conceptualizing the interaction and interrelationships of individual lived experience and social organization (Alway, 1995). Feminist standpoint epistemology suggests that all knowledge is socially situated and so it is necessary that researchers locate the context of their knowledge production and negotiate the power structures within which women's stories are told (McCorkel & Myers, 2003). These power structures often take the form of invisible or unquestioned 'master narratives' that inform issues relating to race, class and gender.



Master narratives are dominant ideologies that serve to legitimate the way things are by appearing to be natural or transparent discourses. However, researchers who clearly identify the impetus and suppositions driving the research study can challenge these master narratives. In the case of this study, I am interested in how women's stories of transitioning to university reflect larger cultural considerations in relation to identity and pre-existing gender roles. By focussing on the narrative strategies and the content of these stories, the study highlights connections to wider contexts and provides insight into what being located within the university environment means for this particular student cohort.

By revisiting participants over time it is possible to observe changes in self and the fluid processes around identity formation. The various ways that individuals choose to interact and react to contexts can be highlighted in studies that travel with individuals. This study, while only a year in length, journeyed with the participants in order to explore the various 'critical moments' encountered as they themselves were experiencing them, revealing a 'habitus-in-process' (McLeod, 2003). This year long engagement provided a means not only to record the various developments over the year but also, enabled rapport to develop between the women and myself. Such a relationship facilitated the exchange of detailed description of their experiences in this academic environment. The study then provides a 'close-up shot of real lives with a focus on the plot, story line, turning points and defining moments' (McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p.61).

### **Study Context & Participants**

As mentioned, the study was conducted at a smaller regional campus over a one-year period, at the time of the study the total student population was 3,500. The regional location where the campus is located is both economically and socially disadvantaged with higher than state average levels of: unemployment, families in receipt of pensions or benefits and low-income earners. In addition, this region is educationally disadvantaged when compared to both state and nation-wide figures, as Table (2) highlights:

**Insert Table (2) here**

At the time of the study, the university also had one of the highest national rates of students derived from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds, as defined by postcode indicators.

The seventeen first year female students who participated in the study were all derived from the local region and their ages ranged from 18 to 47 years, with a mean age of 32.3 years. The study did not intentionally focus on older students but the campus demographic was characterised by

mature-aged students. In the year the study occurred (2006), approximately 60% of the student population were classed as mature aged or over the age of twenty-one, the highest proportions of these being between 21 and 24 years. All the women were the first in their immediate family to come to university, meaning that no siblings, parents, children or partners had previously attended a higher education institution.

While none of the participants had previously enrolled in a higher education institution, ten had completed some studies after High School. This included attendance at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Colleges (n=4) and also participation in an Enabling program (n=6) which provided a University Admissions Index (UAI) enabling application to an undergraduate program. A number had also completed the State Tertiary Admission Test (STAT), which also provided an alternative entry to university, while one woman was studying in an Enabling program. Given the narrative focus in this study, it is appropriate to introduce each of the women in a more detailed fashion, hence the following table is designed to provide this in a succinct manner:

**Insert Table (3) here**

### **Data Analysis and Presentation**

Obviously, narratives are not transparent and so do not reflect one true reality but instead need to be negotiated as opaque texts that are enacted at that particular point in a life's trajectory. Narrative constructions are not boundless, instead they are constrained by relevant events and actions but how these elements are selected, reported, defined, and positioned is where individuals have input and control. Hence, the analysis of such stories reveals both individual and cultural meanings but these must be derived from the text rather than defined a priori. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) provides a systematic and rigorous method of investigation as it requires a continuous process of comparative analysis initially between interviews and then, in relation to the literature.

The analysis in this study strove for 'density' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.158). This conceptual density is focussed on the meaning that events and activities have for individuals rather than the generation of broad theoretical explanations. In this way, the research is somewhat reflective of Denzin's (1989, 2000) interpretative interactionism, which aims to provide rich and deep description of personal experience. Such an approach is not atheoretical but rather focuses on the interpretation of events and lives. Rather than attempting to produce explanatory models, the objective is to 'bring alive' the 'private experiences that give meaning to everyday life as it is lived in this moment in history' (Denzin, 1989, p.139).

