

# 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](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

*University of Wollongong Thesis Collections*

*University of Wollongong Thesis Collection*

---

*University of Wollongong*

*Year 2009*

---

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

Tao Li  
University of Wollongong

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. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/3049>

This paper is posted at Research Online.

## **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.

## **Chapter 1**

### **A STUDY ON MATURE AGE STUDENTS: INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides the purpose and conceptual framework as well as significance of the study based on the explanation of its background. It also introduces theories on career and adult learning that provide a rationale for the methods and methodology of the study. It also introduces five stories of mature age students who are the participants in this research. Finally this chapter provides descriptions of the remaining chapters.

#### **1.2 Purpose of the study**

The main purpose of the research is to explore reasons why mature age students came to university after working for several years and, secondly, to examine how they engaged in study at university as mature age students as well as their perceptions about higher education in terms of employment.

The research, therefore, aimed to answer the following three research questions:

Question 1: Why did you come to university after working for several years?

This question includes mature age students' feelings, thoughts, relationships, previous work and learning experiences, learning orientation and career goals.

Question 2: How do/did you study at university as a mature age student?

This question encompasses mature age students' learning strategies and abilities as well as the use of time and resources.

Question 3: How do you think of higher education in terms of your career development?

This question explores perceptions of the university experience and the connection of higher education with employment.

### 1.3 The conceptual framework of the study

The conceptual framework of the study explores mature age students in the context of nonlinear life career patterns. It examines mature age students' reasons for coming to university, self-development and management as well as perspectives on the connection of higher education and employment. This conceptual framework of a nonlinear career pattern reflects the complicated life career experience of mature age students and the discursive nature of employment. It also looks at their feelings, thoughts and perceptions on learning, career and family life. The following diagram summarizes some of the issues related to mature age students' career development and higher education.

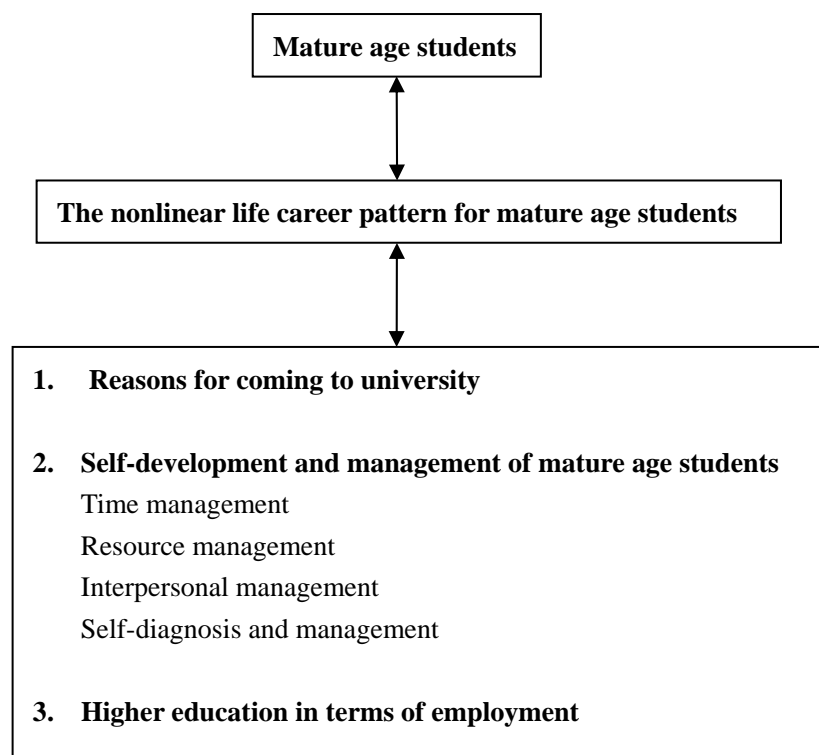


Figure 1.1 The conceptual framework of the study

#### **1.4 Significance of the study**

The Australian government is actively encouraging adults to go to university and many of them will be mature age students. According to Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Reform Julia Gillard, there will be more mature age students at university from 2009 to 2025. She announced that the government would raise the proportion of the Australian population aged 25-34 with a Bachelor level degree to 40 per cent by 2025 (Universities Australia, 2009), while the proportion was 29 per cent in 2006 (Australia Government, 2008). In this context, the study is timely as it explores some of the issues that influence mature age students.

The study will also contribute to a developing but limited body of research on mature age students. The study investigates the entangled and intricate family life, learning and work of mature age students, and explores learning and self-development and management at the levels of both individuals and complex social contexts. One of the innovations of this study is it is a study that it incorporates multiple perspectives including adult learning, learning and development, career development and self-development. The cross-disciplinary research seeks to open up a new “door” to reflect on and solve problems in a comprehensive way in an area where there is little research.

The study also contributes to career counseling with adult populations. In Australia, career counseling services are “too focused towards young people” (OECD, 2002, p. 14), but “for the majority of adult Australians, the (career) services available are limited and hidden. Yet the evidence of demand is considerable: where openly accessible services exist, they are heavily used...some services for young people are regularly approached by adults...” so “...many (career) services take care to limit their publicity for fear of being overrun...” and “...we suspect that much potential demand is untapped” (OECD, 2002, p. 19). In other words, the services that are available focus on

younger age groups. For mature age people, they have limited access to support and informed advice. This study explores how mature age students position their career orientation before going to university, how they set realistic and achievable career goals and, how they achieve these career goals. In short, career counselors and increasing numbers of mature age students will benefit from these insights and suggestions on career planning and management.

## **1.5 Background of the study**

### **1.5.1 Economic rationalism and individual freedoms**

According to Bessant (1997) and Woodward (2005), throughout the 1970s and 1980s Australia witnessed the institutionalization of empowerment and individual freedoms which advocated individual ownership by equipping people with confidence, knowledge and resources to make their own decisions. In these years terms like “democracy, participation, community and empowerment entered into the vocabulary of human service agencies and even governments” (Bessant, 1997, p. 35).

Since the early 1980s, the Australian Labour Party (ALP) embraced neo-liberal economics or economic liberalism, which has become a dominant ideology impacting on modern public policies (Bessant, 1997; Woodward, 2005) including education. The ideology of liberalism values individual freedom and a minimal role for the government dominated (Hyde, 2002; Woodward, 2005). This dominant economic theory was also referred to as economic rationalism in Australia (Woodward, 2005). The discourse of neo-liberal economies or economic rationalism argued the notion that:

- 1) Individuals are rational and autonomous beings and they are merely interested in pursuing happiness (Bessant, 1997);
- 2) Free markets and free trade should be established and operated with minimal government interference (Woodward, 2005);

3) There is a minimal role and size of government and trade unions (Argy, 1998; Hyde, 2002; Woodward, 2005).

These notions were disseminated and popularized under the Labour governments of Hawke and Keating (Bessant, 1997) and subsequently continued under the Howard government. Since then financial deregulation and privatization have become central to public policies (Woodward, 2005). Competition was introduced into both the public and private sectors (Hyde, 2002). Argy (1998) argues that “intervention should be by means which interfere as little as possible with the price mechanism” (p. 373). In other words, to encourage a free market situation the government must limit its interference.

Underpinned by economic liberalism, Australian industries are exposed to severe competition due to technological development, globalization, financial deregulation and privatization. No interference from government in a free market facilitated structural reforms or adjustments in Australian industries. For example, some labour-intensive industries like manufacturing declined significantly (Woodward, 2005). As Nahan (1998) points out that the “Australian system has been good for the skilled, the motivated, and the clever” (p. 407).

Some authors believe that economic rationalism facilitates free choice. Woodward (2005), for example, asserts that “there was a renewed emphasis on individual *freedom* [sic]” (p. 38). Woodward (2005) continued to explain that governments adopted low taxes because “individuals needed to be given the *choice* [sic] in how they disposed of their income” (p. 38). In the liberal market (Argy, 2003) individuals are encouraged to make their own decision to “buy and sell what they want” (Bessant, 1997, p. 36). That is to say, they are free to make choices for their education, life and careers. For example, if necessary they can go to university to equip themselves with new knowledge and skills for career transitions after working for several years. In this vein, the traditional linear life career pattern which advocates that people receive education in their

childhood and early adulthood that will prepare them for a particular career pathway has been under question (Cross, 1981; Glastra, Hake & Schedler, 2004).

### **1.5.2 “Disposable” workforce and adult learning**

As mentioned previously, Australians enjoy freedom of choice and they are able to choose how to dispose of their income (Woodward, 2005). However, many face job insecurity (Hamilton, 1998) because they are encouraged to make choices under risk (Woodward, 2005) in a free market. The Australian labour market has seen a growth in unemployment and an abundance of temporary and part-time work (Argy, 2003; Woodward, 2005), as well as “greater unevenness in new job opportunities by skill, age and location” (Argy, 2003, p. 2) since the early 1980s.

Kell (1996) identified three groups of workers representing the “disposable” (p. 6) workforce in the free market in Australia: the first group is highly skilled professional and technical elite – they usually work in high-tech industries and have short term employment contracts; the second group is a growing number of part-time and temporary workers – they earn less than full-time workers and they drift in and out of unemployment from time to time; the third group includes men over 40 years of age, aboriginal people, the minority and most women – they are at risk of long-term unemployment. The opportunity for lifetime employment becomes rare; for the majority of employees, they have to change their jobs several times over their working lives (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004).

In this context, it is not surprising that a proliferation of learning demands linked to career transitions or job crisis has become a widespread tendency in Australia. Countless government reports and public policies, for example, *Employability Skills for the Future* (2002), *Lifelong Learning in Australia* (2003) and *Review of Australian Higher Education* (2008), highlight the importance of continuing learning and

development of adult populations by means of urging governments to establish a solid link between adult learning and economic development in the learning-intensive economies. The reason is that “a refusal to invest in lifelong learning can hold back economic growth” (Bélanger, 2005, p. 816).

As mentioned by Dale (cited in Scanlon, 2008, p. 18), in Australia over the past 150 years there have been continuous attempts to align education with the needs of the economy more effectively. In order to promote the economic development and cope with increasing numbers of “disposable” workers (Kell, 1996) in deregulated economies, the “Commonwealth, state and territory governments have agreed to work together to halve the proportion of Australians aged between 20 and 64 years without qualifications at the certificate III level and above between 2009 and 2020 – nearly 6.5 million people” (Australian Government, 2008, p. 4). This indicates that the demands for adult learning and education will continue to be very strong between 2009 and 2020.

On the other hand, this requires governments at all levels to ensure that equitable tertiary educational opportunities are provided to the 6.5 million people with diverse backgrounds including people disadvantaged in their access to higher education. Since 1991, all universities in Australia have been required by the national justice framework established by *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990) to provide equity in learning opportunities for the disadvantaged in their access to higher education (Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 1996). This requirement has become even more important in light of more recent goals set by the government.

In practice, increasing numbers of Australians are engaged in lifelong learning. In May 2008, the Australian Bureau Statistics (2008) conducted a national survey which involved 13.9 million people aged between 15 and 64. In this survey, more than 2.5 million people were enrolled in a course of study. A total of 96 per cent were enrolled in



courses that would result in a recognized qualification. More than one in four (28 per cent) of people who were enrolled in a course for a qualification were studying for a Bachelor's Degree. Among the more than 2.5 million learners, nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of them were studying full-time and 38 per cent (968,200 people) were studying at higher education institutions. 57 per cent were in the 20 to 64 age group, that is to say, in this age group many of them were mature age students. This data indicates that Australian learners valued qualifications such as Bachelor's degree; adult learning was growing in Australia; and higher education institutions played a vital role in promoting participation in adult learning.

### **1.5.3 Mature age students: A subject for research**

Mature age students also may be referred to as mature students, re-entry students, returning students, and adult students. In Australia, mature age students are those who are at least 21 years old by March 1 of the year of tertiary entry and are involved in an undergraduate-level education ([www.cce.usyd.edu.au](http://www.cce.usyd.edu.au)). This is the definition of mature age students used in this research. Mature age students used to be a minority in an elite higher education system, however, in some institutions and in particular programs they are increasing in number to gradually form a new majority in higher education. This change has occurred in conjunction with the introduction of special entry schemes to university and the abolition of student fees since the mid-1970s (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

Hore and West (cited in West et al., 1986, p. 15) classified mature age students on the basis of educational standards into four groups: early school leavers, recyclers, returners and deferrers. Early school leavers, for example, are those who left school early without the qualifications required for entry to higher education. On their return to study, they may be defined in various ways. Recyclers, on the other hand, had previously completed a post-secondary qualification. This group can be further classified into two

sub-groups: those who are upgrading their qualification in the same discipline; and those who are studying a different discipline. Returners are those who discontinued their study in higher education and have returned or started again. Deferrers refer to those who qualified at school to enter higher education but who did not do so at the time.

Aslanian and Giles (2007) present the profile of the typical undergraduate adult student. They generalized that the typical undergraduate student is getting older when beginning an undergraduate degree and the majority are female. The second trend is that many more mature age learners are returning to university with some university experience including a bachelor's degree. This trend indicates the possibility that mature age students are seeking career changes or more advanced credentials. The third trend is that adult students are working and financing their own education.

#### **1.5.4 Special entry schemes for mature age students**

In Australia, two major pathways exist for entry to undergraduate study: One is entry via the University Admissions Centre (UAC) and the other is through direct application. Students who apply through UAC are divided into one of two categories depending on whether they have just completed Year 12 or whether they are using records from a recognized qualification gained elsewhere to gain entry. In both cases, academic results are used to calculate an individual's ranking on the University Admissions Index (UAI). The UAI can then be used by institutions to determine entry.

Application through direct entry is also available to both groups. Students applying straight from school where UAI is below the required level for entry may be admitted to courses that prepare them for study at the tertiary level – for these students, standards determined by the University must be met in order for entry to a particular degree.

For mature age students, there are special entry schemes for them to enter the university.

They may enter the university through UAC or apply directly for study within the university. They can apply on the basis of previous qualifications like Special Tertiary Admission Test (STAT), TAFE/AQF qualifications, TAFE Tertiary Preparation Certificate (TPC), or they can enter the university through courses that provide preparation for tertiary level study, for example, University Access Program (UAP).

Australia has a long history of accepting mature age students for undergraduate-level study through special entry schemes (Cullity, 2007). Special entry schemes often target people with socially, economically and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds to empower them and to eliminate the barriers that prohibit them from achieving a university qualification (Cullity, 2006). In Australia, 13 of the nation's 44 universities had special entry schemes for mature age learners (Cullity, 2006).

On the basis of *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Education, Science and Training, 1990) and special entry schemes, growing numbers of people can equally access higher education. In 2002, mature age students accounted for 38 per cent of the undergraduate intake (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science & Training, cited in Cullity, 2007, p. 176). In 2007, the number of mature age students aged 21 or over was 682,255, which accounted for 66.2 per cent of the total higher education intake (Australian Government, 2008, p. 70). It appears that this data combined "undergraduates" and "postgraduates" into the same group aged 21 or over. This illustrates one of the difficulties in gathering data about mature age undergraduate students. The probable reason is that mature age students illustrate a wide social mix of backgrounds including women, students with low socio-economic status and indigenous students. In Australia the absence of meaningful data about mature age students is worrying (Cullity, 2007).

## **1.6 Rethinking theories for mature age students: Careers and learning**

The study employed the nonlinear life career pattern underpinned by Levinson and

Levinson's (1996) life cycles and Harrington and Hall's (2007) career as a series of learning cycles. Other theories of careers and learning appropriate for mature age students used in this study are philosophy of adult education, learning how to learn, principles for adult learning (Knowles, 1990; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991), work-based learning and self-development and management (Smith, 1999).

### **1.7 Studying mature age students: A narrative approach**

In order to answer the basic research questions, the study employed a narrative method (Baumeister & Wilson, 1996; Chase, 2005; Chen, 1997, 1998; Clark, 2001; Elliott, 2005; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Mancuso, 1996; Murray, 2003; Punch, 1998; Singer, 2004; Ylijoki, 2005) and qualitative techniques (Creswell, 1994; Kervin, Vialle, Herrington & Okely, 2006; Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Mason, 1996; Merriam, 1998) to collect and analyze data. Through narratives the study gained rich data which reflected the meaning making that participants had interpreted and the experiences that participants had constructed. The richness of this data was demonstrated in the in-depth understanding and great insights as well as accumulated wisdom, which were apparent in the life experiences of the five mature age participants. Face-to-face interviews, email discussions and document reviews provide the consistency of evidence across sources of data. The five stories with thick description make up the majority of the data and provide a window into the lives of the five participants. The five participants are now briefly introduced.

### **1.8 Narratives of career and learning: Five stories of mature age students**

The stories of Emma, Tess, Mary, Ben and Jennifer present the experiences of a group of mature age students with a focus on nonlinear life career patterns, their expectations of higher education and their hopes and plans for future careers. A brief introduction to

each participant including their self-appraisals and their criterion for career success is provided here.

### **Emma**

Emma was 54 years old and majored in Community, Culture and Environment in the Faculty of Arts. She worked for almost 30 years as a registered nurse and nurse manager. She wanted to teach English History in a secondary school or undertake Ph.D study after graduation. Her self-portrayal was that she was “responsible, diligent and persevering”. Her criterion for career success was “You can do what you are really interested in”.

### **Tess**

Tess was 26 years old and studied in the Faculty of Arts. In the hope of becoming a political journalist, she worked very hard. Before heading for the University of Gold Coast, she worked in selling, customer service and reception as a salesgirl and receptionist for 8 years. She portrayed herself as a “creative, smart, busy and outgoing” student. She believed that her friends saw her as open-minded. Her criterion for career success was “Making a difference in politics in the media, or at least being a good, respected journalist – anything that makes you happy”.

### **Mary**

Mary was 24 years old and would graduate soon. She used to work in the building industry, selling hardware, before coming to university. Negative learning experiences in high school did not hinder her moving on. She was doing an Honours year when interviewed and already had a part-time job when studying at university. She wanted to become a primary school teacher or director in early childhood education. She picked

terms such as “optimistic, vivacious, happy, driven, highly-motivated and outgoing” to describe herself. Her criteria for career success were “You should be happy for what you’re doing” and “You can achieve more”.

### **Ben**

Ben was 29 years old and studying in the Faculty of Engineering. He went to university straight from high school but dropped out without getting a degree after he had studied for three years. He did some unskilled work such as driving taxis and delivering goods. He returned to university in pursuit of a Bachelor’s degree in Environmental engineering. His criteria for career success were “[I] can go further in my field. I [want to be] financially stable, and be able to determine where and for whom I want to work”. He described himself as an “active and patient” man.

### **Jennifer**

Jennifer was 42 years old and had recently graduated. She was a primary school teacher when interviewed. Before studying at university, she had worked part-time, full-time and on a voluntary basis. She also had work experiences in a range of industries such as insurance, supermarket, church and school. She depicted herself as a “persistent and determined” woman. Her criterion for career success was “To be happy in what I do”.

## **1.9 Outline of chapters**

This thesis is presented in seven chapters and a Glossary of key terms can be found in Appendix 1.

Chapter One introduces the overall “picture” of the study. This chapter provides the purpose and significance of the study in the context of economic liberalism and special entry schemes which promote increasing mature age students. This chapter also

provides theories on careers and learning as well as narrative inquiry, followed by an introduction of five stories of mature age students and the outline of remaining chapters of the study.

Chapter Two provides a review of the literature on mature age students. This chapter critically examines the notion of careers and explores the notion of nonlinear life career patterns as well as the motivations and reasons for coming to university. The chapter also looks at the self-development and management of mature age students, and ideas on work-based learning.

Chapter Three explores a range of theories that analyze the links between careers and learning in relation to mature age students. This chapter documents and discusses nonlinear life career patterns and examines how adult learning principles including learning how to learn, Knowles's six principles, transformative learning, and work-based learning to assist mature age students to manage their learning and career development. Self-development and management is also detailed in this chapter to support how mature age students take advantage of various resources for their life transformations.

Chapter Four proposes a qualitative, narrative method. This chapter provides literature to support the use of narrative inquiry as a way of developing a series of stories of five mature age students. Details of the procedures on how the study was conducted, data collections techniques and data analysis are also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Five presents stories of the five mature age students from a range of disciplines at the University of Gold Coast. This chapter draws on interviews with these mature age students and presents a sustained set of narratives as the five participants told their stories.

Chapter Six analyzes the combined responses of the five participants and draws research findings on their experiences and their lives as mature age students and their interaction with employment and education.

Chapter Seven draws conclusions based on the evidence provided by the study. A discussion of life transformation as experienced by mature age students and of the implications that can be drawn from this by tertiary education institutions is provided.



## **Chapter 2**

# **INVESTIGATING RESEARCH IN MATURE AGE STUDENTS**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides a review of the literature related to career development. It has a focus on the nonlinear life career pattern. It also examines the balance between the demands faced by mature age students in their personal and social spheres and the choices they experienced in their self-development and management and work-based learning at university.

### **2.2 Career**

The term “career” has been defined in a wide variety of ways in the literature. From the postpositivist perspective, careers can be predicted by means of objectively measuring and evaluating an individual’s personality and capacities in that career through, for example, Holland’s test for person-environment fit (Brown, 2007). However, many of the tools of career counseling such as psychometric tests have been conceived as “test-em and tell-em” methods (Herr et al., Cited in McIlveen & Patton, 2006, p. 19). Groth-Marnat (cited in McIlveen & Patton, 2006, p. 19) argues that psychometric tests overemphasize technological measures and analysis without appreciation of the unique phenomenon and contexts where people exist. As Savickas and Baker have asserted, “with less stable personalities and occupations, vocational psychology’s basic model of person-environment fit with its goal of congruence seems less useful and less possible in today’s labor market” (cited in Bright & Pryor, 2005, p. 292).

A number of researchers have gone further and defined career in terms of constructivism. Constructivist ideologists contend that humans are self-interpreting beings and they are capable of negotiating changes and contextual meaning-making through interactions with dynamic settings (Chen, 1997, 2003; Mertens, 2005). This constructivist approach provides a foundation for viewing careers as a subjective construction of the individual through interaction with the outside world (Amundson, 2006; Chen, 2003; Collin, 1998; Dany, 2003; Young & Valach, 2004).

Accordingly constructivists argue that people can construct their careers through narratives. As pointed out by Bujold (2004), “career is seen as a story” (p. 471). People interpret the meaning of their careers within current social context, and imagine their future career themes based on past and present career narratives (Chen, 1997; Christensen & Johnston, 2003). “Like other aspects of life, career is by nature a narrative experience and participation” (Chen, 2002, p. 16). Through narratives people develop a sense of agency and accumulate wisdom and gain insights into their working lives (Singer, 2004). It is through narratives that people make sense of who they are, where they come from and where they are going in their life career pathways.

Chen (1998) argues that a career is a continuing life process and during the process it is not surprising that career experience intertwines with life and learning experiences through the lifespan. This is especially the case as growing numbers of women enter the labour market, and life experience can well reflect an overall picture of one’s career development. In this case, “career”, “life career” and “life career development” are viewed as interchangeable and interrelated (Chen, 1998, p. 439). This indicates that the traditional notion of careers characterized by separating work, learning and life is not suitable for the contemporary society. The traditional life career pattern has been replaced by the nonlinear life career pattern (see Chapter 3).

According to Chen (1998), it is vital to understand the human involvement in this

process if the pursuit of a career is an ongoing life process. It is people themselves who initiate action within their life career trajectory. Without human involvement there would be no career (Chen, 1998). Some researchers contend that in contemporary society the individual takes more responsibilities for his/her life career development than the organization he/she works for (Dany, 2003; Filipczak, 1995; Hall & Moss, 1998; Mirvis & Hall, 1994) because people are autonomous and self-directed in their life career development when they confront with the uncertain labour market, globalization, technology advancement and downsizing (e.g., Briscoe & Hall, 2006; Harrington & Hall, 2007; Hall, 1996, 2004; Hall & Mirvis, 1995; Hall & Moss, 1998). As discussed previously, increasing numbers of “disposable” workers (Kell, 1996) have experienced career transitions or unemployment in a free market. In this case, traditional notions on careers like Super’s age-related career development and upward mobility in an organization may not fit with the rapidly changing world of work. As Sterrett (1999) claims that considerable changes have taken place, Super’s (1957) notion would be less able to reflect this situation. The nonlinear life career pattern which highlights woven life, work and learning and people’s proactivity in the chaotic labour market will be detailed in Chapter 3.

In summary, career in this study mainly focuses on the intertwined life, work and learning in one’s lifespan. In this vein, “career”, “life career” and “life career development” have the same meaning and can be used interchangeably in this study. Moreover, the emphasis is also placed on how people proactively construct and reconstruct their life careers through narratives.

### **2.3 The nonlinear life career pattern: Exploring the dynamic lives of mature age students**

In the knowledge-based society, continuing learning and career change have become

indispensable components of modern life. As a consequence of economic change and globalization as well as a proliferation of women in the workforce, career development is not linear and is not separated from life and learning. Rather, it is nonlinear and it has inextricably intertwined with life and learning, which has been an accepted phenomenon in the contemporary Australia (Dyer, 2006). The following narratives present this nonlinear life career pattern featured by woven work, life and learning in the contemporary Australia.

Dyer (2006) critically reflected on life career development in the knowledge-based society in Australia by using narratives. Her study demonstrates the close relationship between learning, work and family life. First, she looked critically at her eldest brother's career. Her eldest brother experienced job promotions and job changes. Sometimes he only saw his family at weekends. His family had to move eight times because of his job change or promotion. Throughout his career he studied as a part-time student to gain a university degree.

Dyer (2006) herself experienced unemployment and frequent job changes in her young adulthood. In 1991, she enrolled in a business management certificate. In 1993, she gained a bachelor's degree and moved to another town for university study. She enrolled in a master's program, doing some tutoring work. In 1997, she enrolled in a doctoral program and got part-time contract work. Eighteen months later, she was offered a full-time position and got a four-year fixed-term contract. Three months after accepting the full-time job, she was pregnant. She continued to work throughout the pregnancy and six weeks after the birth of her baby she returned to work. She worked full-time and pursued the doctorate, and parented.

In this study, Dyer employed narratives to examine her eldest brother's career and her own career and through reflective narratives she described notions of the nonlinear life career pattern. This study indicates that the intertwined relationship between family life,

working life and learning. This study also addresses the importance of lifelong learning in a chaotic labour market.

## **2.4 Entering and returning to university: Motivations and reasons**

### **2.4.1 Comprehensive reasons**

In recent years, the proliferation of adults returning to higher education has been attributed to economic and technological development (Bélanger, 2005). There is also government and institutional encouragement and support for this to happen. For example, Australian mature age students in Leder and Forgasz's study (2004) listed several general reasons for their going back to university as vocational interest, credentialism, career development and finance.

Another Australian survey identifies a number of reasons why mature age learners undertake learning as follows (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2003, p. 4): job skills upgrading; business establishment; knowledge; meeting new people; developing self-confidence; community involvement and developing personal skills.

Carp, Peterson and Roelfs (cited in Cross, 1981, p. 89) employed survey questionnaires to investigate reasons for continuing education. They undertake continuing education because of personal goals, for example, they want to get a new job/advance in present job/attain a degree. The second major reason for their continuing education is for escape goals, for example, they want to get away from routine/personal problems. The third main reason is for personal fulfillment, that is to say, they want to become a better parent/spouse/a happier person.

Kember et al. (2001) conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with 53

part-time students to find out why they studied at university. The reasons are identified as followings: they need to make a career shift or continuing professional development through their careers; they gain an opportunity for tertiary education because they did not previously have the chance or they did not qualify for direct entry to university when they were young; they learn for pleasure throughout the lifetime (Kember et al., 2001, p. 269).

In the next sections several reasons are advanced for why mature age students come to university.

#### **2.4.2 Self-transformation**

Britton and Baxter's research (1999) used narrative to explain why mature age students decided to return to study in the UK. In their study, twelve mature age students were chosen. Some students see opportunities for higher education to change their lives. One mature age student expressed strongly the notion of perspective transformation through critical reflection. Through such reflection, he experienced a major perspective change that had transformed his goals and his view of himself:

*...I made new friends and they were decent people, it was the first time I had associated with decent people and they were a good example to me and I thought I want to become like them, this is the sort of person I want to become and it was a big turning about period for me, working at the leisure centre and going to college. In the past I had just been doing jobs for the money and spending money on drink and drugs (p. 188).*

### 2.4.3 Self-fulfillment

A sense of self-fulfillment from achievement is also seen as important by Tough (1971) who investigated why adults undertake self-directed learning projects. He found every learner had more than one reason for engaging in learning projects. Most people were motivated to learn by the desire to apply new knowledge and skills. Several adults described their positive feelings in the process of learning as “enjoyment, satisfaction, or interest” (Tough, 1971, p. 55).

In another research project, Bauman et al., (2004) mailed a survey questionnaire to 115 mature age undergraduate students and 53 students completed the survey. They found one of the top reasons for mature age students going to university was self-fulfillment. Wolf’s (2005) findings supported the outcomes of Bauman et al. (2004). One mature age student said:

*I’m fifty-seven years old and will stay until I retire. But I need something more in my life. I want to use parts of me that I haven’t had a chance to use. I want to develop spiritual connections. Everything is open for the future. I am in flux* (Wolf, 2005, p. 53).

