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### **'Don't let anyone bring me down again': applying 'possible selves' to understanding persistence of mature-age first-in-family students**

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### **Keywords**

first-in-family, mature-age, persistence, understanding, selves', 'possible, applying, again':, down, students, me, 'don't, bring, anyone, let

### **Disciplines**

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## **"Don't let anyone bring me down again": Applying 'possible selves' to understanding persistence of mature-age first-in-family students**

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### **Abstract**

This article applies the framework of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) to the motivation and persistence behaviours of one group of university students. We draw on possible selves to consider how particular goal-focused actions and life experiences may significantly shape movements towards imagined futures. Utilising a narrative approach from longitudinal data, this article considers the ways in which possible selves were articulated by five first-in-family students, all of whom were mature-aged women returning to formal learning. A series of vignettes enabled us to explore how students themselves conceived of this movement into university, and how hoped-for selves were considered and enacted (or not). The ways in which societal expectations and expected life trajectories impact (re)conceptualisation of 'selves' is discussed, particularly when individuals choose an unexpected or non-normative life course.

### **Key Words**

First-in-family, higher education, motivation, persistence, possible selves, vignettes

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## Introduction

Globally, significant numbers of students engaging in higher education (HE) are first in their families to do so. However, after commencing, these students are more likely to consider leaving than their second or third-generation counterparts (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). First-in-family (FiF) students are defined as the first in their immediate family (parents, main caregivers, siblings, life partners) to attend university (O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2017). These students face a number of challenges, often falling into multiple equity categories that may engender structural and educational disadvantage (Nichols & Stahl, 2019; O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2017). In the absence of familial biographies of university experience, venturing into HE can be complex and fraught (O'Shea, 2016), simultaneously creating radical shifts in individual trajectories (Gofen, 2009). For FiF in particular, earlier repertoires of imagined selves are less likely to be 'predicated on requiring a degree' (Harrison, 2018, p. 12). Hence, envisioning oneself as a graduate is often breaking new ground in terms of what is conceived as probable, or even possible.

This article explores how students themselves conceived of their journey into and through university, considering the effect of shifting goals and motivations. Conceptions of possible selves as incentives to post-graduation goals and disrupters of current life trajectories are also explored. We draw upon Erikson's perspective which considers the agentic and fluid nature of these conceptions, which can be powerful in their enactment:

Possible selves are conceptions of our selves in the future, including, at least to some degree, an experience of being an agent in a future situation. Possible selves get vital parts of their meaning in interplay with the self-concept, which they in turn moderate, as well as from their social and cultural context. (2007, p. 356)

The next section considers what possible selves offers to our understandings of HE participation and insights that this may provide for students who are first in their families at university.

## Literature Review

### *Possible Selves Framing*

Possible selves theory has its roots in social psychology (Markus & Nurius, 1986), but is gaining traction in educational contexts as a goal-focused theory, framing understandings of motivation 'in terms of futures to achieve or avoid' (Erikson, 2019, p. 29). Understanding student motivation encompasses a broad set of behaviours and the need for strict theoretical boundaries. Possible selves theory provides such boundaries through the 'theoretical link between motivation and self-concept [and] the workings of the individual, idiosyncratic meaning given to students' goals' (Erikson, 2019, p. 28). Erikson describes the interplay of four aspects of possible selves that influence motivation to attain goals and imagined end-states. These include emotional aspects (positive and negative), perceptions of control, the probability of attaining the desired self and salience with existing selves. Thus, persistence behaviours towards educational goals are framed through 'future-oriented, identity-relevant, goal-directed thinking' about the selves students would like to become, could become, or fear

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becoming ‘and the salience of that thinking for regulating behaviour to reach a future state’ (Hamman, Gosselin, Romano & Bunuan, 2010, p. 1349). Within this framing, the conceptions FiF students have of future selves are not fantasies or dreams, but have an important motivational effect, giving meaning to actions taken in the present.

