

Dr Mike Brown is the Coordinator of the Bachelor of Technology Education at the University of Ballarat, a researcher and teacher educator in the areas of adult education, vocational education and training and applied learning. He has completed participatory research into community-based learning, work-based learning and applied learning. Together with other members of the RAVE team in the School of Education at the University of Ballarat, Mike has an interest in men's participation and learning in community activities and settings.

Contact Details

Dr Barry Golding, School of Education, University of Ballarat,
PO Box 663, Ballarat, Victoria 3353
Tel: +61 3 53279733 Fax: +61 3 53279717
Email: b.golding@ballarat.edu.au

Listening to individual voices and stories – the mature-age student experience

Cathy Stone
University of Newcastle, Australia

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative research project, part of a doctoral thesis, which examines the impact of university study on a group of 20 female and male mature-age students at the University of Newcastle, Australia, who have entered university via a non-traditional pathway. These students are in the second to final years of their undergraduate degree programs and have all faced significant hurdles in gaining university entrance and continuing with their studies. The majority have come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with little, if any, family history of higher education and little positive experience of prior study. This paper gives voice to their stories – their triumphs and achievements as well as their struggles – and highlights the important role that publicly funded institutions can play, not only in widening access to higher education, but also in encouraging and assisting students from a diverse range of backgrounds to participate fully in higher education and achieve their goals.

This paper describes a ‘work in progress’ – a research project exploring the experiences of women and men along their journey as mature-age university students. The research will form the basis of a doctoral thesis which the author is undertaking with the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Sydney.

The research is qualitative, primarily from a narrative perspective, and has involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 mature-age students in the second to final years of their degree program at the University of Newcastle, Australia, having entered university through a non-traditional pathway. Eighteen of the students entered university via the University of Newcastle’s Open Foundation Program, one entered via the STAT (Standard Tertiary Aptitude Test) and one achieved university entrance through RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning).

How did it all begin?

The idea of conducting formal research to explore the experiences of mature-age students arose directly from my interest and experience as a student counsellor within a university setting. For the previous ten years, I had been providing a counselling service to students at the Ourimbah Campus of the University of Newcastle. This Campus has a particularly high proportion of mature-age students, mostly female, and through my professional work I had been hearing the personal stories of many of these students (Stone 1999). Their stories were overwhelmingly ones of courage in the face of adversity. Most had faced significant challenges and difficulties in their journeys toward becoming university students and in their efforts to continue with and succeed with their studies. Female mature-age students were over-represented, both amongst the student population as a whole and amongst those using the counselling service. Therefore, I became more familiar with the women’s stories. However, the men’s stories that I did hear also tended to be ones of struggle, determination

and courage. The difference was that they usually talked of more support – from families, from female partners and from workplaces.

Undoubtedly, mature-age students face a range of hurdles to overcome in returning to study, particularly at the higher education level, and the personal stories of those seeking assistance through the counselling service bore this out. Women with whom I talked in my role as a counsellor often seemed to be particularly disadvantaged, as they struggled with balancing their roles of wife, mother and student, often with little confidence in their academic abilities. Many had little support from partners and families. In many cases, their studies were perceived as being secondary to their other responsibilities or, indeed, as a kind of ‘leisure’ activity. However, despite this level of struggle, another common feature amongst these students, both female and male, was the strong sense of personal achievement, a growing confidence and a new sense of identity and purpose. No matter the difficulties, it was all worth it. As a counsellor, I was privileged to hear these stories and to witness the changes that occurred in these students’ sense of themselves, as a direct result of being at university.

Through this process of talking with so many mature-age students, in a counselling setting, about their experiences, I began to wonder to what extent the stories of those students presenting at the counselling service were reflective of the experiences of mature-age students in general. I was aware that it could be helpful to higher education institutions to have a clearer understanding of the particular issues facing mature-age students, in order that they can be most appropriately supported to enter university, succeed and graduate.

The setting

As a regional university, the University of Newcastle attracts a relatively high proportion of students from low socio-economic backgrounds at both of its two main campuses. The Ourimbah Campus in particular has a high proportion of mature-age students

from low socio-economic backgrounds. The University as a whole has a strong equity focus on supporting its low socio-economic students of all ages. It is located on the east coast of Australia in the state of New South Wales and has an enrolment of approximately 24,000 students, mostly located at two main campuses. The larger campus caters for around 18,000 students and is located within the city of Newcastle itself, about 160 kilometres north of Sydney. The smaller campus hosts around 3,500 university students and is located at Ourimbah, about halfway between Sydney and Newcastle, in an area of the coastline known as the NSW Central Coast.