Another stated the need for better opportunities:

*After raising two daughters who are now married and independent and working at a job that seems so humdrum, and looking at my husband of twenty-two years and wondering, ‘Why did I marry him?’ I feel lost. I’m hoping that by taking this program [vocational certificate] I will find a new path in life: something just for me*

(Wolf, 2005, p. 53).

Another mature age student wanted more fulfilling circumstances:

*My son started kindergarten and I thought I could either go and get another boring office job, or I could do something that I actually want to do* (Stone, 2008, p. 269).

Reay's (2002) study was conducted in the UK and narrative was employed in this research. Many of the 23 adult students in London FE College viewed higher education as a way to achieve self-fulfillment despite their "troubled" educational history. Mo and Sally in this study described their FE College experience as incredible. By contrast, none of the 97 younger students had this opinion. For them, higher education was "more often than not simple part of the normal life course" (Reay, 2002, p. 402).

In Britton and Baxter's research (1999), one of the major reasons for mature age students returning to study was for personal fulfillment. In this study, some participants reported that they had missed out on opportunities to go to university when they were younger because of their negative educational history or their marriage and family commitments. Some participants expressed the view that they had taken the wrong direction. Although they did not go to university when they were young, they never gave up the aspiration for education or the faith that they could accomplish more. Education was therefore a means for fulfillment. One woman, as a consequence of studying, said, she could do better for herself. Another wanted to be a nurse, but she had to take care of her children as a single mother and experienced financial hardship. However, 20 years later, she entered the University Access Course and said:

*Well, I had heard of it quite a few years ago, and then, for one reason, I was having*



*a lot of trouble with one of the children and I knew I couldn't cope with it then, so I put it off and put it off, then I kicked him out, and I thought, 'Right, do something for yourself.'* (Britton & Baxter, 1999, p. 184)

#### **2.4.4 Job-related reasons**

One of the most important reasons for going to university is to improve job prospects. A large body of research stresses the strong linkage between one's work life and engagement in adult learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). In Aslanian and Brickell's (1980) survey, half of the participants were engaged in learning activities for job-related reasons. According to the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs (1996), one of the most important reasons for mature age students returning to university is to gain entrance to a better career.

A study by Cross (1981) provides the following explanation for the relationship between work and adult learning. Some people were interested in continuing their education because they needed new careers, whilst others needed to improve their career pathways:

*People who do not have good jobs are interested in further education to get better jobs, and those who have good jobs would like to advance in them. Women, factory workers, and the poorly educated, for example, are more likely to be pursuing education in order to prepare for new jobs* (p. 91).

The close relationship between career development and learning/education is supported by Harris and Rainey (2006) who assert that career development involves a sequence of choices including educational choices. Harris and Rainey's (2006) study was conducted

in Australia and 49 students were interviewed. This research reveals “crazy” learning trajectories in their participants’ career development. One participant studied in seven fields as Information Technology, Child Care, Science and Education, Theology, Telecommunications, Paramedical Training and Ambulance Studies. Another one’s learning pathway was: Nursing, Language, Counseling, Diabetes Education, Immunization and Workplace Training and Assessment. Harris and Rainey (2006) propose that educational choices “reflect the stage of career development an individual finds oneself in at a particular stage in one’s lifetime” (p. 9).

Chao and Good (2004) argue that mature age students are more career-focused than their younger counterparts. They interviewed 43 adult students in America. In their study, mature age students conceived of higher education as a good opportunity for negotiating career changes. One 43-year-old student said his previous job as a construction worker physically disabled him, and he could not continue in that job, so he decided to go to university to learn new skills for a new job.

#### **2.4.5 Life transition**

Having to deal with life transitions is another important reason for adult learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Aslanian and Brickell (1980) found 83 percent of adults in their study attributed the reasons for learning to some past, current or future changes in their lives like marriage, job change, birth of children, and moving location. Based on Levinson and Levinson’s theory (1996), adults experience life transitions in their life span several times and these life transitions challenge adults but also provides opportunities to learn and to grow (Merriam, 2005; Walters, 2000). The following statements by mature age students explain why they decided to go to university:

*It was all around the same time I lost my job, split up with him and thought*

*'Okay!'* (Stone, 2008, p. 272)

Another said:

*I had a tumultuous marriage before I came back to school. After divorce, I noticed that I really wanted to do something new; I wanted to have a new life, new job, and new self. To reach the new experiences, including new career, I thought college education would be the first step* (Chao & Good, 2004, p. 9).

However, not all life transitions trigger a learning experience. For learning to occur, individuals need to have some capacity and willingness to reflect on their experiences in life transitions (Merriam, 2005).

#### **2.4.6 Credentialism**

Gaining qualifications and credentials to be competitive in the labour market is also conceived as important. In Britton and Baxter's (1999) research, participants hoped to gain formal recognition for their career development. Many of them were successful in some fields but felt frustrated because of a lack of formal qualifications or degrees. They saw education as providing this recognition and this meant that many of them saw education in instrumental terms.

This is continued by Osborne, Marks and Turner (2004) who stated that gaining a degree or qualification is viewed as a "passport" to a better employment situation and the way to totally new job opportunities. Frustration with dead-end jobs was identified by Osborne, Marks and Turner (2004) as the most important reason for mature age students' returning to higher education.

## **2.5 Self-development and management of mature age students**

### **2.5.1 Time management**

#### **2.5.1.1 Age concerns**

Some mature age students express concerns about their age in terms of seeking further education. Heenan (2002) used an ethnographical research approach and interviewed 10 women adult students in the UK. In Heenan's (2002) study, many mature age students go to university late in life and some women students reported that they did not think it was worth investing large amounts of money in higher education because of their age, and that they thought that at their age higher education would be pointless. They would never get a job even if they obtained the qualifications. They said, "If it's a choice between me nearly fifty and a twenty-year-old, who do you think would get the job?" (Heenan, 2002, p. 50)

Many mature age students thought how to take advantage of their limited time. Some mature age students reported that using prioritizing strategies was very important (Smith, 1999). Older mature age students may "selectively invest their reduced time-left-to-live in personal projects that can be completed in limited periods and are associated with specific sources of personal meaning and emotional support" (Smith, 1999, p. 236). In this way age is not barrier but prompts participation and involvement.

#### **2.5.1.2 Caring responsibilities and life balance**

A body of research on mature age students is focused on the struggle to balance life, work and their learning with multiple roles they play outside university (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Moreau & Leatherwood, 2006). A male

mature age student complained about how little time he had for studies because of his part-time work and his caring responsibilities for a newly-born baby (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003).

Two mature age Australian students described how difficult it was to balance work, learning and family life:

*I thought...I'd have a little bit more time to spend at home, but I haven't...To me that hasn't been as big a problem as it as has been to my parents...I think I've got more caught up in the course than I...expected.*

*I've had to disappear from a few important (work) meetings which have gone over time so that I can go to class* (Leder & Forgasz, 2004, p. 193).

In both instances, reference is made to engagement in study taking priority over personal and professional commitments.

## **2.5.2 Resource management**

### **2.5.2.1 Prior educational background**

In Reay's (2002) study, some participants reported that "I missed a lot of schooling when I was young" because of "troubled" educational experiences (p. 407). They continued to explain why they learned little knowledge and skills when they were young. "My schooling was a bit messy really" (p. 407). "The last two years at secondary school I just couldn't see the point; I wanted to rebel against practically everything. If anyone told me do something you know I would naturally want to do the complete opposite" (p.

407). Despite their negative educational history, many mature age students saw higher education as rewarding when they decided to come to university.

#### **2.5.2.2 Financial considerations**

Higher education fees and costs are particularly important for women who have less financial independence. In Heenan's (2002) study, all the ten women mentioned that the cost of higher education was problematic. Six women explained that they were not financially independent, so they had to negotiate with their partners and families for payment for higher education fees and costs. One woman said, "I couldn't commit myself and my family to such a big financial undertaking. It wouldn't be fair" (Heenan, 2002, p. 49). It was generally acknowledged that a 3-year period for a degree was a huge financial commitment and many of these women were worried about the consequence of investing large amounts of money in higher education due to their age.

In Australia, students can apply for a FEE-HELP loan which can cover all or part of students' tuition fees. The maximum of \$83,313 (for 2009 – indexed annually) in tuition fees may be paid using FEE-HELP over a student's lifetime ([www.think.edu.au](http://www.think.edu.au)). In the Bradley Review, it was advised that the Australian government should raise the loan fee for FEE-HELP for fee-paying undergraduate students to 25 per cent (Australian Government, 2008, p. 168).

#### **2.5.2.3 Collecting career information**

Mature age students' anxiety was also influenced by a lack of career information. In Heenan's (2002) study, a number of women complained that they did not get clear and adequate information about their future options from the university careers service:

*I was just confused. I didn't know what I could do and what I couldn't do. At least*

*if you had the information you could have made the choice. I did make an appointment to go to see a careers advisor but to be honest I was as wise going into that talk as I was coming out. I asked her about fees and she said I'd need to talk to somebody else, as she didn't deal with that. It was like banging your head against a brick wall. In the end I just gave up.*

Another woman had the same experience:

*I went to one place and they said oh no you need to talk to somebody else about that. I went to them and they said well it depends on a whole range of things, I just couldn't get a straight answer. In the end I just felt stupid and was afraid to ask any more (p. 51).*

These women both experienced frustration because they were unable to gain specific information. The pathway to further educational opportunities is often confusing for those with limited experience in dealing with tertiary institutions. These examples highlight the importance of a supportive environment for mature age students when they are studying at university.

### **2.5.3 Interpersonal management**

#### **2.5.3.1 Supportive environment**

The support from families is conceived as essential for successful study options. In Chao and Good's (2004) study, they interviewed 43 adult undergraduate students ranging in age from 26 to 62 years. In this research, participants reported that receiving

support from their family and friends was of great importance for their higher education. One 38-year-old student discussed how her husband encouraged her to enter higher education since he knew she was not progressing in her work:

*My husband encouraged me to earn a college degree since he knew I was stuck with my work. Then we negotiated on sharing our responsibilities of taking care of kids. He sometimes needed to be at home when I was in school. But, you know, my kids like to do their homework just like I was doing mine. So I guess I set up a role model for my kids (p. 9).*

Confirmation of the significance of support from family, friends and teachers who function as catalysts is evident in Stone's (2008) study. In Stone's (2008) study, 20 mature age students were interviewed in the University of Newcastle, Australia.

*...she [the teacher] said, 'If you want to go to uni, you should go, because you can.'* (Carol, 44)

*So I spoke to my wife...she said go and get educated...she found out all the information and I made it by three days...my wife pushed me (Bob, 41).*

*I have a friend who was doing uni at the time. Different degree...but I saw her doing it with her family and I thought, well, maybe I could do it too (Tina, 38) (Stone, 2008, p. 272).*



These examples address that support from families, friends and teachers encourage and “push” them to go to university. These people around mature age students function as catalysts for mature age students’ learning and career development.

## **2.5.4 Self-diagnosis and management**

### **2.5.4.1 Critical reflection**

An advanced understanding of oneself is seen as a big motivation for students. In Willans and Seary’s (2007) study, one student showed this in the statement that “I’m not stupid after all”. She had changed her view of herself and her ability after undertaking the Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program at Central Queensland University in Australia. Before studying in the STEPS program, this woman thought of herself as stupid. The student explained why she had this perception of herself:

*If I was with them [the family], I tended to sit back because I wasn’t educated as much as them and they spoke with these big words, sometimes purposefully just to patronise me.*

She continued to state:

*Like I come from a very serious family, mother like way before her time running her own business and also a nursing sister [sic]. My father also had a business and they were very serious people. My two sisters have very serious careers (p. 445).*

When this student initially came to the University of Central Queensland and attended the STEPS program, she found students there had diverse levels of intelligence, experiences, backgrounds and interests. Like others she saw herself change the assumption about her intelligence and abilities to achieve:

*We are all part of something and we all need flippety gibbets just like we need really serious people like my parents were, and my sisters were; and that's the big thing that I've learnt, that's giving me confidence to go on, to realize that "No, I'm not stupid after all", and I have shocked myself how I'm taking things in and achieving things (p. 446).*

In Willans and Seary's (2007) study, another male student also experienced through critical reflection. He also came to Central Queensland University for the STEPS program after a period of unemployment and felt scared to open up and express his feelings for fear of mockery or disapproval by others. He said:

*I'd never really expressed my view and probably that goes back to grade 4 and the humiliation I felt then. I never wanted to go through that again, so I never opened up and gave my views about what I thought about something (p. 447).*

However, his confidence increased when he listened to and shared the written and spoken work during the Language and Learning course:

*I was fearing the writing because I thought I'd be entering areas of my mind that I had blocked off for thirty years. I thought it was going to open something and I*

*don't want to be embarrassed or ashamed or stuff like that, so that was a big step for me. But I've enjoyed it. I've felt actually nurtured all along. I'm not so self-conscious about what I write now, and when other people read it (p. 447).*

Finally, as a consequence of the course he changed his assumption about himself:

*Coming in and doing Language and Learning here to me is challenging my mind and its actually getting me out there and opening up into something I haven't been doing for many years. I know I can achieve anything now and I am only restricted by me, no one else (p. 448).*

Through critical reflection mature age students change assumptions about themselves, their intelligence and abilities. They also grow confidence and this confidence is important in higher education and their life transformations.

#### **2.5.4.2 Learning abilities**

A lack of confidence is most profound among mature age students especially when they evaluate their academic abilities. This was confirmed by Leathwood and O'Connell's (2003) research findings. Leathwood and O'Connell's (2003) study was conducted in the UK. Focus group (126 participants in total) and in-depth interviews (18 participants) were employed to collect data in this research. One 31-year-old student in their study said:

*I didn't think university was for me to start with. I thought I was thick. I just thought I couldn't do it...I'm one of those people that are never happy with what*

*I do, I am. I can never do good [sic] enough as far as I'm concerned* (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p. 608).

Another example was provided by McAlister's (1998) case study conducted in the UK. In this case study, middle-aged Maria had low confidence and low self-esteem. Maria was unable to take advantage of support structures at university and, like other vulnerable students, she doubted her ability. In her narrative, she noted:

*You're doing this and thinking 'I must be really stupid because, according to the book, in six years time I should be wearing a black cape and being handed this scroll – what's wrong with me? It must be ME [sic] who has got a real problem with this'. It came as a shock* (McAlister, 1998, p. 294).

#### **2.5.4.3 Learning strategies**

The impact of limited learning strategies is discussed in Murphy and Fleming's (2000) study, where a concern about mature age students' academic learning strategies occupies a role in success in higher education. In their study, Liam described when her tutor handed her essay back, she could not believe it was her essay. It was like a sixteen-year-old student's essay. The essay had personal interpretation but no references or quotations. Liam ascribed this to having limited writing strategies and Julie considered the experience of her first essay as “a nightmare” (p. 82) reducing her to a flood of tears and she told her lecturer she could not write the essay.

#### **2.5.4.4 Risk taking and controlling**

In order to achieve goals, people make a choice and leave their familiar “comfort zones”

(McGraw, 1999, p. 180). This puts them at the risk of uncertain and unpredictable situations and causes anxiety and fear of the future. “When you choose, you may know what *might* happen, but you don’t know what *will* happen” (Hammond, Keeney & Raiffa, 1999, p. 109). Under such conditions, taking risks and pushing boundaries becomes an important feature for success in the uncertain labour market. For mature age students they have to calculate several risks when they decide to come to university to be full-time or part-time students. They earn less, become older and have less time with family and friends. Or, on the contrary, they also have options for many new opportunities to open up for them (Hammond, Keeney & Raiffa, 1999). The transitions and changes are summed up by McGraw (1999, p. 180) who said “if you do different, you will have different”. The best way to minimize unnecessary risks for mature age students is seen by many researchers is to set a realistic and obtainable goals (Ebberwein et al., 2004; Gammon, 1997) and “keep your options open with flexible plans” (Gammon, 1997, p. 173).

## **2.6 Self-development and management: A successful mature student**

The questions about how issues of self-development and management were explored by Gammon (1997). This study was focused on one student named Ann who was a twenty-eight-year old single mother. It is widely accepted that many mature age students “dropped out” of university due to lack of money, lack of time, family commitments, heavy workloads, and poor academic skills in this study. Ann also faced these obstacles. However, Ann overcame all these barriers.

Gammon (1997) reported that Ann had a realistic and sustainable goal and Ann also took advantage of the help available at university for students such as tutors and budget counselors. She made use of the gym and enrolled in a stress management workshop at university. She managed her time well but she also worked three times harder than her peers. All these strategies made Ann become a successful mature age student who was

achieving her goal.

Ann's story indicates that she did well in time management, resource and interpersonal management as well as self-management when she studied at university as a mature age student with children. That was why Ann could handle all those barriers mentioned previously. In summary, what Ann had done could be categorized into the following themes:

- Time management: She “practiced good time management” and worked three times harder than her fellow students.
- Resource and interpersonal management: She used the assistance systems available at university. She consulted with tutors and budget counselors.
- Self-management: She enrolled in a stress management workshop on campus and set a realistic and obtainable goal that was strong enough to motivate her to continue.

## **2.7 Work-based learning: Integrating theory with practice**

Nyström, Dahlgren and Dahlgren (2004) contend that students who had experiences of applying theoretical knowledge to practice when they studied at university would find a job earlier and easier than those who did not have the same experiences. They interviewed 11 students majoring in Psychology and 8 students in Political Science and Economics. The ages of the participants majoring in Political Science and Economics ranged from 24 to 27 years. The ages of the students in Psychology were between 24 and 44 years. Five were male and 14 were female in this study.

Nyström et al (2004) noted that 7 students of Psychology and 2 of Political Science and Economics were employed already during the last semester of higher education. From 15 to 18 months after graduation, 10 graduates of Psychology and 5 of Political Science

and Economics were employed. It appeared that the students in Psychology found jobs earlier and easier than those with backgrounds in Political Science and Economics.

Nyström et al (2004) explained that the students of Psychology had the clinical internships and the compulsory period of supervised professional practice so they experienced more opportunities for integrating theory into work than did the Political Science and Economics students. Through periods of clinical internship and compulsory professional practice supervised by academic staff and workplace instructors, the students of Psychology gained a clear view on professional roles and tasks together with accumulating some professional experience. They also had access to professional networks and contacts. In contrast, the students of Political Science and Economics had little chance to do practical work supervised by academic staff and professionals in the workplace, and most of them had a broad liberal knowledge but a vague sense of role identity and few connections.

This study suggests the importance of work-based learning such as practicum experiences, work placements and internships (Crebert et al, 2004) in students gaining employment. Through accumulating some professional work experience they are able to transfer abstract theories and formal knowledge into practical contexts.

An example of this is provided at the University of Griffith, Australia. Students in the School of Microelectronic Engineering, School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, and School of Leisure Studies experienced work placements as a formal part of their degree program (Crebert et al, 2004). These programs are combined with work placements and have the following features:

- integration of the work placement in the undergraduate program (e.g., credit points are allocated)
- provision of both an academic and workplace supervision for the student on placement

- allocation of a staff member to take responsibility for coordinating the program between school and industry
- formal assessment by the university of the students' learning outcomes from work placement; and
- acceptance of a fair degree of responsibility by students for negotiating and managing the placement process, as part of their professional development (Crebert et al, 2004, p. 151).

In this study, the importance of work experience in a workplace was discussed. One graduate generalized that the work placement was of great significance for students' learning and career prospects:

*For me, it is more about getting in there with the real live work environment, seeing real issues, real solutions and working with a team of real people (p. 159).*

A total of 82.5 per cent of 664 respondents underlined the opportunities provided during work placement for skills development. One graduate commented:

*(Work placement) provided a framework for developing skills needed to adapt to different work environments (p. 155).*

Another continued:

*Work placement provided opportunities to utilize these skills and abilities I developed (at university) in a workplace situation. It provided valuable feedback from industry regarding the level of skill I had acquired through my university*



*studies* (p. 155).

In the study, 78.5 per cent of respondents said they had been required to put theory into practice and as a consequence, 72.6 per cent had no trouble in moving between academic and practical situations. A total of 74.2 per cent of respondents reported that the skills gained through work placement had enhanced their subsequent career development.

## **2.8 Conclusion**

This chapter provided a review of literature on mature age students and some aspects of work-based learning. The key term in the study “career” was discussed, and the notion of a nonlinear life career pattern was proposed as an explanation for the dynamic nature of work, learning and lives of mature age students. The chapter also provided a basis for exploring why mature age students came to university after working for several years.

The chapter also examined how mature age students incorporated diverse resources into their self-development and management for their higher education and career development. This incorporation included how they managed their limited time for life-learning-work balance when they studied at university. Besides limited time and multiple responsibilities outside university, mature age students also faced financial problems, poor academic learning skills and low confidence. Some mature age students experienced critical reflections which changed assumptions about themselves and they became confident for their higher education. Literature on mature age students provided a reference for this study.

The last part of this chapter examined work-based learning such as practicums, internships and the work placements. Graduates thought highly of work-based learning

because it positioned students in a “real live work environment”, solve “real” problems and allowed them to work with a team of “real” people in the workplace. Exposure to work contributes to an acquisition of knowledge and skills required by the workplace and to improvement employment prospects of graduates.

In short, studies reviewed in this chapter on mature age students’ learning and career development provided an account of the issues faced by mature age students. These issues included poor learning skills, “troubled” prior learning experiences and difficulties with life-work balance. Findings from earlier studies helped to shape the design of this thesis and provided information that informed the questions that participants were asked. These studies provided a rich foundation for this research project.

## **Chapter 3**

# **RETHINKING THEORIES FOR MATURE AGE STUDENTS: CAREERS AND LEARNING**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a theoretical framework for this study. It examines the notion of a nonlinear life career pattern as a consequence of the deregulated labour market and economic rationalism. It also explores a philosophy of adult learning and basic features of adult learning such as Knowles's six principles and Mezirow's transformative learning. Aspects of self-development and management were discussed as an effective approach for mature age students to handle their lives and learning when studying at university.

### **3.2 The nonlinear life career pattern**

In the traditional linear life career pattern, education, work and family life are linear and separated (Cross, 1981). Specifically, in childhood and early adulthood people receive an education and then they work until they are retired. Most women take responsibilities for caring for old parents and young children, while men work outside the home. Secondly, in the traditional linear life career pattern people gain lifelong employment and upward mobility in the same organization.

However, this traditional linear life career pattern is challenged by globalization and deregulated labour market. With minimal government interference in a free market, organizations are downsizing and delayering at a pace never before seen in order to be

more adaptive and more innovative to respond effectively to fragmented and rapidly shifting consumer demands (Aronowitz & Difazio, 1994). Under this circumstance, downsizing, restructuring and technology development lead to a proliferation of “disposable” workers (Kell, 1996) which include most women in the workforce (Merriam & Carrarella, 1999) and the soaring numbers of unemployed, temporary and part-time workers in the contemporary Australian society (Hyde, 2002; Woodward, 2005). The traditional linear life career pattern focusing on lifelong employment has “collapsed”.

In this context, the Australian government encouraged adults to undertake higher education as an effective means of handling unemployment and job insecurity. As mentioned previously, the “Commonwealth, state and territory governments have agreed to work together to halve the proportion of Australians aged between 20 and 64 years without qualifications at the certificate III level and above between 2009 and 2020 – nearly 6.5 million people” (Australian Government, 2008, p. 4). Moreover, Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Reform Julia Gillard announced that government would raise the proportion of the Australian population aged 25-34 with a Bachelor level degree to 40 per cent by 2025 (Universities Australia, 2009), while the proportion of the same age group holding a Bachelor’s degree was 29 per cent in 2006 (Australia Government, 2008). This means that there will be more mature age students at Australian universities from 2009 to 2025.

Growing numbers of mature age students in Australia challenges the traditional linear life career pattern. First, education and learning do not exclusively belong to children and young adults because adults can go to university at any age. For example, people may go to university in their thirties or fifties after working for dozens of years. This also means life and careers become increasingly dynamic and unpredictable in a contemporary society. Confronted with job insecurity and the chaotic labour market, numerous people have experienced career transitions and/or unemployment, and many

of them choose to go to university for upgrading their knowledge and skills after working for several years. In this case, the notion of a traditional linear life career pattern in which people learn at early age then work until they retire has been challenged. Lifelong learning and dynamic life and careers have become major trends in the contemporary society.

Second, learning, work and life are not separated but intertwined for mature age students. There are two major reasons. One reason is that job insecurity and technology advancement drive mature age people to enter the university. Once they are engaged in lifelong learning, the relationship between their lives, learning and work is interdependent and interactive: Their life and work experience will influence what and how they learn at university; knowledge and skills they gained at university will influence their lifestyle and the quality of life and work. Secondly, increasing numbers of women enjoy equal rights with regard to going to university and work, so both husband and wife have to share family commitments. That is to say, for mature age students, family commitments, personal learning needs and occupational aspirations need to be taken into consideration before decisions are made to go to university or when they are studying at university. In this way, learning, life and work are intricately intertwined.

To sum up, the traditional linear life career pattern has been under question due to increasing numbers of “disposable” workers (Kell, 1996) and the popularized lifelong learning. A new nonlinear life career pattern has emerged. This nonlinear life career pattern highlights lifelong learning, unpredictable modern life and careers and the intertwined relationship between life, work and learning. This pattern fits with the chaotic labour market.

The nonlinear pattern of engagement with careers is more dynamic and unpredictable than previously thought and is underpinned by by Levison and Levison’s (1996) cyclic

life pattern and Harrington and Hall's (2007) notion of career as a series of learning cycles. The cyclic life pattern highlights changes and transitions in one's life. It refers to the notion that people may experience important transformations in their lives after examining their "life structure" (e.g., career, education, and marriage/family). The notion of the nonlinear life career pattern is also supported by Harrington and Hall (2007) who view career as a series of learning cycles which addresses the idea that a career means a mini-cycle of learning, and changing career reflects a new cycle of learning. Harrington and Hall emphasize the importance of learning/education in one's career development.

### **3.2.1 Levinson and Levinson's life cycles**

The previous view of careers in the linear life pattern has been challenged by the notion of the cyclic life pattern (Cross, 1981). Levinson and Levinson (1996) outline a series of ten stages that occur across the lifespan where people may make a momentous transformation after examining and reexamining their life structure (e.g., marriage/family, occupation, education, memberships and roles):

Early Adult Transition	Ages 17-22
Entry Life Structure for Early Adulthood	Ages 22-28
Age 30 Transition	Ages 28-33
Culminating Life Structure for Early Adulthood	Ages 33-40
Mid-life Transition	Ages 40-45
Early Life Structure for Middle Adulthood	Ages 45-50
Age 50 Transition	Ages 50-55
Culminating Life Structure for Middle Adulthood	Ages 55-60
Late Adult Transition	Ages 60-65
Era of Late Adulthood	Ages 60-?
(Levinson and Levinson, 1996, pp. 25-27)	

These life cycles apply to both men and women (Levinson & Levinson, 1996). In these life cycles, the relationship between life, learning and work are not separated. On the contrary, they are tangled. People examine their life structure which mainly consists of their family lives, careers and education they may determine to do a life or career transition. Levinson and Levinson's (1996) theory indicates that "(life/career) transitions" may occur at any life stage. "Transition" is central to Levinson and Levinson's (1996) life cyclic pattern, and this pattern fits with dynamic and uncertain labour market and unpredictable modern life and careers.

This theory focusing on transitions questions the linear life career pattern which highlights that life and careers can be foreseen and they are "fixed". In this traditional life career pattern people learn in childhood and early adulthood, and then they work until they retire. It seems that in this pattern what people learn in childhood and early adulthood can be used through their lifetime. It seems that in this pattern people are never out of work and they always do the same work until they retire so they do not have to undertake lifelong learning.

This traditional linear life career pattern which stresses "fixed" life and careers can not be applied to a free market underpinned by economic rationalism. In Australia, many people have experienced unemployment and underemployment as well as career transitions due to severe competition and an abundance of temporary and part-time work (Hyde, 2002; Woodward, 2005). The Australian government encourages people to go to university (Australian Government, 2008), so the number of mature age students is increasing and will continue to grow (Australian Government, 2008). This indicates that numerous people in Australia have experienced career and life transitions, and this is congruent with Levinson and Levinson's (1996) theory.

To sum up, Levinson and Levinson's (1996) theory questions the linear life career pattern which emphasizes "fixed" life and careers. In the rapidly changing world of

work, a proliferation of people have experienced career transitions and their lives and careers become dynamic and increasingly unpredictable, and this supports Levinson and Levinson's (1996) theory which highlights "transitions" in one's life.

### **3.2.2 Career as a series of learning cycles**

Harrington and Hall's (2007) theory further confirms the strong relationship between work change and lifelong learning. They assert that careers can be conceived as a series of learning cycles and over the span of a working life what can be seen is not the career stages that many traditional career theories stress but a series of learning cycles as one responds to changes in contexts. The learning cycle is not closely tied to chronological age but rather to "career age" (Harrington & Hall, 2007, p. 186). One's life career development becomes a sequence of learning cycles characterized by an "exploration-trial-mastery-exit" (Harrington & Hall, 2007, p. 186) trajectory of learning new knowledge and skills. This theory indicates that what individuals learned in childhood and in youth cannot guarantee lifelong employment. Individuals need to undertake lifelong learning in order to "survive" in the labor market or pursue personal growth voluntarily. In short, a contemporary life career pathway can be viewed as a progression of learning cycles over one's lifespan.