The diverse and dynamic nature of future selves is drawn from an array of possible selves available to an individual, through ideas, beliefs and images from salient and social experiences, as well as goals, hopes, and fears (Markus & Nurius, 1986). However, experience varies across social groups and backgrounds, and people will imagine differently ‘what selves are possible...desirable, and...probable’ (Harrison, 2018, p. 5). Imagining one’s potential may even present as disrupting societal norms, particularly if future selves are not ‘well anchored in social reality’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 955). Markus and Nurius argue further that the process of inventing and constructing the ‘nature of the self’ is simultaneously in tension with the extent to which ‘the self is socially determined and constrained’ (1986, p. 954). Equally, motivation for actions may be driven by what *not* to be(come) (e.g “me *not* as a dropout/receptionist/labourer”), referred to as ‘undesired selves’ (Knox, 2006, p. 72).

Possible selves has broad relevance in HE research, including unpacking persistence and motivation amongst diverse students. The framework was applied retrospectively by Harrison and Waller (2018) to effectively critique the effect of ‘aspirational’ discourse in UK outreach programs dealing with young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Bennett and Male (2017) used it to frame the design and delivery of workshops for engineering students to enable them to articulate aspects of their futures in the field. Persistence through HE requires individual agency, motivation and decision making (O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018), where clear foresight of future selves ‘may also exert motivational influence to persevere, and provide more clarity on how [students] may achieve goals and avoid undesirable outcomes’ (Hamman, et al., 2010, p. 1351).

### ***Possible Selves and FiF Learners***

For FiF students, being at university sits beyond familial biographies; thus access to intergenerational ‘inheritance codes’ is limited or ill-defined (Ball, et al., 2002, p. 57). When conceptions of a ‘university-self’ are not well-anchored in everyday social influences, such self-knowledge is likely to be ‘vulnerable and responsive to changes in the environment’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 956). Thus, FiF ‘university-selves’ may be somewhat fragile or unstable, prone to change or redefinition. Equally, FiF students may have clear conceptions of what they *do not* want to become, from triggered memories of familial, biographical or past realms of experience (Knox, 2006).

The realities of FiF students often sit at complex intersections of multiple equity categories<sup>2</sup> which indicate systemic social and educational inequities (Delahunty & O’Shea,

<sup>2</sup> Six identified equity groups in Australia: students with disability; low-socioeconomic status; rural/isolated areas, non-English-speaking background, women in non-traditional study areas; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Equity in education is a measure of achievement, fairness, and opportunity

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2019; O’Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2017; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Equity categories in HE can be problematic in the tendency to define students in singular terms, rather than recognising the multiple and constraining factors that impact upon educational and professional trajectories (Davis & Taylor, 2019). In our research (spanning 2014-2019) FiF students self-selected relevant demographic categories, revealing often complex and multiple indicators of educational inequities. In findings already reported, we deliberately drew upon a range of theoretical lenses to open up the data to different readings and avoid taken-for-granted assumptions or mono-dimensional perspectives (see Delahunty & O’Shea, 2019; O’Shea & Delahunty, 2018). Likewise, possible selves adds another layer to our understandings of how diverse FiF participants, with ideas and desires for their future, set about attaining their imagined selves. As Harrison (2018) states, this becomes apparent through forming a ‘future tense for the self-concept’, when:

possible selves represent...our current perceptions about where our lives might lead through the construction of multiple representations of ourselves as we might be days, months or years hence. (p. 4)

In order to gain more nuanced understandings of FiF persistence, this article focuses on how students articulated their hoped-for selves, which were often negotiated in relation to societal and structural factors.

## Data and Methods

This article presents data drawn from three broad, related studies. The first study (2014) explored FiF students and the influence of family on persistence and retention in HE (O’Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2015); the second (2017-2019) explored persistence of FiF students retrospectively, whilst the third (2019) investigated how employment or other options after graduation are negotiated by this cohort. Table 1 outlines the data collected for each study:

Table 1: Summary of longitudinal data collected 2014-2019.

Study	Interviews	Surveys
Study 1 (2014)	102	173 (FiF students) 40 (FiF family members)
Study 2 (2017-2019)	72	436 (FiF students)
Study 3 (2019)	18	12 (FiF students from Study 2) 225 (Alumni)

Given the close proximity of the studies, a small number of students elected to participate across each of the projects, providing an in-depth longitudinal portrayal of their undergraduate journey. This article focuses on interview data collected from five FiF participants from different Australian universities, all women in the 31-40 age range. Four were interviewed twice and one was interviewed three times. The decision to focus on this sub-group was deliberate, as the difficulties of managing university and student identity are noted for mature women (Gouthro, 2005; O’Shea, 2015; Stone & O’Shea, 2013) as is gaining employment post-graduation (Pitman, Roberts, Bennett & Richardson, 2017). Two participants had three children each: one was a single mother, another was partnered.