Franzosi (1998) argues that while the fracturing of narratives and the pursuit of particular themes can essentially alter the intrinsic meaning of text equally it is not theoretically tenable to replicate large chunks of narrative in pristine form. While shorter narratives can be analysed in their originality, for material such as that derived from semi-structured interviews it may be necessary to delineate the text in some way. However, to retain some level of textual integrity Franzosi advocates the use of multiple methods of data analysis. The interviews in this study have been analysed using two analytic schemes, initially analysis was iterative (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) using the grounded theory approach. By engaging with the text, the objective was to generate codes and categories so that the interviews could be explored abductively. These codes and categories enabled exploration of specific areas of interests and this was complimented by a narrative analysis, which particularly focussed on stories related to coming to university as well as narratives that explored facets of this experience. Thus, the article presents an 'analysis of narrative' (Polkinghorne, 1995), where data is analysed for paradigmatic typologies or categories. The term paradigmatic refers to the categorisation of material according to similarities across cases, characterised by '...a recursive movement between the data and the emerging categorical definitions during the process of producing classifications that will organise the data according to their commonalities' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.10). Ultimately, the intent is to explore how different categories exist relationally and whilst unique, explore each in terms of their commonality. The cumulative nature of the interviews also enabled retrospective reflection, providing stories that were multi-layered, evolving and developing over time.

## Findings

Exploring social reality from the perspective of women provides the possibility for a different perspective to be presented, as Always (1995) explains such analysis provides for:

the power to constitute and define oneself as a subject; the power to create and to nurture; the power to resist, to defy, to survive, to witness; the power to negotiate competently the demands of everyday life.(p221)

One of the ways this power was articulated was in relation to the turning-points that the women described in relation to their decision to come to university and their experiences within this environment. This following section will focus on these turning points as they were articulated in relation to the following three themes:

- *Deciding to come to university*
- *Persisting in this environment*
- *Changes in thinking*

### Deciding to come to university: “...it’s a life goal I guess for me...” Vicki

For the older women in particular, deciding to enrol at university was a major decision in their lives; often this was taken in the face of resistance from partners and in some cases, family. Kira, who has five children, explains how her dependents are a major impediment to studying refusing to assist with home duties and ultimately, resisting their mother’s proposed undertaking:

*...it would be nice if my children were a little more supportive and understand like Mum needs time out, we will go and cook dinner... (Kira)*

The reactions that Kira receives from both her children and husband are equally unsupportive and characterised by disinterest. Kira explains how her husband ‘*doesn’t want to study, doesn’t understand study, he is not interested at the end of the day*’. University seems to exist beyond his world-view and hence lacks legitimacy within the family domain. A number of the women’s partners were similarly unenthusiastic about these educational endeavours. Whilst nine women described expressions of unconditional excitement and encouragement from parents only two students expressed a similar reaction from partners. Given that there were nine that were in relationships at the time of the first set of interviews, this low number is significant.

Sue’s feelings of elation over getting into university are somewhat negated by her husband’s reaction to her decision, when replying to the question on family reactions, Sue tentatively introduces the topic of her husband:

*I’m suppose to be honest aren’t I [sighs] well we’ll start with my husband... its all been a shock and a surprise to him because in the ten years we’ve been married I’ve never talked about teaching or anything. So its sort of come out of the blue for him and ... he’ll be my biggest critic, he’s very good cos he brings up all the negatives which gets a bit frustrating at times.... (Sue)*

Even after commencing her studies, Sue admits that it is ‘*still a bit difficult chatting with my husband about it*’ and she suggests that maybe he ‘*feels threatened*’ and that ultimately he is ‘*waiting for the bad bits*’. Despite the passive resistance that Sue describes she seems determined to continue with her studies and discusses how she intends to keep family life and university life separate. This strategy is perhaps indicative of the lack of support forthcoming from home.

Despite the covert or in some cases, overt, resistance from home, the older women all reflect upon their arrival in terms of reaching a ‘turning point’ that instigated this decision to enrol. These turning points varied in nature but were all characterised by reaching a point in life where university became a possibility, a necessity even, for the women:

*I was going to start a library a librarian course after my HSC but it became more important for me to get out of home because it was a really dysfunctional family*

*and I just had to get out. I was going to then go back but that just never happened, life happened ... When I was married ... everything that was done was for his career and then when I had a child I was really the rock ... after my husband left me ... it was taking some steps trying to work out what the hell I wanted to do...(Catherine)*

Whilst Catherine's decision was initiated by the demise of her marriage, both Katie and Sheila explain how this 'turning point' was situated within the recognition that university might offer the possibility of getting more out of their current life:

*I was actually working 3 days a week and I wasn't getting job satisfaction anymore, it got to the stage where I thought there has got to be more to life than getting up going to work and coming home ... being unhappy with what I was doing, I thought there has to be more to life. (Sheila)*

*...wanting something more out of my job and wanting, I have a need to learn [so] last year I just really wanted to absorb some new information. (Katie)*