In this study, all five participants exhibited a nonlinear life career pattern. They worked for 5 to 30 years before studying at university as mature age students and secondly, work, family life and learning are intertwined in their lives. Their experiences demonstrate that career can be conceived of as a series of learning cycles (Harrington & Hall, 2007). Different jobs mean different learning cycles: Emma had worked in Nursing for almost 30 years before she turned to studying Community, Culture and Environment. She wanted to become a teacher or a researcher. Tess used to be a receptionist, salesgirl and administrator before she studied Politics and Journalism. She now wanted to become a political journalist. Mary had worked in the building industry



as a salesgirl. She was studying Early Childhood Education when interviewed. Ben had worked in event management for several years prior to pursuing Environmental Engineering. Jennifer worked in a range of different industries before she became a primary school teacher.

### **3.3 Adult learning**

#### **3.3.1 Philosophy of adult education**

Self-fulfillment has been the focus of much attention in the literature of adult education (Woodard, 2005). Self-actualizers explore opportunities to fulfill their talents, abilities and potentialities by “doing the best that they are capable of doing” (Maslow, 1973, p. 178). Humanistic education, advocated by renowned scholars like Knowles and Rogers, proposes that people are open to change and lifelong learning in order to strive for personal fulfillment (Elias & Merriam, 1995; Pratt, 1993; Tisdell & Taylor, 1999/2000). Self-development of one’s full potential is regarded as a universal human need (Knowles, 1990; Knowles, Holton III & Swanson, 1998; Woodard, 2005).

According to Tisdell and Taylor’s (1999/2000) classification of philosophical orientations to adult education, radical humanists like Mezirow also advocate personal growth and self-actualization, but personal fulfillment from the perspective of radical humanism is more about becoming a rational and responsible citizen through an emphasis on critical reflection. Mezirow’s (1990) transformative learning illustrates this notion of how adults become rational and responsible through critical reflection.

#### **3.3.2 Learning how to learn**

In the knowledge-based society, employees are required to possess a comprehensive set

of competencies that are not occupation specific but are transferable across all facets of life and work (Australian Blueprint for Career Development, 2006). The package of transferable competencies involves learning how to learn (Rawson, 2000). Smith (1982) defines learning how to learn in the following way:

Learning how to learn involves possessing, or acquiring, the knowledge and skill to learn effectively in whatever learning situation one encounters (p. 19).

As an important provider of lifelong learning, the higher education sector plays a vital part in offering opportunities that will improve the ability of adult student to learn how to learn. Little (2001) proposes that higher education emphasizes *how* students learn rather than *what* students learn. The reasons for higher education focusing on learning how to learn involves the nature of rapid change in jobs and the completely new sectors that are emerging. What we learned in childhood and in youth about the workplace and the skills that are necessary to function effectively can no longer guarantee lifetime employment.

In this case, people are required to manage the relationship between work and learning all through their life. They are required to have the personal abilities to deal intelligently with change and challenging situations (Little, 2001). Krumboltz and Worthington (1999) assert that one of the essential skills for success is learning how to adapt to changing conditions. More and more adults who return to university view higher education as a powerful means to build up the set of transferable knowledge and skills (Krumboltz & Worthington, 1999) that will enable them to ensure employment in an extremely competitive labor market.

### **3.3.3 Principles for adult learning**

In 1927 Lindeman introduced the concept of andragogy into the literature of American

adult education (Brookfield, 1987a) and he explained that “Andragogy is the true method of adult learning” (p. 27). Lindeman (1987a) first distinguishes adult from child education: “schools are for children. Life itself is the adult’s school”, and “the child’s education goes along with nature; the adult’s learning conflicts with nature in an effort toward self-mastery” (p. 28).

In *The Meaning of Adult Learning*, Lindeman claims that, for adults, education is a means to accommodate to the universe, and the universe always changes. In this case, adult education “never ends” (Lindeman, 1987b, p. 37). “It lasts so long as life itself endures” (p. 37). The purpose of adult learning is not to learn “how to make a living but rather how to live” (p. 37).

After examining the contributions of andragogy to adult learning over the past twenty-five years, Pratt (1993) asserts that “andragogy has been adopted by many adult educators around the world and has influenced the practice of adult education across an impressive range of settings” (p. 21). From this viewpoint, “andragogy has made an enormous contribution to adult education” (Pratt, 1993, p. 21).

What is learning in terms of andragogy? During the 1950s and 1960s the dominant definition of learning involved a change in behaviour. Knowles, a well-known adult educator, diverted the focus of research on learning from behaviorism (Pratt, 1993). From an andragogical perspective, Pratt (1993) draws inferences about learning. In the first place, adults’ prior experience is most significant for their learning. In the second place, learning does not mean finding out about a preexisting world. Rather, learning, in essence, is the interpretation and construction of meaning through experience, and therefore, “learning is more subjective than objective” (p. 16).

Secondly, why do adults learn from an andragogical perspective? The answer is in the philosophical roots of andragogy – humanism (Eisen, 2005; Pratt, 1993; Tisdell &

Taylor, 1999/2000): the individual is seen as central and the emphasis is placed on personal growth and self-actualization.

Knowles's six principles have formed the heart of andragogy (Pratt, 1993). They are "a core set of adult learning principles" (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998, p. 3) that "apply to all adult learning situations" (p. 2). How these principles apply to mature age students is as follows (Knowles, 1990; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005):

1) The need to know. Mature age students need to know why they have to learn particular information and skills before they are engaged in a learning task (Misch, 2002). Mature age students like to contextualize learning in their real lives (Choy & Delahaye, 2002).

2) Self-direction. Mature age students are independent and autonomous in their lives and they are capable of directing their own learning and lives (Misch, 2002; Yoshimoto, Inenaga & Yanada, 2007). Being self-directing means that adult learners enjoy self-diagnosing their learning needs, setting learning goals and implementing their own learning plans (Knowles, 1990; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

3) Prior experience. Mature age students have accumulated a reservoir of experience which functions as a rich resource for learning. They bring their diverse life experiences to the learning situations.

4) Readiness to learn. Mature age students should be ready for those things they need to learn, so their readiness to learn is aligned with the need-to-know. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) contend that adults' readiness to learn is connected to life stage, as well as occupational and social roles. Merriam (1996, p. 137) describes her knee pain as another example. She said, "Knee pain presented the 'teachable moment'; there would

have been no interest in this topic otherwise” because when she was young she had no knee pain.

5) Learning orientation. Mature age students are life-centered or problem-centered when they are engaged in learning. They are motivated to devote themselves to learning if they have a clear idea that what they learn will be immediately applied to real life. For example, Merriam (1996) claims that she was not interested in anatomy as a subject, but rather in the anatomy of her knee and the possible reasons for her knee pain and how to cure it.

6) Motivation to learn. Mature age students are more likely to be stimulated by intrinsic motivators (e.g., self-fulfillment, happiness) than extrinsic motivators (e.g., degree, salary).

In summary, the principles of adult learning suggest that if mature age students are to become successful learners they need to know the purpose of the learning tasks they are undertaking; they need to take responsibility for their own learning and their prior experience must be valued. The principles also suggest that mature age students may be more likely than their younger peers to prepare for their learning; they are experienced problem-solvers and they are likely to be intrinsically motivated. These principles suggest that mature age students may often be self-regulated lifelong learners and their re-entry to education is evidence of this.

### **3.3.4 Transformative learning**

Jack Mezirow’s (1991) research on transformative learning originated from his wife’s return to college in pursuit of undergraduate-level education. Mezirow found that this experience changed her radically in which she gained a new career and life-style. Influenced by his wife’s experience, Mezirow (1991) conducted a national study of

women returning to university and the work force. He and his colleagues interviewed eighty-three mature age female students in twelve programs in New York, New Jersey, California, and Washington. On the basis of their research findings, Mezirow and his team of researchers concluded that participants had undergone a personal transformation through transformative learning.

Based on constructivism and radical humanism, transformative learning highlights personal fulfillment. It has a focus on becoming a critical and autonomous thinker through perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1997; Tisdell & Taylor, 1999/2000). Glisczinski (2007, p. 319) argues that in the knowledge-based society individuals are supposed to “think and act dynamically – rather than linearly”. As Mezirow (1997) pointed out, confronted with increasingly complicated technology and rapidly changing service sectors, mature age students are required to become more independent and innovative in understanding and mastering knowledge and skills rather than merely acquiring them. The goal of adult education is to help mature age students become more independent by critically reflecting on and negotiating their own values and beliefs rather than uncritically acting on those of others. Mezirow (1997) emphasizes that the nature of adult learning is to develop critical, rational and autonomous adult learners.

In terms of transformative learning, mature age students are believed to have a high level of freedom of thought and action. They have control over their environment and achieve their goals through critical reflection and actions (Taylor, 1998). If the circumstances change, previous interpretations of the realities are always subject to modification and substitution (Clark, 1993a; Mezirow, 1991, 1997, 2003).

In light of transformative learning, learning as “the vehicle of adult development” is viewed as “a change in consciousness” through critical reflection, which “can not be understood in behavioral terms” (Clark, 1993b, p. 53). Mezirow (1991) defines learning as “making meaning” (p. 11). The definition of transformative learning is:

the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative perspective; and finally making choices or otherwise acting on these new understandings (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167).

Mezirow (1991, 1997, 2003) proposes eleven phases for the process of transformative learning. Key phases include a disorienting dilemma, emotion change, critical reflection and action. Taylor's (1998) critical review of the theory and practice of transformative learning indicates that few of the studies reviewed provided actual data to verify each phase. Kitchenham (2008) claims that there is no need to experience all eleven phases or to experience them in a fixed order in transformative learning. Mezirow (1991, p. 152) acknowledged that transformative learning proposes "a form of developmental progression in adulthood that does not follow clearly defined steps or stages" and "transformative learning is not a stage theory" (p. 160).

#### **3.3.4.1 Disorienting dilemma**

The stimulus and the first phase of Mezirow's theory (1991) is a disorienting dilemma – a tangible internal and/or external personal crisis or a catalyst or trigger of a perspective transformation (Taylor, 1998, 2008). Originally, a distorting dilemma referred to an external crisis such as death, divorce, examination failure or retirement (Mezirow, 1991). Clark (1993a) who broadens the definition of a disorienting dilemma, finds "integrating circumstances" are catalysts to transformative learning too. Integrating circumstances are indistinct periods in which individuals consciously or unconsciously seek for something missing in their lives. When they find this lost portion, the transformation process is stimulated.

Benson, Guy and Tallman (2001) interviewed four mature age students who enrolled in

two online courses. Barbara experienced a disorienting dilemma where she initially felt uncomfortable and discouraged (a disorienting dilemma) because the online courses did not give her the feedback she had expected. Therefore, she wrote to the teaching assistant about the same assignment:

*Tara, I sent my first assignment in on Mon[days]. and have not heard anything from Dr. Jones about if I need to make corrections. As I understood it, that was why it was a wise idea to get them in early. I understand this may take a little longer for Dr. Jones this first week, but I'm interested if she will give us extra fix up time. It's Wed. night since I work, I won't be back on-line till the assignment deadline. Thanks. (p. 264)*

Without getting feedback straight away from Dr. Jones for her first assignment in an online course, Barbara felt uncomfortable and frustrated, so she turned to the teaching assistant for help. This indicates that Barbara encountered a disorienting dilemma in online learning which require students to be independent.

#### **3.3.4.2 Emotional change**

In transformative learning, perspective transformations are triggered by a disorienting dilemma. Mature age students engage in ongoing self-examinations which are often accompanied by some “emotional upheavals” (Moore, 2005a, p. 8). The strong emotional changes also lead to critical reflection (Moore, 2005b). Taylor (1998) finds that some research on transformative learning is focused on the relationship between critical reflection and feelings. Evidence of this relationship between critical reflection and feelings can be found in the studies of Ball (1999) and Kitchenham (2006). In Kitchenham’s (2006) study, all ten teachers aged 40 or over experienced emotional



changes from worry to comfort during their process of perspective transformations.

#### 3.3.4.3 Critical reflection

Transformative learning generates more profound changes in people than does traditional learning because it reshapes identity as suggested by Clark (1993b) who said “we were one sort of person, but after we were another” (Clark, 1993b, p. 48). In this case, transformative learning “shapes” people (p. 47) by altering distorted and limited perspectives. Critical reflection is the way that transformative learning shapes people, so Mezirow (1991) asserts that critical reflection is central to adult development (Mezirow, 1991). Cranton (1996) and Merriam (2004) contend that critical reflection is pivotal to transformative learning.

Reflection involves us in thinking about experience (Rogers, 2001). Experience and feelings are crucial ingredients for constructing knowledge, and reflection on experience and feelings can align them with future action (McAlpine & Weston, 2000). Cranton (1996) explains why reflection is so important to us:

Our natural human interest in emancipation drives us to reflect on the way we see ourselves, our history, our knowledge, and our social roles. If we see that we are constrained or oppressed by any of our perspectives, we may be challenged to revise them (p. 75).

Three types of reflection have been identified (Cranton, 1996; Cranton, cited in Tsao, et al., 2006; Mezirow, 1991): Content reflection involves thinking about **what** I believe (feel, perceive) about myself. Process reflection is to question **how** I have come to have this perspective (feeling, perception) of myself. Premise reflection is related to questions of the self of **why** I should question this perspective (feeling, perception). This means that “critical reflection requires the person to see the larger view of what is

operating within his or her value system” (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 114).

As mentioned previously, in Benson, Guy and Tallman’s (2001) study only Barbara experienced a perspective transformation from dependence to independence in online learning. She explained why she was dependent on the course instructor:

*Because of my age, I came from a real traditional background where you turn in the assignment and what you thought wasn’t real important, it was what the professor thought. You spent your whole time trying to second-guess a professor...and I really think that I ended up learning how to [be independent] because Dr. Jones backed me into a corner and I didn’t have a choice. On this Reference course, you had to depend on yourself. Maybe it’s one of those things you either loved or you hated. At first, I was just furious. I was upset all the time. I don’t know if I’m doing this right. No one’s telling me if I’m doing this right. You would turn in homework and you would get feedback on that but it’s not the same as talking to someone and saying, is this right? (p. 265)*

Barbara critically reflected on why she felt “furious” and “upset” with online learning when no one was telling her if what she had written was correct. Barbara explained the reason for this was that “I came from a real traditional background where you turn in the assignment and what you thought wasn’t real important, it as what the professor thought”. Through critical reflection, Barbara realized that “you had to depend on yourself”. This illustrates the notion that transformative learning “shapes” people through critical reflection (Clark, 1993b, p. 47).

#### **3.3.4.4 Action**

As mentioned earlier, transformative learning begins with a dilemma and moves toward the transformation of distorted and limited assumptions through critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991). It is noted that changing perspectives accompanied by no action is not transformative learning because action is an essential component of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). After altering perspectives through critical reflection, mature age students may make a plan for action followed by acquiring knowledge and skills to implement their plans. Consequently mature age students may become confident and build up their competence and integrate the new perspective into their daily lives. Action is indispensable for transformative learning (Baumgartner, 2001).

In Kitchenham's (2006) study, all ten participants initially felt worried about applying new technology to educational settings, however, through critical reflection they felt comfortable and stated that they "had adopted new ways of acting" (p. 217) in connection to new educational technology. In Benson, Guy and Tallman's (2001) study, the mature age student, Barbara, became independent after completing the online courses. She also employed the new perspective in her classroom teaching to help her students:

*Now if you have problems, you come back to me but I want you to try to find it rather than taking them by the hand and taking them over there. In middle school, they shouldn't have to do that...I've learned the value of making kids do it themselves (p. 263).*

#### **3.3.4.5 Supportive environment**

Ball (1999) found that strong emotions accompanied perspective transformations, so it was believed that support from families, friends, lecturers, tutors, books, magazines and

so on were significant in maintaining personal changes. Mezirow (1997) claims that the emphasis of transformative education should be placed on creating a supportive learning context in which educators serve as facilitators instead of as authorities over mature age students. Southern (2007) highlights the importance of creating a community of care in transformative learning is that “we participate together, learn from one another, and work together to take our transformative experiences out into the world” (p.337).

### **3.3.5 Work-based learning**

Higher education and work have a close relationship (Table 3.1), according to Brennan, et al. (2001). However, business enterprises are challenging the traditional functions of higher education institutions because of a belief by some that there is generally no connection between theory and practice in the traditional university curriculum (Tynjälä, Välimaa & Sarja, 2003).

The “gap” between education and work (Crebert et al, 2004; Fallows & Steven, 2000; Marginson & O’hanlon, 1993; Tynjälä, Välimaa & Sarja, 2003) lies in several important differences between learning and problems in education and those in work. Learning in education is featured as individual activities, purely mental activities, symbolic manipulation and generic skills and principles (Resnick, cited in Tynjälä, Välimaa & Sarja, 2003, p. 150). In contrast, learning at work emphasizes socially shared activities, different tools used, contextualized reasoning, and situation-specific competencies (Tynjälä, Välimaa & Sarja, 2003, p. 150). Furthermore, problems in work are ill-defined in a specific context whereas problems in education are well-designed in a theoretical coherent framework (Marginson & O’Hanlon, 1993).

Confronted with all these differences, higher education providers need to develop “vocational know-how and competitiveness regionally by combining the needs of working life, vocational training, and theoretical and practical knowledge” (Tynjälä,

Välilä & Sarja, 2003, p. 149). Some kinds of work-based learning as work placements, practicums, internships (Crebert et al, 2004; Nyström, Dahlgren & Dahlgren, 2004) and apprenticeship (Fallows & Weller, 2000) were proposed to narrow the “gap” between education and employment.

Work-based learning addresses the application of theoretical knowledge gained at university in practical situations (Crebert et al, 2004; Stern, Rahn & Chung, 1998; Tynjälä, Välilä & Sarja, 2003). Tynjälä, Välilä and Sarja (2003) assert that essential in work-based learning is the social interaction between students and teachers, students and workplace instructors, teachers and employers, students and their peers. Crebert et al. (2004) contend that industry engagement is beneficial to students because it proposes real-life problems and it assesses the application of theoretical knowledge into practical situations from a perspective of professionals in the workplace.

Table 3.1 Relationships between higher education and work (Brennan, et al., cited in Little, 2001, p. 122)

Dimensions of higher education relevant to work	Linkages between higher education and work	Dimensions of work relevant to higher education
Quantitative and structural developments	Labor market, intermediary agencies and transition	Employment
Curricula, training and socialization	Regulatory system	Career
Provisions and students' options	Lifelong education and work	Work tasks and requirements: Profession Quality of work and employment

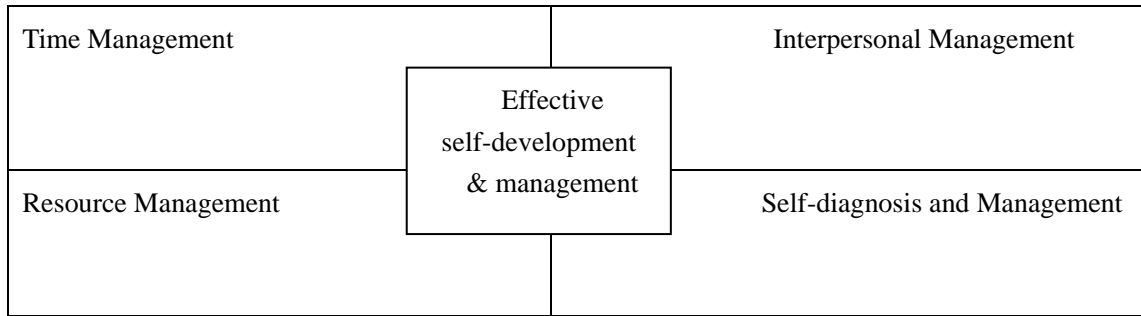
### **3.4 Self-development and management**

In order to manage our lives and achieve the goals for which we are striving, a model of effective self-development and management is proposed (figure 3.2). This model includes the need for time management, resource management, interpersonal management and self-diagnosis and management (Smith, 1999). The effectiveness of self-development and management depends on how well the four components are combined when we strive for our life goals (Smith, 1999).

Limited time is one of the major reasons gained to explain why mature age students work hard and why they are highly-motivated at university. Limited time may result in doubt about the rewards of higher education (Heenan, 2002) or cause future anxiety among mature age students. Another aspect of time management is that in conjunction with other responsibilities such as caring responsibilities which may lead to delayed entry to higher education or a difficulty in balancing life commitments for mature age students.

According to Smith (1999), resource management refers to the consideration of personal finance and personal abilities including skills and knowledge acquisition and information collection. Interpersonal management means to negotiate with others in order to maintain a supportive atmosphere of mutual understanding. Self-diagnosis and management highlight reflection and self-evaluation for learning abilities and strategies, choosing and setting achievable goals (Ebberwein et al., 2004; Gammon, 1997) and taking action under risk (McGraw, 1999).

Figure 3.2 Effective self-development and management



Source: Adapted from Smith, 1999, p. 231.

### 3.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined some theories that attempted to explain the factors involved in mature age students' learning and life career development.

A nonlinear life career pattern has become a hallmark of contemporary society. The traditional life career pattern of earlier industrial society has been replaced by the nonlinear one. The nonlinear life career pattern has an intertwined family life, work and learning in one's life span and it highlights lifelong learning and unpredictable life and careers. It is consistent with Levinson and Levinson's (1996) life cycles and Harrington and Hall's (2007) idea of career as a series of learning cycles.

Andragogy (Knowles, 1990; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 1998; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005) emphasizes six core principles in adult learning including the need to know, self-direction, prior experience, readiness to learn, learning orientation and motivation to learn. These six principles of adult learning highlight some of the characteristics of mature age students that contribute to their success: They are well-prepared for their learning with valuable prior experience and goals and often highly-motivated and autonomous in their studies.

The significance of disorientating dilemma, critical reflection, emotional change and action are emphasized in the process of transformation learning. The emphasis is placed on critical reflection because in the rapidly changing world of work, mature age students are required to become more independent and to negotiate their own values and beliefs rather than to act on those of others. As argued by Mezirow (1991), “transformative learning is not a stage theory” (p. 160), and important components that have been mentioned may appear in a different order in the lives of different people.

Work-based learning highlights the close relationship between higher education and employment. In order to narrow the gap between theory and practice, mature age students are recommended to seek some opportunities to apply what they have learned at university in practical situations.

Smith’s (1999) self-development and management encompasses: time management, resource management, interpersonal management and self-diagnosis and management. This model covers most aspects of mature age students’ lives such as learning, work, and family lives, individual and environment, and, inner conflicts and social interaction.

The philosophical orientation toward adult learning is rooted in humanism. Mature age students come to university in pursuit of happiness and self-fulfillment. Radical humanists like Mezirow also advocate personal growth as a reason for return to study. The emphasis of radical humanism is on cultivating rational, critical and independent adult learners.



## **Chapter 4**

### **STUDYING MATURE AGE STUDENTS: A NARRATIVE APPROACH**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter describes and explains the research design and the process of data collection and analysis and the use of narrative as a research approach that enables mature age students to describe their lives and studies.

#### **4.2 Research design**

##### **4.2.1 Qualitative research**

This research is framed within a qualitative paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Creswell (1994) defines qualitative research as an “inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting” (p. 2). The major reason for employing a qualitative approach is to allow researchers to understand the world from the perspective of participants (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Merriam, 1998). Researchers “are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, and experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Marshall (1996) points out that qualitative research aims to understand complex issues and is “most useful for answering humanistic ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions” (p. 522). From this perspective, the aim of qualitative research is to understand “complexity rather than to uncover a *knowable truth*, which might involve watching what people do, talking to

them about it, asking other people about it and trying to understand and explain what is going on, without any resource to numbers or statistics or variables whatsoever” (Kervin, Vialle, Herrington & Okely, 2006, p. 106).

Mason (1996) identifies some key characteristics of qualitative research. These include interpretations in different ways, methods of data production that are flexible and sensitive to the social settings, and methods of analysis and “illumination building” that involves an understanding of complexity. Lankshear and Knobel (2004) argue that qualitative data can provide “rich and detailed descriptions or be richly descriptive in the forms of participants’ own words, direct citation from documents, and journals (rather than ‘counts’ or statistical relationships) of people in action” (p. 69).

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) and Mertens (2005) contend that there is no one accurate interpretation as multiple realities are constructed socially and the researcher’s goal is to understand the multiple realities through interaction between the researcher and the researched. Researchers consistently explore “answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8).

After reviewing the literature on different approaches to research and giving careful consideration to the purpose of this study, a qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate. In this study, five participants provided rich and detailed descriptions of their personal experiences, and I interpreted “the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge” from the perspectives of participants (Mertens, 2005, p. 14). In addition, qualitative research provided an opportunity to investigate, analyze, and report in-depth about the participants’ aspirations, emotions, commitments and expectations through interactions by interviews, observations and online discussions.

#### 4.2.2 Narrative

According to Murray (2003, p. 95), we live in “a storied world”. Murray (2003) continues that we “tell stories to ourselves and to others about our lives. In this way our lives are represented in narrative form” (p. 100). Chen (1998, p. 446) contends that people gain an opportunity to “make sense of who they are, where they come from, and where they are going in their life career pathway” through ongoing life narratives. In this case, a narrative encompasses the interpretations of one’s life experiences and is a form of self-construction (Bujold, 2004). It is a fundamental way of humans understanding themselves and their lives (Baumeister & Wilson, 1996; Chen, 1997, 1998; Clark, 2001; Elliott, 2005; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998; Mancuso, 1996; Punch, 1998; Singer, 2004; Ylijoki, 2005). In a narrative, multiple interpretations are true in particular settings (Smith & Sparkes, 2006; Squire, 2008). This means different people have different understandings about the world, and every interpretation is “true” in a particular context.

A narrative brings order to disorder because it has temporal and causal dimensions (Elliott, 2005; Murray, 2003). Narrative explores not only what happened in the past but what may arise in the future (Chen, 1997). The temporal quality of narrative is aligned with the plot (Elliott, 2005). “It is the plot that connects the beginning of the story to the end” (Murray, 2003, p. 98). Causality is a pivotal component adding consistency to a narrative (Elliott, 2005; Squire, 2008). “The constant reinterpretation of the past in the light of the present, both of which influence and are influenced by hopes and fears for the future, provides the sense of coherence required by the embodied self” (Kirkman, 2002, p. 32). Coherence is central to a narrative (Clark, 2001) which provides unity to an individual’s past, present and future (Singer, 2004; Smith & Sparkes, 2006).

The continuity of self over time does not mean a personal narrative is fixed (Clark, 2001). On the contrary, the process of self-construction is dynamic, ongoing and

complex because people are not inactive receivers, rather, they have “a sense of negotiation for change” (Chen, 1997, p. 315). The interpretation and meaning making is open and negotiable in one’s life span (Chen, 1998). For example, the five participants in this study wanted to change their careers so they came to university after working for between five and thirty years. This indicates that the plot of a personal narrative is open and it can be adjusted and reconstructed (Bujold, 2004; Chen, 1997). “The person has the freedom to think beyond the past and the present by putting insight into the future story plot. Instead of feeling uncertain about what’s going to happen, plans allow one to feel better prepared and more confident” (Chen, 1997, p. 315). In the study, participants had an achievable goal and equipped themselves with knowledge and skills to attempt to reduce risks and uncertainty in the future.

Chase (2005) explains the distinctiveness of the narrative approach when compared with other forms of qualitative inquiry: First, a narrative method emphasizes why it is worth telling the story and what occurred from the perspective of the narrator. It also illustrates the emotions, perceptions and understandings of each individual. Second, the combinations of what, how, and where make the narrator unique. It is the narrator who shapes and constructs the self, experience, and reality. Third, stories are shaped by a variety of social resources and circumstances. Through this lens the researcher identifies the convergences and divergences across narratives. Fourth, narratives are told in a specific context for a particular purpose (Elliott, 2005). Fifth, apart from traditional research practice, narrative researchers employ the first person to present their findings and to address their own narrative action.

In this study, narrative inquiry was employed because it fits the nature and purpose of the research. This project explores why mature age students came to university after working for several years and how they perceived their higher education in terms of their career development. Through the narrative lens, participants in this study could filter their life experiences and extract meanings from unfolding events across large

temporal periods in their lifespan. It is possible to gain rich data from their in-depth descriptions based on their insights as well as the wisdom accumulated in their lives. As Singer (2004, p. 442) notes, narrative allows us to “raise our spirits, guide our actions, or influence others as a tool of persuasion”.

The third reason for using narrative method is that “a person is essentially a story-telling animal, which encourages qualitative researchers to pay close attention to the stories people tell” (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, p. 170). Singer (2004) asserts that “the ongoing life narrative offers another opportunity for individuals to understand where they belong in the world and to determine what takes them closer or further away from the goals to which they aspire” (p. 446). This feature is an important aspect of this study and reaffirms the attributes of narrative.

### **4.3 Location of the study**

This research project was conducted at a medium-sized university in Australia. Approximately 20,000 students are enrolled there. It is located close to a major city on the east coast. It offers programs of study at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels and has a sound reputation as a provider of tertiary education.