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Collectively, this group spanned a range of discipline areas and individual circumstances were often linked to educational inequities. Table 2 provides an overview of the participants.

Table 2: Demographic information, 2014-2019.

Pseudonym, age (2019)	Interviews (n=11)	University code	UG Degree	2017 Stage of study	2019 Employment / study situation	Individual circumstances
Elle, 38	2014 2017 2019	Institution4 (regional NSW)	B.Arts (Indigenous studies)	Final year Part-time work	Graduated (2017) Employed (indirectly related to field)	Single mother, 3 children, low- SES
Danielle, 34	2017 2019	Institution1 (city WA)	B.Health Science (Health Promotion)	3 <sup>rd</sup> year (final) Part-time work	Graduated (mid- 2017) Employed (unrelated to degree). 2019 Masters (newly- enrolled)	Low SES, rural/isolated background
Olivia, 38	2017 2019	Institution6 (regional QLD)	B.Social Science	4 <sup>th</sup> year Part-time work	Graduated (2017). 2019 final year of Masters	Low-SES
Evelyn, 40	2017 2019	Institution5 (regional VIC)	B.Commerce (Honours)	4 <sup>th</sup> year Part-time work	Graduated (2018) Employed (unrelated to degree)	Disability
Aleisha, 40	2017 2019	Institution8 (regional NSW)	B.Teaching (Secondary Science) Honours	2 <sup>nd</sup> year	UG in progress, expected completion 2020. Studying part- time Employed ('loosely' degree-related)	3 children, partnered

Participants were recruited by email and interviews were conducted by the authors in accordance with approvals granted by the institution's ethics committee.

### ***Process for Coding and Analysis***

Interviews (n=11) were transcribed with all participants invited to review the transcript prior to analysis. Once approved, de-identified transcripts were imported into NVivo12 for analysis. Coding involved each author independently scrutinizing the interviews to gain familiarity with individual journeys, followed by discussion of particular nuances. Questions were designed to elicit the ways in which students navigated the HE landscape and participants repeatedly referred to 'persistence' as a personal quality assisting them in their HE journey, often expounding upon this during the interview. At this point possible selves was considered a valuable framework for examining the persistence of these women, despite the 'odds' and various difficulties described. Questions guiding the analysis were: (1) how did students narrate their motivation to persist, (2) how did students reflect upon their future or possible selves? Each interview was broadly coded for references to selves (past, now, future, selves-to-be-avoided). Additionally, when the women reflected on their decisions to return to formal learning, this action was often described as being triggered by a particular event or

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'catalyst'. These 'catalysts' emerged as an important theme which informed the types of possible selves imagined.

The study adopted a narrative analysis approach as distinct from an 'analysis of narratives' (Polkinghorne, 1995). As data are not necessarily in storied form, the outcome is generally a story that has been 'configured' by the researcher to give unity and meaning to the data, requiring the researcher

to develop or discover a plot that displays the linkage among the data elements as parts of an unfolding temporal development culminating in denouement. (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15)

The researcher commences the process with a question in mind such as, *How did this come about?*, then locates the relevant information, as the basis for a story, bound within a particular temporal period. The purpose is to discover data 'that will reveal uniqueness of the individual case' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15) and provide a sense of its complexities and idiosyncrasies.

