

**Survival narratives from single mothers in an  
enabling program:  
'Just hope you don't get sick and live off caffeine'**

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*A growing number of single mothers are seeking entry to higher education via enabling programs; however, these students face unique struggles to make their dream a reality. There is some research on the challenges faced by student-mothers in higher education; however, research specifically on single mothers in enabling education is limited. This research focused on identifying the competing discourses that single mothers faced during an enabling program, and the ways they can be supported. Interviews were conducted with seven women who self-identified as single mothers, describing their personal struggles, alongside their experiences of great accomplishment. What became evident, was despite the difficulties of raising children as a sole parent, the student-mothers gained noticeable confidence in themselves during and after completing their enabling studies. Analysis of the data identified unique challenges faced by this non-traditional group of students and highlighted specific supports that this student group require. This paper details a range of obstacles that impeded their study; related directly to their status as single parents. These hurdles included financial*

*difficulties, lack of support, negative familial relationships, personal health concerns, and study related challenges.*

*In addition, these seven student-mothers identified the key factors that supported their success: forging strong connections with other students, improved self-efficacy, the observed positive 'knock-on' effect to their children, and quality academic support and pastoral care from university staff. Thus, with perseverance and appropriate support, these student-mothers were able to achieve success in an enabling program. This study voices the personal 'survival narratives' of seven student-mothers; revealing challenges and strategies unique to their circumstances, that in-turn, generated a successful student experience.*

**Keywords:** *enabling education, student-mother, single mothers, non-traditional student, widening participation, qualitative research, thematic analysis*

## **Introduction**

Many universities in Australia offer pre-tertiary preparation courses, commonly known as enabling programs, to allow non-traditional students the opportunity to access higher education. Many of these non-traditional students come from low socio-economic backgrounds, have lower-level academic skills, are first in the family, and require equity consideration to support these factors. Within this cohort, mothers are a growing student subgroup that require additional supports to assist in their engagement and success in enabling education. A study of 284 women who self-identified as mothers whilst enrolled in the enabling program *Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS)* at CQUniversity Australia was undertaken. From this group, student-mothers volunteered to participate in research interviews, and subsequently, seven single mothers (SM) were interviewed. These interviews share the lived experiences that single student-mothers face when

engaging in enabling education. This study aims to identify the competing commitments that both supported and hindered mothers during their enabling studies, and how they could be best supported; financially, socioeconomically, communally, familiarly, educationally, academically, and whether the support is relational, contextual, or environmental in nature. This paper details the depth of the challenges that impeded their study, along with the strategies that supported success, with a focus on those directly related to their status as single student-mothers.

### **Literature review**

Enabling programs offer access to higher education, with increasing enrolments from non-traditional students (Department of Education and Training, 2018, p. 1). With female enrolments at 58.3 per cent of all domestic students (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 9), mothers are a growing population within the larger non-traditional student groups entering university via enabling education programs (Universities Australia, 2019, p. 9). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data (2016) reported that 12.7 per cent of students enrolled at a university are parents caring for their children; however, there is a paucity of data available on the parenting status of higher education students, presenting a major barrier to understanding the support needs of parents who study (Andrewartha et al., 2022, p. 10).

CQUniversity's enabling program, STEPS, has increasing enrolments from mothers. Research confirms this increase is due to mothers seeking the opportunity of a career, and an improved future for themselves and their families via a higher education pathway (Bender et al., 2021; Lyonette et al., 2015). While there is significant literature on female students in higher education, there is limited research focused on mothers, specifically engaging in enabling studies (Johnston et al., 2018). The researchers found even less quantity of research on single student-mothers entering

higher education; therefore, this research is particularly significant as it highlights the plight of single mothers entering university through the non-traditional pathway of enabling education. Understanding the characteristics of this unique student cohort – single, student-mothers, is fundamental to enabling their success (Auguste, Wai-Ling-Packard & Keep, 2018).

Mothers face complex challenges when entering university; finding ways and means to blend their responsibilities as a student and mother. Student-mothers must balance academic study with competing priorities: household duties, work, childcare, family support, self-belief, financial stress, and time restrictions (Devlin, 2017; Johnston et al., 2018). Many mothers are the first in the family to attend university, hence, lacking familiarity with the expectations of a university landscape (Devlin, 2017; Stahl & McDonald, 2022). First in family students noted that they “struggled to socially integrate” finding the university experience “isolating, and they doubted themselves” (Stahl & McDonald, 2022, para 15). These patterns haven’t changed over time, with literature from the 1990s and currently, reporting the same key reasons that student-mothers leave their university studies: the difficulty of combining family, work, and study responsibilities (Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1996; Devlin, 2017). Many mothers commence enabling studies lacking self-confidence and feeling ill-equipped to navigate academia (Braund et al., 2020). Single mothers often enter study with lower academic skills, are the first in the family, require equity support and come from low socio- economic backgrounds (Klinger & Tranter, 2009). Significant financial pressures (Devlin, 2017) and lack of familial support were also highlighted as challenges for student-mothers (Klinger & Tranter, 2009). These additional pressures demonstrate that student-mothers often require an extra level of support to succeed in their studies (Billingsley et al., 2020).