This location was chosen because access to participants was readily available. For this study, posters were placed in prominent positions across the campus and contact details were provided for those students who wished to volunteer for this research project. A pseudonym rather than the real name of the university was employed for reasons of confidentiality.

## **4.4 Participants**

Sampling is of great significance in qualitative research because “we can not study everyone everywhere doing everything” (Punch, 1998, p. 193). Qualitative research usually relies on small samples with the aim of doing research in depth and in detail (Patton, 2002; Squire, 2008). There is a clear principle in qualitative research that sampling should be aligned closely with the purpose and the research questions of the study (Punch, 1998). Based on this principle, purposeful sampling is used to locate information-rich informants in qualitative research (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Hoepfl, 1997; Punch, 1998).

Purposeful sampling is the overriding strategy in qualitative research (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Hoepfl, 1997) because the researcher is deliberately seeking a richness of data or “information-rich” cases for the purpose of a particular study (Baxter & Eyles, 1997; Mertens, 2005; Punch, 1998; Sandelowski, 2000). Marshall (1996) argues that “some informants are ‘richer’ than others and that these people are more likely to provide insight and understanding for the researcher” (p. 523).

Purposeful sampling was employed in this study. Criteria for participants in this study were as follows: They were at least 21 years old with at least 5 years work experience. Moreover, they should be undergraduates from a range of faculties at the University of Gold Coast. A relatively small number of participants were engaged in this study. However, the data gathered through their participation was extremely detailed and “thick descriptions” are available in Chapter 5. Patton (2002) asserted that a small number of information-rich informants could provide insights and in-depth understanding that may be more useful at times than empirical generalizations.

All five participants were mature age students at the undergraduate level from the Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Education and Faculty of Engineering at the University of

Gold Coast. They had different work experiences and educational backgrounds from one another before coming to the university. Their stories indicate that they undertook higher education after a period in the workforce. Of the five participants, four were female and one was male. Table 4.1 below provides the profiles of participants in this study. To protect the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms rather than their real names are used.

Table 4.1 Profiles of participants

	Emma	Tess	Mary	Ben	Jennifer
Age	54	26	24	29	42
Status of Student	Full-time	Part-time	Full-time	Full-time	Full-time
Degree	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor	Bachelor
Faculty	Arts	Arts	Education	Engineering	Education
Major	Community, Culture & Environment	Politics & Journalism	Early Childhood Education	Environmental Engineering	Primary Education
Graduate	2009 (Anticipate)	2013 (Anticipate)	December 2008	2009 (Anticipate)	July 2008
Pathway to University	Completed Tertiary Studies	The University Access Program (UAP)	TAFE Diploma	Partly-Completed Tertiary Studies	Australian Year 12 (Prior Work Experience)
Years of Working	Almost 30	8	5	8	Almost 20
Career Goal	Secondary School Teacher or Researcher	Political Journalist	Preprimary School Teacher or Director	Environmental Engineer	Primary School Teacher

In Table 4.1 there were two students (Emma and Tess) who were enrolled in Arts, two (Mary and Jennifer) in Education and one (Ben) in Engineering. One (Tess) was engaged in part-time study while the other four undertook full-time study. Three (Emma, Mary and Jennifer) wanted to become teachers, one (Tess) desired to become a political journalist and another one (Ben) hope to work as an environmental engineer after graduation. Two (Emma and Mary) had two alternative plans for future career

development.

The following are “snapshots” of the five participants. In a few cases, the same expressions from participants have been used in a number of places within the study due to their significance.

### **Emma**

Emma is fifty-four years of age and had a rewarding career in nursing but, as time went on, she became disenchanted with her work. Now she is a mature age student in the Faculty of Arts.

Feeling tired and with no passion for her job as a nurse manager in a government organization, Emma decided to re-enter university in pursuit of a teaching or research job despite almost thirty years work experience in nursing. When her children were younger, she actually wanted to achieve her dream at that time but failed because her computer skills were poor, making it difficult to study online courses for a Bachelor of Arts. She thought it was high time to make a fresh start when her children became financially independent. With emotional support from her family and her friends, she pursued her tertiary education without hesitation. When she talked about her studies at university, she said:

*My brain is still working very well [laughs aloud], and I'm getting very good marks (laughs again), and I enjoy it.*

Based on her good academic performance, she had two different pathways planned: if she could get first-class Honours in the Bachelor of Arts, she would pursue a Ph.D. If she did not attain first-class Honours, she would undertake a Graduate Diploma in Education in secondary teaching and then a part-time Master's degree.



## **Tess**

Tess is a 26-year-old mature age student in Faculty of Arts. She suffered depression during high school and dropped out before heading to the workplace as a medical receptionist, salesperson, and various other occupations in customer service. She spent eight years in different industries and was determined to come to university for tertiary education. She said:

*When I was young, I moved to Sydney, I lived there for five years, party, having fun. There were definitely no plans but there was an idea, 'Oh, I'll go to uni!' 'Oh, I'll go to uni!' 'Oh, I'll go to uni!'*

With the financial and emotional help of her current boyfriend and her family, she succeeded in entering university as a student of political journalism after completing the University Access Program. Actively seeking help available at the university, she made great progress in her academic performance, increasing her grades from pass and credit to high distinction. Tess believed that a “gap” existed between university studies and the demands related to practicing as a journalist. As a result, she attended courses that would supplement the skills she had gained at the university. She attended a shorthand course at TAFE and a number of presenting courses in Sydney aimed at developing skills in television and documentary presentation. She also wrote articles for a student magazine in the university.

## **Mary**

Mary is a 24-year-old mature age student in the Faculty of Education now. Disappointed with high school studies and lacking in confidence about university pursuits, Mary chose to continue to work in the building industry after graduating from high school. She got an offer for full-time work from her boss at the time and she also

pursued part-time TAFE studies simultaneously. After working in this specialized area for five years, selling hardware in the building industry, Mary felt lost and unhappy about the job and reflected on herself, her life and her future. Enlightened and inspired by her big brother and her neighbor, and emotionally supported by her family, she came to university to undertake Early Childhood Education. When she talked about studies at university, she said:

*I really want to work with kids, so I pushed myself to know more, pushed myself to be better.*

She graduated with distinction in the area of Early Childhood, and she continued on to Honours. She was very confident about her future because of her excellent academic performance and the additional effort she put into the practical experience by working in primary school settings in the breaks between university sessions.

## **Ben**

Ben is a 29-year-old student in the Faculty of Engineering. Having studied at university in the field of Environmental Engineering for three years, Ben did not have any sense of achievement. He failed his studies because of the demands of some part-time work and then he dropped out to work full time. He worked for eight years and he was promoted to the position of project manager in the event management industry, but his career did not progress and he started to reflect on his future. After returning from England, he realized that he and his partner wanted to live in a major Australian city and become more financially independent. To do this, he had to gain a university degree which was why he returned to study. His plan was to complete his previous studies with the goal of becoming an environmental engineer. When he talked about his return to university, he said:

*I think I've worked for a couple of years, started again. Um...I think it's exciting.*

## **Jennifer**

Jennifer is forty-two years of age and married with two high-school aged children. She graduated recently with a Bachelor's degree in Primary Education and works in a primary school now.

After finishing high school at the end of Year Twelve, Jennifer started work in an insurance company and also got married. She continued to work in insurance for seven years and stopped working when she had two children. Jennifer remained at home to take care of her husband and two children. At the same time, she undertook part-time work in a range of different positions such as packing shoes, cooking demonstration in supermarkets and secretarial work. She also volunteered as a Sunday school teacher in her local church. When she talked about this teaching experience, she said:

*I got excited when I taught something to a child, and the child said, 'I got that!'  
That made me so excited...so rewarding. That's why I wanted to be a teacher.*

When her husband planned to retire, she decided to go to university to gain tertiary education. She wanted to extend the experience of raising her own children so she enrolled in a degree leading to primary teaching.

## **4. 5 The sequence and design of the study**

Table 4.2 illustrates the design of this study, which was implemented in three phases. An explanation of each phase is presented below.

Table 4.2 Research sequence and design

Phase/Year	Steps	Data Collection
Phase 1 (February – August, 2008)	Literature review on mature age students aligned with research question and the aim of the study; Document review on policies, statistics, reports, etc. Gaining access to participants.	Data from journals, books and document reviews
Phase 2 (1 <sup>st</sup> September – 30 <sup>th</sup> September, 2008)	A greeting letter and introduction of the study to participants; Arrangement of time and place for interviews; Implementation of a pilot study and modification of the interviews; Establishment of rapport with participants; Concerns with sites of interviews.	A pilot study followed by interviews
Phase 3 (October – December, 2008)	Transcribing data; Returning transcripts to participants; Conducting email discussion; Coding and categorizing data.	Transcribing and coding; Email reviews; Trustworthiness of the data.

### **Phase 1**

(February – August, 2008)

In this phase I reviewed the theories and literature on mature age students' learning and career development particularly in higher education. The focus was on reasons for returning to university, strategies of how mature age students learn and perceptions of higher education in light of employment. Of concern were questions related to: How did mature age students position their learning orientation? How did family members react to their returning to higher education? How do mature age students think about higher education? Does studying at university support their future careers? What is the criterion for career success from the perspective of mature age students? With all these

questions in mind I began an exciting journey to explore the “world” of mature age students.

Unfortunately, there are very few researchers focusing on mature age students in Australia. In the library of the University of Gold Coast, only five hard copy books and government reports were found in this field and they were published from 1977 to 1995. No books or reports were published after 1995. Cullity (2006) points out that in Australia the “limited awareness of mature student characteristics and their participation and completion rates is worrying” and this “limits educator awareness of mature learner circumstances” (p. 193). The limited research and statistics on mature age students did not hinder but challenged me to explore the meanings of their experiences in learning and work spheres.

Through the literature review, I built up an understanding of the challenges faced by mature age students. A range of barriers to higher education were evident: negative educational background, lack of confidence, caring responsibilities, problems of balancing work, learning and life, finance and age concerns, lack of academic skills. Nevertheless, many mature age students appear to pursue higher education for self-actualization, happiness and empowerment. Another significant feature for mature age students is that they seem to critically reflect on their lives in the rapidly changing world which often results in a nonlinear lifestyle.

I also reviewed documents about mature age students on the university’s and government’s websites. Statistics, reports and policies on mature age students were carefully collected and reviewed. These documents present a picture in which mature age students appear as a strikingly different group to their younger counterparts.

Besides literature and document reviews, I sought volunteers at the university through a range of ways: E-posters attached to emails had been sent to a lecturer in the Faculty of

Informatics and several research students in the Faculty of Engineering. The lecturer in the Faculty of Informatics agreed to send the email with the e-poster to all his undergraduate students. My supervisors also introduced this research to all their students and invited their family and friends to circulate the posters. I put up dozens of posters in different faculties in the University of Gold Coast. I also asked for help from my friends.

During the time of waiting for responses from volunteers, I felt very vulnerable. What if nobody contacted me? I initially hoped that volunteers would come from a range of faculties and that they would have at least five years work experiences. Fortunately I received phone calls and emails from volunteers from the Faculty of Arts, Education and Engineering as well as Informatics. Unfortunately, the mature age student from the Faculty of Informatics transferred to another campus before the interviews. Therefore, five volunteers for this study had been recruited based on purposeful sampling strategies. They were Emma and Tess from the Faculty of Arts, Mary and Jennifer from the Faculty of Education, and Ben from the Faculty of Engineering.

## **Phase 2**

(1<sup>st</sup> September – 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2008)

In this phase, I sent participants a greeting email introducing myself. In addition, I attached an invitation letter (Please refer to Appendix 4), an introduction to the research project (Appendix 3) and the consent form (Appendix 5). All the participants were encouraged to nominate a meeting time and place.

Very soon all the participants responded with times they were available for the interview. With reference to the meeting place they asked me to suggest a location. I suggested we meet in my office, or a mini-meeting room or sound-proof group learning room in the library. Among the three suggested locations, three participants preferred the

sound-proof group learning room in the library, one chose my office, another one hoped to make the interview in the mini-meeting room.

A pilot interview was conducted initially in order to refine the process to be used in the study. The aim of the pilot study is to test the questions and sub-questions, the overall length of the interview and how to establish rapport between the interviewer and the participants (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). “The pilot study readies you for gathering data. With the result of the pilot, you may revise your research plans, your interview questions, and even your way of presenting yourself” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 31). Indeed, after the pilot interview, I revised some of the research questions and rearranged the length of the interview. Experiences of those who did not complete Year 12 at high school were taken into consideration in the revised research questions (Please refer to Appendix 2). In addition, the length of interview extended from thirty minutes to around fifty minutes.

Before interviewing, I invited all the participants to have a cup of coffee. Emma sent an email back saying that “you just find the student with grey hair – it’s me!” She was confident and easygoing with considerable insight. When we talked in the coffee bar, she showed great interest in the research project. Tess was outgoing and gregarious. She had a lot of friends. She greeted students passing by us from time to time in the coffee bar. Mary was confident and happy. She said she was doing Honours and she was conducting interviews for her own thesis, too. As a mature age student, she was interested in the focus of this study. Ben was a little bit introverted but very polite and humble. Jennifer always laughed aloud and she talked a lot about her family and her life: her two children, their holidays and her church. She was friendly and warm-hearted.

During the conversation in the coffee bar, I introduced myself and the study briefly and showed them the consent form. The participants signed the forms required by the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Gold Coast. We confirmed the time and

the meeting place for the formal interviews.

Both the office and the mini-meeting room were very quiet and safe. I was initially worried about the group learning room in the library because the library was always crowded, and students passed by the group learning room to occupy a table or use the printers. During the interviews, I was seated facing the door and the participant was invited to take a seat facing a wall. I did not want passing students to divert the participant from the research questions. The participants who were interviewed in the sound-proof group learning room showed no real differences in terms of physical responses compared with other two participants interviewed in the mini-meeting room and my office respectively. During the interview, my participants and I sat face to face because I wanted to convey the message that I was interested in their stories. This message was conveyed through eye contact and smiles. This also facilitated the use of the MP3 player.

### **Phase 3**

(October – December, 2008)

Member checks were carried out in this phase to ensure data had been transcribed accurately and represented participants' viewpoints correctly. Mertens (2005) asserted that "member checks [are] the most important criterion in establishing credibility" (p. 225).

In this phase, data collected from the document review and interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Then all the data were coded into categories or themes. The transcribed data were sent back to participants in case they had anything to add or delete or question the transcripts. Participants were invited to return any changes to me. If no changes were received from the participants it was assumed that they were satisfied with the interview content and the transcripts. This ensured that information from the



participants had been transcribed accurately.

Email discussion was also conducted in this phase. The participants were asked to give some examples or details of some of their previous answers. In addition, they were required to give their own criterion/criteria for career success. One participant wrote back saying “it’s challenging!” Another emailed to me saying “it’s an interesting question.”

## **4.6 Methods of data collection**

### **4.6.1 Interviews**

The interview is one of the major means to collect data in qualitative research because it “is a good way of accessing people’s perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality” (Punch, 1998, pp. 174-175). Generally interviewing is about asking questions and answering them, however, “there is much more to it than that” (Punch, 1998, p. 175). The interview is one of the most universal and powerful ways to understand other human beings (Fontana & Frey, 2000, 2005; Punch, 1998). Silverman (1997, p. 99) asserts that “interview is obviously and exclusively an interaction between the interviewer and the interview subject in which both participants create and construct narrative versions of the social world”.

“The quality of the information obtained during the interview is largely dependent on the interviewer” (Patton, 2002, p. 341). As pointed out by Fontana and Frey (2005), the researcher attempts not to give a long explanation of his/her study, never suggests an answer, never agrees or disagree with the interviewee. This means the researcher should be nonjudgmental and remain as neutral as possible. Moreover, the researcher should never interject his or her opinions in response to a participant’s answer. The researcher

needs to control his or her emotions during interviews to enhance the quality of the respondent's answers (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

This study employed open-ended interviews which allowed me “to deepen the response to a question, to increase the richness of the data being obtained, and give cues to the interviewee about the level of response that is desired” (Patton, 1987, p. 125). In an open-ended interview, “good” questions should be “neutral, singular, and clear” (Patton, 2002, p. 353). The nonjudgmental researcher should avoid asking a number of questions together because multiple questions make the participants confused and anxious, therefore, it is the researcher who bears the responsibility to pose one clear question at a time (Patton, 2002). The truly open-ended questions in qualitative research allow participants to “take whatever direction and use whatever words they want to express what they have to say” (Patton, 2002, p. 354).

This study explores mature age students' lives, learning and work. The five participants aged 24-54 had diverse educational backgrounds and work experiences. Both Emma and Jennifer had two children. Emma was a single mother and worked as a professional in nursing for almost 30 years before studying at university for her career transition. Jennifer worked as a non-professional in a range of industries for almost 20 years before coming to university. Both Tess and Mary had negative learning experiences in high school. Tess worked in selling, customer service and reception for 8 years while Mary worked in the building industry for 5 years during which time she gained a TAFE Diploma as a part-time student. Ben experienced several different working lives as a taxi driver, delivery man and event management project manager. After working for 8 years he returned to university to complete his higher education in the field of Environmental Engineering.

Participants had varied backgrounds and work experiences so the interview method was employed to “gain more in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives, which

other methods could not identify” (Patton, 1990, p. 64). The open-ended interview was employed because where there are many possible answers to a question, open-ended questions may be best (Neuman, 1997). Moreover, participants answer the same questions during interviews, so researcher bias is reduced and comparability increases, making data analysis easier because the researcher can locate the answers to the same questions quickly (Patton, 2002).

Besides face-to-face interviews, email discussions were conducted in the third phase of the study as mentioned previously. Only a few questions were posed in the email discussions because all the participants had provided rich information in the face-to-face interviews. Email discussions were viewed as a way to gain some complementary information.

In this study, face-to-face interviews were conducted for between 40 to 50 minutes each. All the interviews were audiotaped. “Audiotaping is valuable for catching the exact words used. Although getting the exact words of the respondent is usually not important, it is what they mean that is important” (Stake, 1995, p. 56). Audiotaping has the advantage of “capturing data more faithfully than hurriedly written notes might” (Hoepfl, 1997, p. 53) and it makes the researcher more focused on the interview.

#### **4.6.2 Document reviews**

Both historical and modern documents are a rich source of data in qualitative research (Punch, 1998). “Learning to use, study, and understand documents and files is part of the repertoire of skills needed for qualitative inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 295). Documents include letters, institutional reports, government policies and proceedings, records, artifacts, statistics and written responses to open-ended surveys (Hoepfl, 1997; Jupp, 1996; Patton, 2002).

In this study, policies, reports, statistics and records on mature age students from the Australian government and the University of Gold Coast and other Australian institutions have been carefully collected and reviewed. Emails in all the three phases from participants were conceived as an important part of the written data. All of these documents are valuable not only because of what can be learned straight from them but also as a stimulus for “paths of inquiry that can be pursued only through direct observation and interviewing” (Patton, 2002, p. 294).

#### **4.7 Data analysis process**

Data analysis is an ongoing process during and after the process of data collection. Marshall and Rosman (2006) illustrate data analysis as a process of “bringing order, structure, and interpretation to a mass of collected data. It is messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative and fascinating. It does not proceed in a linear fashion; it is not neat” (p. 154).

Creswell (2005) gives some suggestions on how to analyze narrative data: firstly, all information gathered should be closely read and initially coded. Secondly, turning points and important events should be identified. In every important event key elements such as time, place, plot, and scene should be highlighted, then the researcher needs to rewrite the story to position it in a time sequence. It is noted that when participants tell stories, the time sequence and coherent logic are missing. It is through restorying participants’ accounts that the researcher organizes key codes into a time sequence and in logical order. Thirdly, the researcher reduces data based on research questions and theoretical framework and codes the data into meaningful segments, that is, into themes or categories (Creswell, 2007; Huberman & Miles, 1998). Punch (1998, p. 203) claims that “the objective of data reduction is to reduce the data without significant loss of information”. Based on the discussions mentioned previously, this method of analyzing data is well recognized in narrative studies.

According to Riessman (2008), in thematic narrative analysis, researchers attend to time and place of narration, and they attempt to “preserve sequence and the wealth of detail contained in long sequences” (p. 74). The primary focus is on “the told” – the events and experiences of participants (Riessman, 2008, p. 58). Researchers rewrite the stories in a time sequence, consequently, “messy” spoken language is transformed to “readable” stories (Riessman, 2008, p. 58), although vagueness remains. However, researchers do not investigate it, presuming readers will “fill in” (p. 58) and interpret the main points.

## **4.8 Triangulation**

As mentioned previously, in order to yield insight and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalization small samples are usually employed in qualitative research (Patton, 2002; Squire, 2008). In this case, the emphasis of criteria for judging the qualitative research is placed on triangulation rather than transferability in this study.

Triangulation is important in order to gain information from more than one angle (MacDonald & Tipton, 1996; Mertens, 2005; Stake, 2005) to prove the consistency of evidence across sources of data (Mertens, 2005; Stake, 2005) and to strengthen the power of interpretations and conclusions in qualitative research (Mertens, 2005). Stake (1995, p. 113) argues that “data source triangulation is an effort to see if what we are observing and reporting carries the same meaning when found under different circumstances”. Triangulation is generally to elucidate meanings and verify interpretations (Stake, 2005). In this study, data collection involved in face-to-face interviews, email discussions and document reviews supported the interpretations of research findings.

Triangulation is free from the suspicion sometimes caused by the use of singular methods, isolated analysis, and single-perspective explanation, and it emphasizes multiple data sources or collection methods to establish coherence (Merten, 2005; Patton, 2002). However, “understanding inconsistencies in findings across different kinds of data can be illuminative and important” (Patton, 2002, p. 556) because no “interpretations are repeatable” (Stake, 2005, p. 454). The qualitative researcher seeks diverse interpretations of different realities while triangulation helps to identify the dissimilar understandings (Stake, 2005). Therefore, inconsistencies in research findings “ought not be viewed as weakening the credibility of results, but rather as offering opportunities for deeper insight into the relationship between inquiry approach and the phenomenon under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 556).

#### **4. 9 Ethical considerations**

Participants were encouraged to tell their stories and to share narratives about their private lives and experiences in the setting of a research interview (Elliott, 2005). In order to protect the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms were employed. Other measures were also taken to ensure the confidentiality and ethical standards in this qualitative narrative research:

- A letter of approval was received from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Gold Coast.
- The written signed consent form was obtained from individual participant to ensure participation is voluntary.
- The recordings and original transcripts were kept at a secure place under supervision at the University of Gold Coast.

#### **4.10 Conclusion**

A narrative method using qualitative techniques was chosen for this study. The reason for selecting a narrative method was that it suits both the nature of qualitative inquiry and the purpose of this study. Through narratives I gained in-depth understandings and massive insights from individual participants about their diverse realities. Data was collected from multiple sources: face-to-face interviews, email discussions and document reviews. Triangulation ensured the gathering of rich descriptive data and the credibility of the research findings of this study.

## **Chapter 5**

# **A NARRATIVE OF LEARNING AND LIFE: FIVE STORIES OF MATURE AGE STUDENTS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents stories from five mature age students. On the basis of information the participants provided about their past and current work and life experiences, together with plans for their future, I rewrote the five stories chronologically. Themes for stories were identified such as “prior learning and work experiences”, “going to university”, “being a mature age student” and “learning and career development”.

### **5.2 Emma: “I wanted to do something important to me”**

**Introduction:** Emma worked in nursing for almost 30 years but she wanted to become a high school teacher of English History. She also expressed a wish to pursue research at the tertiary level. After her children became financially independent, Emma entered university to achieve her dream.

#### **Reflection on prior career**

Emma worked in nursing and was promoted from a registered nurse to a nurse manager. She reflected on why she chose to be a nurse in the 1970s when she first entered the labor market:



*I guess my reason for becoming a nurse in the first place was because my friends were nurses. As a female, particularly in the 70s', nursing, teaching or being a secretary were main careers for women. I don't know why I didn't think of teaching. It was just that my friends were nurses. I did exactly the same as my friends. In the second place, my parents were so proud I was doing nursing because my mother had always wanted to be a nurse, but she hadn't been able to finish it, because she got married. In her time, you couldn't do nursing and got married, so I was kind of feeling something, for her. In addition, I didn't like to start something I couldn't finish it, so I kept on, and that was my career, because I had a big paper to say, I was a nurse, and you could get work, everybody, you know, you could always get work, and so you kept on working.*

Emma explained there were two reasons why she became a nurse in the 1970s: She did “exactly the same as” her friends and she wanted to achieve her mother’s uncompleted dream. Once she became a nurse, she “kept on working” in this field.

Emma elaborated on her feelings when she worked in nursing:

*For about 5 years I worked in X Health [organization's name] as a nurse manager for community, um...most of my work experience in nursing, in different areas of nursing for almost 30 years...I was so unhappy in the workplace...I was so unhappy in the work that I was doing, um...in nursing. I was working seven days a week because of the nature of nursing. I never was off duty. If I had enjoyed*

*doing the work, it wouldn't have been so hard but I didn't like doing it. I just became worn out because there was something wrong with the passion.*

Emma detailed her unhappy feelings in nursing although she had worked in the hospital system for almost 30 years and was promoted to a nurse manager. The unsettling feelings she experienced at work triggered her to explore what she was really interested in doing with her life.

### **First trial for career change**

When Emma worked in the hospital system, she explored alternative roles and occupations because of the dissatisfaction she experienced in the workplace:

*I tried different types of nursing, to try to find something that I was really happy in but I was happy for a short time. At the back of my mind, it was always this self-knowledge that knows it isn't nursing, it's something else.*

*I think because my lifelong passion is [on] reading, I just want to learn, I just love to learn. When my children were small, I was at home looking after them. I guess I got that minds base, to think what it was, and I just realized books and learning naturally goes with teaching. That's how I sort of realized this is what I want. I really wanted to do teaching. I wanted to teach English History.*

After identifying her interest in teaching, Emma attempted her first trial for “a life change” when her children were younger:

*I wanted to do a life change and study something that really interested me, rather than just having income support for the kids...I wanted to do something important to me.*

*When the children were younger, I was still at home, I actually tried to do a Bachelor of Arts through distance education...yes, because I wanted to do teaching, I realized that...it's too hard to do it just from distance, because it was all...computer, it was very hard...so I went back to nursing, because it was all I knew.*

*I had to wait until the children were old enough, so I didn't have to be financially responsible for them.*

Constrained by family responsibilities and limited computer knowledge, Emma failed to “do a life change” and returned to nursing because that was all she knew and because her children were not financially independent at that time.

### **Knowledge and skills**

Although her first trial of career transition was unsuccessful, Emma was open to knowledge and learning on the job. She updated her skills and knowledge in hospital and gained a Bachelor of Nursing at the University of Canberra:

*You need to be aware of the new things that are happening, whether they are new*

*drugs, or whether they are new surgeries. You've got to keep on learning.*

*Years, years ago, when you first went nursing, you were trained in hospital system, that was actually nursing degree, nursing diploma. When I went back to nursing after having kids, I wanted to upgrade. You had to have a degree as a nurse, you know. When I was working, I did my Bachelor's degree in nursing, part time, in the University of Canberra, and worked full-time. At the period of being in the university, I loved doing the lectures. I loved doing research.*

Fortunately, the knowledge and skills she gained in the Bachelor's degree led to a higher position: Emma was promoted to be a nurse manager. Hence, she gained some opportunities for workplace training:

*...as part of what I did in managing role of teaching, um...nursing, I did a lot of education for the nurses, and I set up some in-house education programs, sort of stuff, just used power point. I did some workplace training, so I gained some skills about sort of how to impart teaching, how to impart knowledge, how to give out knowledge, and how to talk to people. And I enjoyed it.*

When asked about skills and knowledge she learned from her past work experience, she answered:

*I learned a lot about working with people, so there were a lot of people skills, and organizational skills, and prioritizing skills. I also did some educational programs, learned how to do PowerPoint things, because that also became part of my job,*

*too.*

### **Going to university**

Emma decided to go to university when her children were grown up.

*Now my children are all adults, and I didn't have that pressure, they have incomes.*

*I guess I made the decision. I thought it was my right time.*

When she went to university, she said:

*It was very terrifying because there was so much I didn't know, in the sense that I had made a big gamble. I left Canberra, moved out to the X Coast, and now I was going to do what I set out to do. I was terrified once I'd gone there. What if I wasn't good any more, or what if I couldn't do it, or what if I couldn't finish it, you know, it was very scary, you know, coming back to university after all this time.*

Emma felt scared when she moved from Canberra where she had lived for many years. She expressed massive inner conflicts: She felt worried about her studies, capabilities and health. She thought going to university was like “a big gamble” after being away school for such a long time.

