Choices, challenges and changes: Exploring transition, persistence and engagement for first generation, female university students

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Author's Declaration

This is to certify that:

I. this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Philosophy Degree
II. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used
III. the thesis does not exceed the word length for this degree.
IV. no part of this work has been used for the award of another degree.
V. this thesis meets the *University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.*

Signature(s):
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Name(s):
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Date:
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At the deepest levels of despair, I would often find myself poring over the acknowledgements of other completed doctoral theses, seeking some form of inspiration or proof that I could complete this project. What these acknowledgement sections did indicate to me was that other students, who had families and commitments had managed to succeed and so I thank them for rescuing me from these moments of misery. However, what they did not reveal are the darkest moments when your head is full of self-doubt and you question why you ever started this. I had many of those moments.

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List of Abbreviations

ABS:	Australian Bureau of Statistics
HSC:	High School Certificates
HECS:	Higher Education Contribution System
IRUA:	Innovative Research Universities Australia
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SES:	Socio-economic status
STAT:	State Tertiary Admissions Test
TAFE:	Technical and Further Education
UK:	United Kingdom
UAI:	University Admission Index

Abstract

Beginning university study can initiate feelings of fear and self-doubt as students acculturate to a new and somewhat alien environment. For those individuals who have no friends or family members to provide guidance as they adapt to this university culture, such feelings can only be exacerbated. The lack of research that examines the processes of transition, persistence and engagement from the perspective of those involved has been noted in the literature. Hence, this study set out to outline how one group of female students, all of whom are the first in the family to attend university, subjectively experience this first year of study.

Seventeen students were recruited to participate in a series of four semi-structured interviews conducted throughout one academic year. These interviews investigated the processes involved in transition as well as the types of fears and perceptions held about engaging in tertiary study and the hurdles encountered during the year. These richly detailed narratives define the meanings individuals attach to the university setting, and also provide insight into the personal motivation and persistence required when engaging in this environment.

Research that seeks to give voice to actual student experience assists understanding about the higher education sector. The Interpretivist approach assisted in producing a study that questions traditional notions concerning what it means to be a first year student and indicates how this reality is both constructed and negotiated. This framework has been further informed by both grounded theory and narrative analysis in order to highlight how individuals move through an environment characterised by flux and transformation. The result is a study that recognises the diverse and heterogeneous nature of this tertiary landscape and gathers data from the students themselves in order to inform future university policy and practice.

They came
And for a while
They shared
A time. A place. A journey

(Anonymous, 1993)

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Yvonne, whose journey ended too soon.

Chapter One: Beginnings

Introduction

Whilst writing this thesis, it struck me that this year marks a personal anniversary, marking my twenty year engagement with the higher education sector. This time has been spent both working and studying in universities; the latter activity initiated when I entered an undergraduate degree two decades ago. This progression from second to third level education was a 'big deal' in my family. I was the first in the family to pursue a degree, both my parents had left school at the first opportunity; neither gained university qualifications.

In 1988, along with forty-two other students, I commenced the first year of a three year honours undergraduate degree in Britain. With one exception, all the members of this commencing year were within twelve months of their eighteenth birthdays. In 1991, forty students graduated; one person had left due to an unexpected pregnancy and another was delayed in completion due to illness. Over the previous three years, our whole lives had revolved around the campus. This location was not only where we studied but also where many chose to socialise and live. Lectures occurred in a large class-room where questions were encouraged and everyone was known by their first name; tutorials invariably consisted of less than ten students and participation was an expectation rather than a requirement. At the commencement of the degree, all students were allocated a year adviser, usually a lecturer or course tutor, who acted in an assistive capacity throughout the degree. I met with this adviser regularly during these three years of study.

The majority of my fellow students were in receipt of a local government authority or council grant; most of them had chosen to study away from home as this increased the amount they were eligible for. Only a few students worked, I had a few part-time jobs over the three years but largely this was the exception rather than the norm. Like today, money was tight but then only two students owned a car; no one had a personal computer and the only mobile technology possessed might be a Sony Walkman.

My undergraduate experience is so fundamentally different to that encountered by many students today as to be almost unrecognisable. Perhaps, this reflects the location of my studies in the United Kingdom (UK) but then having worked in the Australian higher education sector for over a decade I thought little could surprise me about the contemporary student. Yet, as I listened again and again to the students in this study, I was struck by the nature of their experience. I questioned whether I would be able to persist in their circumstances or whether I would want to engage in this type of university environment. The realisation quickly dawned that my undergraduate experiences are not only derived from a very different era but are also representative of assumptions and practices that no longer exist. During my degree, I only encountered one person who actually 'dropped out' or left the program whereas withdrawing from university seems common practice now (DEST, 2002; Lukic, Broadbent & Maclachlan, 2004). I cannot imagine what it must be like to sit beside a fellow student one day only for them to disappear the next. Time has become a precious commodity but as a result, the time afforded to making social connections on campus are often jettisoned in favour of the necessity of paid work or child-care commitments.

What this study seeks to explore is the actual subjective experience of studying in this mass system, where individuality is sacrificed for collective learning, where students are just one face in hundreds rather than one in forty. In this era of massification, what is the quality of this experience for students? What makes them succeed and why do they persist? Ultimately, this research is about creating questions around 'accepted' and 'taken for granted' assumptions regarding the nature of the university experience for those who are regarded as 'non-traditional'. This category is often applied to those students who have not attended university directly from school, who may be older, ethnically diverse or the first in their family or community to attend university. By presenting dialogue and stories from the students themselves, the thesis builds on knowledge from the ground up. The ways in which individuals position and articulate their relationships with higher education may provide insight into why some students choose to persist whilst others decide to go.

This introductory chapter provides the context for the ensuing chapters and begins with a brief overview of major developments within the Australian university sector. This description situates the aims and objectives of this project, which is conceptualised

around a qualitative exploration of how beginning female university students, all of whom are the first in the family to undertake university studies, experience this academic environment. The rationale for focusing on this particular area will be identified when the chapter moves to an explication of the gaps in existing knowledge on this area. A description of the background, purpose and design of the study will identify how this research intends to address these gaps. Finally, an outline of each of the chapters that follow will provide an organisational plan for the thesis.

Context of the study: The Australian university sector

Compared to twenty years ago, Australian university populations are now not only larger but also more highly diverse. Aside from ethnic and cultural diversity, many students now commence studies after a significant gap in educational participation. In the decade between 1994 and 2004, the total number of commencing university students in Australia grew by 36%, but in the same period the numbers of these students who were school leavers (aged 19 or younger) dropped from 54% to 50% nationally (Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis, 2005). The increase in the numbers of students who are older or who have accessed university through non-traditional forms of access is a global development but this has not necessarily negotiated a more equitable educational landscape. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) conducted a comparative analysis of higher education across ten countries and highlight how the 'massification of higher education has not been sufficient to eliminate unequal rates of participation by different social groups' (p.314). Instead, this move may have led to certain non-traditional groups becoming the 'new majority' in many universities but these authors and others do caution against the seemingly positive implications of this development (Grant, 1997; Read, Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Reay, 2003).

A closer examination of entry statistics reveals how high levels of access have not been possible for all groups of students with certain sections of the community still under-represented in higher education. In Australia, lower participation rates have been noted amongst people from working class backgrounds, from rural areas and from ethnic minorities. For example, Abbott-Chapman (2006) highlights how students from low

socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds and disadvantaged regions continue to be under-represented in Australian universities. Similarly, James (2008) states how 'people from low SES backgrounds are about one third as likely as people from high SES backgrounds to participate in higher education' (p.2). However, the issue of higher education participation is not simply about getting students to attend universities but also, about retaining them once they arrive. Non-completion or student drop-out consistently exceeds 20% of the total student population and 22.4% of the population leave in the first year of study (Lukic et al., 2004). However, there remains some uncertainty over this figure due to methods of measurement. The challenge of accommodating the needs of heterogeneous student populations undoubtedly engenders a need for continuing and ongoing research that addresses issues related to student retention and attrition.

Despite the rate at which beginning students depart the university, there is little consistent research into how individuals actually experience this first year of study. While studies of first year students have occurred in other universities, many of these have studied this area via statistical analysis or survey methods, utilising the results to draw conclusions about possible reasons for successful student transition, engagement or retention (Bank, Slavings & Biddle, 1990; Berger & Milem, 1999; Bers & Nyden, 2000; Johnes & McNabb, 2004; Leppel, 2002; Ryan & Glenn, 2002-2003). The bulk of this research has focused on first year attrition, seeking to define what factors influence this decision or actions that institutions and students should be taking in order to maximise chances of completion. This study differs in its approach in that the focus is on how individual students, from a particular sub-section of this population, actually experience transition, persistence, and engagement.

Aims and objectives of the project

The ways in which individual students define university will clearly impact on their behaviour so this research explores the types of meanings that students attach to the university setting. Whilst university administrators and teaching staff may have perceptions about what the university experience is, undoubtedly it is individual students

who translate this experience according to personal meaning systems and realities. Exploring how students themselves articulate their motives and how they themselves persist and engage in this environment will provide alternative perspectives on this area.

Research questions

In addressing some of the limitations of previous research in this area, a series of questions were initially developed but the focus of this research was deliberately kept fluid and dynamic. As the interviews proceeded and new concepts emerged from the data, the parameters of the study were guided accordingly. Whilst the main objective of the study remained consistent, other areas of exploration emerged both initially as the students began to tell their stories (or as the interviews proceeded), and subsequently when analysing this area. As these new and related concepts emerged, the parameters of the study were guided accordingly. At its core, this project was designed to examine issues that impacted on the transition, persistence and engagement of female, first generation students as they proceeded through a year of academic study. Once arrived, the research also examined how students choose to engage with this environment and how, particularly the older women, integrated this activity with other areas of their life. The role of relationships in the enacting of persistence and engagement is also examined in order to explore the impact of existing and new social connections.

Rationale and justification for study

The rationale for examining this area is derived from both personal and public realms. Personally, my role as an academic skills adviser has brought me into contact with students at various junctures of university study. This largely facilitative role is designed to provide support to students as they navigate university study by providing the skills and techniques that will enable them to enact academic success. Having engaged in this role for over a decade, I was struck repeatedly by the persistence and strength of the students at the campus where this study took place. Despite difficult personal circumstances and often seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the students, most of whom were women and first in the family to come to university, choose to continue in their studies rather than withdraw. It is difficult to remain unmoved by the tenacity of these individuals, particularly when one witnesses women who have successfully

navigated a difficult and alien terrain, walk across the stage at graduation. Such observations evoked a desire to more fully explore the meaning of university for this student grouping by conducting a study which is grounded in individual female experience and which facilitates access to the 'backstage' areas of women's lives (Finch, 1984, p.78). In addition, there are broader moral or equitable outcomes derived from studying an area that ultimately aims to better meet the needs and aid the success of a particular student cohort. The research study also has theoretical significance as it differs from more quantitatively focused research on student experience, which often concentrates on identifying universal factors or common denominators that impact on successful transition. In contrast, this study not only analyses the unique journey that students take while assimilating to this environment but also the techniques or spaces used to disrupt or resist accepted positions are highlighted.

While the results are limited in their application, the creation of 'local' theories which are conceptually grounded in the data, may enable other researchers to apply these constructs to their own studies in this area. The number of studies that focus on the entire first year of study within an Australian higher education context are few; this combined with the fact that the research enables first-generation students to voice personal experiences all serve to make this research somewhat unique. In addition, there has also been very little systematic research that focuses on particular cohorts of students such as those who are the first in the family to attend university. Indeed, the merits of using first generation status as a more precise indicator of educational disadvantage have been identified in the most recent literature on this area. James (2008) argues that the current measurement of low SES via post-code indicators, as used in Australia, is limited. Instead, James argues that parental educational levels are a more accurate means to identify SES in relation to levels of academic participation and achievement. Similarly, research at an international level has 'indicated that first-generation status is more indicative of educational disadvantage than parental occupation or income' (Quinn, 2004, p.60).

The interviews occurred at four discrete points throughout the academic year and this volume of meetings adds further depth to this study. Revisiting the students at different stages enables the presentation of 'a rich and progressive picture of the issues new students face as they move through their university experience…' (Walker, 2001, p.38).

The majority of these female students were older with domestic and work commitments, undoubtedly how university is played out in the public and private lives of these women is also worthy of closer exploration as often the '…family circumstances of mature students is given scant coverage in studies concerned with their participation in higher education' (Leonard, 1994, p.164).

Finally, the study intentionally examined the experiences of those students who stayed rather than those who departed, although this was difficult to predict at the commencement of the year. This focus resulted from a gap in understanding about what factors actually encourage persistence. Essentially, this study is premised upon the theory that illuminating the factors that lead to students staying is more important than identifying the reason for leaving. The reasons and factors that assisted these students to transition to and persist within this university environment, will inform university discourse and practices, ultimately enriching future student experience.

Design of the research project

The objective of this study was not to presuppose students' experiences but rather provide the space for them to recount their own stories. During a series of four interviews, students talked about university, presenting their personal reality of creating and sustaining meaning in a world characterised by obstacles, interruptions and constant renegotiations.

Methodologically, the study was informed by a grounded theory approach and also, narrative theory. One of the many strengths of grounded theory is that it adopts an open and reflective perspective on the research process; the researcher engages with the data in an open-minded manner seeking to act on and react to the material rather than attempting to fit material into predefined theoretical frameworks. Examining narrative form avoids the study of events in isolation and instead, facilitates analysis of actions as they relate temporally and spatially to other life spheres. Also, the way people story the world is indicative of choices made around an array of categories, which reflect a focus on 'certain properties' and the 'downplaying' of others (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.163).

Such a perspective highlights how there is no one absolute truth but rather truth is an individual construction reflected in how people narrate events and situations in their lives.

This approach is fully grounded in people's everyday understanding of their university experience and was framed by questions designed to gain entry into this 'lived experience'. The human element in this method engendered a more embracing interaction, demonstrated by the way in which individuals chose to disclose personal thoughts, beliefs and feelings. The interviews were deliberately open-ended and they proceeded from a guided interview style to a more conversational and unstructured approach. It is also important to note that this research is interpretivist in nature and the interviews provided a means for the students to make sense of their own journey, actively constructing their past lives in relation to their present activities.

Participants

The study focuses on seventeen women, many of whom share, in varying degrees, similar educational and occupational biographies. The women were recruited on the basis of being at the beginning stages of university study and also, being the first in their immediate families to attend university. For the purposes of this study, first-generation status was defined as no-one in the immediate family having attended university previously, including spouses or partners, children, parents and immediate siblings.

Participants were invited to participate in the research study and are not proportionally representative of the wider Australian student population. All the students that responded to the invitation to be involved were domestic or local students as they were all eligible for participation in the Higher Education Contribution Scheme and had permanent residence in Australia. The number of students interviewed enabled a diversity of data to be collected but this project is a small one and so makes no claim to be either statistically significant or able to make precise or universal predications about the university sector.

The processes around recruitment and also details concerning ethics approval have been detailed further in chapter four, which highlights the design and context of this project.

Outline of chapters

The following chapter provides a literature review of the area, commencing with a review of material relating to attrition. As stated, this study is focusing on those students who stay but our understanding of that field would be limited without reference to models and theories of attrition. The deficiencies and contradictions in this existing research are highlighted before an analysis of the literature relating to the higher education experiences of particular non-traditional student groups is critically examined. This discussion foregrounds the obstacles and difficulties generally encountered by particular student cohorts, an analysis which then examines how such factors are perceived to impact upon students as they arrive and engage with the university environment.

Chapter three provides the theoretical and conceptual framework adopted by this study, commencing with an explanation of the broader ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this research. The tenets of Interpretivism are explored particularly in relation to Symbolic Interactionism and the choice of this particular theoretical tradition is explained. This chapter also details the methodologies employed in this study and provides a rationale for using multiple analytic strategies (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) which have been informed by both constructivist grounded theory and narrative theory. The chapter then zooms in to analyse the methods used to transform the data, explaining how the qualitative software package, NVivo (7), assisted this process.

This methodological examination is followed by a description of the context of this study beginning with broad strokes that situate the study globally. This wider analysis is followed by an overview of the current Australian higher education landscape before the chapter focuses on the particularities of the university where this study took place. The chapter concludes with a detailed examination of the study's design, with particular reference to how considerations around ethics, reliability and validity were accommodated within the research process.

Chapters five, six and seven distill the findings from the interviews and are structured chronologically according to how students journeyed through university. Chapter five focuses on the student's arrival and identifies processes around this decision to attend university as well as providing a detailed description of the repercussions of this choice.

Chapter six largely draws upon the second and third interviews conducted with the students and seeks to disclose the distinctive characteristics of this experience as students journey through the year. The final data analysis chapter, chapter seven, is more reflective in nature as students engage in the metaphoric act of looking back and looking forward, which generates a sense of 'then' and 'now'. The data in this chapter is largely derived from the fourth and final interview, providing a fitting culmination to the richly diverse, meditative embroidery represented by these women's accounts.

The final two chapters address key issues that emerged from the data, that both inform the central tenet of this project as well as the related research questions. Whilst a medley of processes and categories were identified in the data chapters, the focus in chapter eight narrows somewhat to explore those concepts that relate specifically to transition, persistence and engagement. The interpretation and analysis of this data is informed by a diversity of literature derived from a range of disciplines. The final chapter then draws these conceptual threads together to suggest a number of recommendations that could be used to inform future practice within higher education institutions.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

> …first year students cannot help but experience a sense of dilemma, at the very least, and utter confusion at worst, as to their expected role and responsibilities… (Kantanis, 2000, para. 22)

The feelings expressed in the opening quote are, in all probability, experienced by most commencing students but for those defined as non-traditional such fears and emotions are exaggerated. The last two decades have witnessed university systems negotiating a number of fundamental changes, particularly in relation to demographic modifications. The so-called open access or massification of higher education witnessed in countries like Australia, Britain and America has led to what Rendon (1994) terms a 'tapestry of differentiation' (p.33) amongst students. No longer is the typical university candidate a school leaver originating from predominantly white, middle class enclaves where the tradition of attending further education is well established. Instead, many students now access university through non-traditional modes of entry and as such, may not readily identify with or adhere to the values and practices found there.

The main objective of this chapter is to demonstrate how the current research can inform understanding of this first year of study. A synthesis of the literature will place the research study within the broader scholarly discourse relating to this field. Not only will relevant thinking concerning university transition, persistence and engagement be highlighted but also, the related areas of student attrition and the experiences of non-traditional student cohorts will also be identified in order to fully ground the data analysis and discussion that follow in later chapters. However, it is also important to identify the gaps in the literature and thus, the literature review will indicate how this research project can contribute and enrich this field of study. Having said that, this chapter only provides the initial introduction to the contours of this area as the thesis proceeds the integration and examination of relevant literature continues to unfold; relevant material is woven throughout the thesis providing a constant backdrop to theoretical and analytical formulations.

The complexity and contradictions associated with examining the first year of university will become immediately apparent when the chapter initially explores the definitions of key terms and phrases referred to within the research material before highlighting key theoretical underpinnings. These theories will include an analysis of the literature on retention and attrition as undoubtedly the models and frameworks developed in this field have been used to inform understanding about the first year experience. No literature review would be complete without a thorough investigation of the criticisms of existing research and it is this topic that the chapter will examine next. In exposing such flaws the justification and reasoning for focusing research on 'non-traditional' student cohorts will be highlighted and this will be followed by an examination of some of the issues that impact on these particular groups. This is not to suggest that explorations of university experience should be demarcated and defined according to the vagaries of certain student groups but neither should this area be explored in terms of homogeneity. The lack of consistent delineation and research relating to non-traditional students is also outlined in order to provide a backdrop to the varied obstacles encountered. Students, particularly those from non-traditional backgrounds, often encounter educational situations and do not have the necessary cultural or knowledge capital to negotiate the implicit nature of an institution's 'hidden curriculum' (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, many of the expectations presumed within the class or lecture theatre, may serve to support certain groups whilst excluding others. Such perspectives will inform the main thesis of this chapter which is the need to research the student population in terms of the micro rather than just the macro.

Search strategy

Methodologically, the review includes both grey and published literature; for the purposes of this study, grey literature refers to anything that is in the public domain but has limited distribution and lacks an ISBN or ISSN number. Much of the grey material was institutionally focused and identified by conducting searches on university websites; conference proceedings, both national and international, also provided relevant sources of material. The published literature has been identified through extensive search strategies on a range of library catalogue systems and journal databases. This search spans publications recorded in the last thirty years with particular reference to journals and books published in the last ten to fifteen years. This focus is justified by the very

radical changes that the higher education landscape has undergone in this period. Relevant journal articles were initially identified by using search strategies based on key words such as non-traditional students; mature age students; first year/freshman/university, these searches were largely limited to full citations. When relevant articles were identified; reference lists were consulted for further sources of material. By adopting a question and answer approach to the literature, the research intent was to remain open to ideas no matter what their origin; information and research was thus drawn from an eclectic range of disciplinary sources.

Definition of terms

Before exploring issues around transition, persistence and engagement, it is necessary to define the multitude of terms and phrases associated with these areas. Yet, attempting singular interpretations of many of these terms is often not possible even when considering terminology common at the most fundamental level. For example, in terms of this research study, the title 'commencing' or 'first year' student refers to those individuals enrolled as internal, first time students who remain enrolled after the census date (approximately five or six weeks into semester). However, the multifarious nature of the student body and the many 'pathways' that students are now offered in their pursuit of university qualifications, means that it is difficult to be over-prescriptive in this definition. For example, students can commence university but actually study second year subjects; this is often the case for those individuals who have credit or recognition from previous studies. Indeed, the details of the research participants provided in chapter four provides a snapshot of this diversity.

The increasing number, range and type of student accessing tertiary study has undoubtedly served to engender much interest in the initial experiences of these students. This multiplicity of interests has resulted in the conflation of a number of spheres of study under the broad title of 'first year experience'. Hence, any proper analysis of this area demands definition of a number of terms not necessarily intrinsically related to this stage of university study. Prior to such explanations though, it is necessary to define the very term itself which has been credited to Gardner and

associates, who studied the American tertiary landscape in the early eighties (Schroeder, 2003). Over the years, the title First Year Experience has achieved an international application and now incorporates a number of theoretical and practical spheres including both retention and intervention strategies. For the purpose of this research, the definition adopted will reflect Gardner's original definition which regards first year experience as '…the total experience of students' (cited in Schroeder, 2003, p.10).

Retention and attrition

The word retention is an example of a term of reference that repeatedly appears in the research literature associated with this area. It can be perplexing both in terms of definition and signification. At the most fundamental level, retention concerns those students who successfully journey through their studies but in defining this it is necessary to comprehend those who do not succeed, thus the reasons for attrition also need to be explored; this can include behaviours as diverse as individuals enrolling but never attending, students attending but not participating and others who participate but fail to attain the expected standards. Equally, retention needs to be defined longitudinally, studies that focus only on the initial year of university study arguably skew statistics and results. Instead, retention and by association attrition, is better considered in terms of the course as a whole rather than within discrete time frames.

Tresman (2002) argues that these types of terms also need to be defined on a connotative level citing how phrases such as 'student retention' should not be considered as 'value free' (para. 14). Similarly, Wild and Ebbers (2002) argue this type of terminology requires more consistency in meaning and application. In their study of student retention within a community college environment, these authors argue that current explanations of retention relate specifically to a university setting and fail to consider variety in tertiary educational settings. The common definition they refer to perceives retention and the supposed ultimate success of students as being signified by 'on-time' graduation (Wild & Ebbers, 2002, p.505). Indeed, much research within this area simply equates retention with completion of a prescribed course of study. Jardine and Krause (2005) extend this explanation to reflect the actions of institutions to retain students. While this interpretation reflects the possible complexity of this process; the

definition adopted in this thesis echoes that of Moxley, Najor-Durack and Dumbrigue (2001). In their book, *Keeping Students in Higher Education: Successful Practices and Strategies for Retention*, these authors argue that retention should be negotiated longitudinally, reflecting the development of the student as a whole as they proceed through the years of study.

Definitions of retention are often placed appositionally to those reflecting the loss or exiting of students from tertiary institutions, words such as attrition or withdrawal are also common to the studies purporting to reflect on the first year experience. The most recent Australian government report on attrition rates (1994 – 2002) highlights how first year attrition rates were last recorded at 21.2% (DEST, 2002) and that this rate consistently exceeded 20% throughout the period studied (DEST, 2002; Lukic et al., 2004). Unfortunately, comparative analysis of these rates is limited internationally, as similar to terms of reference associated with retention, common interpretations of attrition remain illusive. This linguistic limitation is further compounded by the lack of consistency in methods used to calculate such figures (Glossop, 2002). At the most fundamental level, Glossop argues that attrition can be defined as the 'difference between the numbers of students beginning each cohort and the numbers who completed that cohort' (p.377). Whilst such figures and the definitions used to obtain them are useful on a general level, ultimately these do not truly reflect the complexity of this area, an issue that will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

Transition and orientation

Research on the first year of university repeatedly makes reference to another key term when discussing the retention and attrition of students. Transition is used to refer to the process of adjustment to, or involvement in, the new tertiary environment experienced by students. Similar to the need to recognise the longitudinal nature of student retention, Latham and Green (1997) echo the need to recognise the longitudinal nature of transition. Kantanis (2003) refers to this process as involving 'a *period* of significant adjustment, development and change...' (author's emphasis, para 2) also requiring significant adaptation on the part of the student. This individual and experiential nature of transition arguably makes it impossible to define in any exact sense. McInnis, James and McNaught (1995) identify how transition is influenced by a 'complex array of

personal and social background factors' (p.29) further negotiated by the specific characteristics of the tertiary setting. Latham and Green (1997) point out that transition is not limited to tertiary or educational environments, instead this process has a centrality to life. These authors define transition in more general terms, referring to it as 'movement from the known to the unknown or…the partially unknown' (para. 3). As such, transition can be regarded as inextricably bound up with the multiple journeys undertaken throughout life and these authors argue that regardless of circumstance, such movement is invariably problematic. In the case of transition to university, failing to engage with this setting or connect with peers are both regarded as possible precursors to student withdrawal (Latham & Green, 1997; Tinto, 1998). As a response to this situation, many educational institutions employ strategies to aid transition; such responses are usually referenced by the term orientation.

Within the literature on the first year experience, the terms transition and orientation are occasionally used interchangeably but it is important to recognise that these reflect very different things. Orientation is used predominantly to refer to the response to student attrition; often such a response is negotiated through programs or materials that focus on the nature or expectations of the university setting. Orientation also differs from transition temporally, in that it reflects a shorter time frame often specifically the initial weeks of the first semester whereas transition may be lengthier. Kantanis (2003) defines the difference between orientation and transition by negotiating the first as being 'embedded' in the second, that is regarding orientation as being an 'initial phase' of the transition phase (p.1). Similarly Krause (2006) regards orientation as 'just one part of the first year puzzle' and perceives the need for this to be accompanied by 'extended transition support' throughout the first year of study (p.2). This long-term approach can arguably afford better engagement for students, where engagement signifies 'the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance their learning at university' (Krause et al., 2005, p.31). Successful transition within the first year increases students' engagement and satisfaction with the university and also, increases the chances of persistence and completion (Burnett, 2006; Tinto, 2002).

Interestingly, the vagaries of the terminology associated with this area of study have certainly not served to diminish the level of attention focused upon it. Instead, as McInnis et al. (1995) point out, study and analysis of the first year of university has been a

feature of Australian research spheres for over fifty years and interest in this area has arguably only grown in recent decades. Undoubtedly, the major insights that research on attrition has produced must be highlighted in order to best understand the complexities and contradictions afforded the newly enrolled student. As Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) argue, studying the reasons for student withdrawal is an essential 'first step' in comprehending this 'first year experience' (p.186). Hence, this chapter will now provide an overview of the research and theory on both the reasons and behaviours associated with attrition or retention, as an understanding of this area will better define the transition process.

Studying student attrition: Early research

Berger and Braxton (1998) refer to the withdrawal process as a 'departure puzzle' (p.104) and draw attention to how this has attracted attention from both scholarly researchers and university policy makers. These parties often have quite a different focus on this research field: the former is largely interested in devising solutions to the riddle, while the latter seeks to create pragmatic strategies that serve both student and institution. Yet, it would be incorrect to assume that the recent interest in this field has led to a saturation of research. Rather when compared to studies of other educational sectors, investigation devoted to the general tertiary field remains limited. This situation has prompted some British researchers to ironically suggest that the university sector is an area that is chronically 'under-researched' (Blythman & Orr, 2001-2002; Edwards, 1990; Martinez, 2001). Undoubtedly, this situation is manifest in relation to theorisation on attrition and retention, whilst inquiry is visible since the fifties, so much more valid and quality analysis is required in order to adequately theorise this crucial facet of university life.

Research on attrition conducted in the seventies and eighties is characterised by a focus on developing models that attempted to explain the process involved in students' decisions about academic perseverance. Bean (1982) classes many of these earlier studies as largely atheoretical with descriptive properties. In 1998, Pascarella and Terenzini highlighted how the majority of studies that had focused on students in the

tertiary environment were based upon the American context and were profoundly biased. These authors analysed over 2,600 studies that purported to highlight the multifaceted effects of college on students, however closer analysis revealed that these studies were limited to particular types of institutions and specific cohorts of students, focusing on '…'traditional', white…students, aged 18-22 who attended four year institutions full-time, who lived on campus…and who had few…family responsibilities' (para. 2). Accordingly, much of this early research only succeeded in theorising a student population that was already in the minority. By the eighties, the tertiary landscape in America had profoundly shifted as the student body became more ethnically diverse, increasingly including those that were employed and also older, by 2001 almost half of all American college students were over 25 (Mancuso, 2001).

However, it was not only America that experienced such a shift, within Britain the late eighties also heralded a move from a closed and elitist system of further education to one characterised by mass participation culminating in New Labour's 2001 promise of 50% participation for all 18-30 year olds by 2010. In Ireland, the target focuses on mature age students and the aim is to increase the numbers of these students to 25% of the total full-time entrants by 2015 (Fleming, 2002). By 1989, Australia had already achieved this target (Scott, Burns & Cooney, 1996) perhaps indicating the way in which the Australian higher education sector had embraced this move from an elite to a mass system in a more timely manner. These changes in the student demographic have necessitated further research in an attempt to understand how this diversity has impacted on the nature of student experience. Older studies and explanatory models are inherently limited as they reflect on the student population in terms of homogeneity rather than heterogeneity.

Aside from issues relating to the applicability of early research to the reality of the current diverse tertiary environment, other criticisms of this early theorisation include the failure to differentiate between those that leave permanently and those students who are taking a break from their studies. The lack of recognition of the non-linear nature of university study is an ongoing weakness of research into higher education and the implications of this poor reporting will be considered in more detail later in this chapter. Another limitation of early research is that some investigations seem centred on a problem-solution matrix with studies concluding that the solution exists external to the

university, essentially beyond its control. In fact, Martinez (2001) concedes that such a perspective remains apparent within more recent British research. However, most of the foundational studies that remain current have attempted more holistic explorations of this area that attempt explanation and exploration of the roles played by both institutions and students.

Theorising attrition

Bean (1982) suggests that when reviewing research related to withdrawal, perhaps it is better to synthesise these into three broad categories of variables that have been shown to influence persistence in some way. By grouping elements according to whether they are related to organisational, environmental or attitudinal attributes Bean hypothesises that the field of student retention can be explored in a more substantial way. Reviewing the studies on this topic might be better negotiated by focusing the analysis according to similar categories. Indeed, such an examination reveals the many contradictions at play within this area.

Internal variables: Attitudinal factors

Most of the studies that have assessed the internal workings of student decisions about withdrawal draw upon psychological imperatives. Early psychological studies largely attempt to identify causality between individual attributes and the possibility of departure (Tinto, 1987). Many of these adopted a quantitative stance providing details of the characteristics and measurable variables of the leaving student in an attempt to assess the potential for completion. Studies that attempt to provide reasons for students' decisions to leave university are flawed as such psychological categorisation only goes a very small way in explaining the inextricable nature of this area. As Longden (2002) argues, for the student the decision to leave university is both 'multilayered' and 'multifactorial' (p.5). While psychological factors may play a part in decisions concerning withdrawal, it is fruitless to attempt to define, what Cope and Hannah (1975) term, a 'departure prone' personality, as much of the early psychological research did (Rose & Elton, 1966; Rossman & Kirk, 1970).

If early attempts at assessing the psychological elements of attrition have failed to address the area in all its complexity, researchers have since recognised the need to redefine the complex psychological processes at play within decisions relating to persistence. Coffman and Gilligan (2002-2003) suggest that there are a number of stressful elements associated with commencing studies and for some individuals these prove to be overpowering, the resulting feelings leading to 'psychological distress' or even withdrawal (p.53). Similarly, Mackie (2001) argues that when studying the individual experiences of learners commencing university studies, the stressful characteristics associated with this process are clear. Research by Salzberger-Wittenberg, Henry and Osborne (1983) identify how this period of adjustment requires both personal and psychosocial development often necessitating fundamental change to ideation surrounding self and selfhood. In fact, drawing on Erikson's (1950) work on identity formation, Salzberger–Wittenberg et al. conclude that for younger students these renegotiations may occur at a crucial stage in individual identity development.

Such issues are bound to affect individuals differently and are indicative of the emotional and very personal repercussions resulting from this process. Coffman and Gilligan (2002-2003) suggest that such psychological stress can be better negotiated on both an institutional level with the introduction of better social support systems and also individually, if students have high levels of self-efficacy. These authors highlight how factors such as social support and self-efficacy combine to enable life satisfaction; their research explores how higher levels of this feeling of life satisfaction can aid in retention and possibly be utilised to predict withdrawal. While the research could not conclusively relate levels of life satisfaction with the possibility of withdrawal behaviour, it was found that social support was significantly related to life satisfaction and that such support also impacted upon withdrawal behaviour. Thus, the researchers conclude that strategies aimed at increasing the life satisfaction of students could possibly influence levels of withdrawal or departure. In support of this, Sevier (1996) argues that university's should offer more than just academic programs and instead negotiate the university experience as 'the sum of the student's academic, social, physical and even spiritual experience' (p.14). The recognition of the multifaceted nature of the university experience undoubtedly needs to inform the nature of the inter-relationships formed between students and organisations.

External factors: Environmental and organisational

Environmental theories of attrition broadly examine the interplay of economic, organisational and social factors on student withdrawal. Such studies explore how broader imperatives, those external to the institution, impact on this area. Economic theories reflect on the role that finances play in student decisions about withdrawal perhaps particularly relevant in Australia as institutional budgets and student finances continue to be constrained (James, Bexley, Devlin & Marginson, 2007). Often such economic imperatives are further compounded by institutional practices and it is the effect of these on attrition that organisational theories seek to explore.

The decision to leave university is generally made as a result of factors that include personal or internal elements, institutional factors and reasons that are influenced by societal or external forces. External reasons that can initiate such an action include demographic indicators such as low SES, as well as social factors such as lack of family support or poor finances, as identified by a number of researchers (McGivney, 2004; Reay, David & Ball, 2001; Yorke, 1999). Additionally, institutional factors such as relationships between students and staff members have also been noted as being influential in the decision to leave (Elliott, 2002-2003; Tinto, 1998).

Martinez (2001) argues that factors external to the student do not necessarily influence student decisions to leave more than factors under the control or auspices of the institution. Instead, this author suggests that factors which encourage positive tertiary experiences are firmly ensconced within institutional frameworks; particularly elements such as good pedagogy, appropriate course choice and good recruitment procedures all of which, Martinez identifies as aiding persistence. Similarly, Davies (2000) argues that financial hardship affects such decisions only when prior discontent or disappointment with courses or teaching is already apparent. In order to examine why students leave university, focus needs to be placed on the workings of the institution itself.

Clearly, the impact of institutional characteristics on a student's decisions and behaviours should not be downplayed. Kantanis (2000) suggests that the massification or widening participation agenda common in Australian universities means that academic expectations of the first year student need to be revised in order to consider the burgeoning diversity of this student cohort. A better recognition of the qualities and

skills that students are now bringing to the university environment needs to be conceptualised as well as a renegotiation of academic expectations and learning behaviours. Such expectations include the need to make explicit, issues surrounding independent learning and the nature of engagement within the academic community. Having studied how organisational structures impact on withdrawal behaviour, Berger and Braxton (1998) conclude that institutions can implement quite basic strategies to aid student retention. Their findings include the need for universities to employ clear communication concerning academic standards and expectations, a need echoed by Martinez and Munday (1998) based on their survey of thirty-three British colleges of further education. The participants in this study included both staff and students, both groups expressing the need for clear advice prior to enrolment in order to ensure a match between student expectations and realities. Such clarity is also required in relation to communicating rules and the need for these to be governed by fairness.