There are strong motivations for mothers to enter university studies. Historically, Carney-Compton and Tan (2002)

found that at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the fastest growing non-traditional group of students undertaking university study, were females. This trajectory has continued with Auguste, Packard and Keep (2018) finding that most non-traditional students identify as women, with many reporting they balance employment, childcare, and family responsibilities alongside their studies. Inside this group, are single mothers, solely managing a household and study. When comparing single mother households to other family types, family units headed by single mothers experienced a “disproportionate share of poverty” with “37% ... more than a third of single mothers and their children living in poverty” (Australian Council of Social Service, 2020, para 4). This standard of living is due substantially to lower levels of education attainment (Synnott, 2010, p. 5). Mothers are financially motivated to complete a university degree, with statistics confirming that graduates experience better employment outcomes, with higher income (Universities Australia, 2021). The Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2022, para 1) states that “higher educational attainment leads to higher total incomes” reporting that a median income for a bachelor’s degree graduate is \$51,200 while a median income for a sub-bachelor qualification was 34 per cent lower at \$33,800 (Universities Australia, 2021, para 3). Researchers concur that “higher average incomes and higher rates of employment correlate with higher levels of educational attainment”, therefore generating a discouraging cycle for those unable to achieve a higher education degree (Synnott, 2010, p. 5). Fortunately, for students who are not able to enter higher education immediately following high school, they can complete a bridging or enabling program as a pathway to enter university. Willans (2019, p. 49) supports the benefits of this pathway stating that an enabling program “prepares students with an appropriate level of knowledge, academic skills, competence and confidence for higher education studies”. Enabling programs are in most cases government funded as an “equity initiative”, so non-traditional cohorts (such as single mothers) and other “marginalised groups

that would otherwise be ignored” can access higher educational opportunities (Chojenta, 2017, p. 89).

While post-secondary education historically has been associated with white middle-and upper-class status (Coontz, 1992), increasing numbers of minority and working-class women from low socio-economic backgrounds are pursuing higher education as an avenue toward upward social mobility (Collins, 1999; Hodges et al., 2013). This aligns with recent research confirming that mothers actively pursue university studies because it provides the opportunity for increased social status (Stahl & McDonald, 2022). More specifically for single mothers, Haleman (2004, p. 770) described their experience in tertiary education as providing “an opportunity for disrupting negative expectations directed toward them” and that higher education “symbolised for the women the possibility of realising the hopes and dreams they hold for themselves and their children”. Similarly, Katz (2013, p. 274) said that the single mothers in their study ‘construct’ “survival narratives – in order to ‘resist’ welfare policies and to ‘give meaning’ to their hardships”. There were very real personal impacts for the 64 student-mothers in Katz’s (2013) study, including mental health concerns, financial problems, and emotional guilt around less time spent with their families. Most of the women admitted that they struggled with their mental well-being during their time as a student (particularly due to time pressures) but once studies were completed, most said their self-esteem had increased (Katz, 2013). In addition, once enrolled, the single mothers felt a sense of commitment that “failure was not an option” and they did not want to “lose themselves” long term in the welfare system (Katz, 2013, p. 287). These single, student-mothers thought that constructing their own “narratives” along with “survival strategies” was important, and helpful to let other mothers know that they have the capacity and ability to study too (Katz, 2013, p. 274). Haleman’s (2004) research echoed that single mothers valued education as instrumental in moving them beyond welfare and poverty, a

position still shared today (Universities Australia, 2021).

Single mothers enter study with a desire to improve themselves, believing that through completing a higher education qualification, they are providing positive role models for their children (Haleman, 2004). According to Synnott (2010), single mothers in undergraduate programs said they decided to return to higher education study, weighing up their concerns about being able to balance family, study, work and the guilt of spending less time with their children, but focused on the goal of successfully completing their undergraduate degree. In a more recent study, Greenberg and Shenaar-Golan (2017) collected information from single mothers who were studying a bridging course to gain access to university and suggested that their main motivation for entering via this pathway was to help them attain improved job prospects, improve their self-efficacy and life satisfaction, and become better role models for their children. These mothers accessed a scholarship fund and received personal tutorials, counselling, assistance with goal setting, and support plans for success at university (Greenberg & Shenaar-Golan 2017). In another study, Ratel (2010) shared that the single mothers felt extremely tired due to their multiple roles of student, mother and employee and this constant balancing act caused disorienting dilemmas that at times became overwhelming. Similarly, Stone and O'Shea (2013) claimed that their female participants identified five main hindrances during their higher education studies: being time poor, giving up leisure pursuits, persistence of traditional gender roles, money and financial stress, and guilt over the time committed to studying away from their family. Ratel (2010) suggested that these study obstacles were heightened for single mothers, causing very high levels of emotional and physical stress; however, Van Stone et al., (2016) and Ratel (2010) highlighted that the student-mothers in their studies identified higher education as a pathway to improving many aspects of their lives.