### **Being a mature age student**

Emma bought a house in another city so that she could pursue her studies:

*I bought a house standing on the South Coast, and I don't have to pay the rent.  
It's part of my big life decision when I left Canberra. I just had a hope that I would  
succeed in it.*

She entered the university majoring in Community, Culture and Environment in the Faculty of Arts. She got some support from her family and friends:

*Absolutely, especially...mainly emotionally, um...very emotionally...very  
supportive...always said, you know, 'Good, Mum!' 'Well done!' and my parents,  
my children and my friends, yes, very very supportive.*

She also talked about support from university:

*Yes, yes. I've got support from the university. People will tell you how to do an  
assignment. The lecturers and tutors will work through it and have the classes.  
There are a lot of academic learning systems. It's good, good.*

*They [tutors] know what we need as students, so talking with them would help.  
Couple of lecturers talked through possible research with me, career options, or  
things like that. It's good, because lecturers know exactly you want to know.*

Emma talked about her academic performance and the positive effect it was having on her:

*My brain is still working very well [laughs aloud], and I'm getting very good marks [laughs again], and I enjoy it.*

Emma explained some of her learning strategies at university:

*We had a lot of students straight from high school, and they were really struggling, so a tutor asked my permission, we shared my assignments out, and worked over them...I think sharing is very important. Yes, I think that's part of how you get good marks. I think my life experience is bigger. Being old you get experience to draw on and you can share them with others.*

As a mature age student, Emma was able to draw on her previous life experiences. This helped her to study successfully and she shared her experiences with other students:

*I talked over things with a lot of different students. When you talk over your thinking, you also listen to others, so you may find nobody has that idea, so you think, 'OK, that's what I've got to do'. I think cooperative learning is huge, really really important. You know what others are feeling when we experience the same thing, and you are going to feel better about that learning.*

Sharing ideas with others helped Emma to reflect on her own understanding and, in turn, this was of benefit to her.

Emma explained why she studied full time and why she wanted to study well:

*I think part of reason [why] I need to do well and [why] I need to get good marks is due to my age. If I study part-time, and do some part-time work, I think it takes me longer time to learn...just the time is longer. I'm in my fifties. [That's why] I'm a full-time student.*

*I really want to do well because it's important to me. If my academic [performance] is strong, then the future employers will overlook my age. I feel I need to have my academic record strong, so the future employers look at this, 'OK, this one can do it'. And then I'm hoping my life experience will be positive...um...If I once get an interview, I'm quite confident that I can talk myself into a job, but getting that interview is a hard thing, that's what I think. I really want to work in rural areas, and I know that's hard to get teaching, so I'm hoping the demand is strong enough.*

Her age as well as her ideas about the expectations of future employers influenced her decisions about study at university.

Emma kept laughing when talking about her plans for her future career:

*Um [laughs aloud] ...it depends. I'm going to make a decision. I'll finish next year. I want to do Honours. If I get really good Honours, say, the first-class Honours, I'll go on doing Ph.D; If I only get, say, average Honours, I'll go on doing secondary teaching, then part-time studies for Master's degree. So I don't know, I don't*



*know. It depends on how marks keep on going [laughs again].*

Although Emma was aware that she was ageing, she appeared optimistic and confident in terms of the choices that were sustainable to her.

### **Higher education in terms of employment**

Emma had some thoughts about tertiary education and what it provided for students. She understood that she would gain knowledge in specific discipline areas and that learning at university could not replace learning in the workplace:

*Here, I learn theories [like] English History...learning the subject matter. I'm not going to learn everything, but learn the basic things. I don't expect the university degree to give me everything that I may be going to learn in the workplace. That's the point. I think that's the point of the degree. [The university] gives you the basic things: the whole structure of that area, and skills and confidence to go on learning in my interested areas. I don't think the university gives you a little package, so [you] use the package, expecting to know everything you need to know in the workplace. Some people are expecting the university to provide [them] everything, because they think it takes three or five years to do all the work in the university, so they think "I should know this", "I can go and do my career successfully because I've been in the university".*

When talking about whether studying at university would support her future career development, Emma noted:

*Because learning is such an abstract thing, it goes to understanding 'attitude'. It's not only the specific thing that you're learning, that you're going to use in the workplace. I mean, for example, you're going to learn [a] formula or theory, etc, that's going to specifically help your work, but [the] integration of learning into career, to me, is really about attitude, yes, you know, um...just that learning doesn't stop, you know, when you leave the university, you're still going to be learning, and skills you learned about why you learn, and about knowledge you've taken...so when you're in the workplace, you know about yourself, you know who you are, why you learn, you know how you learn...so when you're in the workplace, you've got that knowledge about yourself as well as specific subject matters.*

Emma mentioned that an important aspect of tertiary education involves learning how to learn so learners gain some grounded ideas like “who you are” and “where you’re going”. In short, Emma thought that tertiary education equips students with “learning how to learn” and “specific subject matters”.

### Summary for Emma's story:

Theme	Activities & Opinions
<b>Reflection on prior career</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflection on why she chose to be a nurse in the 1970s;</li> <li>• Unhappiness in nursing.</li> </ul>
<b>First trial for career change</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explored alternative roles in nursing first;</li> <li>• Did a first life change but failed;</li> <li>• Continued to work in nursing.</li> </ul>
<b>Knowledge and skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upgraded knowledge and skills in nursing;</li> <li>• Gained a Bachelor's degree in Nursing in the University of Canberra;</li> <li>• Possessed skills like people skills, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>Going to university</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decided to go to university because her children became financially independent;</li> <li>• Felt terrified about "the big gamble".</li> </ul>
<b>Being a mature age student</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bought a house for studying at an another city;</li> <li>• Support from family and friends;</li> <li>• Support from university;</li> <li>• Learning abilities and learning strategies (cooperative learning);</li> <li>• Worried about age;</li> <li>• Good academic performance;</li> <li>• Two alternative career plans for the future.</li> </ul>
<b>Higher education in terms of employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learned basic subject matters;</li> <li>• Felt empowered;</li> <li>• Learned how to learn.</li> </ul>

### 5.3 Tess: “I really want to be a journalist”

**Introduction:** After breaking up with her ex-boyfriend, Tess decided to come to university – she always had a dream of going to university. She majored in Politics and Journalism due to her interest and social commitment.

#### **Prior learning and work experiences**

Tess talked about her learning history in high school:

*I didn't have a good time in high school. My Dad saw it was very depressing for me, so [he] said to me, 'Do you want to leave?' And we were going to move to a country area. I left school, so I actually didn't finish Year Ten in high school, but I came back for Year Eleven. I was 19 at that time. I didn't want to be in high school at 19. I didn't finish Year Eleven, either.*

*I didn't go to university earlier, but I'm studying here now [laughs].*

Tess felt happy with having the opportunity for studying at university as a mature age student although she had unpleasant educational experiences in high school.

Tess worked for 8 years in a range of job positions:

*I have been working for eight years. I did a little bit of sales training, customer training, level-two music training, and medical training. In medical industry, I did all*

*different kinds of administration and customer service. I learned a lot about computers, learned a lot about medical work in the medical industry. A lot of my jobs were more about people: customer service, sales and medical reception. I was always dealing with people.*

## **Going to university**

Tess talked about why she always wanted to go to university:

*I didn't like any of my jobs, really, but they would pay my bills. They weren't terrible, but I just don't want to do them in my life. Medical reception I actually enjoyed, probably because there were some responsibilities involved in my job. Customer service [jobs], sales jobs, [were] extremely boring.*

*I always wanted to go to university since I was a child. My parents, my grandparents had studied at university. I'd always intended to go there. When I was young, I moved to Sydney. I lived there for five years, party, having fun. There were definitely no plans but there was an idea, 'Oh, I'll go to uni!' 'Oh, I'll go to uni!' 'Oh, I'll go to uni!'*

She decided to go to university after the break up with her ex-boyfriend:

*'Oh, my God, what the earth is going on, I just don't understand the world any*

*more'...then I came to uni.*

This relationship change appeared to confirm her decision to make a career change by returning to study.

Tess entered the university through the University Access Program (UAP):

*Oh, I did do the University Access Program to get here at college. The University Access Program got me in. I was so happy, 'I've been here!' Yes, I was so happy for being here.*

*Yes, the 14-week University Access Program, which was really really fantastic, and taught me SO MUCH[speaks loudly here]. I mean, I kind of have good English skills, good writing skills, knew how to write essays, but it helped me with databases and research, just such a huge opportunity to get me familiar with the university. I think I would have had more difficult time, if I hadn't done the access program.*

Tess appreciated the 14-week University Access Program (UAP) because through the UAP she learned a lot about university and gained some skills for academic studies. She thought if she had not done the UAP she “would have had more difficult time” at university.

## Being a mature age student

Tess explained why she chose to study politics and journalism:

*Picking my friends' words, I'm quite open-minded. I'm even willing to take living on board. Union, very interested in Union, work rights and human relations, things like that. I always intended to do journalism. I had decided journalism, but I hadn't decided political journalism [before studying at the college]. When I did the University Access Program, I was looking at Arts subjects in the course guide. I was very excited with politics sort of doing some minor; I was interested in politics.*

*I feel most political journalists in the country, just do documentary; they don't actually question, they just write about what's happening, and I think it's just being sensationalized. Actually journalists in this country, they are willing to ask politicians, be questioned, and put them in TV. The only public channel you real get the truth is ABC at the moment. I don't think it's good. I think the public need actually being more aware for politicians, not what the Daily Telegraph is saying...you know, I think it's important to get real voice.*

Tess expressed that her vocational interests and aspirations as well as her social commitment drove her to become a political journalist.

Tess got support from her family and friends:

*My boyfriend, my current boyfriend, he actually helped me to get to university. He knew what I really want to do, and he did everything to help me to get in. He works very hard, so I don't need to go to work, so I can just concentrate on my studies.*

*Probably my Mum and Dad really really got my head back to get to university.*

*They helped me hugely. They always wanted me to come to university. My Dad always wanted me to come to university. My Mum wouldn't care what I do if I'm happy, but both of them know I really want to come here. My Dad reads my essays for me, and my aunty is always happy to receive my essays and read them for me. Actually I live in XX[name], but I stay with my great-aunty, three-day a week, so I don't have to catch the train, anything like that. They do what they can do to help me in every way, yes, and my partner just helps me hugely, and I even don't have to work, that's pretty cool [laughs aloud].*

Tess elaborated on what learning was and the impact of family commitments for mature age students:

*For young students, like 17 or 18-year-old students, [they] don't watch the news and read newspapers. They are unaware of what's going on to them. Reading [is] like kind of homework [for them], but for me, that's just part of normal life. You watch the news, and you read newspapers, you know, [to] find out what's going on in the world. People straight from high school may find it difficult.*



*I do think the life experience definitely makes it much much easier [for mature age students]. [However,] family commitments actually make it a little bit harder, although you might be smarter, or you might be more mature. But I think it's hard for the first kind of six or eight weeks for mature age students. So I think life experience makes it easier, but family commitments make it harder as well.*

From the perspective Tess presented, learning was “part of normal life” for mature age students and life experiences made learning “much much easier” although “family commitments” made it “harder”, compared with traditional age students.

Tess talked about resources available for mature age students:

*There are so many resources available at university to help you. I wouldn't call it [higher education] easy but I also wouldn't call it difficult.*

*As a mature age student, you've been away from your parents, and you used to ask someone else to fix your problems. Now you have to do on your own, [by] yourself. And I also think you don't have to fear to ask [for] help, you just go up to your tutor or lecturer, say 'Hey, I'm really stuck, can you...', whatever. You just have that confidence to actually be able to do that by yourself. Yes, I think it's really helpful to be able to do it. I mean I always try everything. If I really want to understand something, I'll do anything I can to try to get my head around. I ask my friends, I ask my tutors, I ask my lecturers, I ask librarians. I'm quite happy to use*

*everything in the university.*

Tess thought that mature age students needed to be independent and feel confident to take advantage of resources available at university.

### **Knowledge and skills**

Tess first recalled knowledge and skills gained from previous learning and work experiences:

*I kind of have good English skills, good writing skills, really good people and communication skills and time management skills. I do have some very good customer service skills, sales skills, which I do think are useful everywhere.*

Then she talked about her learning progress in academic writing:

*Just the language makes it more difficult. Politics students use the big words, you know, make it beautiful, and make it complicated. Last session I did two journalism subjects. I found it really really difficult to simplify my writing. I found it really hard, but at the end of session I actually got high distinction for my articles. I was really happy. I started with just pass and credit; I found it difficult to see these marks after that [laughs aloud].*

With regard to her studies at university, Tess made the following observations:

*I have learned employment relations and labour studies. They are just amazing*

*subjects. They look at the different writers' works, all over the world. I don't learn anything in politics, which I find it really really sad. I like Latin and journalism. I finally got a better punctuation in grammar, which I was really really bad at it before. My research skills now are really good, and I really enjoy it, and I think it's important, especially [for] someone [who] wants to be a journalist. It takes up half of my time, and I think I really enjoy it. It's great.*

*University may not teach me all the things about journalism. It will teach me a lot about research, eventually. It'll teach me about politics and will teach me a lot about labour relations, and I feel journalism is fun and is very interesting. I'll learn a lot here. It will make me a better journalist. It definitely makes me a better researcher.*

Tess identified which subjects she had learned at university and in which subjects she had made progress. From her perspective, the university made her “a better journalist” as well as “a better researcher”.

### **Learning strategies**

Tess talked about how she learned at university:

*I just made efforts, and I spent a long time on studies.*

*Generally, it's not difficult, but if you don't do it, if you just decide to do your assignments, and you don't study, you'll go into a really hard time, but if you sit down here, figure out a timetable, you are not going to have a hard time.*

*Take as many courses as you can, and try to get yourself some work experience. What I intend to do is that there are lots of journalism courses outside, this is writing one, this is television one, this is shorthand one.*

*I think it's terrible they don't have shorthand in the university when we expect to be journalists. I actually have to do a TAFE online course to learn shorthand, which cost me \$545. I also do 14-week presenting courses in Sydney, which I spent \$800, you practise...news, documentary, kind of stuff. I do that stuff very hard as well. I'm very interested in television journalism. I'm very interested in documentary. You don't need to present well, but you need to be interested in these kinds of things.*

Tess was a diligent student. She organized her time efficiently and employed strategies that supported her learning. In addition to what she learned at the university she enjoyed in studies at other institutions that provided her with skills she believed would be helpful in her future work.

### **Higher education in terms of employment**

Tess talked about the requirement for graduates who wanted to be journalists:

*They [Employers] will require you to have a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of journalism. You'll occasionally find people take you without it, but 80% to 90% of employers require you to have the certificate of journalism, not the politics, but the journalism.*

About her future employment, Tess said:

*Mostly I do worry. Maybe no one can predict anything. However, I figure out in reality I think I can get a job, if I get practice, if I keep working, if I get high marks, if I get the degree...maybe awful money, but I really want to be a journalist.*

Tess expressed anxiety in terms of future employment. She continued to give some suggestions for students majoring in journalism in terms of employment:

*You need to get work experience. [This is] the bigger one. I work in the Student Union. I write for a student magazine at university as well. I do actually hope to apply for a post in a media in X X [name of a place] before I leave the university.*

*Second, if you can write for a few student papers, [you can] get yourself published. If you can access the Internet, get yourself published; just build up your collection. Keep reading, keep writing every day. I try getting myself published as well.*

Tess advised that students of Journalism have relevant work experience and should aim

to have some of their work published before gaining employment.

Tess questioned career information from the university in regard to the career development of mature age students:

*I do think this university should do more kind of career information as well, because I do think the university, you need to tell people what can happen [in the workplace]. I do think like that is really helpful, when you can actually sit down and find out what you need to do, what positives are, what negatives are. University should be honest about the jobs, not only saying 'This is the greatest profession in the world!' People should be honest about it. The university access program definitely made me think about being a political journalist, um, [think about] some ground ideas, for example, who we are, who we can be, and what we can do. Being honest about it [job information] is really really important.*

Tess believed that students required more information in relation to the world of work so that they gained a realistic view of the challenges they were likely to face.

## Summary for Tess's story

Themes	Activities & Opinions
<b>Prior learning and work experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative educational experiences in high school;</li> <li>• Did not complete high school;</li> <li>• Worked for 8 years as a administrator, receptionist, etc;</li> <li>• Received some training.</li> </ul>
<b>Going to university</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did not want to do these jobs in her life;</li> <li>• Always wanted to go to university;</li> <li>• Split up with her ex-boyfriend;</li> <li>• Entered university through UAP (the University Access Program).</li> </ul>
<b>Being a mature age student</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why and how she chose to study Politics and Journalism (interest and social commitments);</li> <li>• Support from family and friends;</li> <li>• Learning as part of life for mature age students;</li> <li>• Family commitments for mature age students;</li> <li>• Resources available and getting help from others</li> <li>• Worried with future employment.</li> </ul>
<b>Knowledge and skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skills possessed: people skills, writing skills, etc;</li> <li>• Learned how to write journalism in simple language;</li> <li>• What courses she learned at university.</li> </ul>
<b>Learning strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Made efforts and studied for a long time;</li> <li>• “Figure out a timetable”;</li> <li>• Read more than assignment required;</li> <li>• Took many courses;</li> <li>• Took extra courses outside university.</li> </ul>
<b>Higher education in terms of employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Credentialism;</li> <li>• “Get work experience”;</li> <li>• “Get yourself published”;</li> <li>• (University) Being honest about career information.</li> </ul>

## 5.4 Mary: “I pushed myself to be better”

**Introduction:** Mary was unhappy when she worked with adults in the building industry because she liked to teach children. When she studied at university in Early Childhood Education, she gained excellent academic performance and did massive practical work in primary schools. Mary felt confident about her future career development.

### Reflection on prior learning work experiences

Mary talked about her learning and work experiences in high school and why she worked in the building industry:

*The teachers had been there [in high school] for a long time. I thought they didn't inspire me, they didn't push me to think about outside the square, they didn't help me to feel confident, yes, they didn't, they didn't find where I really studied well.*

*My Mum and Dad, they actually wanted me to stay at school. I actually came back, and I did go back for Year Eleven, but I wasn't getting very good marks in high school. I was doing subjects that I didn't like. I didn't think I would go to university at that time. I didn't think I was good enough, I didn't think I was smart, I didn't think I could handle the uni life. When I was younger, I wasn't as confident as I am now.*



*When I was at school, I had a part-time job in a hardware company in the building industry. It was the job I had all the way through high school. In Year Twelve I didn't want to do the subjects, so I looked at job options. They offered me a full-time job [after higher school]. My Mum knew my boss quite well. She quite liked the job. There was quite a good career option there. My Mum wanted me to take the job, you know. And I suppose I just took it! I worked for 5 years!*

When Mary studied at high school, she thought that her teachers did not “push” her, did not “inspire” her, and did not help her “feel confident”. When she got a job offer, her mother knew her boss very well and her mother wanted Mary to “take the job”, so she “just took it!”

Mary expressed her feeling and opinions about working in the building industry:

*Some days I went home I wasn't happy. I leaned on the door; I wasn't where I wanted to be. I wasn't passionate about my jobs, although I was quite good at them. I could go and work in another hardware company. I could find a job in this area, but I decided not to do [it]. I maybe do the same kind of job, you know, but I didn't want to find another job in hardware. I actually wanted to end up in this area.*

*I may work in another one like in a café. I may do something different, but it's still kind of the same thing I really disliked. I was just going to do another job. I wasn't thinking about what I really wanted to do.*

*I quite liked working with people, but I also was very frustrated with kind of working with people of my own age. I always enjoyed something with kids.*

Mary felt “unhappy” and found she was not where she wanted to be. She decided to “end up” working in the building industry although she was “quite good at” that job.

### **Going to university**

Mary decided to go to university after working for five years:

*Well, I feel that mentally I was in the right stage to come and study. I feel if I had to keep going at school, I would end it up...no, not really knowing what would happen. However, I think working gives me some time to think about myself, gives me the skills, the confidence...yes...I think I don't regret working for five years at all. I was ready to do it. You need to be ready. I think it's really a right time. Yes, yes.*

*If I could achieve something by going to uni, I wanted to do it. Because I was still young, I thought there was so much I could achieve. I didn't want to waste my time. I had the option. I had to do [it].*

Mary thought that working for five years gave her “some time to think about” herself. She also acquired some skills and built up confidence. In this case, she was “ready” to go to university and it was the right time for her to return to study.

Mary made the final decision after the discussion with her big brother:

*I think my older brother was a very big influence in my life. He is very intelligent, he is a very practical person, and he is a very logical person. He thinks everything through before he does it, and he always makes thoughtout decisions, and almost always right, because he really thinks about things, um...he was very successful in his career, and he is very respectable because he was so successful.*

*He is an accountant. He came to university and did the degree over six years and worked full-time as well. He was a little bit better than what I was doing. He was a role model, giving me a chance to think about if I wasn't doing this, what I could be doing; if I couldn't work hard any more what I wanted to do.*

*He came to university and got the university degree, but he's also done other studies with other organizations, something like that, you know. [This] makes him become a better accountant. He is always upgrading his skills to become better.*

*I think I made the final decision after talking with my big brother about how unhappy I was. He talked to me about why I'd got to do this for the rest of my life if you were not happy. [He said,] 'You need to be happy; you should be happy. No matter what', you know, 'no matter what you choose to do, no matter how*

*high...’ you know, ‘you could get a very lowly-paid job but very happy because you like to do it’. ‘I think it’s about your own personal satisfaction. You can go on for your great goals’, he said, ‘you should go, you should do it, it’s something new’, you know, ‘it’s challenging, you should do it, you should learn more. Learn more, you will become better for what you can do’. He always inspired me to think about how I can be better, how I can be better for what I can do. The better you become, if you want to be better, obviously, the happier you become.*

Mary’s big brother had a strong influence on her. He acted as a role model for her as she watched him study and work to achieve his goals. This advice was to aim to work in an area that she would enjoy and to pursue this goal in order to achieve her dream.

Mary entered university on the basis of her records in a TAFE Diploma:

*I just applied as a mature age student. I’ve done a TAFE Diploma for that job, just part-time. I got tertiary credits from being at TAFE.*

Mary explained how she had found what she would do in the future before coming to university:

*I did Child Studies in Year Ten, Child Studies, in school, as a subject. I did it very well, that’s what I want to do. I want to teach kids.*

*I also have a neighbor living across the road from me. She is a primary school*

*teacher. After work, she would come and discuss some experiences [with me], to see if I could...if there was a job, if there was something that I'd like to do...yes, in the primary school, after doing a couple of days' work with her, she told me if I could go...this was a career [for me] because I was very good at it.*

In addition to the encouragement she received from her brother, Mary's neighbour shared her experiences in teaching with Mary. The neighbour was also able to organize some work experience in her own school, providing Mary with an opportunity to assess whether this goal was really suitable for her.

### **Being a mature age student**

Commenting on the decision to study at university, Mary said it felt "right":

*Now I go to work and I get home, I'm happy. I feel I'm making the difference, and I feel that, personally for me, that [it] was the right decision.*

When Mary was studying at the university her family supported her in a very practical way:

*My Mum and Dad really help me to work through my studies in the uni. I stay with them. I study and work part-time. That's good. If I didn't have them, I wouldn't come back to uni.*

She also drew on support from staff at the university:

*I sought support from people around me. Lecturers and coordinators were helpful. Tutors were helpful, too. If I email them some work, they are pretty prompt to write back to me. All tell me if I was on the right track. Yes, the uni is very helpful, particularly the subject coordinators.*

Mary graduated with Honours and now she was doing the Honours studies:

*Now I'm doing the Honours. This is [a] one-year study. The Honours studies are more about academic kinds of studies. The coordinator XX [name] told me, 'you're quite good at it [research]. These particular subjects [in Honours studies], you did them very well.'*

Mary attributed her academic achievement to being highly motivated:

*I think I'm really happy and highly motivated. I'm a little bit of high achiever. You know, I like if I do anything, I'll do it well. I think I know a lot, lot, outside the square. I suppose my passion drove me. I really want to work with kids, so I pushed myself to know more, I pushed myself to be better. You know, you need to push yourself. The more you push, the more you get; the more you get, the more you push yourself. Yes, when you achieve, you are inspired. So I got some relatively good marks.*

The words reflect the notion that “success breeds success”, in other words, as she worked harder her marks improved and as she achieved higher marks she was motivated

to put in even more effort.

Mary described her strategies for developing skills in essay writing:

*...obviously the academic writing, you have to know how to structure essays. The first couple of assignments were challenging. I did a lot of essay searches on the Internet just to find out, to figure out the structure of essays. I also got some copies from my lecturers. I said, 'I need your help', or 'I need you to tell me if I'm on the right track'.*

Mary was aware that she would benefit from drawing on a range of resources and also from feedback provided by her lecturers.

Mary also talked about the experiences of mature age students at the university:

*I think a lot of mature-age students are highly motivated, and they work very hard. They push themselves, I suppose, because they see other sides, they see other things, and they know more about actually what makes them happy, or whatever. If they know this is what I want to do, they work very hard, so they can achieve their goals.*

*...for [other] mature-age students, I think [it's] a little bit hard to balance their life. You know, they usually have a lot of commitments when they are a little bit older, even they just work one hour a day, you know, one day a month, something like*

*that.*

In Mary's opinion, balancing the various commitments that many mature age students had was challenging and required higher levels of motivation.

### **Higher education in terms of employment**

Mary thought there was "a little bit of a gap" between what she learned and what she would apply in the workplace:

*I think there may be a little bit of a gap. Um...what you learn is very different from what you do every day. Um...do you know what I mean? You learn how to teach, and you teach in the classroom, both of them are very different. At uni, they give you the specific subjects, and you have to do [them] before you graduate. You know, but if you are in a primary school, in a specific area, you have trouble when you work...that happens in the workplace. You have to deal with it.*

*Um...I think you need to go into a school, and get a chance to do teaching. You need to have a lot of experience before working. You need to do a lot of practice, have a lot of practice experience before you can go to teach. You should do practice before you go to work.*

Mary talked about practicing what was required for teaching and the support provided by the university and primary schools:



*However, you have to do practice, and they [teachers at university] coach [you]. In this case, you get a holistic picture about what the industry is like, what kind of people will work there. Oh, for example, we do a play subject, and you learn about how kids learn, and how they play, um...at the end of session, you go into practicum, and you go into teaching kids under supervision, sorts of things, yes.*

*You get a lot of support from the primary school where you do practice: They give you a lot of resources; they give you a lot of advice, at the same time, you are learning what you want to learn.*

Mary valued practicum experiences supervised by academic staff and practical work in primary schools because she was able to develop the skills required for teaching.

Mary gave some suggestions on employment for mature age students:

*I think developing connections with people in the industry is important. If you, say, are an engineer, you ring up a very famous engineer – someone working in engineering, say ‘I’m doing the assignment’ or whatever, you know, ‘I just want to know if this is what you really do in the industry?’ I think making these sorts of connections is very important.*

*For mature age students, if [you] also make connections with people around you, if you have support from people around you, then you can do that better. Making this*

*connection with somebody who may be more knowledgeable than you, may be a little bit more experienced than you...um...that would be helpful. You can do that with confidence, and you will be better for what you can do.*

*I think if you have these connections – they might help; they might introduce [you to] the job you really want to do, you know. I think making connections with people is really really important. Yes, make connections with others, so you practise what you're learning, and [this] is also very important. When you're learning, you may be able to do [it]. However, if you can do what you're learning, you'll become better for what you can do.*

Mary addressed the significance of students making connections with people around them and with people in the industry in terms of employment because they would be able to provide relevant information about specific areas of employment.

### **Confidence with future career**

Mary analyzed job opportunities in primary schools:

*[Early] Childhood [Education] is [a] very understaffed industry. They have a lot of trouble keeping teachers, because the job is very challenging, very challenging. It's a very physically challenging job, because you work with kids all day long. In some places, you could work with babies, so it's very physical, and it's a very difficult job. So I suppose, there are a lot of schools around here, a lot of schools*

*that need teachers. It's not difficult to get a job in [Early] Childhood, I think, because there's such a strong demand for good teachers.*

Mary noted that the university often provided information about particular jobs as they became available:

*The university really encourages you to teach before you graduate. Just around the lift in the Faculty of Education, there are some notice boards. They put lots of, lots of job [information] on the notice boards. If anyone contacts uni about work, that stuff will be put on the notice boards, and that's very helpful. You know, they support you. They do. Yes, yes.*

Mary's confidence about teaching was based on her experience in schools during the time that she spent studying:

*I'm very confident, because during my time in uni I've done a lot of work experience in primary schools, so I'm personally doing a lot of work experience, you know, a casual day here, a casual day there. I also did a lot of practice stuff in the session breaks, over Christmas, you know, the session breaks. I can feel my skills, so I can feel if I'm going to work, personally I'll be able to get it.*

Communication was recognized by Mary as a critical skill in terms of teaching and one that she had developed through a range of earlier experiences:

*I have those communication skills. I was confident to talk with people, you know. Every day, in the hardware store, some new persons came in. I didn't know them, but [I] talked to them about things. That's very helpful if I start to work in a primary school, help me to meet new people, talk with parents. If I work with kids in a primary school, I need to talk about these staff, parents, and community members, and these sorts of...obviously kids themselves...yes, that'll very help me.*

The confidence she felt in meeting people and talking to them was important to her in relation to her future employment as a teacher.

