

University of Wollongong - Research Online

Thesis Collection

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

Author: Tao Li

Year: 2009

Repository DOI:

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following: This work is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the permission of the author. Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material.

Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Wollongong.

Research Online is the open access repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

2009

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

Tao Li
University of Wollongong

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses>

University of Wollongong

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following: This work is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the permission of the author. Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material.

Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

Unless otherwise indicated, the views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Wollongong.

Recommended Citation

Li, Tao, Transforming life opportunities and learning: stories of career change from mature age students in an Australian university, Doctor of Education thesis, Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, 2009. <https://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3049>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

**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

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	i
List of Figures.....	vii
List of Tables.....	vii
List of Appendices.....	viii
List of Abbreviations.....	ix
ABSTRACT.....	x
Acknowledgements.....	xii

Chapter 1

A study on mature age students: Introduction

1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Purpose of the study.....	1
1.3 The conceptual framework of the study.....	2
1.4 Significance of the study.....	3
1.5 Background of the study	4
1.5.1 Economic rationalism and individual freedoms	4
1.5.2 "Disposable" workforce and adult learning	6
1.5.3 Mature age students: A subject for research	8
1.5.4 Special entry schemes for mature age students	9
1.6 Rethinking theories for mature age students: Careers and learning	10
1.7 Studying mature age students: A narrative approach.....	11
1.8 Narratives of career and learning: Five stories of mature age students	11
Emma	12
Tess	12
Mary.....	12
Ben	13
Jennifer.....	13

1.9 Outline of chapters	13
-------------------------------	----

Chapter 2

Investigating research in mature age students

2.1 Introduction.....	16
2.2 Career.....	16
2.3 The nonlinear life career pattern: Exploring the dynamic lives of mature age students	18
2.4 Entering and returning to university: Motivation and reasons.....	20
2.4.1 Comprehensive reasons	20
2.4.2 Self-transformation	21
2.4.3 Self-fulfillment.....	22
2.4.4 Job-related reasons.....	24
2.4.5 Life transition.....	25
2.4.6 Credentialism	26
2.5 Self-developemt and management of mature age students.....	27
2.5.1 Time management.....	27
2.5.1.1 Age concerns.....	27
2.5.1.2 Caring responsibilities and life balance	27
2.5.2 Resource management	28
2.5.2.1 Prior educational background	28
2.5.2.2 Financial considerations.....	29
2.5.2.3 Collecting career information	29
2.5.3 Interpersonal management.....	30
2.5.3.1 Supportive environment.....	30
2.5.4 Self-diagnosis and management	32
2.5.4.1 Critical reflection	32
2.5.4.2 Learning abilities	34
2.5.4.3 Learning strategies	35
2.5.4.4 Risk-taking and controlling.....	35

2.6 Effective self-development and management: A successful mature age student...	36
2.7 Work-based learning: Integrating theory with practice.....	37
2.8 Conclusion	40

Chapter 3

Rethinking theories for mature age students: Careers and learning

3.1 Introduction.....	42
3.2 The nonlinear life career pattern	42
3.2.1 Levinson and Levinson's life cycles	45
3.2.2 Career as a series of learning cycles	47
3.3 Adult learning.....	48
3.3.1 Philosophy of adult education.....	48
3.3.2 Learning how to learn	48
3.3.3 Principles for adult learning.....	49
3.3.4 Transformative learning	52
3.3.4.1 Disorienting dilemma.....	54
3.3.4.2 Emotional change.....	55
3.3.4.3 Critical reflection	56
3.3.4.4 Action.....	58
3.3.4.5 Supportive environment.....	58
3.3.5 Work-based learning	59
3.4 Self-development and management.....	61
3.5 Conclusion	62

Chapter 4

Studying mature age students: A narrative approach

4.1 Introduction.....	64
4.2 Research design	64
4.2.1 Qualitative research	64
4.2.2 Narrative	66

4.3 Location of the study	68
4.4 Participants.....	69
4.5 The sequence and design of the study.....	74
4.6 Methods of data collection.....	80
4.6.1 Interviews.....	80
4.6.2 Document reviews	82
4.7 Data analysis process	83
4.8 Triangulation.....	84
4.9 Ethical considerations	85
4.10 Conclusion	86