The majority of Australian universities define a mature-age student as any student aged 21 or over. However, a significant number of mature-age students are aged in their thirties, forties or even fifties, who have not been in any formal education for perhaps ten to fifteen years or more. Cullity (2006) tells us that 'without an alternative entry route to university, university is not possible for some adults' and 'to re-dress this concern ... 13 of the nation's 44 universities conduct alternative entry programs (AEPs) for mature students' (p. 177). These alternative entry programs include specific enabling programs (Cantwell, Archer & Bourke 2001) which are designed to help prospective mature-age students gain university entry requirements. Those students without the necessary pre-requisites to apply directly for entry into a degree program at university (for example, those who did not matriculate from high school at the required standard) can apply to undertake such an enabling program.

Universities can apply to the (former) Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training for funding to assist them to run enabling programs (Chadwick 2007) but it is up to the University to decide whether to charge fees to the students. On the basis of their results in the enabling program, students can apply for a place in a university degree program. Mature-age students who enter university via enabling programs are often amongst the most

disadvantaged, with many having had little positive experience of study behind them and a sizable proportion coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds and little, if any, family history of higher education (Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite & Godfrey 2004, Cantwell *et al.* 2001).

The Open Foundation Program at the University of Newcastle is one such enabling program and has the following features. It is for persons aged 21 and over; successful completion of the program can qualify students for University entrance, based on their results; students must take a total of four courses (subjects) which can be studied full-time over one semester or part-time over two semesters. There are no fees and it is open to all who wish to apply (Cantwell *et al.* 2001, Cullity 2006). Approximately 66% of Open Foundation students are female and it has a very high success rate. Over 90% of those who completed the program in 2006 were offered a university place for 2007 (University of Newcastle 2007).

Due to the fact that it has no fees and specifically targets mature-age students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, the Open Foundation Program is regarded as an important equity program for the University of Newcastle (Cantwell *et al.* 2001). Cullity (2006) talks about enabling programs offering mature-age students a 'second chance' at education. The experiences of the group of students interviewed for this research indicates that, for many, it is more of a 'first-chance' – or, indeed, the first real opportunity they have had to consider undertaking higher education.

Who are the research participants?

A brief summary of the 20 women and men, all of whom are in at least their second year of undergraduate study, is as follows:

- 15 female and 5 male
- 11 full-time and 9 part-time

- Age 32–52, median age of 40
- 9 married and living with a partner
- 19 have children, 26 years to 7 months
- 11 single parents
- None have parents who attended university
- 17 are the first in their family (of origin) to attend university.

It was not a criterion of the research for participants to be ‘first-generation’ university students, but given that nearly all of them came through the Open Foundation Program, coupled with the strong equity focus of that program, perhaps it is not surprising. Cullity (2006) tells us that ‘a closer portrayal of AEP students comprises adults who come from a low socio-economic background, left school prior to completing Year 12, are the first-in-the-family to study and are either in paid employment or recipients of social security benefits’ (p. 178). Cantwell *et al.* (2001) also demonstrate that the Open Foundation Program does indeed function as an effective equity program, providing opportunities for students who come from a background where university study is not the norm.

While the analysis of the interview data for this research is still at a very early stage, a number of themes have begun to emerge, tentatively classified as:

- Beginnings
- Challenges
- Resilience
- Identity
- Future

Beginnings

Why did they come?

Why did these students decide to come to university? And why at this point in time? For the majority of the students, there was some

catalyst for action – some event that had occurred which then led, directly or indirectly, to the decision to study. Other researchers have had similar findings. O’Shea (2007) mentions ‘some sort of recent catalyst’ (p.42) that often precipitated the decision to study. McGivney (2006) describes the path back into study for adult learners as being ‘often serendipitous’ (p.85). Her research in this area highlights a number of factors that are influential in adults returning to formal study, including reasons such as ‘because others in their circle are doing it’ and ‘because of the need to deal with an immediate situation in their life (life transitions, illness, redundancy, bereavement, divorce)’ (p.85). These kinds of serendipitous factors were certainly present also for many of the participants in this study:

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 ... (Fiona, 35)

It was all around the same time I lost my job, split up with him and thought ‘Okay!’ (Anne, 36)

I got a redundancy from the bank and I was thinking, what was I going to do with myself? (Evan, 44)

For some of the participants, it was a long-term dream that they had not been able to fulfil in the past:

I was a bit peeved that I didn’t put enough effort into going to Uni, and so it was always in the back of my mind that I wanted to go to Uni and do a degree. (David, 52)

It was never a question of if I would, it was when I would. (Helen, 33)

I always wanted... to go and study... and I wasn’t encouraged to do that... It has always been a yearning. (Mandy, 38)

I think I always knew I had the potential but it was only a thought for a long time. (Penny, 32)

For others, it was something quite unexpected:

Never in my wildest dreams ... I knew I was capable of something, but uni was just over my head ... I just thought it was all beyond me. (Carol, 44)

I saw one of the guys from school and he asked what I was up to and I told him I was at uni... he said, 'Oh bullshit!' He didn't believe me. I never thought about uni. Never actually thought outside of where I was ... (Virginia, 36)

It was just through talking to people that made me aware ... I'd probably be doing TAFE. I think I needed to do something, but it wouldn't have been necessarily uni, because I wouldn't have thought I was good enough. (Linda, 40)

So why now? And why not before? Chapman *et al.* (2006), in their research in Australian rural communities, identify the following barriers that impede participation in education for adults: personal and societal barriers; financial barriers; geographic barriers; management barriers; and vision, mission and identity barriers. For the respondents in this study, the major factors for all the respondents that appeared to have stood in the way of furthering their education could perhaps be classified as personal and societal barriers as well as vision, mission and identity barriers.