## Summary for Mary's story

Themes	Activities & Opinions
<b>Reflection on prior learning and work experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative learning experiences in high school;</li> <li>• Dependent on her mother when taking her job;</li> <li>• Unhappy with dealing with adults on the job.</li> </ul>
<b>Going to university</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decided to go to university;</li> <li>• Wanted to achieve more;</li> <li>• Talked with her big brother;</li> <li>• Entered university through a TAFE Diploma;</li> <li>• Finding her future career in her neighbour's primary school.</li> </ul>
<b>Being a mature age student</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Happy with the decision to go to university;</li> <li>• Support from her family;</li> <li>• Support from university;</li> <li>• Doing the Honours studies;</li> <li>• Reasons for her good marks;</li> <li>• Opinions on other mature age students: passion and motivation;</li> <li>• Suggestions on employment for mature age students: networking.</li> </ul>
<b>Higher education in terms of employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gap between higher education and employment;</li> <li>• "Do a lot practice work before you go to work";</li> <li>• Practice work under supervision of both university and primary school.</li> </ul>
<b>Confident with future career</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understaffed primary schools;</li> <li>• Strong demands for good teacher in primary school;</li> <li>• Has done a lot practice work offered by university;</li> <li>• Strong communication skills.</li> </ul>

## 5.5 Ben: “I want to be more independent”

**Introduction:** Ben went to university straight from high school. He studied Environmental Engineering at the University of Gold Coast for three years, and then he dropped out without getting the degree. Eight years later he came back to the University of Gold Coast and studied in the same field.

### Prior learning and work experiences

Ben recalled his previous higher education:

*You might want to do something, and then you came to university. A few years later, you didn't feel like [it's] a right thing to make the time, and [you] didn't feel like, I was going to achieve something.*

*My friend introduced a job to me, and I took that job. I did general sort of labouring delivery, labouring taxi-driving...I tried to balance my work and study, but eventually that sort of work became more and more full-time, and I definitely sort of failed the study.*

*Looking back, I couldn't have made a good decision on a big picture and I didn't realize what I was required [to do]. I think I could gain more, but actually [I] went to work. Yes, I took that choice to go to work.*

*My parents always gave me guidance. I think they always encouraged me to come back to university. We talked for a long time. I wanted to be independent. Um...I decided I wanted to do it in my way. I decided I didn't come back.*

After initially failing his studies at university because of problems in work-learning balance, Ben decided to drop out. His parents were keen for him to go back to study but it took him a number of years before he was ready to do this.

### **Knowledge and skills**

Ben worked in Australia for five years and then he was promoted to be a project manager and worked in England for another three years. He elaborated on knowledge and skills he had gained:

*Oh, I worked for eight years in the event management industry. I've got a lot of personal development...probably maturity is a big one, I think. As a project manager, I needed to deal with multiple clients, managers and senior staff. You've got a lot of confidence which you may not have as a young kid coming out of school, so definitely develop that. I also dealt with multiple projects...did daily records, kept returning...there were probably a lot of other things. I've got management and time management skills, you know. You've taken the responsibility for your actions. If you want something you should get it; you couldn't achieve it if you refuse to take responsibility for it.*

He recognized that, with maturity and experience, he was able to develop important skills necessary in the workplace and to take responsibility for his own learning.

### **Going to university**

He explained why he decided to come to university after working for eight years:

*I was living in England at that time, and my contract was coming to an end...I was looking for changing about what I was doing, and waited for the option for what I was going to do...I started to think, "All right, what I'm going to do", "I'm leaving back to Australia, what job I'm going to do, where I'm going to live", and that was a decision sort of between myself and my partner. "The work I'm going to do should be in a major city like Sydney, Melbourne, or Perth".*

*I didn't go further on my job, [so I decided to] come back to university to finish the environmental engineering which I'm studying. We wanted to be independent. We needed to further skills, got some training...so we could be more independent to make the choices. I wanted to be more independent on where we were going to work and live.*

When his contract "was coming to end", Ben started to think about what he should do next and where he wanted to live and work. According to Ben, the major reasons for his return to university included being independent and upgrading skills.



## Being a mature age student

When Ben returned to university, he felt overwhelmed:

*I think in the first three weeks it was quite overwhelming, um...being back to the classroom, um...suddenly having tasks to be assessed, and a bit of shock for the system. But I think gradually, as the weeks went on, I got on top of it.*

Ben explained why he decided to study in the same field and confirmed why he came back to university:

*You've got the opportunity. You've made the choice to go back to finish something. [I came] back to study. I decided to come back to complete studies in the same field of engineering. I got interested in environmental issues, I think. You should be interested in your studies otherwise one day you'll pay for that. You know, at that time I was young, I didn't know what I was really interested in.*

*I think I've worked for a couple of years, started again. Um...I think it's exciting. I think, [I] still have that idea: a little bit of being more independent, having financial responsibility...that would be fantastic.*

His parents and his partner supported his returning to university:

*My parents are always supportive about my decisions at any time. My partner is*

*making a little bit of a sacrifice at the moment while I'm back studying because I'm not working full time.*

Ben talked about achieving a life balance:

*Not [at] the moment. I don't have too many personal things outside the university. I don't have to pay for the house. I don't have the family, just myself and my partner. The balance is not a problem.*

Ben explained the reason for his good marks as a mature age student compared with his poor marks when he entered university straight from high school:

*I put in an effort to achieve...so I've got much better results, good marks, compared with before. Probably based on my work and my life experience, [I now realize that] I must put in my study.*

As a mature age student, Ben had changed and his approach to study was also different:

*I'm enjoying coming back. I feel confident here compared with when I was here several years ago. Now I communicate with lecturers and tutors.*

### **Higher education in terms of employment**

Ben held the opinion that in the university students just learned “general knowledge” rather than “specific skills”:

*You don't have many choices really while you're studying in the university. Actually, you don't get specific skills, and you just learn some general knowledge, very basic subject matters, with the degree.*

In relation to the knowledge and skills gained at the university that would be relevant in the workplace, Ben said:

*I wouldn't have such a thought. A lot of knowledge and skills you learn are on the job, I think. You need to have a general understanding for what you are learning about.*

*I don't know how much I learn at the university can get applied in the workplace. I haven't done that yet. I sort of started with engineering and then worked in a completely separate field. Then I decided to come back to complete studies in the field of engineering, so I haven't actually applied any study in the workplace, so [long pause for thinking] ...I haven't done that. I haven't got the degree.*

However, Ben recognized the value of a Bachelor's degree in gaining employment:

*You won't get an interview unless you get the degree in a specific field. So I came back to university, put in a big effort in my study. I just want to get the result.*

### Summary for Ben's story

Themes	Activities & Opinions
<b>Prior learning and work experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative learning history in university;</li> <li>• Did a lot of work;</li> <li>• Failed studies;</li> <li>• Dropped out;</li> <li>• Reflection: "I couldn't have a good decision on a big picture"; "I didn't know what I was required".</li> </ul>
<b>Knowledge &amp; skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-knowledge (maturity &amp; self-development)</li> <li>• Communication skills (talking with people with confidence);</li> <li>• Time management skills;</li> <li>• Management skills (responsibility).</li> </ul>
<b>Go to university</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contract was over in England;</li> <li>• Did not "go further on the job";</li> <li>• Decided to go university for becoming independent and for updating skills.</li> </ul>
<b>Being a mature age student</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Got on top of learning as the weeks went on;</li> <li>• Continued to study Environment Engineering due to interest;</li> <li>• Got good marks based on "my work and life experience";</li> <li>• Worked hard;</li> <li>• Became confidence.</li> </ul>
<b>Higher education in terms of employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learned "some general knowledge" with degree;</li> <li>• A lot of knowledge and skills would be learned on the job;</li> <li>• No idea on "how much knowledge gained at university could get applied in the workplace";</li> <li>• No chance to do practice work in Environmental Engineering.</li> </ul>

## 5.6 Jennifer: “To be happy in what I do”

**Introduction:** Jennifer chose to work after graduation from high school. She married and did a lot of work in a range of industries while raising her children. When her husband planned to retire she decided to go to university. Now she has a job in a primary school.

### Prior work experiences

Jennifer recalled her prior work experiences, both paid and unpaid:

*When I was eighteen years old I finished high school and I went to work at an insurance company for about seven years, and I stopped, I had children. For seven years I looked after my children [laughs] ...then I did some cooking demonstrations in supermarkets, and then I packed shoes in supermarkets, put grocery on the shelves for supermarkets. When I packed shoes at a supermarket, I thought it was good, because I worked at night time. It fitted well with my children because they were too little so I could go to work at night time as my husband was at home. I didn't have to think at that time, because I was very tired from raising my children, so [I didn't think whether] it was good thing or not at that time.*

*I also worked as a secretary for three years at my church...I involved X X [name] Sunday School which is like...teaching little children and teaching as a volunteer,*

*something without payment. I've done that a lot.*

### **Going to university**

Jennifer explained why she decided to come to university:

*Raising my own children, I loved it; it was so exciting. Now my children are in high school, and you don't see them so much. I really want to be involved in that again. And the other reason is my husband is ten years older than me. He has been working for more than 30 years and wants to retire shortly. I think I'm too young to retire [laughs], so I feel I want to go to work if you're going to retire [laughs again]. So these two things made me come back to university.*

As the dynamics of family life have changed over the years, Jennifer has developed goals for working that have led her to return to study.

### **Learning orientation**

Jennifer explained what motivated her to pursue a career in teaching:

*The main thing is that I found I enjoyed watching my own children's growth so much. That just was [an] amazing experience. And I also enjoyed my teaching experiences in the Sunday School. I got excited when I taught something to a child, and the child said, 'I got that!' That made me so excited...so rewarding. That's why I wanted to be a teacher.*

Jennifer also suggested that it is important to determine what it is you are passionate about, so that you can set goals that will lead you to work in an area that will be rewarding:

*Yes, I tried a lot of different things [laughs]. I mean I've been working for a long time and have done many different things.*

*I think you have to find where your passion is. I think you really need to sit down to think about what your passion is, what do you really enjoy in your life, because you don't want a job that you hate for the rest of your life, you know [laughs aloud].*

Jennifer did many different jobs in a range of industries so she could find where her passion was. From her perspective, young people needed to think about their passions and interests when they chose an occupation.

### **Readiness to study**

Jennifer identified the “right” time to go to university for her:

*I guess it was just a right time in my life for me to go to university. It fitted with everything, you know. My husband was very supportive, that was a good thing; that was an advantage. We had the second advantage: children were old enough I could leave them at home. We had the third advantage: my husband earned enough money for me not to work so I could come to university [and studied here] for 3*

*years. I just think it was a right time for me to go...yes.*

Jennifer recognized that support from family, children who were relatively independent, and enough money, were elements of great importance in terms of her decision to attend university.

### **Being a mature age student**

Jennifer talked about her first experience when coming to university:

*I was scared. I was so scared, because I'd never been to university. However, I only felt scared when I first came. Everything was unfamiliar and I didn't know. After that I didn't feel scared; I felt very comfortable and very determined [for] what I wanted to do. Yes.*

Her family provided practical support so that she could achieve the balance she needed to study:

*My children had to cook dinner sometimes. And my husband started taking up washing and extra jobs, so we had to change the balance of our life but we worked that pretty well.*

Jennifer talked about the advantage of her previous experience and how this helped her to focus on her studies:

*No. I don't think it was difficult to study at university. My life experience is bigger*



*than other students'. I think I had a bigger advantage over people straight out of high school. However, I had to work really really hard. I had no other options. I had to get my assignments done; I had to learn as much as I could in the time I was here. My husband wasn't going to pay for me to do another year if I failed.*

*I didn't have time to play. I didn't come here to enjoy something in the Unibar or the movies, anything like that. I simply came to study and left. I was [here] just for the purpose of getting my degree and, that's all.*

As a mature age student, Jennifer thought her “bigger” life experience was “a bigger advantage over people straight out of high school”. She was attending the university to work, not to “play” and was intent on achieving her goal.

### **Higher education in terms of employment**

Jennifer articulated some skills gained on the job rather than in the university:

*I remember, after I left high school as I said I worked in an insurance company for seven years, I worked here until I was promoted to be an assistant manager. I think I learned a lot of skills there. The insurance company I worked for was really really focused on training for staff. They talked to us about something relating to customers...and...you know, letter writing and all of these sorts of skills and they are very important for you to find business. When I came to the university, I could use some of these skills because I learned them a long time*

*ago...um...I didn't learn a lot of skills at the university. I had learned them previously.*

With reference to what she learned at university, Jennifer noted:

*I learned how school systems worked. I didn't understand that all the subjects were covered by syllabus documents [before]...um...so coming to university we had to come through those sorts of documents to understand exactly what those documents meant...um...so probably the main advantage I got from the university [is to] just understand exactly how the educational system works for young children.*

Recalling what she had learned while studying at university, Jennifer identified the importance of understanding how the educational system was organized.

Jennifer identified what she wished she had learned at university:

*Now I'm a classroom teacher. I can say there were a lot of things I should have been told but I wasn't told at the university. And that makes me depressed. I can give you two examples. First, I didn't know how to get a classroom full of students to work on a variety of reading tasks all at their own levels. Second, I didn't know how to manage 20+ students – theory isn't really very helpful! I had to learn from other teachers at the school.*

Jennifer provided two specific examples to illustrate what she “should” have learned at university and noted that she felt “depressed” at having to “learn from other teachers at the school”.

In this case, Jennifer gave a suggestion to the university:

*The final year of uni should be like an apprenticeship with multiple practical placements.*

The importance of work experience prior to completing a degree and a preparation for the work place were significant from Jennifer’s perspective.

### **Open to learning and changes**

Jennifer discussed issues related to learning and changes:

*I think I was willing to change, too. As your life changes, I think it’s good that you could change your career, not to be bored with the same job for thirty-five years hating every minute [laughs aloud]...I wouldn’t like to do that. I think you need to be open to changes. I think you should think where your passion is. For me, the criterion for career success is to be happy in what I do.*

*I’m actually quite happy where I’m now. I’ve got a permanent job so I know I can continue to teach...um...when you become a primary school teacher, the government actually requires you to continue um...to do some training courses.*

*It's not study so you don't have to go to university and further your degree. You have to attend a number of training courses every year to make sure you get more knowledge...yes, sorts of stuff...um...I'm happy to do that. I'm happy, at the moment [laughs aloud].*

Jennifer expressed that she was quite satisfied with her current job and that she was willing to continue training in order to develop her skills further.

## Summary of Jennifer's story

Themes	Activities & Opinions
<b>Prior work experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Worked in an insurance company;</li> <li>• Had children and raised them;</li> <li>• Did some cooking demonstration in supermarkets;</li> <li>• Packed shoes (worked at night because it fitted with her children);</li> <li>• Put grocery on the shelves;</li> <li>• Worked as a secretary at a church;</li> <li>• Volunteered in a Sunday School (teaching children).</li> </ul>
<b>Going to university</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wanted to teach children;</li> <li>• Her husband would retire soon.</li> </ul>
<b>Learning orientation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Loved raised her children;</li> <li>• Felt excited with teaching children;</li> <li>• Did a lot of different things to “find your passion”.</li> </ul>
<b>Readiness to go</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Her husband was supportive;</li> <li>• Children became old enough;</li> <li>• Had enough money.</li> </ul>
<b>Being a mature age student</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Felt scared when she first came to university;</li> <li>• Support from family;</li> <li>• Bigger life experiences;</li> <li>• Work very hard;</li> <li>• No time for entertainment.</li> </ul>
<b>Higher education in terms of employment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learned how school system worked;</li> <li>• Understood subjects covered by syllabus documents;</li> <li>• Gained some skills on the job rather than in the university.</li> <li>• Did not teach her how to teach;</li> <li>• Learned how to teach from colleagues at the school;</li> <li>• Suggestion: apprenticeship with multiple placement</li> </ul>
<b>Open to change and learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open to change;</li> <li>• Liked continuing learning.</li> </ul>

## **Chapter 6**

# **THE EXPERIENCE OF MATURE AGE STUDENTS: RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to investigate reasons why mature age students entered university after working for several years and whether studying at university would support their future life career development.

The major research questions underpinned by the conceptual framework of the study are as follows:

Question 1: Why did you come to university after working for several years?

This question includes mature age students' feelings, thoughts, relationship, previous work and learning experiences, learning orientation and career goals.

Question 2: How do/did you study at university as a mature age student?

This question encompasses mature age students' learning strategies and abilities as well as the use of time.

Question 3: How do you think of higher education in terms of your career development?

This question explores perceptions of the university experience and the connection of higher education with employment.

In order to answer these research questions, data was gathered from five mature age students in a range of faculties at the University of Gold Coast. This data was collected through interviews, e-mail discussions and analysis of documents. The data was analyzed by coding and recoding in a time sequence and in a logical order until meaningful segments (themes or categories) emerged. Then the five stories were rewritten based on the themes, causality and temporality. Moreover, on the basis of comparison of the themes drawn on diverse life experiences and various backgrounds of five participants, divergences and convergences of these themes and sub-themes are identified. This data analysis from thematic narratives aims to answer the basic research questions mentioned previously.

It should be noted, however, that answers to the three research problems tend to overlap extensively.

## **6.2 Transforming life opportunities and learning**

### **6.2.1 A winding road to higher education**

As mentioned previously, *A Fair Chance for All* (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990) provided more opportunities for adult learners to access higher education in Australia. In this study, all five participants came to university through special entry pathways:

Emma: Entered on the basis of previous studies at the tertiary level

Tess: Completed the University Access Program (UAP) as a condition of entry

Mary: Entered on the basis of results in a TAFE Diploma

Ben: Entered on the basis of Partly-Completed Tertiary Studies from a previous degree

Jennifer: Completed Year 12 studies and entered the workforce before attending university.

Emma studied as a part-time student in the University of Canberra in Nursing and gained a Bachelor's degree after her first trial for career change failed. Actually what she really wanted to learn was something related to teaching and research. She attempted to enrol in some online courses that would help her to change her career while raising her two young children. Unfortunately she failed at that time due to her poor computer skills and demands of her family. When her children had jobs and were financially independent, she decided to come to university – she waited for almost 30 years for this opportunity!

Tess had negative educational experiences in high school. She entered university after working for 8 years. Of course, as Tess pointed out, she was influenced by her family because a lot of her family members had already received higher education. She felt happy with studying at university:

*I didn't go to university earlier, but I'm studying here now [laughs].*

Tess entered university through the UAP. Entry to the UAP is competitive and it is designed to provide students with opportunities to develop the skills required for studying at the tertiary level. Tess noted that the UAP provided a useful basis for her, as a mature age student:

*Yes, the 14-week University Access Program, which was really really fantastic, and taught me SO MUCH [speaks loudly here]. I mean, I kind of have good English skills, good writing skills, knew how to write essays, but it helped me with databases and research, just such a huge opportunity to get me familiar with the university. I think I would have had more difficult time, if I hadn't done the access program.*



Mary worked for five years in the building industry. She wanted to teach children and did not want to waste her time by continuing to work in the building industry. Mary entered university on the basis of the results she achieved in a TAFE Diploma:

*I just applied as a mature age student. I've done a TAFE Diploma for that job, just part-time. I did tertiary credits from being at TAFE.*

Ben went to university straight from high school. However, he spent most of his time working because he did not feel satisfied with his accomplishments. He failed his studies and decided to drop out, although his parents tried to persuade him to stay. However, eight years later, he came back to the University of Gold Coast to finish his studies in Environmental Engineering:

*I think I've worked for a couple of years, started again. Um...I think it's exciting.*

Jennifer worked for almost 20 years after graduating from high school. She undertook many different jobs in a range of industries. She wanted working hours to suit raising her children. When her husband planned to retire, she decided to come to university.

It should be pointed out that there was a catalyst or disorienting dilemma in all five participants' lives when they decided to enter university. It is the catalyst or disorienting dilemma that stimulated each one of them to go to university:

Emma: She wanted to work as a secondary school teacher or a researcher but worked as a registered nurse and nurse manager.

Tess: She broke up with her ex-boyfriend so she decided to go to university.

Mary: She wanted to teach children but worked with adults in the building industry.

Ben: He did not want to continue in his job as a project manager in event management and developed an interest in environmental issue.

Jennifer: Her husband planned to retire soon but Jennifer thought she was too young to retire.

### **6.2.2 Aspiration, happiness and fulfillment**

Emma worked in a job that she no longer found rewarding and she ascribed this to her dependence on her friends and her mother when she was young. She felt exhausted with her job in nursing:

*If I had enjoyed doing the work, it wouldn't have been so hard but I didn't like doing it. I just became worn out because there was something wrong with the passion.*

However, Emma had to continue to work in nursing after her first trial of career change failed because of her responsibilities as a single mother:

*I had to wait until the children were old enough, so I didn't have to be financially responsible for them.*

Emma waited for almost 30 years! After her children became adults and became totally independent, she decided to do something “important” to her:

*I wanted to do a life change and study something that really interested me, rather than just having income support for the kids...I wanted to do something important to me.*

Emma never gave up her aspirations and dream. Now she was able to fulfill her potential although she felt terrified when she first came to university. Emma worked hard and got good marks. After our interviews, I met her in the library several times, and saw that she was totally absorbed in her studies.

Mary had an aversion to her job in the building industry although she worked there for five years and was very good at it:

*Some days I went home I wasn't happy. I leaned on the door; I wasn't where I wanted to be. I wasn't passionate about my job, although I was quite good at it.*

Mary wanted to deal with children rather than adults. Being encouraged by her older brother, Mary came to university after working for five years. She thought that her passion about working with children motivated her while studying at university:

*I really want to work with kids, so I pushed myself to know more, I pushed myself to be better.*

Mary was doing Honours and already had a job when she was interviewed. She felt very satisfied and pleased with the decision to go to university:

*Now I go to work and I get home, I'm happy. I feel I'm making the difference, and I feel that, personally for me, that was the right decision.*

In addition, Mary expressed that self-fulfillment was important in her life:

*You should be happy for what you're doing.*

Tess and Jennifer also noted that pursuing happiness was one of the important reasons for their return to study:

[Doing] *anything that makes you happy* (Tess).

*...what you really enjoy in your life, because you don't want a job that you hate for the rest of your life, you know* [laughs aloud] (Jennifer).

*For me, the criterion for career success is to be happy in what I do* (Jennifer).

### **6.2.3 Commitments and idealism**

Like many parents, Emma put family commitments first in her life. Family commitments were much more important than her own happiness from her perspective. The happy ending of her story in this study was that she studied at university and attained a good academic performance. Although she had not graduated, I believed that she would achieve her goal finally because she really worked very hard and she demonstrated significant insights into life and work through her narrative.

Tess studied in Politics and Journalism because she wanted to become a political journalist. She explained her social commitment to journalism:

*I feel most political journalists in the country just do documentary. They don't actually question, they just write about what's happening, and I think it's just being sensationalized...The only public channel you real get the truth is ABC at the moment. I don't think it's good. I think the public need actually being more aware of politicians, not what the Daily Telegrph is saying...you know, I think it's*

*more important to get real voice.*

In the email discussion, she expressed again her strong social commitment to journalism when she was asked to give her personal criteria for career success:

*Making a difference in politics in the media, or at least being a good, respected journalist.*

#### **6.2.4 Empowerment**

When Ben studied at the University of Gold Coast straight from high school, he hoped to achieve something in tertiary education. However, he felt disappointed after studying for three years:

*You might want to do something, and then you came to university. A few years later, you didn't feel like [it's] a right thing to make the time, and didn't feel like I was going to achieve something.*

Holding this opinion, Ben spent most of time at work and failed his studies. He decided to drop out of university although his parents tried to persuade him otherwise:

*I think they [my parents] always encouraged me to come back to university. We talked for a long time. I wanted to be independent. Um...I decided I wanted to do it in my way. I decided I didn't come back.*

When Ben wanted to change his job and his lifestyle, he decided to come back to university:

*...so we could be more independent to make the choices. I wanted to be more independent on where we were going to work and live.*

*I think, [I] still have that idea: a little bit of being more independent, having financial responsibility...that would be fantastic.*

In the email discussion, Ben again emphasized what he hoped to achieve:

*[I] can go further in my field. [I want to be] financial stable, and be able to determine where and for whom I want to work.*

## **6.3 Self-development and management of mature age students**

### **6.3.1 Time management**

#### **6.3.1.1 Age concerns**

Emma was in her fifties when she studied at university. She studied as a full-time student and worked very hard because she was worried about her age:

*I think part of the reason [why] I need to do well and [why] I need to get good marks is due to my age. And I'm a full-time student. If I study part-time, and do some part-time work, I think it takes me a longer time to learn...just the time is*

*longer. I'm in my fifties. [That's why] I'm a full-time student. I really want to do well because it's important to me.*

Time is limited for mature age students; opportunities are also limited for them. That is why Emma was anxious about her future employment. She hoped that the demands for teachers would be strong enough to provide adequate job opportunities in teaching:

*I feel I need to have my academic record strong, so the future employers look at this, 'OK, this one can do it'. And then I'm hoping my life experience will be positive...um...if I once get an interview, I'm quite confident that I can talk myself into a job, but getting that interview is a hard thing, that's what I think. If my academic [performance] is strong, then they will overlook my age, I really want to work in rural areas, and I know that's hard to get teaching, so I'm hoping the demand is strong enough.*

### **6.3.1.2 Caring responsibilities and life balance**

A body of literature indicates that mature age students especially women who studied at university took on caring responsibilities for their children and elderly parents, even their grandparents. In this study, both Tess and Mary mentioned that family commitments made higher education challenging for mature age students.

However, in this study both Emma and Jennifer did this in different ways: They waited until their children became old enough so that they could go to university. Emma, as a single mother, took care of her children until they became adults and had their own incomes. Jennifer looked after her children until they studied at high school. When

Jennifer studied at university, her husband shared the caring responsibilities and her two children sometimes shared household responsibilities such as cooking the dinner. Both Emma and Jennifer had fewer caring responsibilities when they studied at university, so they did not have problems in balancing aspects of their personal lives.

Ben also talked about why he did not feel it was so difficult to balance his life when he studied at university:

*Not [at] the moment. I don't have too many personal things outside the university.*

*I don't have to pay for the house. I don't have the family, just myself and my partner. The balance is not a problem.*

### **6.3.1.3 Time arrangement**

Tess thought mature age students should have a timetable when they studied at university otherwise they would get into big trouble in higher education:

*...but if you sit down, figure out a timetable, you are not going to have a hard time.*

For Jennifer, she studied as a full-time student at the University of Gold Coast for three years. She spent most of her time concentrating on her studies. She said she worked very hard and had no time for entertainment:

*I had to work really really hard. I had no other options. I had to get my assignments done; I had to learn as much as I could in the time I was here.*



*I didn't have time to play. I didn't come here enjoying something in the Unibar or the movies, anything like that.*

### **6.3.2 Resource management**

#### **6.3.2.1 Knowledge and skills accumulation**

Emma worked in nursing for almost thirty years and possessed some skills like people skills, training skills, and so on. She had gained a Bachelor's degree in Nursing before majoring in Community, Culture and Environment at the University of Gold Coast. Tess worked for eight years in a range of occupations such as receptionist, salesgirl and administrator. She equipped herself with computer skills, people skills, research skills and communication skills. Now she was studying Politics and Journalism. Mary worked in a very specialized area in the building industry for five years before studying Early Childhood Education. Mary had a strong research skills and communication skills as well as teaching skills. Ben worked in the event management industry for eight years and had acquired knowledge and skills in communication, time management and leadership. Now he strived for becoming an environmental engineer. Jennifer worked in a range of industries for almost twenty years in an insurance company, church and supermarkets. She worked in a primary school after graduating from the Faculty of Education. Knowledge and skills they possessed were addressed in Table 6.2.

**Table 6.2 Knowledge and skills of all five participants**

<b>Emma</b>	Worked in nursing for almost 30 years; Gained a Bachelor's degree in Nursing; Did some training courses for new nurses in hospital; Possessed skills: people skills, organizational skills, prioritizing skills, computer skills; Majored in Community, Culture & Environment.
<b>Tess</b>	Gained some training in sales, customer, music and medicine; Did different kinds of administration and customer service, etc; Had people skills, computer skills, skills in sales and reception, good English skills, good writing skills, research skills; Attended the University Access Program (UAP); Learned how to write journalism in simple language; Studying Politics & Journalism (courses description, see Chapter 5); Enrolled extra courses outside university: shorthand, presenting course.
<b>Mary</b>	Worked in five years in a specialized area in the building industry; Gained a TAFE Diploma; Did some work in her neighbour's primary school; Studied Early Childhood Education; Did a lot of practice work in primary school and got advice and feedback about her practice; Possessed skills: communication skills, research skills.
<b>Ben</b>	Worked in the event management industry for 8 years; Self-knowledge, people skills, time management skills and management skills; Studied Environmental Engineering.
<b>Jennifer</b>	Worked in a insurance company for 7 years; Worked in supermarkets, church, a Sunday School; Worked as assistant manager, salesperson, secretary, volunteer teacher, etc; Attended some training course on customer, letter writing and so on in the insurance company; Majored in Primary Education; Learned how school system worked and subjects need to be covered by syllabus documents; Learned how to teach from colleagues at the school.

It should be noted that work as a very important source of knowledge and skills is included in this table because all five participants worked for between five and thirty years. Besides work experience, participants acquired knowledge and skills through higher education and training in the workplace. Some of them also highlight learning from networking within or outside institutions.

