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# Navigating the knowledge sets of older learners: Exploring the capitals of first-infamily mature age students

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This paper is based upon research with Australian students who were the first in their family to come to university. The studies sought to explore how attending university impacted upon both the learners and their families, particularly the intergenerational implications of this attendance. Drawing on indepth interviews conducted with older university students enrolled in a medium sized regional university, this paper will focus on how this mature cohort articulated the ways in which they drew upon life and work experiences during their transition to university. Applying the Community Cultural Framework (Yosso, 2005) this article proposes that these learners brought a range of capitals to the higher education environment including what has been termed 'experiential capital'. In exploring the characteristics and sources of these capitals, the paper will include suggestions about how higher education institutions might seek to both recognise and nurture such resources within the tertiary sector.

## **Keywords**

knowledge, sets, older, navigating, learners:, students, exploring, age, capitals, first-infamily, mature

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## Navigating the knowledge sets of older learners: Exploring the capitals of first-in-family mature age students

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**Abstract** This paper is based upon research with Australian students who were the first in their family to come to university. The studies sought to explore how attending university impacted upon both the learners and their families, particularly the intergenerational implications of this attendance. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted with older university students enrolled in a medium sized regional university, this paper will focus on how this mature cohort articulated the ways in which they drew upon life and work experiences during their transition to university. Applying the Community Cultural Framework (Yosso, 2005) this article proposes that these learners brought a range of capitals to the higher education environment including what has been termed 'experiential capital'. In exploring the characteristics and sources of these capitals, the paper will include suggestions about how higher education institutions might seek to both recognise and nurture such resources within the tertiary sector.

**Key words:** Mature aged learners, cultural capitals, higher education, widening participation

### Background

Globally, university enrolments continue to increase and a substantial number of these commencing students are older, often returning to education after a significant gap in learning (OECD, 2013). Increased numbers of older students is not a universal phenomenon but growth in this student population is particularly noted in Australia. This upsurge in older learners is related to a reduction in student enrolments directly from school (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005) resulting in a significant percentage of enrolled undergraduate students who are aged 25 or above (40%) (ABS, 2012).

In addition to mature aged students, another significant cohort within the Australian higher education (HE) environment are those students who are the first in their family to attend university. This cohort has been reported to be almost 51% of the total university population (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), a figure based on parental levels of education. While this figure does not account for the wider family biographies of learners, it does indicate how a large proportion of the university cohort may have had limited exposure to this learning environment. The large percentage of first-in-family students in Australian universities is perhaps not that surprising given that this HE sector has been in a 'phase of educational expansion' (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013, p.321), particularly since the introduction of participation benchmarks and targets for the sector (Australian Government, 2009). This first-generation or first-in-family (FiF) group is recognised as being at greater risk of attrition and also, regarded as typically encountering additional barriers and complexities in their HE journey (Mehta, Newbold & O'Rourke, 2011; Oldfield, 2012; Rendon, 1995).

Ball, Davies, David and Reay in their UK study (2002) report how the lack of a university 'script' within the family can limit the educational preparedness of these learners (p. 57). FiF status is also reported as possibly reducing individuals' perceptions of their sense of fit or 'acceptance' within the institution, resulting in limited sense of belonging and accompanying lower levels of confidence (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). As a result, this cohort may have to complete additional and often invisible 'work' in relation to university attendance, such as reassuring others they have made the right decision or that this is a prudent investment in their future as well as acting as an enabler for others considering further education (Thomas & Quinn, 2007, p.59).

The particular issues and obstacles encountered by older students, particularly those with child dependents, are also documented in the literature (Gouthro, 2006; Hinton-Smith, 2009, Reay, 2003) so this article will focus on how one cohort of older FiF students enacted success within this HE environment. This focus recognises the limited understanding we have about how older 'second chance' learners manage and succeed within this educational environment. The study sought to analyse the capitals that one cohort of older, FiF learners drew upon during their transition to the university environment and at significant points during their learning journeys. Rather than focus on the deficits or weaknesses of individuals, this research wanted to understand how participants conceptualise themselves as successful learners and what assisted in the enactment of this success.