While both these women highlight how university is a means to extend employment opportunity and knowledge domains, some of the other participants regarded attending university in a more embodied sense. Heidi explains how her 'turning point' came with the realisation that there was 'something missing' from her life; university thus seemed to offer the possibility of fulfillment:

*I really wasn't fulfilled and it didn't feel right and I use to think well maybe I should get a hobby maybe I should take up pottery maybe that would fulfill me? Obviously that old life was not right ... I never thought about coming to uni, but obviously the universe had different plans for me and I saw this ad in the paper about [Enabling Program] and I thought: "That is what I am suppose to do!" It was like a light went on...*

For others, this decision to attend was considered as enabling a shift away from the domestic space. Stephanie explains how this is 'something I've wanted to do for a long time' but this ambition became a dream once she 'started the family'. While the immediate catalyst for coming at this stage was a person that she was working with, Stephanie's decision is also linked to her own desire; she later explains how her decision was not initially supported by her husband but that her self-determination refused to let the matter rest '....it was just me being very headstrong and wanting and wanting and wanting'. University then is her 'turn', a personal right that she intends to claim despite resistance. Similarly, Kira describes how she has arrived at a point when she wished to do something for herself, the opportunity to limit the 'shuffle' she does between children, home and work, which she perceives is taking over her life: 'I am just getting sick of shuffling...I have been doing it for 18 years...'.

For the younger childless students, who include recent school leavers, Annie and Mary and those in their early twenties, Rachel and Helen, the decision to attend reflected a different process. For

all of these students the decision to enrol was more indicative of a logical step, the logic largely derived from vocational and career opportunities. Unlike the older students who largely reflected upon a catalyst, which led to a turning point; for the younger students the decision to come to university was more sequential in nature, representative of the next stage in life. For Mary, this decision is rather haphazard as she explains: *'...I didn't know what else to do so I just thought I'd come.'* Whereas Annie perceives arrival at university both as another stage in her life and a powerful message to those who told her that university was beyond her reach. This lack of support only made her more determined to attend:

*...I wasn't as dumb as people thought I was...they [the teachers] seem to have got the impression...I would never achieve anything in life. (Annie)*

Helen and Rachel, both in their early twenties, refer to this decision as necessitated by the need to succeed in their careers. For both of these students, arrival at university was preceded by attendance at TAFE courses; university was regarded as an 'enabler' that would initiate the next stage of life. As Rachel explains TAFE was *'the next step up from school'* and university *'was one step up'* from TAFE. The decision to arrive at university was a logical *'step'* from previous educational or vocational endeavours. However, for the women who were older or who had family commitments, this process was more complicated involving additional facets often pre-empted by a turning point or change in perspective. Once arrived, the university environment offered further challenges and opportunities in relation to persistence and success.

Regardless of the geographic proximity of the campus and its relative familiarity, the realities of university were quite different to expectations held by most of the students. The campus may have had a sense of place in the local community and in some cases, in students' lives before enrolment but the actual reality of attending was perceived as both distant and alien. The initial encounters that students had with the institution, often whilst completing enrolment, proved to be both complicated and intimidating (O'Shea, 2007). The initial interviews indicated how the women struggled to make sense of the learning and expectations they encountered, this difficulty spanning the various age groups:

*Well! I've nearly quit twice [laughs] and it is so confusing and so overwhelming (Catherine)*

*I didn't know where to go, didn't know who to ask, didn't know what to do and people who I did end up asking didn't actually know either so it was frustrating and stressful and really stands out in my mind (Rachel)*

*...it's very daunting and I dunno, I was so scared (Mary)*

Despite encountering difficulties and expressing doubt about an ability to succeed in the initial weeks of semester, when I returned to talk to the women in the second interview, only one had

departed (Vicki). As we reflected on the completed semester, the women explained how their persistence was also characterised by a series of turning points

### **Persisting in this environment: ‘...I know that I have accomplished something...’ (Annie)**

At the end of the first semester, the women reflected upon some of the key turning points they had encountered during the preceding months. Passing and failing assignments or exams factored hugely in the students’ narratives about the semester. At the beginning of the year, fifteen of the students mentioned that their biggest fear was to fail a subject or assignment. This was both related to the financial implications of such failure but also the personal and public repercussions such as diminished self-confidence as well as disappointment from self and others. Arguably, this fear may have been exacerbated by not having the knowledge or cultural capital implicit to this environment or a knowledgeable other outside the university who could reassure them about their scholarly activities. It seemed that this lack was filled by assignments and exams, where good marks were tangible indicators of belongingness to the university community. Annie admits that only after receiving her first set of results does she feel:

*I can do it and I am able to do it...I am doing pretty well and I never really thought of myself doing well for the first year.*

Repeatedly during the academic year, assignment and exam results were characterised as significant turning points in the women’s perceptions of their belongingness at university, as the following quotes indicate:

*...reaching the end of semester and getting exam results and thinking: “Phew that’s okay.” Cos you kind of sweat through... it kind of gives you the confidence.*  
(Heidi)

*I was really worried when I came cos I didn’t think I would be capable of passing, I thought I would fail ... and I am glad I did it cos I did succeed and I have done it and now I am more motivated to keep going cos I know I can do it... (Helen)*

*Over the years you just sort of dwindle as a person and this year has just been a very big boost for my confidence that I can actually go and read a book and I can do an essay ... this year I was happy with 70 I got for the first essay ... that was really yeah, I am not as dumb as I thought I was. (Stephanie)*

Some of the participants in the study had encountered previously negative educational experiences and this had impacted on their identity as learners. For example, Linda who describes how she left school early due to a number of mishaps and ‘personality clashes’:

*I moved a lot and went to nine schools ... I lived in the shadow of my younger brother who was academically brilliant ... the teachers put me under that shadow, my mum did too ... and that’s quite tragic when you’re moving that often and the teachers still say: “Oh we thought you’d be more like your brother” and things like that...I enjoyed school, I didn’t hate it. Until I got to Year 11 and then I*

*just had a clash of personalities with a teacher so I sort of left half way through Year 11. (Linda)*

In these cases, the opportunity offered by university to re-evaluate this learner identity was sometimes unexpected but always welcomed, as Linda explains in her final interview:

*... it has been good I think I have become a bit stronger throughout the year but that is good ... I enjoy stretching my mind so yeah, regardless of whether I continue going or not, I won't view it as a waste ... it has definitely had its advantages. (Linda)*

Similarly, Sheila explains how receiving assignments acted as a 'turning point' in her perceptions about whether she could succeed at university study. Sheila, who is studying Education, explains how her assignment results fundamentally shifted her beliefs about herself as a learner in the university environment:

*...getting all my assignments back and getting high distinctions and that was just never thought possible, I never thought that I could ever do especially in my first year ... so it was a really sort of motivating... I was just shocked to think I had been out of school for so long and could do so well...*

While some participants expressed changed perceptions of themselves as learners, this change was often negotiated in relation to pre-existing university knowledge domains and acceptance of the terms of membership of the university community. In varying degrees, the women had to learn to 'speak' the right language; even if reluctant participants. While seemingly embracing these expectations and requirements, Sue indicates just such reluctance:

*...creative writing ...I loved that it...it was a pleasure to do and ...it's none of the academic writing and all that sort of rubbish... (Sue)*

Clara, Susie and Kira also refer to a gap in knowledge or understanding about the university culture or habitus in the initial stages of study. For both Susie and Kira, this gap is described as a form of 'culture shock', specifically in terms of not understanding the expectations they encounter. Susie describes her initial orientation to university culture as a 'punch in the nose' and then continues by explaining how overcoming this depended upon 'learning to write again and to get my thoughts down on paper the right way.' Similarly, Clara explains how 'it's hard to get your head around it all, just the academic side of it'. Once these, often implicit expectations, are negotiated which is usually signified by receiving 'good' grades on assignments then the women feel more confident to continue moving through this environment, no longer 'imposters' but instead members, albeit tentative, of the university community. The significance of such turning points summed up by the reflections of both Rachel and Kira:

*Once you know that you can achieve something and pass or get a credit you feel a lot more comfortable like: " Oh yeah, I can do this." ...I think back [on] stuff you know, shitting your pants in a way and even up to the first assignment or*



*something. Like how to write it properly and stuff but after that if anyone asked me I would tell them that it gets easier... (Rachel)*

*I always thought I don't have the brains for uni and I still think I don't have the brains for uni but when you look at two subjects I suppose I did pass even though it was only a just pass I still passed... (Kira)*

The previous two quotes are derived from the final interview, where the women were encouraged to reflect upon the year in its entirety and how the experience of attending university had impacted on their current and future selves. A number of the participants described how this experience had been a transformative one, often on a deeply personal level. This leads to the third significant turning point to be explored in this article, namely changes in thinking.