### 6.3.2.2 Financial considerations

Emma did not come to university earlier to achieve her dream because her two children were not financially independent. Thirty years later, her two children had their own jobs, and Emma also had some savings when she studied at university:

*I bought a house standing on the South Coast, and I don't have to pay the rent.*

When analyzing her readiness to go to university, Jennifer also mentioned financial issues as one of the important issues that she took into account when she decided to study at university:

*...my husband earned enough money for me not to work so I could come to university [and studied here] for 3 years.*

*I had to work really really hard...My husband wasn't going to pay for me to do another year for fail.*

### 6.3.2.3 Resource acquisition and utilization

Emma, Tess and Mary all mentioned that mature age students should take advantage of the resources available at university to facilitate their learning. The resources include useful information or knowledge that may be gained from university especially from teaching staff. For example, Emma made the following observation:

*They [tutors] know what we need as students, so talking with them would help.*

*Couple of lecturers talked through possible research with me, career options, or*

*things like that. It's good, because lecturers know exactly you want to know.*

Tess called on her peers as well as staff for help:

*There are so many resources available at university to help you...I mean I always try everything. If I really want to understand something, I'll do anything I can to try every possible way to get it. I ask my friends, I ask my tutors, I ask my lecturers, I ask librarians. I'm quite happy to use everything in the university.*

Mary was clear about how to approach for guidance:

*I sought support from people around me. Lecturer and coordinators were helpful. Tutors were helpful, too. If I email them some work, they are pretty prompt to write back to me. All tell me if I was on the right track. Yes, the uni is very helpful, particularly the subject coordinators.*

Tess thought that she had gained a lot of career information from attending the UAP:

*The university access program definitely made me think about being a political journalist, um, [think about] some ground ideas, for example, who we are, who we can be, and what we can do.*

However, with reference to information from the careers service, Tess recommended that when the university staff provided some career information to students, they be

honest about it:

*I do think this university should do more kind of career information as well, because I do think the university, you need to tell people what can happen [in the workplace]. I do think like that is really helpful, when you can actually sit down and find out what you need to do, what positives are, what negatives are. University should be honest about the jobs, not only saying ‘This is the greatest profession in the world!’ People should be honest about it.*

Besides feedback and advice from the school where she did practice teaching, Mary suggested that mature age students get useful information from people in a specialized industry to understand how people worked in the “real” workplace:

*If you, say, are an engineer, you ring up a very famous engineer – someone working in the engineering, say ‘I’m doing the assignment’ or whatever, you know, ‘I just want to know if this is what you really do in the industry?’*

### **6.3.3 Interpersonal management**

#### **6.3.3.1 Supportive environment**

All five participants appreciated support from their families. Emma’s children always encouraged her when she studied at university. Mary got support from her parents, big brother and her neighbour. In particular, Mary acknowledged that her big brother who inspired her to achieve her goals influenced her massively. Influenced by her family where most members had received higher education, Tess got some assistance in several

spheres. For example, her parents and Aunty read essays for her, and she could stay with her great-Aunty when she had some courses at university. Ben's partner financially supported him. Jennifer's husband shared some housework and her children also did some housework.

Emma appreciated support from her family and friends:

*...always said, you know, 'Good, Mum!' 'Well done!' and my parents, my children and my friends, yes, very very supportive.*

Tess had support from her immediate and extended family:

*My Dad reads my essays for me, my aunty is always happy to receive my essays and read them for me. Actually I live in XX [name], but I stay with my great-aunty, three-day a week, so I don't have to catch the train, anything like that. They do what they can do to help me in every way, yes, and my partner just helps me hugely, and I even don't have to work. That's pretty cool [laughs aloud].*

Mary's brother provided inspiration and encouragement:

*...he [big brother] said, 'you should go, you should do it, it's something new', you know, 'it's challenging, you should do it, you should learn more, learn more, you become better for what you can do'. He always inspired me to think about how I can be better, how I can be better for what I can do.*

Ben's parents and partner provided different kinds of support:

*My parents are always supportive about my decisions at any time. My partner is taking a little bit sacrifice at the moment while I'm back studying because I'm not working full time.*

Jennifer's family reassigned roles and responsibilities:

*My children had to cook dinner sometimes. And my husband started taking up washing and extra jobs, so we had to change the balance of our life but we worked that pretty well.*

With reference to support from university, Emma valued the formal academic learning systems at university that aim to help mature age students. Tess elaborated that it was helpful for mature age students to actively ask for help from tutors, lecturers, librarians with confidence. Mary emphasized job opportunities and practice under supervision from university staff.

Emma recognized who provided support for mature age students:

*People will tell you how to do an assignment. The lecturers and tutors will work through it and have the classes. There are a lot of academic learning systems. It's good, good.*

Tess mentioned the importance of self-confidence when seeking help:

*I also think you don't have to fear to ask help, you just go up to your tutor or lecturer, say 'Hey, I'm really stuck, can you...', whatever. You just have that confidence to actually be able to do that by yourself. Yes, I think it's really helpful to be able to do it.*

Mary valued experiences that involved in the workplace:

*The university really encourages you to teach before you graduate. Just around the lift in the Faculty of Education, there are some notice boards. They put lots of, lots of job [information] on the notice boards ...at the end of session, you go into practicum, and you go into teaching kids under supervision, sorts of things, yes.*

Mary also appreciated feedback and advice from the school where she did practice teaching:

*You get a lot of support from the primary school where you do practice. They give you a lot of resources; they give you a lot of advice, at the same time, you are learning what you want to learn.*

Jennifer pointed out that her colleagues instructed her how to teach students in the classroom:

*I had to learn [them] from other teachers at the school.*



### **6.3.3.2 Networking**

As mentioned previously, Mary highlighted developing connections with people in the industry to make certain how to apply theory into practice. Furthermore, she noted that making connections with people who were more knowledgeable or more experienced was very important for mature age students. The benefits might be job opportunities and applying what you were learning, which helped you to improve your skills:

*I think if you have these connections – they might help; they might introduce the job you really want to do, you know. I think making connections with people is really really important. Yes, make connections with others, so you practise what you’re learning, [this] is also very important. When you’re learning, you may be able to do [it]. However, if you can do what you’re learning, you’ll become better for what you can do.*

### **6.3.4 Self-diagnosis and management**

#### **6.3.4.1 Critical reflection**

In this study, both Emma and Mary experienced a perspective transformation from dependence to independence through critical reflection and acted on the new perspective: Both of them thought that they had been too dependent on people around them (their mothers, friends or teachers in high school) when they chose their first occupation. Emma “did exactly the same as my friends”, and “my mother had always wanted to be a nurse, but she hadn’t been able to finish it”. For Mary, she thought her teachers in high school “didn’t inspire me, they didn’t push me to think about outside the square”, and her mother “quite liked the job” in the building industry, so her mother

wanted her to take the job. In the workplace, they finally found what they really wanted to do, and questioned why they were on the wrong track through reflection. After that, they became more independent in terms of their goals by quitting their jobs and going to university to learn something that they really wanted to learn, and to do something that was very important to them.

Ben also experienced a level of critical reflection. He thought he had not completed his studies and dropped out of university because he could not see the “big picture” and was initially unsure about what he wanted. Realizing this, Ben came back to university to finish his studies after a period of time in the workforce.

#### **6.3.4.2 Being well-prepared**

Every participant made some preparations for their higher education. They had “bigger” life experience, previously accumulated knowledge and skills and had some savings. They gained support from their families and friends for returning to study. They set realistic and sustainable goals based on vocational aspirations, passion and interests. They were highly motivated for their higher education and future plans. In short, they all were prepared for their tertiary education psychological, socially and financially. It is evident that they chose terms such “right time”, “right stage” and “right decision” to describe that they were ready for higher education and life transformations.

The following three participants provided more details about how they were well-prepared for their higher education.

Emma entered the university after working for almost thirty years and her children were financially independent although she had a clear idea about her vocational interests and aspirations when she was young. During the thirty years of her working life, she had accumulated knowledge and skills and saved some money. When she studied at

university as a full-time student she bought a house on the South Coast so she did not have to pay rent. Because her two children had become adults and had their own jobs, Emma did not have caring responsibilities and a financial burden when she studied at university. Emma was highly motivated by her dream and her “big” life experience which functioned as a rich resource for her tertiary education.

Tess worked for eight years and had strong communication skills and good writing skills. She attended a 14-week UAP which gave her “huge opportunities” to get familiar with university and higher education. Most of her family members had received higher education and she “always wanted to go to university”. More importantly, she had very strong social commitment to become a political journalist in order to let the public have a “real voice”. She was ready to study in the field of political journalism, which is where her interests were focused.

Mary worked for five years and had strong communication skills. Working in the building industry, she realized that rather than dealing with adults, she would like to work with children. However, Mary was very rational about her career transition. She gained advice from her older brother who used to be a mature age student and was very successful in the workplace. Mary also gained some practical experience in order to confirm her learning orientation. The work she did in her neighbour’s primary school confirmed her learning orientation before going to university.

#### **6.3.4.3 Options and choices**

As discussed previously, life is comprised of a series of options. The five participants had to make choices in the face of hundreds of occupations: geographer, computer scientist, teacher, engineer, architect, journalist, accountant and so on. Making an initial decision among all the available options is challenging.

They located their learning orientations before coming to university mainly based on their interests (or some of them said “passion”). Emma realized what she wanted to learn in the university was something related to books:

*I think because of my lifelong passion in reading, I just want to learn, I just love to learn...I just realized books and learning naturally goes with teaching. That's how I sort of realized this is what I want. I really wanted to do teaching. I wanted to teach English History.*

On the other hand, Emma also expressed an interest in research. When I first met her, she told me that she was interested in doing research. When she saw the poster in the notice board she contacted me and wanted to become one of the participants. In the interview she said:

*I loved doing research.*

Tess has a strong interest in “Union, work rights and human relations”. Not surprisingly, she chose to be a political journalist. Her learning orientation of Politics and Journalism was underpinned by her interest and strong social commitment for conveying “the truth” to the public.

Mary found her vocational interest and preference through five years work in the building industry. She discovered that she was interested in working with children rather than adults. She also did some teaching in her neighbour's primary school to confirm it:

*...this [teaching] was a career [for me] because I was very good at it.*

Ben dropped out from the University of Gold Coast because he did not experience a sense of accomplishment. However, he came back and continued to study in the same field eight years later because he realized he was interested in “environmental issues”:

*I got interested in environmental issues, I think. You should be interested in your studies otherwise one day you'll pay for that.*

Jennifer found she loved teaching children in a variety ways: She loved the “amazing” experience of raising her own children; she “enjoyed” her teaching experiences in the Sunday School. She tried many other jobs to confirm her career interest:

*Yes, I tried a lot of different things [laughs]. I mean I've been working for a long time and have done many different things.*

*I think you have to find where your passion is. I think you really need to sit down to think about what your passion is, what do you really enjoy in your life, because you don't want a job that you hate for the rest of your life, you know [laughs aloud].*

Undoubtedly, when people make decisions about how they want to spend their time working, their interest determine their decisions. However, “strength” seems to be overlooked. According to Simonsen (2002, p. 73), a recommended choice is that “you like it” and at the same time you “are good at it”. Mary is one example of this choice-making model. She had a strong interest in teaching children, and she obtained

excellent academic transcript. Most importantly, she gained practical experience in primary schools and improved her teaching skills before graduation.

Tess is another example, although she did not mention her strength straight away. She worked for eight years in customer service, sales and administration. She said, “I was always dealing with people”. When I talked with her, I found she did have very strong communication skills. Most importantly, she had very strong social commitments underpinning her career decision-making. Responsibility is one of strengths for human being (Buckingham, 2002).

#### **6.3.4.4 Risk-taking and controlling**

Emma felt terrified when she first left Canberra for her studies in another city. Before going to the University of Gold Coast, she was a nurse manger – a rewarding job with a good salary. She lived in her “comfortable zone” (McGraw, 1997). Now she had no idea about what would happen in the future. She was worried about her health and she was fearful about failure:

*It was very terrifying...because there was so much I didn't know, in the sense that I had made a big gamble. I left Canberra, moved out to the South Coast, and now I was going to do what I set out to do. I was terrified once I'd gone there. What if I wasn't good any more, or what if I couldn't do it, or what if I couldn't finish it, you know, it was very scary, you know, coming back to university after all this time.*

Emma also worried about her future employment due to her age. She hoped that demands for teachers would be strong enough to provide job opportunities in rural areas.

Tess had the same anxiety about future employment because of its unforeseeability:

*Mostly I do worry. Maybe no one can predict anything.*

Jennifer felt scared when she first came to university because she had never been there before. However, feeling fearful did not last for long. She became accustomed to the new life at university. Ben thought “in the first three weeks it was quite overwhelming” because he suddenly got some assignments to be assessed and he felt “shocked” about the educational system after being away university for eight years.

With regard to risk-controlling, all five participants set realistic and obtainable career goals based on their abilities (It should be noted that when I conducted interviews, there was an economic turndown in America rather than Australia). Moreover, Emma had two alternative plans for her future employment which would reduce unnecessary risks. Both of her career plans were realistic and sustainable based on her academic performance at university (if we do not take into consideration the needs fluctuation of the labour market):

*Um [laughs aloud] ...it depends. I'm going to make a decision. I'll finish next year. I want to do Honours. If I get really good Honours, say, the first-class Honours, I'll go on doing Ph.D; If I only get, say, average Honours, I'll go on doing secondary teaching, then part-time studies for Master's degree. So I don't know, I don't know. It depends on how marks keep on going [laughs again].*

#### **6.3.4.5 Open to change and learning**

All five participants were open to change and lifelong learning. Emma did not like her

work in nursing and believed she had no choice but continued to work in the hospital because of her family commitments. She expressed her willingness to change:

*You need to be aware of the new things that are happening, whether they are new drugs, or whether they are new surgeries. You've got to keep on learning.*

*Years, years ago, when you first went nursing, you were trained in hospital system, that was actually nursing degree, nursing diploma. When I went back to nursing after having kids, I wanted to upgrade. You had to have a degree as a nurse, you know. When I was working, I did my Bachelor's degree in nursing, part time, in the University of Canberra, and worked full-time. At the period of being in the university, I loved doing the lectures. I loved doing research.*

Jennifer also expressed that she was open to change and learning:

*I think I was willing to change, too. As your life changes, I think it's good that you could change your career, not to be bored with the same job for thirty-five years hating every minute [laughs aloud] ...I wouldn't like to do that. I think you need to open to changes...the government actually requires you to continue um...to do some training courses...I'm happy to do that.*

#### **6.3.4.6 Learning abilities**

Unlike the literature, this study finds that mature age students do not question their learning abilities and they all had good marks particularly Emma and Mary. They did have some negative feelings about studying at university especially during the first few



weeks. They felt “scared” or “terrified” or “shocked”. However, they felt fearful not because they doubted their learning abilities but because they experienced something new that had never happened in their lives before (Emma and Jennifer) or they worked for a long time and suddenly got some assignments (Ben). Mary and Tess felt happy even in the first few weeks at university.

On the contrary, Emma was very satisfied with her learning abilities:

*My brain is still working very well [laughs aloud], and I'm getting very good marks [laughs again], and I enjoy it.*

More evidence could be found in the five stories to support that they did not have problems with their studies as they progressed. Tess made progress from pass and credit to high distinction; Mary was doing the Honours studies; Ben got good marks. It is noted that most of the participants ascribed their good academic performance to their “bigger” life experience. Emma also contributed cooperative learning to her good marks.

#### **6.3.4.7 Learning strategies**

Emma's learning strategy was to share ideas and assignments with others. Through interaction with others, she listened and identified the divergences and convergences of different ideas:

*I talked over things with a lot of different students. When you talk over your thinking, you also listen to others, so you may find nobody has that idea, so you think, 'OK, that's what I've got to do'. I think cooperative learning is huge, really*

*really important. You know what others are feeling when we experience the same thing, and you are going to feel better about that learning.*

Tess's learning strategies were more diverse compared with Emma's. She studied for long periods of time; she worked out a schedule for her assignments and studies; she learned more than assignments required; she took as many courses as possible; she sought for assistance from people around her; and she also enrolled two extra courses outside the University of Gold Coast – shorthand and the presenting course. In short, Tess took advantage of multiple learning strategies to get through her higher education.

Mary kept herself highly motivated and she thought that this was why she received good marks:

*The more you push, the more you get; the more you get, the more you push yourself. Yes, when you achieve, you are inspired. So I got some relatively good marks.*

Another learning strategy Mary employed was to clarify essay structure:

*...obviously the academic writing, you have to know how to structure essays. The first couple of assignments were challenging. I did a lot of essay searches on the Internet just to find out, to figure out the structure of essays. I also got some copies from my lecturers. I said, 'I need your help', or 'I need you to tell me if I'm on the right track'.*

#### **6.3.4.8 Growing confidence**

When Emma first came to the University of Gold Coast, she felt frightened because of her uncertainty about higher education. However, when she was asked about her future plans, she laughed aloud several times. She was satisfied and confident with her learning abilities and her academic performance.

Ben came back to university to finish his studies. He said he gained more confidence this time:

*I'm enjoying coming back. I feel confident here compared with when I was here several years ago. Now I communicate with lecturers and tutors.*

Mary was very confident about her future career development. She said there was a strong demand for good teachers in primary schools. Secondly, she had done a lot of practice in primary schools. Moreover, she had strong communication skills which were useful for a teacher in a primary school.

### **6.4 Higher education in terms of employment**

#### **6.4.1 Credentialism**

Tess mentioned the importance and status of a degree in the workplace;

*They [Employers] will require you to have a Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of journalism. You'll occasionally find people take you without it, but 80% to 90% of*

*employers require you to have the certificate of journalism, not the politics, but the journalism.*

Ben valued the degree in their higher education:

*You won't get an interview unless you get the degree in a specific field. So I came back to university, put in a big effort in my study, I just want to get the result.*

Jennifer saw this in more instrumental terms:

*I was [here] just for the purpose of getting my degree and that's all.*

#### **6.4.2 Work-based learning**

Tess complained about the lack of a course in shorthand at the University of Gold Coast, which was very important for any one who wanted to become a journalist. Tess gave some suggestions for mature age students majoring in journalism in terms of employment, with her own specific strategies:

*You need to get work experience. (This is) the bigger one. I work in the Student Union. I write for a student magazine at university as well. I do actually hope to apply for a post in a media in ××[name of a place] before I leave the university.*

*Second, if you can write for a few student papers, [you can] get yourself published. If you can access the Internet, get yourself published; just build up*

*your collection. Keep reading, keep writing every day. I try getting myself published as well.*

Mary explicated the “gap” between theory and practice:

*I think there may be a little bit gap. Um...what you learn is very different from what you do every day. Um...do you know what I mean? You learn how to teach, and you teach in the classroom, both of them are very different.*

Fortunately, the Faculty of Education provided some job opportunities for practice in schools to students, so she experienced teaching in primary schools and gained some feedback from both university academic staff and teachers in primary schools to improve her teaching skills. In this case, she accumulated some work experience of applying knowledge gained at university to practical contexts. Mary appreciated that the Faculty of Education provided job opportunities and supervision:

*The university really encourages you to teach before you graduate. Just around the lift in the Faculty of Education, there are some notice boards. They put lots of, lots of job [opportunities] on the notice boards.*

*...at the end of session, you go into practicum, and you go into teaching kids under supervision, sorts of things, yes.*

Based on her own experiences, Mary suggested that other mature age students needed to gain work experience:

*Um...I think you need to go into a school, and get a chance to do teaching. You need to have a lot of experience before working. You need to do a lot of practice, have a lot of practice experience before you can go to teach. You should do practice before you go to work.*

Ben had no idea about implementing what he had learned at the university in the workplace, because he regarded his learning as “general knowledge” and “very subject matters” and not specific to a particular job:

*A lot of knowledge and skills you learn are on the job.*

#### **6.4.3 Learning how to learn**

Emma thought that mature age students should not count on learning everything in the university. The “attitude” of lifelong learning was important, because they should continue to study across their lives when they left university. Learning was about very basic ideas: who you are and where you are going.

*Because learning is such an abstract thing, it goes to understanding ‘attitude’.*  
*It’s not only the specific thing that you’re learning, that you’re going to use in the workplace. I mean, for example, you’re going to learn [a] formula or theory, etc, that’s going to specifically help your work, but learning, to me, is really about attitude, yes, you know, um...just that learning doesn’t stop, you know, when you leave the university, you’re still going to be learning. [Learning is about these] skills*

*you learned about why you learn, so when you're in the workplace, you know about yourself, you know who you are, why you learn, you know how you learn...so when you're in the workplace, you've got that knowledge about yourself as well as specific subject matters.*

## **6.5 Conclusion**

The mature age students in this study experienced “a winding road” to higher education: They came to university after working for five to thirty years. The turning point was that they encountered a disorienting dilemma in their lives or on the job which stimulated them to reflect on their aspiration, interests and previous choices of occupations. They often entered university through special entry pathways and studied in their chosen fields. Before they studied at university some had a very clear idea about their learning orientations and career goals which were based on their occupational interests and passion, abilities as well as a sense of social commitment. Higher education was conceived as part of a career transition – they all wanted to have a new job. This also involved them in pursuing happiness, fulfillment, self-actualization and empowerment.

In the face of the chaotic labour market mature age students led a complicated life intricately intertwined with learning and work, and this made their learning and career development challenging. They were required to manage time well, which involved caring responsibilities and life balance. They also needed to know how to acquire knowledge and skills and sought assistance in educational settings. Support from people around them and building networking were of great value for their success in both learning and career development. More importantly, they developed some plans and strategies as well as actions based on their self-diagnosis and critical reflection.

Mature age students in the study also expressed their perspectives on higher education in terms of employment. Some of them valued the credentials gained from university but others pointed out that there was a gap between higher education and the skills needed for work. Some said that students should be able to apply theory to practice before going to work.

The major research findings were addressed in Figure 6.3.

These major findings respond to the research questions of the study. The reasons that the mature age students in this research project gave for returning to study after several years of work were varied. They mentioned personal fulfillment, happiness and a commitment to contributing to the community. As mature age students at university, their approaches to study reflected the different skills and strategies they had learned related to management. For example, they discussed time management, drawing on appropriate resources and developing relationships with those who would support them. In the process, they developed important skills involved in lifelong learning that would contribute to their future career development.



## **6.2 Transforming life opportunities and learning**

A winding road to higher education  
Aspiration, happiness and fulfillment  
Commitments and idealism  
Empowerment

## **6.3 Self-development and management of mature age students**

Time management  
Age concerns  
Caring responsibilities and life balance  
Time arrangement  
Resource management  
Knowledge and skills accumulation  
Financial considerations  
Resource acquisition and utilization  
Interpersonal management  
Supportive environment  
Networking  
Self-diagnosis and management  
Critical reflection  
Being well-prepared  
Options and choices  
Risk-taking and controlling  
Open to change and learning  
Learning abilities  
Learning strategies  
Growing confidence

## **6.4 Higher education in terms of employment**

- Credentialism
- Work-based learning
- Learning how to learn

**Figure 6.3 A summary of the major findings**

## **Chapter 7**

# **PROPOSING A NONLINEAR APPROACH TO MATURE AGE STUDENTS: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents contributions to the field of higher education of this study. Then this chapter provides a discussion of the outcomes of the study of the life transformation of mature age students. Recommendations for universities for a better quality of service for mature age students are also included based on a better understanding of the unique characteristics and demands of mature age students as demonstrated by this study.

### **7.2 Contributions to the field of higher education**

This research project provided a detailed “picture” of mature age students in the domains of family life, learning and work in an Australian context. Some research findings of this project confirmed previous studies, for example, mature age students’ personal fulfillment, credentialism and support from their families were important factors in returning to study. This research also enriched the findings of previous studies. It did this by providing detailed information about the participants’ reasons for returning to study, diverse pathways to higher education and “zigzag” learning journey related to their career development. Some findings of this project contested those of earlier studies. For example, in previous studies, earlier learning experiences were regarded negatively by the participants, as were caring responsibilities and difficulties in achieving a work-life balance. Participants in this study, however, regarded these experiences and responsibilities in a more positive light. They were able to draw on personal resources they had developed as a means of coping with experiences that others regarded

negatively.

Recognizing the strengths that mature age students bring with them as a result of life experiences is important for educators in the tertiary sector.

### **7.3 Conclusions**

**Mature age students set goals that would transform their lives, but found they were on a “zigzag” journey for achieving these goals.**

Mature age students in the study had displayed a sense of future orientation and willingness to change. They set realistic goals for themselves and wanted to achieve these goals through higher education which they envisaged would transform their lives. However, they found that they were on a “zigzag” journey as they pursued their dreams. Most mature age students in the study felt discontented with their lives and careers before entering university. Some of them had to postpone tertiary education until their children became independent. Some had worked in a range of industries and experienced job insecurity. They entered university through special entry pathways after working for five to thirty years. Their direction into university was diverse and their learning journey connected with career development was often described as “zigzags” and “crooked paths” (Harris & Rainey, 2006).

**Mature age students were individually-focused, but they valued cooperation, collaboration and networking when they studied at university.**

Before entering university, mature age students were individually-focused. Attention was given to their feelings about their targeted jobs, vocational interests, aspirations, plans and dreams. However, when they studied at university, they highlighted the significance of “cooperative learning”. They enjoyed opportunities to collaborate with classmates, lecturers, tutors and librarians for their assignments. They emphasized the

importance of forging connections with professionals in the industries in which they hoped to work. Through networking and experiences within these industries, they learned how to apply theory to practice whilst gaining specific information about the work.

**Individual choice was made for life transformation, but mature age students thought highly of a supportive environment in the process of life transformation.**

Although mature age students strived for life transformation based on their personal vocational interests and ambitions, they valued a supportive environment and regarded this as being of great importance in the process of life transformation. They obtained support from their families and friends emotionally, academically and financially. They would ask their tutors, lecturers, coordinators and librarians if they needed help. When they were involved in practicums they were supervised by academic staff at university and also gained feedback from professionals in the workplace. This means that mature age students valued the integration of “know why” and “know how” or the integration of learning into practice. To sum up, support from their families, the university and the industries would facilitate the process of life transformation.

**Mature age students went to university to develop the knowledge and skills required for career transitions, but they found that they learned “some basic subjects” and academic skills as well as “learning how to learn”.**

Mature age students positioned their learning orientation and set career goals before entering university in order to equip themselves with specific knowledge and skills required by their targeted careers. However, when they studied at university they found that they learned “some basic subjects” and research skills as well as “learning how to learn”. This provided them with a basis for considering “who you are” and “where you’re going”.

**Mature age students assumed that higher education and the labour market were**

**closely linked, but they found these links were not built into their career goals.**

Before entering university mature age students had thought that they had no problems to open up job opportunities in their chosen fields if they received a degree at university because they presumed that there were a solid connection between higher education and the labour market. However, when they studied at university they found there was a “gap” between higher education and employment. In this case, work-based learning was strongly recommended by mature age students in this study in order to narrow the gap between theory and practice.

**Mature age students were discontented with their lives and careers before entering university, but they found they were fulfilling ambitions and became confident when they studied at university.**

Before entering university most of the mature age students in the study felt dissatisfied with their lives and careers. They always became worn out and had lost a sense of passion with their work. However, when they studied at university they found a new “transformed self”: they became confident and independent and they thought that they were fulfilling personal ambitions and pursuing happiness.

**Mature age students were dependent and had limited choices before entering university, but when they studied at university, they found they felt empowered and flexible.**

Before entering the university some of the mature age students in the study were more dependent on others such as their parents and this was sometimes why they worked in a field that they disliked. Moreover, they had low confidence and confronted with limited in the chaotic labour market. However, when they studied at university they felt empowered because they could decide where they wanted to work and live and for whom they wanted to work, and they could become financially independent. It is noted that this did not remove totally anxiety about their future employment.

## **7.4 Recommendations for universities**

Major recommendations for universities include a need to:

- Recognize mature age students as a special group, and this group has unique characteristics different from traditional age students. Increasing numbers of mature age students challenge universities who are more focused on younger students.
- Recognize the diversity of entry for mature age students. Mature age students have diverse backgrounds and many commitments outside university, so entry pathways to university should be more flexible for them to accommodate multiple ways of entering universities.
- Provide informed counseling and guidance to support mature age students. Mature age students live a complicated life compared with their younger peers, so their counseling demands may be quite different from traditional age students. For example, Students will need to support to resolve the issue and questions on their learning and employment. They need help to resolve how they balance their lives, learning and work when they study at university. They may need to help find out how to resolve problems in a nonlinear life career pattern.
- Value their prior life and work experience. Mature age students have “bigger” life and work experiences than their younger counterparts, and this functions as a valuable resource for their learning and their career development. Furthermore, their life and work experience can be better utilized by both individuals and universities.
- Build better links between the workplace and higher education. Universities need to provide opportunities for work-based learning for students so that they can apply theory to practice.
- Better recognize the nature of life transformation of mature age students. Life transformation is a complicated process which involves individuals, communities, institutions and local industries. Universities need to build up a supportive environment for mature age students to facilitate their life transformations.

- Recognize the multiple demands of students and accommodate them by extending course time, changing to academic consideration and providing more flexible learning modes.