The questions guiding this study included: (1) What knowledges and skills did students reflect upon as assisting them in their transition to university? and (2) In what ways did existing social and cultural

constructs translate into and interact with the university environment? The significant growth in older learners combined with overall increases in the proportion of those who are the first in their family to attend university (OECD, 2013) warrants a deeper exploration of how these individuals succeed within this environment.

## Literature Review

This literature review focuses on the particular learning contexts of older students who are the first in their immediate family to attend university. Acknowledging the importance of learners' intersectionality, the review refers to this student cohort in terms of maturity, gender and social status, with reference to educational risk. These topics provide both background context and also, justification for the particular theoretical and methodological choices made.

The term 'risk' has been applied to the HE context, particularly for those students who are regarded as 'non-traditional' learners (Archer, 2007; Brine & Waller, 2004; Wakeford, 1994; Reay 2003, Johnston & Merrill, 2009). Returning to education as an older learners has been described as both 'tentative and fraught with fear of failure' (Hinton-Smith, 2009, p.115), anxieties similarly echoed by participants in Kasworm's study (2010) on adult returners. For mature learners, who may be from low socio-economic backgrounds, this movement into the HE environment has been described as a 'risky' business (Reay, 2003). This risk associated with, amongst other things, issues related to finance, changes in relationships and also, risks to identity.

### *Older students and financial risks*

The financial risks associated with HE participation are well documented in the literature, particularly for those from poorer backgrounds (Rauscher & Elliott III, 2014; Nissen, 2015; Shaw, 2014). However, for older learners who may be a breadwinner in the home, the need to carefully consider university attendance is imperative; such consideration referencing both the needs of the self, and also broader family commitments.

In the UK, Shaw (2014) explains how part-time learners report both personal and public risks related to finances. On an individual level, fears include misapprehensions that returning to education will be perceived as a 'selfish' act resulting in possible 'suffering' for dependents. While on a more public level, learners reported anxiety about gaining graduate employment and repaying their student debt, given their age (p.844). In the United States, Edel (2012-2013) argues that the increasing costs

required to attend university are tantamount to a 'higher education bubble' which just like the housing bubble will inevitably burst at some point (p. 1559). Edel predicts that this collapse will lead to both enormous student debt and increased social unrest.

Student debt in Australia is already very high and it has been predicted that this will increase to \$70 billion AUD by 2017 (Hare, 2015). In recognition of this, the Australian government is currently considering introducing more stringent regulations about loan repayments and also, lowering the repayment threshold (Knott, 2016).

### ***Older students and relational risks***

The changes to relationships engendered by this return to HE are similarly well defined, particularly for older female learners with caring responsibilities. Andrew, Maslin-Prothero et al (2015) conducted an extensive study of older nursing students' experiences of returning to university and found that partners significantly 'enabled' or 'hindered' this return. The authors point to the impacts such support factors have on the progression of this student cohort and the implications for the nursing profession. Similarly, Stone and O'Shea (2013) explored the learning narratives of older students and found that it was frequently women who reported conflicts in relationships with partners and significant others.

Arguably for the older student cohort, this movement into university can represent a 'non-normative transition' (Mercer, 2007, p.30), that occurs at an unexpected or unanticipated stage in life. Mercer (2007) argues that this aberrant nature may translate into less family and social support available to individuals. Yet, such lack should not necessarily be dismissed as a negative and can result in learners becoming more self reliant, as a 'motivator, facilitator and regulator' of their studies (Mercer, 2007, p.30). Little research focuses on how such internal influences are played out within the lives of individuals, so a deeper qualitative understanding of this enactment is required.

### ***Older students and identity risks***

The risks to identity are more subtly understood for mature returners. Wainwright and Marandet (2010) highlight how '...adopting a new identity of learner in addition to the continued identity, role and responsibilities of parent can be challenging' (p.458). These are not necessarily gendered risks but have been reported more in the literature on female caregivers (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal & Kilkey, 2008; Edwards, 1993; O'Shea, 2015). Mallman and Lee (2014) point out that very little is known about the actual identity work of older learners of both genders, particularly the 'emotional dynamics of inhabiting a new learner identity' (p.5).