Specifically, what was identified by a number of the women was the lack of encouragement from family as well as a sense of not being 'smart enough'. This echoes the findings of a study conducted in the 1970s by McLaren (1985), with 48 female mature-age students enrolled at a small adult education college in the United Kingdom. McLaren found that most of the women had left school by 16 as a result of parental and societal attitudes about education not being important for girls: 'Most parents expected their daughters to marry young and to find a conventional job' (p.46).

Thirty years later, the women in this study described similar experiences.

My family life, as it was, was, like, get out and get a job. (Tina, 38)

I left school in 4th form. It wasn't even the thing to do the HSC back then – maybe just go out and do a trade – get a job. (Carol, 44)

Well, my mother didn't encourage me to get my HSC, in fact, she told me I wasn't smart enough, so I joined the workforce when I was sixteen. (Mandy, 38)

I had been told for so long that I wasn't very bright... (Helen, 33)

For some of the respondents, it was a case of unhappy memories of school which had inhibited them from considering further study. Golding, from his research with male adult learners (2006), believes that 'it is men who have had the least positive formal learning experiences – particularly at school – who are most at risk and are less likely to ... embrace any form of institutional, adult and community or formal learning' (p.176). However, Tett (2000) in her study of male and female mature-age working-class students at a small university in Scotland, found that 'all of the students were negative about their own school experiences' (p.186). She found interesting differences between the male and female descriptions of their school experiences. The men in her study tended to attribute their negative experiences to the teachers' dislike of them for being too rebellious or argumentative, while the women were more likely to attribute their negative experiences of school to pressure at home, through family responsibilities and expectations.

Whatever the specific reasons, both the men and women in this study commonly reported negative school experiences:

I didn't like school ... I moved around a lot of the time so I didn't really develop any close relationships. (Anne, 36)

No good. I didn't like it. I also have no HSC. I had bad school experiences. (Katrina, 42)

End of Year 9, things just went downhill from there ... I went on to Year 11, dropped out half-way through ... I just lost it with school. (Bob, 41)

For others, it appeared to be a case of life simply getting in the way:

I had wanted to be a teacher when I left high school, but my father had died between Year 10 and Year 11 and Mum said, 'I can't afford to buy your Year 11 uniform, do you mind getting a job?', so that was the end of that. (Nerida, 49)

I started my HSC, but I fell pregnant so ... I started doing it by correspondence... but I couldn't concentrate. (Anne, 36)

I had to drop out [of uni]... I had a 3 month old child and I couldn't do it ... (Helen, 33)

Inspirations and influences

'People who act as influencers, catalysts or change agents are hugely important in leading others into learning' (McGivney 2006, p.87).

This appeared to hold true for many of the participants in this study. Sources of influence and inspiration included parents, friends, partners and teachers:

I found a Wyong TAFE course called CEW [Career Education for Women] and they were fantastic ... she [the teacher] said, 'If you want to go to uni, you should do it, 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)

For one of the women, her son was the catalyst, although not in the way one might have expected: 'I was trying to arrange to get him [my son] into uni and he wasn't interested and I thought, "Well, bugger you! If you're not interested, I'll go to uni".' (Nerida, 49)

For many, recent experiences of formal learning had been much more positive than their school experiences. Some like Carol, quoted above, were inspired by a recent experience of other formal study to think about going on to university:

I started off doing the CEW course and, right from that course, I wanted to go to university. (Anne, 36)

I loved it! [TAFE Diploma] It was a real culture change ... and ever since then, I sort of had a yearning, looking for something ... (Mandy, 38)

I'd enjoyed learning massage ... and I guess I finished that and thought, 'Well, I want to do more and I want to keep learning now...'. (Rachel, 47)

These findings are again similar to those of Tett (2000) who found that all in her study were 'able to give positive examples of learning which had taken place at a later point in their lives' (p.187).

Coming to University – what made it all possible?

Coming to university was only made possible by alternative entry programs – and, in the case of 18 of the 20 participants, it was specifically the University of Newcastle's Open Foundation Program. Once again, there was for many a serendipitous element to their introduction to the idea of doing Open Foundation.