### ***Presentation of the Findings***

This article focuses predominantly on exploring how persistence behaviours can be explained through conceptions of future selves, and the motivation to attain or avoid particular end-states. Additionally, changes and flux in conceptions were contemplated to consider how learners readjusted their goals and reconceptualised possible selves. Importantly, these conceptions are neither discrete nor inseparable aspects of possible selves, as each is intertwined with life's complexities, realities and expectations (Oyserman, Destin & Novin, 2015). Acknowledging this interconnectedness together with the compounding effects of belonging to multiple equity groups, we present the findings as vignettes to ensure that the concept of possible selves is presented in an embedded fashion rather than stripped of context or setting. The vignettes were extracted from longer stories as similar themes across them became apparent, and underlying themes came into view. We acknowledge our own subjectivities as both authors undertook university studies as mature learners juggling young families, jobs and study. The experiences detailed by these women bear some similarity to our own, so to minimise preconceptions, we engaged in an iterative cycle of memo writing and reflective notes during analysis (Rolls & Relf, 2006), referred to during the writing process.

### **Findings as Vignettes**

The vignettes present a palette of possible selves conceived by each participant, bounded within a period of time. As a 'slice of life' (Thomson, 2017), each vignette is framed around a number of foci with extensive reference to participant quotes, preserving authenticity and individual subjectivities. Each includes: a brief biography, 'catalysts' triggering university study, re-visioning the future, readjusting hoped-for selves, and summing-up. These stories are replete with student voices and intended to provoke a response, provide examples, and stimulate the reader to reflect upon the experience of these women (Thomson, 2017), as well as contribute to a collective of stories of mature-aged learners negotiating HE (O'Shea, 2015;



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O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2017; Stone & O'Shea, 2011, among others). Attention to aspects of individual agency, prompted by events and happenings, provided insight into how these participants enacted persistence whilst working towards educational and career goals. Such achievement is discernible longitudinally across the 3-5 years of data collection these women participated in, providing rich narrative detail to this unfolding.

### *Elle*

Elle came from a 'lower income area' where 'people automatically perceive you as the bottom end of society...[where] you're not going to amount to much'. University was 'never, ever' talked about, and 'career' was never part of her vocabulary. Elle is the fifth of six children; her mother worked as a cleaner, her father in the steel-manufacturing industry. She started skipping high school as she 'didn't have any motivation for it'. Eventually she attended an alternative education program, leaving after Year 10<sup>3</sup> (aged 16) to work as 'a check-out chick'<sup>4</sup>, before moving into retail (fast-food, greengrocer, delicatessen). Prior-to-university Elle's conceptions of future selves conformed to societal expectations and those around her, such as working casually in retail or service roles.

For Elle, contemplating university study came through a personal crisis of 'getting divorced'. She perceived university as a way to 'become self-sufficient': to 'earn my own way and not rely on a man ever again'. Elle's determination was instrumental in helping her enact a new self. Her resolve inspired the title of this paper: 'Don't let anyone bring me down again'. By consciously striving to avoid recreating a past self of dependence, she forged a new life trajectory. This trajectory took the form of a future reconceptualised as a university graduate and role model, motivated by wanting to 'do better for myself, really' and for her three young children:

I deserved better than being a single mum...growing up in housing commissions<sup>5</sup> and seeing how some kids can go. So, I thought if I set the path for my kids then, fingers crossed, they'll be able to go to uni and get a good job.

Based on earlier life experiences, Elle was motivated by a career helping young people. Her aim became doing something 'that I love doing...and get[ting] paid for it'. She began an Arts degree in 2012, learning 'amazing stuff' in Indigenous Studies. Even after failing 'a couple of subjects', she never thought of giving up, and knew 'what I want, where I want to be, seeing that in the future'. A stint of voluntary youth work at her local neighbourhood centre resulted in 'the haze...slowly going away' and she knew 'what I want to do...something that I found a passion for'.

By 2019, Elle had graduated (late-2017), was working full-time as a caseworker with out-of-homecare youth transitioning to independence. This role motivated her to consider

<sup>3</sup> Year 10 marks the end of [compulsory schooling in Australia](#)

<sup>4</sup> 'check-out chick': female employee working on a supermarket checkout, usually casual employment

<sup>5</sup> Housing Commission: low-cost government public housing

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Masters study as a future possibility, to 'go back and do research involving young people in lower income areas'. She recognised that her job 'is only the start of my career'.

Elle's navigation through university was far from smooth sailing. Her desire to be financially self-sufficient was punctuated by periods of heavy reliance on government welfare and family and several moves back to her parents' small home. Ultimately she 'couldn't afford' to attend her own graduation. The realisation of her future self was not a clear-cut process and did not 'happen automatically', but she was proud of her 'perseverance...not giving up',

just coming from the lower income area and overcoming all the boundaries that are kind of set for you...I like breaking those barriers...that society sets for us.