Ideally, such explicitness should also extend to material and information produced about the institution. In an increasing economic driven marketplace, universities are required to essentially sell their wares and some of the promotional material may not reflect student realities. Watson, Cavallaro-Johnson and Austin (2004) sought to highlight how student perceptions of their chosen program and profession influenced decisions to withdraw or persist. This study focused on a cohort of students studying Education and revealed how they had a somewhat unrealistic perception of the teaching role and that realisation of the realities associated with the teaching profession had a negative impact on retention. These authors discovered a 'considerable gap between their [students'] idealism and realism of the class-room' (p.68) and suggest that both retention practices and promotional material should attempt to provide a realistic precursor to the chosen study and profession. The market driven nature of the higher education sector has situated the student as client, establishing a brand has been imperative as institutions struggle to claim a segment of the market (Krause, 2005). As White (2007) highlights, this process is further determined by the global nature of the education sector:

> Consumers of 'educational product' are actively recruited on the world stage, particularly as full fee paying international students provide a much needed injection of funding. (White, 2007, p.594)

It is perhaps not surprising that the increasing market focus of universities has led to the concurrent application of marketing theory to the study of this area. The idea that an

absence of loyalty exists between the consumer student and the educational organisation has arguably incited the inclusion of such terminology as service quality and customer satisfaction within university discourse.

Bruning (2002) applies public relations theorisation in order to understand the nature of student connectedness. Focusing on 'organisation-public relationships' (p.39), Bruning suggests that individuals who perceive that they are engaged in a relationship with an institution are more inclined to remain as customers, indicating that a focus on relationship building with students can perhaps translate positively in terms of retention. In such relationships, Bruning (2002) identifies the need not only to communicate with those involved in the relationship but additionally to make those individuals feel valued. Berger and Braxton (1998) also emphasise the importance of this relationship building and highlight how students' participation in the decision making process on campus can facilitate and contribute to such feelings of value. Thus, arguably the nature of the relationship between the institution and the student has clear implications for, and influences on, learner's behaviour and decisions. Indeed, it is precisely this relational area that interactionalist approaches to student retention sought to explore and theorise.

Interactionalist models of retention

Interactionalist thinking on student retention explores the ways in which student and institutional environment interact or the 'sociology of retention' (Bean & Bogdan-Eaton, 2001-2002, p.74). Spady (1970) is recognised as being the first to conceptualise the university setting as a social system manifesting unique moral and social configurations. This theorist argued that drop out can be reflected upon in a similar way to how Durkheim conceptualised suicide within the wider community. Durkheim postulates that the possibility of suicide increases if two forms of integration are absent, namely moral and collective integration (Tinto, 1975, p.91). While Durkheim's model has been criticised in its explanation of suicidal tendencies, it has provided a basis and alternative perspective for analysing student transition and persistence.

Spady's (1970) theory referred to Durkheim's suicide theory, arguing that certain forms of integration which help to reduce suicide, may be similarly applied to attrition. This approach was longitudinal and identified particular variables that aid social integration

and thus, increase the chances of persistence. However, achieving social integration within the university environment is identified as not sufficient to guarantee success. Instead, a lack of integration with the academic social system was also recognised as impacting negatively on levels of commitment, resulting in negative affiliation (Tinto, 1975). Whilst Spady (1970; 1971) recognised that social integration was important, he also emphasised the need for students to have adequate social support, appropriate academic development and suitable academic performance as well as possess common goals or values to that of the institution. Tinto (1975) further developed this model, identifying the importance of grounding such analysis in relation to individual characteristics including key referents such as social status, educational background, motivational attributes and individual expectations. Tinto's model, known as the 'Interactionalist Theory of Student Departure', is arguably both the most widely cited and the most widely tested empirically. This model has been referred to as the 'lynchpin' of research about retention and persistence (Bers & Nyden, 2000).

The study outlined in this thesis focuses on reasons and circumstances effecting student transition, persistence and engagement. Thus while Tinto's model is not intrinsically related it does require analysis as this model has formed a major part of the discussions around the first year experience. As such, it is necessary to provide a detailed explanation of Tinto's work, including an outline of the criticism of this approach. The limitations of Tinto's work are particularly noted in relation to the non-traditional student cohort, a descriptor that is representative of this study's participants. Thus, the following section begins to provide a basis and indeed justification for the parameters of this study, providing a rationalisation for further study and exploration.

Vincent Tinto

Tinto (1975) proposed a longitudinal model of student attrition that incorporated both facets of Durkheim's theory and also referenced Van Gennep's work on the rites of passage within tribal societies. Essentially, Tinto argues that while individual student traits impact on decisions, it is the interplay between these and the issues of integration that ultimately determine persistence or withdrawal. Incorporation within the institutional environment is perceived as being vital to continued persistence and largely pursuant on the level of engagement students acknowledged not only in relation to peers but also

most importantly, in relation to academic staff (Tinto, 1975). Hence Tinto's model presents student retention as arising from interaction between the student and the academic environment.

Tinto's (1975) initial intent was to move beyond a descriptive model and attempt to include personal descriptors or measures related to both motivation and individual expectations including information related to goals or commitment to a particular institution. In drawing parallels between drop out and suicide, Tinto argues that, as Durkheim suggests, suicide is more likely to occur if individuals fail to integrate with society usually as a result of holding different views or values to those of the social system. In a similar way, Tinto suggests that the university community is characterised by quite specific values or attributes. However, given the fact that these values are both academic and social in nature, this theorist points out that the model should differentiate between these two main forms of integration; arguing that a person could be successfully integrated into one of the spheres but still withdraw due to poor integration in the other area. Attrition is perceived as occurring over a long period characterised by the nature of interactions between individual student and institutional social and academic systems. These interactions serve to moderate or influence commitment or propensity for drop out, the higher the level of commitment or integration with the university setting the more likely persistence. Equally, if a student possesses high levels of commitment then they may persist despite low levels of social or academic integration.

In addition to these internal factors, this model also identifies how external elements may combine to increase the risk of attrition but Tinto suggests that these can be perceived within a cost-benefit framework. Thus, students who regard university study as an appropriate and a rewarding employment of time and energy will tend to persist, however if this situation alters for example, changes to the employment market leading to less jobs in the field, these students may choose to expend energy in another activity more indicative of goal achievement (Tinto, 1975). This point has been more recently supported by Martinez (2001) who argues that students' decisions about persistence and withdrawal are constantly weighed up according to 'costs of continuing with or abandoning, a programme of study' (p.5).

Tinto also identifies certain characteristics of the learner as being more indicative of possible attrition; these include family background, individual characteristics such as behavioural elements, past educational experiences and goal commitment which combine with interactions with the institutions to influence decisions about withdrawal. Tinto's model has been both adopted and adapted by numerous theorists but arguably this approach provides much of the theoretical underpinnings present within the research on this area.

Updating and revising Tinto's model

More recent research continues to define and develop Tinto's 'interactionalist' model, indeed in 1993 Tinto revised it himself to include greater focus on the impact of perceptual and behavioural interaction in relation to the process of integration. Bean and Bogdan-Eaton (2001-2002) apply psychological theory, developing the psychological model of student retention. Building upon Tinto's notions of social and academic integration, these authors link the motivation to achieve integration with an individual's locus of control in the new educational environment. However, arguably measuring or assessing this 'locus of control' is problematic, given its indefinable nature.

Clearly, whatever the theoretical stance, there continues to be an emphasis on the crucial impact academic and institutional relations have on student transition and persistence. Models that have gained currency within the field, both psychological and social, have repeatedly shown that the relationships that students form within an institution can aid integration and this has clear impacts in relation to first year retention and attrition. These relationships can be both social and academic in nature and if positive can result in validation and participation. The formation of relationships within the university environment is regarded as being a key to persistence and successful transition, this argument forms the basis for one of the areas explored in chapter six. In this chapter, the role of such relationships for the students involved in this study will be examined, in order to highlight the implications of these within the contemporary university environment. Tinto (1998) postulates that academic integration is more important than social integration but equally argues that it is difficult to predict influences on an individual basis. Indeed, there is some dispute regarding the importance of various integrative factors in relation to withdrawal, a contradiction revealed within the literature.

Academic or social integration: Which is the more vital?

Literature on student integration resounds with diverse opinion on the nature of integration and where it should occur, a number of authors argue that validation is more beneficial and valued when it occurs outside the class-room (Bank et al., 1990; Kantanis, 2000; Rendon, 1994). Such a perspective is probably best summed up by Kantanis (2000) who states that 'social transition underpins a successful academic transition to university' (para. 9). Kantanis' research indicated that the creation of peer friendships impacted significantly on persistence. Similarly, Johnson (2000-2001) suggests that fostering a sense of community amongst participants is one vital way of creating relationships. In contrast to this, Tinto (1998) suggests that while social integration plays a part in this process it is undoubtedly academic affiliation that is more important. In other words, the relationships that occur within the academic environment are the major influence; the validation that occurs within this locale supports external involvement.

Tinto postulates that a lack of integration can be attributed to two main sources, incongruence and isolation. The first is characterised by a lack of institutional affiliation whilst the second is tied to a lack of social interaction. Strong social integration can act in a preventative manner in relation to attrition but for Tinto, it is academic integration that remains imperative to retaining students. Other research though has adopted a less prescriptive approach suggesting that both forms of integration have a role in student retention. For example, Perry and Allard's (2003) research indicates how establishing connections both with peer groups and the wider academic community is vital to successful transition. This is also indicated by qualitative research conducted by Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow and Salomone (2002-2003) where students' sense of belonging was partially predicated on both developing peer relationships and also acknowledgement from academic staff that individual students were 'more than just another face in the crowd' (p.251). However, given the nature of the contemporary student experience and the fact that in Australia, students vary greatly in the amount of time they spend on campus (Krause et al., 2005) the nature and the importance of these relationships needs to be examined more closely.

The types of relationships that students form with each other and also with the university teaching staff has a qualitative effect on both the first year student experience and also the nature of transition, persistence and engagement within the university environment.

Chapter six will further indicate how the nature of these relationships and the value attributed to these, differed between students in this study. The reasons for this variance and its possible implications will be explored in more detail in this later chapter.

Temporal variables

> In the pressure cooker environment of contemporary institutions, students must adapt quickly to survive and thrive. (Skene, Hogan & Brown, 2006, p.1)

Forming connection takes time so another important facet of the transition to university is the temporal characteristics of this behaviour. Tinto (1998) argues that the initial weeks of the first year is a crucial period in relation to decisions around persistence, as students are often not yet connected to the institution on an emotive or experiential level. In Tinto's model, there are a number of crucial stages where the possibility for attrition may increase. This includes the application stage where often inappropriate perceptions of the institution are formed or indeed marketed and also the period of transition to the new learning environment, usually comprising the initial weeks of semester. Tinto nominates the first six weeks of semester as a critical time in this process. The temporal nature of student withdrawal is founded upon Tinto's derivation of Van Gennep's work on rites-of-passage, which distinguishes the development of community membership in three separate stages, namely: 'separation', 'transition' and 'incorporation'.

The first of these stages is characterised by the student separating from previous community affiliations. Tinto (1987; 1993) argues that the need for such separation offers one explanation for students who depart early in the semester. This author suggests that attrition may result from a failure or lack of desire to disassociate from the familiar or primary community associations. In order to pass through this initial stage successfully, Tinto (1987; 1993) describes how individuals must alter or reject past affiliations or beliefs, thus transformation might be required on both a personal and a public level involving the denial of prior connections to family, friends and locations. Those willing to move away from such associations may, according to this model, increase the chances of integration. Arguably, the assumed timeframe within this model may limit its application within the Australian context given that university students do not have a lengthy period allocated to adjusting to further study, unlike the American college

system, also this model makes assumptions around the age and stage of the entering student. However, these are just a few of the limitations identified in relation to Tinto's approach and as the next section attests, much critical feedback exists both in relation to Tinto's model and other research. When examining the literature on this field, it soon became apparent that no single model can fit every situation.

Critical appraisal of literature on attrition and retention

Much of the existing research on retention and transition has undergone rigorous analysis and empirical validation, yet both methodological and theoretical criticisms are still apparent. Glossop (2002) identifies methodological limitations within current research such as low response rates and measurement issues; while Seppanen (1996) argues that the survey methods, so often a feature of studies in retention, lacks validity both in relation to determining reasons for withdrawal and in terms of providing tangible suggestions for improving the retention of students. Equally, Martinez and Munday (1998) question the use of telephone or postal surveys of departed students suggesting that responses may be superficial. These criticisms are based upon the temporal nature of departure; often the reasons for leaving could simply reflect a student's context or situation at a particular point in time. By focusing on those students that stay rather than those that depart, the study in this thesis will generate quality data by conducting in-depth interviews with students as they actually proceed through the academic year. Whilst the data generated may be context bound reflecting perspectives and particular points in time; the opportunity to repeatedly visit students throughout the year, enables a 'layered' account of the processes involved in transition, persistence and engagement to be presented.

This repeated interaction should avoid some of the limitations of previous research. As Brawer (1996) identifies much of the existing research on persistence is limited in terms of the methodology adopted. One criticism is the singularity of focus where studies concentrate on isolated attributes of students such as personality factors or academic abilities and their impact on retention; alternatively some studies refer solely to specific institutional strategies. This singularity of existing research has more recently been

criticised by Glossop (2002) who draws attention to the fact that in the UK, much of the investigation into higher education is focused on specific institutions limiting general applicability. Barefoot (2000) supports this concern in relation to the American research on this area. Further, many of these studies exist as grey literature and largely arise on an ad-hoc basis reflective of individual interest rather than systematic research. Similarly, within Australia, McInnis (2001) highlights how research on student experience has failed to produce broad, 'substantial reflective work on higher education' (p.111). Undoubtedly this lack of attention, means that few 'comparisons between colleges or indeed component parts of colleges' have occurred (Martinez, 2001, p.14). While this study is based in one institution, this research may form the basis for future, more in-depth studies of particular student cohorts. Future research on this area needs to attend to broader educational and social contexts in order to highlight the possible impacts on current and future student populations.

Martinez and Munday (1998) also contend that the multiplicity of student experience means that this area should also be explored in terms of the micro and the individual; as otherwise the unique nuances of experience may be lost. This is one of the challenges for this research, to relate individual student experience to broader political and social factors; providing a detailed snap-shot that while not broadly applicable will still initiate valid understanding in relation to student transition, persistence and engagement.

Theoretical limitations

For Glossop, the methodological limitations of existing studies have had detrimental effects on the study of attrition and retention, a situation arguably further compounded by theoretical limitations.

> The [theoretical] limitations of previous research illustrate the inherent difficulties in achieving a sound knowledge base, on which practical solutions for tackling the problem can be based. (Glossop, 2002, p.376)

Mackie (2001) also identifies how many studies simplify the withdrawal process, failing to recognise the multiplicity of this area. Many of these theoretical orientations perceive withdrawal as resulting from certain predetermined elements that seemingly dictate this action. In short, the study of student retention seems firmly entrenched within 'a specific discourse and a specific theoretical framework, both of which are open to challenge' (Tresman, 2002, para. 4). For Tresman, this discourse is largely influenced by the

market driven nature of the education field resulting in the application of management theory and terminology. Such application has led to the questionable practice of treating students as consumers and assuming that education should be consumer rather than practitioner-led but surely there is room for a combination of these interests? Lahteenoja and Pirttila-Backman (2005) describe how:

> There is a shifting away from the traditional university ideals of seeking knowledge and cultivating the spirit to a more instrumental approach, to marketisation and a 'discourse of efficiency'. (p.658)

Indeed, such a focus within institutions has led to the extreme of certain studies seeking to discover the values that students attach to particular institutions in order to facilitate better marketing and so meet these desires (see for example: Elliott & Shin, 2002).

The consumer focus of university providers should not always be perceived in negative terms. Instead, Read et al. (2003) regard this consumerism as providing the possibility for a more engaged student experience enabling a discourse of 'resistance' (p.273). These authors suggest that when students position themselves as 'empowered consumers' then the opportunity to be located in a 'more central position in the world of academy' becomes a possibility (p.273). However, this does depend on whether the institution is interested in what the market is saying and presupposes a disposition to act on such feedback. Equally as customers, students may also be constructed as passive recipients of a service, holding minimal obligation in relation to participating in the process (White, 2007). The debates around the marketisation and consumerism of higher education remain unresolved about how these practices impact on the student population.

Another major gap in the research is the failure to combine both academic and non-academic predictors of successful retention and academic performance. McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) attest that within the Australian research context there is little published material that attempts to explore how a gamut of factors including psychological elements, demographic factors as well as academic ones, integratively impact on the university experience. Research in this area should then remain open to a diversity of possible influences rather than limiting study to a preconceived framework. Indeed, within qualitative research, adopting an approach to research that is grounded in

the actual responses of students retains the possibility for discovering theory rather than imposing ideas or theories on material.

Further, McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001) criticise how studies of academic performance have tended to refer to Tinto's interactionalist model and focus on one particular element rather than studying factors in combination. For example, in their own study, they contradict one of Tinto's tenets by suggesting that a high level of commitment to the university does not necessarily translate into high levels of academic performance, questioning assumptions around this model. However, given that Tinto's work has formed the empirical basis for much theorisation about the first year of study, it is not altogether surprising that this researcher has received significant critical appraisal.

Specific criticism of Tinto's Interactionalist Model

Tierney (1992) highlights that while most of the research in college persistence and retention implicitly reflects the epistemology of Tinto's models, not many of these critically appraise this epistemology. With this in mind, Tierney (1992) questions some of the fundamental assumptions of Tinto's anthropological approach. For example, the appropriation of the term 'ritual' is questioned, as this is not embedded in a specific cultural environment. Instead, the term remains implicit and thus Tierney argues when ritual is applied to the university environment, it can only be assumed to reflect the rituals of the dominant culture, being the white culture. Thus, when applying the rites of passage analogy, it seems assumed that in this model students from minority cultures are expected to undergo a ritual in another culture, a scenario that arguably Van Gennep did not envisage within this framework. Tierney (1992) also points out that Tinto implies a level of choice in whether to participate in this rite of passage, a decision against involvement leading to departure. Such decisions rarely exist in similar rituals occurring within traditional contexts.

Tinto (1998) has responded to such criticisms by stating that Van Gennep perceived his theory as having relevance to a number of situations and contexts, particularly those that necessitate the movement of individuals from one location to another. Also, Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson (1997) suggest that Tierney's criticisms are further limited by his failure to suggest alternative approaches or theoretical frameworks that could be applied

to this area. With this in mind, these authors suggest that Tinto's stages should not be dismissed and this approach remains empirically open to further exploration and refinement. Indeed, it is noteworthy that, as yet, no Australian studies have attempted a comprehensive assessment of the applicability of Tinto's model to an Australian higher education context, yet many studies make mention of this model.

There is another facet of this model that has attracted much critical attention. Tinto's separation stage which implies the need for students to separate from prior 'values' and 'norms' in order to integrate effectively with the tertiary setting has been questioned by a number of theorists (Berger & Milem, 1999; Gatz & Hirt, 2000; Mackie, 2001). Rather than perceiving separation as an essential step to integration, these authors argue that for many students prolonged contact and involvement with family and friends may actually aid integration rather than prevent it: '…incorporation into the campus community might well be fostered when maintaining links with family and home...' (Gatz & Hirt, 2000, p.313). Indeed, in recognition of the importance of links with the family, some universities are now actively engaging with the families of students. For example, one university in New Orleans offers programs that are based upon ongoing involvement with families and parents of students; an equity representative of the university pointing out that '…the family system is a key component of what's made them [the students] successful this far…we consider parents integral partners in their student's success' (Brotherton, 2001, p.37).

Tinto (1987) has recognised the limitations of this separation stage for some student cohorts, conceding that individuals who are more mature or married, may rely more heavily on external communities and affiliations. Arguably, this is the case with first generation students many of whom seek and indeed need to retain the support of family and friends. However, Elkins, Braxton and James (2000) suggest that for those students whose previous affiliations may question or even reject associations with tertiary education, attendance at university may represent 'a major disjunction' to family beliefs and behaviours (p.263). This area is explored further in chapter six, which explores the nature of relationships both inside and outside the institution as well as choices students made around pre-existing affiliations.

There has been some suggestion that Tinto's propositions have been taken too literally. Nora (2001-2002) argues that the separation stage might be better perceived as a disassociation from certain values or beliefs rather than complete disaffection from familial or relational bonds. In recognition of this, institutions should perhaps foster inclusivity by actively encouraging different values and norms rather than simply expecting the student to adopt those associated with the dominant factions of society. Tierney (1992) also calls for a reconceptualisation of transition to university, suggesting that rather than perceiving this as involving a separation from previous cultural commitments, university environments should reinforce and incorporate the knowledge and skills derived from an individual's cultural membership.

Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) also appraise Tinto's model on a number of levels, primarily suggesting that the interactionalist approach has limited application beyond the American context as it retains cultural specificity that does not readily lend itself to cross-cultural application. Empirically, Ozga and Sukhnandan argue that the theoretical assumptions implicit within this approach have led too many researchers to '…become preoccupied with the manipulation of variables in an attempt to uncover causality...' (p.317). Mackie (2001) also criticises the nature of the variables expounded within Tinto's model, suggesting a need to better explore the role played by external factors in relation to the integration and engagement of students, particularly students who live and socialise off campus. However, Tinto remains adamant that factors external to the university environment play a secondary role to those experiences within the institution.

> While external factors may influence one's decisions to go to college and greatly constrain choices as to which college to attend, once entry has been gained…the impact of external events is largely subsumed in the process of college entry. (Tinto, 1987, p.125)

Such a declaration seems to reflect the inherent limitations of Tinto's model in relation to the contemporary student population. Students, both old and young, have a range of competing demands outside of university which continue to effect persistence and engagement in this environment. Tinto does concede that dramatic events occurring within the external environment may lead to involuntary departure but he maintains that other outside elements play a minor role in the student experience. Again, the later chapters devoted to the analysis of the interviews from this study will indicate whether this was also the case for the students in this research project.

In contrast to Tinto's perceived insulation, Smith and Naylor (2001) identify how students who continue to live within the family home develop different social networks on compared to those who reside within university confines. Indeed, for all those students regarded as non-traditional, variables beyond those identified by Tinto influence decisions relating to persistence or withdrawal. Tresman (2002) regards these as including initial educational experience and again draws attention to the importance of support from those traditionally deemed external to the university setting such as peer groups, family and employment.

Horstmanshof and Zimitat (2003) echo the need for a better understanding of these external impacts. These authors suggest that while Tinto recognises that individual students may have histories that influence decisions to depart, the model clearly neglects to recognise the role played by factors, such as institutional policy and structure, in these actions. Further, in failing to recognise the role played by such external institutional frameworks, Tinto's perspective places the student as responsible for assimilation, almost locating the failure to make this adjustment as lying with the student rather than the institution (Lawrence, 2002; Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998).

Blaming the student

Some authors have highlighted how failure within the university institution seems largely attributed to the individual student regardless of the stage of study (Lovitts, 2001; Thomas, 2002; Woodrow, 1999). Jones and Thomas (2002) suggest that this victim blaming is apparent within institutional and government discourse around higher education. In other words, the responsibility for attrition levels resoundingly lies with students' poor academic standards and lack of preparedness for the university sector. This blame mentality only succeeds in further marginalising certain student cohorts. The pathologising of some students over others is apparent in political discourse. This is most clearly indicated in the following excerpt from a speech made by Baroness Warnock, speaking in the House of Lords, in 2002:

> …we should stop filling our universities with students who displayed no interest in academic matters at school…too few of them have any interest in continuing to learn. They have no very clear idea of the point of what they are going to learn or what they will do with it. For many of them, their

> years at university will, if they stick it out, be expensive and a waste of time. (House of Lords Hansard, cited in Given & Smailes, 2004, p.3)

This quote is undoubtedly representative of an extreme view but the link between increased access and increased attrition is subtlety present in discourse around higher education. However, such claims are unjustified as the rates of attrition in Britain have not increased significantly since the introduction of policies designed to widen student participation (Thomas, 2002). In fact, variations in the numbers of students leaving occurred prior to the expansion of the British university sector. Within the Australian tertiary arena, Kantanis (2000) highlights how early research on this area has also sought to 'apportion blame' (para. 2) both in relation to the students and in relation to existing systems of schooling.

The commencing first year student is placed at a disadvantage. Like a 'colonised' subject, a new university student is located powerless in a cultural environment that is attempting to thrust a particular perspective or world-view on them (Mann, 2001, p.11). In this way, students are faced with the conflict of trying to create a bridge between prior experience and the new world of knowledge they are entering, not as equal citizens but as powerless individuals. Students, particularly those who are first in the family to come to university are often ill-prepared for the realities of university study. Misinformation may be derived from indirect information sources such as friends or family; thus setting up a mismatch between student expectations and institutional structures, invariably resulting in a level of friction and dissonance.

However, for those who do decide to depart, rather than perceiving attrition as a form of failure or indeed weakness, instead it may reflect a choice made by individuals who wish to act rather than be acted upon. More recently, a number of researchers have recognised that attrition cannot always be defined purely as a negative process (Crossan, Field, Gallacher & Merrill, 2003; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Tresman, 2002). Leaving may in fact represent a positive move for the student involved leading to new goals or aspirations, perhaps the opportunity to enter the workforce. Also, it is important to realise that not all withdrawal is representative of a departing student but may simply reflect a decision to transfer to another institution (Long, Ferrier & Heagney, 2006). Indeed, Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) suggest that what is required in this field is more precise measurements relating to why students

leave, arguing that until institutions can measure such factors, theorising the processes around departure will always be difficult.

Assessing student movement

Whiteley (2002–2003) reflects upon the multiplicity of reasons for leaving in her research on the impact of motivation on students' withdrawal behaviours. Instead, of simply concluding that low motivation or institutional commitment predicts withdrawal (Bennett, 2003); Whiteley suggests that this is a more complex process. Students who display less motivation may in fact be strategically using one program of study as a means to enter another. Such planned attrition has remained largely unexplored but research conducted by the Tertiary Entrance Procedures Authority in Queensland and described by Whiteley revealed how this practice is quite widespread, particularly in urban universities.

While nearly a quarter of the students questioned suggested that they did not intend to finalise their studies, it was revealed that many of these students were employing a strategy that has become informally known as 'churning'. This practice involves students enrolling in their preferred university but with the aim of changing programs within the institution at some stage of their studies. Another tactic which Whiteley identifies is 'parking', more characteristic of regional universities; this involves students enrolling in one university with the intent of transferring to another, using their partially fulfilled course as a basis of entry. Clearly, narrow definitions of persistence and retention ultimately fail to capture those students that move from one course to another within the same institution or who may move to another university but still persist in study.

Robinson (2004) identifies the need to study students individually as the 'time to complete' performance indicator fails to capture the many different pathways that students take. This need is echoed by Crossan et al. (2003) in their study of learning careers, which indicated how progression through university is both 'complex' and 'multi-directional' (p.64). Long et al. (2006) point out that current Australian figures for first year student progression and attrition may be up to 50% inaccurate if the numbers of students intending to re-enrol are considered. In their 2004 survey, these authors found

that 25% of the students who discontinued study were enrolled in another educational institution by the following year. However, currently if a student moves to another institution, this individual will be counted as a commencing student in the new institution but defined as an attrition statistic in the previous establishment.

There have also been suggestions that researchers studying retention and attrition have been overly prescriptive in relation to what constitutes successful student retention. As Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) state:

> Scholars concerned with the impact of college on students (ourselves included) have perhaps taken an overly narrow view of what constitutes desirable outcomes or effects. (para. 6)

These authors suggest that much of the research has failed to realise the diversity of possible outcomes and has been hampered by a focus on those ideals expounded by more traditional notions of tertiary education. Within Australia, this focus is augmented by educational policy and quality agencies that perceive the retention of students as indicative of quality provision. As long as retention rates are perceived as performance indicators then the emphasis will continue to be on the retention of students until completion rather than recognising the complex and non-linear nature of this university career. The increasingly diverse student population has resulted in a need to move away from the more traditionally conceived student categories, instead terms of reference more indicative of this multiplicity are required.

> …administrators and faculty often see students through too many narrow lenses…the admissions lens, the faculty lens, the student affairs lens and occasionally the student outcomes lens. Seldom, however, is there one panoramic view of students. (Hossler & Bean, 1990, p.19)

This is not to suggest that homogeneous or collective definitions of students and student experiences are required; as these simply limit the potential to truly assess this student experience. Instead, the individuality of student experience needs to be foregrounded. The journey that each student takes through the first year of study differs fundamentally and for those who choose to leave, the reasoning behind this decision is as individual as the students themselves.

The gaps and limitations of existing retention studies should not preclude advancement in this field of study. However, rather than continuing to debate existing models it is

necessary for research to move beyond existing theories to analyse student experience from a diversity of perspectives. Clearly, the evolution of mass education and the resulting plurality within the student population requires a re-evaluation of many of the foundational theories and approaches to support, most of which have remained unchanged. The university culture in North America differs dramatically to that of Australia particularly in relation to selection processes for universities and colleges as well as significant differences in the numbers of residential students; this difference makes it 'hazardous' to imply 'inferences' across countries based on this research alone (Johnes & McNabb, 2004, p.25). Hence, while North American studies can provide information on a generic level, local Australian studies are required, in order to define the particularities of the Australian student perspective. Finally, there is also a need to hear the student voice in studies in order to learn how individuals perceive this experience; indeed how much does the modern university attendee desire the assimilation into the university community that so many theories aspire to measure?

This doctoral study intends to better comprehend what it is that makes students successfully engage with the university environment, rather than succumb to pressures and depart. Much of the existing literature is fixated on identifying the variables that lead to departure rather than exploring what encourages persistence. Essentially, perhaps the reasons for leaving are not as important as the reasons for staying: '…strengthening or providing additional reasons to stay could make whatever reasons there are for departure less salient' (Sieveking & Perfetto, 2000–2001, p.345). Such reasoning provides additional justification for the study highlighted in this thesis, a clear rationale for focusing on the nature of persistence rather than attrition. While the research on attrition is voluminous it is clearly not without its limitations particularly when applied to the more contemporary student population, a population largely characterised by diversity in background, experience and age. In order to better understand these distinctions, the next section of this chapter will explore the complexity of not only student populations but also the issues and obstacles commonly encountered by identifiable cohorts. The heterogeneity of the Australian university sector may have challenged researchers examining the many facets of the first year of university study but equally this situation has probably helped to maintain continued interest in this area.

Diversity in the university environment

> Future research will need to establish how retention and achievement issues affect different categories of adult learner. (Martinez, 2001, p.13)

Even a cursory glance at the literature on tertiary study reveals a lack of attention to specific student groups (Martinez, 2001; Quinn, 2005). Within the American context, much of the research conducted on non-traditional student groups has been negotiated in relation to the community college environment, as historically this educational structure has operated under access imperatives. Zwerling (1992) argues that much of the older research has focused on younger students and that the outcomes cannot always be applied to more mature age students. Indeed, some of the research on first generation students fails to even define the age of participants (see for example: Ishitani, 2003; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella & Nora, 1996). The results are studies that while commendable in their objective to focus on a group largely under-represented in research fields, inevitably fail to address the multifarious nature of the student experience.

Categories such as first in the family cannot be applied generically or in terms of universality, as otherwise the information presented will be ambiguous and also lack contextual application in any real sense. Generally, individuals do not fall neatly into predetermined categories so any attempts to categorise students simply as female or economically disadvantaged or first in the family, is bound for confusing and contradictory assumptions. Realistically, a student can not only be female but also economically disadvantaged and first in the family and each of these factors has certain implications for the student's first year experience. Osborne, Marks and Turner (2004) highlight the need to be explicit when conducting research with student groups, when they state:

> Mature students do not compromise a homogeneous group. Age, sex and ethnicity and whether they wish to study full or part time help to distinguish sub-groups. Other factors such as the presence of dependent children, marital and employment status, family tradition and past educational experiences may all help to define matters for consideration when deciding to…become students. (p.295)

Hence in the following chapter on research context and design, each of the students involved in this study will be situated clearly in relation to their individual demographic

and familial circumstances. Research in this area is not, however, only hampered by a lack of clear delineation around subjects but also, similar to the broader study of retention and withdrawal, existing research is also limited somewhat by lack of clear definition.

Key terms and meanings

Prior to the onset of mass education, non-traditional students were invariably defined in a simplistic and largely deficit manner, frequently being perceived as being the picture negative to the image of the typical traditional student. Thus, this cohort was simply defined as those who did not attend university directly from school, but enrolled later and were not derived from the dominant gender, ethnic or socio-economic categories. Also, those who were not attending in full-time, campus based mode would also be similarly negated by this term. However, the increasing diversity attributed to mass participation has resulted in a situation whereby this 'different' grouping has become the new majority in many institutions. It is necessary to acknowledge and conceptualise university students in more realistic ways, given that many will be mature, engaging in employment of some sort, culturally diverse and perhaps positioned at the lower end of the socio-economic class system.

Schuetze and Slowey (2002) highlight how the contextual variables impact on how the term non-traditional student has been interpreted. Within the discourse of equality of opportunity, non-traditional is deemed to refer to those groups of students who are socially, educationally or economically disadvantaged. This category could include those students from minority groups both ethnic or gender based or those defined as existing within low level class systems (Leathwood & O' Connell, 2003; Wilson, 1997). This term has also been defined within a life-cycle discourse whereby non-traditional students are assumed to be those who are more mature often with more diverse educational backgrounds. Similarly, attempting to define this term globally reveals how it is applied in a very generic manner sometimes simply referring to those students who differ in modes of attendance. This multiplicity of meaning has obvious implications for researching and studying this area.

Alternative definitions of non-traditional students

Schuetze and Slowey (2002) identify how there is a need to move away from delineating students according to simple age or cultural background criterion. Instead, these authors propose that the non-traditional cohort be more broadly defined according to factors such as educational biography, entry routes and study mode in combination with economic, gender, geographic and ethnic variables. Ultimately, the authors contend that the term non-traditional student is better conceptualised as a lifelong learner in order to avoid ambiguities (p.322). While such a title removes the situation where a proportionally large group of students is defined as deficit to the illusive traditional student body, it is also important to realise that terms such as lifelong learner are not necessarily transparent. Instead, Parker (2004) has argued that the concept of lifelong learning has been hijacked by political agendas and ultimately implies a shift in the financial responsibility for learning from institutions to actual students. Clearly, any term employed to theorise this area is bound to have ideological implications but also, given the fact that the so-called non-traditional student encompasses such a diversity of individual traits and backgrounds, any generalist referents will ultimately limit any depth of understanding. While changes in terms of reference might better define the social and personal attributes of these cohorts, increases in studies that strive to focus on the particularities of specific student groups is also required.

In support of this premise, one study conducted with female university students, concluded that for women, progression to university frequently occurs later in life. Morgan, Dunn, O'Hara and Greer (1980) suggest that for most women, life progression occurs in a 'three phase sequential model' (p.6) comprising school, family and then a return to study. This leads to the authors recommending that:

> Educational institutions…should be encouraged to consider…for many women, the years after 25 (approx) are to be considered the normal and unexceptional starting age for an academic and professional career. (Morgan et al., 1980, p.73)

The age of this study combined with the general and stereotypical nature of this quote might negate this perspective but more recent studies have indicated a similar pattern. For many women particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds, such progression is common (Osborne et al., 2004; Pascall & Cox, 1993). For example, the

female respondents in Pascall and Cox's study revealed how after leaving school, further or higher education was perceived as unattainable, instead 'marriage was a pre-occupying possibility' (p.39); only later in life did the option to study at university become a choice or possibility. Universities then need to recognise how the expectation of university attendance immediately after school is somewhat gendered, serving only to ignore the realities of certain student cohorts. This is just one example of how focusing on student cohorts can assist in opening up or re-defining taken-for-granted assumptions.

Theorising this diversity

In order to recognise the many guises of the contemporary university student and highlight the particular needs and experiences of these groups, it is perhaps more appropriate to focus on actual barriers or issues that many of these students face both before and after enrolment. These barriers not only impact on the nature of transition, persistence and engagement of students but also the fundamental nature of choice within the higher education sector. This is not to suggest that the factors or issues outlined are exclusive to certain groups but rather that these are often more commonly encountered or experienced by particular student cohorts.

Financial imperatives

In studying the various barriers faced by students from low socio-economic backgrounds in accessing British tertiary education, Forsyth and Furlong (2003) interviewed high school students who while qualified to participate in university either chose not to or followed particular patterns of enrolment. Many students opted for vocationally focused courses that seemed to have the promise of a job 'at the end of it all' (p.217). This focus on the vocational application of courses can be deemed an invisible educational disadvantage, ultimately limiting choices for many students who have restricted financial means. In fact, the combination of such choices along with the omnipresent fear of incurring debt resulted in many of the participants choosing to enrol in shorter courses within the further education sector as opposed to completing a lengthy degree program. The authors concluding:

> …young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were pushed towards courses which offered them financial security rather than cultural capital. (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003, p.222)

Another study also conducted with students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who were studying within the Irish university sector, expands upon this disadvantage highlighting how low income subjects expressed a low perception of ownership of educational institutions. The authors suggest that:

> …this lack of a sense of belonging lowered people's hopes for themselves and their children and as a result had clear implications on the participation rates of low SES students. (Lynch & O' Riordan, 1998, p.459)

Indeed, qualitative research conducted by Reay, Davies, David, and Ball (2001) confirms how existing financial and social structures can combine to limit low SES students tertiary options and ultimately maintain divisions and hierarchies within the British tertiary education landscape. Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) point out that students from lower classes, older students, those with dependent children and those from certain ethnic groups are all also more averse to incurring debt.

