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Transformations and self-discovery: mature-age women's reflections on returning to university study

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Transformations and self-discovery: mature-age women's reflections on returning to university study.

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Abstract

Research has highlighted the challenges that women face as mature-age students in higher education. The challenges are particularly acute when a woman is the first in her family to go to university. Many women begin their journey as students with considerable self-doubt and lack of confidence. They also frequently face an ongoing struggle to find a way to combine their studies with other family responsibilities (Edwards, 1990; Merrill, 1999; Tett, 2000). This article presents the reflections of 18 women enrolled as mature-age students at an Australian university campus. Their triumphs, achievements and self-discoveries, as well as their struggles whilst undertaking their studies, are explored. In presenting the reflections of this group, the transformative nature of these experiences is highlighted, not only for the women themselves, but also potentially for their families, particularly their children. These narratives of achievement and transformation ultimately provide inspiration to other women contemplating such a step as well as insight for academic administrators and teaching staff regarding the significant personal change this decision can engender.

Key Words: University, mature-age students, second-chance learners, university access and participation, narrative inquiry

Introduction

There is no doubt that women have responded to the call to higher education in large numbers. By the end of the twentieth century women undergraduates outnumbered males in the United Kingdom and in many European countries (Quinn, 2005). This trend has not diminished in the twenty-first century. Quinn (2005) suggests that the increase in female students can be partially explained by the relocation of training for traditionally female employment, such as teaching, nursing and social work, from the vocational to higher education sector. However, this is only one part of the equation. The increase in women in higher education is to a large extent the result of an international widening access agenda. This began in the 1960s with the decision of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) to develop the concept of 'lifelong education' (Bagnall, 2006, p.25).

This international agenda of lifelong learning reached Australian shores in the 1970s (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007) following the publication of a number of UNESCO reports, which advocated the need to encourage and widen access to post-compulsory education (Longworth,

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2004, p.7). It continued to develop impetus throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with an increasing emphasis on trying to reduce the barriers for those who had fewer opportunities to undertake higher education studies. With the publication in 1996 of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report 'Lifelong Learning for All' there was further international acceleration 'towards mass and universal participation' (Skilbeck, 2006, p.117) including participation by older students. In the most recent OECD indicators (2010), 36% of the 25 – 64 year-old cohort in Australia had attained tertiary qualifications, which is significantly above the OECD average of 28%.

Indeed, the number of mature-age students at Australian universities has been increasing steadily since the 1970s. One of the earliest and boldest attempts in Australia to increase participation in higher education amongst those from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds occurred in 1973, with the abolition of university tuition fees by the Whitlam Labor government. This led to an acceleration in higher education across all age groups with the most noticeable increase amongst those aged 30 and over. This measure also had the effect of encouraging female participation. The trend for women to enter higher education continued throughout the 1980s. By 1991, 55% of all new students were women, with the largest increase in female student participation occurring in the 25 and over age ranges (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1993). Free university education provided an opportunity for many women who, as lower income earners than men and/or financially dependent upon a male breadwinner, had not previously been in a financial position to undertake university studies.

In the over-35 age group of university students in Australia, women outnumber men nationally by almost two to one (James, Baldwin, Coates, Krause & McInnis, 2004) and a greater number of women than men enrol in mature-age alternative entry programs (Cullity, 2006, p.182). It seems that Australian women have been particularly ready to embrace the opportunities deriving from the lifelong learning agenda and the equity measures associated with this.

The move from women being the minority in higher education to that of being the norm has obvious implications for the university structure and culture. Webb (1997) argues that this increase in women's participation has not altered the class and gender inequality that exists within higher education. Closer examination of figures reveals high levels of access have not been possible for all sections of the community. The participation of certain groups, such as those from low SES backgrounds, from rural areas and from ethnic minorities, is concentrated in particular institutions and programs, and such groups are still under-represented in higher education overall (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007).