### *Danielle*

Danielle's parents were divorced when she was a baby. She had one older brother and two younger half-siblings. They moved from the city to a 'really small country town' when she was 12. Danielle's mother was 'a house cleaner...my whole life'. She never considered her family 'poor, because I don't ever feel like we were', but 'things were tight for a very long time'. She had learnt to budget as 'a kid' always knowing that 'extracurricular' things were just 'not feasible'. Danielle finished school, worked locally and studied at TAFE<sup>6</sup> reflecting a prior-to-university future that conformed to expectations and opportunities within her regional community.

After Danielle completed various TAFE qualifications and a traineeship at the town's only 'local real estate agency', she started an administration job. She later moved to the city to pursue 'different admin reception roles' and a year later, moved to another city for 'a change'. This move proved serendipitous, as it highlighted a self she did *not* want:

I figured out that I absolutely hated administration and didn't want to do that anymore. So I decided to pack it all up and go to uni.

Danielle enrolled in a health promotion degree motivated by her own experience of 'health and weight struggles', although her self-concept was fed by 'negative self-talk' of not being 'smart enough' for university. While she never considered quitting, it was tough and her 'mum's hugs' were 'pretty much the only thing that got me through', and her conviction that this was '125% exactly what I want to do with the rest of my life'. In her final semester, she reflected on study as 'the thing that's motivated me'; without it she 'would have died inside'. Prior to university her work felt 'meaningless and pointless and monotonous and boring', but now she was enacting a future-self focused on helping others.

Danielle had graduated by 2019, but few jobs in health promotion resulted in her taking short-term contract roles with a mental health organisation. This work 'wasn't something that I got out of bed every morning and went, "I'm so excited about the day"'.

<sup>6</sup> TAFE: Technical and Further Education, predominantly vocational training

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However, it highlighted a broader possibility 'more focused on changing systems and society and...the whole human rights aspect of health'. She enrolled in Masters study, motivated by new, previously unimagined, possibilities:

I never thought [this is what I'd be doing]...well, 10 years ago, I didn't think I was anywhere near competent enough to do university or anything like that...clearly, I was very wrong.

Danielle's journey through university was far from easy, challenged by a range of factors including negative self-talk, 'mental breakdowns', being far from family, and working late-night and weekend jobs to supplement welfare benefits. Despite this, university was a transformative experience: especially as 'quite [an] introverted' person,

I consciously pushed myself to do more...Before I came to uni...you could even see me as a scared mouse hiding away somewhere. And now I'm not that anymore so, you know, I've pushed myself into situations and experiences that I would never have done before.

### *Olivia*

Olivia grew up in the outer suburbs of a major city, but then moved to a different state. Her father came to Australia under a humanitarian visa, doing 'hard manual labour'; her mother, a 'stay-at-home' mum, did the business bookwork. Neither parent liked school and left at '14 and 15'. Since finishing school Olivia did 'lots of bits and bobs...studied at a photography school for a while and...worked as a nanny [laughing]'. She grew up where everyone was 'the same kind of people as us' and she 'never really had any friends whose mums worked or...who just did different stuff', so she had 'no idea about what the opportunities were or even *what* there was'. She was first in her family to complete secondary school, but ruled out university as 'everyone' reckoned 'you have to be a lot smarter'.

After leaving school Olivia worked in office management but she 'wasn't feeling very fulfilled'. After becoming concerned about the treatment of asylum seekers and thinking 'this is cracked<sup>7</sup>', she realised to make change 'you need knowledge'. This sparked her HE journey, spurred on by the conflicting values of her workplace:

I was working in an industry and for a company that didn't align with my views and I began to feel really uncomfortable about...somebody...making money off something that I thought was really horrible and so I just wanted some power...to make some change.