Financial concerns were also reflected in a study of ethnic minority students studying within an American institution. Couvillion-Landry (2002-2003) suggested that for certain minority groups, the idea of borrowing money to finance education is anathema to both familial and community belief systems, the result is that students may be discouraged from attending tertiary education at all. Obviously, such an assumption could be applied to both students from low socio-economic backgrounds and those first generation students, where perhaps the unknown outcomes of further education may be negated by the costs involved. Equally, more mature students may feel inhibited by financial pressure particularly if they have given up work. Wilson (1997) cites one male mature age student who described the lack of financial independence as an 'alien and uncomfortable experience' (p.359). While Scott et al. (1996) indicate how a lack of finance is one of the main reasons why women with children drop out of education.

Within the Australian sector, financial factors also pose barriers to educational participation. The 2006 national survey into student finances indicated that students were more financially challenged in 2006 compared to when the last survey was conducted in 2000 (James et al., 2007). Students continue to spend less time on

campus, increasing amounts of time in paid work and there is a growing reliance on parents and family members for financial support, particularly amongst the 20-24 year old cohort (Krause et al., 2005). This increase in financial dependence is associated with a decrease in the number of students receiving government sponsorship such as Youth Allowance, Austudy or Abstudy; even for those students who qualify for this type of payment the amount is calculated to be 40% below the Henderson Poverty Line (O'Keefe, 2006). Australia is the only country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) where total public funding to tertiary institutions declined between 1995 and 2004. Across the OECD, funding to tertiary education increased by an average of 49% however during the same period in Australia, this funding declined by 4% (Gillard, 2008).

The price of education also continues to escalate. Between December 2007 and March 2008, increasing Higher Education Contribution System (HECS) and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) fees resulted in a 3.8% growth in the cost of education (Ross, 2008). In 2008, the cost of tuition for a full time undergraduate student on a government supported place ranges from $4077 to $8499 for the year of study depending on which course is being undertaken. The HECS does enable students to defer this payment until the individual is earning a specified amount ($39,824 in the 2007-08 income year); once students reach this threshold, the debt is paid back through the taxation system. However, if the student decides to leave before graduation, they will incur the full debt but with no degree. Based on these types of trends, it has been estimated that in the 2008-2009 financial year the overall amount that students will owe to the Australian government will increase by an estimated $2 billion to $18.8 billion (Alexander, 2006).

Obviously, such financial considerations have tangible repercussions on student engagement and participation. Full-time students are often committed to paid work which in turn limits both the time spent on campus and also the time devoted to studies. How these financial imperatives are played out in the lives of the students in this study is a recurrent theme in the narratives presented in later chapters.

Levels of motivation

Research on attrition and retention outlined in the earlier part of this chapter identified how personal motivation levels can impact on the academic success or otherwise of the general student body (Bean & Bogdan-Eaton, 2001-2002; Tinto, 1975; Whiteley, 2002–2003). Studies relating to the motivational attributes of students from recognised equity groups have revealed that these have a somewhat distinct character. McInnis et al. (1995) describe how those students who are the 'higher education pioneers' (p.70) within the family, display greater 'academic application' than those students who had parents with tertiary qualifications. McInnis et al. postulate that perhaps these higher levels of application reflect recognition that academic success is not guaranteed nor taken for granted; necessitating additional work and focus. The same authors highlight how many older students also indicated higher levels of purpose or motivation in relation to reasons for studying, with attendance regarded as a 'second chance' or an opportunity not to be wasted (p.71).

When measuring mature age female students' motivation to return to study, Scott, Burns and Cooney (1998) suggest that statistical measurements of motivation are somewhat flawed and should not be used solely to predict the academic future of this group of students. For many students, but particularly women, a complex interplay of personal factors may profoundly affect academic outcomes. Women who indicate high levels of motivation may do so as a direct result of difficult personal circumstances. Griffith (1988) highlights how for many mature age women the return to study is often initiated by either 'instrumental' or 'process' reasons (cited in Cochrane, 1991, p.49). The first of these relates to tangible need such as financial well-being, while the second refers to developments or changes in life. In Scott et al.'s study (1998) some female participants defined an ambition to succeed in order to escape difficult marital or personal circumstances. Cochrane (1991) also highlights how mature female interview participants revealed how dramatic or important personal developments provided the impetus to come to university. Inevitably for some students, these issues or problems are the very reasons that prevent continuance or success. Undoubtedly, for some women education is perceived as an opportunity; a means to untie the 'knots' that domesticity and poor employment opportunity have created (Pascall & Cox, 1993, p.5); while motivation may be high this might not be enough to succeed in the university environment.

Leppel (2002) further identifies how for mature age students marital status and young children can have both positive and negative effects dependent upon the gender of the student and the societal role adhered to. For example, while a spouse and children can provide both emotional support and motivation to students equally such dependents demand both financial and emotional investment. For women, this situation exacerbates the difficulties of succeeding at university as the dual role of student and mother/housekeeper can lead to both high stress levels and possibly a devaluing of the student role in order to maintain equilibrium in the home. Exploring how the older female students in this research study meet these demands will provide further understanding of how the personal and public worlds interact for mature, female students in the twenty-first century.

For some ethnic minority students, the desire to study may be motivated by more public or communal need. Daniel-DiGregorio, Farrington and Page (2000) have produced one of the few studies that focuses on Indigenous Australian students during their first year of study. This qualitative study examined factors related to academic success of these students within the health sciences. The interview data compiled supports Nugent's (1992) premise that some Aboriginal students are inspired to undertake further study in order to benefit broader community needs, a form of active social justice (cited in Daniel-DiGregorio et al., 2000). Thus, for the participants in Daniel-DiGregorio et al.'s research, academic success was not only judged in relation to assessments but also in relation to how the knowledge and skills acquired could benefit the Aboriginal population. Clearly, again the distinctive flavour of such motivational factors does heighten the need for qualitative research that reveals the idiosyncrasies of specific cohorts of students rather than theorise student populations as unified collectives.

Socio-cultural disadvantage

The increasing number and diversity of students does not necessarily equate to a more equitable educational landscape. Instead, researchers in the UK, North America and Australia have revealed how participation rates amongst certain groups remain consistently low (Couvillion-Landry, 2002–2003; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Gallagher, Richards & Locke, 1993; James, 2008; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002).

Given that globally there has been much discussion about the growth of the education sector and the ensuing massification of education, it is interesting to note that in the British tertiary sector, the numbers of enrolled students that were deemed economically or socially disadvantaged did not grow proportionally. Instead, the student population is largely derived from more affluent backgrounds and the number that could be deemed low SES remains consistently low. This situation has led Forsyth and Furlong (2003) to suggest that the increase in student numbers is likely to be made up of '…more (i.e. less able) middle-class entrants, rather than this increase being accounted for by the inclusion of the disadvantaged' (p.221), a sentiment echoed by Reay, David et al. (2001) and in the Australian context, by James (2008).

Reay, Davies et al. (2001) argue that far from the British university sector being a 'level playing field' instead students from minority backgrounds encounter very different 'opportunity structures' to those who are more socially or economically advantaged (p.871). Simply put, educational participation may be deemed as too risky not only in terms of the financial investment required but also emotionally and personally (Archer & Leathwood, 2003). Similar low participation is reflected within the Australian tertiary landscape, with figures indicating that the participation of people from low SES backgrounds has not increased, despite fifteen years of equity policy apparently designed to address this imbalance (James, 2008). This under-representation is particularly noted in those more elite or sandstone institutes; not only in Australia but also in the United States' Ivy League Colleges and the United Kingdom's Russell Group (James, 2008). This obvious polarity perhaps then lays credence to Read et al.'s (2003) assertion that '…the authenticity of the "normal" young white middle-class student is maintained at the elite "real" universities' (p.268); this creation of a 'norm' only serving to further 'stigmatise' those deemed as other (Ferrier & Heagney, 2001, p.86).

The low participation of certain groups is particularly inequitable in a post-industrial society where knowledge is a fundamental form of capital. Within educational theorising, there has been a tendency to adopt a deficit model in relation to this inequality. Lynch (1996) argues that the 'pathologising' and 'stereotyping' of low SES students as somehow limited by problematic backgrounds ultimately serves to lower expectations both amongst educators and students (p.15). Instead, rather than blaming the individual

or suggesting a lack of ability, recognition needs to be given to the way economic and social forces combine to limit educational access and participation. The normalisation of educational deficits within certain student groups ultimately serves to conceal individual abilities and ambitions, hence limiting success within the higher education environment. Equally, James (2008) notes that within Australia the issue is one of access rather than academic ability as once enrolled '…socioeconomic status appears to explain little of the variation in higher education success and retention rates' (p.4).

Inequitable access: Arriving

Other fundamental barriers to access and participation within the tertiary environment have been noted in a number of studies that focus on non-traditional student groups (Grant, 1997; Read et al., 2003; Reay, 2003). Attending university may be considered atypical behaviour within a student's community, some students even describing negative reactions from teachers (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). In Edward's (1990) study on female returners with children, the students experienced disjuncture both inside the institution and also outside in their community. As Edwards (1993) describes: 'other mothers did not do the sort of thing they were doing' (p.144). Those who have enrolled in university also describe the difficulties of fitting in with the university culture, Couvillion-Landry (2002-2003) highlights that for those students who are in the minority, problems and fears are generally exacerbated. Thus, while most first year students undoubtedly experience feelings of 'isolation and loneliness' (p.2) for the students who differ from the mainstream such feelings are amplified.

Given the nature of family and personal circumstances, the difficulties associated with acculturating to this academic world may lead to 'guilt, pain and confusion' as students attempt '…to live simultaneously in both worlds, while being accepted in neither' (Couvillion-Landry, 2002-2003, p.3). Rendon (1992) succinctly defines the emotions and experiences of students who are the first in the family to attend university as:

> …a feeling of alienation that moves the students from the concrete to abstract experience and that takes the student from an old culture that is vastly different in tradition, style and values to a new world of unfamiliar intellectual conventions, practices and assumptions. (p.56)

For younger students who have no parental history of university attendance; both parents and students have a steep 'learning curve' as there is no one available at a local

familial level to provide guidance as students 'navigate' the culture of this tertiary experience (Harrell & Forney, 2003, p.155). Theorists such as Bourdieu (1977) and Connell (1993) perceive social positioning as intrinsic to the nature of educational experience. Those students who lack the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu) reflective of university discourse are faced with a further obstacle that can also ultimately preclude success within this domain.

Arriving at university can also initiate difficult decisions for students for whom higher education is not the norm. London (1989) argues that choices made within the higher education framework can generally reflect a young student's desire for autonomy but for first generation students such bids for autonomy can increase the distance between individuals and community or familial connections. The resulting transformations in relationships with family, peers and self can result in students having to straddle themselves between two distinctive and largely separate worlds, never completely fitting into either environment. Thomas (2002a) supports this observation suggesting that the anxiety about '…not fitting in and not being able to cope may be reinforced in families and communities where HE is not the norm' (p.8). In some cases, students may define attendance at university in terms of loss (Rendon, 1998), as they find it necessary to redefine their identity whilst relocating to the new university environment.

The experiences of first generation students have been likened to those of a new immigrant who has to fake knowledge in order to fit in, a type of 'cultural emissary' charged with a feeling of accountability towards others in their community (London, 1989; 1992). This feeling of social responsibility is echoed in Edward's 1990 study on mature mother students. The students expressed a need to succeed in order to avoid a tarnish being applied to other mothers entering higher education. Undoubtedly, this type of pressure, whether internal or external, further burdens students and adds invisible complexity to commencing tertiary studies and the processes of becoming a student. Indeed, how students, who differ from what is normalised or validated within the university environment, construct a student identity in this environment deserves further attention. The consequences of massification and accessibility has led to a changing role of university in relation to identity formation; where previously student identity was developed and negotiated at university the varied nature of the student population translates into 'competing mechanisms of socialisation' (Lahteenoja & Pirttila-Backman,

2005, p.645). Forming a student identity is then a complex process and needs to be explored within small scale research so that the intricacies of this identity formation can be examined. A discussion of this process forms a substantial part of chapter eight where the significance of the research data is interpreted. However, the difficulties acculturating to the university environment is certainly not limited to females or first generation students, such difficulties can also be experienced by ethnic minorities or Aboriginal students within an Australian context.

In varying degrees, university academic culture is removed from most first year students' experience but undoubtedly, academic discourses are not only distant to but also sometimes in conflict with Aboriginal students' learning culture. Aboriginal people remain one of the most educationally disadvantaged groups in Australia. Many members of this group experience limited schooling, much of which is interrupted. However, this apparent lack of academic success is due to more than just the nature and rate of attendance. Instead, the reasons for this limited education are manifold and reflect the range of social, cultural and economic imperatives, some of which have been outlined earlier in this chapter. Some of the additional obstacles that have been identified as limiting the academic success of this group include different styles of learning (Eades, 1995; Sansom, 1990) and diverse cultural world-view (Harris, 1990).

Inequitable access: Engaging

The divergence in world-view that exists between Aboriginal people and many white Anglo Australians has been credited as being so fundamentally different as to be almost 'incompatible' (Harris, 1990, p.290). This difference in world-view is very apparent in relation to knowledge and its ownership structures. Traditionally, knowledge within Aboriginal society was owned or looked after by certain individuals. In this way, knowledge was personalised and not freely transmitted between different parties and instead often acquired through personal involvement or participation (Sansom, 1980). Traditional learning has been generally characterised by observation and imitation with context specific environs augmenting skills and knowledge acquisition. While this definition is suggestive of a specific or distinct Aboriginal learning style, such characteristics are also indicative of a more holistic, experiential approach to learning. Drawing on the work of Gardner, Dean and McKaig (1992) and Gray (1994), Jackson

(2000) suggests that in order to become academic in the traditional sense, individuals are expected to discard such experiential and spiritual learning.

Such expectations are informed by the rationality favoured within academic settings, and have been argued to also exclude female experiences and perspectives (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997). The male bias that is omnipresent both within academic discourse and values related to knowledge is acknowledged by a number of female writers (Acker, 1984; Jackson, 2002; Spender, 1982). Clearly, if certain student cohorts perceive the act of being academic as a concept that is alien to their world-view and abilities, the implications for university transition, persistence and engagement are manifold.

Freire (1971) describes traditional education as a form of banking, a system whereby teachers deposit knowledge into the minds of students. In the book *Women's Ways of Knowing*, Belenky et al. (1997) argue that such a situation still exists, as the very intrinsic structures of tertiary education encourage this framework. Knowledge is packaged and delivered in a process fashion; the objectivity demanded by academe removing the 'dross of the self' and implying a 'divine origin' (Rich, 1979, p.144). This omniscient knowing has great implications for female students particularly if the banker or teacher is male. Essentially, this situation may serve to diminish a woman's belief in her ability to produce knowledge and emphasises a perception that the powers of knowledge and rationality lie with the male. Indeed, Jacobus (1979) argues that while access to education is often assumed to be a means to increase equality in fact participation in any male centred discourse will inevitably lead to: '…a silencing of the feminine, a loss of women's heritage' (p.10).

Instead of this male-centred 'banker' role, Belenky et al.'s participants expressed a desire to have a teacher that encouraged and expanded upon the knowledge and skills already possessed by students. Such a role is termed a 'midwife-teacher', essentially aiding students to 'birth' their own ideas and 'consciousness' (p.218). Belenky et al. also make reference to the concept of maternal thinking, which is used to describe a type of

female experiential knowing. This implicit knowledge base is defined as defying tangible explanation and positioned appositionally to scientific thinking.

I would question whether women's thinking styles should be compared to such biological functions and would argue that this actually serves to diminish these skills. The application of such terminology actually devalues this type of implicit knowledge; instead it is better described as being closer to what Gibbons (1994) defines as Mode 2 knowledge. This knowledge base exists outside dominant scientific discourse; comprising of tacit components rather than codified knowledge. Perhaps, by referring to female knowing in less exclusively feminine terms, the inclusion of these within dominant discourses may become more of a possibility. The difficulties of demarcating knowledge according to gender is also criticised by Britton and Baxter (1999). These authors argue that while the literature has distinguished between an instrumental orientation to education perceived as being within the male domain and a self-fulfilment orientation regarded as female, such a divide is far too simplistic.

Having said that, experiential knowledge undoubtedly remains firmly positioned outside the academic domain and this serves to silence older women students further, when they realise that intrinsic aspects of the self are negated by the university environment. As Jackson (2002) explains:

> Little recognition is given or importance attached to the lifelong learning that develops through women's family lives, networks and civic participation. What counts in universities is 'academic' learning. (p.63)

Jackson (2002) argues that higher education institutions make power relations around gender invisible as what is celebrated is objective, neutral and rational knowledge. Participants in higher education are positioned as having an equal right to this knowledge but this knowledge is stratified and what is valued is largely negotiated within a masculinist discourse. Current theories of learning are not neutral but rather serve to construct learners in particular ways. For example, the idea of self-directed learning is based upon a very masculinist learning discourse, as the 'emphasis on the individual…marginalises the significance of the collective and co-operative' (Hughes, 1999, para. 5). Acker (1994) calls for recognition of this type of hidden difference and highlights the need to value and include alternative conceptualisations of knowledge creation and reception. Indeed, the need to recognise such diversity is requisite if a

better understanding of the female experience of participating in education is to be derived.

Hayes (1995) suggests that all women should be treated as a special group within education, as they are often expected to adopt simultaneous roles that include 'adult, parent, family member and student' (p.31). Belenky et al. (1997) argue that women frequently subsume their own needs to those of their families and regard obtaining things for individual self as exposing selfish behaviour. This is echoed by a number of studies that indicate how older female students reflect upon their desire to study in terms of guilt (Britton & Baxter, 1999; Edwards, 1993; Kirkup, 1996; Merrill, 1999). Such reflections provide some sort of indication of the sorts of extra pressures than many women, often those with family responsibilities, experience as they attempt to juggle study and family commitments.

Arguably though, women are not the only group that may require specific recognition within the university structure. Any research that seeks to detail the nature of student experience should retain a focus on the experiences of particular student groups. This need is supported by Ozga and Sukhnandan (1998) and Zwerling (1992) but research that focuses on particular student cohorts is limited, a factor repeatedly highlighted in literature on first year retention and transition (J. Richardson, 1994; Lynch, 1996; Mclean, Hartley, Ryan, McDonald & McDonald, 1999; Weil, 1988; Wilson, 1997). Equally, much of the existing literature has been limited by its failure to engage with how students individually and personally experience university (Krause, 2005; Leonard, 2001; Wilson, 1997).

Perhaps, one of the most significant recommendations for the type of research outlined in this thesis comes in the concluding chapter of the report that presents the findings from a decade of research on the first year experience. Krause et al. (2005) identify how there is a:

> …need for in-depth qualitative data on various dimensions of the first year student experience with a view to understanding the reasons for and the motives behind student responses. (p.90)

The voices of students have been conspicuously missing from research that aims to record and highlight how individuals actually experience the many facets of university.

Hence, the research outlined in this thesis has attempted to both precisely delineate the student cohort under analysis and also, by applying methods informed by qualitative research methodology, generate data that both takes account of the subjective nature of transition as well as illustrate the motives and reasons that inform persistence and engagement in this environment. However, any analysis of the student population also needs to be situated within broader institutional and political frameworks. Therefore, chapter three will further contextualise this research by providing a thorough investigation of the wider structural and political contexts of the contemporary higher education sector, which undoubtedly impact on the student as an individual. As mentioned in the beginning sections of this review, this chapter simply provides an introduction to this area; as the thesis evolves it continues to be grounded and related to the literature informing this area.

Conclusion

The material presented in this chapter has been selected according to the best way in which to situate the research outlined in later chapters. The tensions and inconsistencies within the current literature on this area have been clarified in order to rationalise the significance of this study. While examination of the first year of study has attracted research interest, much of this has either been concerned with developing explanatory models; been located within a North American context (Webb, 2001) or has failed to engage with the students themselves (Winn, 2002). In more recent British literature, the focus has moved toward actual student preparedness for university; this is particularly characterised by the work of Reay, Ball and David (2002), Reay, David et al. (2001) and Reay, Davies et al. (2001) which examines how class, ethnicity and age impact on university experience. Within Australia, the continuing dissemination of more current literature on first year experience and transition issues has been assisted by the First Year in Higher Education conferences that have been held annually since 1995 and also the work of The Centre for the Study of Higher Education at The University of Melbourne. Responses to the first year tend to fall into two categories, many relate to Tinto's theories on integration whilst more recent models suggest the need for universities to accept and rejoice in diversity (Skene et al., 2006). The need to focus

research longitudinally in order to explore the reasons for transition and persistence rather than the variables effecting attrition have also been recognised within the Australian literature (Purnell, 2003; Walker, 2001).

In order to situate the study effectively, this chapter has followed multiple pathways, drawing together strands of research from a diversity of areas including student experience literature, particularly as it relates to non-traditional student experience as well as research on student experience and also literature on anthropology and feminist writings. This range of material provides a necessary background to both the analysis and interpretation of the students' accounts. However, this plurality a common thread running throughout this thesis similarly exposed in the methodology chapter and in relation to the actual presentation of the data. A pluralism perhaps only matched by the diversity of the current Australian university student population.

Approaching issues such as first year transition, persistence and engagement in a more open and reflective manner has quite obvious benefits for all stakeholders within the educational field. Focusing on particular student groups enables both their voices and those belonging to influential others to be heard. Such sentiments are summed up by London (1989) as he reflects on his own qualitative study of family dynamics and first-generation students:

> Listening and relistening to the tapes…I was struck by the power students attributed to family voices, as if their present struggles to find their own [voice] amplified the entreaties, whispers or growls heard at home (p.166).

The research in this thesis facilitates the narrative space for students to expand on both the personal and public voices that have impacted upon the many transitional facets of the first year of study. Students narrate their own personal pilgrimage and in so doing, contribute to a deeper understanding not only about the obstacles or challenges but also the encouragements encountered as they journey through the academic year. Thus, read on and embrace the stages of this odyssey as these women give voice to their individual and unique first year experiences.

Chapter Three: Research Methodologies and Methods

Introduction

> The ultimate excitement and terror of a qualitative project is that you can't know at the start where it will end. (Richards, 2005, p.125)

As a researcher moves through the literature and navigates the processes surrounding data collection, analysis and writing up, it becomes clear that this is not a seamless, linear journey but rather one that is littered with detours, dead ends and wrong turns. The dilemma of research is that the journey cannot be planned and the destination remains illusive until the end. The approach adopted in this study intends to transform and interpret qualitative data in a sensitive and scholarly fashion that both reveals the data in all its complexity and in so doing, highlights the multiplicity of lived experience. However, what remains hidden is the lengthy voyage undertaken to arrive at this point, the many interpretative maps consulted and the false starts that were endured. This chapter will provide an indication of the complex reasoning that led to choices made in relation to theoretical perspectives as well as provide justification for the particular methodologies and the methods used to examine this area.

Burge (1990) suggests that educational researchers should embrace a more humanistic methodology that 'takes account of the social and political contexts of the learner, teacher and the institution' (p.6), thus advocating more qualitative methodologies as opposed to more quantitative ones. Qualitative research is particularly relevant to studies that attempt to analyse human behaviour or practices and so arguably, more suitable for the proposed study. The lack of research that focuses on how students subjectively experience university has been noted in the literature review therefore, choices around approaches to the research were contextualised by this lack. University is a distinct cultural world, one which cannot be solely revealed through the use of quantitative methods of analysis, which have featured strongly in this field. While such approaches are relevant when providing background or statistical material the lack of space for voice means that individuals' experiences remain marginalised and silenced. As West (1996) points out:

> …our understanding of student motivation is limited because learners themselves have rarely been encouraged to reflect, in a flexible and longitudinal way, on their reasons for educational participation and learning in the context of past as well as present lives. Many studies of adult motivation, particularly those using survey and quantitative methods, have barely scratched the surface of the personal and social dialectics which may be involved. (p.1)

The need for studies that focus on individual students has been explored more recently by Krause (2005) who recognises that there is '…remarkably little in the current literature on who our students are…' (para. 3). While this study only focuses on seventeen participants, the ultimate objective is to engender some level of familiarity with the participants. Quinn (2004) echoes that it is this type of local research which is 'critically situated' and best positioned to 'generate webs of connections' as it moves from the local to the global (p.61). The advantage of such qualitative small-scale studies lies precisely in this specificity rather than an attempt at homogeneity.

This qualitative study is theoretically situated within the interpretivist tradition and particularly informed by the tenets of Symbolic Interactionism. This chapter foremostly locates the interpretivist tradition and Symbolic Interactionism in relation to epistemological and ontological concerns. An account and justification for the methodologies and methods used to explore students' dialogues is then provided. Denzin and Lincoln's (1994) definition of researcher as 'bricoleur' (p.3) best highlights the position of the researcher in this study, as the research is characterised by a focus on variety and diversity, but ultimately assembled into a coherent picture. To this end, the empirical data derived from the qualitative interviews has been explored from a multiplicity of perspectives in order to best negotiate this material. Both grounded theory and narrative research paradigms inform the data analysis stage of this research and so this chapter will highlight both of these methodologies and justify this choice. Finally, data collection and data handling methods will also be described and the decisions around interviewing and transcription outlined in order to further contextualise this research approach.

Theoretical perspective

> …there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity….No single method can grasp all the subtle variations in human experience. Consequently, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretative methods, always seeking better ways to make more understandable the worlds of experience they have studied. (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.19)

Qualitative research and inquiry has existed in many guises since the late nineteenth century and this general category serves as a site for many diverse approaches to research. A number of philosophies reside within the qualitative framework but some essential differences exist in relation to definitions of understanding and how best to conceptualise meaning in all its complexity. In addition, each orientation theorises the part or position occupied by the researcher in different, but related, ways. Despite this variance, qualitative research is largely empirical in nature, gathering evidence from a variety of sources and utilising methods such as case studies, interviews and participant observation. Qualitative researchers generally believe that reality is multi-layered and thus in order to obtain a better understanding of this multiplicity it is necessary to employ a variety of methods.

Interpretivism is essentially founded on recognition of the need to negotiate specific cultural and historical interpretations of the social world. Historically, the interpretivist approach is linked to the ideas of Weber (1864 - 1920), who postulates that the human sciences should be concerned with 'verstehen' (understanding**)**. Weber makes a distinction between verstehen and erklaren (explaining), the latter associated with the natural as opposed to the social sciences. Weber's concept of verstehen was concerned with understanding the meanings and values held by individuals and this theorist developed the concept of the ideal type as a means to gather such evidence. This idea of verstehen informs a number of theoretical perspectives but each of these has negotiated and developed this concept in different ways. Both the hermeneutic movement as expounded by Dilthey (1833 -1911) and Schutz's phenomenological framework build upon and differently adapt the concept of verstehen but each approach is joined in an ultimate objective to understand human action and experience.

One could say all qualitative research seeks access to verstehen at the most general level as it attempts to interpret and understand the world guided by certain beliefs and assumptions. Often such interpretation is defined by the researcher who will create a framework that reflects both personal beliefs and the aims and objectives of projects. The researcher is not removed from the research process and is instead: '…bound within a net of epistemological and ontological premises which – regardless of ultimate truth or falsity – become partially self-validating' (Bateson, cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.19). While epistemology refers to the philosophical basis held in relation to the types of knowledge that are both possible and legitimate, different theoretical perspectives can intersect at various points and are not necessarily reflective of singular or discrete epistemological positions (Kelle, 2001).

Ontological and epistemological underpinnings

Epistemologically, the study is informed by social constructivism, which does not subscribe to the view of an objective truth that exists independently and out there. Social constructivism adheres to the idea that people do not just happen upon meaning rather that this is constructed via reference to social and personal concepts or frameworks so interpretations are continually developed, defined and modified by this interaction. Such meaning formation occurs '…against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and so forth' (Schwant, 1994, p.197). Thus, individuals form meanings diversely even when responding to the same factors or environment and there is no one true and valid meaning or interpretation. However, it is important to note that meanings are not free from social context instead, as Crotty (1998) states, all 'meaningful reality' is 'socially constructed' (p.9).

Social constructivism not only necessitates deriving meanings from the respondents but also heralds the importance of identifying the researcher's interpretations of reality. The relationship between the researched and the researcher is not one traditionally conceived within a more positivist epistemology, as this interaction is characterised by mutual openness, empathy and personal involvement. In this way, the outcomes derived from this form of research are treated as constructions rather than 'objectified' truths (Charmaz, 2000, p.528). From such a perspective, interpretivism works within the relativist ontology which assumes that there are multiple interpretations of reality. While

things exist outside of individuals, objects have forms that are independent of humans but the meanings imparted upon these only emerge upon engagement with humans. Realism is then different to objectivism as the latter perceives meaning as existing within objects, intrinsic to form and independent from human perception (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Symbolic Interactionism supports this perspective as it can be contrasted with those approaches that perceive human activity or behaviour as solely resulting from internal process or social structures. The term Symbolic Interactionism was first introduced in 1937 by Blumer who formalised the approach over the ensuing years, it is regarded as an approach that advocates and emphasises the importance of the researcher's own subjectivity and the need for interpersonal involvement in the research process (Jacob, 1987). This approach then moves beyond simply replicating existing knowledge or beliefs and instead, negotiates ideas or theories that may ultimately challenge both the researcher's perspective as well as those generally dominant or accepted, exposing the political and moral implications of seemingly taken-for-granted processes.

With this in mind, it becomes vital to explore personal positioning as a researcher and assess how such consideration may impact upon the focus and theoretical underpinnings of the research process. Such analysis may include reflection on areas as varied as beliefs, personal experience and project parameters. As May (1996) suggests:

> Researchers should therefore be aware of the ways in which their own biography is a fundamental part of the research process. It is both the experiences of the researched and researchers which are important. (p.14)

How this personal positioning impacted on the contours of this study will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. At this point, it is enough to reaffirm that the theoretical perspective favoured in this research is one bounded by qualitative paradigms, which in turn will evoke an emic focus that strives to reveal individual points of view. The interpretivist tradition fulfils this objective by encouraging the researcher to take on the role or positioning of the subject and immerse themselves in an actor's social reality. I am also approaching the study as a female researcher and one of the main objectives is to define how women '…are understood as competent subjects getting by, creating and surviving within hostile and limiting environments' (Alway, 1995, p.222). Hence, while

methodologically placed within an interpretivist framework this study is also sensitised by both my positioning as a woman and also, personal subjectivity. This project intentionally blurs boundaries by adopting a number of analytic approaches and in so doing, engenders a multiplicity that fits comfortably within the postmodern research agenda.

Postmodernism rejects the notion of universal categories as this is simply imposing the view of one dominant group on another less powerful grouping, instead this approach recognises how reality differs for each person since it is created around individual, social and historical perspectives (Kirkup, 1996).This postmodern stance in research has led to a 'new pluralism of research methods' (Keller, 1998, p.275) where it becomes acceptable, indeed perhaps expected, for researchers to borrow elements from different methodologies and disciplines in order to navigate unique research frameworks.

Based on this diversity and plurality, the researcher should adopt the position of bricoleur which requires the ability to relate to a number of theoretical perspectives and approaches as well as maintain a level of reflexivity and reflection in relation to the study. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest that the researcher as bricoleur operates on a number of interpretative and political levels, recognising the important role that personal history plays within the research as well as negotiating the socio-political elements of any study. In becoming a bricoleur, a researcher is charged with the responsibility to re-vision what is apparent and instead negotiate a stance that encourages openness in relation to interpretation and negotiation. However enacting such diversity engenders the need to provide a 'systematic and coherent rationale for...choice of methods as well as a clear exposition of the selected processes that have produced…results' (Lieblich, Tural-Masiach & Zilber, 1998, p.2).

This chapter will continue by initially highlighting the approach to interviewing utilised in this research study and also clearly situate this approach within a contested terrain of scholarly debate relating to the merits and limitations of the interviewing process. Such an analysis will consider both the theoretical frameworks underpinning decisions made prior to and during this project's interviews as well as discuss the responsibilities associated with research conducted by women and with women. Highlighting these issues will provide the justification for the method of data analysis adopted, which drew

on narrative analysis and was informed by grounded theory. This examination will add further clarity to the results and conclusions presented in chapters five, six and seven

Data collection methods: Interviews

This qualitative study was based solely on interviews conducted with students, these interviews occurred at four points during the 2006 academic year (Appendix C). Interviews were held throughout the academic year in order to reflect the doubts, decisions and developments that occurred spontaneously throughout this period, further operational details of the interviews are provided in the next chapter. Each of the interviews lasted up to an hour and while a choice of locations was offered, students largely opted to meet in an office at the campus. The interviews were reflective of a constructivist approach and sought to explore how individuals make sense of their world, offering 'sites for the production and distribution of narratives' (Czarniawska, 2002, p.734).

The students were active agents in these interviews and as a researcher, my intention was to create an environment that facilitated both exploration and interpretation of facets of their life that may have remained ignored. To this end, I was more characteristic of what Kvale (1996) terms the 'traveler' interviewer as opposed to the 'miner'. Whilst the latter conceives of knowledge as somehow buried, intact and pristine waiting for discovery, the 'traveler' meanders through the interview journey with no predefined destination in mind. However, 'meandering' does not suggest an absolute lack of direction rather the interview was directed via question choice and reference. These conversations were not just transparent forms of communication but rather constructed by both students and myself, as well as being situationally reflective. The objective of these meetings was to explore what exactly this decision to come to university meant for students at this particular point in their life and what the implications of this decision were both personally and publicly.

The analytical focus of these encounters was not simply on 'what' was said but equally on 'how' it was said, a dual focus that both studies the content of the interviews and also examines the actual process of interaction (Eliott, 2005). As the interviews proceeded so did the voices become more distinct. The first set of interviews were largely based

around the classic conventions of turn-taking but as they continued the level of interactivity and conversation increased. The interviews returned to themes over time and as this occurred so did shifts in perceptions and perspectives become apparent.

If it is accepted that interviews offer an opportunity to explore beliefs rather than actions (Arksey & Knight, 1999); then more insight is afforded in longer studies where interviews are conducted on a regular basis over a period of months or even years. The number of interviews in this research project enabled not only the development of rapport but also clarification of topics and themes. Interviews built upon each other, so themes and concepts explored in one set of interviews could be further developed and expounded in later interviews enabling rich descriptive data to be captured. The fact that interviews were clustered together meant that often I would hear what Kvale (1996) calls 'red lights' (p.133) such as repeated terms or unusual phrases and these could then be further explored or clarified in subsequent interviews. With each successive interview, it was possible to refer to background information to further contextualise the responses and help to 'bridge' between 'concrete' and 'abstract' experience (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p.46). This process may also have been assisted by the fact that I was a woman interviewing women.

Women interviewing women

Finch (1984) argues that female researchers have almost a privileged position when interviewing other women as the interview provides the opportunity to speak in a largely unconstrained manner. This relationship can capitalise on shared experience and provide an 'entrée' into the interview situation (pp.78-79). Indeed, feminist approaches to research place much emphasis on research identification with subjects Oakley (1981), arguing that such non-hierarchical relationships enable entry to others' inner lives.

> …the situation of a woman interviewing women is special, and is easy only because my identity as a woman makes it so. I have, in other words, traded on that identity. I have also emerged from interviews with the feeling that my interviewees need to know how to protect themselves from people like me. (Finch, 1984, p.80)

There is a clear possibility for exploitative relationships in any interview situation; this is arguably increased when one is trusted based on gender considerations rather than individual intentions. The potential for the generation of rich and detailed data is great

but this should not be achieved at the cost of standards of morality. Oakley (1999) argues that one hidden risk for research conducted with women is the chance of 'manipulation' and 'betrayal' (p.165) and arguably this is not only in regard to the subjects but also the female gender generally. While individual subjects are protected under the guise of anonymity, material may be used as evidence against women in general.

Certainly in studying first generation female students I felt a sense of responsibility to portray the experiences of these women. The great endurance they displayed in persisting in their studies was a testament to both themselves and an encouragement to others. Indeed, many of the subjects felt the same way, frequently mentioning that they perceived their involvement in the study as having positive repercussions for others. While I would never intentionally seek to misrepresent information in the cause of the greater female good, this study is placed within a sociology for women (Oakley, 1981) and strives to present an account based upon female versions of reality and experience. There is little doubt that the choice of this particular area is intrinsically related to my own position as both a woman and also, as an individual who was the first in the family to come to university.