For example, in Australia, the participation of people from low-SES backgrounds is calculated nationally as 15.5%. This participation however is clustered in regional universities, whereas in the more elite universities, participation is well below the national average at 11% (Centre for the Study of Higher Education [CSHE], 2008). Indeed, the Review of Australian Higher Education, led by Denise Bradley (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2008) identifies how students from remote areas, indigenous students and those from low-SES backgrounds remain the most 'under represented' (p.10). In the UK the numbers of young people from disadvantaged areas entering university has increased since the mid 2000s. However the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) estimates that less than one in five of this cohort enters higher education compared with more than one in two for students from the most advantaged areas (HEFCE, 2010). In the United States, those who attain college degrees are also concentrated into the more affluent

sectors of the population. Those who are poor, have no family members who have been to university and/or who are from an ethnic minority background are less likely to either attend a four-year college or gain a degree (CSHE, 2008).

In order to address this type of inequity, a number of countries (Germany, Sweden, Ireland, Finland and the UK amongst others) have introduced participation and access targets (DEEWR, 2008). In 2000, the UK Blair government set a goal of 50% participation for all 18 to 30-year-olds by 2010. The success of this initiative is yet to be formally assessed but early statistics have indicated a participation rate of 45% for 17–30 year olds in 2009 (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills [DBIS], 2009). Based on recommendations from the Review of Australian Higher Education (DEEWR, 2008), the Australian government has committed to increasing the university participation rate, setting a target of 40% of 25 to 34-year-olds with a bachelor degree or above by 2025.

Government discourse stresses the importance of access to and participation in higher education in terms of vocational opportunities and future financial rewards. Research has highlighted that over an individual's lifetime, a university graduate will generate more than $1.5 million, or 70% more income than someone who has only completed high school qualifications (National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling, 2008). However, should attendance at university be measured solely by the potential vocational opportunities and earning capacity offered? By focussing on such outcomes are we at risk of failing to recognise and acknowledge the wider personal and emotional repercussions? The research outlined in this paper uses a narrative inquiry approach to reveal other tangible benefits. The stories of a particular cohort of mature-age female students indicate that the opportunity to go to university can mean so much more to individuals, in that it offers the potential for broader personal transformations and self-discoveries.

Literature review

Most Australian universities define a mature-age student as aged 21 or over at time of entry and not immediately following full-time secondary studies (Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001; Cullity, 2006). However, this definition fails to capture the diversity of this cohort. When considerations such as family commitments, employment status, past educational experience and full- or part-time enrolment, are considered, some idea of the melting pot of the mature-age student experience becomes apparent. In a UK study, Baxter and Hatt (1999) differentiate between mature-age students. Those who have had a large gap between education are named 'returners'; whereas younger students, with less of a gap are named 'interrupters'. Female returners are often considering a return to the public world after raising children. Within the Australian context, West, Hore, Eaton and Kermond, (1986) differentiated mature-age students into four types: 'early school leavers' (left school before gaining university entry qualifications), 'recyclers' (upgrading qualifications and/or changing careers), 'returners' (started university, left and now returned) and 'deferrers' (gained university entry qualifications but deferred until now).

Most of the women discussed in this paper can be termed as either 'returners' (Baxter & Hatt, 1999), or 'early school leavers' (West et al, 1986). Many had left school before gaining university entry qualifications and all had a significant gap between educational experiences. Such students can be highly vulnerable to failure and may suffer considerable anxiety in returning to education (Davies & Williams, 2001). Women are more likely than men to rely on government support as a major source of income, have child rearing responsibilities and may have limited access to vehicles or internet (North & Ferrier, 2009). Returning to education can

be further complicated by fragile learner identities, perhaps resulting from previous negative educational experiences (Brine & Waller, 2004).

Aside from these tangible restrictions, women also have to contend with a legacy of discrimination that exists at a foundational level within institutions. Writers such as Quinn (2005) and Jackson (2000) contend that gender constraints within the academic environment structurally discriminate against women. Quinn (2005) refers to the 'dominant masculine discourse' (p.7) of the academic environment and the fact that 'until comparatively recently, women, particularly working class ones, were explicitly excluded' from the university community (p.2). The legacy of this, in the words of Jackson (2000), is that it remains a community in which 'women's voices in education are devalued and marginalised' (p.281). A study by Morrison, Bourke and Kelly (2005) on gender inequality at a UK university found that 'activities or spaces where women predominated were often viewed as inferior, marginalised or even mysterious' (p.153).