**Changes in thinking: ‘...even if I don't become a teacher ... this has been such a learning experience that I have changed my thoughts, I have changed who I am.’ (Barbara)**

Over the year, changes in thinking were articulated in relation to practical plans such as career goals and also, in more personal terms. This university learning became not only about acquiring knowledge but also provided the means to restore a sense of self or identity. Change occurred at the most fundamental level, even as an attempt to rebuild a life or just the opportunity to tell a different story. This certainly featured in the narratives of the older students many of whom had experienced profound change in the time leading up to and after university enrolment.

One of these changes related to shifts in the power balance in relationships often resulting from exposure to new knowledge domains. Kira explains how her attendance has encouraged her to question her life and her place in it; this development possibly both undermining the ownership of knowledge and challenging the power dynamic within the home:

*I tried to explain to him [husband] I want 'why's' you don't. I want to know why I'm not happy, why did it happen, why do you do this, why do you stay out all the time. I want to know why and you don't, you just want to let it ride. I said a lawyer wants to know why they are not winning a case, a fashion consultant wants to know why that dress didn't fit. I said I am just like them now, going off to uni I want answers I want to know why things happen...you don't and therefore we are sailing in different directions... (Kira)*

For Kira, attending university was one of the catalysts that led to the demise of her marriage. However, despite the emotional repercussions of this and the ensuing difficulties of supporting and housing five children, Kira refused to give up on her academic study. While reducing her load to one subject, Kira explains that both her own sense of determination and the gains in her

confidence have compounded her desire to continue; Kira is simply adamant that she is *'not going to give up'*.

While Kira's relational turning point was quite radical, she was not the only participant to experience quite fundamental shifts in marital relationships. In the second interview, Stephanie describes how after her husband was resistant to the amount of time she was devoting to study, she offered him the following ultimatum *'he can just pack up...if he wants to leave, leave but I am not going to stop from doing it. This is what I want to do'*. Stephanie's relationships with her husband has moved from one characterised by her seeking permission to attend university described in the first interview where she *'harped on my husband for a whole year and he's agreed to it'*; to a new status, where she felt powerful enough to challenge his position in the family:

*...if he doesn't want to support me for the next 5 years, then if he wants to leave, leave but I am not going to stop from doing it, this is what I want to do. We've been together for 16 years and I've always followed him to do what he wants to do and I've never stopped and said: "Hang on I don't really want to do that"...I've done all these things I've gone his way, I wasn't happy. I'm happy doing this and now it's his turn to realise that he can still have his way of things and I can have mine and we can work together...*

Stephanie attributes this transformation to witnessing *'single Mums...coming to uni and...there is no partner, there is no help for them...'*. Such developments also reflect dramatic turning points in relational terms.

For the other married participants, less radical changes were described, often related to the gradual renegotiation of roles within the domestic space, as the older students became more involved in studying, so the invisible work of women became more apparent. Katie's husband might be *'struggling a little bit'* but Katie now realises that:

*the house does not fall down if I don't do everything...and he can be drying clothes in front of the heater at 5 in the morning, not my problem'*.

There is a hint of liberation in this statement, which is echoed by Susie, who admits to not minding that she now has to *'sacrifice on some of the housework'*. By choosing to persist at university, the older married women in this study choose to reclaim their lives and extend the boundaries of domestic space; this shift necessitated sometimes radical renegotiations in relationships with family members.

As the year progressed the emphasis on the personal over the instrumental became more apparent; university attendance was perceived as facilitating growth and personal change. Such

change was noted both in the ways in which individuals defined the self and also how the self was perceived publicly during interactions with others. In the final interview, Catherine outlines how her reasons or objectives for studying have undergone a fundamental shift, no longer is attendance simply about *'becoming a nurse'* but she now recognises that uni *'satisfies or completes something that hasn't been done before'*.

For Catherine, university has been elevated from being a means to an end, enabling the acquisition of a job with the *'security of holiday pay and stuff like that'* described in the first interview, to something defined in a more embodied sense. Similarly, Katie reappraises this year in a very subjective and intrinsic way. In the first interview, Katie describes how university attendance offers the opportunity to *'move up the food chain so as to speak'* but by the last meeting, she explains how attendance is more personally validating: *'I don't think I ever did this for the money I did it for the personal achievement of it'*.

