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# Stepping into higher education from the vocational education sector in Australia: Student perceptions and experiences

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## Abstract

*It is not unusual to hear study in the vocational education sector referred to as a 'stepping stone' into further studies in the higher education environment. What this pathway entails for those who choose it is not immediately clear however. This paper reports on research conducted with a small cohort of students who arrived at an Australian university with credit or advanced standing based on their studies in the vocational sector. A narrative inquiry approach highlights the voices of these participants drawn through stories of their individual experiences of the transition to higher education. Recommendations related to structural and educational change are based on evidence that this vocational 'stepping stone' can mean different things to different people.*

**Key words:** Credit Transfer, university, vocational education, mature age students, transition.

## Introduction

The experience of first year students in Australian universities is well documented (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005; James, Krause & Jennings, 2010). Less understood are the issues faced by students who enter university with advanced standing gained through courses completed in the vocational education sector. This paper explores the experiences of one group of students with advanced standing who were transitioning between Australian Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges and the university environment.

The percentage of domestic students admitted to higher education on the basis of TAFE results accounts for approximately 9.6% of total commencing enrolments in Australia (Karmel, 2008). This percentage will increase as current government policy committed to broadening pathways between the two sectors is enacted. It is expected that by 2020, 40% of all people over the age of 25 will be studying towards an undergraduate degree. Given the agenda for widening participation and ensuring social inclusion in the higher education sector, universities must expect to "cater for a larger and more diverse group of incoming first year students" (James et al., 2010, p.1). As Watson (2008) notes, increased access does not guarantee success and the challenge for universities is to understand the requirements of students who enter with advanced standing based on prior vocational studies.

The numbers of TAFE students enrolled in Australian universities is largely determined by competition for places from school leavers, particularly amongst the elite or sandstone universities (known as the Group of Eight or Go8 in Australia). Watson (2006) notes that in the Go8 universities nearly 60% of commencing students are derived from high schools whilst only 3% are admitted on the basis of TAFE qualifications. In other universities approximately 36% of commencing students are school leavers (Watson, 2006, p.43). Such

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differentials indicate stratification in the higher education environment as well as a lack of consistency in the way these individuals are treated across institutions (Watson, 2006).

Albeit limited, research suggests that at least some of the issues faced by students in transition rest on “the contrast between the competency-based orientation of TAFE and the theoretical orientation of the university” (Heirdsfield, Walker & Walsh, 2005, p.423). Associated issues involve the perceptions of university staff and the limited nature of teaching and learning resources designed specifically to support students’ needs (Heirdsfield et al., 2005). These issues are in addition to those typically faced by the broader first year student population and may well lead to increased feelings of isolation and uncertainty in terms of the culture of the university for those students from the vocational sector (McInnis et al., 2000). However, this transition process cannot be defined in a universal sense and, as Swaminathan and Alfred (2001) argue, any emphasis on “commonality” can ultimately “promote invisibility” (p.30). James et al. (2010) endorse this view and emphasise the need to determine the experience of particular student subgroups given that “the student experience varies greatly according to students’ backgrounds” (p.8).

Research that qualitatively examines transitional experiences is limited, with few studies that focus on specific student cohorts (Martinez, 2001; Quinn, 2005). This study investigated the experiences of first year students with advanced standing entering undergraduate study at an Australian university. Identifying each student cohort’s profile and needs in the first year of study is an important task for universities and a basic step in the process of improving the quality of services provided. Rather than locating difference within a deficit framework (Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001) the research outlined in this paper has the potential to enrich and inform the learning environment, promoting diversity in a positive manner. The research process provided an opportunity for participants to voice their concerns and to raise issues for discussion that were significant for them following their arrival at university. Their stories highlight the ways in which this particular route into university helped shape their higher education experiences. A more informed understanding of the ways in which this subgroup of students may best be supported is possible when these experiences become available for discussion.