Female mature-age students face significant challenges within their personal lives. Research over the past two decades (Edwards, 1993; Smith, 1996; Tett, 2000) indicates that women are less confident about their academic achievement and less likely to receive privileged time for their studies than are male mature-age students. For most women, time for study is fitted in with their caring responsibilities of home, family and, in many cases, paid work. Feminist writers and researchers such as Hughes (2002), Davies (1990) and McNay (2000) contend that society places a different value upon men's time and women's time, with men's time consistently viewed as more valuable and productive, whereas women are expected to give up their time to the demands and needs of others.

Given such challenges for women who return to higher education, one might wonder what it is that individuals derive from this experience on both a personal and a public level. The following sections outline two qualitative studies undertaken at an Australian university, from which data has been drawn to explore the personal realities of returning to university, for one group of female mature-age students.

Research context and participants

This paper draws upon the material from in-depth semi-structured interviews with 18 mature-age female students aged over 30, with at least one child still living at home with them. Each of these women had participated in one of two broader studies, which examined their experience of participating in university.

The two broader studies were conducted separately in 2006. Study (A) followed female students who were first in family to come to university, through their first year of university study. The term *first in family* is defined as no-one in the immediate family having previously attended university, including spouses or partners, children, parents and immediate siblings. Each woman was interviewed on four separate occasions (O'Shea, 2007). Study (B) collected in-depth interview data with mature-age (aged 21 or over) female and male undergraduate students, who had entered university via an access program, and who were between years two and four of their degree (Stone, 2008). In both studies, participants were encouraged to narrate their own experiences of university and what this endeavour meant to them on a very personal level. The following table provides details of each study, including the number of participants involved and the structure of interviewing:

Table (1): Details of the two studies

	Details	Total participants
Study (A)	• *Students recruited on the basis of being first in family at university.* • *Interviewed on four different occasions over the academic year* • *All female, first year students: median age 34*	N=17
Study (B)	• *Students recruited on the basis of mature-age entry to university via an access program* • *One in-depth interview (1.5 – 2 hours)* • *15 female and 5 male students in years 2 – 4 of an undergraduate degree: median age 40*	N=20

All the participants were enrolled at a large Australian regional university. This university has a number of campuses that are located within regions recognised as being economically and socially disadvantaged. All but two of the participants were studying exclusively at one of the university's smaller campuses. The following table outlines education and employment statistics for the region within which this campus is located, compared with the statistics for the relevant Australian state. The data is from the local council community profile in the year that both studies were conducted (2006). The names of the region and state have been removed to maintain anonymity:

Table (2) – all information derived from XXXX Shire Community Profile based upon ABS Census data (2001- 2006)

Year 2006	Local Gov. Area	State
Left school at Year 10 or below	56.2%	40.4%
Completed High School (Year 12)	26.5%	42.4%
Population with no educational qualifications	51.5%	45.6%
People with Bachelor or Higher degrees	6.6%	16.4%
% of unemployed	6.8%	5.9%

In 2006 this smaller campus had an enrolment of approximately 3,500 university students, with close to 60% of these (n = 2,100) defined as mature-aged. Amongst students aged 30 and over, the ratio of women to men was approximately three to one. The participants for the two studies were recruited indirectly via both university-wide channels of communication such as student publications and notice boards as well as snowball sampling where informants encouraged peers and colleagues to participate in the study.