Shifts in perceptions of self were noted by a further four students; some of these were referenced in moderate terms such as Clara who now simply feels *'proud of myself'* and Linda who reveals that she has become *'stronger throughout the year'*. For others these changes were more radical in nature such as Rachel who reflects on university enabling her to become a *'better person'* and Barbara who at the end of this academic year expansively states: *'I feel like a different person and I feel like a better person ...I am happy and that is a really good feeling.'*

Barbara regards university as representing a powerful turning point in her life and along with Heidi refers to attendance in terms of self-empowerment and new identity formation. Both of these women have endured difficult life circumstances including illness and marriage break-ups which have clearly affected their confidence and self-belief; yet despite the difficulty of university study, it is this act that has engendered a turning point in perceptions of self:

*...I found it to be a very big self-discovery...you are learning about yourself what you are capable of, what you can actually do, that you can get through it, that all the hard times are worth it because you just feel proud of yourself for doing it really.... (Barbara)*

Barbara thus perceives university as not just facilitating her own self-learning and discovery but also, negotiating a new way of thinking about the self. Equally, Heidi reflects how university is *'very empowering'* as it provides the space for her to voice *'opinions and instead of people looking at me...like you are a bit of a "know it all" they like it and encourage it...'*. The impact of university thus extends beyond the lecture theatre and the campus boundaries, effecting and negotiating disparate elements in students' lives.

## Discussion: Transitions, turning points and narrative

This article set out both to explore how a group of first in family, female students narrated their first year at university and also, highlight the merits of using narrative inquiry as a means to explore the subjective experience of university attendance. The following discussion will address these two areas in more detail and suggest some conclusions that can be drawn from this study.

The changes outlined by the women undoubtedly fulfill the definition of turning points as outlined by Ronka et al (2003) who suggest the transition needs to be both 'personally significant' and have some repercussions for an 'individual's developmental trajectory' or at least, evoke new meanings in life (p.204). The previous data sections highlight how such adjustments to developmental trajectories were articulated in relation to vocational goals, familial relationships, beliefs about self and renegotiations around identity. Often these changes emerged over time and the repetitive nature of the interviews as well as the opportunity to explore issues in-depth arguably facilitated the explication of these revisions. The narratives that the women told me were situated within a past-present relationship as they narrated the past invariably this was further contextualised by who they were in the present. There existed a duality within the stories that was demarcated by arrival at university; what existed before was juxtaposed by what had occurred in this environment. For the majority of participants, particularly the older women, this move to university was represented as a 'turning point' in their life trajectory. As Elder (1998) identifies:

Transition experiences represent a strategic approach to the possibilities of studying lives in motion. Transitions make up life trajectories, and they provide clues to developmental change. (p.7)

Turning points can have positive or negative outcomes, positive turning points are related to achievement of goals whilst negative turning points are often those negotiated by loss. Clausen (1995) highlights four distinct types of turning points which include (1) adjustments to established roles, (2) revisions in life view or perspectives, (3) changes to goals or personal objectives and (4) changes to self perspective. In varying degrees, the changes outlined in this article can be related to each of these categories.

In terms of established roles, while the older women explained how their domestic roles had been redefined over the course of this initial year of study, this did not always mean a renegotiation in domestic responsibility in the household but rather that the domestic labouring role became more explicit. This change resulted in husbands, partners and children becoming

more aware of the complexities of running a household and some of the women being more adamant about the need to share this responsibility. In this way, attending university can be considered as 'emancipatory' experience (Merrill, 1999), as it offers the space to redefine a sense of self and possibly renegotiate relationships with others. Similar to Leathwood and O'Connell's (2003) participants, some of the students in this study indicated how they had experienced being under-valued or even negated within the social world and that university offered 'a form of defense against any future assaults of this kind' (p.605).

Over the course of the year, the women also expressed change in relation to their perspectives on life and self. Both Barbara and Catherine indicate in an evocative way just how university has emerged as something quite different to what was anticipated, having entered university to explicitly fulfill vocational and financial ambitions, these two students now acknowledge attendance in more emotional and experiential terms. University now fills a 'void' in life. Whereas for Catherine and Barbara this attitude emerged over the year, Heidi recalls always thinking how '*...something is missing am I suppose to be taking up pottery or ceramics or knitting or something...*'. By the final interview, Heidi realises that university '*is where I am suppose to be, this is the second half of my life*'; university offers the possibility to fulfill something that has been missing from life and even provided the means to legitimate the self within wider social spheres. Indeed, for Heidi this space is also a means for her to exhibit an intellectualism without 'being ridiculed as odd' (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander & Grinstead, 2008, p174).