For Grace, there was a sense of hearing about it just in time:

I opened up the local paper and it had the Open Foundation ... and it was closing day on the Friday so ... I went straight down and that was it. My husband came home and said, 'What did you do today?', and I said I went and enrolled in uni! (Grace, 47)

For Fiona, there was a chance encounter: 'I saw this lady that I used to live next door to... on the campus on that Open Day and she said you have to do Open Foundation. It's the best thing in the world.' (Fiona, 35)

For Linda, who was working at the coffee shop on campus and heard about Open Foundation from some of her regular customers, there was a sense of being in the right place at the right time: 'And then finding out about Open Foundation ... I'm thinking, how did these oldies get to be uni students?' (Linda, 40)

An anxious time...

Their memories of starting University were mixed. For many it was an anxious time – particularly for a number of the women:

First six weeks were a nightmare ... very overwhelming ... I was close to just giving it all away ... (Katrina, 42)

It was scary ... I really felt out of my depth. (Ingrid, 48)

I'd sit in the car for 45 minutes ... I couldn't get out of the car ... I was brand new and it was frightening. (Amber, 49)

Similarly, O'Shea (2007), in her research with first-in-the-family female students, found that 'for many of these students, commencing tertiary studies initiated feelings of anxiety, unfamiliarity and self-doubt' (p.41). However, for some, the excitement outweighed the fears: 'The first day I walked in and feeling just excited, oh all this knowledge ... it felt good!' (Grace, 47, married)

The men's memories of starting indicated that they had felt reasonably confident and any worries were more about financial concerns:

There were no real difficulties ... I really, really enjoyed it. (John)

There was no real fear. I guess the only apprehension was, can I afford to come? (David)

The biggest one was giving up work and not having an income. (Bob)

Much of the previous research into the mature-age student experience indicates that women generally tend to be less confident than men in the academic environment. Acker's research with mature-age students in the UK (1994) found that male students tended to 'show few self-doubts and high self-confidence' (p.66). This is supported by Shands' research (1998) which found that female students tended to 'distrust their intellectual capacity more often than men' (p.145).

Challenges

The major difficulties and challenges described by the participants can be classified as: financial struggles; lack of time; difficulties with organising and prioritising; dealing with changes in relationships with partners and children; and balancing the needs of study with the needs of family, home, partners and children. Abbott-Chapman and colleagues, in their research with mature-age students at the University of Tasmania, found that 'mature-aged students face particular challenges in terms of family and employment pressures and demands which compete with studies, and also financial problems associated with giving up full-time employment' (Abbott-Chapman *et al.* 2004, p.171).

Similarly, for all the students interviewed for this study, life was a juggling act. Finding enough time and enough money were constant challenges for most:

Financial adjustment is a big one ... but when it comes to the kids, trying to find time for the kids and the family. They don't always come number one which is really wrong. (Bob, married, 4 children)

I think the toughest thing overall is just the financial situation, because I've only been able to work part-time, and wanting to

be a good mum and have time for the girls. (Rachel, divorced, 2 children)

I've been having to budget very tightly ... I think they [the children] are probably just sick of budgeting for so many years. (Penny, single, 2 children)

Because my daughter turned 16, the money I was getting from Centrelink almost halved ... (Virginia, single, 1 child)

For some of the women who were living with a partner, their growth in confidence in their own knowledge and opinions led to a change in the dynamics of their relationship:

I get a little bit frustrated with him sometimes because he still thinks the same ... so we just try to cool off on the political debates. (Linda, married)

I probably don't have as much respect for him as I once had, because now I know I'm more confident and say what I think. (Mandy, married)

The pressure on some relationships when women in particular return to study has been well-documented in previous research. Many men can feel 'threatened and excluded' (Wilson 1997, p.358) resulting in an 'almost total lack of domestic and emotional support' (Edwards 1993, p.117). Leonard (1994) also describes how a third of the female mature-age students she interviewed met considerable resistance from their male partners over their decision to return to study.

Two women in this study had encountered considerable resistance from their partners, to the point where they had chosen to end the relationship:

He wasn't too happy with it; he made things difficult for me and I had to borrow the neighbour's car just to get here ... you know, I was the wife at home, dinner on the table, house was always clean – the house is never clean now! It got to the point where he

would be drunk on the days that I was at uni ... it got beyond a joke. (Helen, now divorced, 2 children)

His opinion was it was time for me to sit back and knit and wait to become a grandmother ... (Amber 49, now divorced, 2 children)

One of the men had also separated, due to long-term issues combined with his finding a more compatible partner at university: 'It probably would have happened anyway [marriage break-up]. I think the big thing was I met somebody that I clicked with.' (Evan, now separated, 3 children)

In contrast, some of the participants found that their studies had affected their relationship in positive ways. 'While families can provide strain, they also ... provide support' (Wilson 1997, p.358). Anne, Bob and Nerida are examples of this:

I think it's helped support it [relationship with partner] because we are both studying (Anne)

Probably affected for the better. My wife is very supportive, always has been. (Bob)

I appreciate what my husband does for me, and I don't know if I used to do that. (Nerida)

However, for all of the participants in this study, life was a constant juggling act – some juggling a combination of the demands of study and paid work:

I didn't give up my work, I still have a mortgage and I'm still working ... generally 35 hours a week minimum on top of studies. (John, married, one child, studying full-time)

When I get home from work ... I have something to eat and then I'm straight into the study. (Paul, divorced, 3 children, studying part-time)

The women in particular were juggling the demands of study, housework, children, partners – and, at times, also paid work:

I started this new job a couple of weeks ago. It started on a Monday, so I had an assignment due on that Monday which I'd already got an extension for, and so I just had to stay up until I finished – up to 3am so I finished it, and that's becoming the norm. (Tina, married, 3 children, studying part-time)

I had to let go of the housework – what a shame! Now we crunch around on rice bubbles and food ... I'm finding it quite frustrating – the mess. (Mandy, married, 5 children, part-time study)

The juggling of life beyond uni was huge at times ... it all came down to me. I was the one running the house, so I had to make sure all their needs were met and the house was looked after. (Rachel, divorced, 2 children)

Feminist literature refers to the multiplicity of women's roles and the 'gendered expectations of family obligations and the ongoing disparity with which women take on the "second shift" through maintenance of children and home' (Wolf-Wendel & Ward 2003, p.113). Other research into the mature-age student experience finds that 'often a return to school creates significant role strain and feelings of guilt, inadequacy and self-blame over difficulties in handling multiple roles' (Rice 1989, p.552).

Quotes such as the ones below demonstrate this sense of role strain, guilt and self-blame which was evident in the stories of many of the women in this study:

I found it very difficult last night, she was in tears [7 year old daughter] ... and I put my time away to finish my essay, so inside I wanted to get things done ... It's a big conflict because we had a lecture and a presentation this morning ... (Katrina, widowed, 2 children)

Just I do feel like a bit of a failure from having to push the kids aside a lot ... at the moment, my son is going through some issues at school ... and you have feelings, is that because of me? is it all my fault? ... (Tina, married, 3 children)

Other feminist writers perceive that society places a different value on 'men's time' and 'women's time', with men's time being seen as more valuable and productive (McNay 2000). Hughes (2002) talks about 'male time and female time' (p.133) with 'male time' being linear, clock time and 'female time' as time given up to the demands and needs of others. Certainly amongst the participants in this study, it appeared to be the case that, in general, study time for the men was very much 'taken for granted' with wives and partners tailoring their activities around male study time. In contrast, the women tailored their study time around other responsibilities at home, including their children, partners and other home and family responsibilities.

For example, Bob's wife – now the family breadwinner since Bob gave up work to study full-time – tailors her work around his study hours: 'Any work my wife is doing, she has tailored it around my hours' (Bob, married, 4 children, full-time study).

On the other hand, comments from Grace, Anne and Rachel indicate the ways in which they ensure that their study hours do not impinge on family time:

I finish everything by 4pm, I pick my husband up at 4.30 and after that it's dinner time. (Grace, married, 3 children, part-time study)

I always make sure I've got weekends free. (Anne, living with partner, 2 children, full-time study)

I had to make sure that my classes fitted in with what the girls were doing. (Rachel, divorced, 2 children)

Resilience – what helps them to keep going?

Help and support

Students reported receiving help and support from a number of sources – particularly lecturers, support services on campus (such as counselling, learning support, careers advisers, student mentors), partners, children and their own parents.

My Mum lives two streets away, so does my sister so I get a lot of help from them. (Penny)

The lecturers are more approachable, they have more time for you. (Virginia)

I found her [lecturer] very, very supportive ... when I hit that point and said, 'I can't do this', then ... I spoke to student support. (Katrina)

The student support here ... has been great. (David)

However, above all, the students talked about the support, friendship and assistance they received from fellow students:

The girls I'm with – our little study group that we made in Open Foundation – I made some friends there and we're all doing the same degree and we formed a little group and we support each other ... (Linda)

My friends here at uni are just amazing ... I've met some real friends here, friends that I will have for the rest of my life. (Helen)

First off, my friends. If we don't understand something, we talk among ourselves. (Fiona)

She [friend at uni] and I stumbled through both of our fall-overs and if one of us is down we talk about it to each other. (Amber)

It was not only the women who reported this. The men regarded their network of fellow students on campus as just as important:

You have to form your little 'cliques' because it's vital ... and it's reciprocal, too. We had this group of 10 [in a class exercise] and this core of ten people are really my best friends at uni now. (Evan)

Probably first of all, fellow students – we talk. (David)

Probably more [help] from students. (John)

Determination to achieve the goal

Sheer determination was a significant factor for many in their persistence with their studies, despite the obstacles previously discussed.