Researcher reflexivity

> Researchers are biased. This is not good or bad. It simply is. Thus, it is both sociological good sense and an ethical obligation to disclose those biases. (Norum, 2000, p.337)

While analysis of the respondents' world-view and perceptions is undoubtedly the main objective of any interview, arguably this is relatively ineffectual without equal consideration of the researcher's biases and opinions. The need to reflect on researcher positioning is discussed at length in feminist research literature but this practise is not derived solely from feminist praxis. Rather, Weber (1949) was one of the first theorists to discuss the impact of self on the research process (Cotterill & Letherby, 1994). However, this requirement has been further defined by feminist researchers, some of whom argue that there is a need for in-depth explication of personal identity and power relations (Arendell, 1997; Cotterill & Letherby, 1993; Ellis & Berger, 2002; Krieger, 1985; McCorkel & Myers, 2003; Roman, 1992). Thus, researcher reflexivity is not perceived as simply overtly situating the research within the contexts of subjective identity but rather

requires being subjected to the 'same level of scrutiny' that is aimed at subjects (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p.205).

This type of candid examination can lead to the recognition that:

> …the skeletons we dig up are often our own. What passes as a scientific discovery about 'the Other' is often the very assumptions and narratives we used to construct our subjects and their 'difference' prior to entering the field. (McCorkel & Myers, 2003, p.220)

My positioning as a woman, a student, a staff member, a parent, a wife and a daughter undoubtedly influenced what I 'saw' within the data; I came to this study with certain preconceptions some of which were subconsciously hidden. The fact that I was also the first in my family to attend university undoubtedly influenced my choice of topic and this combined with my interactions with students over the years as an employee of the university further impacted on this research. Recognising and highlighting prejudices can provoke deeper analysis and engagement with data, in this study this process was facilitated by keeping a reflective journal. The journal not only detailed personal reflections and assumptions derived from the research but also the act of writing assisted in refining and disclosing theoretical implications. However, true reflexivity is more than just about revealing certain aspects of identity and personal history but should also endeavour to destabilise the researcher's privileged position, and one way this can be achieved is through the actual techniques adopted in research.

Interview techniques

From the onset of interviewing, questions were carefully worded and structured not only to generate reflection on this first year of study but also to provide individuals with the latitude to reference personal themes and images. The intent was to be fluid and open, attempting to listen for the inner voice of the interviewee. As interviews progressed linguistic forms or metaphoric expressions that participants had mentioned previously were included and all interviews were also cross-referential, further clarifying previous responses or words. As Bakan (1996) points out:

> A metaphor or fiction might open a door that cannot be opened by approaches that are too weighed down by duty to literal truth. (p.7)

For example, in the first interview, one student mentions how university study is like a *'rollercoaster'* so in later interviews, this term was introduced into questions to further define this concept. Similarly, a number of the older participants referred to the students who had just left school as the *'young ones'* and again, where appropriate, this frame of reference was introduced into questions. As much as possible, interview questions were constructed around student reality rather than imposing preconceived perspectives. This technique recognises how metaphors and phrases such as these enable the students to make sense of this environment and are therefore intrinsic to any explication of this particular reality.

As a staff member on campus coordinating the academic support program, I was also conscious of needing to vigilantly avoid taking certain linguistic terms for granted, assuming shared understanding. Such assumptions could result in leading the informants to answer in a certain way. To avoid such pitfalls, one of the strategies used in questions was to position the participants in the role of expert, who has valuable and worthy information to impart. Many of the questions asked participants to reflect on what things were like for them both emotionally and practically; this provided an opportunity for participants to reconstruct their own experiences unencumbered by interviewer expectations (Seidman, 1998).

This 'interrogation' was subtle as I endeavoured to disrupt taken-for-granted notions of question and answer turn taking, in order to circumvent the dominance–submissive polarity, often assumed in interview situations. Respondents were invited to engage in lengthy monologues, many of which appeared to be extraneous at the time. Each of the interviews concluded with an invitation to participants to add additional information that had not been previously covered, while many of the respondents chose not to include extra material, on some occasions such a request opened a floodgate, that again lead the interview in unexpected directions. Such strategies are characteristic of depth interviewing, where participants are given the space to explore the 'affective, cognitive and evaluative meanings' of situations (Mishler, 1986, p.81). Finally, by following participants through the year and encouraging reflection on current activities or the recent past, the interviews avoided inconsistencies generated by long-term memory recollection, enabling analysis of those issues that are front of mind (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

Being an insider researcher

As mentioned, my position in the interviews was complicated by my professional role on campus as concurrent to this research I was also co-ordinating the provision of academic skills support to students. There are both complex challenges and potential conflicts associated with conducting research within an environment one belongs to. This section will highlight some of the considerations associated with conducting studies as an insider or native researcher. One of the most difficult aspects of being located within the research environment in a professional capacity is the almost unconscious assumption of shared meanings and understandings. After transcribing the first set of interviews it became apparent that at times I failed to encourage or require respondents to complete sentences or adequately explain what words or phrases meant to them on a personal or individual level. Instead, I assumed a shared understanding due largely to my familiarity with the university environment and the workings of the institution. This realisation so early in the research process provided the impetus to actively avoid this practice in later encounters where I pursued ideas and processes in a more vigilant manner. However, undoubtedly my position within the university environment influenced both the questions I asked and the answers that I received. As Hayano (1979) highlights:

> '…an insider's position is not necessarily an unchallengeable 'true' picture; it represents one possible perspective' (p.102)

Norum (2000) identifies researcher biases as not only inevitable but also intrinsic to research, assisting in the choice and identification of stories and descriptions as well possibly revealing aspects hidden from others, who are uninformed by particular biases. Instead of denying bias, Norum (2000) emphasises the need to explore how the researcher's inner self 'bleeds' into the conceptualisation and development of any study. Researchers need to engage in a 'delicate and reflexive balancing act' (Reinharz & Chase, 2002, p.234) and as these authors explain, will need to consider:

> … how our acts of knowing – our interpretations of women's words – are socially situated which includes reflecting on our complex social locations and subjectivities as well as out personal, political and intellectual agendas. (Reinharz & Chase, 2002, p.234)

Conducting research within a familiar environment can also offer benefits, providing a space to reflect and ponder anew assumptions or beliefs that may have been too readily

accepted or assumed. As the connections between research and professional practice are overt and intertwined rather than delineated or removed from each other, the outcomes can often be applied in a timely and effective manner. Indeed, the insider researcher may be the most appropriate person to redress issues or problematic areas that have been identified by participants.

My professional status on campus meant that I was sometimes placed in the role of what Cotterill and Letherby (1994) define as the 'expert' where participants would seek advice about academic issues and this arguably had an effect on their persistence patterns; this possibility is analysed in greater detail in the final data analysis chapter. In dealing with this dual position it was necessary to demarcate between my role as researcher and my campus role stating to students that I would avoid referencing the research whilst engaged in support work with them and equally would not endeavour to provide academic assistance whilst interviewing. However, frequently once the tape recorder was switched off I would offer suggestions relating to academic support particularly if students were expressing frustration in terms of managing time or completing assignments, as it was my professional responsibility to address issues of concern for students. I occasionally also saw students outside of interviews whilst I was teaching or indeed in individual appointments, which might be perceived as further complicating my positioning and also underlining a power differential. Equally this ongoing contact could also be perceived as enriching the interview relationship and increasing levels of rapport. The ethical implications of this relationship will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter.

Much of the data derived from the interviews can be termed as 'nuanced description' (Kvale, 1996, p.127), also the small number of participants and the relative homogenous group may mean that the transferability of the findings may be limited. Ultimately, it will be up to individual readers to decide the extent that the findings from this study can be applied to other environments and contexts. Undoubtedly, the experiences of my interviewees are influenced and perhaps limited by external social forces and perhaps it is the impact of these forces and the ways in which the students negotiate these where generalisations can be formulated. In order to open-up the data derived from the interviews, the study adopted a combination of methodologies which are highlighted in the following section.

Methodology: Data analysis and transformation

> …what is taken to be [appropriate] methodology at a given time is subject to fads, fashions and foibles. (Sorokin, 1965, cited in Vidich & Lyman, 1994, p.58)

Research methods and methodologies rarely fit neatly into defined categories; instead just like the reality they seek to explore, they are 'messy' defying exact demarcation and definition. Thus, for the novice researcher, it is certainly necessary to study the diversity of approaches available but always understanding that ultimately methodological choices need to be negotiated according to the particular study's parameters, the individual researcher's positioning and the needs of the participants.

The term 'data analysis' has been conceived in many different ways and can be regarded as a somewhat ambiguous or contested term (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Analysis can be in part regarded as a way to reduce data through coding, indexing and sorting. In doing this, usually researchers follow a particular approach or perspective which enables some level of interpretation of the material. This activity is often regarded as signifying the last stage in a lengthy and time-consuming research study which hopefully then leads to some theoretical insight. Wolcott (1994) instead refers to analysis as the 'transformation' of data and suggests that this can be accomplished by three discrete approaches: description, analysis and interpretation. The first of these seeks to explain what is occurring within the data in purely descriptive terms. The second analysis, Wolcott explains, is the process of extending this description by applying a systematic approach which is theoretically bounded and grounded within the data itself. The third way of transforming data is through researcher interpretation which moves beyond cautious analysis and instead subjects the material to imaginative and open thought. Wolcott (1994) does not perceive these as dedicated stages in a study nor does he suggest that each is singular but rather that all three can be employed to different degrees in order to best negotiate the data.

In this study, data has been 'transformed' and the chapters devoted to this transformation (chapters five, six and seven) combine Wolcott's description and analysis

approaches. The discussion chapter then moves into interpretation; the conclusions presented in this chapter are both drawn from my own frame of reference and the available literature. To achieve this transformation, the research pathway was cyclic in nature and required a continual dipping into both the qualitative data and the literature, each informing the other. The data was coded and categorised in order to facilitate this process but categories were derived inductively from the data itself, grounded in the actual experience of the participants. This process was assisted by the QSR NVivo (7) software program, a tool that can be used to efficiently sort, match and link data. NVivo provides a system for the categoristion of data but the conceptualisation of data remains with the researcher, requiring a combination of reflective thinking and analysis. The use of a computer program may be regarded as mechanistic, implying a lack of imaginative engagement with the data. Instead, I found that the package enabled me to explore the data in more complex and detailed ways, in fact this process furthered my exploration and engagement with the research material. The use of NVivo 7 will be explored in more detail in the data handling section of this chapter which further elaborates on how this tool was utilised to open up data to explore patterns and themes.

The empirical nature of this study combined with its emphasis on multiple theoretical perspectives and a grounding in the real world has undoubtedly led to the production of, what Geertz (1973) refers to as, 'thick description' as participants depict, define and situate the experiential and personal reality of university. This thick description is further facilitated by the adoption of multiple analytic strategies. The interviews in this study were analysed for themes and processes using a grounded theory informed approach to negotiate a conceptual scheme. In addition, the narrative form and metaphorical content of the interviews was examined in order to generate additional theoretical insight. As Cortazzi (1993) explains:

> There is no reason why insights from a number of disciplines should not be integrated for any particular research question. This is not usually done, perhaps because of a tendency for academics to work within the scope of a single discipline…narrative analysis…might well be used in conjunction with other methods of educational research… (p.138)

The data shaped and defined the interpretative framework rather than being driven by preconceived ideas or theories. By continually returning to the data with different 'conceptual lenses', the interview dialogue is not perceived as indicating one absolute truth but rather as distinct pieces in an evolving puzzle. Thus, true data saturation never

occurs instead there is always something additional that can be gleaned when data is approached from multiple angles.

Data Analysis within a Symbolic Interactionist Framework

Interpreting research data is, as Miller and Crabtree (1999) highlight, 'a complex and dynamic craft' that requires many changes and renegotiations both in terms of 'organising styles and analytic approach' (pp.128-129). Within an interpretative framework, analysing data does not necessarily lead to precise or exact explanations; the emphasis is on showing patterns and relationships rather than proclaiming causality. Hence, the interpretations that are highlighted in the data analysis chapters (5 – 7) are not reflective of one true reality instead, as a Symbolic Interactionist, I reject this singular notion of the real. By imaginatively and rigorously engaging with the research material, the objective is to have an 'intuitive and impressionistic' relationship with the data (Charmaz, 2006, p.147). Such a relationship sits comfortably within the symbolic interactionist paradigm, which both advocates and emphasises the importance of the researcher's own subjectivity and the need for interpersonal involvement in the research process (Jacob, 1987, p.37). In this way, qualitative investigation modelled upon this approach can move beyond simply replicating existing knowledge or beliefs and instead, negotiate ideas or theories that may ultimately challenge both the researcher's perspective as well as those generally dominant or accepted within society.

> Theorising means stopping, pondering and rethinking anew. We stop the flow of studied experience and take it apart. To gain theoretical sensitivity, we look at studied life from multiple vantage points, make comparisons, follow leads and build on ideas. Because you chart your direction through acts of theorizing, you may not be able to foresee endpoints or stops along the way. (Charmaz, 2006, p.135)

Such diversity opens the researcher up to the possibility of new phenomena as events and issues are explored within a 'disciplined eclecticism' to allow what Geertz (1973) defines as 'systematic unpackings of the conceptual world' (cited in Shulman, 1986, p.19). The data analysis process in this study is better conceived as the generation of ideas, a process largely facilitated by the asking of questions. The analytic focus commenced with an emphasis on the data itself rather than preconceived frameworks or models obtained from external sources such as literature, policy or previous studies. Ultimately, the objective is to see the everyday in a new way and one way to do this is

through constant comparative analysis; by reexamining a notion and playing with it through comparison and questioning it becomes possible to revision the obvious or taken for granted. Words, phrases and the nuances of narratives were re-visited and explored so that ideas and theories emerged in an interpretative and reflective manner.

While the interviews largely concern the experiences of a group of students as they proceed through their first academic year at university the semi-structured nature of them means that the dialogue extends beyond any preconceived parameters and of course, commentary on realities beyond university culture are present. In order to do justice to the multiplicity of perspectives and open up the analytic possibilities, the data has been examined in a multi-variegated way. This process began with the naming and categorisation of the interview data; the resulting fragmentation of data led to the creation of thematic codes and from these, analytic concepts and interpretivist frameworks have been derived. However, the fracturing of data can lead to an emphasis on content and so this study has also adopted a narrative approach to further highlight how individuals make sense of this environment. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) 'urge' researchers 'not to become fixated on one analytic approach' (p.24) so this research project has responded to just this challenge.

Narrative approaches to research

Narrative at its most basic level is defined as consisting of a sequence of events that are organised into a whole in order to facilitate understanding about their significance (Eliott, 2005, Franzosi, 1998). Such a definition highlights three characteristics of narratives being that they are chronological, meaningful and also social in that they are generally created in relation to a specific audience. Structurally, narratives have been described as stories which move from one 'equilibrium' to another, often commencing with a 'stable' situation which is then destabilised by factors or forces. The resulting state of disequilibrium is then addressed by a differing set of circumstances to create a new equilibrium, this may relate to the initial state but it is not exactly the same (Czarniawska, 2002, p.735).

Barthes (1977) is credited as being one of the first theorists to point to narrative as an important facet of social science research, a potential tool for analysing individual social

reality and meaning making (Czarniawska, 2002). There has been a consistent interest in narrative as a tool for understanding the human and social science this is demonstrated by the abundance of literature relating to its application and research potential, see for example Czarniawska (2002), Eliott (2005), Gubrium and Holstein (1998), Mishler (1986) and Polkinghorne (1988). Indeed, the importance of narrative approaches to study is also reflected by its popularity and cross-disciplinary application. Narrative studies have been adopted by a diversity of disciplines including but not limited to psychology, sociology, education, literary studies, history and health and this multiple usage may in part be reflective of the versatility of this approach (Lieblich et al., 1998; Muller, 1999). Essentially, narrative enables entry into the 'lived experience' of individuals, facilitating perspectives that embrace the multiplicity and polyvocality of reality and offer an alternative to the ideal of objective realism.

Generally, these stories are chronological in that they have a start, some type of plot development and then an ending of sorts, however the significance of narratives exists beyond the structure; narratives are also situated within a cultural context. While stories told may at one level refer to events within one person's life equally, these stories also reflect 'cultural messages about society' (Muller, 1999, p.224). When participants are asked to reflect on past events and narrate these, not only are these stories presented in an organisationally coherent way but also, such renditions reveal the significance of these for the narrator. By placing events in a temporal sequence and creating a plot, the narrator is essentially highlighting the significance of some occurrences over others as well as 'shaping' these into 'meaningful units' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.160). As Polkinghorne elaborates:

> The humblest narrative is always more than a chronological series of events: it is a gathering together of events into a meaningful story. (1988, p.131)

For the reader, narrative form has been credited with encouraging empathy, facilitating interaction that enables individuals to define and highlight the significance of certain life actions (Eliott, 2005; Polkinghorne, 1988). In telling a story, individuals refer to shared cultural understandings about how to present events or structure the story, appropriate forms of imagery or metaphoric reference that can be used and also, decisions about what narratives can be told and what might be considered culturally taboo. However, having said that, the in-depth interview situation provides space for individuals to engage

in lengthy monologues which often avoid normal turn-taking conversational practices. Such an opportunity may encourage exploration of areas that in general conversation would remain off-limits. This highlights another key feature of narrative interview research, undoubtedly the conversational outcomes result from the nature of interaction between interviewer and interviewee.

Narrative saturates life and enables individuals to reassess past actions, negotiate future outcomes and locate the inner self in the present. From a feminist perspective, the narrative space enables women's stories of experience to remain complete rather than being delineated around a question and answer framework (Graham, 1984).The speaker is actively involved in making sense of life as well as shaping activities and events into significant units; participants are thus provided the opportunity to play an active role in the interviews, facilitating the disclosure of the 'dynamic quality of experience' (Graham, 1984, p.119). Ochberg (1996) perceives narrative in a more radical sense, suggesting that telling stories is one method of taking control of life and reclaiming ownership of actions however, the act of interpretation may remove this onus of power and instead suggest that individuals are simply buffeted by the winds of cultural constraint. To circumvent this possibility, the researcher needs to not only identify the social processes at play within the narrative but also maintain a sense of 'wakefulness' in order to avoid simplistic or descriptive analyses (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

However, equally it is important to note that narrative interpretation is simply that an interpretation, there are many different readings made possible within a text. This recognition of the polymorphous state of narrative analysis does not necessarily diminish its possibilities but rather enables the reconceptualisation of taken for granted notions. Narrators are not tied to a particular narrative standpoint but may move between perspectives, certainly in the case of these research interviews, participants did move between positions depending on whether they answered as a mother, a daughter or a student to name just a few. Such positionality reveals the multiple choices in narrative and also the control an interviewee has in relation to what and how things are heard. Hence, it would be naive to assume that narratives provide a pristine reflection of life as it is lived but rather these forms should be treated as subjective and biased descriptions but it is precisely this that makes narrative such a meaningful form of expression. The act of making sense and explaining events lends narrative its evaluative and explanatory

value. As Polkinghorne (1988) points out while the 'content of each plot is unique' narrative characteristics can be shared in terms of emplotment and structure (p.154). Similarly Muller (1999) identifies:

> It is in the telling and hearing of stories that people disclose, arrange and make sense of their own experience as well as that of others. (p.221)

Using narrative in this research project

Research conducted within the education arena can benefit from narrative analysis. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) justify the inclusion of narrative analysis by pointing out that experience is best understood and explained via narrative and that education is one such form of experience:

> Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.23)

Brookfield (1995) suggests that all educational research should commence with the actual learners, it is essential to identify with students and attempt to see ourselves 'through students' eyes' or get 'inside students' heads' (p.92). Interviews offer the space to negotiate and evolve such rich, meaningful narrative however, interviewers must adopt a less directive role allowing subjects to tell their stories rather than simply respond to questions. Gubrium and Holstein (1998) identify how experiences are 'storied' during interaction; constructed in response to apparent 'interpretative demands' (p.166). Narrative analysis enables access to Verstehen allowing an understanding of the individual within the social setting and in the active production of meaning. Similar to the interview structure itself, narrative production is a collaborative relationship in that both the interviewer and the respondent have some influence and control over the outcome. (Birch, 1998; Ochberg, 1996)

The complexity of social reality can be opened up if one is prepared to experiment and move beyond the personal comfort zones, the analysis here strives for 'density' (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.158). This conceptual density is focused on the meaning that events and activities have for individuals rather than the generation of broad theoretical explanations. In this way, the research is somewhat reflective of Denzin's (1989; 2000) Interpretative Interactionism, which aims to provide rich and deep description of personal

experience. Such an approach is not atheoretical but rather focuses on the interpretation of events and lives. Rather than attempting to produce explanatory models, the objective is to 'bring alive' the 'private experiences that give meaning to everyday life as it is lived in this moment in history' (Denzin, 1989, p.139).

Essentially, narrative enables educational research to perceive the different worlds that exist in educational settings and provide a means to engender university on a symbolic and lived level. The production and recognition of counter narratives highlights the constructed nature of accepted discourses and negotiates contested terrains of meaning rather than acceptance. There is no standard or generally accepted approach to conducting narrative analysis and the approach adopted is dependent on the focus of the study, essentially dictated by whether the focus is on narrative content or the structure and form of this discourse. In this research study, it is the evaluative nature of this occurrence, the meaning associated with these experiences that is explored. This study is influenced by Lieblich et al.'s (1998) approach to narrative research which relates to 'any study that uses or analyses narrative materials' (p.2). The objective is not to describe the stories held by individual students in order to identify similarities between narrative structures but rather respondents' stories are examined to understand why it is that students choose to come to university and why persistence occurs in the face of many seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The focus of this analysis is on the content of narratives in order to highlight how the speaker makes sense of these events. The objective is to draw attention to the personal ramifications of this decision and also, indicate how transition, persistence and engagement are enacted on an individual level.

In order to retain textual integrity, Franzosi (1998) advocates the use of multiple methods, mentioning the possibilities of computer applications and other approaches to data analysis. Hence, this study utilises the interpretative framework generated by the grounded theory approach, which has been assisted by incorporating the NVivo 7 computer package. Narrative constructions are not boundless, instead they are constrained by relevant events and actions but how these elements are selected, reported, defined, and positioned is where individuals have input and control. Hence, the analysis of such stories reveals both individual and cultural meanings but these must be derived from the text rather than defined a priori. Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) provides a systematic and rigorous method of investigation as it requires a

continuous process of comparative analysis initially between interviews and then, in relation to the literature.

Grounded theory

According to Creswell (2007), the two most popular approaches to grounded theory are the systematic processes of Strauss and Corbin (1998) and the constructivist approach of Charmaz (2006), it is the latter that this study adopts. Constructivist grounded theory focuses on the phenomena that are being studied and regards facets of the research experience that include relationships with participants and shared experiences as intrinsic to the creation of data and analysis. This perspective emphasises the interpretative nature of theory generation and so reveals how theory is necessarily a construction that relies on researcher engagement with the data as well as being contextually bounded by temporal, geographical, cultural and situational contexts (Addison, 1999; Charmaz, 2006). The constructivist grounded theorist is situated within the Symbolic Interactionist framework and recognises the multiple realities of lived experiences as well as the negotiated framework that meanings exist within.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) formally expounded grounded theory in their publication: *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* and it has since been adapted and refined to emerge in a number of related forms. Essentially, my own approach seeks to ground the research within the realities of individuals' everyday lives. To avoid imposing an 'analytic frame' to analysis (Charmaz, 2006, p.62) the questions that were asked related to the actual data rather than preconceived and rigid categories. This is one of the strengths of constructivist grounded theory. The researcher engages with the data in an open-minded manner seeking to act on and react to the material, the emphasis is on the data itself rather than preconceived frameworks or models obtained from external sources such as literature, policy or previous studies.

Before commencing the interviews, it has been suggested that it is important for the researcher to locate the study within the nexus of literature and theoretical formulations (Kvale, 1996). However, the study avoided this in order to enable thematic categories to emerge inductively from the data, Yet it is important to realise that ideas do not exist within the data, no matter how much you read and reread transcripts or how long you

spend coding. Instead, understanding is generated through a movement between reading the data and reading the literature. While there is a definite place and indeed need for extensive consultation of existing literature, this should occur after a preliminary engagement with data to avoid prescription and the imposition of existing frameworks on material. Hence, while I initially engaged with the data only, as the study proceeded I consulted relevant literature and models in order to build ideas and theories,

Peirce (1960) developed the concept of 'abductive reasoning' which falls between the polarity suggested by inductive and deductive logic. Peirce identifies how an exact adherence to either of these is not effective in the development and engendering of new ideas and that abductive reasoning offers the potential to move beyond such sterility. Abductive reasoning is premised on the act of identifying specific phenomenon and then locating this within alternative conceptual frameworks. In this way, the particular event or aspect of the research is interpretatively defined and engaged with in an imaginative and creative way. If researchers move beyond the discipline in which they are working within, the possibility for further analysis and exploration is opened up, analysis and interpretation should not be trammelled by discipline boundaries but rather should reach unfettered into areas that have not yet been explored. Such an approach provides the 'sensitising concepts' (Blumer, 1954) which ultimately supply alternative and varied lenses for visioning and revisioning the data.

In this study, theoretical sampling was enabled as the transcription and early analysis of data enabled the generation of categories, interview questions were then designed in order to exploit and further define these initial codes. As Charmaz (2006) states theoretical sampling can involve asking 'earlier participants further questions or inquir[ing] about experiences that you have not covered before' (p.103). Data is interrogated from various theoretical perspectives and any emerging hypothesis is empirically examined by referring back to the data and checking the validity of these ideas. This process enables the category to be 'fleshed out' and clarified. However, conducting theoretical sampling when engaging with people in relationships is far from simplistic, it is not possible to meet with people and simply expect them to be plundered for information in order to develop conceptual categories. Rather this process has to be conducted around the trust and rapport that has developed; this requires reciprocity in the research relationship. Also, additional ethical clearance may be required, for

example, in my own project the discovery that students were contemplating second year in terms of a further transition in their study, suggested that students undergo multiple transitions rather than this only occurring at the initial stage of study or being temporally delineated. Based on this realisation, I applied for further ethical clearances to interview students at the end of the second year of study in order to facilitate further retrospective examination; these interviews will form the basis for further research on this area.

The result of the four interviews was the generation of a huge volume of material; the final two sections of this chapter outline the practicalities of handling this amount of data. In research it is vital to reveal the process of theory generation and reveal the 'distinctive journey' that led to theoretical destinations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.32). Hence, the information provided in this next section is further supplanted and explained by examples and excerpts presented in the appendices.

Data handling

The term 'data handling' is derived from Richards (2005) who decries the lack of literature on what researchers should actually 'do' with data once it has been obtained. Personally, 'handling' data better describes the delicate process of extraction and interpretation that was performed in this study as opposed to the regulation or organisation implied by the term 'data management'. This section of the chapter is then concerned with how I worked with the data in order to 'produce adequate and useful outcomes' (Richards, 2005, p.x).

Transcription

Charmaz (2003) urges grounded theorists to study the emerging data and suggests that transcribing interviews is one way to facilitate this early engagement. In-depth interviewing generates a vast amount of text, however it is important to avoid pre-selecting parts of the tape as this would involve making early judgments about what is important and what is not; choices that should not be made at an early stage. Despite the time involved, each interview was typed up by myself and this process enabled me to attend closely to what the women were actually communicating both verbally and non-

verbally. The act of transcription also highlighted avenues for further exploration and questioning, in this way interviews followed students' experiences rather than focusing on personal or preconceived assumptions.

The text was transcribed in its complete narrative form, grammar and syntax were left in their original form and the original transcripts note all non-verbal signals such as laughs, sighs and pauses that were recorded on the tape. At the end of each interview, I also noted personal reflections about the interview in a journal, which was referred to when I came to transcribe and examine the data. However, transcription is rarely neutral or value free, even decisions about punctuation can alter the intrinsic meaning of a speakers phrase or sentence (Arksey & Knight, 1999). In the interests of readability and clarity, when quotes were placed in the following chapters false starts and repetitions were removed to facilitate understanding; such removal is indicated by three dots. All quotes are derived from the one speech act unless otherwise indicated so the material is presented in its correct context. Once transcribed, the students were referenced by pseudonyms or initials to both ensure confidentiality and also, remove any researcher prejudices that may have developed during the interview process. The initial objective was to engage solely with the words of the women rather than situate these within a personal context.

The three chapters covering data analysis foreground the words of the participants and deliberately avoid including long quotations. Instead, situations and actions are described in detail, referenced with shorts quotes or even phrases to negotiate the nuances of the situation. In this way, the richness of the context is not drowned by extraneous information; instead of placing an entire paragraph often a single sentence or phrase elicits the meaning just as effectively. This is echoed by Richards (2005), who argues: '…quotations will be more powerful if they are as brief as possible, pruned to express just what matters.' (p.197)

After transcription, each completed interview was imported into the QSR NVivo program which facilitated both data handling and coding. When engaged in the act of coding data the main objective is to group data according to commonality of purpose or content, frequently data is coded according to topical or thematic similarity. Coding can become

quite a mechanistic activity but it does provide the basis for making conceptual links, hence it represents the initial step in the analytic process.

Coding data in QSR NVivo (version 7)

> The choices available in NVivo return the power of analysis to the researcher who must choose wisely amongst a set of tools and is by no means required to use them all. (Bringer, Johnston & Breckenridge, 2004, p.249)

NVivo has been subjected to intensive researcher feedback and aims to support researchers in their work with data (Bazeley, 2007). The software program offers a myriad of ways to engage with data but despite my desire to learn all the techniques available, in this study only a small proportion of its capabilities were utilised. Basically, NVivo organised the data and the ideas that emerged, data could be repeatedly queried whilst the production of graphic models and reports further assisted in developing conceptual thinking. There are many different ways that NVivo can be used in projects; the following section provides an account of how this software was used in this study. This description is provided in order to assist with understanding the outcomes of the study and also to ensure transparency within the research process.

Interview text was coded in two phases namely initial coding and then focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). Initial coding was conducted on a line by line basis examining words and segments of text for 'analytic import' (p.42). These largely artificial and simplistic constructs enabled the exploration of particular social phenomenon that emerged early in the analysis phase. This initial coding is then a heuristic device enabling greater analytic clarity and involving a large degree of reflection. This reflective practise was also facilitated by a ‘memoing’ process that strove to ask questions of the data and provide a basis for benchmarking the research process; these memos proved invaluable in the later interpretative stages of analysis. Coding was conducted at an inductive and abductive level, in order to break through the 'ordinariness of a routine event' (Charmaz, 2006, p.53).The techniques utilised to ‘interrogate’ text included completing line by line analysis and using in-vivo coding so that the emerging categories remained embedded within the participants’ discourse (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Initial codes relied heavily on the text and helped to define what was in the data. This stage also allowed me to get a feel for the data and organise this into categories, which are called ‘free nodes’. Appendix A, figure 1, provides examples of these free nodes developed in the early stages of analysis. The second step was the development of ‘tree nodes’ which are hierarchically structured with categories and subcategories. Figure 2 (Appendix A) provides an example of a tree node hierarchy. However, tree nodes and free nodes are merely the beginning of analysis and in order to really delve into the material it is necessary to employ the query element of NVivo.

Making connections between data and across nodes is better conducted at query level and many of the queries in NVivo are similarly constructed to the approaches expounded by Strauss and Corbin (1998) including axial coding and the use of coding matrices. Initial coding fractures data into disparate elements whilst axial coding reassembles it into coherent wholes; NVivo enables this through the creation of sets and coding queries which enable the researcher to identify the 'when, where, why , who, how and with what consequences' (Charmaz, 2006, p.60). This type of focused coding then explores the most interesting or useful initial coding and tests this against the larger body of data, with a particular focus on actions and processes. Figures 3 - 5 (Appendix A) presents the sequence of a coding query. Diagraming or modeling also helps to perceive the data in new ways and can assist with identifying and clarifying the relationships between categories.

As the researcher moves through the NVivo landscape coding, modeling and using the query functions, data is gradually perceived at an analytic level. The term ‘coding on’ (Richards, 2005, p.97) refers to such an advance in conceptual thinking when nodes are re-examined in order to create other concepts based on what is being said. ‘Coding on’ is one approach to what Delamont (1992) refers to as interrogation of the text, the node categories that have been developed cannot be conceived of as static and immovable but rather simply serve as the jumping-off point and will evolve as they are played and experimented with. Similar to Glaser (1978), where possible I identified and named codes as ‘gerunds’ and based these names on the actual words used by the participants - for example ‘creating anxiety’; ‘seeking’. The gerunds provide a sense of action while referencing students’ own words assumes an insider's view rather than imposing another world-view upon the data.

One criticism of using software packages such as this one is that they ultimately distance the researcher from the data (Kelle, 1995; Weitzman, 2000). However, I would argue that this package actually facilitated both proximity and distance to the text as the researcher can 'zoom in' to focus on particular parts of text located in nodes and then 'zoom out' again. Within NVivo, data can simultaneously exist in a number of categories and a hyperlink enables the researcher to move between the discrete segment and the actual discoursal context. Hence, NVivo enables researchers to view the text both in context but also to reconceptualise the data by placing it in a new context or separated from the original text document. Personally, it was necessary to overcome the tactile-digital divide (Gilbert, 2002) and it took time to adapt to working on screen rather than with paper. While this initially proved cumbersome, the ability to hyperlink across documents along with the model facility quickly compensated for any early difficulty.

While the development of categories and the labelling of data accordingly may be regarded as somewhat reductive, this is merely a strategy to enable entry into the richness and diversity of the phenomena of the university experience. The project ultimately attempts to weave 'patterns from fragments of experience' (West, 1996, p.14) and both the methodologies adopted and the data handling processes assisted in this objective.

Conclusion

The diverse approach adopted in this study not only serves to present the data in different ways but also reveals the multiplicity of the analytical process. By implementing two complementary approaches to analysis, the intent was to move away from the idea of one true reality and instead recognise that such logico-deductive reasoning simply circumscribes understanding.

The interviews in this study have been analysed using two analytic schemes, initially analysis was iterative (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) using the grounded theory approach. By engaging with the text, the objective was to generate codes and categories so that the

interviews could be explored abductively. These codes and categories enabled exploration of specific areas of interests and this was complimented by a narrative analysis which particularly focused on stories related to coming to university as well as narratives that explored facets of this experience. This approach recognises that events are 'enacted in storied moments of time and space' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.25) and while these stories are personal and social they also reflect wider social conditions. However, the story that is told today will differ, maybe only marginally, from one that will be told tomorrow and similarly the responses and anecdotes narrated in my interviews on one particular day are not consistent nor fixed.

This is a research journey; perspectives and concerns shift as the researcher moves through the landscape of the study. The theory and the data generated will emerge gradually as the research speeds up, slows down and comes to an eventual halt. The ultimate destination remains a shadowy illusion, as it shifts and waivers; the researcher must remain persistent, prepared to adopt new directions or traverse over old ground, always hoping that just around the corner is their journey's end. The next chapter takes us one step further on this path by further contextualising this study within a social, political and economic framework. The chapter begins by situating higher education within a global and national context before narrowing focus to examine the region where the study occurred and its particular demographics. Finally, the actual protocols and procedures surrounding the study design will be highlighted and explained.

Chapter Four: Research Context and Design

Introduction

The particular nuances of the student experience in Australian universities need to be situated and framed by the significant national and international changes witnessed in higher education in the last two decades. In the decade from 1996 -2006, the numbers of students in Australian universities doubled to just under one million in total (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Similarly, the number of universities has grown exponentially from nine publicly funded universities in 1956 to a total of 37 in 2008. The growth in student numbers has been accompanied by increases in both the range of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) available as well as the number of universities that now deliver in an off-shore capacity. Education is currently the third largest export in Australia and so it is not surprising that in 2007, the total value of education exports reached 12.5 billion dollars (ABS, 2008; Bradley et al., 2008). These are just a sample of the most recent changes that have occurred in the Australian sector; equally dramatic developments have occurred in many other countries.

Clearly, in order to assess the data derived from this study it is imperative to situate this project not only locally and nationally but also historically and globally. This chapter will present a series of contextualised snapshots; as the chapter proceeds these zoom closer and closer onto the project itself in order to present a dense and detailed backdrop to the forthcoming data analysis chapters. The initial chapter sections are not designed to be comprehensive but rather provide a brief summary of major developments and initiatives within the higher education field. In describing the situational context for the study itself, insight into the institution where the research took place will be presented and demographics of the broad university population identified. However, in order to assure anonymity of place and people, this information will not be sourced nor include identifiable markers. The final sections of the chapter explore the actual mechanics of the study, providing details of research design including information on the participants, recruitment procedures as well as issues relating to reliability and validity. Before moving to this level of specificity it is necessary to present a wide-angle perspective on this area. The following sections provide a brief overview of the

contemporary global higher education sector before focusing on current trends and developments within the Australian university environment.

Global higher education context for this study

The increasing numbers of students entering higher education, witnessed in the last two decades, needs to be explored on a number of levels. On the one hand, this 'open door' policy is perceived as offering an opportunity to change life circumstances and extend personal choice. However, there is a need to make sure that this 'open door' does not simply become a 'revolving door' (Blythman & Orr, 2001-2002, p.232). The move from an elite to a mass system is not necessarily accompanied by increases in either choice or opportunity; instead students in countries like Britain and Australia, enter a university landscape that is delineated by hierarchy.