Mothers entering university begin this journey with competing commitments. Research in the early 1990s found that in general, Australian mature aged students are often more academically successful than school leavers, due, in part, to life experiences, the development of time management skills, and resilience (Scott, 1993). More specifically, Scott (1993) noted that student-mothers faced hardships due to completing the majority of household duties, childcare, work commitments, and the expectation that they stay home to care for non-school aged children. This narrative has not changed with recent student-mothers reporting the challenge of balancing study with the competing responsibilities of household duties, work, and childcare (Devlin, 2017; Johnston et al., 2018). Due to these responsibilities, Scott (1993, p. 5) found that many mothers had to “interrupt their studies” to allow for external variables and suggested that university systems and support structures need to be more empathetic towards mothers and their external situations. Acknowledging that student-mothers have unique demands, Scott (1993) proposed that universities should assist this cohort with improved access to childcare and support services. More current research recognises that childcare and its associated costs, represents a significant obstacle for “parenting students” and that student-mothers are at risk of being pushed out of higher education systems if institutes do not accommodate their needs (Ryberg et al., 2021, para. 14). The Institute for Women’s Policy Research says that on-campus childcare, academic and career counselling, employment services, and flexible course schedules should be the priority strategies for supporting parents enrolled in higher education (cited in Ryberg et al., 2021, para. 13). Research also noted that universities need to work around school hours where possible and incorporate on-campus childcare facilities to give mothers an equitable chance to succeed in their studies (Von Benzon, 2022). According to Youngblut et al., (2000, p. 125) there are three primary obstacles that either prevented single mothers from studying or attaining work: childcare (affordability and availability), lack of involvement



by the father (financially and in the day-to-day care of the children), and negativity from family and friends about a mother commencing study or work.

External support networks are critical for mothers to achieve academic success. Johnston et al., (2018) found that single mothers valued a strong support network, and many of these mothers rated the support of lecturers and other university staff as essential for their success. Research by Van Stone et al., (2016) concurs that personal ambition (psychological factor), and support from university services, family, fellow students, and university staff (sociological factors) were crucial to single mother's academic success. The importance of these supports was confirmed by Haleman's (2004, p. 780) research participants, with the single mothers stating that they could not have experienced success in higher education without external supports, saying they felt "stressed out by the combined responsibilities they faced". Johnston's et al., (2018, p. 17) research on student-mothers found that whilst they struggled with a number of challenges, the enabling program helped them gain self-confidence, improved time-management, motivation, and the perception that they were more positive role models for their children. Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) noted that whilst balancing study was challenging, most non-traditional female students decided to embark on higher education mindful of the added demands of higher education. Braund et al., (2020, p. 13) reported that student-mothers conscientiously made positive choices to support their study success; spurred on by "hope for their possible futures". Andrewartha et al., (2022) asserts that current research shows that single mothers show great academic persistence and are committed to achieving in higher education.

In summary, there is limited literature available on the experiences of single mothers in enabling education. Enabling education is unquestionably a journey of

empowerment and development for single mothers (Torres et al., 2020, p. 158). Research conducted indicates that student-mothers are resilient and highly capable, and if they manage their competing commitments and utilise external supports, they can achieve success (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). As the support requirements of student-mothers are different from those of the general student population, universities should prioritise implementing specific policies and strategies to retain student-mothers, and support higher levels of success for non-traditional female students (Augustine et al., 2019). This qualitative study was designed to identify the challenges facing single student-mothers in an enabling program and distinguish the most effective supports that assisted them to achieve success.

## **Methodology**

Merriam's (2009) basic qualitative research methodology underpins the research design, allowing the researchers to apply an interpretive lens to analyse more thoroughly, the meaning constructed by the participants about their personal experiences. In turn, the analysis strives for a deeper appreciation of the single mother student experience. The primary method of collecting data was through individual interviews. The researchers used a semi-structured approach where key topics were highlighted for discussion. This allowed the researcher to encourage open dialogue with the participants. Merriam (2009, p. 90) confirms this semi-structured approach "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic". Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis method was used to effectively analyse the transcripts to identify and report the common themes that presented within the data set. The six phases of thematic analysis were followed: analysing and coding the data, searching for broad themes, then reviewing each one, identifying, and narrowing the themes, and the final step of writing the report (Braun

& Clarke, 2006, p. 79). The individual interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and data inductively extrapolated using the six phases of thematic analysis to identify and report the key findings. The process of analysis was inductive, and meaning was mediated through the researcher. The findings strive for depth of understanding of the students' experiences, with the final outcome being a richly descriptive account of the experiences of single mothers in an enabling program.