Methodology

The powerful nature of narrative inquiry is recognised in the literature, particularly when exploring the experiences of women. Ellis and Bochner (2002) argue that narrative offers the potential for readers to 'enter empathetically into worlds of experience different from their own' whereby 'readers become co-performers, examining themselves through the evocative power of the narrative text' (p.748). The use of a semi-structured interviewing technique, as used in both studies, is consistent with narrative inquiry, in that it allows participants to tell their own stories, and provides a means by which rich descriptions of their world can emerge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Essentially narrative analysis is an interpretative approach, necessitating interpretation from both narrator and researcher, leading to a joint construction of meaning. This highly interpretative nature has attracted criticism as there is always the possibility that the researcher may impose meaning on data (Josselson, 1996). To avoid this possibility, multiple readings of the text are required for confirmation of connections as well as alternative explanations. In the

research discussed in this paper, initial readings of the data focussed on the content of the narrative while subsequent readings explored plot and chronological development before seeking similarities or commonalities between narratives.

Hollway and Jefferson (2000) describe how a reflexive approach to narrative analysis is required. As the narrator interprets the world around them in order to construct a particular narrative, so does the listener/researcher interpret the narrative in order to seek to understand the contextual meanings within it (Elliott, 2005). The constructed nature of this process requires researchers to articulate their position in relation to the research being conducted. At the time of undertaking the two studies, both researchers/authors were employed in professional student support positions at the same university as the participants. Through their work, both had worked closely with mature-age female students, and had been privileged to hear the personal stories of many.

Conducting research within a familiar environment can offer both benefits and complex challenges. As an insider or native researcher, challenges may include potential researcher bias and a risk that the researcher will assume shared meanings due to contextual familiarity with the environment. Both authors recognise the need for the researcher to ponder upon and perhaps reconsider assumptions or beliefs that may have been too readily accepted. This in itself can be of benefit to the research process. Indeed, the overt and intertwining connections between research and professional practice may position the insider researcher to be the most appropriate person to redress problematic areas identified by participants.

As discussed, this paper focuses on the stories of 18 women in particular. All were mothers who had left school more than 10 years previously. Their stories reveal the transformations and self-discoveries they have experienced through being at university, and the extent to which, for each of them, university has been a highly significant, life-changing experience. The table below introduces each of the women:

Table (3): Details of participants

Name Study A/B	Age	Attend.	Marital Status	Children / Ages	Entry pathway*	Degree Program	Yr of Degree Prog.	High School Completed?
Catherine (A)	44	F/T	Single	One (15 yrs)	STAT	Bachelor of Nursing	First	Yes
Heidi (A)	47	P/T	Divorced	Three (20+ yrs)	TAFE	Bachelor of Social Science	First	No
Katie (A)	33	F/T	Married	Two (6 & 9 yrs)	STAT	Bachelor of Oral Health	First	Yes
Kira (A)	38	F/T**	Separated	Five (6,8,14,15 & 18 yrs)	TAFE	Bachelor of Psychology	First	No
Nicki (A)	33	F/T	Single	Yes (2 yrs)	HSC / TAFE	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts	First	Yes
Sheila (A)	31	F/T**	Married	Two (5 & 7 yrs)	STAT	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts	First	Yes
Ingrid (B)	48	F/T	Divorced	Six (21,20,18,16, twins 13)	AC	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts	Fourth	Yes
Mandy (B)	38	P/T	Married	Five (15,13,10,8,6)	AC	Bachelor of Architecture	Second	No
Helen (B)	33	F/T	Divorced	Two (12,10)	AC	Bachelor of Herbal Therapies	Third	Yes
Amber (B)	49	F/T	Divorced	Two (23,21)	AC	Bachelor of Social Science	Third	Yes
Linda (B)	40	P/T	Married	One (7)	AC	Bachelor of Social Science	Second	Yes
Rachel (B)	47	P/T	Divorced	Two (twins 17)	AC	Bachelor of Arts	Third	No
Grace (B)	47	P/T	Married	Three (22,20,14)	AC	Bachelor of Psychology	Second	No
Fiona (B)	35	F/T	Single	One (7)	AC	Bachelor of Social Science	Second	Yes
Tina (B)	38	P/T	Married	Three (15,14,13)	AC	Bachelor of Nursing	Second	No
Katrina (B)	42	F/T	Widowed	Two (11,7)	AC	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts	Second	No
Nerida (B)	49	F/T	Married	Three (26,23,22)	AC	Graduate Diploma of Education (Primary)	Fourth	No
Penny (B)	32	F/T	Single	Two (11,12)	AC	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts	Second	Yes

*HSC = High School Certificate, STAT = State Tertiary Admission Test, TAFE = Technical and Further Education, AC = Access Course ** Two of the students started the year in full-time mode but either dropped a subject (Sheila) or a number of subjects (Kira) as the semester or year proceeded.