Abbott-Chapman (2006) identifies how in both Britain and Australia:

> …the higher education sector is highly differentiated with more elite research-orientated institutions at the top of the hierarchy and newer, more technologically orientated universities at the bottom. (p.4)

This perceived division has been argued to further cement social inequality, where students from disadvantaged backgrounds are ghettoised into those institutions that are outside the privileged sites of learning. In Britain, this demarcation is regarded as being around pre-1992 'old' universities and those post-1992 'new universities' (Brine & Waller, 2004, p.98) whilst in Australia, this division is defined around the so-called 'Group of Eight'.

This group is promoted as containing Australia's leading universities, providing 'an authoritative source of policy advice and analysis on higher education and university research' (Group of Eight Strategic Plan, 2008 -2012, para. 1). When current statistics and trends are examined the divisions in levels of access within the university landscape become quite apparent. In Australia, the participation of people from low-SES backgrounds is calculated nationally as 15.5%, but this participation is clustered in regional universities whereas in the Group of Eight participation is well below the

national average at 11% (James, 2008). In the United Kingdom, the system of higher education is also highly stratified between those established universities and those institutions of higher education that gained university status after 1992. Similar to Australia, there has been little growth in the number of working class students accessing university and those that do, are more likely to attend the post-1992 universities (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Reay, Davies et al., 2001). Contemporary university discourse may be framed by the ideal of lifelong learning and also policies associated with mass participation but these concepts are also deserving of more attention.

In most industrialised countries, the expansion of the university system is probably more realistically linked to a need to compete in an increasingly globalised marketplace. This economic era has been termed a weightless economy where information is the emerging currency rather than heavy industrial technologies. Education is now commercially traded similar to other commodities on the world market. The impetus for expansion in the university arena reflects a need for skilled and educated workers which combine with changes in society such as 'growing aspirations for better jobs and greater social mobility' (Winn, 2002, p.446).

While the numbers of students entering university have increased, government funding to universities has decreased and the need for universities to generate independent funding is now a necessity (King, 2001), creating the phenomenon of the 'enterprise' university (Robertson & Blacker, 2006, p.215). These changes are evident across the western higher education sector, with similar transformations apparent in Canada, the UK and the US. Clearly, this move from an 'elite' to a mass system of higher education has initiated a fundamental shift in the 'very nature of higher education in terms of structure, purpose, social and economic role' (Schuetze & Slowey, 2002, p.309). Such shifts are particularly apparent in the Australian university environment

Australian higher education context for this study

> In Australia since the mid-1990's our higher education system has been subjected to a seemingly random blend of neglect with occasional bursts of ideological-driven interference. (Gillard, 2008, para. 8)

The quote above is derived from a speech from the recently elected Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Julia Gillard, in which she announces an impending review of the higher education sector. The proposed review is heralded as a new era in government–university relationships; one that will apparently be characterised by collaboration rather than the existing 'command and control' approach (Gillard, 2008). Whether such a change will actually be initiated remains to be seen but without doubt, in the last 10-15 years the Australian higher education has been buffeted by government policy, particularly as it relates to fiscal support.

The costs associated with attending university, mentioned in the literature review, increase the need for higher education institutions to support the persistence and success of students both for the individual student and the institution. Scott (2006) reports how this sector is under pressure to effect change and meet student 'expectations and demands' (p. vi) in order to simply maintain sustainability. However, the current market-driven focus of the higher education sector has engendered standards and indicators designed to measure university output and qualify teaching and learning rather than qualitatively examine student experience. In Australian universities the drive is to quantify productivity by weighting different research publications and by assessing teaching and learning through drop out and grade distributions. Add to this, the increasing casualisation of teaching staff and the increasingly large numbers of students, and the result is a system that is reflective of a corporate model of education. The quantification of higher education has undoubtedly led to qualitative changes in the nature of student experience.

In response to the escalating costs of education and the competitive market framework that has become entrenched in this sector, the Labour Government intends to phase out full-fee paying undergraduate places from 2009 in order to improve equity of access. In an attempt to address the skills shortages those students who elect to study mathematics and science will also have fees reduced by approximately 50% and the

number of Commonwealth Scholarships will double to 88,000 in order to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Gillard, 2008). Perhaps, 2009 heralds a new era for higher education and as a result, the research contained in this thesis may already be limited in its relevance and application; but then this is a limitation of any historically situated study. The study outlined occurred in 2006 and reflects particular conditions associated with this period. The next section of this chapter will zoom in on the actual location where the research occurred in order to further contextualise the particularities of this study.

The higher education setting for this study

This study is set on a small subsidiary campus of a larger metropolitan institution, the distance between the research site and the main campus is 80 kilometers. In order to situate the study broadly, the following section will first highlight the characteristics of the main campus, which will be called *City University.* To further ensure anonymity, the research site will be referenced as *Midtown Campus*.

City University

City University was established in the mid sixties and while not a member of the Group of Eight is ranked in Australia's top ten universities. The university is also a member of the Innovative Research Universities Australia (IRUA) group which reflects an ambition to be dynamically focussed on research. The university has a total student population in excess of 26,000, who are studying over 300 programs across five faculties and four campuses, one of which is based off-shore.

City University emphasises alternative pathways into university and as a reflection of this offers a number of enabling or access programs, which provide students with an University Admission Index (UAI) to apply to university. Three different access programs exist; each tailored to a different student cohort namely school leavers, mature age students and also Aboriginal students. Six of the students in this study completed the access program for mature age students (over 21 years) and this provided the basis for the entry to their undergraduate program; one of the students was completing this

program during the research study.

This access pathway, combined with the demographics of the catchment area, has created a diverse student population within City University, including a relatively high participation share of people from low socio-economic backgrounds. In 2007, 27.9% of students were in the lowest socio-economic band; this is the highest participation rate of SES disadvantage nationally. The university also has higher access and participation rates for Aboriginal students compared to both state and national figures. However, the population is not very ethnically diverse, which reflects the mono-cultural nature of the primary catchment areas. In 2007, only 0.9% of students had a first language other than English and 10.5% of total enrolments were classed as international on-shore students. Similar demographics are reflected at Midtown Campus.

Midtown Campus

This smaller campus is located in a region that is recognised as being economically and socially disadvantaged. This recognition is derived largely from statistical evidence revealing higher than state average levels of unemployment, families in receipt of pensions or benefits and low income earners. According to the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics data (2001-2003), the area also has much lower university attendance rates than state or national figures (2% compared to 4% for state and national) as well as a much lower proportion of residents who have completed a university degree (6% compared with 11% for the state and 10% for the country) or completed the final year of high school (27% compared to 38% for the state).

This campus is somewhat unique in that it not only houses City University students but also TAFE students as well as having a small separate community college presence, the community college uses the site to provide some accredited courses and also what are termed ‘life-style’ studies such as photography, cooking etc. Presently, there are approximately 7,000 TAFE and university enrolments; just under half of these are university places. The multi-sectorial nature of this campus means that an array of programs are offered and in turn, these attract a diversity of students ranging from sixteen year old school leavers entering vocational traineeships for increased employment possibilities right up to students in their sixties and seventies who are often

simply interested in enriching their life and increasing their knowledge. Most of these students have a number of responsibilities and activities competing for time in their daily life and only a tiny percentage of the students live on campus, the rest either live in the surrounding suburbs or commute.

Midtown Campus emphasises pathways between TAFE and university study and has been recognised by The Department of Training and Youth Affairs (2000) as '…one of the best justified and longest established and most successful multi-partner campuses in Australia'. This emphasis is reflected in the students involved in this study, four of whom took this path from TAFE to university.

The Midtown student population

While Midtown is regarded as a growth campus, its location and public perception of the campus may limit this potential for growth. Midtown is located in a commuter-belt region where over 50,000 residents travel daily to urban employers, located up to 100 kilometers north and south of the campus. Public transport is designed to facilitate this commuting which means that internal transport systems are very poor and students have difficulty accessing the campus.

Undoubtedly, the relatively recent inception of the campus, the first group of students commenced in 1989, gave many people the choice to attend university, perhaps some who would not have considered this type of endeavour previously. In fact, the proximity of the campus to many new housing developments, designed to accommodate the expanding population from surrounding urban regions, does provide a catchment area. As a result, the majority of the students reside in the local community and once lectures are finished generally depart the campus hence, little student life exists on campus. The non-residential nature of the campus means that the student experience will be qualitatively different to larger institutions with a large residential student population. This situation is compounded by the number of mature age students at the campus. In 2006, when this study took place, the percentage of equivalent full-time study load was the same for 17-19 year olds as for 30-39 year olds (14%); by far the majority of students were aged between 21 and 24 years.

Finally, the university does not keep information on the family status of students but based on the demographics of the region and anecdotal evidence, a large proportion of the student body can be assumed to be the first in their family to attend university. Undoubtedly, this lack of tradition in, or experience with, attending university further defines this cohort and indeed this factor became a central axis around which this project was built. All seventeen of the students in this study can be termed as 'first generation' in that no-one in their immediate family had attended university previously. This included spouses or partners, children, parents and immediate siblings; members of extended family such as cousins, in-laws or other relatives were not included in this definition. The following section will provide details of each of the participants and also detail recruitment procedures and the practicalities of the research design.

Research design

Chapter three on methods outlined the choices made in relation to the structure of the study and provided justification for techniques employed during interviews, transcription and data handling. The next section of this chapter will begin by explaining the ethical practices that informed the study before describing the mechanics of the study including details of the students involved. The ethics of any proposed research require careful consideration and analysis in order to eliminate discomfort or disruption to participants. In order to assure this, the researcher employed a number of primary measures to protect the welfare and rights of those people involved.

Ethical consideration

In order to uphold ethical and legal responsibilities, ethics approval for the study was sought from the participating educational institution. Those involved in the research gave their consent while in possession of all the relevant information and participants were given assurances regarding anonymity and confidentiality of the data (Appendices D & E). The ethical principle of 'beneficence' refers to eliminating any risk of harm to a subject and ensuring that the research should have benefit for those involved (Kvale, 1996). One of the broader objectives of this study was to use the students' experiences to inform student support strategies. In this way, the knowledge and information gained

could impact positively on the experiences of future first year students. Indeed, in the year following this study I trialed a new transition initiative that was informed by these students' experiences (O'Shea, in press). Further, in order to limit the possibility for potential risk to students, strict codes of confidentiality and anonymity were implemented.

While the data was being transcribed, all names, including those of facilities and other non-essential information, were altered and the participants were each given a pseudonym, these reference each quote. The pseudonyms also enable the reader to follow how the participants respond to issues as the year progresses, providing an added facet to a study by furthering engagement with the students involved. Data was stored in a secure, locked location and only accessed by myself, the researcher, in order to complete transcription and review as required. During the interview process, I was mindful of the possibility for personal distress as the unstructured nature of the interviews meant that a broad spectrum of topics was covered. In such instances, students were provided with information about the counseling service and where consent was obtained, a referral to the counselors was organised. Participation in the study was voluntary and students were constantly reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Interview transcripts were made available to subjects upon request; however, none of the subjects requested a copy.

Participants

A purposive sample of seventeen first-year students was recruited for the interviews. This number provided a diverse range of data, enabled a depth of data to be collected and maximised the quality of the data generated. The women's ages ranged from 18 to 47 years, with a mean age of 32.3 years. All of the people that responded to the invitation to be involved in the study were white Anglo Australian. Fifteen of the students can be classed as mature age (those defined as over the age of 21) whilst two were under 19 when the study commenced. The intent was not necessarily to focus on mature age students but given the demographics of the campus it is not surprising that the majority were older. Of the fifteen mature age students, thirteen of these are mothers, nine initially resided with their partners (one later separated) and five were single parents. The two younger students were both living at home with their parents; Table 1

indicates the marital and parental status of each of the students. Sixteen of the interviewees are undergraduate students, one individual (Stephanie) was studying on an access program and the majority were studying full-time; however, this number did vary as the year proceeded.

The campus caters to a diverse scope of students from a range of educational backgrounds, many of whom have accessed tertiary education from non-traditional forms of access. This scenario is reflected in this study as while none of the respondents had ever previously enrolled in a degree, ten had completed some studies after high school. Four students had attended TAFE colleges whilst the remainder had enrolled in a university access course designed to prepare students for university study and also provide an University Admissions Index (UAI) to enable application to an undergraduate program. The other participants in the study either entered university as a result of high school certificates (HSC) or by sitting for the STAT test, a two-hour state examination which also provides students with the requisite UAI. Table 2 provides further details of the students; the participants' pseudonyms are arranged alphabetically for ease of reference.

Table 1: Marital and parental status of participants

Name (age)	*Partnered*	*Single*	*Children*	*Sole Parent*
Annie (18)		√		
Catherine (44)			√	√
Clara (23)			√	√
Heidi (47)			√	√
Helen (22)	√			
Jane (32)	√		√	
Katie (33)	√		√	
Kira (38)	√*		√	
Linda (32)			√	√

Mary (18)		√		
Name (age)	***Partnered***	***Single***	***Children***	***Sole Parent***
Nicki (33)			√	√
Rachel (22)		√		
Sheila (31)	√		√	
Stephanie (34)	√		√	
Sue (39)	√		√	
Susie (38)	√		√	
Vicky (45)	√		√	

** Kira's marital status later changed*

Table 2: Personal details of participants

Name	Program of Study	Brief Background
Annie	Bachelor of (Early Childhood) Teaching Full-time	*Annie lives at home with her parents and younger brother, Annie completed her HSC and this provided her with the necessary UAI for entry. Annie also qualified for additional points awarded to entrants residing in the local catchment area.*
Catherine	Bachelor of Nursing Full-time	*Catherine is a single parent with a teenage son. Catherine sat the STAT test which qualified her for university entry.*
Clara	Bachelor of (Early Childhood) Teaching Full-time	*Clara is a single parent who lives with her five year old daughter; Clara left school in Year 11 but completed an access program which provided the necessary UAI for admission.*
Heidi	Bachelor of Social Science Part-time	*Heidi lives alone but has three grown up sons; Heidi completed an access course that enabled her to gain entry to this program.*
Helen	Bachelor of Management Part-time	*Helen lives with her boyfriend and has no children. She did not sit for the HSC and entered university after gaining credit via a TAFE course.*
Jane	Bachelor of Education (High School) Full-time	*Jane lives with her husband and three children (aged 2, 4 & 8). Jane did not sit her HSC but did complete an access program which provided the UAI for admission.*
Katie	Bachelor of Oral	*Katie lives with her husband and two children (aged 6 & 9);*

	Health Full-time	*Katie completed her HSC but entered university on the basis of her STAT test result.*
Kira	Bachelor of Psychology Full-time*	*At the beginning of the study, Kira lived with her husband and five children (aged 6, 8, 14, 15 & 18); Kira had completed a TAFE qualification which gave her admission to university.*
Linda	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts Full-time	*Linda is a single parent who lives with her two children (aged 9 & 10). Linda left school after Year 11 but completed an access program which formed the basis for university admission.*
Mary	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts Full-time	*Mary lives at home with her parents and younger sister. Mary completed the HSC and also qualified for additional points awarded to students living in the catchment area.*
Nicki	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts Full-time	*Nicki is a single parent living with a two year old son; Nicki completed her HSC and a TAFE diploma which provided credit for entry to university.*
Rachel	Bachelor of Social Science Part-time	*Rachel lives at home and has no children. Rachel completed her HSC but entered university with credit from a TAFE qualification.*
Sheila	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts Full-time*	*Sheila lives with her husband and two children (aged 5 & 7); Sheila completed a STAT test which formed the basis for her entry to university.*
Stephanie	Access Program Part–time	*Stephanie lives with her husband and three of her four children (aged 8, 9, 13 & 18). Stephanie is currently studying an access course and hopes to gain entry to an undergraduate program in Education (Primary).*
Sue	Bachelor of Teaching / Bachelor of Arts Full-time	*Sue lives with her husband and two children (aged 8 & 10). Sue did not complete her HSC but gained entry to university after passing the STAT test.*
Susie	Bachelor of Social Science Full-time	*Susie lives with her husband and two children (aged 3 & 6). Susie completed an access course which enabled admission to university.*
Vicky	Bachelor of Nursing Full-time*	*Vicky lives with her husband and three daughters (aged 16, 19 & 22); Vicky had completed the HSC and also an access program which provided the basis for entry.*

** Some of the students started the year in full-time mode but either dropped a subject (Sheila) or a number of subjects (Kira and Vicky) as the semester or year proceeded.*

The previous two tables are simply designed to briefly introduce each of the students who participated in the interviews. This introduction provides a backdrop to the data

analysis in chapters five, six and seven; the tables do not capture the rich detail of these women's lives which will emerge as these later chapters are read.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited indirectly via both university wide channels of communication such as student publications and notice boards (Appendix F) as well as directly via student mentors. At this campus, a peer mentoring program has been in place since 1999, this program has recruited and trained students who are more advanced in their degree program to act as mentors to newly enrolled students, meeting with them on commencement day and providing initial orientation to the campus environment. The student mentors distributed an invitation (Appendix B) to the commencing students in the orientation week of semester one, 2006. This invitation provided brief details of the study, including the need to be female, first year and also, the first in the family to come to university; interested parties were invited to express interest by providing details of their email address for further contact. As a result of the above, twenty-three participants initially responded. These students were then contacted by email and invited to meet the researcher in order to find out more about the study. Email was deliberately chosen as the most appropriate form of communication between interviews as it was less intrusive than telephone communication and more timely than postal mail. Twenty-one students responded to this invitation, the remaining two students later withdrew; one of which withdrew from university completely due to family circumstances.

At this preliminary meeting, students were presented with the information sheet (Appendix D), invited to ask any questions about the nature of the project and the parameters of the study were again outlined. At this stage, students were also offered the opportunity to change their minds and withdraw if so inclined. Three of the students were identified as being in the second year of university and one of the students revealed that a parent had previously attended university so were not able to participate in the study. Each of these students were later contacted by email and thanked for their interest in the study. The remaining seventeen students attended an initial interview between the 27th February and 17th March 2006 and a further three interviews were conducted through that academic year; a detailed interview schedule is available in Appendix C.

The researcher's position on campus was explicitly stated in both the participant information sheet (Appendix D) and also by verbal means prior to the first interview. Individuals were also assured that participation would not impact negatively on any possible future relations with the researcher; indeed at the time of the interviews, the researcher was employed in a coordinator role and so had less personal contact with students. However, what remained unforeseen was the way in which the researcher and professional role intersect, just as it was impossible to predict the course of the interview so equally was it difficult to prevent reference to my role as an academic adviser. It was clear that denying or displacing this professional role would be inappropriate. Instead, each interview was prefaced with assurances that any questions regarding academic support would be answered after the interview and this was usually sufficient; however, at times information and advice was offered during the recorded meeting.

As mentioned the interviews were semi-structured and while questions were prepared (Appendix C) often conversations evolved in unforeseen directions. Indeed, this seems to be one of the limitations of the informed consent required by ethical processes as there will always be themes and concepts that emerge unbidden from these types of conversations, which cannot be predicted at the onset of research. As Chase (1996) points out, no consent form can adequately '…capture the dynamic process of interpretation and authorship' (p.57); this limitation of informed consent is also identified by Price (1996) and Jossellson (1996). Instead, participants need to be made aware that the outcomes from this type of research are both unpredictable and dynamic but such revelations do not remove responsibility for maintaining both validity and reliability.

Validity and reliability

When assessing validity there is a need to show how the research is solid and logical, the progression from one stage to another or one point to another must be coherent. In this study, validity is partially ensured by outlining the steps that were taken and also firmly grounding the outcomes within the data, which will become apparent in the ensuing data analysis chapters. The inclusion of detailed accounts can also improve the validity of qualitative studies enabling individuals to negotiate personal interpretations of the study and relate it to their own practice. Indeed, herein lies one of the strengths of

qualitative studies, the research paradigms often relate directly to actual professional practice meaning that results can be immediately applicable to researchers' and readers' professional situations.

Reliability is often assessed by the ability for the study to be replicated however, such measures of reliability are limited in a study bounded by qualitative parameters. As Richards (2005) argues:

> There are very few situations in a qualitative project, as in life, that can be replicated in a controlled way. The goal of standardized 'measures' which return consistent measurement in a controlled setting is obviously incompatible with qualitative work. (p.141)

However, providing research that is trustworthy is possible through methodological transparency. In this case, such transparency was facilitated by keeping thorough data records that highlight methodological decisions and also clearly validating the procedures that were adopted. Chapter three highlighted how a reflective journal provided the means to explore internal and external processes around this research. In addition to this, the study also included additional logs that focused on the reasoning and justification for the ways in which the data was handled at different stages of the project. These logs and memos were generated within the NVivo program and included a retrospective journal that outlined key research areas and questions, preliminary thoughts and also, initial results from queries. In addition, each category or node that emerged from the data was linked to a memo which further interrogated the nature and possible significance of the category (Figures 6 – 9 in Appendix G). Each of the entries were time-stamped so that I could return and see a particular time and stage of the study that initiated a new thought process or an alternative direction.

The external validity of this study remains quite limited, as the ideas and results that emerged may not reflect the reality of other tertiary settings. What emerges from this study is a 'situated truth', located within the particularities of time and context (Gergen & Gergen, 1994, p.1032). Yet, this is so often the case in research that adopts a qualitative approach and utilises individuals and their opinions.

Crystallization

Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods of analysis to ensure 'rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.5). However, L. Richardson (1994) rejects the concept of triangulation as a means to assess the validity of a study, and instead suggests that, like a crystal, qualitative research has multiple sides creating different nuances of description. This study includes many different voices as a means to highlight both the rich diversity of this experience and reflect the 'infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities and angles of approach' (Richardson & Adams-St. Pierre, 2005, p.963).

As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) so succinctly point out:

> There is no 'correct' telling of this event. Each telling, like a light hitting a crystal, reflects a different perspective of this incident (p.6)

The following chapters offer a 'collage' of narrative, where no single account is privileged over the other and recognises that all interpretative representations are influenced and embedded within the researcher's subjective positioning and perspective. Like a montage, each chapter provides a snapshot of different aspects of the first year conveyed by a diverse mixture of voices.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a series of gradiated views of this project, gradually zooming in from the wider context of this study which is informed by the global higher education landscape through to series of snapshots that provide information both on the immediate conditions of this study and issues around research design. The main thrust of this chapter has been to situate the study to such an extent that any reader, regardless of background or culture, can approach the data in an informed and knowledgeable way.

The following data chapters detail how the students themselves elect to describe their experience, such accounts are not necessarily transparent reflections on reality but rather should be regarded as an indicator of how students make sense of this process. The women in this study are not intentionally linked by age, class or educational background rather their commonality is derived from their status as first in the family

students and their gender. As the information in this chapter indicates, the women are derived from a variety of programs, some are studying part-time and ten have completed previous TAFE or access type courses. This diversity might be regarded as a limitation to this research particularly given that some of the students had completed TAFE or access qualifications at the same campus. However, the objective of this research was to accompany these women as they proceeded through an initial year of study within a university context in order to explicate the process around transition to this environment as well as their experiences of engagement and persistence. There is no doubt that this experience will be mediated by a range of factors but then, this is no different to studies that purport to examine mature age students' experiences or low SES students understanding of higher education. Individual student experience is always going to be mediated by factors beyond preconceived categories, it is necessary to recognise that everyone's story will differ.

By returning to the data repeatedly in an iterative loop, the aim is to provide insight into how these women experience university. As the analysis continues the data that emerges may both challenge and extend existing theories due to the rich complexity of these narratives. For example, the simple act of arriving at university, detailed in the next chapter, is opened up and elaborated upon to reveal fine nuances of detail that are often missing from large scale studies. The data analysis chapters that follow do not purport to present the correct or right answers to questions but rather require the reader to engage with the text on both an individual and a personal level. The ultimate interpretative act lies with the reader who is allowed the space to interact with the text on a deeply personal and individual basis. Out of this interaction comes the possibility of transferring results to other locations and contexts.

Chapter Five: Arriving – The Beginning Transition

Introduction

The following three chapters are designed to present the findings which emerged from interviews conducted with seventeen female students throughout the 2006 academic year. Students' voices pervade these in order to capture the nuances of this university experience. The chapters are chronologically ordered and each focuses on a particular set of interviews; this chapter is based upon the findings derived from the initial interview. This first meeting occurred between the second and fourth week of the first semester and highlights how students translate or articulate the university experience both before and in the initial stages of entering this environment. I have titled this chapter, *Arriving – The Beginning Transition* because as the year progressed it became clear that transition to university is an ongoing process rather than something that starts and finishes within a discrete timeframe. As these chapters progress, this facet of the university experience becomes more pronounced.

In this chapter, the initial two sections highlight the processes around the decision to arrive at university at this particular point in time. The complexity of this decision varied between students, was often affected by the age and stage of individuals and also, in some cases emerged as a result of disparate life circumstances. The initial section termed *'Deciding to arrive'* introduces the factors that initiated this decision before the chapter moves on to explore the motives and conditions relating to this arrival. The third section explores the reactions from others to this decision and the final part highlights the reality that students encountered after arrival and their personal responses to this.

Therefore, this chapter highlights the stages of arrival as defined by students. These stages provide an interpretative lens that facilitates exploring this process in a sequential manner, however, these stages are not discrete nor does this typology suggest that each student passed through these in an ordered or predetermined fashion. Within an interpretative framework, generating theory does not necessarily lead to precise explanation; instead, this approach aims to initiate a deeper understanding. The interviews provided a means for the students to make sense of their journey, actively constructing their past lives in relation to their present activities. Throughout the following

sections, references used from student interviews will be italicised or appear as quotes. Names will only be allocated when the information presented is specific to a particular student, names will not appear if this is more representative of a global attitude or belief.

Before examining the motives that students defined in relation to their arrival at university it is first necessary to examine the process by which students decided to arrive. While the process of deciding to arrive and the motives expressed in relation to arrival are closely aligned, these two processes have been differentiated as it became apparent that both involve quite different elements. When examining the interviews, it also became clear that the students who had recently left school or those who were in their early twenties and without parenting commitments took very different pathways when deciding to enrol to those of the mothers; for this reason this first section deals exclusively with the thirteen students who had children.

> For many adults, the process of deciding to become a student is not a one-off event; rather it is a complex and extended process, and specific factors may have salience at different times.(Osborne et al., 2004, p.293).

Osborne et al.'s observation certainly reflects the journey that many of the older students took in both deciding and actually arriving at university. These authors point out that while individuals' decisions are multifactorial and reflect a unique set of circumstances there is also a level of salience of factors amongst certain sub-groups of students. One of the ways this salience became apparent was when students were demarcated according to age, marital status and family background. Hence the following discussion initially focuses on the women with children before exploring this process from the perspective of the younger students who had recently left school.

Deciding to arrive: Getting to a point in life

Overall, the decision to arrive, for the mothers, can be defined as a process of *getting to a point in life* where university no longer seemed unobtainable but instead becomes a possibility. While there was interplay of individual factors leading to this decision including age of children and changes in status, both marital and vocational; more fundamental patterns emerged from these women's accounts. In order to reach this

'point in life', the participating mothers reflect upon processes which I have delineated according to two categories: *looking to others* and *satisfying the self*.

> *…this is something that I have wanted to do since I was in year 7 of high school so yeah; I am ready for it now.* (Stephanie)

For the students with children, arriving at university at this time was not something that had come unannounced or out of the blue; this decision represented a gradual realisation derived from both emotional and circumstantial conditions. Seven of the mothers mentioned how they had wanted to come to university after leaving school but how developments had occurred which made this impossible. As Catherine puts it: *'…I was going to go back but that just never happened life happened…'*. Life literally did happen for two of the participants, Stephanie and Clara, both of whom had babies before completing high school. For the other five, a combination of relational and financial prerogatives led to the decision to postpone the thoughts of university. Interestingly, all seven mention how this desire was never abandoned; instead it simply receded only to re-emerge later in life. Sue wanted to do nursing when she left high school, but she '*got busy with life, doing other things'.* Sue never quite dismissed university instead this was something that she always intended to do but the time had to be right. Variations of Sue's story were common in the older women's accounts; timing was a key factor in this decision to arrive.

What was considered as representing the right time differed between participants; after successfully nursing her sister back to health Catherine realised that *'…yes I could do counseling or social work as up until then I wanted to but never had the confidence…'.* Regaining confidence was mentioned also by Sue and Linda as a factor that led them to decide that the time was right:

> *…I had the opportunity of doing a training course … and I thought: Oh, I'm not stupid, I can learn [laugh]…and it really piqued my interest, I guess, in learning...* (Sue)

The reasons for coming to university in both of these cases reflect an incident that led directly to increases in self-esteem and confidence. For Linda, the combination of inspiration she received from a TAFE training course combined with support from her children's teachers, facilitated her decision to come to university at this time. Despite succeeding in previous training, she remains doubtful of her abilities and at this stage, relies on the voices of others – '*they're saying: Of course you can'* - to provide a buffer to

her own self-doubt. Linda is not alone in referring to the support and validation offered by other people as crucial to the decision to enrol in university at this point in life. Other students also referred to the act of 'looking to others' as vital to this decision to arrive.

Getting to a point in life by looking to others

> *I had a lot of different teachers say to me: 'You're fantastic and why aren't you teaching?'…That even started me thinking: 'Why aren't I doing this? I love it! I enjoy it! I get satisfaction from it! So…*[I] *started looking into the possibilities*. (Sheila)

Validation and encouragement was identified as another facet to this arrival at a *point in life* where university study was considered as a very real possibility. Sources of such support were not restricted to formal educational institutions but included encouragement derived from friends and work colleagues and in some cases, family members. Brooks (2003) argues that the role of friends in decisions and choices around higher education is under theorised in the research and literature in this area. The women in this study identified work colleagues as not only providing verbal encouragement but in some cases were characterised as ideal types, those who exemplified what students wished to achieve. The workplace, both paid and voluntary, exposed women to individuals who already possessed university qualifications. As university was recognised as being a possibility for others so it became a possibility for self. Vicky describes how after getting a job in a hospital, she witnessed her work colleagues successfully *'get to the stage of graduating',* this exposure served as a form of encouragement as they '*were my age or older'.*

In Vicky's case, university was always a presence in her life, she had never successfully silenced the voice in her head, the thought was '*always in my mind'.* However, she only considered applying after being exposed to others who were achieving what she had long desired. This exposure gave her the necessary push and served to increase her motivation: '…*even if it gets to the stage…I'm there with my walking stick I still see myself graduating…'.* Clara, a young single mother with a five year old child, talks about how attending university was also a long-held ambition and something that she perceived as enabling her '*to reach my potential'*. Again, it was working with individuals who had already achieved this aspiration that served as the main catalyst to attend at

this particular time, leading to the decision that she had arrived at the most suitable point in her life:

> *…if everyone else can do it I can do it…my main influence, I'd have to say, would be the people that I worked with before. They have all got their degrees in the same field that I want to be in*. (Clara)

All of the participants in the study share a lack of family tradition or exposure to higher education; whilst attendance at university has been previously considered it took the actual witnessing of others achieving this ambition to make it a possibility. This exposure to others provided both a catalyst and also a level of reassurance that this could be a viable option. For many of the older women, life was constrained by financial and familial obligations so university represented the possibility of choice. The decision was negotiated by both public (external) and personal (internal) influences so while external factors are important without the accompanying internal processes this decision may not have been made.

The role of internal processes in the women's accounts varies, certainly in interview one, while the women talked at length about the people or conditions that impacted on their decision, only three of the mature age students explicitly state that their decision to arrive was derived largely from personal or internal reasons. Such statements are characterised by 'I' statements instead of references to motivating others. Interestingly, two of the women have large families and both make reference to the sacrifices and expectations parenting had demanded over the preceding years. Hence, arriving at the necessary *point in life* was also reflective of an individualistic act; which represents this process as a means to satisfy self rather than just as a response to or as a means to satisfy others.

Getting to a point in life in order to satisfy the self

While Kira has undertaken TAFE training her decision to come to university at this point is justified by the fact that it is *'something I wanted so that's why I did it'* similarly, Stephanie explains *'it's where I want to be'.* For these two women, the mothering role has been a demanding one and it appears that university offers the opportunity to focus on the self. Stephanie explains how this is '*something I've wanted to do for a long time'* but this ambition became a dream once she *'started the family'*. While the immediate

catalyst for coming at this stage was a person that she was working with, the decision to arrive was already *'…there waiting for someone to say some little click word that brought me back to where I want to go…'*. Rather than look to others as the catalyst, Stephanie's decision is inextricably linked to self desire; she later explains how her decision was not initially supported by her husband but that her self-determination refused to let the matter rest *'….it was just me being very headstrong and wanting and wanting and wanting'.* University then is her 'turn', a personal right that she intends to claim despite resistance. Similarly, Kira describes how she has arrived at a point when she wished to do something for herself, the opportunity to limit the *'shuffle'* she perceives as taking over her life: '*I am just getting sick of shuffling…I have been doing it for 18 years…'.*

Both dialogues are somewhat radical in their departure from the mothering stereotype and reveal how arriving at university for both these students is reflective of a desire to obtain something more than the life conscripted by service to children and partners. The identities available to women within the domestic domain can be both unfulfilling and devaluing (Leathwood & O' Connell, 2003; Merrill, 1999). Stereotypically, the mother is expected to desire to nurture and focus on the child, there is no room for the self in such an image. Women's lives are usually centred on the care of others rather than the care of the self (Britton & Baxter, 1999). However, these two mothers reject this positioning and despite having a total of nine children between them, reveal the limitations and frustrations they associate with such delineations. Neither Kira nor Stephanie is prepared to settle for this in life and instead university offers them an opportunity to renegotiate their positioning both within the family and in terms of life course in general. Kira hopes that university will provide *'different outlooks'* whilst for Stephanie, university is perceived as being able to provide her with the qualifications for where she wants to be. The wider political implications such decisions have both in the household and the wider public world will be further explored in the discussion chapter of this thesis.

The third mother who refers to her decision to come to university as reflective of a need to satisfy the self is Heidi. In this case, while she reflects on motherhood constraining her choices in the past, the decision to come to university at this point in life is in response to an unforeseen life event. Heidi's decision emerges after an industrial accident which resulted in an illness that requires ongoing and intrusive treatment. For Heidi, these

recent life changes have made her focus more on self and the decision to come to university resulted:

> *I always wanted to do it but never really had the opportunity to do it because I'd always been with the kids and the partner…I was locked into something that you know I couldn't really get out of but yeah this accident happened and it allowed me the opportunity to re-evaluate my life….*

Heidi's decision rests upon her own desires and unfulfilled possibilities, unlike Kira and Stephanie who are prepared to satisfy the self despite child and family commitments; Heidi's decision is informed by an unexpected change in life course. However, regardless of circumstances all three women perceive university as a means to satisfy inner needs and emotions. In contrast, the nine other mothers who reflect upon this decision to attend, point to the decision as predominantly resting upon factors outside the individual. The voices of others featured strongly in these accounts. For Katie, the impetus came from '*people in the industry…really encouraged me to go in this direction …',* friends also played a role in encouraging participation and *'pushing me there'* (Nicki). Only Susie refers to her husband as being the catalyst or pushing this decision:

> *Actually my husband…said to me: 'I don't want you working in a pub no more'…And I said: 'I'm not qualified to do anything else'. And he said: 'Why don't you get qualified?' The lady in his band went through open foundation, went to uni and is now a history teacher in high school so he found out information of her…so my husband really pushed me that way.*

While some husbands are supportive once they commence; it is only Susie's that encouraged attendance. Indeed, five women describe varying degrees of resistance from husbands to their initial decision to attend. Hence, getting to this point in life was not necessarily a joint venture; instead the women endured reluctance, questioning and outright negativity, these reactions will be explored in more depth in a later section of this chapter, which is devoted to this topic.

For the younger childless students, who include recent school leavers, Annie and Mary and those in their early twenties, Rachel and Helen, the decision to attend was a very different process. For all of these students the decision to enrol was more indicative of a logical step, the logic largely derived from vocational and career opportunities. Unlike the older students who largely reflected upon a catalyst or person that led to them *'getting to a point in life'*; for the younger students the decision to come to university was more sequential in nature, representative of the next stage in life.

Deciding to arrive: The next stage in life

…I started a whole another stage of my life. (Annie)

Both Annie and Mary refer to their decision to attend university in terms of progression. For Mary, this decision is rather haphazard as she explains: *'…I didn't know what else to do so I just thought I'd come sorta thing.'* However, Mary is explicit about the fact that she had to *'do'* something. This was an expectation derived from her parents, who while happy she is attending university, would never countenance Mary doing nothing: *'…it was sorta either go to university or go to TAFE or get a job…'*. Unlike many of the older students, Mary's decision to come to university was not a long-held ambition but rather resulted from the perception that both TAFE and employment only offered limited opportunity. When describing her reasons for not enrolling in TAFE, Mary identifies how *'…there is really nothing for girls besides like hairdressing';* equally, getting a job at this stage of her life was also described in limiting terms: '*…it's so hard now trying to find a job that I'd want to do in 10 years time like with no sorta qualifications…I didn't want to do bar work when you're like 35 or 40…'.*

It is difficult to explicate whether these are actually Mary's true perceptions or whether her parents are gently nudging her in the direction of university. Mary's father is a blue collar worker and her mother works casually in the service industry so university may have been regarded as an opportunity for their daughter to have more choice in life. Regardless of this possible influence, Mary regards university as both the most logical and appealing next stage in her life; her commitment perhaps foreshadowed by the perceived lack of choice that she describes.