### *Compounding problems of “invisibility”*

Research into how students negotiate the transition from one education sector into another and how this particular subgroup performs academically is limited (Tickell & Smyrnios, 2004). Reasons for this may include the difficulties academic staff experience in identifying students after their arrival either because of systemic limitations or the reluctance of students to self-disclose regarding their status. Brunken and Delly (2010) refer to these students as the “hidden disadvantaged” (p.143) in this regard. This invisibility and the disadvantages they experience is compounded by the fact that such students may articulate directly into second year or into subjects at various levels in their first year of study and so effectively miss out on the orientation activities designed for commencing students. Cameron (2004), at the University of South Australia, conducted one of the few research projects examining the processes of transition for TAFE students. This particular cohort was defined as older with negative school experiences and significant educational disadvantage. Often the first in their family to enter university, the students in Cameron’s study lacked a fundamental understanding of institutional expectations and practice but were expected to adjust to study at a second year level whilst navigating their initial transition to the university.

Research conducted on the experiences of first-in-family students at university indicates that a lack of prior understanding or experience of this institutional environment can have far-reaching implications for the confidence levels and ultimate success of the students involved (O'Shea, 2007). For students, both school leavers and mature age, who are the first in their families to go to university, there may be few role models available to them and little assistance in helping them understand the cultural and academic expectations of university life. This situation is exacerbated for students articulating from TAFE who may not be readily identified and yet expected to participate in subjects designed for later years students, given the credit arrangements. Such feelings can add stress and anxiety to an already difficult situation, initiating a downward spiral that may ultimately lead to withdrawal, both academic and social.

The research outlined in this article focuses on individual student experiences of “stepping” from vocational education to university and reflects Harris’ (2010) suggestion that:

*...a quite different, and perhaps even more fruitful, perspective on sectoral relationships might be gained by focusing on learners and asking: what are they doing and what do they think? (p.19).*

Using semi-structured interviews and adopting a narrative inquiry approach provides space for students to voice their reality of transitioning into and engaging with a higher education institution.

### ***Narrative inquiry: Approach and methodology***

This research is interpretivist in nature and rests on a qualitative approach that encourages participants to construct accounts of their past experiences within the framework of their current activities. Semi-structured interviews present a vehicle for this, providing students with opportunities to make sense of their own particular journey to university. The narratives that emerged from these interviews provide an insight into the experiences of this student group as a whole.

Narrative is a fundamental means of communication and its existence in a variety of forms is well documented (Riessman, 2008). The stories that are gathered through this approach are powerful devices, valued by researchers for their ability to convey detailed, complex and often intimate experiences whilst providing a foundation for change. Interpreting the data is “a complex and dynamic craft” that requires many changes and renegotiations both in terms of “organising styles and analytic approach” (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, pp.128-129).

### ***Aims***

The aims of this study were to examine the stories of participants to determine their reasons for choosing to pursue a pathway to university and to understand their experiences in the first year of study. By focussing on the content of narratives and the ways in which this content reflects how the speaker makes sense of these events, the intention was to highlight the implications of this particular transition in their life. The ways in which individuals “story” their personal experiences enables connections to be made with broader cultural considerations, not only highlighting what is deemed as “storyworthy” but also what “matters” (Narayan & George, 2002, p.817).

## Design

In this study the focus was on students enrolled in three undergraduate courses within a Faculty of Education in 2010. Nearly 10% of newly enrolling students applied for credit on the basis of previous study at TAFE in that year. Historically, credit transfer arrangements were made by staff involved in the mapping of content across both programs of study at TAFE and the University but with limited feedback from students. Anecdotal reports have been used to implement changes supporting students in these courses, however, this study was undertaken to inform the development of resources and programs that will ensure a successful academic experience for those entering with advanced standing in the future.