## **Participants**

The participants for this study were extracted from a broader scale research project. The initial project involved emailing 5880 female students who had been enrolled in the STEPS enabling program. From the 410 responses, 284 identified as a mother with dependant children, and of those, 85 self-identified as single mothers. As the focus of this research was to investigate the experiences of single mothers in an enabling program, purposive sampling was employed. This was a deliberate approach to ensure the characteristic of being a single mother, was the common feature of the sample population. Therefore, the 85 single mothers were invited by email to participate in individual interviews. As a result, seven single mothers volunteered to participate in the research. The interviews were conducted either by video conference or face-to-face and the recordings were transcribed verbatim. To de-identify the participants, pseudonyms (A-G) were assigned for confidentiality purposes. The demographics of the participants were varied, with ages ranging from 24 to 43 years. While most women were aged 30 to 43 years with between two and four children in their care, the youngest participant was 24 years of age, with one dependent child (see Table 1). Four were enrolled as on-campus students, two enrolled as mixed-mode blended learning students (online and on-campus) and one was a fully online student. At the time of publishing this paper, all of the participants had successfully completed the STEPS enabling program and five out of seven were

currently enrolled in undergraduate degree studies. The main limitation of this study is that the paper is gender specific, using only the voices of women, who self-identified specifically as single mothers during their enabling program, and this study is a small contingent from that sample group. Although participants were able to nominate as non-binary, there was no one in this sample that chose to identify as a gender, other than female.

**Table 1.** *The main demographics of the seven (7) single mothers interviewed in the study*

Name	Age started Enabling Program	Year started Enabling Program	Number of Dependent Children	Relationship Status	Course of Interest/ Current Study
Alice	31	2017	3	Divorced; Casual boyfriend	Want to study Nursing
Beatrice	37	2013	2	Separated	Bachelor of Law/ Accounting
Cathy	43	2015	4	Separated from second marriage	Bachelor of Psychology
Desley	41	2016	2	Single	Diploma of Early Childhood
Elizabeth	30	2015	3	Single	Bachelor of Nursing
Faye	37	2017	3	Single	Bachelor of Law
Georgina	24	2017	1	Single	Bachelor of Nursing

## Findings

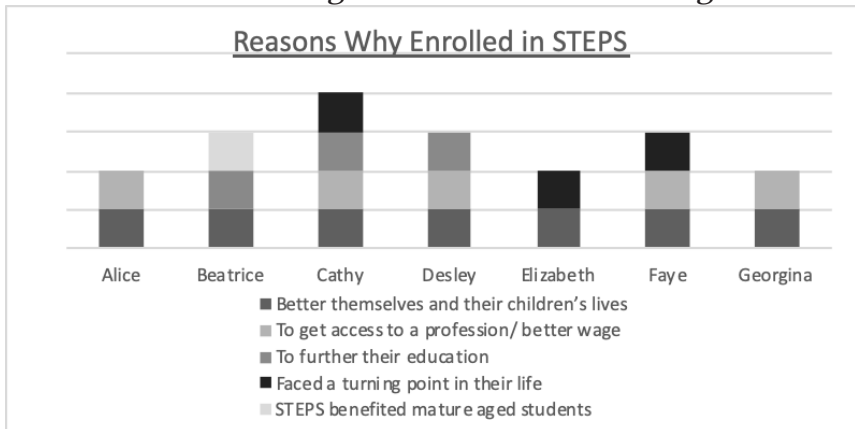
Through an inductive analysis process, six key themes emerged from the data reflecting the context and factors impacting single mothers engaging in enabling education. These themes include reasons for enrolment; fiscal arrangements; support networks; challenges experienced; positive study experiences; and advice to prospective students. These findings are discussed using the students' voices to present a deeper and more meaningful

understanding of the complex experiences of single mothers in enabling education.

### Reason for enrolment

Students were asked to share their motivations for enrolling in an enabling program (see Table 2). All participants shared the goal of wanting to improve themselves and better their children’s lives. Five single mothers were motivated to complete an enabling program as a bridging course to their chosen undergraduate degree, with the perception that this would lead to job opportunities with a higher income. Georgina wanted to give her daughter a better start in life. She stated *‘I didn’t just want to live on a childcare wage ... I wanted her (Georgina’s daughter) to have that financial stability, so... I could get a better job pretty much’*. Desley had similar reasons stating, *‘I didn’t want to be stuck at home sitting on the dole.’* Three single mothers faced turning points in their life in the form of marital relationship breakdowns and homelessness, forcing them to look for improved future opportunities. Cathy explained that she was also financially motivated after being faced with a turning point in her life *‘basically to be homeless would have been the only other step we had.’*

**Table 2.** Reasons that single mothers enrol in enabling education



## Fiscal arrangements

Fiscal arrangements were of interest, as it was assumed that most single mothers would have been reliant on financial support.

The findings clarified that although some participants worked, most relied on government benefits to finance their studies (see Table 3). Cathy had a very difficult financial and personal situation saying she had to rely on *'charity and my family, my mum'*. Ex-husband issues also exacerbated the issue and put Cathy under severe financial stress where she *'couldn't pay for my own groceries.'* Desley also found making ends meet quite a struggle, as did Elizabeth who called herself a *'broke student'*. Georgina's mum had studied the enabling program prior to her enrolling, so she was very supportive of her daughter and helped finance her studies. Alternatively, Beatrice said even though she worked full-time through the whole course, she still experienced financial challenges to make ends meet. Beatrice highlighted that Centrelink benefits were not enough to support her family, so she needed to continue working. Beatrice acknowledged that she was willing to work while studying; however, she noted that this created challenges trying to fit work around work, family, and study commitments, particularly when children are young.