While transitions in identity occur for both older and younger learners it is important to recognise how these are bounded by particular ages and stages of life. Adult transitions are ‘frequently multiple and multilinear, the adult life course is ever less defined by precise age-related stages; and support mechanisms are fragmented and spread between the public and – increasingly so –the private sector’. (Field, 2009, p.22). Identity work for this older cohort can be particularly difficult, as they have been described as performing this from a position of ‘stigma’ defined by age and maturity (Mallman & Lee, 2014, p.9). These authors describe how the older participants in their study internalised this ‘stigmatised other’ and modified their identity positions accordingly. This stigma was largely constructed based on the younger students perceptions of what was appropriate behavior within the HE context, with older participants indicating that ‘... they were not only aware of the stigma...but that they chose to modify their behaviour’ (p.9).

Research in this field underlines the issues and obstacles that older learners may encounter in their transition to university, but there remains a need to deeply research the emotionality of this journey (Christie, Tett, et al, 2008). Returning to education as a mature learner may be a pattern of engagement that is reflected globally (Skilbeck, 2006) but few in-depth studies explore the capital reserves that learners draw upon whilst moving into this educational environment. Hence, this article draws on students’ narratives to better understand the knowledges and skills that diverse student populations bring to the university landscape, rather than assume that these learners always occupy a position of lack.

## **Theoretical approach**

The research outlined in this paper recognises how any discussions of university participation and engagement need to draw upon a multiplicity of people and experiences to enable us to move beyond deficit discourses and an over reliance on equity constructs (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This process was assisted by reference to the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) framework developed by Yosso (2005), which recognises the cultural strengths of diverse student groups. The CCW Framework has been largely theorised in relation to Students of Colour within the United States, but equally has careful and considered application to other under-represented groups throughout society.

In developing CCW, Yosso (2005) further developed Bourdieu’s perspectives on cultural capital. Yosso (2005) argues that Bourdieusian concepts of cultural capital assume that white middle class culture is the ‘standard’, which can result in other types of culture being ‘judged in comparison’ (p.76). In essence, Yosso (2005) built upon established interpretations of Bourdieu’s work in order to better understand the intersection of student and institutional capital. As Yosso (2005)

explains, traditional Bourdieusian cultural capital theory ‘...place[s] value on a very narrow range of assets and characteristics’. (p.77).

Yosso proposes that there are alternate forms of cultural practices and wisdom that are equally valued by more marginalized or less powerful groups. The CCW framework then moves beyond deficit perspectives to actively reframe the assumption that individuals need to adapt or conform in order to exhibit the accepted cultural capitals. Yosso proposes six forms of capital or ‘cultural wealth’ including ‘aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant.’ **Aspirational** capital relates to an ability to hold hope and dreams for the future despite real and perceived obstacles. **Resistance** capital refers to the qualities and behaviours used to inform oppositional behaviours whilst **linguistic** capital recognises the value of both oral and visual forms of communication. **Navigational** capital acknowledges an individual’s ability to negotiate and move through social institutions, which may be both intimidating and hostile. Whereas **social** capital refers to the networks that surround people that provide both concrete and emotional support. Finally, **familial** capital identifies the knowledges that family and community relationships provide. While these capitals are culturally and ethnically specific, applying CCW to this data allowed the deep exploration of the ‘voices’ of one group of disadvantaged / marginalized students and also to think ‘differently’ about the FiF student experience. In particular, this theoretical application enabled the students’ narratives to be examined in terms of what FiF individuals bring to the university environment and how these types of capitals or wealths potentially enable them to enact success.

This paper seeks to both consider which of Yosso’s ‘cultural wealths’ resonate with this particular cohort and also interrogate the possible ‘silences’ in this work, specifically as these relate to older, FiF students returning to learning after a significant interruption in educational participation. The term ‘silences’ is being used to signify possible theoretical gaps in this framework that have resulted from applying it to various cohorts and contexts. Whilst Yosso (2005) regards CCW as having application to a range of underrepresented groups, it is necessary to remain mindful to the possibility of new and emerging themes within the data. Using Yosso’s framework permitted me to ‘think alongside the data’ (O’Shea, 2016, p. 64), moving recursively between the students’ stories and Yosso’s capitals. This approach permitted new concepts to emerge from the data rather than assuming the neat application of an existing framework.