Interviews were semi-structured in nature with a focus on the following broad areas:

- *Reasons for coming to university*
- *Initial experiences of this environment*
- *Expectations and realities*
- *Factors that assisted or hindered student success*
- *Identity formation*

The semi-structured nature of the interviews meant that the flow of conversation ultimately directed the sequence in which questions were asked. The objective was to allow participants the ‘space’ to develop their own stories rather than impose a rigid formula to the interview. Following transcription the interview text was coded in two phases namely initial coding and then focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). Initial coding was conducted on a line-by-line basis, examining words and segments of text for “analytic import” (p.42). These largely artificial and simplistic constructs enable the exploration of particular social phenomena and, as a heuristic device, coding allows greater analytic clarity and a large degree of reflection. Coding was also conducted at an inductive and abductive level, in order to break through the “ordinariness of a routine event” (Charmaz, 2006, p.53). The techniques utilised to “interrogate” text included completing line-by-line analysis and using “in-vivo” coding with the software program NVivo (Version 8) so that the emerging categories remained embedded within the participants’ discourse (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.65).

## Participants

The eight participants were recruited through student emails and advertisements via the Faculty website, as well as snowball sampling where one participant recommended the study to colleagues or friends. While the participants were all female, there was great diversity in relation to background and the pathway each had followed to undertaking study at university. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 57 years, with the younger students moving directly from school to TAFE and then to university in a relatively direct manner. The pathway for older students had more diversions and interruptions describing a variety of stages in their educational and employment careers before arrival at university. This non-linear trajectory is not uncommon for women as they re-enter study pathways and the workforce following child rearing in particular (Lysaght, 2001; Pascall & Cox, 1993).

As mentioned earlier, the participants were enrolled in one or another of three particular degrees. In all cases, established pathways exist for students who have completed diploma level study in the vocational education sector. Table 1 (below) provides details about each participant as well as a summary of the qualifications for which advanced standing was awarded. The quotes that follow are referenced by pseudonyms allocated to each participant.

TABLE 1: Here

### ***Analysis and discussion***

The following sections explore how the students chose to define and narrate their experiences of arriving at university with advanced standing. Whilst the students' accounts reflect different pathways, commonalities of experience and perspectives on this journey were noted. Some broad themes emerged from their stories and provide a focus for the following discussion:

- *Advanced standing and prior learning experience*
- *Perspectives of vocational providers compared to university*
- *Knowledge and positionality within the university environment*

#### ***“Advanced standing kind of makes it sound like I stand ahead...” (Naomi)***

In the higher education institution where this research occurred the term “advanced standing” is defined as “credit or exemptions granted to a student” based on prior learning experiences. Students who received this “credit” perceived it in both negative and positive terms. In all, half of the students interviewed identified negative outcomes associated with the process of receiving advanced standing whilst only one referred to this in positive terms. For some, there was a certain level of confusion about the nature of the advanced standing and why it was awarded:

*[I]...don't feel that my advanced standing has really given me anything. I don't feel that there is really any recognition when it is truly looked at [in] the big picture, there really is no advanced standing. (Lara)*

Those who viewed advanced standing negatively often perceived it as a “loss” in relation to the range of subjects they could select. Both Lucy and Naomi lamented the fact that electives were no longer available to them; both regarded this as impacting on the quality of their learning experience at university:

*It was actually electives that I got off and I said: “well electives is something that I am actually really interested in” because that is... personal learning. (Lucy)*

*I don't wait for electives that are never going to come. (Naomi)*

However, while the basis for obtaining advanced standing was described negatively by some, the actual educational experience was not similarly regarded. Instead, attending TAFE prior to coming to university was universally regarded as beneficial. This perspective may have been due in part to a rose coloured glasses syndrome but the nature of these reflections is worthy of further analysis.

#### ***Prior Learning Experiences: “I think TAFE is a lot more laymen's terms...” (Mary)***

On a practical level, the participants explained how attending TAFE had provided foundational knowledge of the discipline, which largely complemented what they were learning at university:

*I go and sometimes get out the TAFE stuff to help me try and understand the Uni stuff. (Mary)*

*So things come up and I'm like: "Oh I remember that from TAFE" (Belinda)*

Four of the students refer to their prior VET learning experiences as an opportunity to "try things out" career or study wise. In terms of studying, the students talk about TAFE as providing a "taster" or confirming the area as suitable for a long-term career. For example, Anna explains how she now advises friends and family to use TAFE as a means to experiment with the profession, explaining that this has less financial repercussions than university. Similarly, Belinda explains how attending TAFE made her realise that she has a "passion" for young children but she simultaneously wonders about the commitment of her university peers:

*Whereas I kind of look at some of them and think I wonder if it's really what they want to do or if it's just something they have come to after school.*

TAFE was characterised as a safe space to experiment without making the time and financial commitments required of university. The more intimate environment of TAFE acted as an enabler for participants. Lara explains that at age eighteen, university just seemed "too big" and "too academic" so attending TAFE provided a safer space to learn:

*TAFE wasn't as huge and I think too because TAFE was more hands on or it seemed to be more hands on. (Lara)*

Similarly, Nancy explains that she prefers "the more tutorial style teaching at TAFE where it is smaller groups". These perceived differences extended beyond the structural elements of the institutions and were defined in relation to various facets of operation of both institutions. The next section provides an overview of these differences as identified by the students themselves.

### ***Perspectives of vocational providers when compared to university***

Participants identified the three main areas of difference between TAFE and university as:

- Structural and economic
- Learning methods and expectations
- Academic and social relationships

Whilst five of the eight participants entered university after furthering their life experiences, their perceptions of difference were largely similar to those who directly transitioned from TAFE, however an age and maturity perspective was evident.

### ***Structural and Economic Differences: "such a big place with so much resources and so many different teachers" (Mary)***

Similar to Cameron's (2004) study "like high school" was the comparative used by six of the eight participants in describing the TAFE class structure, timetable and teaching style. Classes were small and stable with all required content presented by the teacher. As Lara explains: "you were handfed a lot". University on the other hand, with the mass formal

lectures and associated academic expectations, was variously found to be “*confusing*”, “*different*” and “*frustrating*” (Lucy, Anna).

Participants in the study perceived the TAFE experience as supported, controlled (Pearce, Murphy & Conroy, 2000) and vocationally oriented, one in which you are “*never alone*” (Belinda), whilst university was deemed a mass system due to its structure, size and learning perspective. Three students explicitly refer to university in hierarchical terms, perceiving it as being higher in status using terms like “*pinnacle*” (Naomi) or “*way up here*” (Lara). Mary explains that it was precisely this elevated status that made her dismiss this pathway initially as she thought: “*I would never get into Uni; there is no way...*” Such a sentiment echoes Green and Webb’s (1997) study where the majority of their alternative entrants did not perceive of university as a possibility after leaving school; there was clear delineation around who could attend university and who could not.

### ***Expectations: “a big gap between what we expect and then what we find” (Naomi)***

It is within the context of expectations around learning methods that the differences between TAFE and university experiences were most distinct. Similar to the “recurring, overlapping variables” reported by Dickson (2000, n/p), the depth of knowledge required at a university level was described as being well above that of TAFE, which was grounded in vocational experiential learning. Catherine claims university was “*more in depth...[you’ve] got to be a self-learner... committed to keep reading*” but continues by explaining how it came as a shock to realise “*there was so much learning to be done*”.

The expectation of independent, self-directed learning at university was cited by five participants as vastly different to the competency skills-based learning at TAFE. Assessment tasks at TAFE were reported as outcomes based, focussing on specific skills required for industry work, and were based on pass/fail whilst graded written assignments formed the basis of university assessments. Whilst some written assignments were completed during their TAFE studies differences in marks were noted: “*coming from TAFE with distinctions to come here to just pulling credits*” (Mary). Both Anna and Lucy failed assignments during first year university because of referencing requirements. The narratives of these students echo findings from Watson (2006) who found “*work that received good marks at TAFE was failed at uni*” (p.28) due in part to the “*expectations regarding academic literacy...[that involves] skills of critical thinking and analysis*” (Watson, 2008, p44).

Mary explains that more depth was required for academic writing in university and an increased complexity of terminology and language usage. She also notes how “*she wouldn’t have survived [uni] without having gone to TAFE first...TAFE stuff help[ed] me understand the uni stuff*”. This statement echoes the foundational nature of TAFE studies mentioned earlier and frequently referred to by the students throughout these interviews.