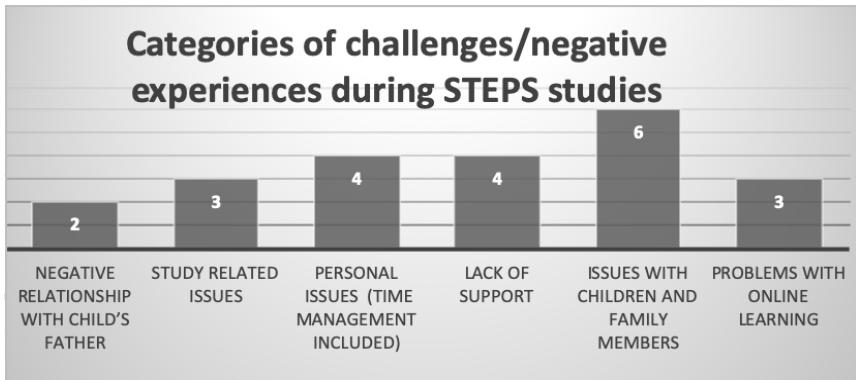
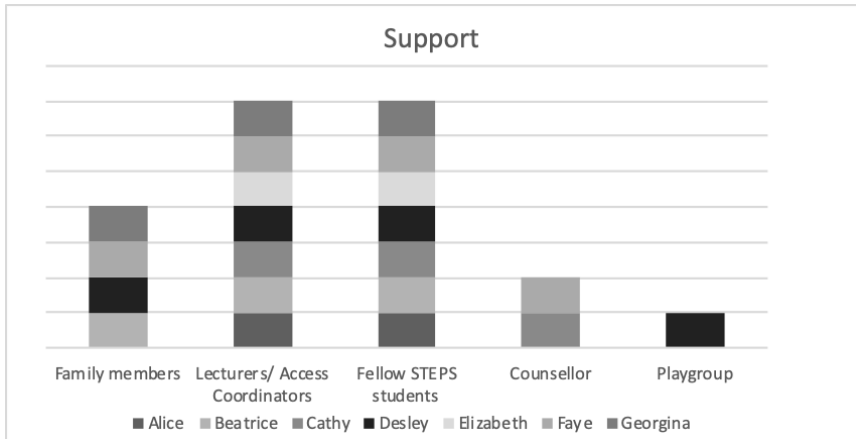
**Table 3.** *Financial support for single mothers when engaging in study*

Name	Alice	Beatrice	Cathy	Desley	Elizabeth	Faye	Georgina
Work	1	1		1			
Savings	1						
Centrelink			1	1	1	1	1
Charity			1				
Family			1				1

## Support networks

The single mothers provided insight into the networks that supported them through their study. As evidenced in Table 4, all seven participants noted the value of the support provided from lecturers and Access Coordinators (AC). Alice said the educators were '*fantastic*' and they were only ever an email away and even provided extra time to assist after formal classes. *I don't know if there would really be anything more that they could do, bar doing your assignments for you.*' One student noted that the Access Coordinator's Monday morning motivation session reminded students about assessment due dates and was very helpful in assisting with planning out her week. Georgina was grateful for her lecturers who were '*very patient with me.*' Faye summed up how positive the staff were by saying: *The support network that we have at uni is phenomenal.* Several participants specifically named their Access Coordinators by praising the special efforts they made to support them throughout their studies. All single mothers noted that fellow students played a significant support role during their studies, with a special mention of a student-mother's playgroup noted as highly valued. Additionally, support from family members and counsellors was a recognised support network. Cathy highlighted the importance of a support team - the lecturers, fellow students, and counsellors. She noted that other '*people will support you, but ... they're not going to understand why you're in tears over an essay.*' She also mentioned that as a single parent, you do not always have a supportive network and can often have '*judgy relatives*' leading you to '*doubt yourself.*'

**Table 4. Networks supporting single mothers during their studies**



### Issues with children and family members

Almost all the participants reported issues with children and family members as the most significant challenge faced during their studies. Georgina expressed difficulty due to the timetable not being released until one week prior to the commencement of term. This created difficulty securing childcare, and added emotional stress for her and her child, as they had never attended outside care prior to Georgina attending university. Georgina recommended that the timetable should be available earlier to assist others in this



same situation. She also found that having a young baby limited her options to attend any extra classes or be involved with a study group, as she felt an emotional sense of guilt, for not being there for her child. However, Georgina did have the support of her mother saying if *'things got too heavy she would just do stuff for me'*. Faye talked about the mental health issues her teenaged children faced due to an abusive ex-partner (including post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal tendencies, and mental breakdown). She said that these issues would escalate around the time their school assessments were due, creating a great deal of additional stress to manage in the household. Despite these challenges, Faye said her children were generally supportive of her; however, her youngest child did have additional needs requiring extra attention. Faye explained how study became very particularly challenging when either she or her children got sick, sharing that you *'just hope you don't get sick and live off caffeine.'* Alice echoed a similar sentiment, stating she found it very difficult to maintain her study patterns and *'keep up'* if she missed classes due to her child's sickness.