## Methodology

This paper presents research conducted with FiF students at an Australian university between 2013-2015. For the purposes of this study, FiF status was defined as having no one in the immediate family including partners, parents, siblings and children who had previously attended university.

The research was conducted in two stages. An initial study was conducted in 2013 and students were recruited via an email sent out to a random selection of first year commencing students who indicated on their enrolment forms that neither parent had attended university. A total of 26 first-in-family students were interviewed but only the narratives of the older students (those over 25 years) who had no other family members involved in university have been drawn upon in this analysis (n = 13). This focus on older students is based upon similarities in education and employment biographies. The younger participants (18-25) were largely single and living at home; this group also demonstrated cultural wealths but these were influenced by living conditions and more recent educational experiences, whereas the older students shared gaps in educational participation and similarly held extensive life or employability experiences. Such patterns of difference are echoed more broadly in Australian research, Western, McMillan and Durrington (1998) report that students over the age of 25 years are statistically more likely to be married, have children, and be living independently of parents. These authors suggest that 25 years should be regarded as an age threshold for researching students in university. Such a demarcation would recognise that those under 25 years and those over 25 years 'have distinct sociodemographic profiles' (p.120) with each cohort warranting separate and considered attention.

Whilst the study was small-scale, the use of open-ended narrative biographical interviews generated rich data. Students were encouraged to reflect deeply on their motivations for attending university and the ways in which they enacted success within this environment. Drawing on analysis from this initial study, the second study sought to elaborate on themes related to the cultural wealth of older participants, with specific reference to Yosso's framework. This latter study was conducted between 2014-2015 and a total of nineteen older students, with ages ranging from 25 – 62 years, agreed to participate in in-depth interviews.

Participants were recruited on the basis of being the first member of their immediate family, which included siblings, parents, main caregivers, life partners and children, to attend university. Each of the participants engaged in one in-depth interview of between 40–50 minutes. Open questions were framed to provide students with opportunities to story this experience, using familiar language and

metaphors rather than the rhetoric of the institution. While all the interviews were semi-structured in nature, some of the questions included the following: *How are you managing to fit university into other aspects of your life? How is university spoken about in your household? How have these conversations changed over time? Do you think you are knowledgeable about the university environment? If yes, how did you gain this knowledge? If no, what knowledge do you feel you are lacking?*

Table (1) provides an overview of all the participants (all of whom are referred to by pseudonyms) and indicates the diversity of this group in terms of age, background and also, discipline focus. Included in this participant group are parenting and carer students as well as those experiencing financial or social stratification, with many being derived from low socio-economic backgrounds (LSES). This diverse life experience added greater depth to the findings, recognising that individuals are intersected by multiple biographical and social considerations.

Table (1): Demographic information of participants

Pseudo	Gender	Age	Status P S D W	Sole Parent Y/N	Children Y/N	No. of children	Program	Stage
Nick	M	39	P	N	Y	4	B Education	1
Hannah	F	33	P	N	Y	5	B Nursing	1
Elle	F	33	S	Y	Y	3	B Arts	2
Nadir	M	25	S	N	N	0	B Information Technology	2
Emma	F	32	P	N	Y	1	B Nursing	1
Natalia	F	27	S	N	N	0	Medicine	2
Ursula	F	45	P	N	N	0	B Arts	1
Graeme	M	31	S	N	N	0	B Science	4
Yvonne	F	38	S	Y	Y	2	B Arts	3
Asha	F	34	D	Y	Y	3	B Arts	final
Daniel	M	30	P	N	N	0	B Engineering	final
Hien	F	29	S	N	N	0	B Commerce	1
Allana	F	30s	P	N	Y	2	B Nursing	1
Ebony	F	34	P	N	N	0	B Science	1
Stephen	M	31	P	N	N	0	B Nursing	final
Ally	F	39	S	Y	Y	2	B Psychology	1
Yve	F	26	P	N	N	0	B Arts	1
Anna	F	37	S	N	N	0	Medicine	1
Alan	M	42	P	N	Y	2	B Commerce	1
Nigel	M	26	S	N	N	0	B Education	1
Tina	F	28	P	N	N	0	B Science	1
Tom	M	62	P	N	N	0	B Commerce	1
Nancy	F	62	S	N	N	0	B Commerce	1
Ann	F	36	P	N	Y	2	B Science	1
Elaine	F	36	D	Y	Y	5	B Commerce	1
Eva	F	48	W	Y	Y	2	B Nursing	1
Lena	F	43	D	Y	Y	2	B Arts	1
Natalie	F	43	D	Y	Y	2	B Commerce	1
Rose	F	28	P	N	Y	2	B Arts	1
Sheila	F	28	P	N	Y	1	B Arts	1
Yvette	F	45	P	N	Y	2	B Arts	1
Adele	F	62	S	Y	Y	2	B Nursing	1