While the participants saw value in their previous vocational studies, this value-add was not necessarily acknowledged within the university sector. Mary, Lara, and Lucy, as mature aged students, variously describe a sense of disconnectedness at the beginning of their degree. Lara refers to the age differential within the student cohort, saying how at the initial stage of her studies she felt “*like [she] should be at home baking cookies*” whilst Lucy and Mary believed no recognition was given by lecturing staff for prior learning and/or life experiences. Lucy continues by describing how there was an unspoken expectation that she “*was coming to the university with a blank slate...starting back from scratch again*”.

Part of this feeling was attributed to the nature of the relationships between the students and staff, which further influenced the perceptions of participants.

***Academic and social relationships: “there was a certain level of protocol, not unfriendliness” (Lucy)***

All participants reflected upon the new relationships and networks established within the university environment. For Lucy, Mary, Belinda and Naomi the relationships between academic staff and participants in a TAFE context was summed up as being “*a lot more personal*” (Lucy) due predominately to the daily face-to-face contact with teaching staff. Relationships with university lecturers on the other hand were more impersonal in part due to lecture/tutorial structure, as well as academic protocol (Lucy), however Mary found technology enabled her “*more contact with teachers through SOLS [Online Learning System] and emailing*” along with the open door policy of many of her lecturers. This surprised Mary as she was warned at TAFE that she would need to “*toughen up and stuff like that*” because contact with staff would be minimal.

The relative youth of university students was also reflected upon by a number of older participants. Lara explains that “*when I enrolled, that was my old moment, my first ever one*”. Similarly, Nancy describes how:

*I felt old, well I didn't really feel old but I was with younger people who probably thought I was old in their eye.*

Throughout TAFE, the age of fellow students was similar whereas returning to university study as a mature-age student there were “*not many of us*” (Lara). Indeed, this age difference led Lucy to describe TAFE as “*an adult learning environment*” compared to university which, contrary to Cameron (2004), she describes as “*a high school leaver's environment*”. This diversity in age cohorts resulted in Lucy feeling that interactions at TAFE were always on an adult level whereas coming into first year university, as a mature-age student with academic TAFE qualifications, she was still treated like a first year straight from high school. Whilst academic rigor and protocol were key components of lectures she felt the way of communicating with students was dismissive:

*There is a blanket way of communicating with students...sometimes that came across for a mature person as slightly demeaning.*

The Mature Aged Orientation session at the beginning of her degree was “*one of the first and nearly last times that I was communicated to at the same level*” (Lucy). George and Maguire (1998) suggest that some lecturers fail to perceive the older student cohort and tend to position all students as “*recent school leavers*” (p.422), which further “*others*” this older cohort.

***Knowledge and positionality within the university environment: “I try to keep quiet in classes...I don't want to be a know it all” (Lucy)***

Despite having successfully completed qualifications within the vocational education sector, the participants felt nervous about their academic performance in the university environment. They believed that their qualifications would provide a foundation for university studies but their experiences varied as they participated in subjects offered at different levels. Some experiences hinged on perceived differences between academic requirements across the two

sectors whilst others related to how they positioned themselves or how they believed others positioned them.

Vocational education in Australia is framed by a competency-based approach to learning, requiring learners to demonstrate competence in clearly identified skills. In higher education, the expectation is that students will develop critical thinking skills that allow them to engage in theoretical reasoning and analysis. The differences in these approaches include expectations about student performance in assessment items, as well as variations in teaching styles. Wheelahan (2007) argues that the two different approaches to teaching and learning delineate those who have access to certain forms of knowledge from those who do not. The more powerful styles of reasoning and knowledge discourses are situated within the higher education environment and typically are negotiated in relation to particular discipline areas.