I think the overwhelming thing for me is that I want to learn and I don't want to give in half-way and I want to see it to the end. (Paul)

I don't like to give up – definitely not! (Fiona)

Probably if I wasn't so pig-headed, determined, I might have given up. (Grace)

I didn't want to give up ... I don't think I've ever given up on anything in my life. (John)

It would be a waste of all that time I have already invested ... that's what keeps me going. (Tina)

Love of learning

A genuine love of and desire to continue learning was another factor expressed by a number of the students:

I love it ... I get a buzz ... just the environment, the books and the knowledge. (Ingrid)

I enjoy it ... I like to write, but it doesn't always come easy, but I'm happy when I finish what I do. (Carol)

My love of learning. (Nerida)

The knowledge that will come out of it ... the overwhelming thing for me is that I want to learn. (Paul)

A growth in independence

A number of the women in particular cited a new independence in their lives that increased their determination to continue with their studies.

The fact that the first time in 15 years I can just get in the car and drive up and get lost in books and research ... independence. And it's something of mine. I don't have to share it with [husband] and the children, they don't have to be here, they don't have to have anything to do with it. (Mandy)

The thought that when I go overseas I can get work ... and I'm not going to be on the dole ... and have my own home. (Virginia)

Feminist literature on women and leisure (Wearing 1996 & 1998, Wimbush & Talbot 1988) discusses the notion of leisure as a form of 'resistance' for women against the traditional female role of wife, mother, housewife and a means of achieving some level of independence from the restrictions of these roles. Wearing points out that 'the freedoms provided by the sphere of leisure can result in a greater autonomy for women' (Wearing 1998, p.49). While it is highly debatable whether university study can be called a 'leisure' activity, it was certainly the case that, like leisure, study had provided some of these women with time to themselves. For a number of the female participants in this study, going to university appeared to have provided them with a means of 'resistance' which enabled them to develop some legitimate independence from the confines of the traditional female role.

Identity

All the participants in this study reported some changes in their view of themselves since undertaking university studies. Many also

reported changes in others' perceptions of them. Generally speaking, the women seemed more often to report changes that appeared to be significant internal transformations, such as:

Feeling fulfilled, completely filled the void. (Grace)

Coming to uni, I sort of bloomed ... Much more outgoing. (Fiona)

I've gained confidence ... I feel happier – I guess self-esteem. I feel like I'm going somewhere. I'm achieving a goal. (Penny)

I feel like I'm an intelligent, attractive woman that is capable and confident and can hold an intelligent conversation. (Mandy)

My thoughts about myself have changed. I understand myself better. (Linda)

I'm a different person totally. (Nerida)

While the men also reported changes that appeared to reflect significant personal growth, this was more often couched in terms that reflected an addition to existing skills and a growth in status or respect from others:

I don't think I have a higher or lower opinion of myself, but I knew I was a skilled boat builder – this has just added to my skills. (John)

I see myself as more confident ... I've always been socially aware, but I think probably more so now. (David)

I have grown as a person ... I'm a lot more tolerant ... I feel like I have got a bit more respect. (Bob)

Confidence ... My people skills have always been good, but just to be able to practise has been good. (Evan)

I think I just know a bit more ... I'm a bit more 'full of it!' (Paul)

McClaren's study (1985) of mature-age female students found that higher education was 'a significant instrument of change' (p.171) in

the lives of the women she interviewed. This has been supported by a number of other studies of women as mature-age students (Edwards 1993, Kelly 1987, Martin 1988). Studies of both female and male mature-age students (Britton & Baxter 1999, Tett 2000, West, Hore, Eaton, & Kermond 1986) also indicate that while there are significant changes in identity for both men and women in higher education, the change in identity for women is particularly profound. Britton and Baxter (1999) for example, tell us that ‘men and women tell different stories, which reflect not only differences in their life experiences but also different understandings of the self’ (p.192).

When asked about any losses they had experienced as a result of being a student, virtually all the participants, female and male alike, mentioned time and money as being the most significant losses. Interestingly though, for all the struggles, each one seemed to agree that the gains outweighed the losses:

Because the alternative is to go and work at Coles, and I really don’t want to go back there. (Anne)

Only time and money. I don’t see many downsides. I have people say, ‘I’d love to do what you’re doing’ and I say ‘Do it!’ I don’t think there are many losses. (Bob)

That’s the wonderful thing about uni, that it opens you to this world that never ends. (Penny)

Future

The male participants were all very certain of their future:

I will have a nice comfortable life coming up. (Bob – Teaching)

Get a position or to gain employment with a job that will be stimulating. (David – Management)

I shouldn’t have any problem getting a job ... I don’t see any shortage of jobs for me when I finish. (Evan – Teaching)

Get a job with fair wages and security and super ... really capitalise ... (John – Science)

The qualification will make me more marketable. (Paul – Management)

For some of the women, their future was still to be determined:

I’m not sure where I’m going to end up ... I have no idea. (Carol – Arts)

I’m still kind of unsure where I want to go. (Fiona – Social Science)

I haven’t got a firm plan ... I don’t know how to narrow it down or what job I can do. (Penny – Teaching)

This is consistent with other studies of mature-age students such as Tett’s research (2000) with ‘working class’ students in the United Kingdom. She found that ‘the difference having a degree would make was ... gendered’ in that ambitions were ‘much more instrumental for the men whilst the females had less specific ambitions’ (p.189).