For Annie, the decision is also regarded as the next logical step in life, but her prior education experiences at high school had also quite an effect on this decision. While some students indicated how previous training facilitated arrival; educational experiences derived from schooling were often not so positive. In Pascall and Cox's (1993) study of women who return to university, memories of school were predominantly negative, leaving school education at this point 'warranted no tears' (p.22). Annie perceives arrival at university both as another stage in her life and a powerful message

to those who told her that university was beyond her reach. This lack of support only made her more determined to attend:

> *…I wasn't as dumb as people thought I was…they* [the teachers] *seem to have got the impression…I would never achieve anything in life.* (Annie)

University not only offers progression in an educational career but also opportunities for those already working in their professional field. Both Helen and Rachel refer to this decision as necessitated by the need to succeed in their careers. Both of these students are in their early twenties and the decision to arrive was preceded by attendance at TAFE courses. These two also discern university as a logical move that would initiate the next stage of life; as Rachel explains TAFE was *'the next step up from school'* and university *'was one step up'* from TAFE.

For these four students, the decision to arrive at university was a logical *'step'* from previous educational or vocational endeavours. However, for the women who were older or who had family commitments, this process was more complicated involving additional facets which included a recognition of arriving at the right point in life. Such recognition was also governed by people and conditions that existed in varying proximity to the students. Arrival was further defined by the motives that participants described both in relation to enrolment and their choice of course. Arriving at university involves a number of inter-related facets, including not only the actual decision to arrive but also involving motives that impact on that choice.

Motives around arriving

The participants in this study spoke at length about the reasons for choosing their particular course and also this particular campus. These choices can be perceived in terms of an interplay between motivating factors and conditions, which further impacted on the process of arriving. As this study is situated within an interpretivist framework and informed by Symbolic Interactionism, these motivational descriptors are termed as motives rather than motivations. When individuals are regarded as actively engaging and creating meaning in life, human action can not be translated in terms of conditioned responses. The term motivation implies forces external to the individual as the primary

precursor to action whilst the word 'motives' situates such actions within the self, serving to identify 'the meaningful ground of his [sic] behaviour' (Schutz, 1967, p.86). Motives are not fixed within the individual but rather represent the interpretation of conduct by the actors involved. Mills (1940) regards motives primarily as words that are used to explain choices of action which are linked to 'anticipated consequences' (p.906) or as Foote (1951) describes as 'ends in view' (p.15). Motives serve to make sense of past events and the choices made; as Mills further explains motives provide the rationalisation 'for present, future or past programs or acts' (1940, p.907).

Schutz (1967) differentiates between two ideal types of motives, being 'in order to motives' and 'because of motives', the first of these refers to choices of action that are orientated to the future whereas 'because of motives' are based on past experiences or events. Such differentiations enables exploration of the concept of motive as it relates to the individual actor rather than presupposing external direction. When discussing the motives that brought students to university and their choice of particular programs, the interviews revealed how participants defined a combination of both 'in order to' and 'because of' motives. Hence the following section highlights the reasons students identified as precursors to university attendance and further delineates these according to this Schutzian analytical device.

'In order to' motive: Getting a job

> *I kinda saw teaching as no matter what you do…there's so many like children and so many jobs available.* (Annie)

At some stage in the first interview, all the participants mentioned how their choice of course was motivated in varying degrees by vocational aspirations. This motive can be defined in Schutzian terms as an 'in order to' motive, due to its future focus. Both of the younger students are already reflecting upon the possible employment opportunities afforded by a university degree, Annie has researched the employability of her degree having examined the employment section of the local newspaper seeking reassurance that teaching positions are available. Mary, the other school leaver, talks at length about how the degree will enable a career which will provide the future financial means to buy a car and a house. These are exciting prospects when you are dependent and living at home indicating Mary's expectations that her '*whole lifestyle will change'.* Mary is

imbued with excitement and anticipation as she talks, university is portrayed like a 'key' to a metaphoric treasure chest, assuming almost the role of provider for Mary. Such expectations were not limited to Mary, indeed many of the mature students perceived university as literally the goose that would lay the 'golden egg' in the form of regular and secure employment, particularly those experiencing financial instability.

Catherine, a single parent, is very focused on the vocational opportunities afforded by the degree and she too, has explored the nature and type of employment available. Despite experiencing some negative responses from *'people your own age…saying you must be out of your mind why would you want to do a job that is so badly paid and crappy work'*. Catherine explains that the opportunity to obtain guaranteed employment in a secure environment has been a key motive in her decision to choose a degree in nursing:

> *…all my jobs have been things where the money goes up and down all the time and you don't have the security of holiday pay and stuff like that …*[nursing is] *a job where I know there will be jobs.* (Catherine)

For the two younger women who were studying part-time and retaining employment in their chosen field, the motive was expressed in terms of reflecting 'in order to' obtain promotion. For example, Rachel's ultimate goal is to run the drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre where she is already employed part-time but she has been told by her colleagues that in order to achieve this, the degree is essential. In this case, university is a necessity for progress, Rachel indicates how '*…I have to get this degree and get that bit of paper at the end so I just need to focus on that happening but it is a long haul…*' .

The vocationally based nature of this motive serves to characterise university almost as *'a stepping stone'* to a future destination; arguably this motive means that university has a very different role in Rachel's life than for other students who perceive their motives in less pragmatic and more ambiguous terms. Rachel's motives to come and study at university are clearly informed by vocational ambitions, as are Helen's who also regards university as a 'stepping stone' to a well-defined future in the business world. However, while students like Katie are similarly motivated by future vocational desires, these are more obscure and ill-defined. Instead of a requisite 'stepping stone', university is instead

perceived as a destination, offering the possibility of new experience and fulfillment rather than simply a conduit to future life:

> *I decided that I would apply…the work we were doing it gets a bit monotonous after 16 years and just wanting something a little bit more out of life…wanting something more out of my job and…last year I just really wanted to absorb some new information.* (Katie)

On the face of it, Katie's motives appear to be vocationally orientated but this is accompanied by more experiential desire, Katie is seeking change and arriving at university is perceived as an opportunity to obtain this rather than simply a means to an end. I would argue that when university is perceived as some type of necessary 'stepping stone', where the focus is on the destination rather than the journey then this has very clear implications for the place of university in a student's life and impacts on their engagement with the institution. This theoretical interpretation and its possible significance will be explored in more detail in the discussion chapter of this thesis.

Given the demographics of this group it is probably not surprising that the motives discussed in relation to choice and university were vocationally justified and that these were focused on a future or 'in order to' sense. Undoubtedly, the need for secure and regular employment is an over-riding requirement in the current economic and social climate but West (1995) argues, this motive is 'only one part of a much larger dialectic' (p.137). West's longitudinal study on university students identified how motives to study are also firmly rooted in personal life. Parr (1998) highlights similar findings in her study, where mature women initially justified their return to education in vocational terms but when asked the question again later, more personal reasons were proffered. Parr argues that 'doing it for myself' can be regarded by older female students as being 'somewhat selfish'. Instead, this author concludes that economic reasons are favoured as these are more 'socially acceptable reasons to give to a relative stranger'. (Parr, 1998, p.94)

Similar to West's and Parr's participants, the majority of the older, married students in this study initially identified better employment opportunities as the primary motive to arriving at university. However, more personal motives relating to self-fulfilment and desire emerged over time as the relationship between myself and the students grew and strengthened. Such a change was not reflected in the younger students' accounts; the

reasons for attending university were consistently defined in instrumental terms. Aside from vocational reasons, this first set of interviews indicated how participants were also studying in order to make a difference; the following section explores how different students conceptualised this motive.

Motives around making a difference

> *…but slowly changing the world that's what I always say to my grandmother – I'm gonna change the world…* (Rachel)

Ten of the students identified one of their motives for enrolling in university, and their choice of course, as resulting from a desire to make a difference. What characterises this concept is the wider theme of altruism or a focus on others. For those students who explicitly discuss university study as enabling them to make a difference in their personal worlds, the emphasis is not on the student but on the family. Equally for those who mention this motive in relation to the wider world, it is expressed as a desire to help others rather than self. The motive of *'making a difference'* can be further discriminated by applying Schutz's ideal types; the following section explores this desire, highlighting how this action can be derived from both 'in order to' and 'because of' motives.

Making a difference: 'in order to' motive

As mentioned, 'in order to' motives have a future focus and for some of these students both the motives to arrive and the choice of course was also justified as a means to make a difference in the future. Three of the younger participants, Mary, Annie and Rachel, mention how university and their particular degree will enable them to positively impact on people's lives in the future. For Rachel, her motives to gain recognised qualifications in the social science field will enable her to continue working with people in need and almost in crusade like terms '*change the world*'. Equally, both Annie and Mary describe the choice of teaching course as reflective of a desire to *'make a difference'* (Mary) or in Annie's case in order to *'…be there for the children and teach them all the right things and the right ways'.*

The relative youth of these participants, Mary and Annie were in their late teens whilst Rachel was in her early twenties, could be perceived as a common link; an indicator maybe of youthful enthusiasm. However, the choice of course was defined as 'in order to' make a difference by three of the older participants. Sue describes her choice as

almost a calling or vocation derived from a desire to work with young teenagers or the *'tough nuts'*, providing them with *'a little bit of nurturing'*. Indeed, for both Sue and Sheila, these altruistic tendencies may partially relate to their decision to elect teaching as a career. Manuel and Hughes (2006) identify that the reasons given for studying teaching often indicate 'social justice dimensions' (p.11). However, both Bhatti's (2003) study on working class graduates and Reay et al.'s (2002) research on older students reflect a more universal desire to assist others after graduation, expressing what Bhatti terms as a 'need to care'. This desire to make a difference is not limited to this particular group of students but instead is a theme that is echoed by other learners but the significance of this motive remains largely under-researched in the literature.

The idea that arriving at university would benefit others was not only limited to unknown beneficiaries in the future but for many of the mothers, this concept also related to immediate family, particularly children. The motive of *'making a difference'* was also used to refer to improving the financial and educational environment for children. For example, Sheila describes how ultimately the degree will *'benefit the family'.* Similarly, Stephanie describes how, after being challenged by a colleague that her attendance at university was a selfish act, she justifies this act by realising *'it* [university] *will be better off for us in the long run…*' The ways in which university was portrayed as making a difference to family and children included setting a good example, enabling future security and also, facilitating a better quality of life.

However, this motive was not only focused on future objectives but also reflected past actions or events. Schutz defines 'genuine-because' motives as firmly rooted within an individual's past life experiences. In the case of making a difference, while the action is located in the future sometimes the 'explanation of the deed' (p.91), is reflective of past events:

> ...in the genuine-because motive, a lived experience temporarily prior to the project is the motivating factor; it motivates the project which is being constituted at the time. (Schutz, 1967, p.92)

The next section will continue to explore the motive 'making a difference' but relate this to Schutz's second ideal type.

Making a difference: 'because of' motive

Susie's motives for enrolling in a social science degree not only highlights her desire to make a difference but as the interview indicates this motive is firmly couched in past life experiences. For Susie, arriving at university offered her the opportunity to make a difference in a profoundly personal area. While her husband expected her to enrol in a teaching degree upon completion of a university access program, Susie describes how she *'changed her mind'* because '*I knew in myself what I want to do and he was a bit cranky when he found out I'd changed from teaching [laughs] into social science…'.*

Susie's motives for changing her course seem at first to relate to a future altruistic desire to make a difference to young offenders but in fact, this decision reflects her own past experience of drug dependency*: 'I've always wanted to work for the police force because I started smoking pot at a very young age…'* For Susie, the motives articulated in relation to the course choice while reflective of the desire to make a difference in the future are rooted in her past. Equally, for other students it was past events that also impacted on the motive to make a difference, this was particularly the case with those students who choose education programs. Annie's lack of support from her school teachers has led to her desire to make a difference to other children. Sue also explains the historic nature of her motives and how she has '…*been touched by people who've been gifted in teaching and I'd like to feel that I'll be one of those teachers…'.* Perhaps, articulating university arrival in terms of making a difference might be one way that older women further rationalise what could be perceived as a selfish act. Demonstrating a 'communitarian' as opposed to an 'individualistic' orientation to attending university (Reay, 2003) may legitimise this decision by locating it within the more acceptable feminine discourse of helping ?

Human motive is not simplistic in its intent nor can it be defined in precise or singular terms. The participants in this study were provided with the space to explore the motives that impacted on their arrival and the choices they made at various junctures throughout the year of this study. The ongoing nature of the study provided the means for individuals to challenge previously held convictions. In the first set of interviews, reasons for behaviour and actions were expressed subjectively; rarely did these accounts assume a linear or simplistic form instead, motives were multiple and assumed varying importance in students' reality. As the year progressed, motives were revisited and

redefined as students reflected upon the nature of their university experience and the ensuing growth and development. Motive is not static but rather evolves in a fluid motion over time; at this point we will move on from motive and return to it in the final data analysis chapter devoted to the year in reflection.

Conditions around arriving: Choosing this campus

Universities are commonly perceived of in 'bachelor boy' terms *'a big party and kids go out and drink and you know all sorts of stuff'* (Sue). This imagery is supposed to be particularly endearing to younger students. However, Annie is not interested in *'parties'* or *'getting drunk'* and so this 'bachelor boy mentality' (Robinson, cited in Edwards, 1993, p.63) is not something that this student feels connected to despite her age. Instead Annie's choice of this university is related to the familiarity of the campus and its close proximity to her home. This perspective is not unusual as a total of twelve of the participants mentioned how the decision to come to university was directly influenced by the closeness of this campus. The size of the campus also appealed to students, Annie explains how she feels more comfortable at a smaller campus and compares her experience to her cousin who has to sit outside the lecture theatre of her large urban university with a tape recorder as there is not enough space to sit inside.

In discussions, the campus was often juxtapositioned with other more urban campuses, the familiarity, size and proximity perceived as influential to students' choices. The location of the campus made university a possibility for the older students, traveling further a field was just not an option due to family and work commitments. Added to this was the presence of this campus within the lives of students prior to deciding to arrive; this location already consciously existed for all the participants particularly for those who had previously attended the site to complete TAFE or other qualifications. The university community is not necessarily bounded by geographic perimeters. Rather the size (approximately 3,500 university students) and the rural location of the campus, means that many of the students both had a geographic familiarity with the campus and also, may know or be aware of other people attending the site. The location of a child-care facility on campus also extends this sense of place as two of the women had children who were enrolled in the centre.

Whilst the proximity and familiarity of the campus was largely perceived in positive terms, two of the students indicated how this can also be a restrictive factor. Both Sue and Linda highlight how their choice of campus was defined by financial imperatives and the need to fit study around child-care and family needs. In both cases, they regard this decision as constraining their choices of degree, forcing them to reconfigure and adapt their future aspirations:

> *I was limiting what I could look at because I wasn't prepared to travel away from this campus…I'm not prepared to travel to City university…because that extra hour in travel translates to two hours out of every day and more time out with my kids…I mean it was disappointing some of the range is not…here. If I had the choice between teaching and a librarianship course I would have done librarianship but it's not available here. Love to do that…* (Linda)

While the decision to come to university may mark a radical departure from many of these students' expected life course, it is still one that is negotiated by external pressures. The proximity and familiarity of this campus undoubtedly assisted in students' arrival at university but equally, located this choice within the confines of existing lives. The location of the campus may facilitate the pursuit of a dream or ambition but this opportunity is both mediated and restricted. This is particularly the case for the older students with families. The choices made in relation to university are constrained by familial and economic considerations, the nearest city campus was just *'too far to travel especially with children'* (Susie) committing to three years of commuting would financially be '*a very long strain on everyone'* (Katie). A number of studies have indicated how geography limits a student's educational choices and opportunities (Abbot–Chapman, 2006; James, Wyn, Baldwin, Hepworth, McInnis & Stephanou, 1999; Reay, 1998a). For the students in this study, the existence of this campus may have motivated and facilitated arrival but once they arrived clearly their choices were equally mediated and limited by this location.

Having adopted a focus on students' motives and conditions surrounding choices of course and campus, the need to explore the external implications of arrival seems appropriate. The next section will highlight how this action was perceived by those external to the student.

Reactions to this arrival

> *My son's teacher, she did comment how wonderful it is, what a good role model for my children*. (Katie)

Given that all the students were first in their families to come to university, their decision engendered a diversity of reactions from others, which are worthy of exploration. Arriving at university is both contingent and effected by the support from others, reactions assume a large degree of importance; negative responses or even an unsupportive comment can have far-reaching repercussions during this delicate beginning phase of study. Being validated in the decision to study is recognised as being particularly vital at the early stages of a university career (Rendon, 1994); indicated by Katie's quote below. Indeed, in the same interview, Katie reveals how both the teacher's casual aside and other positive reactions served to further authenticate her decision to arrive:

> *Just every ounce of encouragement I can get I have been given, which is really nice it is really nice and I am surprised because I had never talked about it until October last year with anyone outside work and it was just really nice to get the reaction.*

As the previous sections have indicated, the decision to come to university for students, particularly those deemed as mature age, was one encumbered by a range of personal and public factors; this was a decision that had already involved complex negotiations and often represented the realisation of a long held and prized ambition or dream. Hence, the initial responses from others assumed a large degree of importance. Students revealed how reactions were forthcoming from sources both close and distant to them, including family members, friends, colleagues and casual acquaintances. Some responses were actively sought but equally some were uninvited, originating from unexpected sources. Rather than delineate actual types of reactions, this section will focus on those sources and highlight both the patterns that emerged in students' accounts as well as the consequences these had for informants. The sources identified repeatedly by students are largely from, what I have termed, 'immediate family' namely parents, partners and children. However, students also mentioned reactions from those more distant from them including extended family such as grandparents and in-laws as well as friends and associates, I have grouped these under a composite category called 'others'.

The following accounts relate to initial reactions and hence, focus largely on those external to the institution. Not surprisingly, the responses derived from immediate family were spoken about at length and so will be focused upon in the next section, followed by the reactions from others. Regardless of participant's age, reactions from immediate family were undoubtedly those that carried the most importance. Despite having no experience of university studies themselves, parents were most commonly described as providing fundamental support and encouragement.

Parents' reactions

Nine of the students described their parents as not only providing great encouragement in their endeavours but also practical support in terms of financial assistance, babysitting, and advice. Katie's father is also very supportive as he *'always wanted me to go to university but it was never for me at the time and he's really proud that I am now going'.* In Nicki's case, her parents decided to relocate and moved over 200 kilometres so that they could be closer to her while she was studying. For Nicki, a sole parent, this gesture effectively made the difference to her decision to arrive as she had begun to question the feasibility of this choice.

Many of the mothers were particularly supportive and encouraging of their daughter's academic endeavours; support was often pragmatic or instrumental in nature. When analysing the interviews, it was the mothers who were most explicitly mentioned by the students as those who offered actual tangible forms of support as opposed to verbal encouragement. Catherine describes how while her mother wanted her to go to university after she left high school, a violent and dysfunctional household made this impossible. After telling her mother about her decision to enrol in a nursing degree nearly twenty years later, she humorously describes the initial reaction: '*…my Mum is beside herself…she thinks it's going to allow me to meet doctors, finally get me married off to a doctor [laughs]…'.* Despite living some distance away, her mother has offered to assist with babysitting and regrets not having the financial means to provide more tangible support.

Mothers' levels of involvement and support in their daughters' decisions may reflect how the educational career of children remains within the mothering domain (Reay, 1998).

Alternatively, what Catherine and other students' accounts indicate might be a mother's desire to facilitate better choices and options for their daughters, perhaps choices that they did not have themselves? Indeed, West (1996) reflects how his own mother was 'investing energies in my education as part compensation for her own frustrated ambition and loss' (p.22). Certainly, the mother's presence was very apparent in these accounts and overwhelmingly positive from Linda's Mum who is *'stoked'* to Sheila's who is '*absolutely ecstatic'.* Sheila's mother provides instant and clear validation around this decision*:*

> *…the very first day that I started…she said: 'I just want to tell you I am very, very proud of you and you'll be the only one in our family to go through university'.* (Sheila)

The offer of pragmatic support from parents was particularly vital for those students with child-care responsibilities. However, not all family members reacted in such sympathetic or practical terms; Clara, a single parent with a young daughter, reveals the lack of family support in a circumspect way. Clara's own mother was a single parent to five children and it becomes clear that Clara's ambition to come to university was derived from a primary school teacher who demonstrated belief in her academic abilities. This belief stayed with Clara but it did not seemed matched with a sense of validation from home. Instead, Clara seems to rely on friends for practical support and refers briefly to the lack of interest her three brothers have about her academic pursuits while her older sister is a *'bit jealous'* and tries to make Clara *'feel guilty'*. Clara chooses not to seek validation from these familial sources and instead is largely self-supporting:

> *I don't think they realise it to be a big deal either or they haven't made it appear to me that they are excited for me to be here or proud of me for doing something like that.* (Clara)

Both Helen and Rachel reflect how their parents, while not actively discouraging, seem to be unaware about their daughters' educational endeavours. In both cases, the parents seem to lack understanding about university study and so react in a largely disinterested way. Brooks (2004) suggests that the depth and range of parental involvement in educational choices may relate to the 'access' parents have 'to particular forms of cultural capital' (p.505). Given the first in the family status of these students, the parents have no previous educational capital to draw upon. Helen describes how her father thinks she is still at TAFE and how *'…Dad still calls it Tech: 'How's tech goin', Helen?' Like he doesn't know…'* Equally, Rachel's parents do not seem to understand the

mechanics of study but are happy for her and assist with practicalities such as accommodation; ultimately, their support is more sideline. The diversity of response from parents also suggests that reactions cannot be assumed nor generalised. While none of the parents had experience of university themselves this does not necessarily determine reactions which varied from enthusiasm and excitement through to a lack of interest or understanding.

Reactions received from children and partners

The reactions that the parenting students received from children was also a major theme in interview encounters. Five of the mothers mention how they have discussed this decision with their children prior to enrolment and while not seeking approval, positive reactions were clearly important. Sheila actively sought the opinion of both her children, who were four and six at the time, about her decision to enrol: '*I said: "Mummy wants to be a teacher!" And they said: "Ohhh, yeah that sounds good mum"…*'. When children reacted positively, the students felt assured and more comfortable about their decision as Linda highlights: *'I mean my kids are behind me 100% I wouldn't have come here if it was going to affect them'.* Linda positions university as a very clear second to family, her arrival at university is conditionally tempered by the reactions from her children and for her, a negative response will precipitate her departure:

> *…if this became too much for my kids again, I would ultimately defer I'd have to stop because they are never going to stop being my primary focus.*

For female students with children, many hidden variables affect this student experience; the difficulties of maintaining and appeasing all facets of life have the potential to create substantial barriers to success and progression in their academic endeavours.

Some of the mothers mentioned strategies that they had already established in order to minimise the impact of university on the children's lives. In the first interview, Catherine mentions how she does not *'want to withdraw'* from her teenage son; this comment suggesting that at this stage of study university is perceived as a potential threat to this relationship, one that is characterised as being *'very close'* due to her single parent status. Catherine is attempting to negate the potential threat offered by university by

putting strategies in place that actively help her to stay connected with her son. For some of the other mothers there is a level of guilt associated with the choice to study.

Clara describes how her daughter cried for the first six months that she attended an access course and she explains how her guilt extends to the financial implications of university attendance. In Clara's case, she feels guilty about the possibility of disadvantaging her daughter, for example not having the money to buy a new school uniform. Both Nicki and Jane talk about the guilt they have about putting children in child-care; for Jane she fears being unavailable for them and leaving them *'alone'*, once again university is characterised as somewhat threatening to the relationship between mother and child.

The reaction of children to study is not always negotiated through a mother's fears and beliefs; instead some children's behaviours actively restrict the academic pursuits of the mothers. This is certainly the case for Kira, who has five children; these dependents are defined as the major impediment to studying refusing to assist with home duties and ultimately, resisting their mother's proposed undertaking:

> *…it would be nice if my children were a little more supportive and understand like Mum needs time out, we will go and cook dinner…* (Kira)

Indeed, the reactions that Kira receives not only from her children but also her husband are equally unsupportive and characterised by disinterest. Kira explains how her husband '*doesn't want to study, doesn't understand study, he is not interested at the end of the day'.* Kira is truly a pioneer, in the sense that she is navigating and exploring new terrain with little or no assistance from others.

Similar to Helen and Rachel's parents, university exists beyond the world-view of Kira's husband and hence lacks legitimacy within the family domain. A number of the women's partners were similarly unenthusiastic about these educational endeavours. Whilst nine women described expressions of unconditional excitement and encouragement from parents only two students expressed a similar reaction from partners. Given that there were nine that were in relationships at the time of the first set of interviews, this low number is significant. Long et al.'s research (2006) indicates how higher rates of attrition are associated with financial dependence on a partner or spouse but this was only significant when female students were dependent on male partners with 'little association' identified for male students (p.39). It is also interesting that even in those

cases where the husbands were regarded as being encouraging, this perception was not necessarily supported by the women's narratives and words

Indeed, definitions of husbands' support is worthy of further investigation. Susie and Katie describe how both their partners have been supportive of their decision to arrive. Yet, both husbands' responses are characterised by reference to the personal benefits anticipated at the culmination of the degree. The women explain how their husbands plan to *'retire'* once their wives have graduated. While laughing as they describe this reaction, there is clearly a level of tacit or implicit bargaining that is occurring between parties in the household. One cannot help but wonder whether this would be characteristic of a male's intention to attend university? In Leonard's (1994) study on mature age female students, the financial support that some of the women received from their husbands was similarly justified on the basis of a 'future lucrative career for the wife' (p.170). In Vicky's case, the negotiation is more overt as she describes how in her husband's case:

> *…his attitude is: good, do what you need to do and study now and then when I sorta retire from my main job you can be working at what you want to do and I might go and study*. (Vicky)

Many of the husbands in Leonard's (1994) study also used 'domestic sabotage' to limit their wives' success within academia, engendering feelings of guilt about their decision to return to study. This attitude was also reflected in a more recent study by Kirk (2004) and is similar to what was reported in this research, where sometimes the reaction from partners was less than positive.

Sue's feelings of elation over getting into university are somewhat negated by her husband's reaction to her decision. When replying to the question on family reactions, Sue tentatively introduces the topic of her husband:

> *I'm suppose to be honest aren't I [sighs] well we'll start with my husband am I allowed to talk about him?…its all been a shock and a surprise to him because in the ten years we've been married I've never talked about teaching or anything. So its sort of come out of the blue for him and … he'll be my biggest critic, he's very good cos he brings up all the negatives which gets a bit frustrating at times… .* (Sue)

In the same interview, Sue admits that it is *'still a bit difficult chatting with my husband about it'* and she suggests that maybe he '*feels threatened'* and that ultimately he is

'*waiting for the bad bits'*. Despite the passive resistance that Sue describes she seems determined to continue with her intent to study and discusses how she intends to keep family life and university life separate. This strategy is perhaps indicative of the lack of support forthcoming from home. While not receiving much recognition or encouragement from her husband, Sue does highlight how validation is forthcoming from others, in this case her friends.

Reactions: Others

> *Some people are like: 'Oh my goodness, how can you do that?' I guess because I am married, a wife and all that jazz…* (Sue)

Students did not only speak of reactions from those who were in some way affected by the decision to come to university but also, describe reactions from many others, particularly friends and work colleagues. By far the majority of this was positive in nature often reflecting not only excitement for the students but also a sense of pride and awe. The majority of friends that the women referred to had never been to university and so when told of the impending decision, responded with questions and queries. Kira, Susie, Stephanie and Sheila all describe how friends reacted with utter amazement that they were contemplating this endeavour, indicating how this decision was regarded as quite alien to their friends' world-view and life perspective. Sheila explains how friends were curious about both the nature of university study and while supportive of her, questioning of their own ability to entertain such a possibility:

> *Most people have said: 'Good on you - I don't know if I could do it but that's fantastic, if that's what you want to do that's great'.*

Equally, all the work colleagues mentioned by students reacted in a positive way, providing both verbal encouragement and practical support in the form of knowledge sharing and accommodations to work conditions. The most consistent and unexpected sources of positive reactions mentioned by the mothers were teachers in their children's schools. This may reflect the high number of participants planning to undertake studies in education fields but the response of teachers to this undertaking was undoubtedly further facilitative of this endeavour.

Wolf (1988) highlights how adults require a 'good enough object' to sustain a self during periods of transition; such 'objects' can be people or more 'symbolic' activities (cited in

West, 1996, p.97). Reactions from both family and, those whom I have termed as, 'others', can be crucial at this early stage of study. For these students, a positive reaction from individuals can make the difference to their initial feelings in relation to university and either validate and justify their choice or serve to initiate questions and self-doubt. All of these students sought support and reassurance; if this was not forthcoming from those close to them they sought it from other sources as demonstrated by Sue, who had the support of friends if not her husband. However, this need for support is perhaps not surprising when the reality of arriving at university is considered and the ensuing emotional turbulence.

The reality of arrival

> *…probably that first day…was probably the most stress that I remember feeling…I didn't know where to go, didn't know who to ask, didn't know what to do and people who I did end up asking didn't actually know either. So it was frustrating and stressful and really stands out in my mind …* (Mary)

Despite the geographic proximity of the campus and its relative familiarity, the realities of university were quite different to expectations held by most of the students. The campus may have had a sense of place in the local community and in some cases, in students' lives before enrolment but the actual reality of attending was perceived as both distant and alien. The initial encounters that students had with the institution, often whilst completing enrolment, proved to be both complicated and intimidating (O'Shea, 2006; 2007). Regardless of age or previous educational experience, this first day at university was imbued with tension and fear, whilst the beginning weeks were described as both alienating and somewhat disappointing.

Students talk about barriers in terms of getting to university but these barriers continued upon entry. Some of these relate to the students themselves for example, a lack of knowledge about university rules and regulations or reference to negative self talk in relation to university study. Many of these barriers are beyond the control of the student and are more indicative of the structural and ideological frameworks impacting upon them. Rather than focus on situational contexts that students encountered, this section

of the chapter will examine the emotional repercussions of these experiences, delineating between those that engendered positive and negative affects.

Reality: Negative effect

> *But just what I expected it wasn't what it turned out to be…*
> (Annie)

Commencing tertiary studies initiated feelings of anxiety, unfamiliarity and self-doubt, emotions clearly revealed in the narratives and expressions used by respondents to describe their first day of attendance. The first lecture was described as *'overwhelming'* (Sue), *'scary'* (Jane) and *'very daunting'* (Clara) leading to feelings of *'panic'* (Clara) and an initial sense of *'Oh gosh what am I doing and questioning myself…'* (Clara).

There was a general misapprehension about how university would be structured and organised particularly in relation to the amount of contact time with other students and teaching staff. Despite describing high levels of motivation, when students were interviewed in the fourth week of the semester, most expressed some level of disappointment about the course. Catherine describes how initially she felt quite lonely as she did not anticipate the amount of technology she would encounter and this limited her connection to the course. Both Catherine and Vicky allude to the fact that their degree program is structured like a correspondence course; a detrimental situation as these two students regard the '*social connection with the people' as* being an important facet to their learning.

Martinez and Munday's (1998) study on student persistence and drop out, highlights how both staff and students regard the increasing move towards technology as engendering a more 'fragmented student experience' (p.88) making it more difficult to establish meaningful relationships with others. While feelings of isolation and loneliness were only mentioned explicitly by four students, others define this lack of personal contact as initiating a sense of being daunted and overwhelmed. Frequently, these sentiments were related to the distance they felt in relation to other students and actual teaching practices.

Twelve of the participants reveal how expectations and reality did not match and as a result, they all experienced some level of disenchantment with the reality. Again this is interesting when we consider the numbers of students who had attended the campus previously, five of the twelve had completed TAFE or access programs on-site. For example, students were surprised by the size of tutorial groups expecting small, intimate groups focused on collegial discussion instead some of the tutorials included up to thirty students. Another major disappointment was the lack of direction afforded by the academic staff in relation to academic expectations and practices. Arguably for students, both school leavers and mature age, who are the first in their families to go to university, there may be few role models available to them and little assistance in relation to comprehending the different cultural and academic expectations of university life.

Repercussions of this reality

Such feelings can add stress and anxiety to an already difficult situation, initiating a downward spiral that may ultimately lead to withdrawal, both academic and social. As Stone (2004) states:

> …fears and uncertainties can be a potent mixture for failure in the first year of tertiary studies – often by withdrawing rather than actually failing to make the grade in their assessments. (p.2)

This lack of understanding about institutional expectations was not solely limited to the level of work required. Many of the participants revealed a lack of clarity or knowledge about quite fundamental institutional processes for example, enrolment procedures, financial requirements, timetabling. Overall, there seemed to be an assumption of knowledge on the part of the institution, a situation that clearly needs to be addressed, as Jane describes:

> *…I think it comes down to just everyone assuming that you know what to do but nobody really speaking up and saying: 'Well I don't know what to do', cos I didn't know what to do....*

Indeed, research conducted at the University of Melbourne conducted by Kennedy, Krause, Judd, Churchward and Gray (2005), indicates that institutions should avoid making assumptions concerning students' aptitude in utilising technology, regardless of their age or exposure to these tools. Annie, one of the school leavers, failed to enrol online as she thought you just '*came to the uni*…[and] *everything you had to do they'd*

tell you in the first days'. In Annie's case, her initial euphoria about being accepted was soon depleted resulting in her initial weeks being: '*heaps stressful cos…like the course is wrong and my professional experience.'*

Such early negative experiences are bound to have a cumulative effect on self-confidence and for this particular cohort, where confidence is already low; such erosion of self-belief has detrimental results in relation to future academic transition and success. Despite her youth, Mary also found the technological expectations really daunting and she had problems enrolling and also navigating and learning the technological applications. This lack of knowledge might be in part due to the first generation status of the participants but wider research has indicated the need for better communication between institutions and students around these expectations (Ozga & Sukhnandan, 1998; Scanlon, Weber & Rowling, 2007).

This lack of understanding further erodes student confidence and self-esteem. Even in the first interview, participants spoke about doubts concerning their ability to complete the course. There is a sense that these students do not feel in control of their experience and this lack of control translates into misapprehensions about abilities. Catherine describes how she has already obtained counseling support as she is doubtful about her ability to succeed and is having difficulty sleeping due to stress. In Catherine's case, the lack of control felt in relation to the university is conveyed by reference to the 'universe' as she explains that spiritual forces were initially against her when she commenced studying. Other students articulate this lack of control when describing the institutional practices at play during arrival. Such practices resulted in feelings of ignorance: *'I feel useless'* (Kira), self-doubt: '…*it was so confusing I was doubting at some stages whether …maybe I wasn't as smart as I thought'* (Catherine) and being overwhelmed *'…I found it incredibly overwhelming, just incredibly I really wasn't equipped to deal with all of that…'* (Vicky). This lack of understanding may in part relate to the sources of information students relied upon to inform them of university practices.

Sources of expectations

Expectations of university were often derived from previous educational experience and this undoubtedly had a part to play in the disillusionment with the reality; references to TAFE and school featured in student reflections. While previous educational endeavours

provided the most common yardstick by which students defined expectations, two of the students refer to popular culture as being the source of their ideas. Gregory (2007) argues that the 'educational narratives' that exist in film and television, serve to 'distort' expectations around education, such distortion is implied in these students' interviews (p.8). Catherine thought university would be *'a bit more Harry Potterish'*; whilst Annie had based her expectations on what Gregory (2007) describes as a 'vastly popular education narrative of the 1990's' (p.12), the American television serial *Beverly Hills 90210*.

Mary, the other school leaver, relied on her cousins and friends' brothers and sisters for information about university, describing how she eaves dropped on conversations:

> *'…my friends have had older sisters and brothers and the stuff that they have said I use to pick up - oh that must be what it's like…'*

There seems to be a lack of legitimate sources of information for students who have no previous tradition of university attendance. Instead, having nowhere to go to seek the information required, individuals must settle for what they hear or pick up from often ill-informed sources. This situation sometimes translated into a sense of serendipity around activities such as enrolment and course advice. Both Jane and Sheila make reference to how some things just occurred through a measure of happenstance:

> *…I ran into somebody else through daycare who said 'You gotta go online at 9am and then enroll'…That was just another thing I didn't know.* (Jane)
>
> *I found that out by mistake when I rang the admin office for something else…* (Sheila)

These quotes reveal the ad hoc and uncertain nature of arrival at university for these students; surely such experiences only serve to further exclude certain students from the beginning engendering a sense of intrusion or otherness. When the many obstacles that students have already navigated in order to get to this point are considered, how such initial encounters affect student motivation and engagement in this environment can only be imagined.