Students who receive advanced standing on the basis of previous educational qualifications may also be regarded as “different” or as a discrete subgroup within an entire cohort, both by themselves and by others. Despite an apparent “invisibility” in terms of the system that may disadvantage them, members of this group may be wary of appearing to stand out because of their previously acquired knowledge. For example, Lucy valued the prior knowledge she had gained but this was tempered by a reluctance to make herself obvious through involvement in open discussions:

*I try to keep quiet in classes so that other people’s ideas can come forward [and]...because I don’t want to be a know it all*

She went on to confess that, whilst “*the knowledge comes flowing in*” when she is writing assignments, she will not involve herself in class discussions: “*I could put my hand up like this all the time in the lectures, but I just don’t*”. Other participants also mentioned a reticence to stand out in their classes by demonstrating prior knowledge or understanding although they all conceded that this was an advantage at the individual level.

The term “mixed progression” is commonly used within this faculty to denote those who have entered with advanced standing and whose progress will follow a particular pattern. For example, a schedule distributed at enrolment outlines the pattern of subjects that can be taken to complete a particular four-year degree in three years due to the credit that has been awarded. The subjects taken in first year are a mix of first, second and third year subjects, hence the term “mixed progression” to denote the progress of these students through the degree. The students have become known as the “mixed progression group” and refer to themselves in those terms.

Belinda explains this situation very clearly:

*We were called “mixed progression”...which was the way we went through the course, I guess. And so we had...a couple of first year subjects, a couple of second year subjects, even a third year. So they have obviously taken the subjects that we don’t have to do and then slipped us in to all the ones that we do.*

She mentions at a later point that these students have “*become quite close*” and “*stuck...together*” but she also pointed out that “*because it’s such a small group with advanced standing I don’t feel like I’ve got to meet as many people as I probably would have liked.*”

Melissa confirmed this view and referred to the advanced standing group in her cohort as “*my mixed progression girls*” explaining that “*like birds of a feather [they] stick together*”. Mary also explains that a division is sometimes evident when students are called on to work together in groups that are not based on this difference in progression:

*For one of my [mixed progression] girls, she is in a subject now where she is struggling a bit because no one wanted to work with her.*

She reiterates this point later with a different example:

*There was one girl...who was willing to come and work on a group thing but no one else would put their hand up or walk over and say they would be in a group to do a group subject with us...So it gets a bit frightening to go in a class if you think a teacher is going to split us up.*

This sense of exclusion is echoed by another participant but from a different perspective. Anna describes feeling excluded or “othered” when she heard students talking about a subject that she was not eligible to complete because she had received credit for it. She explained that this “...causes a bit of a barrier I guess, in the sense that you feel, I didn’t do that subject and we didn’t do that at TAFE”. For Anna, there is a sense of being apart from others because of what it is assumed that she knows. This difference in knowledge was a disadvantage “*especially in group work because of a lack of shared experience*”. Like Mary, Anna believed that this disadvantage is compounded when other students who have not received credit are unwilling to undertake group work with those who have.

Whether because of imagined or real divisions, the pathway for students with advanced standing is not as smooth as it might be. They value the knowledge gained through the vocational education sector, and while recognition is provided formally within the university, they struggle for validation on their own terms and also in the eyes of their peers. With the particular cohort involved in this study, there appears to be little question that their academic performance is satisfactory but their personal and social standing appears under threat, particularly when they are isolated from one another. Their strength as individuals is gained through their acceptance within the “*mixed progression group*” rather than on their own terms.

### ***Conclusions and Recommendations***

The size of this study means that the experiences articulated are in no way universally applicable. Instead, the intention of the research was to elicit a subjective response to the lived experience of students moving between vocational and higher education to initiate further discussion in this area.

Based on these interviews, a number of points emerged that are worthy of further consideration. Primarily, the participants seemed confused by the basis on which advanced standing or credit was awarded. This suggests that there is a need for increased transparency within institutions, which would be complemented by common frameworks and approaches across institutions. Indeed, the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education also identified this need suggesting the implementation of “...common terminology and common graded assessment across the two sectors” (DEEWR, 2008, p.173). While most universities in Australia have established credit arrangements with vocational providers, particularly the national TAFE colleges, these arrangements are largely ad-hoc, with credit agreements varying not only across but also within institutions. The development of some sort of shared

academic culture between these sectors would undoubtedly assist the students transitioning between sectors.