However, in this study this was not the case for all of the women:

I would like to be a registered psychologist and so that’s what I’m aiming for – and get an internship somewhere and register. (Grace – Psychology)

Hopefully, I’m able to secure a job which will pay more and therefore economically be able to support my children better than I would have been able to originally. (Katrina – Teaching)

Also, even though some of the women did not articulate the specifics of their future, there was a strong sense for many of knowing what they wanted in a broader sense:

Self-sufficiency and independence for me. I don’t want to have to rely on any government department or any other person

for financial support. I want to be able to do it myself. (Helen – Herbal Therapy)

I'll have more money, and I won't have Centrelink breathing down my neck. (Ingrid – Teaching)

Perhaps it is not surprising that there was this recurring theme of the hope and desire for an independent future, given the relative lack of prior opportunities for independence in the lives of many of the women. Edwards (1993) in her study of mature women students showed that the juggling of demands between home and family impacted heavily on women and placed significant barriers in the way of their being able to find and enjoy either personal or financial independence.

Also emerging strongly through the stories of both the women and the men in this study was a sense that, through the completion of their studies, personal dreams would be realised:

I will be up on the podium with my friends in 2008 ... we've got dreams and plans ... (Bob)

Sense of purpose, learnt something and can use it to help other people. (Anne)

I can't wait for the day when I can wear the funny hat and have a degree, and I guess there is a certain amount of prestige about it. (Paul)

There's about a hundred doors [opening up] ... totally different. (Amber)

Just experience something different. Africa ... something entirely different out of Australia. Aid worker or something. (Tina)

The changes that they envisaged for the future were not limited only to themselves. All of them viewed a different future, to varying degrees, for those close to them, particularly their children:

The kids are definitely taking their studies more seriously. I was really surprised by that – just by seeing me do it ... (Ingrid)

I've now started a new cycle and my children can start too ... the girls have been exposed to all of that and they will continue it now ... it's like breaking a vicious cycle. (Rachel)

I'll be able to provide a better life for my children and better education. (John)

They will see that there are opportunities ... whereas, maybe if we hadn't thought about going to uni, they probably wouldn't have thought about it. (Penny)

For these mature-age students, not only has university been 'a significant instrument of change in their lives' (McLaren 1985, p.171) but it seems likely that it has, in many cases, been an agent of generational change. The children of these now university-educated men and women may indeed be more likely to consider continuing into higher education than they might have otherwise, through the positive example of their parents' achievements.

Conclusion

Research into participation levels in higher education in Australia tells us that 'socially and educationally disadvantaged mature learners remain some of the most under-represented students in the higher education community' (Abbot-Chapman *et al.* 2004 in Cullity 2006, p.184). We also know that 'the success of mature-aged non-traditional entry appears independent of socio-economic background' (Cantwell *et al.* 2001). It is therefore of enormous importance that opportunities are created to enable such students to enter university and to succeed. Alternative entry programs and in particular equity-based enabling programs such as the Open Foundation program create such opportunities.

The stories of these 20 women and men, who have come to university as 'second chance' students (Cantwell *et al.* 2001) illustrate the

transformative nature of their experiences as students. The growth in confidence, the increase in opportunities for the future and the sense of dreams and ambitions being achieved, were common to all of these students. In addition, the possibility for generational change in terms of likelihood of participation in higher education appears very strong.

Public institutions have a vital role to play in developing greater awareness of ‘the relevance of lifelong learning to student personal and/or vocational well-being’ (Cullity 2006, p.185) as well as putting into practice programs which provide opportunity and encouragement for ‘non-traditional’ students to enter university. Research into mature learners also ‘indicates the need to consider mature students as individuals with separate social, educational, personal and vocational experiences’ (Cullity 2006, p.189). Hence it is of equal importance that institutions provide specific programs and ongoing support to enable such students not merely to enter university, but to find the encouragement to help them stay and succeed.