Findings and discussion

The following sections highlight the findings from the women's narratives and ground them within wider theory and research. These sections focus on three themes that emerged inductively from the data under the broader category of transformation which include:

- Revisions in the ways the women articulated their motives around beginning university at this particular stage of life
- Changes in perspective narrated in relation to the self and others
- Growth and transformations in confidence and wellbeing.

Motives around beginning

For these participants, university was initially viewed as a means to achieve a better future for themselves and their families, through improved vocational opportunities.

Catherine (44, Y1), a single parent, is very focused on the job opportunities afforded by her degree. She explains that the opportunity to obtain guaranteed employment in a secure environment has been a key motive in her decision to choose a degree in nursing:

> *All my jobs have been things where the money goes up and down all the time …*[nursing is] *a job where I know there will be jobs.*

For those who already had a recognised occupation such as assistant nursing or retail management, university was perceived as a means to increase the potential for advancement:

> *I'd like to move up the food chain so as to speak and get some new career direction.* (Katie, 33, Y1)

Undoubtedly, the need for secure and regular employment is an over-riding requirement in the current economic and social climate but West (1995) argues, this motive is 'only one part of a much larger dialectic' (p.137). West's longitudinal study on university students identified how motives to study are also firmly rooted in personal life. Parr (1998) also makes the point that economic reasons are perhaps viewed as more 'socially acceptable reasons to give to a relative stranger' (p.94). To initially admit to be 'doing it for myself' may raise concerns for mature-age female students, fearing that they would appear to be 'somewhat selfish' (Parr, 1998, p.94).

Similarly, a change in attitude about why they were at university was evident amongst this group of women. This was particularly noticeable amongst those participants who were interviewed several times, when the first and last interviews were analysed. For example, in the final interview, Catherine's perspective on why she is studying appears to have undergone a profound shift. University is no longer just about instrumental or vocational goals for her, but also represents significant personal accomplishment.

> *It is not just becoming a nurse that I want to do but it is actually getting the degree, there is a certain goal in that as well that satisfies or completes something that hasn't been done before.*

University has been elevated from a means to an end to an important personal endeavour, which engenders a sense of completeness.

Like Catherine, Katie also reappraises her first year at university in terms of personal validation, stating: 'I don't think I ever did this for the money. I did it for the personal achievement of it'.

This change in motivation was also evident amongst the women who had had more years at university to reflect on their reasons for persisting with their studies. For example, Nerida (49, Y4) reflects how she has discovered 'a love of learning' whilst Ingrid (48, Y4) describes how she 'gets a buzz' from 'the environment, the books and the knowledge'.

For others, particularly the married women, university had come to represent freedom and personal independence from their roles as wives and mothers.

> *The first time in 15 years I can just get in the car and drive up and get lost in books and research… independence! And it's something of mine. I don't have to share it with [husband] and the children. They don't have to be here; they don't have anything to do with it.* (Mandy, 38, Y2)

Such transformations herald a move from conceptualising university as something for others to an act for self, or, as Blaxter and Tight (1993) describe it, an 'intrinsic pleasure' (p.15). These changes are indicative of profound growth and change both in relation to perceptions of university and also on a more fundamental level.

Moving on – changes in perspectives

Courtney (1992) highlights how adults participate in education for a number of reasons. Often these reasons are associated with the management of change and crisis, both public and personal, which may include illness, depression or changes to relationships. Education then is not only about acquiring knowledge but can also provide the means to restore a sense of self or identity. This certainly featured in the narratives of these students, many of whom had experienced profound change in the time leading up to university enrolment. Despite the substantial financial, emotional and temporal changes demanded by university, the outcome of this endeavour was more than just the opportunity to obtain better employment or earn more money. Instead, university offered a means by which self-confidence and esteem could be improved.