Certainly, the recognition of the skills and knowledge that the students bring with them from the vocational sector is another consideration for higher education providers, particularly how best to incorporate this within the teaching and learning environment. The participants in this study did not necessarily perceive themselves as lacking knowledge rather the knowledge they had gained somehow differed to what was expected in the university environment. McBeath (2003) describes how her research on cross-sectoral articulation reveals a certain level of “suspicion” held by universities that tasks taught within the vocational sector lack “the theoretical underpinning knowledge, and hence rigor, required by university study” (p.5). Differences between the two sectors were also manifested in the ways that students described their decisions to come to university and their sense of belongingness within the institution.

Perceptions of belongingness are particularly noticeable in the narratives of the older students, many of whom describe how after school, university was regarded as “not for them”. Such preconceptions suggest that these learners may be a particularly vulnerable cohort, requiring validation of the skills and experiences that they bring to the higher education environment rather than their prior learning being ignored. Cameron (2004) points out that:

*For TAFE students entering university, who are often adult students from disadvantaged backgrounds and who usually left secondary school early...the induction to university can be very stressful. (p.3)*

This stress can arguably be partially alleviated by a consideration and even celebration of the prior learning these students already hold. Such recognition was not something the participants in this study experienced. Indeed, for some, this prior knowledge was deliberately hidden as it was perceived as further alienating them from other student cohorts.

One final point relates to the nature of the “pathways” taken between vocational and higher education. Arguably, the expected and desired student career path is one characterised by continuous service, one of linear progression where students enter the institution and then progress steadily until completion. However, Giles (1990) argues that such assumptions do not reflect the reality of women returning to education. The assumption cannot be “one of unproblematic forward movement from a position of lack to one of gain” (para. 4). Similarly, Crossan, Field, Gallagher and Merrill (2003) argue that this linearity may be reflective of the learning careers of younger students who come to university after completing school however, it fails to recognise the very different pathways taken by other learners. Instead, the learning careers of adults tend to be “complex” and “multi-directional” (Crossan et al, 2003, p.65).

Perhaps a better way of conceiving of these pathways is as ‘swirling’ rather than linear (Harris, Rainey & Sumner, 2006). In the study by Harris et al (2006) of 49 students, this movement was variously described as “stepping stones”, “zigzags” and “crooked paths” (p.10). In common with the older women in the present study, their participants all had “diverse, complex and interesting” (p.38) pathways between and within educational institutions. However, the current credit transfer and articulation arrangements within Australia do emphasise a “time-served” (McLaughlin & Mills, 2011, p.78) model where linearity is assumed and also favoured. Such sequential models then do not reflect the disrupted pathways that learners actually take during their studies and this is particularly the case for women.

Whilst not making any claims for statistical significance, small-scale qualitative research projects such as this do offer the possibility for practitioners to make connections to their own institutions and workplaces. We hope that readers can identify with the voices and words of the participants featured in this study, perhaps even perceiving similarities with their own student population and educational contexts. Arguably such recognition facilitates the possibility of instigating structural and educational change for this particular student cohort.

*Word count (including references, tables and figures): 6,761*

## Appendix One

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Commenced</b>	<b>Pathway</b>	<b>HSC</b>
Naomi	22	2009	HSC - TAFE (Diploma) - University	Yes
Catherine	57	2009	5 <sup>th</sup> Year - TAFE (Diploma) 11yrs gap - University	No
Anna	24	2008	TAFE - University	No
Belinda	20	2009	Year 10 - TAFE (Diploma) - University	No
Lara	38	2010	HSC - TAFE (Cert. IV.) - Work (Community services) - TAFE (Diploma) – Work (Teacher’s aide) - University	Yes
Lucy	37	2010	Work/travel - TAFE (Diploma) – family - TAFE (Diploma) - University	No
Nancy	35	2007	HSC - TAFE (Diploma) – Work - Family commitments UNI (Arts degree 12 months in 2006) - University	Yes
Mary	36	2010	HSC - TAFE (withdrew illness) - TAFE (Cert IV) - Work/travel/family - TAFE (Diploma) - University	Yes

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