When Olivia began a social sciences degree she, too, was uncertain if she was 'smart enough to even attempt uni'. This perception gradually transformed as she 'love[d] learning' and needed 'to know about everything'. Olivia 'never seriously' considered quitting, but had 'dropped a subject' to accommodate working 'two or three jobs'. Ultimately, she recognised

<sup>7</sup> Colloquial term meaning 'senseless'

<sup>8</sup> i.e. certifying temporary asylum seeker accommodation

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that university helped her develop 'really good leadership skills...and it really surprised me just how empowering it feels to know stuff'.

Towards the end of her undergraduate degree Olivia described feeling 'really sad to be coming to the end...there's so much more I want to learn' and decided to enrol in a Masters degree. As a mature-age postgraduate she described feeling 'on the backfoot' in terms of job prospects, acknowledging that over time 'the job market has decreased a bit in the areas that I've been looking in'. As a result, her future desires had shifted to consider any 'job I could see myself doing...at the end of the year'.

Barriers affecting Olivia's experience were mainly bureaucratic: the 'enrolment process...not understanding what I was doing...a lot of jargon...everything so foreign'. Negotiating subject choices was 'a minefield...I'll just fumble my way through'. While she never had a firm career goal, she did determine to 'put in every single ounce of effort...to pass' and 'far exceeded' her personal expectations. She ultimately reflected how:

My brain is so stimulated, I'm always so excited...I feel really fulfilled and really happy...My life was a bit ho-hum and then as soon as I started, everything was so exciting and stimulating.

### *Evelyn*

Evelyn was raised in 'a very loving family' in a regional area and is the eldest of four. She described her family as not 'com[ing] from money', and their circumstances, 'humble'. Her parents 'struggled and stressed' having 'to work hard to earn what we had'. Her father had no formal qualifications but had 'never been out of work', and her mother did nurses' training<sup>9</sup>. While Evelyn does not consider that the family lacked for material things, she acknowledged that everyone was 'grateful' for what they had: 'we don't waste food, we fix our clothes, we look after our things'. Evelyn 'always wanted to do well' at school, but an earlier desire to pursue law was curtailed by the effects of school bullying – an experience which contributed to not 'really get[ting] anywhere with my studies', which forestalled any pursuit of 'the university thing'.

Evelyn worked in administrative roles, and progressed rapidly from receptionist to executive assistant. She decided that she wanted a change, 'to strike out' on her own, 'to find myself'. The catalyst came as a thought, 'maybe I want to do what my boss does. I was in my early 30s and thought "I might go to university now"'. Evelyn's reconceptualised future-self seemed to emerge from a fundamental recognition that she was capable of more.

In the second interview, Evelyn was halfway through her honours year, confessing that several times she had 'absolutely' considered quitting. What helped her persist was the encouragement of university mentors and friends, her own (sometimes-waning) motivation, 'just the thought' of disappointing her parents, as well as thinking 'what a waste...so close to graduation'. Her possible selves were 'fluid': she had multiple goals and avoided being 'only

<sup>9</sup> Hospital-based training

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focused on one goal...[with] blinkers on' as she was aware that other things could 'come in and throw me off that goal'.

After graduating Evelyn secured an administrative role in a local mental health clinic, happy to 'go back to my previous life...get my footing back in the real world'. By 2019 she had moved to another state and was working in a consulting firm as executive and project assistant. She was not using her degree but would 'very much like to use the finance side' of it. University study gave her 'a deeper understanding of how things operate' and she feels affirmed as a graduate through a lot of 'compliments about my abilities'.

Evelyn's experience also was not without challenges. She struggled financially, sometimes (reluctantly) calling on friends and family, as well as coping with medical issues. However, she reflected positively on her university experience in terms of 'uncomfortableness' or 'challenge' characterizing her journey as a process of unlearning in order to relearn:

[university] didn't just teach me; it shaped me and it nurtured me and it gave me friends and colleagues and a mentor...and the opportunity to develop some amazing life skills...It's been a place of great learning, self-reflection...and has made me a very strong leader.

### *Aleisha*

Aleisha is the elder of two and lived all her life in a regional town. Both parents 'hated school' and left before Year 10; her mother was a 'stay-at-home mum' and her father, an electrician. Aleisha described their circumstances as 'low-end of middle-class'. She attended a 'low-SES public school' and by Year 12 she'd met her future husband, and after school she drifted into retail and banking work, 'because that's what you do'. Aleisha 'always knew' she wanted to be a science teacher, 'from my first Year 7 science class', but neither she nor her parents knew how to 'get there' as they didn't understand 'the system'.