The most fundamental transformation concerned the inner self, particularly the ways in which the women defined themselves, how they would like to be defined by others, and what they now regarded as important to them. The desire for education had come to be regarded by some as an intrinsic or elemental need, as Heidi (47, Y1) describes:

> [I feel] *stronger…I think more emotional (laugh), definitely stronger, definitely a lot more confidence in myself…it was such a hard time*

> *when I got poisoned* [by chemicals at work] *…I lost a lot of myself, so for me, university has given me back what I lost but plus, plus more… it's bringing back what I have lost.*

Similarly, Nicki (33, Y1) explains that coming to university has provided her with a sense of 'worthiness', which was absent before:

> *I just got a feeling, it sounds really stupid, but, worthiness... I think, well, I am worthy of being here. I can do it. And that just was great self-empowerment to me.*

University was also described by many of the women in terms of building a 'public career to complement or take the place of the private career of domesticity' (Pascall & Cox, 1993, p.77). In a number of the women's stories, there is a sense of missed opportunities in the past. Therefore, the chance to come to university is a means to extend opportunity, providing additional choice in public and private lives. For Nicki, the choices offered by university are clearly articulated in the following statement:

> *I never allowed myself to make plans because so many things would happen … I am even sorta thinking now when I leave uni these are some of the possibilities and that's something that I have never really been able to do before … If I had stayed where I was I would have just gone down.*

Changes in the women's close relationships as a result of their being at university, were also evident. Three of the women encountered such active resistance from their partners towards their studies that they felt they had to make a choice between marriage or university:

> *He wasn't too happy with it, he made things difficult for me and I had to borrow the neighbour's car just to get here… you know, I was the wife at home, dinner on the table, house was always clean* (Helen, 33, Y3)

> *He made it like I was cheating young people out of opportunities … and then added I was too old to play this game successfully… his opinion was it was time for me to sit back and knit and wait to be a grandmother.* (Amber, 49, Y3)

Overall, the women living with a male partner received little support from him in a practical sense. Nevertheless, it appeared that as long as a woman's partner did not actively object or interfere with her studies she described him as 'supportive'. Kira (38, Y1) explained how her husband 'doesn't resent' her attendance at university and how 'he is happy for me to go' as long as she had:

> *already prearranged where the children will be … I do all of that, do everything so he's happy like that.*

Changes in the traditional hierarchy within the family were apparent. Growth in confidence in their own knowledge and opinions, as a result of their studies,

inevitably brought about a change in their perceptions of themselves in relation to their partners.

> *Some of the beliefs I've held…. I used to rely on 'Today Tonight' or whatever and that's total crap...I get a little bit frustrated with him sometimes because he still thinks the same.* (Linda, 40, Y2)

> *I feel like, all of a sudden, I've got a brain… my opinion is worthy. I no longer feel like I'm on the back foot. … I probably don't have as much respect for him as I once had, because now I know I'm more confident and say what I think.* (Mandy, 38, Y2)

Such quotes indicate that the traditional hierarchy is being questioned, even challenged, as these women begin to view their own opinions as worthwhile and no longer inferior to those of their husbands. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the women were very willing to be understanding of their partners' feelings, to tailor their own behaviour in order to avoid overt conflict and to stress the positives in their relationships. One example is that of Linda (40, Y2):

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

Also Grace (47, Y2), who mentions that her husband feels threatened by her studies and so she keeps the peace by watching her words: 'I'm very careful with what I say'.

Implicit in these stories is a willingness by the women to accommodate their partners in order to avoid active resistance. There are strong similarities here to Smith's study (1996) in which she found that 'patriarchal values towards women's role in the family' (p.68) created a situation where women 'expected to receive little emotional support [and] had to judge their husbands/partners' moods before broaching the subject of returning to study' (p.70).