While the opportunity to come to university was regarded in positive terms by most, the women all admitted that the reality of arrival was regarded as fraught with difficulty and risk. One of the major risks articulated was in relation to 'failing'; all seventeen participants mentioned this as being their main fear in the first interview. UK research has indicated that for students from working class or low socio-economic status, attending university is infused with risk (Brine & Waller, 2004; Reay, 1998). These risks include academic failure, economic and material risks as well as risk to relationships and class affiliations. Reay (1998) argues that for working-class women higher education is 'both hazardous and uncertain as there are potential losses as well as gains...' (p.12) This was certainly reflected in the stories of the older women in my study; as they struggled to not only meet the challenge of study but also, the necessity of meeting domestic and family obligations. Added to this, was the need for the women to acquire the cultural capital and knowledge that was valued in the institution. It was not that these women did not have 'cultural capital' but rather that this was in the wrong 'currency' (Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001, p870). Acquiring and manifesting the requisite skills, often implicitly expected within the institution, was just another challenge they had to overcome.

However, it is necessary to realize that such disjuncture is not necessarily negative or problematic. Instead, the increasing fluidity of life and the resulting transitions can provide the opportunity for new learning and dispositions. Authors such as Ingram, Field & Gallacher (2009) and Ecclestone (2009) have identified how in adult education literature there is a tendency to ‘...paint transitions as difficult, troubling even unpleasant. The dominant view is that people must set out to remedy deficits, such as poor literacy skills, weak employability or a lack of cultural capital’ (Ingram et al, 2009, p4). Instead transitions can actually afford learning opportunities a sentiment echoed by Brookfield (1991) who regards the challenge and risk associated with this process as actually increasing ‘...the significance these episodes hold for students so that these episodes become transformative turning points leading to changes in students’ self-concepts’ (p49). Overall, overcoming difficulties were regarded as key turning points for the women in this study as such incidences offered proof of ability and provided a sense of accomplishment in succeeding in activities previously regarded as beyond ability. For example, passing an assignment was regarded as not only indicating belongingness but also redefined learner identities.

By reflecting upon this first year as a series of turning points, the intent is to move away from portraying first-in-family students or those for whom attendance at university is not the norm, as hapless victims or powerless in the higher education environment. Such categorisations fail to recognise the ability of universities to provide what Quinn (2005) terms as ‘*liminal space*’ that enables individuals to dream new possibilities and share these with others. Exploring these narratives through the lens of ‘turning points’ enables us to perceive the complexities of this experience for those involved. Cappeliez et al (2008) have indicated that for women, turning points are generally negotiated in relation to health and family arenas whilst work predominates for males. This conclusion leading the authors to assert that ‘gendered social roles play a key structuring role in the construction of one’s life story and sense of identity’ (p.61). However, for the women in this study, the transition to university unfolded a range of new perspectives and demands that ruptured these gendered roles and exposed the contested nature of such domains. For these women, the turning points they experienced focussed very much on the ‘self’ leading to re-evaluations on both public and private levels.

Alway (1995) highlights how resistance is not limited to acts of political rebellion or activism in the public arena but can be recognized in the ways in which women reclaim their selves and enact transformation on a micro level. University study was perceived both as filling an empty space in an experiential or embodied sense as well as providing a space, sometimes this space

was highly political in nature. Space can be a contested issue for women but for some of the informants, university provided a location for a collective space, which had the possibility for female dominated conversation, both strategic and emotional in nature. In a more radical sense, the space offered by university provided the means for growth and change and for some of the older students a sense of 'empowerment' and control in their personal lives. When the narratives of these women are examined in terms of 'turning points' the impact of this decision on their lives and the significance of this on so many levels becomes obvious. Constructing these autobiographical accounts also enabled the participants the means to justify and explain their departure from expected and established patterns of behaviour.

Narrative inquiry assisted in foregrounding the character and profound depth of these changes. For the women in this study, the act of narration was in itself a learning experience. The opportunity to reflect upon the nature of this experience and externalise this via narratives provided a means to contextualise this learning and enriched understandings of self and others. Indeed, providing structured opportunities for students to explore this type of personal narrative in the lecture theatre or classroom undoubtedly can assist in this transition process and also, reveal the often implicit workings of the higher education environment. Houston, Lebeau and Watkins (2009) suggest that while transition has become increasingly 'blurred' and 'fuzzy' (p147) the phases of transition for university students can still be reduced to three stages being 'that of becoming a student, moving from student to graduate and from graduate to employer' (p147). However, such linearity may fail to recognise the complexity of this process and also, the embodied nature of female transitional experiences as narrated by the participants in this study. Instead, a realistic representation of what transition to university entails can only be derived from the students themselves. For the women in this study, the various turning points encountered in their transition to university and the act of narrating these has clearly provided the means to revision their future not only vocationally but also, in terms of social roles and identity.