Reality: Positive affect

On a more positive note, eight of the mature students expressed relief about the presence of other older students at the campus. Having other mature students in the class or just visible at the campus validated many of these participants and justified their decision to come to university at this later stage in life. Vicky describes how her initial thoughts focused on: *'Ohmigod I don't want to be the oldest person at university...'* seeing other older students increased her levels of confidence and made for a more comforting initiation into this environment. Similarly, Sue explains a similar focus on age on her first day of lectures, recalling how she was *'…watching people…thinking: "Oh good, she's older, she's older" [laughs]. I think I must have been pretty preoccupied with age…'.*

References to the age of students on campus were apparent in many of the interviews, a number of the older students in my study expressed initial trepidation when confronted with the youthful faces in the lecture halls. Rather than regarding these students as having more legitimacy in the academic environment, some perceived the younger cohort or '*the young ones'* as being less motivated and more interested in *'partying'* (Sue). Interestingly, both of the students who had just left school described the presence of the mature cohort in a positive way, explaining how the mature age participation enriched their learning experience and have '*a lot to offer in tutorial discussions too that you don't think about'* (Mary). On the flip side of this observation, is Linda who describes feeling a level of responsibility within tutorials to maintain the discussion, this student disliked the *'deathly silence that occurs when a lecturer is waiting for a response so I'm finding myself talking an awful lot and hating every second of it'*. These perceptions are not unique to this particular group of students, instead wider literature has indicated similar observations made by both older and younger students. (Leonard, 1994; Wakeford, 1994)

Clearly, the presence of different generational groups within the learning environment has repercussions for the class dynamic. In fact, McInnis et al. (1995) caution how divisions between age groups can be exacerbated by older students dominating class-room discussion or asking many questions, in some cases leading to a 'negative' learning climate (p.74). Such situations have implications for teaching practitioners,

requiring skilful management of student participation. This pedagogical implication will be an area that the next chapter will explore in more detail.

Conclusion

This chapter had indicated how, for this particular group of students, arriving at university is not a simple or linear process; instead it is a journey fraught by choices and challenges. For the older students, the decision to arrive and actual arrival was negotiated around a series of competing and restrictive conditions. All the students arrived at university with expectations and these were sometimes unmet; in some cases, the reality of this experience was completely overwhelming. As the interviewees reflected on this decision to arrive and then the actual arrival, their narratives were characterised by resilience and determination. As an interviewer, I found myself questioning whether I would have the same level of motivation if confronted by such an array of obstacles and yet, perhaps this process becomes clearer when the actual meanings university held for these women, particularly the older students, is explored in more depth.

The interviews revealed how university was both a means to obtain further training or knowledge and also represented a desire or want, whether that is a desire simply to feel *'special'* as in Vicky's case or wanting to get *'a little bit more out of life'* (Nicki). Emotions like desire and want are often passionate in nature; they can be long standing and certainly in the case of desire, reawakened by an event or person. It is not always possible to successfully define the complexities and intricacies of such inner emotions and desires. However, by foregrounding the student voice, this chapter has presented a version of the social world that is defined individually rather than universally. The next chapter continues to explore this multiplicity of experience detailing the contours of the journey students take as they move through the university landscape

Chapter Six: Persisting and Engaging

Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the experience of students in the initial stages of the semester, while this chapter will explore the nuances of this experience disclosed by students as they persisted through this first year of study. As mentioned, interviews occurred at four discrete points throughout the academic year, this chapter focuses on the second set of interviews conducted towards the end of semester one and the third set of interviews which occurred in the beginning weeks of semester two. The quotes in this chapter are derived predominantly from these interviews but occasionally the first set of interviews is used as a reference point, so each quote will be identified numerically as either (01); (02) or (03) so that the reader has a sense of the chronology of the student experience. The cumulative nature of these interviews meant that it was easier to engage participants on a personal level. Research that chooses to travel with students during their studies reveals a very different perspective on student retention and completion, a viewpoint that is lacking in policy documents and university discourse (McCormack, 2005). This study reflects a desire to understand 'the world' from participants' points of view, as Spradley (1979) explains:

> …I want to know what you know in the way that you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand? (p.34)

Just as Spradley elevates his participants to 'teacher' and assumes the role of learner, I also endeavoured to look at the familiar in new ways and reject prior assumptions of understanding. The length of this study, which extended over the academic year, facilitated the opportunity to explore individuals' beliefs rather than just actions enabling not only the development of rapport but also clarification of topics and themes (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

When I revisited the students at the end of the first semester, all but one had managed to 'survive'. The metaphor of survival was replete in students' dialogue and this chapter intends to foremostly explore this phenomenon by focusing on the ways in which students defined both surviving and succeeding. This discussion is followed by an exploration of the characteristics and qualities that may have assisted in this 'survival'. As the year progresses, clusters of qualities emerged within the interviews so the conditions and consequences of these will be

identified. The role of relationships both within the institution and outside will be revisited and also, the strategies employed by students to move effectively through the university environment.

The data in this chapter builds upon the material presented in the last chapter, highlighting how students negotiated this first year of study. Persisting in and engaging with university cannot be attributed to discrete or singular attributes but rather reflects an interplay of factors; this chapter intends to reveal the complexity of these before moving onto the final data analysis chapter, which focuses on the final interview and participants' reflections on the year as a whole

Persisting: A case of 'survival' or 'success'?

In the first and second interviews, a pattern of responses emerged unexpectedly from the data, which were not generated by any one particular question. Fifteen of the students broadly characterised the first year of study in terms of either success or survival. Later interviews followed-up on this commonality in order to generate a deeper understanding of how participants understood such objectives and whether such considerations had altered as the year progressed.

Persistence as success

Defining what exactly students mean by 'success' and 'survival' is not straightforward so instead of trying to impose meaning on these terms it is more appropriate to examine the actual words of the participants. In the initial two interviews, eight participants self-identified as individuals who desired success in the academic year, this desire to succeed was extrapolated in different ways. Three of the students make explicit statements around the term success for example, in the first interview Stephanie states *'I think I will succeed'* (01). Similarly, in interview two Heidi explains how university can be hard because *'you're determined to you know do well and succeed in what you're doing…'* (02). Other participants allude to success in terms of grades on assignments and clearly identify higher grades as indicative of success. Katie explains that she does not want to '*just pass'* (02) instead she is *'aiming really high and hoping that I achieve that'* (02). Linda is more explicit about her desire for high grades as in her opinion; passing is '*not really succeeding, I like distinctions'* (02).

Success was also measured on a more personal level and reflected the amount of effort that students were prepared to expend on their studies; '*doing the best you can'* was generally used to engender a sense of success. Nicki admits to being very competitive and describes how she is *'always trying to put that extra bit to try and get that extra mark'* (01) and once she gets *'a bit of a grasp on what I'm actually doing*' intends to *'aim for the higher ones'* (01). Similarly, Sheila is adamant that she will not just '…*put a half hearted effort into just scraping through…'* (01). Success was largely referenced by either obtaining good marks, aiming high or putting a concerted effort into study.

Persistence as survival

Survival was referenced both in relation to personal material circumstances, particularly for the single parents, and also defined some of the students' relationship with the university. In terms of the latter, survival was defined in almost oppositional terms to success, again references to marks predominated but in these cases students admitted that they were simply aiming to pass. For two of the students, the first year was perceived as a trial or as a period where personal capability could be measured; both Mary and Kira describe how they intend to initially *'aim for a pass'* and then apply themselves more, later in the degree:

> *…this first year I thought I'd just aim for pass or get credits…if I pass my subjects this semester I think I will apply myself a lot more next semester and during next year… .* (Mary, 01)

Seven participants make references to getting through or just passing like Jane who admits that she is *'just doing the bare minimum to get through'* (01). Surviving was then about not aiming too high and was focused on successfully enduring the year as opposed to achieving high grades. Susie explains how she is '*just aiming to pass, aim to pass';* similarly, Rachel wants to '*get through the semester and pass.'* (01)

What students say does not necessarily dictate how they act but the clear articulation of two quite different perspectives was striking during the analysis of interviews. This delineation indicates how persistence is translated on an individual level, while institutionally the act of persisting is generally equated to timely completion; how students choose to do this clearly varies. Indeed, the ways in which persistence is enacted, what it entails and how it is characterised all provide the central tenets of this chapter.

Persisting and personal qualities

The previous chapter clearly indicated the laborious path that students undertook in the initial weeks of semester; thoughts of departure and giving up crossed some individuals' minds at this stage of study. During the course of the year, seven of the students explicitly mention how they had seriously entertained thoughts of leaving however, only one student was not enrolled when I returned for the second set of interviews. Vicky, one of the older participants, had mentioned *'feeling overwhelmed'* (01) about the time demands of the degree and was contemplating dropping subjects but had not mentioned or reflected upon the possibility of departure. By the end of the first semester, Vicky had unfortunately left the university. While I endeavoured to further explore the reasons behind Vicky's decision, attempts at contact including a brief telephone conversation and a resulting postal survey, did not afford much detail. Instead, Vicky seemed to disappear silently from the university landscape, perhaps desiring a quiet and private exit rather than the explication of reasons for this decision.

Longden (2002) argues that decision about departure are both 'multilayered' and 'multifactorial' (p.5) but as the remaining sixteen participants did not succumb to departure it is important to explore possible qualities that may assist students to remain at university. Hence, it is the personal characteristics or qualities that these individuals indicated in interviews that this chapter will explore next. There are a number of studies that relate personal attributes and characterisations to decisions about leaving (Coffman & Gilligan, 2002-2003; Mackie, 2001; Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 1983). However, the following section focuses on those qualities that appear to positively influence persistence. This list is not exhaustive nor do I suggest universal application but rather these characteristics are reflective of the students involved in this study. Based on the interviews, the qualities which impacted on persistence behaviour include self-efficacy, what I have termed 'determined persistence' and growing confidence.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is a belief that one is able to perform actions that bring about anticipated outcomes (Bandura, 1977, 1997). This belief in personal capability has been linked positively to academic achievement suggesting that high levels of this attitude or belief can result in increased persistence (Lent, Brown & Lark, 1984). Individuals who possess high levels of self-efficacy

might perceive stress more positively, perhaps in terms of challenge as opposed to viewing such situations in a threatening or restrictive way. Pajares (I997) explains that individual success is not only predicted on the actualisation of skills and abilities but also, reflects personal beliefs held about such personal capabilities hence high levels of self-efficacy effect confident self-belief whereas inefficacious convictions, often caused by experiences of failure, can lead to doubt and possibly for university students, attrition.

> People with greater self-efficacy will persist longer because they believe they are able to eventually succeed. (Shelton, 2003, p.69)

Two of the participants in this study arrived at university displaying high levels of this quality; interview exchanges highlighting how belief in their internal processes was both buoyant and thriving. One such individual was Sheila, who reflects how she has always '*believed that if I put my mind to something I can usually accomplish something'* (01). Equally, Sue describes in the first interview how *'I don't doubt my capabilities I know I'll do really well…when I put my mind to it I do well'* (01). The majority of the students did not reflect such self-belief and instead were uncertain about their ability to perform at university. In some cases, the students mistakenly looked to the institution itself to provide the requisite validation and encouragement.

In the third interview, Catherine reveals how one of the '*most hidden obstacles'* related to her own belief *'that I could do it, I could even get in, in the first place and then that I would be able to manage…'* (03). Catherine arrives at university with real doubts about her capabilities only to experience limited support and contact on arrival. Catherine realises that she needs social contact and is unable to obtain the validation and reassurance required from a computer screen: *'I don't want to go on Blackboard to ask a question…as I am much more a people person….'* (01). For those students who arrive at university with low self-efficacy, the processes surrounding enrolment and orientation do little to encourage confident self-belief. Rather as the narratives of the students in the last chapter indicate, arriving at university is a time of uncertainty and doubt. Such feelings may be exacerbated by an increasing reliance on technology.

Catherine's self-efficacy only increases because of assignment results, concurrent with the grades she receives, belief in her own self grows: *'…getting results back that keeps you going…'* (02). Similarly, Mary talks about an increasing sense of belief as each successive assignment and exam was passed, her self-efficacy grew gradually as the year progressed. Passing and failing assignments factored hugely in students' narratives about the academic

year. At the beginning of the semester, fifteen of the students mentioned that their biggest fear was to fail a subject or assignment. This was both related to the financial implications of such failure but also the personal and public repercussions such as diminished self-confidence as well as disappointment from self and others. These students did not have a knowledgeable other outside university who could reassure them about their scholarly activities so assignments largely assumed this role. Good marks were tangible indicators of belongingness to the university community, self-efficacy increased and perhaps thoughts of departure receded? For some students, assignment grades engendered a desire to succeed rather than just survive. Annie admits that only after receiving her first set of results does she feel:

> *I can do it and I am able to do it...I am doing pretty well and I never really thought of myself doing well for the first year.* (02).

For others, a developing sense of self served to validate their decision to arrive and facilitated the desire to persist. This is best summed up by Nicki, who in the third interview reflects how she has not only acquired new discipline specific knowledge but also new knowledge about self:

> *I have learnt that I can do it and that I am capable of doing it if I put my head down and I have learnt that everything will just work out….*
> (Nicki, 03)

To equate students' decisions to stay as resting solely upon levels of self-efficacy would be mistaken; there were a number of qualities that students highlighted in interviews, which contributed to persistence behaviour. Examining the contours of individuals' emotions is a highly interpretative process but close analysis informed by grounded theory techniques facilitated the process of identifying and examining the nuances of meaning in participants' dialogue. While self-efficacy was a feature identified as either already present or emerging in participant accounts, there was one emotional characteristic that cut across the majority of the interviews. The determination to succeed and persist in the face of obstacles also negotiated student resilience and it is to the manifestations of these qualities that this chapter will turn to next.

Determined persistence

> *…I am determined to finish my degree if it kills me. I'm determined so I'm not going anywhere I won't be dropping out.* (Heidi, 02)

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, determination manifests itself in a 'firmness' or 'resolute' purpose (p.270), often in the face of difficulty or adverse circumstances, whereas persistence and its Latin origin 'persistere' is defined as continuing 'steadfastly' (Soanes &

Hawker, 2005, p.758). Placing these two words together is used to emphasise the strength of character students displayed during the academic year.

Persistence means very different things for different students. For some, like Rachel, persistence is very much an aspect of their self-identity not something that emerged when she came to university but rather was a characteristic that she feels is demonstrated in her employment history. Persistence behaviour was often described in relation to other activities in life at the beginning of the year; the ability to persist at university measured by previous demonstrations of this quality.

Susie describes how she is battling a drug addiction and is trying to go *'cold turkey'* while also commencing study at an undergraduate level; this indicates a high level of persistence and determination. For Kira, life in general has always been a battle and so she is used to getting through on her own. Indeed, by the second set of interviews, everyone except Mary had reflected on their determination to persist in some way; perhaps, Mary's reticence on this subject might have been related to her ambivalence about university attendance mentioned in the last chapter. However, Vicky's declaration in the first interview: *'…I'm going to get through…my circumstances have never been better for studying…if I'm going to do it it's now'* (01) belied her imminent departure from the course. In Vicky's case, the verbalising of high levels of determination did not translate into actual persistence behaviour or what I have termed 'determined persistence'.

Enacting determined persistence

'Determined persistence' defines both the attitudes that students highlighted in the interviews as well as actual behaviour executed in response to perceived obstacles. While Vicky seems determined perhaps when things became difficult, this sense of determination did not translate into action hence, the decision to depart. This was not the case for the other women each of whom described situational contexts where determination characterised and informed actions. For many of the mothers, 'determined persistence' manifested itself in relation to unforeseen home events and illness. For example in the third interview Sue describes how her first semester was characterised by a need to juggle *'family and schools and sick kids and everything'* (03) and how these problems continued in second semester, it became a *'nightmare with the assignments still being due of course…'* (03).

In spite of these personal difficulties, Sue did not seek more time to submit assignments instead all were submitted on time, despite late nights and domestic responsibilities. Sue's experiences were not unique, unexpected and difficult developments were reported by all of the students at some point in the year, crises were encountered which negatively impacted on study. This is not totally unexpected when it is considered that three of the women had children with special needs, five were sole carers for young children and that a total of nine students were juggling work with study.

Illness dogged participants or their family members throughout the year but some of the repercussions of this ill health were more limiting and debilitating than others. Heidi admits that despite an invasive illness and being a sole carer for an aged parent, she is *'determined to you know do well and succeed in what you're doing…'* (02). University is both a source of stress and solace; her determined persistence is closely aligned with the emotional and personal escape that academic study provides *'…this is my escape, oh definitely this is for me, as hard as I find it.'* (03)

In Heidi's case, the boundaries between her determination to succeed in university and her determination to overcome and defeat her illness are blurred; one informs the other. Indeed, 'determined persistence' seemed to be positively enforced by the ability for academic endeavours to facilitate escape from very difficult personal circumstances. This is not only a facet of Heidi's narrative but also reflects the experiences of four other women, namely Annie, Kira, Nicki and Jane, all of whom indicate how persistence at university effected a level of control in relation to adverse or unforseen life occurrences. In the second interview, Annie explains how a recent relationship break-up has resulted in her boyfriend *'threatening me and stuff'* but that university has offered relief from the pressures of this situation as '*uni has been helping me get through all the problems'* (03).

Like Heidi, Jane's academic life is buffeted by the repercussions of a chronic illness, in this case her daughter's. Again, her determined persistence is both informed by the desire to overcome obstacles and the fact that university offers a legitimate escape from the endless monotony of hospital appointments and caring responsibilities. In the third interview, Jane laughs as she admits that she is quite looking forward to the late night demands of her next semester's timetable *'…as I won't have to do the dinner or bed'* (02). When asked what keeps her going in the face of the demands of an incapacitated child and two other children not yet at school; she

replies '*I need to do it cause if I stop now I'll stop forever and I'll never do it again. I'd rather just keep going just somehow …'* (02).

Jane was one of the seven students who admitted that there were times that she considered dropping out but when such thoughts of attrition crossed her mind she convinced herself to keep going even if only for another day *'…don't quit yet thinking tomorrow is the day'* (03). Similarly, Stephanie reveals that she wants to '*pack up and get in the car and go and forget everything'* (03) she responds by convincing herself '*no I'll just wait till the end of this year and I'll do my exams and then I'll pack up and go'* (03). For these students, 'determined persistence' was then reaffirmed by focusing on the very immediate future or adopting a 'one day at a time' attitude; however, the more distant future also featured in students' persistence patterns.

Determined persistence and the future

'Determined persistence' appeared to be in a constant state of flux; there were times that students felt defeated by both the institutional and personal hurdles they encountered. Often it was a focus on the future that provided the impetus for individuals to maintain levels of this characteristic. Horstmanshof and Zimitat (2003) refer to the concept of possible or future selves in defining the reasons why students persist at university studies. These authors argue that fears and desires relating to the conceptualisations of these possible selves serve as powerful influences on persistence levels.

For most of the participants, conceptualisations of a hoped for or possible self emerged as the year progressed; as the possibilities afforded by university became more concrete often these selves were juxtaposed against a 'negative' self. For example, in the third interview Stephanie reflects how *'you still have doubts every now and then like what I am doing and I am past it, I am too old...'* (03). As she continues, she juxtaposes two alternative versions of her future, perceiving her options as either *'work in a deli'* (03) or as a teacher, being able to *'go out and play with the kids and stay young at heart'* (03); arguably, such oppositional selves further provide the impetus for students to persist in a determined and dogged fashion. In the first interview, Sheila was the only student to have a clearly defined vision of future self:

> *…I can see myself as a teacher like I know it is four years down the track maybe five years down the track but I can see myself in that role…maybe that is why I am so focused because I can visualise myself at the end.* (Sheila, 01)

Sheila looks to her future self as a source of inspiration; she can already imagine herself in the class-room and this projection provides the motive for her to continue when things get difficult. The role of future and possible selves as an indicator of persistence will be explored in more detail in the discussion chapter of this thesis.

At this point, the chapter will move to a third and final personal quality that emerged across interviews. During the academic year; a common feature of participants' narratives was recognition of a growth in confidence that had been engendered by university. Hence, it is to the manifestations and repercussions of this that the following section will outline.

Growing confidence

As clearly indicated in the previous chapter, for these individuals the euphoria associated with arrival at university was frequently negated by ensuing doubts and misapprehensions. However, when I met with the students in the second and third interview, transformations in confidence levels and a greater sense of control were defined. This was a universal manifestation, each of the participants reflected upon similar developments, only the degree and the repercussions of this change differed.

This growth of confidence led to five of the students highlighting how they felt more *'comfortable'* within the university environment. This might simply be a better awareness of class-room location or how to utilise the library; but such transformations made a qualitative difference to the student experience. Increases in confidence were informed by a better sense of capability in relation to this environment and a clearer understanding of institutional expectations. However, increases in confidence levels engendered by academic environment extended outside of the institution. By interview three, Katie feels *'smarter'* and this has led her to feel *'better talking to people'* (03) in general. When further explaining this transformation, she juxtaposes between how previously she was quite tentative in discussions with people but her new sense of self translates into a more confident, assertive Katie:

> *…whereas before I'd say: 'Oh yeah that doesn't sound right or that sounds too much…' Now I can confidently say: 'Oh no, that's you know, that's not the way it happens it happens this way'…I feel confident that I can talk to people that way… (*Katie, 03)

Such reflections were not demarcated by age or status but for some of the married women these new levels of confidence affected the dynamics of their relationships with husbands and partners. In Susie's case, the knowledge she has acquired in university has resulted in her acquiring her own opinion and perspective on things:

> *…some of the remarks that I have been spitting back at my husband when he's been saying things have just stopped him dead in his tracks…I come out with these things that he knows about and I've never known about…* (Susie, 03)

Equally, Stephanie has taken on a new role in her relationship with her husband; university has initiated confidence '*in my own ability to do things'* (03) and assume responsibility for tasks that she previously felt were beyond her abilities such as completing household paperwork:

> *I use to always say to my husband here you fill it out and I'll sign it. Now I …fill it out myself and don't have any worries about it… (*Stephanie, 03)

There is a real sense of then and now in these statements, revealing the very tangible repercussions that university is having on participants' lives. However, such transformations were invariably accompanied by fundamental shifts in marital relationships, a development that will be explored in the next section of the chapter.

At some stage in the academic year, all the participants reflected how attendance at university had engendered growth in confidence. In some cases, this growth was attributed to tangible proof of academic ability evidenced by assignment results and feedback, in other cases this confidence related to an awareness of skills that had previously been unrecognised. Interestingly, transformations in confidence level were not necessarily moderated by the difficulties of the university environment. Instead overcoming these obstacles further increased levels of confidence. The ways in which participants talked about confidence levels suggested the gradual emergence of new aspects of identity. This quality was then perhaps one facet of an emergent student identity, indeed the processes around and the possible implications of this identity work will be subjected to extensive examination in the discussion chapter.

The radical nature of these transformations had repercussions for both students and the people they came in contact with. Change was not only negotiated internally but also manifested itself in relational terms, particularly in terms of attitudes to new and existing

relationships as well as the nature of these relationships. In both interviews two and three, the informants reflected on connections both inside and outside of the institution and the roles these played in their academic activities. Persisting and engaging within this environment were both influenced by the types of relationships that students already had as well as those that were valued and sought.

Engaging: The role of relationships

Changes in confidence levels evoked new relationships with the university institution, characterised by a growing sense of control within this environment. However, this growth in confidence also facilitated transformations in existing relationships as well as the negotiation of new ones. Rather than focus on who the relationship concerned, the following analysis reflects on the processes and meanings that students identified around relationships. Once enrolled, support from family and friends continued to play a vital role in the participants' description of their university life. As the students themselves changed so inevitably did their relationships with others, particularly with those closest to them. By far the most discussed changing relationships were those between the older women and their families. Hence, this section focuses on the parents in the study as they reflected at length upon transformations that had occurred in their relationships with children and for those who were married, or had partners.

Changing relationships with children

In the first interview, the women with children talked about explicit and specific strategies that they had adopted to accommodate both the needs of the university and the needs of their families. At this initial stage, involving children in study was mentioned as a priority by eight of the mothers, the strategies for this varied from bringing children into the campus or doing homework together to actually using children in assignments. This collaborative approach to university was perhaps one way of removing the otherness of this pursuit and maybe indicated an attempt to normalise these academic activities by placing them firmly within the family routine.

However, the ideal of successfully blending children and study was already proving illusive by the second and third interviews. Despite Sheila's best intentions, she admits how her children are not *'exactly co-operating'* (02) with what she has set herself to achieve. Similarly, Linda talks about the difficulty of mixing children and study as she is reluctant to *'divorce'* (01) herself from the kids when she is at home. For this student, university is almost a thief something that is stealing or demanding time from her, this implied characterisation was apparent in other mothers' reflections. Catherine reflects on a similar worry in the first interview:

> *I don't want to suddenly withdraw cos there is only the two of us at home and it is a very close relationship. (01)*

Such misapprehensions underline the polarity between family and study as each competes with the other for attention. Acker (1980) defines university and family as two 'greedy institutions' both of whom demand high degrees of consideration and participation. Some of the women with children had already realised the demands of both spheres of their lives and were consciously taking steps to separate university from family life, as one way perhaps to avoid conflict. Sue only does university work during school hours whilst Katie tries *'not to work on weekends'* (02) unless everyone is *'quiet and happy'* (02). Katie's aim is to only bring university work into the home when she is not *'…feeling like I am putting anything else aside'* (02). Such imagery portrays university as an intruder, only permitted when the family is already occupied. Later in the year, Sheila reflects on a similar strategy:

> *I always make sure you know I came home from uni* [and] *had the kids home from school, did their homework or played with them and made dinner and did all those sorts of things with them and then put them to bed and then I did generally start and that's when I found that time…you know I made this conscious decision at the beginning of the year…the time that I am not at uni and the kids are at school that's when I really want to try and get all my work done.* (Sheila, 03)

The separation of family and academic life is also reported by the women in Edward's (1990) study. The implications of this separation will be more thoroughly explored in a later section of this chapter, which details strategies adopted by students to survive the rigours of academic study.

While the demands of university could be divisive, the act of returning was also regarded as a catalyst for positive change in relationships with children. Four of the mothers

reflect upon such positive repercussions. By interview three, Kira and Linda recognise the benefits that university attendance has brought to their mother-child relationships. In Kira's case, she hopes that *'… me going to uni encourages her [daughter] to think well I could do it'* (03) as opposed to Kira at that age (14 years) who *'thought that I didn't have the brains'* (03). Clearly in the latter case, university is not a thief or intruder but rather the 'giver'; providing choices that may not previously have been considered. Additionally, by positioning university within a discourse of good parenting, the mothers may have appeased guilt feelings associated with this activity. Both Reay (2003) and Edwards (1993) reflect on how the mothers in their studies portrayed themselves as a potential role model for children in a possible bid to reconcile and justify their student status within the domestic domain.

Participation in university also engendered an elevation in status, particularly when the child was older. Both Catherine and Heidi, single parents, reflect how their sons now think *'okay Mums got a brain in her head'* (Catherine, 01); as Heidi further elaborates: '*…my eldest son said: "God I never would have thought that you'd be smarter than me" '* (02). Perhaps, the actions of these women served not only to reaffirm their place in society but also to redefine their sons' perception of women in general. No longer residing solely within the domestic space, 'Mum' is now recognised as commanding recognition within the public world. Changes in relationships were not limited to children; similar developments were noted in relation to husbands and partners.

Shifts in relationships with husbands or partners

As the year progressed, some husbands and partners choose to legitimise university participation through supportive actions but equally others attempted to subjugate or sabotage this activity by placing it on the periphery of family life. As mentioned in chapter five, some of the husbands were supportive, or appeared to be, from the commencement of study. For the other spouses, changes in attitude were either very gradual in coming or not forthcoming at all. Undoubtedly, if support is not forthcoming from those closest to the student, then this is bound to have implications for persistence and academic success.

While Sue actively strove to avoid possible conflict with her husband by keeping family life and university separate; two of the other women spoke about challenging their partners' unsupportive attitudes. In Kira's case, both her husband's attitude to her academic endeavours and the personal transformations that study engendered, proved to be catalysts that heralded the demise of her marriage in the second semester of the academic year: *'…study opened my eyes up…I wanted answers and he didn't. He was just happy to let it be and I wasn't…* (03).

University attendance has the potential to fundamentally shift the power balance in marital relationships and it is not unusual for divorce or separation to ensue. In Edward's (1990) study of thirty three mature age female students, a quarter of the marriages dissolved after the woman commenced study. For Kira, university opened up a new world of knowledge and encouraged her to question her life and her place in it; this development possibly both undermining the ownership of knowledge and challenging the power dynamic within the home:

> *I tried to explain to him I want 'why's' you don't. I want to know why I'm not happy, why did it happen, why do you do this, why do you stay out all the time. I want to know why and you don't, you just want to let it ride. I said a lawyer wants to know why they are not winning a case, a fashion consultant wants to know why that dress didn't fit. I said I am just like them now, going off to uni I want answers I want to know why things happen…you don't and therefore we are sailing in different directions… .* (Kira, 03)

Despite the dissolution of the marriage and the ensuing difficulties of organising and housing five children, Kira refused to give up on her academic study. While reducing her load to one subject, Kira explains that both her own sense of determination and the gains in her confidence have compounded her desire to continue; Kira is simply adamant that she is '*not going to give up'* (03). This perspective further evidences how overcoming obstacles has the potential to further empower and motivate students to persist. As Kira reflects*: 'I probably gained confidence…so my gain I suppose is confidence … I said to myself well I can do it, if I don't give up…'.* (03)

While Kira's relational transformations were quite radical, she was not the only participant to experience quite fundamental shifts in marital relationships. In the second interview, Stephanie describes how after her husband was resistant to the amount of time she was devoting to study, she offered him an ultimatum *'he can just pack up…if he*

wants to leave, leave but I am not going to stop from doing it. This is what I want to do' (02). Stephanie's relationships with her husband has moved from one characterised by her seeking permission to attend university; *'harped on my husband for a whole year and he's agreed to it'* (01); to a new status where she felt powerful enough to challenge his position in the family:

> *…if he doesn't want to support me for the next 5 years then if he wants to leave, leave but I am not going to stop from doing it, this is what I want to do. We've been together for 16 years and I've always followed him to do what he wants to do and I've never stopped and said: "Hang on I don't really want to do that"…I've done all these things I've gone his way, I wasn't happy. I'm happy doing this and now it's his turn to realise that he can still have his way of things and I can have mine and we can work together*…(02).

Stephanie attributes this transformation to witnessing *'single Mums…coming to uni and…there is no partner there is no help for them...'* (02). Equally, such changes also reflect personal growth in confidence as well as manifestation of 'determined persistence'. In the cases where students seemed distressed by the relational changes, I was able to provide a referral to university counselors available on campus for further support and guidance.

For the other married participants, less radical changes were described often related to the gradual renegotiation of roles within the domestic space, as the older students became more involved in studying, so the invisible work of women became more apparent. Katie's husband might be '*struggling a little bit'* (03) but Katie now realises that '*the house does not fall down if I don't do everything…and he can be drying clothes in front of the heater at 5 in the morning not my problem'* (03). There is a hint of liberation in this statement, echoed by Susie, who admits to not minding that she now has to *'sacrifice on some of the housework'* (03).

By choosing to persist at university, the older married women in this study choose to reclaim their lives and extend the boundaries of domestic space; this shift necessitated sometimes radical renegotiations in relationships with family members. Despite the difficulties such changes initiated, these students chose to continue with university, some merely 'surviving' others 'succeeding', but all continuing. However, the choice to persist also resulted in new relationships, some were welcomed whilst others were actively resisted, the next section of this chapter will focus on this disparity.

Forging relationships within the university

Theorists such as Tinto (1987; 1993), Rendon (1994) and Shelton (2003) emphasise the importance of student/staff relationships within the university environment, highlighting how interactions should occur not only on a formal level but also informally, outside of established academic sites of learning. However, the participants in my study revealed a lack of clarity concerning the expected and acceptable roles in the student/academic relationship. Some students indicated a reluctance to access lecturers, making reference to the approachability of individuals, the presence of this proportionally impacting on the nature of the student experience. One of the women spoke quite wistfully of how she wished she felt comfortable enough with the lecturers *'…to go and talk to them but none of them seem to be really very approachable...'* (Linda, 02).

Feeling comfortable about accessing lecturers was something that these students valued and this is also emphasised by Shelton (2003), who argues that both individual academics and faculty need to take an active role in providing psychological support. Such support, Shelton suggests, should be based on qualities such as approachability; caring attitudes, respectfulness and 'genuine interest' toward students (p.64). First year students are generally expected to adapt and acculturise to the university environment in a timely and fluid fashion and some academics may not seem to fully appreciate or empathise with the very radical nature of this adjustment. Kantanis (2000) argues that the more traditionally focused academics often foreground the imparting of knowledge rather than the teaching or supporting of students, adopting a 'sink or swim' philosophy in relation to these commencing cohorts.

This attitude was echoed by some of the participants who made reference to the reluctance of lecturers to 'spoon-feed' them, which often resulted in ambiguity over expectations and requirements. Catherine explained how she was more inclined to discuss assignments with her friends as she had once '*asked a question about something'* and was abruptly told to *'Just read it, you know you should be able to figure this out'* (02). Catherine continues by arguing that this *'…doesn't work very well when you are an adult and you are telling her "well I can't figure this out"…'* (02). Equally, Linda is not enjoying the lectures as she feels that there is not '*enough guidance from the lecturers*' (02). These perspectives highlight the need for higher education pedagogy

to be based upon the premises espoused by the practise of andragogy, which recognises that the needs of adult learners differ dramatically to the younger cohort. Andragogy is based upon adult learning principles which exhort the need to let individuals know the reasons for learning, as well as encourage self-direction and facilitate learning around existing life demands (Swaminathan & Alfred, 2001). Adult learners bring skills and strengths to the academic environment; teaching should aim to elaborate on these in a fulfilling way for both learners and teachers. For many of the students in this study, the nature of relationships with lecturers deviated strongly from their expectations and their needs.

Expectations around relationships

Kira explains how she had based her ideas on her experiences with TAFE teachers and she found that university teaching staff were very different in approach. Kira expected lecturers to be *'more approachable and helpful'* (02) instead *'they don't answer questions in their lectures so you can walk away … knowing absolutely nothing*' (02). Much of the contact that students reported having with lecturers was mediated through electronic media such as discussion boards and email. There was a general disaffection with this type of communication, the limitations of temporal and spatial distance impacting on learning and understanding: '…*it's basically the Blackboard* [electronic teaching program] *is your teacher…'* (Annie, 02). These perspectives also reveal a basic mismatch between students' definitions of what constitutes appropriate support within the university environment and the reality they encountered. This differential may partially reflect the first generation status of the students as the meaning of support was largely informed by previous educational experiences, which do not necessarily transpose to a university context.

Rendon (1994) highlights how both academic and interpersonal validation within the university framework remains vital for students regardless of their age or stage, arguing that this is particularly the case for non-traditional students. The importance of this sense of involvement is also borne by Elliott (2002-2003) who found that students desire validation and acceptance by academics and also need to feel valued by the institution. In the third interview, Helen reflects on her recent lack of motivation, admitting that this is largely due to an incident with a lecturer:

> *I was in a tutorial and I went to answer and…he said: 'Could you let someone else answer'…now I am really quiet I am not motivated to go to any of the tutorials or anything like that*. (Helen, 03)

For Helen, the perceived dismissive nature of the lecturer has radically altered her perception of university and her attitude to learning. For students who are beginning their studies and perhaps already filled with trepidation, it may only take one negative incident to occur to result in them feeling discouraged. Like Helen, Rachel describes how the abrupt reaction of her lecturer to a question led her to decide *'okay, I won't go to you again*' (02). However, it was not only the younger students who described negative incidences with teaching staff; Linda also details a number of incidents where different lecturers had behaved in a very dismissive manner or quite inappropriately, one such incident leading her to drop the subject. In Linda's opinion, the solution was simple '*…I think that some lecturers need to stop being holier than thou, they are human as well*…' (03).

Perhaps not surprisingly, it was those lecturers who recognised that their students were both *'human'* (Clara, 02) and also, had *'another life that's happening'* (Clara, 02) that were preferred. In other words, those individuals who were perceived as permitting the personal into their relationships with students were identified in a positive light. The students expressed a desire to be engaged by teaching staff, to forge relationships based on mutual respect. Indeed, two of the students outlined strategies designed to evoke such connection. Jane highlights how students needed to realise: *'…you can break them down, yeah train them, which is what you need to do'* (02). When asked what the 'training' involved Jane elaborates '*talk to them and…tell them things about what's going on in my life and…just finding out little bits about them'* (02). Strategies obviously designed to disrupt the distanced and removed stance of some academic staff.