Growing and changing

A number of studies have demonstrated the link between academic achievement and an increase in confidence, particularly amongst mature-aged learners (Giles, 1990; McGivney, 2006; Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1993). A similar link emerged from the stories of these 18 women.

> *I've gained confidence and to me that was a big thing, because I wasn't a confident person.* (Rachel, 47, Y3)

> [After] *getting all my assignments back and getting high distinctions and that …I never thought that I could ever do that I was just shocked to think I had been out of school for so long and could do so well.* (Sheila, 31, Y1)

The concept of *wellbeing*, and the effect of education on the wellbeing of mature students, is mentioned in the literature on adult education. Schuller (2006) describes how 'education can act to enable people to sustain their wellbeing, to maintain it…in the face of the strains and stresses of everyday life' (p.16), while

Skilbeck (2006) also mentions the 'personal wellbeing' (p.126) that results from adult education programs.

Certainly there was evidence in the narratives of these students that they were undergoing significant personal growth and improved wellbeing, described in terms such as:

> *Feeling fulfilled, completely filled the void.* (Grace, 47, Y2)

> *Coming to uni I sort of bloomed….Much more outgoing.* (Fiona, 35, Y2)

Part of this was discovering their intelligence:

> *I suppose just knowing that I think I can do it … a little bit of confidence about 'I'm not dumb'.* (Tina, 38, Y2)

> *I'm not dumb as I was told for many, many years at school.* (Katrina, 42, Y2)

Reay, Ball and David (2002) talk about 'the almost magical transformative powers of education' (p.402) revealed in the stories of female students they interviewed, while Paasse (1998) found that 'women experience a shift in their identity with exposure to new and different discourses' (p.105). This transformative shift was apparent here also. The women's experiences of being at university had contributed to the development of a greater sense of personal agency, independent achievement and the possibilities this opened up for further independence.

> *Self-sufficiency and independence for me… I don't want to have to rely on any government department or any other person for financial support. I want to be able to do it myself… I suppose that's it, a freedom and independence.* (Helen, 33, Y3)

> *I value myself, which is an easy thing to say but a hard thing to do. If everything fell apart tomorrow I would be alright.* (Nerida, 49, Y4)

Such transformations were not limited only to themselves. Achieving at university was perceived as the start of a 'new cycle' that would have a profound influence on their children. As Rachel (47, Y3) explains:

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

Some of the women in this study, echoed participants in Reay et al.'s (2002) research, which found that women undertaking access courses in the UK 'saw themselves as role models for their children' (p.11). The following quotes highlight this realisation:

> *With them watching me read all the time, they're kind of improving themselves at school, and I will just talk about things with them…* (Penny, 32, Y2)

> *A positive role model, and to see that I'm doing something and*
> *furthering myself…* (Grace, 47, Y2)

They were aware that their children would have some understanding of university and what it can offer, in a way that was not available to them when they were growing up.

> *I think that they will definitively not be scared to study, because they*
> *are here in the uni environment… such a familiar place.*
> (Mandy, 38, Y2)

Others expressed the intention to give their children more than they received themselves educationally.

> *My goal is to give them more options to help them…if they want to go*
> *and study I could buy their books or something… things like that.*
> (Penny, 32, Y2)

The relatively modest, yet heartfelt goals described below by Helen (33, Y3) reflect the extent to which she can see new possibilities for her children, almost within her grasp.

> *I would love to be able to take my children to more things, and take*
> *them to a concert and stuff like that. As a child I never went to the*
> *theatre with my parents…but I would really like my children to*
> *experience that – that's where I see my future…I think I see this degree*
> *– and hopefully the Masters afterwards – I see them as stepping stones*
> *to being able to give my children more variety.*

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

For these 'second-chance' students (Cantwell, et al., 2001; Giles, 1990) it was clear that the opportunities and rewards resulting from being at university outweighed the difficulties and struggles. Not only has university been 'a significant instrument of change in their lives' (McLaren, 1985, p.171) but it has also been an agent of generational change. The growth in confidence, the increase in opportunities for the future and the sense of ambitions being achieved, were common themes in the narratives.