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Table (2): Interview timing and themes

<b>Interview</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>	<b>Themes</b>
1	End of Feb – Mid- March	<i>Personal background Reasons for arrival Initial experience and reactions to university</i>
2	Mid- May – End of May	<i>Review of feelings about study Developments in reactions to uni life Suggestions for help and assistance Family support / Friendships</i>
3	Mid- August – Beginning September	<i>Progress in transition Changes in perceptions about university Changes in feelings/emotions Expectations for second semester Highs and Lows</i>
4	November / December	<i>Reflections on the year as a whole Observations about the interview process</i>

Table (2): Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001 – 2003)

<b>% of pop.</b>	<b>University attendance rates</b>	<b>Individuals with university degree</b>	<b>Completed H. School</b>
Region	2%	6%	27%
State	4%	11%	38%
Nationally	4%	10%	65%

Table (1): Details of Participants

<i>Name</i>	<i>Program of Study</i>	<i>Brief Background</i>
<b>Annie (18 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of (Early Childhood) Teaching Full-time	<i>Annie lives at home with her parents and younger brother, Annie completed her High School Certificate (HSC) which provided the necessary UAI for entry. Annie also qualified for additional points awarded to entrants residing in the local catchment area.</i>
<b>Barbara (33 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts Full-time	<i>Barbara is a single parent living with a two-year-old son; Barbara completed her HSC and a TAFE diploma, which provided credit for entry to university.</i>
<b>Catherine (44 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Nursing Full-time	<i>Catherine is a single parent with a teenage son. Catherine sat the STAT test which qualified her for university entry.</i>
<b>Clara (23 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of (Early Childhood) Teaching Full-time	<i>Clara is a single parent who lives with her five year old daughter; Clara left school in Year 11 but completed an Enabling program which provided the necessary UAI for admission.</i>
<b>Heidi (47 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Social Science Part-time	<i>Heidi lives alone but has three grown up sons; Heidi completed an Enabling course that enabled her to gain entry to this program.</i>
<b>Helen (22 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Management Part-time	<i>Helen lives with her boyfriend and has no children. She did not sit for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) and entered university after gaining credit via a TAFE course.</i>
<b>Jane (32 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Education (High School) Full-time	<i>Jane lives with her husband and three children (aged 2, 4 &amp; 8). Jane did not sit her HSC but did complete an Enabling program which provided the UAI for admission.</i>
<b>Katie (33 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Oral Health Full-time	<i>Katie lives with her husband and two children (aged 6 &amp; 9); Katie completed her HSC but entered university on the basis of her STAT test result.</i>
<b>Kira (38 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Psychology Full-time*	<i>At the beginning of the study, Kira lived with her husband and five children (aged 6, 8, 14, 15 &amp; 18); Kira had completed a TAFE qualification, which gave her admission to university.</i>
<b>Linda (32 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts Full-time	<i>Linda is a single parent who lives with her two children (aged 9 &amp; 10). Linda left school after Year 11 but completed an Enabling program which formed the basis for university admission.</i>
<b>Mary (18 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts Full-time	<i>Mary lives at home with her parents and younger sister. Mary completed the HSC and also qualified for additional points awarded to students living in the region.</i>
<b>Rachel (22 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Social Science Part-time	<i>Rachel lives at home with her parents and has no children. Rachel completed her HSC but entered university with credit from a TAFE qualification.</i>
<b>Sheila (31 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts Full-time*	<i>Sheila lives with her husband and two children (aged 5 &amp; 7); Sheila completed a STAT test, which formed the basis for her entry to university.</i>
<b>Stephanie (34 yrs)</b>	Enabling Program Part-time	<i>Stephanie lives with husband and three of her four children (aged 8, 9, 13 &amp; 18). Stephanie is currently studying an Enabling course and hopes to gain entry to an undergraduate program in Education (Primary).</i>
<b>Sue (39 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts Full-time	<i>Sue lives with her husband and two children (8 &amp; 10). Sue did not complete her HSC but gained entry to university after passing the STAT test.</i>
<b>Susie (38 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Social Science Full-time	<i>Susie lives with her husband and two children (aged 3 &amp; 6). Susie completed an Enabling course, which enabled admission to university.</i>
<b>Vicki (45 yrs)</b>	Bachelor of Nursing Full-time*	<i>Vicki lives with her husband and three daughters (aged 16, 19 &amp; 22); Vicki had completed the HSC and also an Enabling Program which provided the basis for entry.</i>

*\*Some of the students started the year in full-time mode but either dropped a subject (Sheila) or a number of subjects (Kira and Vicki) as the semester or year proceeded*