## **7.5 Summary**

This research has documented the feelings, perceptions and expectations of mature age students before they studied at university and during they study at university. It provided a clear “picture” of how mature age students not only succeeded academically but also “transformed” their lives through higher education. Before they entered university, they were individually-focused, goal-oriented, and highly dependent and they assumed that there were solid links between higher education and the labour market. They came to university for knowledge and skills required for their new careers. They succeeded through a very difficult process and grew to value collaboration and grew more confident and empowered. One of the outcomes was a sense of confidence and a growing level of choices and options for mature age students. This had a transformative effect on the selected students. Another outcome was that these mature age students entered higher education with a sense of purpose but as they engaged with their studies and developed knowledge and skills within chosen fields they gradually developed a sense of agency.

The major implications for universities from this study involved recognizing mature age students as a special group. This would ensure that their demands for career services, entry pathways to higher education and work-based learning meet the special needs of this group.

## References

- Amundson, N. (2006). Challenges for career interventions in changing contests. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 6(1), 3-14.
- Argy, F. (1998). Australia at the crossroads: Radical free market or progressive liberalism? Key issues and conclusions. *The Australian Economic Review*, 31(4), 373-383.
- Argy, F. (2003). *Where to from here? Australian egalitarianism under threat*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.
- Aronowitz, S., & Difazio, W. (1994). *The jobless future: Sci-tech and the dogma of work*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota.
- Aslanian, C., & Giles, N. G. (2007). Trends in adult learning: A recent snapshot. *The Catalyst*, 36(3), 14-22.
- Aslanian, C. B., & Brickell, H. M. (1980). *Americans in transition: Life changes as reasons for adult learning*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board.
- Australian Blueprint for Career Development (ABCD) (Trial Version, May 2006). Retrieved Sept. 20, 2007, from <http://www.dest.gov.au/schools/recap/section3/blueprint.htm>
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (May 2008). Transition from education to work (Cat. No.6227.0). Retrieved 3 March, 2009, from [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)
- Australian Government (2008). Review of Australian higher education (Chair: Bradley, D.). Retrieved 23 April, 2009, from [www.deewr.gov.au/he\\_review\\_finalreport](http://www.deewr.gov.au/he_review_finalreport)
- Ball, G. D. (1999). Building a sustainable future through transformation. *Futures*, 31(3-4), 251-270.
- Bauman, S. S. M., Wang, N., Deleon, C. W., Kafentzis, J., Zavala-Lopez, M., & Lindsey, M. S. (2004). Nontraditional students' service needs and social support resources: A pilot study. *Journal of College Counseling*, 7(1), 13-17.
- Baumeister, R. F., Wilson, B. (1996). Life stories and the four needs for meaning. *Psychological Inquiry*, 7(4), 322-377.
- Baumgartner, L. M. (2001). An update on transformational learning. *New directions for*



*adult and continuing education*, 89, 15-24.

Baxter, J., & Eyles, J. (1997). Evaluating qualitative research in social geography: establishing 'rigour' in interview analysis. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 22 (4), 505-525.

Bélanger, P. (2005). The changing nature of employment and adult learning policies: Unlocking creative forces. In N. Bascia, A. Cumming, A. Datnow & K. Leithwood (Eds.), *International handbook of educational policy* (pp. 815-827). Dordrecht & London: Springer.

Benson, A., Guy T., & Tallman, J. (2001). Viewing online learning through the lens of perspective transformation. *International JI. of Educational Telecommunications*, 7(3), 251-269.

Bessant, J. (1997). Free market economics and new directions for youth workers. *Youth Studies Australia*, 16(2), 34-40.

Bright, J. E. H., & Pryor, R. G. (2005). The chaos theory of career: A user's guide. *The Career Development Quarterly*. 53(4). 291-305.

Briscoe, J. P., & Hall, D. T. (2006). The interplay of boundaryless and protean careers: Combinations and implications. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. 69(1). 4-18.

Britton, C., & Baxter, A. (1999). Becoming a mature student: Gendered narratives of the self. *Gender and Education*, 11(2), 179-193.

Bronte, L. (1997). Learning to change. *Adult Learning*, 8(5/6), 11-15.

Brookfield, S. (1987). *Learning democracy: Eduard Lindeman on adult education and social change*. Wolfeboro: Croom Helm Ltd.

Brown, D. (2007). *Career information, career counseling and career development* (9<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

Brown, J. O. (2002). Know thyself: The impact of portfolio development on adult learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 52(3), 228-245.

Buckingham, M. & Clifton, D. O. (2002). *Now, discover your strengths: How to develop your talents and those of the people you manage*. London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd.

- Bujold, C. (2004). Constructing career through narrative. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 64(3), 470-484.
- Bye, D., Pushkar, D., & Conway, M. (2007). Motivation, interest, and positive affect in traditional and nontraditional undergraduate students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 57(2), 141-158.
- Chao, R., & Good, G. E. (2004). Nontraditional students' perspectives on college education: A qualitative study. *Journal of College Counseling*, 7(1), 5-12.
- Chartrand, J. M. (1992). An empirical test of a model of nontraditional student adjustment. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 39(2), 193-202.
- Chase, S. E. (2005). Narrative inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) (pp. 651-679). London: Sage.
- Chen, C. P. (1997). Career projection: Narrative in context. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 49(2), 311-326.
- Chen, C. P. (1998). Understanding career development: A convergence of perspective. *Journal of Vocational Education & Training*, 50(3), 437-461.
- Chen, C. P. (2002). Enhancing vocational psychology practice through narrative inquiry. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 11(1), 14-21.
- Chen, C. P. (2003). Integrating perspectives in career development theory and practice. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 51(3), 203-216.
- Choy, S., & Delahaye, B. (2002). *Andragogy in vocational education and training: Learners' perspective*. In Proceeding 5<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Australian VET Research Association (AVETRA), Melbourne, Australia.
- Christensen, T. K., & Johnston, J. A. (2003). Incorporating the narrative in career planning. *Journal of Career Development*, 29(3), 149-209.
- Clark, M. C. (1993a). *Changing course: Initiating the transformational learning process*. In 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Adult Education Research Conference Proceedings, edited by D. Flannery. University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1993. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 368 967)
- Clark, M. C. (1993b). Transformative learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 57, 47-56.

Clark, M. C. (2001). Off the beaten path: Some creative approaches to adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 89, 83-91.

Colardyn, N., & Bjornavold, J. (2004). Validation of formal, non-formal and informal learning: Policy and practices in EU member states. *European Journal of Education*, 39(1), 69-89.

Collin, A. (1998). New challenges in the study of career. *Personnel Review*. 27(5). 412-425.

Cranton, P. (1996). *Professional development as transformative learning: New perspectives for teachers of adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publisher.

Crebert, G., Bates, M., Bell, B., Patrick, Carol-Joy., & Cragolini, V. (2004). Development generic skills at university, during work placement and in employment: graduates' perceptions. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 23(2), 147-165.

Creswell, J. W. (1994). *Research designs: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Creswell, J. (2005). *Education research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Merrill.

Cross, K. P. (1981). *Adults as learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.

Cullity, M. (2006). Challenges in understanding and assisting mature-age students who participate in alternative entry programs. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 46(2), 175-201.

Cullity, M. (April 2007). The nature of alternative entry programs for mature age students: A Snapshot. *Herdsa News*, 7-10.

Dany, F. (2003). 'Free actors' and organizations: Critical remarks about the new career literature, based on French insights. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*. 14(5). 821-838.

Darab, S. (2004). Time and study: Open foundation female students' integration of study with family, work and social obligations. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 44(3), 327-353.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2000). The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-28). London: Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2003). *Strategies of qualitative inquiry* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Department of Education, Science and Training. (2003). *Lifelong learning in Australia*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Department of Employment, Education and Training. (1990). *A fair chance for all*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Department of Employment, Education and Training (1993). *Arts, science and work: Work-based skills and the generalist courses in higher education* (Chair: Marginson, S.). Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Department of Employment, Education and Training & Australian National Training Authority (2002). *Employability skills for the Future*. Retrieved 20 Sept., 2007, from <http://www.dest.gov.au>

Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs. (1996). *Outcomes of a university's flexible admissions policies*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Dyer, S. (2006). Critical reflections: Making sense of career. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 15(1), 28-36.

Ebberwein, C. A., Krieshok, T. S., Ulven, J. C., & Prosser, E. C. (2004). Voices in transition: Lessons on career adaptability. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 52(4), 292-308.

Eisen, Mary-Jane. (2005). Shifts in the landscape of learning: New challenges, new opportunities. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 108, 15-26.

Elias, J. L., & Merriam, S. B. (1995). *Philosophical foundation in adult education* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Malabar: Kreiger Publishing Company.

Elliott, J. (2005). *Using narrative in social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. London: Sage.

Ellos, W. J. (1994). *Narrative ethics*. Aldershot, England: Avebury.

Fallow, S., & Steven, C. (2000). The skills agenda. In S. Fallows & C. Steven (Eds.), *Integrating key skills in higher education: Employability, transferable skills and learning for life* (pp. 3-12). London: Kogan Page Limited.

- Fallows, S., & Weller, G. (2000). A graduate apprenticeship scheme. In S. Fallows & C. Steven (Eds.), *Integrating key skills in higher education: Employability, transferable skills and learning for life* (pp. 119-130). London: Kogan Page Limited.
- Filipczak, B. (1995). You're on your own: Training employability, and the new employment contract. *Training*, 32(1), 29-34.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2000). The interview from structured questions to negotiated text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 645-672). London: Sage.
- Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2005). The interview: From neutral stance to political involvement. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) (pp. 695-727). London: Sage.
- Foster, E., & Stephenson, J. (1998). Work-based learning and universities in the U.K.: A review of current practice and trends. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 17(2), 155-170.
- Gammon, M. (1997). What makes a successful mature student? *Adult Learning*, 8(4), 30-31.
- Glastra, F. J., Hake, B. J., & Schedler, P. E. (2004). Lifelong learning as transitional learning. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 54(4), 291-307.
- Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. New York: Longman.
- Glisczinski, D. (2007). Transformative higher education: A meaningful degree of understanding. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 5(4), 317-328.
- Green, L., Hemmings, B., & Green, A. (2007). Career change and motivation: A matter of balance. *Australian Journal of Career Development*, 16(1), 20-27.
- Hall, D. T. (1996). Protean careers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *The Academy of Management Executive*, 10(4), 8-15.
- Hall, D. T. (2004). The protean career: A quarter-century journey. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 65(1), 1-13.
- Hall, D. T., & Mirvis, P. H. (1995). The new career contract: Developing the whole person at midlife and beyond. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 47(3), 269-289.

Hall, D. T., & Moss, J. (1998). The new protean career contract: Helping organizations and employees adapt. *Organizational Dynamics*, 26(1), 22-37.

Hamilton, C. (1998). In search of the fourth way: A commentary on the books by Fred Argy and Mark Latham. *The Australian Economic Review*, 31(4), 409-421.

Hammond, J. S., Keeney, R. L., & Raiffa, H. (1999). *Smart choices: A practical guide to making better decisions*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Harrington, B., & Hall, D. T. (2007). *Career management & work-life integration: Using self-assessment to navigate contemporary careers*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Harris, R., & Rainey, L. (2006). *Crazy paving? Learning pathways between and within VET and higher education*. In Proceeding 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference of the Australian VET Research Association (AVETRA): Global VET: Challenges at the Global, National and Local Level. Wollongong, Australia. Retrieved 28 August, 2008, from <http://www.avetra.org.au/ABSTRACTS2006/PA%200005.pdf>

Heenan, D. (2002). Women, access and progression: An examination of women's reasons for not continuing in higher education following the completion of the certificate in women's studies. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 24(1), 39-55.

Henderson, S. J. (2000). "Follow your bliss": A process for career happiness. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 78(3), 305-315.

Hoepfl, M C. (1997). Choosing qualitative research: A primer for technology education researchers. *Journal of Technology Education*, 9(1), 47-63.

Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. (1998). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 179-210). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hyde, J. (2002). *Dry in defence of economic freedom: The saga of how the dries changed the Australian economy for the better*. Melbourne: Institute of Public Affairs.

Jupp, V. (1996). Documents and critical research. In R. Sapsford & V. Jupp (Eds.), *Data collection and analysis* (pp. 298-316). London: Sage.

Kell, P. (1996). Creating a disposable workforce: New inequalities in work, training, and education. *Education Australia*, 34, 6-8.

Kember, D., Armour, R., Jenkins, W., Lee, K., Leung, D. Y. P., Li, N., Ng, K. C., Siaw, I., & Yum, J. C. K. (2001). Orientations to enrolment of part-time students: A classification system based upon students' perceived lifelong learning needs. *Higher*

*Education Research & Development*, 20(3), 265-280.

Kervin, L., Vialle, W., Herrington, J., & Okely, T. (2006). *Research for educators*. South Melbourne, VIC: Thomson.

Kirkman, M. (2002). What's the plot? Applying narrative theory to research in psychology. *Australian Psychologist*, 37(1), 30-38.

Kitchenham, A. (2006). Teachers and technology: A transformative journey. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 4(3), 202-225.

Kitchenham, A. (2008). The evolution of John Mezirow's transformative learning theory. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 6(2), 104-123.

Kluge, M. A. (2007). Re-creating through recreating: Using the personal growth through adventure model to transform women's lives. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 5(2), 177-191.

Knowles, M. S. (1990). *The adult learner: A neglected species* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Houston: Gulf Publishing Company.

Knowles, M. S., Holton III, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (1998). *The adult learner* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Houston: Gulf Publishing Company.

Knowles, M. S., Holton III, E. F., & Swanson, R. A. (2005). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Krumboltz, J. D., & Worthington, R. J. (1999). The school to work transition from a learning theory perspective. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 47(4), 312-325.

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2004). *A handbook for teacher research: From design to implementation*. London: Open University

Leathwood, C., & O'Connell, P. (2003). 'It's a struggle': The construction of the 'new student' in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(6), 597-615.

Leder, G. C., & Forgasz, H. J. (2004). Australian and international mature students: The daily challenges. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 23(2), 183-198.

Levinson, D. J., & Levinson, J. D. (1996). *The seasons of a woman's life*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Lieblich, A., Tuval-Mashiach, R., & Zilber, T. (1998). *Narrative research: Reading, analysis, and interpretation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Linderman, E. C. (1987a). Andragogy and adult learning. In S. Brookfield (Ed.), *Learning democracy: Eduard Lindeman on adult education and social change* (pp. 27-28). Wolfeboro: Croom Helm Ltd.

Lindeman, E. C. (1987b). Characteristics of adult education. In S. Brookfield (Ed.), *Learning democracy: Eduard Lindeman on adult education and social change* (pp. 37-38). Wolfeboro: Croom Helm Ltd.

Little, B. (2001). Reading between the lines of graduate employment. *Quality in Higher Education*, 7(2), 121-129.

MacDonald, K., & Tipton, C. (1996). Using documents. In N. Gilbert (Ed.), *Researching social life* (pp. 187-200). London: Sage.

Mancuso, J. C. (1996). Constructionism, personal construct psychology and narrative psychology. *Theory Psychology*, 6(1), 47-70.

Marginson, S., & O'Hanlon, A. (1993). *Arts, science and work: Work-related skills and the generalist courses in higher education*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Marshall, C. & Rosman, G. B. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Marshall, M. N. (1996). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family Practice*, 13(6), 522-525.

Maslow, A. H. (1973). A theory of human motivation. In R. J. Lowery (Ed.), *Dominance, self-esteem, self-actualization: Germinal papers of A. H. Maslow* (pp. 153-173). Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc.

Mason, J. (1996). *Qualitative researching*. London: Sage Publications, Inc.

McAlister, S. (1998). Maria's story – A student with 'low' qualifications withdraws from higher education. *Distance Education*, 19(2), 287-298.

McAlpine, L., & Weston, C. (2000). Reflection: Issues related to improving professors'



teaching and students' learning. *Instructional Science*, 28(5), 363-385.

McGraw, P. C. (1999). *Life strategies: Doing what works, doing what matters*. New York: Hyperion.

McIlveen, P., & Patton, W. (2006). A critical reflection on career development. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 6(1), 15-27.

Merriam, S. B. (1996). Updating our knowledge of adult learning. *The Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, 16, 136-143.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study application in education: Revised and expanded case study research in education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Merriam, S. B. (2001). Andragogy and self-directed learning: Pillars of adult learning theory. *New directions for adult and continuing education*, 89, 3-13.

Merriam, S. B. (2004). The role of cognitive development in Mezirow's transformative learning theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 55(1), 60-68.

Merriam, S. B. (2005). How adult life transitions foster learning and development. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 108, 3-13.

Merriam, S. B., & Carrarella, R. S. (1999). *Learning in adulthood: A comprehensive guide*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers.

Mertens, D. M. (2005). *Research and evaluation in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5-12.

Mezirow, J. (2003). Transformative learning as discourse. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 1(1), 58-63.

Mirvis, P. H., & Hall, D. T. (1994). Psychological success and the boundaryless career. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 15(4), 365-380.

Misch, D. A. (2002). Andragogy and medical education: Are medical students internally motivated to learn? *Advances in Health Sciences Education*, 7(2), 153-160.

Moore, J. (2005a). Is higher education ready for transformative learning? : A question explored in the study of sustainability. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3(1), 76-91.

Moore, M. J. (2005b). The transtheoretical model of the stages of change and the phases of transformative learning: Comparing two theories of transformational change. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 3(4), 394-415.

Moreau, Marie-Pierre., & Leathwood, C. (2006). Balancing paid work and studies: Working (-class) students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 31(1), 23-42.

Murphy, M., & Fleming, T. (2000). Between common and college knowledge: Exploring the boundaries between adult and higher education. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 22(1), 77-93.

Murray, M. (2003). Narrative psychology and narrative analysis. In P. M. Camic, J. E. Rhodes & L. Yardly, *Qualitative research in psychology: Expanding perspectives in methodology and design*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Nahan, M. (1998). In search of the third way. *The Australian Economic Review*, 31(4), 399-408.

Neuman, W. L. (1997). *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Nyström, S., Dahlgren, M. A., & Dahlgren, L. O. (2008). A winding road – professional trajectories from higher education to working life: A case study of political science and psychology graduates. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 30(3), 215-229.

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (2002). *OECD review of career guidance policies: Information, guidance and counseling (Australia)*. Retrieved Sept. 25, 2007, from

<http://www.oecd.org/pdf/M00033000/M00033399.pdf>

Osborne, M., Marks, A., & Turner, E. (2004). Becoming a mature student: How adult applicants weigh the advantages and disadvantages of higher education. *Higher Education*, 48(3), 291-315.

Patton, M. Q. (1987). *How to use qualitative methods in evaluation*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation methods*. Newbury: Sage.

- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Patton, W., & McMahon, M. (2006). *Career development and systems theory: Connecting theory and practice* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Punch, K. F. (1998). *Introduction to social research: Quantitative & qualitative approaches*. London: Sage.
- Pratt, D. D. (1993). Andragogy after twenty-five years. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 57, 15-23.
- Rawson, M. (2000). Learning to learn: More than a skill set. *Studies in Higher education*, 25(2), 225-238.
- Reay, D. (2002). Class, authenticity and the transition to higher education for mature students. *The Sociological Review*, 50(3), 398-418.
- Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods fro the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Rogers, J. (2001). *Adults learning* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Focus on research methods: Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing & Health*, 23(4), 334-340.
- Scanlon, L. (2008). Adults' motives for returning to study: The role of self-authoring. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 30(1), 17-32.
- Schuetze, H. G. & Slowey, M. (2002). Participation and exclusion: A comparative analysis of non-traditional students and lifelong learners in higher education. *Higher Education*, 44, 309-327.
- Shaw, M. E. (1999). *Model for transformative learning: The promotion of successful aging*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, Ottawa, CA.
- Silverman, D. (1997). *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice*. London: Sage.
- Simonsen, P. (2000). *Career compass: Navigating your career strategically in the new century*. Palo Alto, California: Davies-Black Publishing.
- Singer, J. A. (2004). Narrative identity and meaning making across the adult lifespan: An introduction. *Journal of Personality*, 72(3), 437-459.

Smith, B., & Sparkes, A. C. (2006). Narrative inquiry in psychology: Exploring the tensions within. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(3), 169-192.

Smith, J. (1999). Life planning: Anticipating future life goals and managing personal development. In J. Brandtstädter & R. M. Lerner (Eds.), *Action & self-development: Theory and research through the life span* (pp. 223-255). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Smith, R. M. (1982). *Learning how to learn*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Cambridge.

Southern, N. L. (2007). Mentoring for transformative learning: The importance of relationship in creating learning communities of care. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 5(4), 329-338.

Squire, C. (2008). Experience-centered and culturally-oriented approaches to narrative. In M. Andrews, C. Squire & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Doing narrative research* (pp. 41-63). London: Sage.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) (pp. 443-466). London: Sage

Stern, S. D., Rahn, M. L., & Chung, Yun-ping. (1998). Design of work-based learning for students in the United States. *Youth & Society*, 29(4), 471-502.

Sterrett, E. A. (1999). A comparison of women's and men's career transitions. *Journal of Career Development*, 25(4), 249-259.

Stone, C. (2008). Listening to individual voices and stories – the mature-age student experience. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 48(2), 263-290.

Super, D. E. (1957). *The psychology of careers: An introduction to vocational development*. New York: Harper.

Taylor, E. W. (1998). *The theory and practice of transformative learning: A critical review*. Columbus, OH: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education (Information Series no. 374).

Taylor, E.W. (2008). Transformative learning theory. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 119, 5-15.

Think Education Group (2009). FEE-HELP information booklet – 2009. Retrieved 25

April, 2009, from [www.think.edu.au](http://www.think.edu.au)

Tisdell, E. J., & Taylor, E. W. (1999/2000). Adult education philosophy informs practice. *Adult Learning, 11*(2), 6-10.

Tough, A. (1971). *The adult's learning projects: A fresh approach to theory and practice in adult learning*. Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Tough, A. (1982). *Intentional changes: A fresh approach to helping people change*. Chicago: Follett.

Tsao, M., Takanhashi, K., Olusesu, J., & Jain, S. (2006). Transformative learning. In M. Orey (Ed.), *Emerging perspectives on learning, teaching, and technology*. Retrieved 16 November, 2008, from <http://projects.coe.uga.edu/epltt/>

Tynjälä, P., Välimaa, J., & Sarja, A. (2003). Pedagogical perspectives on the relationships between higher education and working life. *Higher Education, 46*(2), 147-166.

Universities Australia (2009). *Universities applaud commitment to implementing Bradley Review*. Media Release (Wednesday 4 March, 2009). Retrieved 27 April, 2009, from [www.universititesaustralia.edu.au](http://www.universititesaustralia.edu.au)

University of Sydney (2009). *Mature-age entry at Sydney Uni*. Retrieved 25 September, 2008, from [www.cce.usyd.edu.au](http://www.cce.usyd.edu.au)

Vaitenas, R., & Wiener, Y. (1977). Developmental, emotional, and interest factors in voluntary mid-career change. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 11*(3), 291-304.

Walters, M. (2000). The mature students' three Rs. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 28*(2), 267-278.

West, L., Hore, T., Eaton, E. G., & Kermond, B. M. (1986). *The impact of higher education on mature age students*. Melbourne: The Monash University Printing Service.

Willans, J. & Seary, K. (2007). 'I'm not stupid after all' – changing perceptions of self as a tool for transformation. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning, 47*(3), 433-452.

Wolf, M. A. (2005). Life span well-being. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 108*, 53-59.

Woodard, C. A. (2005). *Career shock: A study of late baby boomers pursuing career change through formal learning*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Oklahoma State

University, Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Woodward, D. (2005). *Australia 'unsettled': The legacy of 'neo-liberalism'*. Sydney: Pearson Education Australia.

Ylijoki, Oili-Helena (2005). Academic nostalgia: A narrative approach to academic work. *Human Relations*, 58(5), 555-576.

Yoshimoto, K., Inenaga, Y., & Yamada, H. (2007). Pedagogy and andragogy in higher education – A comparison between German, the UK and Japan. *European Journal of Education*, 42(1), 75-98.

Young, R., & Valach, L. (2004). The construction of career through goal-directed action. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*. 64(3). 499-541.

## **Appendix 1**

### **GLOSSARY OF THE STUDY**

The following key terms in the study is drawn from the review of literature.

#### **Mature age student:**

They are at least 21 years old by March 1 of the year of tertiary entry and they are in an undergraduate-level education.

#### **Career:**

Career is a series of experience mainly constructed on the job in one's lifespan. However, it is not exclusively focused on work as it also intricately intertwines with learning and life. In the study, "career", "life career" and "life career development" are viewed as interchangeable.

#### **Self-development and management:**

Self-development and management consists of time management, resource management, interpersonal management and self-diagnosis and management.

#### **The nonlinear life career pattern:**

The pattern is referred to the inextricably intertwined life, learning and work in neo-liberal era, which highlights education and career transitions in one's lifespan.

#### **Learning how to learn:**

"Learning how to learn involves possessing, or acquiring, the knowledge and skill to learn effectively in whatever learning situation one encounters" (Smith, 1982, p. 19).

**Principles for adult learning:**

As the heart of andragogy, Knowles's principles of adult learning include the need to know, self-direction, prior experience, readiness to learn, learning orientation and motivation to learn.

**Transformative learning:**

Transformative learning begins with a disorienting dilemma and moves toward the transformation of distorted and limited assumptions through critical reflection and finally moves toward actions based on these new understandings.

**Work-based learning:**

It integrates education into work so that students can apply knowledge and theories gained at university in work contexts.

**Narrative:**

It consists of the mean-makings of one's life experiences and is a form of self-construction.



## **Appendix 2**

### **Sample Interview Questions**

1. Please tell me something about your prior learning experiences before coming to university.
2. Please tell me something about your prior work experiences before coming to university.
3. Please tell me something about knowledge and skills you had gained before you came to university.
4. Please tell me something about your vocational interests.
5. Why did you come to university?
6. What made you decide to come to university?
7. When did you think you were you ready to come to university? Why?
8. What was the first feeling when you first came to university? Why?
9. What is your career goal? Why?
10. What's your major? How did you find that you wanted to learn this?
11. Did your family and friends support your studies at university?
12. How did they support you?
13. Do you feel confident about studying at university? Why?
14. How did you learn at university?
15. Do you think what you learned at university is useful in the workplace? Why?
16. Are you confident about your future career? Why?
17. How do you integrate learning into your future career development?
18. Do you have any suggestions for mature age students' integration of higher education and career development? What suggestions?

## Appendix 3

### PARTICIPATION INFORMATION SHEET FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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

Dear student

This is an invitation for you to participate in a study conducted by a researcher at the University of Gold Coast. The purpose of this research is to explore how mature age students integrate learning and career development in the rapidly changing world of work.

INVESTIGATOR

LI Tao

Faculty of Education

Please  
see print

#### WHAT WE WOULD LIKE YOU TO DO

If you choose to participate you will be asked to be involved in a fifty-minute interview about your learning and work experiences. The interview will be recorded on a tape recorder. Typical questions include: Please tell me something about your work and learning experience. What made you decide to do a university degree? Did you find it difficult to balance your life? Why? Do you feel confident about studying at university? Do you feel confident about your future career? Why? Do you think what have you learned at university will support your career development?

Two weeks after the face-to-face interview, email discussions will be conducted and they will be based on your interview answers. There will be no more than two email discussions for every participant.

#### ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS

This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics Committee (Social Science, Humanities and Behavioural Science) of the University of Gold Coast. If you are not satisfied with the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the Ethics Officer at the University on (02) 42314457.

Thank you for your interest in this study.

## **Appendix 4**

### **A LETTER OF INVITATION**

Dear ,

My name is LI Tao. I am doing my Ed.D thesis titled “Transforming Life Opportunities and Learning: Stories of Career Change from Mature Age Students in an Australian University”.

This project will explore the ways in which learning and career development are integrated in the experiences of mature age students as they undertake education at the tertiary level. The study will be concerned with the ways in which mature age students balance the demands they face in their personal lives, their work and their learning. An important focus will be on whether or not tertiary education supports their career aspirations.

A face-to-face interview around fifty minutes followed by email discussions will be conducted. There will be no more than two email discussions for every participant.

Thanks for your interest in this study.

Sincerely yours,

LI Tao

Faculty of Education,

University of Gold Coast

Please

see

print

copy for

## Appendix 5

### CONSENT FORM FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

#### Transforming Life Opportunities and Learning: Stories of Career Change

#### from Mature Age Students in an Australian University

**Researcher: LI Tao**

I have been given information about “*Transforming Life Opportunities and Learning: Stories of Career Change from Mature Age Students in an Australian University*” and discussed the research project with LI Tao who is conducting this research as part of a Ed.D degree supervised by A/Prof. Peter Kell and Dr. Pauline Lysaght in the Faculty of Education at the University of Gold Coast.

I consent to participate in interviews conducted by LI Tao. I understand that my contribution will be confidential and that there will be no personal identification in the data that I agree to allow to be used in the study. I understand that there are no potential risks or burdens associated with this study. I understand I have had an opportunity to ask LI Tao any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, and I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my relationship with the Faculty of Education at the University of Wollongong in my course/program of study.

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact LI Tao (0411 071 876) and Peter Kell 4231 3857 or Pauline Lysaght 4231 3424. If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Gold Coast on 4231 4457.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for an Ed.D thesis, and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed

Date

.....

...../...../.....

Name (please print)

.....