Both studies adopted a recursive approach to data analysis, which required a continual dipping into the data, reflection and then interrogation. This process was assisted through line-by-line analysis within the qualitative analysis software NVivo (10); the emerging thematic categories (or nodes) were then explored and questioned. Themes then emerged inductively from the interview narratives and were further refined through a process of reflection and memo writing. This act of writing enabled deeper engagement with the data, particularly as a means to check implicit assumptions and assumed understandings.

## Results and Implications

The focus in this analysis is on those learners who were over 25 years of age, many of who were returning to learning after a significant gap and shared many similar demographic attributes (Western, McMillan & Durrington, 1998). The median age for this cohort was 37 years and the majority were women (n=24). This group included a substantial number of parents (n=18) with a total of nine being sole parents, the latter were female only. Based on analysis, connections between Yosso's capitals were demonstrated in varying degrees within the data. Related publications have explored a number of these connections (O'Shea, 2016; 2014; O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, in-press) so the focus in this article is on connections to aspirational, social and familial capitals. While each of these will be treated discretely in the following sections, overlaps and intersections between capitals were apparent. Hence these are more appropriately defined as existing on a continuum of capitals rather than representing distinct forms of cultural wealth. The section begins with a summary overview of findings related to each and this is followed by a discussion of additional capitals specific to this older student cohort.

### *Aspirational Capital*

As mentioned, aspirational capital involves individuals 'nurturing a culture of possibility' (Yosso, 2005, p. 78) despite difficulties and obstacles. All the participants described how arriving at university had been the culmination of long-held desires and ambitions. While it was clear that sometimes these dreams had been hidden, this desire to attend university remained constant. Elle, a single parent of three children, reflected how her decision to come to university was embedded in a long-term ambition to:

*be self-sufficient. I don't want to be on government payments forever. I want to be able to earn my own way and not rely on a man ever again.*

Nick who left school and home at seventeen, described how his journey to HE had been somewhat disjointed and lengthy as *'there hasn't*

*been too many academic people in my life that have guided me in this direction; I've sort of done it for myself.'*

For Yvonne, getting to university was achieved despite family members who actively resisted her dream and plans, she explained that at age 38 she was finally able to overcome the negative voice of her father:

*in the back of my head going "You're a silly girl, you'll never get anywhere". And there's that little child past that just wants to go "Nah nah, got there."*

Asha explained how she had always lived in social housing but after a 'pretty nasty divorce' she decided to come to university to demonstrate:

*that just because that's where you come from it doesn't mean that it closes off your options ... You know, if I can do it, maybe they can do it.*

*(Asha, 34 year old mother of 3 (3, 9, 15), B. Arts)*

### ***Social Capital***

These learners were not only the first in their families to come to university but in many cases, their attendance was unique in their wider social environs. The reactions from those closest to the students was largely mixed. Some family members indicated fear and resentment about the costs of attendance and others were a little baffled by the whole concept of HE participation. Whilst this lack of understanding could limit the capabilities of others to directly inform the university experience, students reflected on a range of supports derived from such social networks. This often took the form of tangible and practical strategies to assist the learner, for example childcare, assistance with finances and also, cooking. Anna (37, single) described how her parents 'took away' things that were worrying her so 'that I didn't need to think about anything other than what was happening and my uni'. Ebony's mother provided fundamental support for her daughter's educational pursuits as she explained 'My mum would do anything; she's always making sure we're okay and that we've got food and whatever'. These resources were not necessarily visible or valued at an institutional level but often fundamentally impacted upon learners' educational experiences. Such social capital is strongly linked to what Yosso terms as familial capital, which shifts focus to the inspirations derived from family and community relationships, dealt with in the next section.