Elizabeth also experienced challenges with her children; two of whom have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and do not manage change well. As a coping strategy, Elizabeth implemented strict routines to help keep her family life and household running smoothly. Beatrice said she found it difficult to balance the demands of family and study and needed to learn to *'say no'* to extraneous demands. An example she noted was agreeing to her niece living with her for four months, which derailed her family and *'completely screwed up my life'*. This additional responsibility impacted Beatrice's studies, as she was already tired from working full-time, looking after her own two children, and managing the additional stress from her niece's negative behaviours. Cathy said she found it difficult to find extra time to study, as after school her young children needed her time and attention, adding how she felt *'mother's guilt'* when leaving her children in after school

care. She explained that she followed the generational pattern of marrying young and having her first baby soon after. She negatively compared herself to her cousins who travelled and *'had a fantastic life'* before settling down around 30. She felt the disappointment from her family; *'I was like the family loser, I collected ex-husbands and children whereas everyone else got degrees. In my Nan's house, there's really no pictures of me.'* Cathy's role as a student-mother conflicted with her childcare demands; however, she was motivated to achieve to provide greater opportunities for her own children.

### **Lack of support**

Absence of family support was highlighted as an aspect that created substantial challenge. Although Cathy shared that she had a supportive mum, she knew of other single mothers who were undertaking their study with very limited family support. She summed up the impact of being a single mother approaching study:

*'I don't think it's actually the study, I think it's the emotional strain and the big change in your life. When you are a single parent, you're a bit bashed around by the time you get there... you have probably had someone else in the relationship by the end of it, telling you all your faults and how incapable you are... you do carry a lot of guilt and you do carry a lot of failure.'*

Georgina was not the first in family to undertake university study but experienced a lack of family support because she felt her relatives forgot *'how crazy and how demanding it [study] is'*. Similarly, Elizabeth said she recognised she did not have the support of extended family saying, *'it's just me and my kids against the world really, which is not bad... at least I know who is on my team'*.

Furthermore, Alice noted that she struggled to look after

herself properly, due to her tendency to put everyone else first. This selflessness and lack of self-care was also reiterated by other single mothers.

Cathy experienced many challenges during her enabling program studies, acknowledging that in the beginning her older children and friends were supportive until they discovered the time commitment and then quickly *'bailed'* on offering support to her. Cathy described a major *'meltdown right when I was finishing the enabling program'*. She was selected to present at the Australasian Undergraduate Research Conference, which she felt was a great honour. The dilemma arose when the conference date clashed with her youngest daughter's birthday, and Cathy was advised her daughter was unable to attend the conference with her. Cathy chose the valuable opportunity to present at the conference but felt that she was viewed as a *'bad mother'* for choosing the conference over her child. She shared the frustration of societal *'double standards'* as fathers' work commitments cause them to miss children's events without being viewed as a *'bad father'*, but the moment a mother makes this choice, then they are judged as a *'bad parent.'* She felt a lack of support when another parent commented that *'you're a really a lousy person if you're not doing the school concert and the tuckshop and everything else'* especially as she had done this for her first two children.

Another participant felt the Australian Government could provide additional support for single mother's seeking to improve their lives through enabling education. Beatrice felt exhausted having to work full-time alongside her studies, saying that the demands of work, study and family were very difficult to manage simultaneously. She stated, *'Yes, we can still work, but (if) we're getting (more) support, even if it's for two years or three years, we would then be off the Centrelink treadmill.'* Beatrice described the frustrating challenge of not having a reliable support system to *'babysit the kids'* so she could attend classes and spend time on her

studies.

### **Study related issues**

Three single mothers described specific challenges that they faced during their enabling studies. Georgina explained her most evident challenge of time management;

*'I can't just come into the 24-hour labs and do it all night, as other people can. I was the only person that I really knew that was doing four subjects ... and that had a child, so it became really hard to try and talk to people about that.'*

Faye spoke about a debilitating fear of writing and referred to her commitment to her study as a *'roller-coaster ride'*. She would over analyse everything and worry about the grades she predicted she would get. Desley admitted she came close to giving up the whole enabling program, due to not understanding maths, but after asking for some help from an old school friend she successful *'pulled through'*. Several participants spoke about struggling with the equipment and platforms needed for online learning. Alice explained how she found it difficult to independently navigate online studies, and Cathy mentioned not being able to attend the Zoom sessions due to family commitments, especially afternoon sessions, after the children were home from school or early in the morning. In contrast, Beatrice said the video conferencing technology and online support lecturers helped bridge the learning gap; however, she found the challenge of online learning was the lack of peer support by *'not being able to connect to the other students'*.