Aleisha deferred a university offer and 'then we had kids and it kind of got pushed to the wayside'. After ten years in banking and two children, Aleisha was made redundant and decided to have a third child. These circumstances proved opportune for re-igniting her dream: 'My husband said, "Why don't you go and do what you want to do? We can afford to live on my wage"'. She subsequently completed an enabling program<sup>10</sup> and enrolled in a teaching degree.

Aleisha reflected that university gifted her an identity 'where I'm not mum, I'm not wife, I'm not child. I just get to be me'. She described herself as a diligent student: 'I'm at every lecture...I'm the one listening to the recording...the person who reads the readings', and a high achiever, 'I quite like getting HDs<sup>11</sup>'. Even so, she has considered quitting, if 'strapped for cash' or when their child is sick 'and I'm sitting in hospital writing essays', going "No!...this is ridiculous". During difficult times her husband's support is 'my biggest thing'.

<sup>10</sup> Enabling program: a short entry pathway to prepare and qualify people for an undergraduate degree

<sup>11</sup> HD means 'high distinction' or a mark of 85% or above

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In 2019 Aleisha was 'bouncing' between 'full-time to almost non-existent study' and had accepted a non-teaching position as 'lab technician and TAS<sub>12</sub> assistant'. Graduating from 'the longest degree known to man' has been necessarily delayed through her changing circumstances. While not yet in her hoped-for career, she rationalised her current role as 'kind of relat[ing] to what I'm going to be doing at the end of the day' and 'helping my family to transition to me working'.

Aleisha's university participation was positive, but not without difficulties inherent in the family-life-study balancing act, particularly 'barriers created by my family unit'. Family was 'the priority', which precluded her from taking up some options such as 'international...or interstate placements'. Because she 'had to work harder to get to where I am...I want it more'. While staying at university was highly stressful at times, she regards it as 'healthier...that outlet just for me', helping her 'handle what was going on at home' was 'very empowering'. When she sees 'that little "HD" I'm like "Yay, I'm awesome" and I high-five myself'.

## Discussion

Each vignette exposes the layered nature of university attendance for these mature female learners. While each story is different, commonalities are clear, including recollection of specific situations or realisations which led them to pursue HE study and subsequently set them on educational trajectories that were vastly different from familial biographies, and (often) societal expectations. However, the ensuing journey was often circuitous and involved re-visioning, reconsidering and readjusting possible selves in response to what was controllable, sometimes recreating possible selves better aligned to newly articulated goals (Pizzolato, 2007). We now explore the intricacies of this movement out of study and how these learners disrupted understandings of expected or normalised selves to create new possibilities for themselves.

Perceptions of 'the possible' are shaped by family history and 'prevailing structural constraints' (Harrison & Waller, 2018, p. 919). For these women, earlier decisions about work largely reflected gendered expectations around traditional low-paying female occupations such as being a 'check-out chick' or roles in sales/retail (Elle, Aleisha), banking (Aleisha) or administration (Evelyn, Danielle, Olivia). Possible selves available seemed defined and compounded by traditional female gender positionality (Knox, 2006). For some, university study was not previously considered, but interestingly, each of these women was able to draw on various 'experiential capitals' (O'Shea, 2018) gained from their backgrounds, where hard work and adversity were often expected. Each had an unwavering conviction that the fulfilment of their hoped-for selves lay in attaining a university degree, motivating them to persist despite hardship. This persistence was often juxtaposed with the transformative experience of learning.

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Each woman had a clear recollection of when their life trajectory was redefined to include a university-self. These catalysts were 'precisely situated in time and space' (de Place & Brunot, 2019, p. 2) and held particular meaning-for-action that expedited thinking beyond current circumstances. Decisions prompted by who to become or avoid becoming are complex, however factors inspiring new possibilities are found in Aleisha's desire to be a teacher and in Evelyn's to 'find' herself and test her own capabilities. Equally, motivation *not* to be(come) something was strong in Elle's desire never to be financially/emotionally dependent, and in Danielle's decision to move out of despised administrative roles. These decisions could be described as internally motivated (Pizzolato, 2007), whereas for Olivia, being unable to reconcile conflicted values in her workplace indicated the influence of external factors. Undoubtedly, these catalysts were key influencers in the decision to study and instrumental in 'breaking the mould' through the action taken toward better future imaginaries.