### ***Familial Capital***

The voices of 'others' predominated these interviews, these participants largely referred to family, friends and community members

as providing an impetus to both commence and continue with their studies. A number of the parents reflected on the significant influence that children had on their educational endeavours. One example is Allana who described how her son (aged 13) provided her with inspiration in her educational undertakings with her participation initiating new conversations in the home about possible educational futures. Allana explained how she is *'encouraging him because we always talk about [university] he said to me "Mum, I would love to do this and do this and do this"'*. Allana's academic activities were having powerful effects within this household, initiating new academic vistas and potentials. Such intergenerational impacts were similarly described in a number of the students' narratives; both learners and their significant others were impacted by this return:

*....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 themselves.*

(Elle, 33 year old single mother of three (aged 5, 9, 11), B. Arts)

*I want something better for my children.*

(Ally, 39 year old single mother of 2 (3, 9), B. Psychology)

*I definitely think it's [university] showing them [children] if you want something you've just got to do it; not everything is fun – you've just got to do the hard yards and get it done.*

(Hannah, 33 year old mother of 5 (3, 5, 8, 12, 13), B. Nursing)

Such familial capital arguably provided students, particularly mothers, with both the necessary motivation and also, incentive to continue with their studies and yet, this motivation is rarely recognised or celebrated within the university environment (O'Shea et al., in-press)

### ***'Silences' in Yosso's framework: Experiential Capitals***

Whilst Yosso's CCW framework was key to opening up this data and enabling analysis in terms of strengths rather than deficits, this analysis also pointed to 'silences' in this framing. This is understandable given the differences in the groups being explored and points to the need to explore the student experience in terms of the intersectionality of learners rather than assume a commonality across student populations.

The deeply personal accounts provided by these older participants indicated how this movement into university was an embodied one. A movement that was also underpinned by what has been termed 'experiential capital', which provided a rich but largely unacknowledged

resource in this HE journey. The term ‘experiential capital’ is being used to refer to knowledge sets that had been derived from life and professional experiences. Such experiences provided unexpected support and insider knowledges that learners indicated were having positive contribution to their academic success. The concept emerged from students’ narratives about how the university experience reflected previous stages in their life course and how existing skills or knowledges had contributed to this HE journey. These experiential capitals were manifested through references to self-awareness, motivation, resilience and tenacity, often realised through a priori career and biographical moments.

In terms of self-awareness, these mature students described how previous lived experience had provided them with a depth of understanding that could be applied to their learning. Tom at 62 years summed this up succinctly:

*...us oldies are well aware of [our] shortcomings. You don't get to our age without knowing what you're good at and what you're not good.*

(Tom, 62 years old, partnered no children, B Commerce)

This self-awareness could also provide a different knowledge set, replete with the personal, as Nick explained: ‘*...the drive I've realised has to come from me.*’ (Nick, 39 year old father of four (ages 1, 12, 14, 16), Primary Education). Others reported this self-awareness as providing insight into their particular strengths and weaknesses:

*Looking back, years ago, I wouldn't have even been able to, just my anxiety sort of convinced myself I couldn't have done it and I would have lost it.*

(Emma, 32 year old mother of one son (age 12), B Nursing)

Closely linked to self-awareness, is the level of motivation that these learners described in relation to their return to education. Again, this has been identified as an experiential capital as this motivation was frequently articulated in terms of the need to move beyond previous circumstances. The references to such motivating factors were frequently alluded to in these narratives. For example, Allana who had worked as a carer for an elderly relative reflected upon her desire and motivation to complete her nursing degree as follows:

*I said "I don't want to be making beds for the rest of my life", you know, I mean 50 and you come and make a bed? It's not good for your back. I said "I want to be somewhere".*