### **Negative relationship with the child's father**

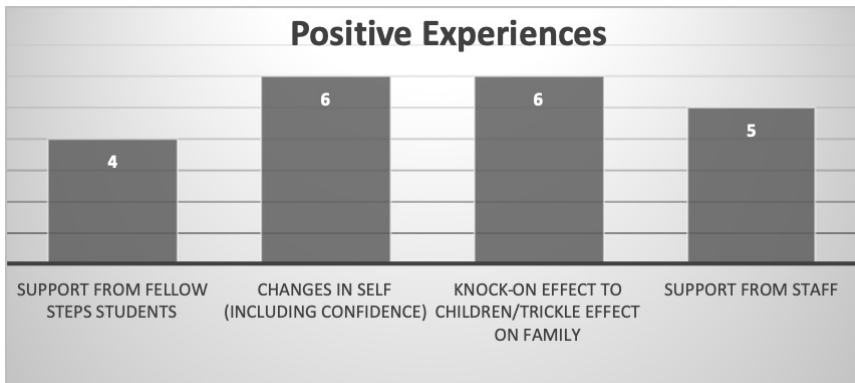
Issues pertaining to their children's fathers were also identified as creating a challenging study environment for single mothers. Georgina said one of the major obstacles she experienced in completing the enabling program, was having constant interference from her child's father with

whom she had a very *'unhealthy relationship'*. She found that getting ahead with her studies in case *'something happens'* was the coping mechanism that she established. Similarly, Desley also experienced major time and energy hindrances from the fathers of her two children; *'I've been juggling two court orders for almost three years and that's very time consuming'*, but she would remind herself of her long-term career goals to keep moving forward with her studies.

### Positive Study Experiences

Despite many challenges, the single mothers noted that there were many positive elements to the enabling program for themselves and their families. The key positive themes to emerge were 1) changes in self; 2) knock on effects; and 3) peer support (see Table 6).

**Table 6.** *Positive study experiences*



### Changes in self

Almost all participants reported an improved self-confidence after undertaking the enabling program. Alice shared that she felt relaxed about entering her undergraduate studies due to feeling *'academically prepared.'* Faye mentioned her personal confidence

increased due to receiving sound grades, even though she was very anxious during her studies. Furthermore, she felt a sense of pride when an assessment task report she wrote about a community benefit was submitted to the local Mayor. Beatrice discovered that she had the capacity to study and that experiencing small successes helped her stay committed. She shared that previously *'it can be the littlest rock thrown and that's what will topple me.'* Desley found that she worked better in an external environment and would use the campus library as a *'place of work'*, adding that the academic setting increased her self-confidence. Elizabeth said she had gained noticeable confidence during her studies and after leaving a domestic abuse situation:

*'I was very broken spirited; I was not game to make any sort of decisions or ask any questions ... I was meek, I was the wallflower, you didn't see me, but I've gained a lot of confidence and I've grown as a person.'*

Cathy described that she felt more secure in herself, with an improved self-confidence that enabled her to rise above negativity from people who knew her outside of the university. She said her family and friends were amazed that she was studying a psychology degree at university:

*'It's not like you realise you write yourself off, but you really do... you don't aim real high and I think the enabling program really showed me it is possible for me to get into a better position.'*

### **Knock-on effect**

Another positive impact identified by the single mothers was the trickle effect onto their children. Alice spoke of how her autistic son chose an enabling program over TAFE after watching her achievements and seeing how supportive the staff were during the program. Alice felt that the enabling program was so valuable, she tried to convince her mum to

study the course too. Faye talked about the trickle effect on her children in terms of establishing effective study habits in the house;

*'I've started noticing my daughter, who is in year 11, is actually putting more effort into her work. I don't know if that's from my example or she's just getting a little bit more motivated, but it could be.'*

Desley echoed a similar sentiment about the positive impact of seeing their mum as a student;

*'my boys are 14 and 12, and, it's definitely inspiring them to study, further study. They did have intentions, but I think it's also inspired them even more.'*

### **Peer support**

Another positive theme identified was the support received and sense of connectedness to fellow students. Alice spoke positively about her supportive student peers *'because no-one really at home understands the stress of that or understands due dates...the girls at university, are my best supports I think, you know, because they understood.'* Specifically, she spoke about the encouraging support from her study group, particularly in regards to achieving success in maths. Faye, Elizabeth, and Georgina echoed the same sentiments with the latter saying that her major positive of the enabling program was *'making some friends and not just being known for a mum, just having my own identity again'.*

### **Advice for prospective students**

When asked what advice the single mothers would offer to prospective students, they made several recommendations. Elizabeth's advice was straight to the point; *'Do it, just do it. It's hard work but if you want it enough, you'll do it...'*

*it's probably the best thing I ever did.'* Faye shared that enabling education was *'life changing'* and although she was dependent on student welfare right now, after completing her undergraduate degree, she knew she would be in a much better financial position. She acknowledged the value of the enabling program stating that *'if I'd jumped straight into my degree, I would be completely lost and unprepared.'* Alice encouraged prospective students to take the step to enrol as it's *'definitely doable'*. As a single mother, Georgina's advice stressed the importance of time management and accepting that challenges will arise and to use the supports around you to overcome them. Cathy offered some practical advice for student-mothers saying they need to *'get rid of every bit of clutter in your life... basically you'll end up wasting the time you could spend with your kids...yelling at them and trying to clean up your house.'* Importantly, Georgina noted that enabling education is not all about academic success: *'if you fail, you fail, it's not the end of you as a person'*. Georgina highlighted that even if you failed a subject, undertaking the enabling program was worth it.