Conclusions and insights

The transformative power of engagement with higher education is well illustrated within the stories featured here. For each of these women, university had been, and was continuing to be, a personally transformative experience. Being at university as part of a learning community and expanding their knowledge led these students to think very differently about themselves in a number of significant ways. With increasing confidence, they were also developing a greater sense of personal independence as they challenged the more restrictive aspects of their gendered role.

Many were also keenly aware of the positive influence that their studies were having upon their children and the likelihood that their children would consider university as an option. A new cycle had begun, which would have potential ramifications for future generations. In Rachel's words, this was the beginning of 'a different culture' in their families. Of course, there is always the possibility that the interviewees were biased in their responses, perhaps presenting a more positive version of their experiences. However, the richness of responses and the diversity of experiences described by the women indicate how each journey was unique but examining the narratives collectively revealed distinct, common themes.

These narratives provide insight into the particular factors that have helped and hindered the progress of their second-chance journey and into some possibilities for future action for higher education policy and practice. Three key recommendations are outlined below. The first and second recommendations relate to the dual imperatives of widening access and improving financial support, as recognised in the Bradley Review of Higher Education in Australia (DEEWR, 2008). The third recommendation relates to institutional measures.

Firstly, there is a need to continue to expand the pathways and opportunities for mature-age students to enter university. Once students from low-SES backgrounds are enrolled, they are likely to do as well academically as others (CSHE, 2008). Governments and institutions genuinely seeking to widen university participation need to heed the recommendation to encourage and enhance 'mature-age pathways for people who have not undertaken the conventional linear school-university pathway' (CSHE, 2008, p.8).

Secondly, the financial implications of going to university can be an overwhelming deterrent for many mature-age female students. Those who leave paid work in order to attend university are disadvantaged financially while government assistance is inadequate, with around 50% of students having difficulties managing financially and close to 13% often unable to buy enough food (James, Bexley, Devlin & Marginson, 2007). If higher education institutions are to improve access and participation across all socio-economic groups, there needs to be more adequate and appropriately targeted government financial support for students of all ages.

A third and equally important point is that higher education institutions need to take into account the particular situations and the gendered nature of the challenges which female mature-age students face. Higher education means much more to these students than simply improved vocational opportunities. An understanding of this at an institutional level may encourage a more flexible approach by academics and administrators. Recognising and respecting the many other demands that these students have upon them is of key importance in maximising the potential for mature learners to fully engage with the learning community.

With this in mind, the provision of appropriate support services for this student cohort is a vital consideration for institutions. As previously mentioned, both authors worked for many years as university student support professionals.

Their personal experience of working in this field, as well as conducting this research, has furthered their understanding of the importance of support and transition services. Mature-age women in particular are likely to be undergoing significant personal discoveries in the process of being a student. Adequate access to support services such as counselling, career advice, learning support and other services, can be essential to both participation and success.

What this study clearly indicates is that attendance at university should not be measured solely by the potential vocational opportunities or earning capacity offered. Instead, more emphasis on the wider personal and emotional outcomes of this choice need to acknowledged. The personal growth afforded by this return to education as well as the influence this can have on children and other family members needs to form a key part of the discourses around widening participation and access in higher education. Encouraging and appropriately supporting mature female students can also assist universities to move closer towards being places of equal access and greater diversity. In the process, the students themselves are exposed to experiences that have the capacity to transform their lives, individually, socially and economically, as well as potentially those of future generations.

Women as mature-age students are already entering higher education in significant numbers and constitute a highly important cohort. Yet, they remain largely unacknowledged for the contribution that they make, not only to the classrooms and other learning and social activities of individual institutions, but also to the wider national and international higher education access agenda. Encouraging and appropriately supporting these students can pave the way for a future in which greater numbers of mature female learners have the opportunity to enter, stay and succeed at university. These students also assist universities to move closer towards being places of equal access and greater diversity. In the process, the students themselves are exposed to experiences that have the capacity to transform their lives, individually, socially and economically, as well as potentially those of future generations.

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