References

- Abbott-Chapman, J., Braithwaite, J. & Godfrey, J. (2004). *Promoting access, increasing opportunities for university education: a study of mature-aged students from disadvantaged regions*, University of Tasmania.
- Acker, S. (1994). *Gendered education*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Britton, C. & Baxter, A. (1999). ‘Become a mature student: gendered narratives of the self’, *Gender and Education*, 11(2), 179–193.
- Cantwell, R., Archer, J. & Bourke, S. (2001). ‘A comparison of the academic experiences and achievement of university students entering by traditional and non-traditional means’, *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 26(3), 221–234.
- Chadwick, R. (2007). ‘Update on Enabling from DEST’, *Enabling Education 2007 – What works?* Newcastle, Australia.
- Chapman, J., McGilp, J. E., Cartwright, P., De Souza, M. & Toomey, R. (2006). ‘Overcoming barriers that impede participation in lifelong learning’, in Chapman, J., Cartwright, P. & McGilp, J.E. (eds.), *Lifelong learning, participation and equity*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 151–174.
- 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.
- Edwards, R. (1993). *Mature women students: separating or connecting families*, London: Taylor and Francis.
- Golding, B. (2006). ‘Men’s learning in small and remote towns in Australia’, in Chapman, J., Cartwright, P. & McGilp, J.E. (eds.), *Lifelong learning, participation and equity*, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 175–203.
- Hughes, C. (2002). *Feminist theory and research*, London: Sage Publications.
- Kelly, S. (1987). *The prize and the price: the changing world of women who return to study*, Sydney: Methuen Haynes.
- Leonard, M. (1994). ‘Transforming the household: mature women students and access to higher education’, in Davies, S., Lubelska, C. & Quinn, J. (eds.), *Changing the subject: women in higher education*, London: Taylor & Francis, 163–177.
- Martin, J. (1988). *Second chance. Women returning to study*. Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin.
- McGivney, V. (2006). ‘Attracting new groups into learning: lessons from research in England’, in Chapman, J., Cartwright, P. & McGilp, J.E. (eds.), *Lifelong learning, participation and equity*, Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, pp. 79–91.
- McLaren, A.T. (1985). *Ambitions and realizations: women in adult education*, London: Peter Owen.
- McNay, L. (2000). *Gender and agency: reconfiguring the subject in feminist and social theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- O’Shea, S. (2007). ‘Well, I got here but what happens next? Exploring the narratives of first year female students who are the first in the family to attend university’, *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 29, April, 36–51.
- Rice, J. (1989). *Continuing education for women: handbook of continuing education*, San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Shands, K. (1998). ‘Doppler effects: female frequencies in higher education’, in MacKinnon, A., Elgqvist-Saltzman, I. & Prentice, A. (eds.), *Education into the 21st century: dangerous terrain for women?*, London: Falmer Press.
- Stone, C. (1999). ‘Standing up to fear and self-doubt: tackling the challenge of mature-age study’, *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 13, April, pp. 4–14.

Tett, L. (2000). 'I'm working class and proud of it' – gendered experiences of non-traditional participants in higher education', *Gender and Education*, 12(2), 183–194.

University of Newcastle (2007). Enrolment data,
http://www.newcastle.edu.au/service/cpr/university_statistics/index.html

Wearing, B. (1996). *Leisure*, Melbourne: Longman Australia.

Wearing, B. (1998). *Leisure and feminist theory*, London: Sage.

West, L.H.T., Hore, T., Eaton, E.G. & Kermond, B.M. (1986). *The impact of higher education on mature-age students*, Higher Education Advisory and Research Unit, Monash University: Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission.

Wilson, F. (1997). 'The construction of paradox? One case of mature students in higher education', *Higher Education Quarterly*, 51(4), 347–366.

Wimbush, E. & Talbot, M. (1988). *Relative freedoms: women and leisure*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Wolf-Wendel, L. & Ward, K. (2003). 'Future prospects for women faculty: negotiating work and family', in Ropers-Huilman, B. (ed.), *Gendered futures in higher education*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 111–134.

About the author

Cathy Stone is the Deputy Academic Registrar for Student Support Services at the University of Newcastle, Australia, and is currently working towards a Doctor of Social Work degree at the University of Sydney.

Contact details

Student Support Unit, University of Newcastle, Ourimbah Campus,
PO Box 127, Ourimbah, NSW 2258

Tel: (02) 4348 4033 Fax: (02) 4348 4065

Email: Cathy.Stone@newcastle.edu.au

Workplace learning: depression as an 'undiscussable' topic in eight information and communications technology organisations in South Australia

Lisa Davies
University of South Australia

More than 800,000 Australians every year are affected by depression. Despite evidence that depression is manageable, that people can be successfully treated in individually appropriate ways and that earlier identification and treatment are associated with more rapid recovery, depression appears to be poorly recognised and understood. In this paper, I focus on depression in the workplace. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with human resource managers in eight organisations within the deregulated information and computing technology sector in South Australia. I focus on managers' ability to access information about depression, and their beliefs about the value of work-based education about the illness. I also report on managers' understandings of prevailing attitudes towards depression and mental health education in their workplaces. The analysis is conducted within a qualitative, interpretive framework.