## **Discussion**

Stereotypically, there is a stigma attached to the term 'single mother' that might make someone think of a welfare dependent, uneducated, unskilled, irresponsible, and unmotivated woman (Haleman, 2004; Hasche, 2017). However, this research discovered that the single mother participants were dedicated, motivated and resilient. The research focus underpinning this study, sought to give depth to the competing discourses that single mothers face during an enabling program, and the networks and strategies that can provide support. The main conclusion drawn from the findings is that whilst all students face challenges during their studies, single mothers, face unique hindrances; physically (time, family, childcare demands), cognitively (academic skills and prior learning experiences) and emotionally (confidence and self-belief) when studying.



Enabling programs fill a social equity gap, by encouraging non-traditional students to develop the knowledge and skills required to successfully complete a higher education degree. These single mothers shared that their enabling education experience was much more than academic skill development. They felt enveloped by support, giving the student-mothers hope that they have the capacity to accomplish a degree and gain improved employment, all whilst enhancing their self-efficacy and being positive role models for their children.

There is limited literature about single mothers in the enabling space and the higher education arena that seeks to consider ways to improve the support offered to this unique cohort. This paper aims to add to this gap, by analysing the narratives of these seven single mothers to identify their specific challenges and sharing the strategies that those around them can employ to help overcome these barriers. Some practical support recommendations that became evident included earlier access to lecture timetables in order to pre-arrange childcare, decluttering of household study areas, and making use of academic library spaces as a motivating environment for study. Financial security is a major concern for many single mothers, and transparent access to Centrelink's family services as well as more financial study support from the government would help to ease their financial concerns. Variables such as available day care places and government financial assistance impact the day-to-day support choices for student-mothers. Another strategy to support single mothers is to build into enabling programs, the development of time management skills and personal growth learning, to enhance their personal lives as single mothers present with unique external circumstances. Unfortunately, external disruptions, such as family and child custody disputes, are not within the scope of the universities to assist, but supports such as counselling, academic tutoring and student support services are highly valued by single mothers. These added university services give student-mothers a space to share their concerns and

seek guidance and support through the challenging times as a student. Research reports that young children can have a negative impact on their mother's studies in terms of degree completion (Hernandez & Rabia, 2014; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005); however, this study demonstrated that mothers who were able to implement study strategies that encompassed family commitments can set themselves up for success.

Despite the many challenges the single mothers faced such as struggles with ex-partners, children with learning difficulties and sickness, their own mental health issues, unsupportive family members, and problems navigating online education, with persistence they were able to successfully manage their studies and valued the support they received from fellow students and university staff. Many participants reported a significant increase in their confidence levels whilst completing the enabling program. Some challenges noted by the single mothers were similar to mothers with partners, but they did identify a number of unique obstacles including difficulties in arranging suitable child-care, improved access to Centrelink family services to assist with financial difficulties, and a request for this government agency to provide better financial support for single student-mothers to ease them of work burdens so they could dedicate more time to their studies. The transformative nature of enabling programs cannot be undervalued. For these women, they have hope that they can negate financial stress by gaining a higher education qualification and establishing a career in a profession of choice. In doing so, not only will it assist their financial status, but it will encourage generational change, with their children positively influenced to strive for higher achievements in their own lives.

## **Conclusion**

This paper analysed the experiences of seven single mothers in their student journey through an enabling program. The participants in this study assigned a high value to their studies, acknowledging education as an opportunity to gain preferable employment, yet many felt the pressure of the extra responsibilities to blend their roles as student and parent. Research by Katz (2013, p. 273) indicated that single mothers' "survival narratives" detailing the financial, social, and emotional challenges of pursuing an education while on welfare, demonstrated the need for employing different strategies to persevere through this challenging period. Institutional support structures of earlier access to timetables to enable childcare planning, study spaces, awareness of the difficulties, and additional support service provisions were all perceived as positive supports. However, the supports that single student-mothers need are generally external constructs that the university does not have control over.

This study of single mothers entering university via an enabling program recognised that these seven women created their own personal 'survival narratives' and by employing specific strategies unique to their circumstances, they ultimately achieved a successful student-mother experience. Their identity transformed from being a single mother embarking on study, to self-perception of a highly capable individual who, against odds and adversities, successfully completed an enabling program, achieving their dream of higher education. Their survival narrative could be encompassed in one word: 'hope'. Hope for improved career prospects; hope for independence; hope for financial security; and hope that their role modelling, positively influences their children's opportunities for the future.

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