Chapter 5

A narrative of career and learning: Five stories of mature age students

5.1 Introduction.....	87
5.2 Emma: "I wanted to do something important to me"	87
Summary for Emma's story	98
5.3 Tess: "I really want to be a journalist"	99
Summary for Tess's story.....	110
5.4 Mary: "I pushed myself to be better"	111
Summary for Mary's story	124
5.5 Ben: "I wanted to be more independent"	125
Summary for Ben's story	131
5.6 Jennifer: "To be happy in what I do"	132
Summary for Jennifer's story.....	140

Chapter 6 The experience of mature age students: Research findings

6.1 Introduction.....	141
6.2 Transforming life opportunities and learning	142
6.2.1 A winding road to higher education	142
6.2.2 Aspiration, happiness and fulfillment	145

6.2.3 Commitments and idealism.....	147
6.2.4 Empowerment	148
6.3 Self-development and management of mature age students.....	149
6.3.1 Time management	149
6.3.1.1 Age concerns	149
6.3.1.2 Caring responsibilities and life balance	150
6.3.1.3 Time arrangement	151
6.3.2 Resource management	152
6.3.2.1 Knowledge and skills accumulation	152
6.3.2.2 Financial considerations.....	154
6.3.2.3 Resource acquisition and utilization	154
6.3.3 Interpersonal management	156
6.3.3.1 Supportive environment.....	156
6.3.3.2 Networking	160
6.3.4 Self-diagnosis and management	160
6.3.4.1 Critical reflection	160
6.3.4.2 Being well-prepared.....	161
6.3.4.3 Options and choices	162
6.3.4.4 Risk-taking and controlling.....	165
6.3.4.5 Open to change and learning.....	166
6.3.4.6 Learning abilities	167
6.3.4.7 Learning strategies	168
6.3.4.8 Growing confidence.....	170
6.4 Higher education in terms of employment.....	170
6.4.1 Credentialism	170
6.4.2 Work-based learning	171
6.4.3 Learning how to learn	173
6.5 Conclusion	174

Chapter 7

Proposing a nonlinear approach to mature age students: Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Introduction.....	177
7.2 Contributions to the field of higher education	177
7.3 Conclusions.....	178
7.4 Recommendations for university	181
7.5 Summary	182
References.....	183
Appendices.....	198

List of Figures

Figure 1.1 The conceptual framework	2
Figure 3.2 The effective self-development and management	62

List of Tables

Table 3.1 Relationships between higher education and work.....	60
Table 4.1 Profiles of Participants	70
Table 4.2 Research sequence and design	75
Table 6.2 Knowledge and skills of all five participants.....	153
Table 6.3 A summary of the major findings.....	176

List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Glossary of the study.....	198
Appendix 2: Sample interview questions	200
Appendix 3: Participation information sheet for university students	201
Appendix 4: A letter of invitation	202
Appendix 5: Consent form for university students	203

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Associate Professor Peter Kell and Dr. Pauline Lysaght for their invaluable guidance, encouragement, dedication and time. The knowledge in my learning journey in the completion of my Ed.D thesis that was imparted by both of my supervisors has instilled in me newfound insights and wisdom that I will cherish and bear in mind in the rest of my life. I would also like to thank Professor Jan Wright and Dr. Gillian Vogl who gave me invaluable suggestions and guidance in the initial part of my study.

Special appreciation also goes to Professor Ye Zhonghai and Associate Professor Shen Jinrong at the East China Normal University (ECNU) in China where I pursued a Master's degree. They always assisted me with invaluable suggestions, support and motivation although I had graduated there in 2003. My appreciation of them is endless.

Many thanks also go to all five participants in my study without whom this research would have been impossible. Their dedication, efforts and willingness to share their personal experiences have been priceless.

I thank my dear friends in both China and Australia. They supported and motivated me when I had a tough time in my life.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my family: Li Shuze, Lü Sirong, Gao Zhengquan, Gao Ping, Li Jü, Li Jun, Li Yong, Lü Yan. I thank them for their love, support, patience and motivation that enabled me to come to Australia and complete my Ed.D thesis. I cannot thank them enough. Without them I could have not become what I am today.