(Allana, 30s, mother of two (10, 13), B. Nursing)

Similarly, Graeme's motivation to succeed at his degree was derived from an 'epiphany' that recognised the hard physical nature of his role in a local steel company:

*I was a shunter so it's almost like an apprentice driver where you fix the train and you're responsible for the movement of [it] and the guy that I was working with his knees were gone, his back was gone, and I just had this epiphany - that's me in 30 years. I can't do that.*

(Graeme, 31 year old, no children, B. Science Education)

Experiential capital was also manifested in terms of the resilience and tenacity that featured in these students' narratives. Attending university was often completed in the face of a range of obstacles; but rather than deter individuals, these hurdles were described as largely providing impetus to continue. One of the older participants, Adele (aged 62) described how her maturity and experiences provided her with invisible capitals in this HE field:

*Tenacity, stubbornness and thinking I'm not going to let this beat me... And I think when you get older too, you find ways around things where maybe as a younger person you're "Oh my God, I'm stressed, stressed." As an older person I don't care. "I'll just go and see the coordinator. Don't get excited." You live and you learn.*

(Adele, 62 year old single, two adult children, B. Nursing)

Similarly, Nick explained how the 'school of hard knocks or being knocked down in the past, it sort of makes you more resilient sort of thing...' (Nick, 39 year old father of four (ages 1, 12, 14, 16), B. Education).

There remains a tendency to define older students in terms of deficit or lack, which can mean that their life knowledges remain largely underutilized and unrecognised within the university landscape. In these interviews, the participants reflected upon a range of abilities that included resilience; motivation and tenacity, often derived from their previous life experiences, which assisted them to succeed and persist.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The rich detailed data generated from this study indicated how FiF students do not necessarily arrive at university bereft of the necessary capitals to enact success but rather that the capitals they described are not necessarily those traditionally celebrated. In innovatively applying Yosso's framework to 'second-chance' learners (Giles, 1990) who are the first in their family to come to university; the study moves beyond a deficit discourse of student diversity where the individual student is 'blamed' for their lack of success and instead reframes diversity within a strengths perspective.

Significantly, this study provides the basis for further understanding of how the self and existing capitals are drawn upon when older, FiF students transition into, and engage with, the HE environment. While this study is small scale, the rich detailed insights provide suggestions for ways to improve the student experience for this cohort, particularly transition and outreach programs designed for older returners who are the first in their family to undertake tertiary studies. For example, recognising that FiF learners arrive with cultural wealths can assist institutions in putting strategies in place that 'open up' this understanding for both learners and staff. This could include using mentors, with similar biographies and life experiences, to demonstrate how these knowledges have assisted them to navigate and engage with the HE institution. Such peer learning could also assist in the normalization of university culture and create a culture of strengths-based understanding rather than assumptions of lack or deficit.

Similarly, there is a clearly defined need to understand learners in a more holistic sense, which includes recognising (and celebrating) personal and employment biographies. Shaw (2014) argues that the diversity of this mature age cohort needs to be recognised as a 'valuable commodity within a university' (p. 841); this group should be actively encouraged to participate in university rather than precluded due to perceived risks. Such insight could be derived from the inclusion of an initial assignment item that aims to encourage reflection on the part of the learner in relation to these existing strengths or life experiences. This exercise has a duo-fold purpose as it both allows the individual to consider how their life story has contributed to their educational aspirations and equally enables teaching staff insight, albeit partial, into their student cohort.

This research has pointed to the very real need for HE institutions to reconsider the types and range of capitals that are recognised and celebrated in this environment. With the significant numbers of older students returning to the tertiary sector in many countries (OECD, 2013), the need to revise our understandings and assumptions about this student

population is increasingly necessary. Arguably, older students arrive at the institution replete with cultural strengths and it is beholden on us as educators to build recognition of these both into our approach to pedagogy (or andragogy) and the curricula. For example, mature learners may well welcome the opportunity for independent research much earlier in their degree, similarly the opportunity to make connections between prior experiences and current knowledge acquisition may also be welcomed by this cohort. Above all, the need to explicitly recognise and celebrate what these learners 'bring to' this learning environment should outweigh presumptions of lack or deficit.

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