Importantly, their earlier biographies also point to the challenges and difficulties each encountered, which seemed clearly connected to resilience shown in later life; the ability to bounce back and move forward owes something to past selves contributing to defining 'an individual again in the future' (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 955). Such 'experiential' capital (O'Shea, 2018) derived from working hard, going without, making do, being thrifty not wasteful, or appreciating the little they had, contributed to values and strong work ethic taken into adulthood, and seemed to set these women in good stead for the university experience. Similarly, such biographical memories were also influential in navigating 'selves to be avoided', clearly motivating a counter-movement towards more educated, career-focused, financially-secure selves.

Once at university, these women's trajectories were neither straightforward, linear nor uninterrupted. Even with established goals and the drive to achieve them, a number of potential threats existed. These included the realities of 'life', where future selves were bound up with commitment to family as well as uncertain career pathways or employment. These uncertainties necessitated narrowing or broadening conceptions, readjusting or making compromises to previous hoped-for selves (Pizzolato, 2007), such as Aleisha's inability to consider placements away from home and acceptance of a non-teaching position, choices she rationalised as necessary 'stepping-stones' into a teacher future self. Danielle's passion did not alter the fact that there were few jobs in her desired field (but triggered another possible self in human rights). And despite her pursuit for financial independence, Elle could not even afford to attend her own graduation.

The agentic role of these women in persisting varied. Some were thwarted in their desired plans, often as a result of their age and the job market, which is not unique to this group. Students from more diverse backgrounds, particularly the economically disadvantaged, may be driven to seek non-graduate employment after completing university (Vigurs, Jones, Everitt & Harris, 2018). Equally, others may decide to postpone their transition to the graduate labour market by engaging in additional study, and thereby incurring additional cost (Vigurs, Jones, Everitt & Harris, 2019). Some, like Elle, deliberately and overtly challenged

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normative values, negotiating an alternative trajectory for her family. However, this agency was deeply influenced by predetermined gender roles, manifested in the desire to help others (Knox, 2006), when selves were re-visioned. This was key in Elle, Danielle and Olivia's future selves, and for those with children, the opportunity to be a role model was equally vital. Their experiences of societal attitudes and low expectations speak strongly to the effects of gendered stereotyping and selves 'imposed' by others. Yet, these stories point to the dynamic nature of this trajectory, a movement simultaneously in tension with the desire to pursue a non-normative life course and the normative values that make some adult decisions acceptable or unacceptable (Harrison, 2018).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

These storied moments of possible selves offer insight into 'the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and motivational meaning connected with it' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 11). The longitudinal interview data indicate how possible selves emerged and the negotiations required. Despite the agency shown, these women were often constrained by circumstances beyond their control, such as the employment market. While this may be common in an increasingly dynamic and competitive job market, it is important that those of us working in the the HE sector continue to recognise that for mature women, these negotiations remain both complex and demanding. These vignettes point to the ongoing need to proactively target equity-seeking women, which might be as simple as having visible mature-age student clubs or student mentoring programs designed for this cohort. These students rarely lack motivation and have great capacity to readjust their future-focus and persist, often having valuable insights to share, such as the women in this study demonstrated. The vignettes evocatively point to how these women, despite the difficulties they faced, drew upon life experience and future focus as enablers of persistence. Institutions should tap into the insights offered by such drive and focus, which students themselves often do not reflect upon until the culmination of their study.

We concur with Erikson (2007) that having a 'concrete notion of being in a distinct future situation' (p. 349) is critical for possible selves to be conceptualised, but is especially so for students who have intersecting identities across multiple categories, such as being older, first-in-family, from a working-class background and female. At times, when completion of the HE journey seemed insurmountable, maintaining the future-focus of possible selves gave these women the impetus to persevere. Importantly, possible selves are fluid and evolving, thus support should both normalise and foreground this fluidity to encourage mature FiF students to consider possible selves beyond the scope of gendered or societal expectations.

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