Transforming life opportunities and learning: stories of career change from mature age students in an Australian university

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Transforming Life Opportunities and Learning: Stories of Career Change from Mature Age Students in an Australian University

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Education

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

Li Tao

B.A., M.Ed in Adult Education & Human Resource Development
THESIS CERTIFICATION

I, LI TAO, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Education, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institutions.

LI TAO
8 June, 2009
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List of Abbreviations

ALP    Australian Labour Party
AQF    Australian Qualification Framework
OECD   Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
STAT   Special Tertiary Admission Test
STEP   Special Tertiary Entrance Program
TAFE   Technical and Further Education
TPC    Tertiary Preparation Certificate
UAI    University Admissions Index
UAC    University Admissions Centre
UAP    University Access Program
ABSTRACT

Since the early 1980s, neo-liberal economics or economic liberalism has become a dominant ideology impacting on Australian modern public policies including education. Globalization, technology advancement and free markets with minimal government interference have contributed to uncertainty in the Australian labour market that has posed risks in employment. An ethos of equality in educational opportunities for all and job insecurity has led to growing numbers of mature age students entering Australian universities in recent years.

The main purpose of this research is to explore why mature age students enter university after working for several years. In addition, the experiences of these students as they study at university as well as their perceptions about higher education in relation to employment are examined. A qualitative, narrative inquiry was employed to investigate the integration of higher education and career development among mature age students. Five mature age students from a range of faculties in the University of Gold Coast participated in the study. Face-to-face interviews, email discussions and document reviews provide the consistency of evidence across sources of data. The five stories with a thick description of the participants’ experiences ensured the credibility of the research findings of the study.

The outcome of the study illustrates that these mature age students believed that higher education could provide them with opportunities that could transform their lives. Engaging in higher education allowed them to pursue goals that would make them feel happy, fulfilled and empowered while meeting a range of social commitments. Most importantly, they developed a sense of agency after they succeeded through a very difficult process and grew in confidence. However, their anxiety for the future was not totally removed due to the expected gap between higher
education and the labour market.

The study overall provides insights and guidelines for learning and career development of mature age students, and this will benefit both mature age students and higher education institutions. The major implications for universities from this study is they need to recognize mature age students as a special group and this means that their demands for career services, entry pathways to higher education and work-base learning are different from younger age students. For mature age students, they need to positively take advantage of the valuable resources of their rich life and work experience in the uncertain labour market.
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