As mentioned, recognising the importance of positive student/teacher interactions and the resulting effects on educational experiences is certainly not an innovative idea. The need for such support has been borne out by extensive literature that emphasises the importance of the connection between student and lecturer, particularly in relation to academic persistence and retention (Elliott, 2002-2003; Perry & Allard, 2003; Scanlon et al., 2007; Shelton, 2003; Tinto, 1998). Creating space and time for interactions with students may be difficult for many academics due to teaching demands. However, what

is striking about the participant accounts is how minor incidents had a major impact on the quality of the student experience. In some cases, just small gestures could make a qualitative difference to learning experiences. For example, just knowing that you could see a lecturer if this became necessary and being acknowledged by name, made a qualitative difference to Linda's perspective of the university. The differences to the learning experience when meaningful relationships with students are created and maintained was clearly highlighted when participants were asked to describe positive experiences concerning lecturers. Susie explains how one lecturer simply acknowledged the difficulty of studying and invited students to talk with staff before quitting. Such a simple gesture meant a lot to Susie: '…*it's good that a lecturer can see that you…are having trouble and they can understand that a few of us are a bit behind...*' (02). Academics are faced with the dilemma of engaging in activities, which while beneficial to students and ultimately institutional budgets, may not necessarily be recognised as institutionally important or valuable, perhaps even regarded as eroding time needed for research. Many academic staff may genuinely wish to improve or positively negotiate student experiences but existing institutional and ideological boundaries often preclude them from doing so.

While attempts to engage with lecturers were sometimes thwarted, it could be assumed that connection with the university was facilitated by forging relationships with other students. Some students like Catherine recognised the importance of developing relationships with other students as *'… you don't see very much of lecturers … so you rely more on your friendships to figure out what is going on …'* (03), but others had a more ambivalent attitude to friendships on campus. The literature may emphasise the importance of social connection for commencing students (Burnett, 2006; Martinez & Munday, 1998; Thomas, 2002a) but the realities of juggling study with family and/or work commitments often precluded the formation of close affiliations. Instead, what became apparent was that relationships with other students served a very pragmatic or instrumental role. On campus conversations were very focused, as Nicki explains, she just *'can't afford to sit around and chat'* (03). Friends in the university were used for different purposes, while a small part of this usage related to emotional support by far the majority was more strategic in nature; the following section further demarcates these 'using relationships'.

Using relationships: 'Connectors' and 'social strategists'

When the interview dialogue was analysed it became apparent that students had quite distinct attitudes to student/student relationships within the university environment. There were those students for whom making connections with other students were vital, perceived as an intrinsic component to engaging with the university environment. These students have been termed 'social connectors'.

The 'social connector' type prioritised the formation of relationships with other students, making the time in busy schedules to actively seek out connections with other people. These associations provided advice, reassurance and practical support; for two of the students these acquaintances also provided emotional support. Seven of the students prioritised such relationships in the first interview namely Catherine, Vicky, Helen, Mary, Annie, Sue and Susie. Catherine clearly perceiving the need for social time when she states '*everyone is really busy but yeah just ducking down and have a coffee or something it's really important…'* (01).

Friends are also very important to Mary but she is adamant that the friendships that she had cultivated from school and prior to university will continue to be important to her as she proceeds through university. Such assertions seem to contradict theorists like Tinto who regards successful transition, particularly for younger students like Mary, as necessitating a movement away from prior community and friendship affiliations.

> *I have a group of friends there are 4 of us and only two of us went to uni…normally on the weekend nights we all go out together.* (01)

When asked in the last interview, Mary indicated that she had maintained contact with these friends. Not all the participants were so successful in maintaining the same level of contact but none expressed a desire to leave friends behind. Instead, friendships that had existed prior to university remained very important and were not diminished by relationships formed on campus. Other students commenced the year by declaiming the importance of pursuing friendships on campus, such activities were perceived as being external to the core business of obtaining a degree. As the year progressed, so did recognition that such relationships had a role in learning. These students or what I have termed 'social strategists' regarded friendships on campus as largely serving an instrumental or pragmatic role in student life.

The majority of participants in this study fell into this 'social strategist' category; frequently explaining that friendships were bounded by the campus perimeter, outside of university hours contact was not encouraged nor expected. Nicki and Clara are perhaps the most blatant of 'social strategists'*;* Nicki '*flutter*[s] *between different groups'* (03) and admits that she *'only speaks to people at uni I don't take any of that back home'* (03). Similarly, Clara is not aiming to '*make lots of friends'* (01) again her time at university is to *'focus still on what I want to do and do my own thing…and not worry about getting clique with people…'* (01).

Perhaps this focus on the pragmatic and instrumental quality of relationships reflects the first in family status of these students? Having no one in the family to seek advice from, or reflect upon the university environment with, may lead students to seek such support from within the campus. While lecturers and academic staff may be able to provide some of this, it is probably the other students that are the most accessible for advice and feedback. Hence, the students are focused more on the functionality of engagement with others rather than the creation of personal connection. Rachel admits that the people she talks to in university would not be defined as '*friends'* but rather are *'people that I associate with*' (02); while such statements may be indicative of the newness of these friendships, undoubtedly the location, size and nature of the campus would also play a huge role in defining relationships. The campus has a tiny residential population (a 25 bed residence is available to students); its commuter type nature is not conducive to forming intense social connection. What is interesting though is that some of the students arrived at university with preconceived ideas about the types of relationships that they would form, or not, as the case might be; such conceptions largely remained consistent as the year progressed.

The use of relationships is not the only strategy that students identified as facilitating their academic endeavours. As the year progressed, participants outlined quite explicit activities that had been adopted to negotiate survival and also, for some, academic success.

Engaging: Types of behaviour and strategies

During the course of the year, individuals talked about survival in two different ways. For the older students, particularly the single parents, initially the idea of survival was defined as something that university would be able to facilitate. Such references occurred in the first set of interviews when students discussed how university offered them a chance at '*surviving'* life. Yet, as all the participants became more immersed in their student identity and perhaps increasingly engaged with their studies, survival was largely measured in terms of academic outcomes. To facilitate this process, students talked about the behaviours and strategies that they adopted to survive and ultimately, engage with university.

Students experiment with different approaches to their studies in order to obtain an acceptable relationship between the amount of input and actual tangible output. When the interview data is examined, the older women talked and reflected proportionally more about the strategies that they have adopted or intended to use in relation to their academic studies. When the references to strategies were totaled for the four interviews and delineated according to the age of the participants, it showed that the older women (those over 25) talked explicitly about strategies designed to effect positive academic outcomes an average of twenty times throughout the four interviews. For the younger participants, this was almost double the number of their references to this topic, which averaged at 11.6.

The literature on this topic highlights how older students indicate 'higher levels of purpose' in relation to their reasons for studying. As mentioned in the literature review, attendance at university may be described in terms of a 'second chance' (McInnis et al., 1995, p.71). Perhaps, the differences in dialogue might then be reflective of this desire, talking about and focusing on strategies for study, might enable older students to feel more in control of this experience and evidence of their commitment to study. That is not to say that the younger students were not also active agents in their learning but simply were less aware of, or maybe just felt less compelled to talk about, these processes. The next section of the chapter explores a number of strategies that students reflected upon in relation to their studies.

Sacrificing or 'satisficing'

The idea of sacrifice is pervasive throughout these interviews; students discuss sacrifice in relation to family, money and friendships. While many of the sacrifices relate to those endured outside of the university; implying a causal relationship between university and the students' life; there is also mention of students having to sacrifice elements of university in order to facilitate everyone's needs. Sheila mentions how she has to sacrifice connection with the university as she has to be in other places and as much as she would like to sit down to lunch and get to know other people; she knows this is a sacrifice she has to make in order to fit everything in.

'Satisficing' is a term used by Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2006) to refer to decisions that people make that while not being optimal are deemed to be good enough. The act of satisficing is apparent in the older women's attitudes to study. The pressures of successfully juggling home, study and work translate into the act of satisficing as certain things are sacrificed in order to satisfy the minimal requirements of the course. Satisficing was one of the ways that some of the women *managed, controlled* and *maintained* university study in a life full of competing demands. Strategies for 'managing and controlling' as well as those designed to 'maintain' existing conditions, will be dealt with in the following two sections, each reflecting attempts by students to co-ordinate and operate the various temporal, personal and academic facets of their life. The final section explores the behaviours and strategies that were characterised by participants actively seeking out support and information.

Managing and controlling: People and time

The married women in this study assumed responsibility for successfully integrating existing family, and in some cases, work responsibilities with academic studies. Previous research has indicated that studying does not lead to a reduced load in the house or workplace but rather there is an expectation that household standards and level of economic contribution should not decline regardless of academic or vocational activities (Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). This responsibility has clear implications for both student career and the processes adopted around academic work. The female students who are also married were torn by the needs of family and

university; this situation was reflected in many of the narratives of the respondents. However, family was not the only thing that students had to manage equally, those with work commitments were challenged by the difficulty of combining work and study.

As the year progressed, time increasingly became regarded as a precious commodity that was required to be managed in quite defined ways. For all the mothers, time was an entity that needed to be bounded and stratified, the response to the question of how they were managing study, largely evoked a detailed schedule where it seemed every minute was accounted for. Essentially, the difference between the women with family commitments and those without was that the former had to reclaim ownership of time, they had to take control of time. For the students who were married and with children, their time was owned by others and so time management might be more about managing and controlling all the others.

Regardless of age or status, all the participants talked at length about the difficulties of managing time and the ways in which this was negotiated. Managing strategies were largely characterised by integration or separation of university and wider life conditions; from the extreme of Sue who even at the end of the year did not allow *'uni work…to impede on home'* (04) to Helen and Rachel who perceive clear links between what they are studying and their employment. For Helen, her work enhances and facilitates her academic activities providing her with the '*opportunity to do what I want and…I can learn a lot off everyone else'* (04).

Sheila talks about *'valuing time'* (01) a lot more and also aiming to *'keep certain times you know that's just for family*…' (01). In contrast to this, Helen describes how her partner is *'expected to go and entertain himself'* (01) when she studies, the household schedule revolves around her study routine dictating mealtimes and social activities. Helen already controls time whereas Sheila's comment reflects a more emerging sense of this ownership; perhaps, for those who feel unable to control time, managing it around family seems the most achievable option. Time was not the only thing that needed to be managed; equally, the students explained how they managed people and life itself so that study could be accommodated.

By the second interview, Rachel has established a *'hierarchy of what I think is important and what's not so important'*, (02) during semester time, university assumes priority. This is similar to Heidi who states *'everything gets put off till after uni'* (02), household routines and job resume at the end of the academic year. However, what was deemed important differed between students, as mentioned previously for many of the mothers university was secondary to children and family, for some of the working students, university was less important than employment, whereas for students like Heidi university was the primary focus in life. The position or place of university in students' lives has clear implications for both their approach to studies and their level of engagement with the institution. In the discussion chapter, the status and place of university in students' lives will be revisited in order to highlight some tentative conclusions about the possible repercussions of these differences in relation to processes around engagement and persistence.

For all the participants, attending university necessitated not only managing and controlling time but also people and life in general. The difficulty of this was further complicated by the demands of maintaining balance in life, another concept which emerged from the interviews.

Maintaining balance

Balance emerged as an example of a 'red light' word during the data analysis phase (Kvale, 1996); seven of the students talked explicitly about the need to maintain balance and highlighted their attempts to do this.

> *I think you gotta keep your balance between your old life and your new life so I'd say try and keep your balance…*(Linda, 01)

Not surprisingly, the term balance featured predominantly in the interviews with women who had children and related to the need to maintain a presence in all facets of their lives. This equilibrium was maintained by consciously making sure that there was time and space for the children and partners, when this balance was achieved, the students were able to devote more time and energy to study. Arguably, achieving this sense of balance supported increased engagement with the institution. However, in the first interview, Katie admits that *'finding that balance is a little bit tricky'* (01) because the kids *'are already sharing me at the moment…so I'll try and strike a balance…'* (01).

Balance was also negotiated in relation to work commitments; for Mary, maintaining a balance between work and university was an experimental process, she is prepared to trade off on her first year of study in favour of employment. Rather than reduce her hours at work, Mary is going to wait, in order *'to see how much I can do'* (01). Paid work was not only a facet of life for the older students with family commitments but also an intrinsic part of the younger generation's culture; creating a culture of what Perry and Allard (2003) term 'earner learners' (p.77). Ryan (2007) argues that in contemporary society, young people increasingly perceive themselves as part of an economy rather than as part of a community. Such a perception, Ryan argues, results from the growing participation of young people in the workforce, this section of the population now plays a growing and substantial contributory role in the economy. James (2008) also identifies the necessity of paid work in students lives within the contemporary Australian higher education landscape. Certainly in Mary's life, work is very important and university has to be balanced with these vocational commitments. At the initial stages of the year, Mary is working two jobs and an average of eighteen hours per week but recognises that she will need to '*balance it out'* (01) later in the year.

Paid work assumed varying levels of status in relation to university work and patterns in attitude often correlated to the age of the student. In Mary's case, paid work takes precedence at the initial stages of study, similar to Rachel who is looking for more hours at her workplace. Annie, another of the younger students, limits the hours she does but works at night to maximise the financial benefits. However, for all the older students who are self-supporting, while paid work is a necessity it is regarded as a means to pay the bills, secondary to both family and university.

Often the nature of the balance changed as the year progressed, at times during the year students realised that the idea of *maintaining a balance* was an ideal. This was particularly the case when assignments were due, in interview three Catherine admits there *'is no balance at all'* (03) and how she wishes to get *'a bit of balance back cos I am juggling a lot of balls as it is hard to get that balance'* (03). Equally, maintaining the balance was illusive for Katie but finally towards the end of the year she feels confident that she has '*found the balance'* (03). Work has to be sacrificed so that Katie can maintain both family and university commitments. While balance was partially facilitated

by managing and controlling, this was a very dynamic process requiring constant renegotiation and fluidity. Perhaps those students who can flexibly adapt to the needs of both university and life are better positioned to persist in their studies? West (1996) argues that women who have successfully navigated the transformations associated with birthing and mothering may engage with the transition process more easily as uncertainty and improvisation have been a feature of their lives. This type of association can also be exclusionary and so arguably it is preferable to negotiate this skill on a more general level rather than assume some essential form of maternalism. Students' dialogues also indicate how the need to constantly evaluate and reappraise behaviours and strategies is central to persisting and succeeding at university, this is also a characteristic of the final approach which has been titled 'seeking out'.

Seeking out

The final behaviour that students identified as important is an act that has been termed 'seeking out'; this proactive strategy involved students recognising the need for, and locating, existing support facilities, within the university environment. Given the first in the family status of students, the type of assistance and advice required was largely not available externally. Support from parents differed to what was received at high school where parents may have been able to advise on what was required; Annie's parents simply '*don't know how to help'* (01).

As the realisation grew that family members or those external to the university were limited in the support and advice that could be offered so did participants reflect more on seeking out support within the university in order to further engagement with the insitution. Only half of the students describe how they sought advice and practical support from within the university. This type of seeking behaviour is perhaps more reflective of individuals who have the confidence and the insight to take responsibility for their learning experience; the onus of responsibility lies explicitly with the students themselves. The Shelton Model of Student Retention (2003) proposes that students, who have a greater level of ability and self-efficacy, are better at recognising the support available to them and also using this support to achieve their academic goals. While this study did not set out with the objective of examining or measuring individual psychological processes, when the interview data were analysed with a matrix query,

both of the students who demonstrated relatively high levels of self-efficacy prior to starting university also referred to seeking out behaviors in the first interview. Similarly, six of the thirteen students who mentioned increasing confidence and self-efficacy during the year, were also engaged in this seeking out behaviour by the third interview.

Nicki is one of the students who reflects upon this type of behaviour throughout the academic year. In interview one, she extols the virtues of *'extra student services'* courses while by second semester she feels confident enough to seek out feedback from academic staff and is not afraid to *'ask the silly questions'* (02). Five of the students mention that they have taken advantage of the academic support services and all highlight the effectiveness of these. However, the positive nature of such reflections needs to be tempered by the reality of my professional role on campus, as the workshops and support services alluded to are largely provided by the service which I was coordinating at the time of the study.

Not every student perceived the responsibility for seeking advice and practical support as resting with them, instead the university itself was regarded as having the responsibility for informing them about the importance of such strategies. In the second interview, Rachel reflects how she did not realise that *'you've actively got to go and find it* [support services] *and participate'* (02); instead Rachel wishes that *'…someone had said you have to go and do this then I probably would have just gone and done it*…' (02). Rachel would only seek out additional supports if actually told to do so. In Rachel's case there is a clear dissonance relating to ownership of responsibility within the university environment and one can only wonder how many other students labour under such false perceptions. Perhaps, this indicates the need to teach new students techniques of 'help seeking' and how to enact such behaviour.

Conclusion

Students differ greatly in their attitude to learning and the strategies they adopt to cope with the rigours of university study. The chapter has highlighted what students mean when they refer to 'survival' and 'success'; situating these terms in relation to processes

around persisting. Qualities that students displayed in relation to their academic endeavours were discussed and the impact of these on engagement and persistence highlighted. The nature of relationships both within and outside the institution was described and used to further enrich understanding of student experience. In this study, patterns emerged around certain processes and the chapter suggested tentative links between the strategies and behaviours identified by students and factors such as age, marital status and personal characteristics. It is impossible to precisely define why some students achieved what they set out to achieve and why others failed in that respect. What is clear is that students attached a huge importance to both their grades and the possibility of failure. The next chapter joins the students at the end of the academic year and defines the reflections that the women articulated in relation to the year as a whole. The sixteen remaining participants were encouraged to look back at the year and further contextualise their personal experience of attending university. .

Chapter Seven: Reflecting

Introduction

This final data analysis chapter focuses on the fourth interview conducted with the remaining sixteen students, which occurred at the end of the academic year. Given the length of time the relationship between myself and the participants had existed, it is perhaps not surprising that this interview was largely unstructured. Arguably, if successive interviews occur between participants then the initial 'pretence' of intimacy can quickly develop into a valid connection, a more collaborative endeavour, where each of the participants are 'implicated in making meaning' (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p.18). Certainly by this stage of the year, the students were very familiar with the research process with some admitting that they *'looked forward'* to these encounters (04). I equally anticipated these meetings as like a new chapter in a book, I was eager to hear the next instalment of these women's stories. The interviews facilitated an 'animated exchange' (Narayan & George, 2002, p.820) of these stories; not only did the students narrate their experiences but like any other conversational partner, I also participated in the interchanges.

By the end of the year, relationships had been formed and all parties had shared stories about families and life outside the university domain. I had been invited into the participants' lives and felt a desire to reciprocate this invitation; sometimes my own stories emerged spontaneously in the middle of the taped conversations on other occasions such exchanges happened after the tape had been turned off. Each of the interviews marked a closer affiliation between myself and these students but it was the last interview where artificial constructs and boundaries were truly removed. This fourth interview was conversational in nature, while I did ask questions, dialogue was equally driven by students, the main objective was an encouragement to reflect and contemplate on the academic year as a whole.

Over the year I had had the privilege of witnessing individuals grow and transform in a very radical sense and felt strongly that this development should be theirs to define and explicate. This chapter will initially highlight the tangible changes that students described

as well as the new perspectives on the future which were defined. The chapter also revisits the hurdles that students had to overcome and tentatively proposes some reasons for persistence. The final section will then highlight how students reflected upon the interview process itself. Again, the desire to move away from the dialectic, hierarchical relationships imposed by a more formal interview structure informed my intent to expose the constructed nature of this medium. One approach to doing this was to encourage reflection by the students on what this interview relationship had meant to them and the perceived impacts such meetings had both personally and academically.

The next section entitled 'Looking back and looking forward' begins by 'looking back' focusing on the reflections students made in relation to the benefits and transformations engendered by university attendance and the processes around the emergence of a student identity. 'Looking forward' focuses on both the student perceptions of the immediate and pressing future as well as desires and ambitions for the more distant future. In this chapter, the quotes are not numerically identified as, unless otherwise specified, they have all been derived from the fourth interview.

Reflecting: Looking back and looking forward

> *I see myself I was way down there when I started whereas now I am up here*. (Nicki)

When this final interview took place, all of the students had completed the requirements of the academic year; some had only just finished their final exams or assignments whilst others had had time to relax and rejoice in their accomplishments. When I rejoined the students, all sixteen had successfully persisted through the year; the seventeenth participant, Vicky, had previously departed in the first semester. Given the reflective nature of this interview, the students largely engaged in comparative analysis, this final set of interviews are imbued with a sense of 'then' and 'now'. All the women talked eloquently of their university experience and the difference it made to their lives; the use of words like *'validating'* and *'empowering'* suggesting that many of these women had undergone dramatic transformations in both perceptions of university and also, self.

Chapter six introduced the idea of university being a 'greedy institution' (Acker, 1980) demanding attention away from other aspects of students' lives and requiring both control and management. However, the reflections in this final interview presented an alternative version of university participation, principally one characterised by institutional restitution or giving back. This reflective nature provided the impetus for students to meditate upon what university had given them, thus not simply greedy but also giving. A number of the older students mention how attendance at university had enabled a new sense of identity and self worth, an outcome that seemed to be unexpected but welcome. Students spoke of learning in highly emotional terms indicating how the experience was characterised by increased feelings of fulfilment and empowerment; put simply a perception of *'being in a better place'.*

Looking back: Being in a better place

> *I was…quite messed up…study made* [me] *get every other aspect of…life together.* (Nicki)
>
> *…going to university is filling a completely different need that has nothing to do with wanting to be a nurse.* (Catherine)

Both Nicki and Catherine indicate in an evocative way just how university has emerged as something quite different to what was anticipated, having entered university to explicitly fulfil vocational and financial ambitions, these two students now acknowledge attendance in more emotional and experiential terms. University now fills a void in life. Whereas for Catherine and Nicki this attitude emerged over the year, Heidi recalls always thinking how '…*something is missing am I suppose to be taking up pottery or ceramics or knitting or something…'.* Heidi realises how university '*is where I am suppose to be, this is the second half of my life'*, fulfilling something that has been missing from life.

Students were not necessarily aware of a void but the comparative act of 'looking back' and 'looking forward', perhaps enabled the women to make clearer sense of the place of university in their life. In Katie's case, the emotional and personal repercussions of university attendance also served to highlight what had been missing from life; these academic pursuits fulfilled her to such an extent that she no longer needs to seek out this contentment in other ways. Katie no longer has many other '*wants*':

> *I just don't have any desire I have everything that I need and I think maybe it's contentment…I have no desire to buy anything. I find it very odd but I think this is all I need right now, I am being fulfilled. I am learning and learning is really what I wanted…I just have a need to study and learn now.*

University study was not only perceived as inhabiting or filling an empty space but attendance was also defined as providing a space, sometimes this space was highly political in nature. Space can be a contested issue for women but for some of the informants, university provided a location for a collective space which had the possibility for female dominated conversation, both strategic and emotional in nature. In a more radical sense, the space offered by university provided the means for growth and change and for some of the older students engendered a sense of empowerment and control in their personal lives. When 'looking back' and 'looking forward' one is struck by the difference between the initial reasons for coming to university stated in the first interview and these reflections on what university actually engendered at the end of the year.

In the first interview, nine of the parenting students reflect upon the decision to attend as negotiated and influenced by external factors. However, at the end of the year, persistence and motives to continue are validated predominantly in terms of satisfying the self (introduced in chapter five). In this interview, participants reflect on the personal growth and change that has resulted rather than the perceived benefits to others articulated in the first interview. Indeed, it is to an extrapolation of this growth and change that this chapter will move to next.

Looking back: Growing and changing

Chapter six highlighted how all the women experienced growth in confidence as the year progressed; however, by the end of the first year many of the students reflected on growing and changing in a much broader, all-encompassing sense. In this culminative interview, Catherine highlights how coming to university is no longer representative of purely instrumental or vocational goals but rather has become indicative of significant personal accomplishment. Catherine outlines how her perspective on why she is studying has undergone a fundamental shift:

> *…it is not just becoming a nurse that I want to do but it is actually getting the degree, there is a certain goal in that as well that satisfies or completes something that hasn't been done before*.

University has been elevated from being a means to an end, enabling the acquisition of a job with the *'security of holiday pay and stuff like that'* (01), to something which engenders a sense of completeness. Similarly, Katie reappraises this year in a very subjective and intrinsic way; moving from the position of university offering the opportunity to *'move up the food chain so as to speak'* (01), to the expression of more validating personal perspective: *'I don't think I ever did this for the money I did it for the personal achievement of it'.*

Such transformations herald a move from conceptualising university as something for others, to an act for self, an 'intrinsic pleasure' (Blaxter & Tight, 1993, p.15). These changes are indicative of profound growth and change both in relation to perceptions of university and also on a more fundamental and personal level. Disclosing this change may also reflect the strengthening relationships between myself and the students; as they became more comfortable with me and the interview process perhaps they felt more secure to reveal inner desires and ambitions. Luttrell (1997) points out that if women are 'able to tell their stories to an audience that listen[s] in new ways and with different expectations' then they are 'freed…to speak of secret or forbidden longings…considered selfish' (p.120). In this case, the ongoing nature of this research, and the multiple encounters, perhaps enabled the women to expose perspectives that would otherwise have remained hidden.

Shifts in perceptions of self were noted by a further four students; some of these were referenced in moderate terms such as Clara who now simply feels *'proud of myself'* and Linda who reveals that she has become '*stronger throughout the year'.* For others these changes were more radical in nature such as Rachel who reflects on university enabling her to become a *'better person'* and Nicki who at the end of this academic year expansively states:

> *I feel like a different person and I feel like a better person and I feel like I could be a better Mum to Mark* [son]*…I am happy and that is a really good feeling.*

Nicki regards university as having a powerful influence on her life over the previous year and along with Heidi refers to attendance in terms of self-empowerment. Both of these women have endured difficult life circumstances which have clearly affected their confidence and self-belief; yet despite the difficulty of university study, it is this act that has engendered a feeling of powerfulness which can be translated to other parts of their life. Again, perhaps Nicki best sums up such feelings:

> *…I found it to be a very big self-discovery…you are learning about yourself what you are capable of, what you can actually do, that you can get through it, that all the hard times are worth it because you just feel proud of yourself for doing it really… .*

Nicki thus perceives university as not just facilitating her own self-learning and discovery but also, negotiating a new sense of self. Equally, Heidi reflects how university is '*very empowering'* as it provides the space for her to voice *'opinions and instead of people looking at me…like you are a bit of a "know it all" they like it and encourage it…' .* The impact of university extends beyond the lecture theatre and the campus boundaries, affecting and negotiating disparate elements in students' lives.

Such shifts in perspective can also indicate growth in student identity as individuals gradually acculturate to this environment, forging a sense of self within the university landscape. The processes surrounding student career and student identity will be explored in detail in the discussion chapter but clearly, these students had a number of competing identities when they arrived at university including mother, daughter, worker, wife and child. For the younger students, with no parenting commitments, education and training had been an ongoing characteristic of their life; hence the student identity was already present before arrival at university. Therefore the transition to a university student identity was less radical than for the older students, particularly those with children. For this latter cohort, stepping into university signified a radical departure from previously held identities and required a move towards a new 'becoming', to that of a university student.

Looking back: 'Becoming' a university student

When the first interviews are examined, it is perhaps not surprising that six of the students with children describe themselves primarily as mothers; if a student identity was perceived it generally had low priority. Stephanie and Nicki declare in the first interview,

that they both regard themselves as *'a Mum first'* (01) similarly Linda describes herself as *'first and foremost* [a] *single Mum'* (01). In this first interview, most of the women with younger children primarily identify in terms of their role within the family unit; identity is dependent upon the family. In fact, perhaps arriving at university signified the first time that some of these women freely chose an identity existing outside that unit; frequently identities such as the worker identity are expected or necessary rather than a choice. Such a radical departure from the norm is bound to engender difficulties and the subsequent conflicts around identity formation will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

The actual process of becoming a student was largely defined in terms of personal change, for Rachel she now has a '*different outlook on life'* which has meant that she is *'much more critical'*. Both Sue and Susie indicate they have become more open-minded, becoming a student is associated with broader horizons:

> *I am not so introverted like self-centred like my life and my kids, get through the day like whatever to survive, so it's gone beyond that now.* (Sue)
>
> *…just more open minded to a lot of things yeah, I was always open minded but now I am even more open-minded.* (Susie)

Coming to be a student did not only translate to personal change but this identity translated into new status within the public domain. This was particularly the case for single parents or those who were welfare recipients. Heidi describes an incident where she was questioned about her welfare eligibility and once she explains how she is a university student, experiences how: *'people talk to you differently; they look at you differently when you say that you are going to university'* (03). Similarly, Nicki is surprised when she returns to the parenting centre she attended as a *'mother in crisis'* to find out that she is being used as an exemplar for other mothers: '*It's actually really amazing to think that she uses me as an example for other people*…' (Nicki). Such recognition is bound to engender a better sense of self-esteem and self worth.

For all the mature age students with children, recognising the student self might be a slow and gradual process, but this 'becoming' brought with it unforeseen benefits and insights. However, for the students who were between twenty-one and twenty-five, the actual process of adopting a student identity was complicated by their categorisation as

a mature age student. All three students who fall into this particular classification reflected on the implications of such identification, which served to impede the adoption of a student identity. In the second interview, Helen explains how at twenty–two she does not identify as a mature age student because *'…there are mature age students who are…a lot older than me…I'm not a true mature age student cos I'm a bit younger'* (02). Equally, Helen and Clara have difficulty identifying with the younger cohort and as a result both find themselves *'in between'*. The discussion chapter explores the repercussions such naming has on identity formation as well as the contested nature of identities within the university framework.

While students used this final interview to 'look back' in a comparative sense, equally this interview provided the platform to 'look forward'. The following sections highlight some of the considerations that participants defined in relation to future aspirations and ambitions.

Looking forward: Broader horizons and choices

This last interview provided students with an opportunity to revisit future hopes and ambitions. By the end of this first year, both of the younger students perceive the future in much broader strokes, Annie and Mary are no longer solely concerned with just getting the degree and walking straight into a job but rather recognise the choices available to them. Annie perceives her future with better clarity, recognising that it is about choice. This transformation is revealed in the sense of self-direction or 'control' that she describes in relation to her future. Annie is actively planning and is now looking '*at making my options a bit broader'*. Similarly, Mary talks about her future in far more dynamic ways, she is no longer interested in just rushing into a job. This is quite a contrast to the beginning of the year when teaching was regarded as simply offering the opportunity to: *'…get a good car…start saving for a house, go on better holidays …'* (Mary, 01). By the end of the year, Mary is interested in taking a few years away from study and traveling as she recognises that she has no *'life experience'*:

> *I don't really feel like I have the power to teach people…when I have just been to school and uni myself….*

For these two students, coming to university has expanded their personal world-view, rather than just a focus on qualifying and gaining employment, university is conceptualised as offering choice for the future.

Similarly, three of the older students explicitly mention how they now regard the future in broader terms. Two of these, Heidi and Katie are now considering careers within the university, indicating how they are reluctant to leave an environment where they feel so *'complete'*. In the third interview, Katie declares *'I love being here'* (03) and by the end of the year sees her future career objective as being *'here teaching this course'* (04). The juxtaposition between this confident and assured woman and the individual whom I met in interview one is startling. Katie has progressed from someone who is reluctant to participate in tutorials because she did not '*feel confident…to share what knowledge I have in case it is incorrect or I have missed something. I just don't feel confident…'* (01) to someone who is now contemplating running these tutorials.

Not all the students express choice in such a radical sense; for the majority of the older women, with family commitments, future aspirations are limited by external factors. For example, Sue is restricted by financial obligations and while she talks about moving interstate to get a job it is not in the same way that Mary talks about going overseas; Sue's choices continue to be limited by her social and economic situation. The idea of broader horizons being engendered by university is largely dictated by the age and the stage of life of these students; the older women with family commitments are still largely confined by the responsibilities of this life. However, even within this restriction there is some opportunity for choice. The choices offered by university also provide a means to legitimately adopt an alternative more powerful position within the family as the primary wage earner.

While this is rather a limited choice, it represents quite a radical shift from existing marital structures where husbands are the primary sources of income. Perhaps, in entering education these women have the potential to access public resources such as a good salary and this may facilitate a redistribution of power within the private domestic field. The next chapter will assess the potential for such choices and changes to effect permanent transformations in the lives of female students, particularly those who are older. When engaged in the act of 'looking forward', the focus was not only in the distant

future but also the more immediate. The next section explores students' perceptions and anticipations concerning the second year, particularly in relation to apprehensions and emotions.

Looking forward: Second year

The emotions experienced by students in the first year infuse and colour the second year for some of the participants. Like a scar, the emotional undertones are omnipresent for Nicki, the feelings she anticipates are reflective of those she encountered in the first year of study. Nicki explains how '*the fears are still there, I am still scared'* this is despite having exceeded her own academic expectations.

Like a bad accident or misfortune, the emotional upheavals of the first year linger beyond that year. For Catherine, the second year is perceived as exciting but also the fact that she knows *'how hard it is going to be'* has translated into her feeling *'daunted'* and '*thinking where am I going to summon up the energy to do that again?'* These phrases reveal how, for some of these students, feelings of fear and trepidation are almost a facet of the university experience. Fear is not necessarily an emotion that is internal to the students but rather seems intrinsic to the university environment. While the feeling is not expressed as strongly as in the first interview, an emotional trepidation is still articulated in relation to the up-coming year. One might assume that as students are about to enter their second year of study that they would feel both more comfortable about their abilities and also have more control over the university environment but six of the students indicated otherwise. At the end of the year, Clara displays misapprehensions as she remains uncertain '*how to write an essay properly and things like that'.* Similarly, Stephanie is nervous about not understanding what she is going to learn while Linda is at a *'crisis point'* because:

> *…the lectures for some subjects are 8 or 9 in the morning and I can't do that…I don't know what I am going to do about it…I have got nowhere where I can put the kids…* (Linda)

Linda's fears are focused on the practicality of juggling family and study commitments. As a single parent who is working part-time, Linda is unable to put the children into care, explaining *'I can't afford to pay for them to go into care if I am not actually earning money while I am in there'*. Linda was not the only student to mention the difficulties around timetabling for the second year of study, three of the other mothers, also

education students, indicated how the second year timetable was unrealistic. Arguably, for students who have already struggled with issues around engagement with this academic environment, such developments can be perceived as powerful indicators of how the organisation regards their status and perhaps reflect how little they are valued.

The timetable seems to have been structured with the 'ideal' traditional student in mind rather than recognising the juggle of work, study and family. Blaxter and Tight (1994) argue that adults are frequently unable or unwilling to study full-time and so are unable to 'engage in anything approaching an ideal version of recurrent education' (p.173). Instead, older students are either 'juggling' or 'struggling' with time (p.174). With the increased expectation and the need for adults to continue education, recognition should be given to the extra burdens and demands that these students cope with.

In the absence of such recognition, the students in this study adopted a very pragmatic focus in relation to course/program selection, choosing subjects that fit around their schedules rather than those that related to their stage of study. Sue reveals that the only way for her to resolve her *'mini crisis'* is to choose an eclectic mix of second, third and fourth year subjects. Similarly, Nicki's choices are restricted to those subjects that she can complete during the day; she has to sacrifice any options that *'finished at 7pm'*. Such strategies have obvious implications for the level of engagement students have in relation to their studies and highlight how difficulties and obstacles accompany students throughout their degree. As Nicki, Linda and Sheila discuss the second year's timetable the feelings of anger and frustration are palpable; variously defined in terms of being *'slightly annoyed'* (Sheila) or represented as *'disgusting'* (Nicki) and *'undoable for me'* (Linda).

Negotiating timetables was only one of many hurdles that students talked about when engaged in 'looking back' or 'looking forward'. When the year is examined retrospectively, this group of women certainly seem to have had their share of difficulties both personal and public in nature. The next section of this chapter examines such hurdles but pays particular attention to how students endeavoured to overcome these and either persist in their studies or consider departure.

Overcoming challenges

A number of the students characterised the academic year as similar to a rollercoaster ride, narrating how university attendance was punctuated by highs and lows. This undulating facet of the student experience was echoed in the final interview, when students reflected on the year and revealed sometimes quite personal and painful events that they had experienced. Again, the fact that students volunteered such information with little prompting from myself, is perhaps further evidence of the strong bonds that had grown over the year. All sixteen students reflected on challenges, both internal and external to the individual. Generally, these recollections were prompted by a question concerning whether the student had considered 'dropping out' at any point in the year.

As mentioned in chapter six, a total of seven students admitted that they had considered leaving, only two of these indicated that such thoughts occurred in the first semester, the others considered this in the latter parts of the second semester (Clara, Stephanie and Susie) or at the end of the year (Linda and Rachel). The reasons provided for such thoughts all related to the institution rather than personal or familial issues and included poor marks on assignments, poor relations with academics and excessive time commitments. However, seven of the students were adamant that 'dropping out' was not an option and that they intended to persist even in the face of adversary. There is no one correlating factor that can be identified as reflective of this attitude, each of these women also encountered obstacles of varying levels of difficulty, but yet the possibility of leaving is not entertained nor voiced. Instead, each is adamant in their desire to persist till the end. Jane explains how any thoughts of leaving were quickly *'overcome'* by her '*instincts of staying and sticking it out'.* For Helen, the death of a grandchild at birth made the year a very difficult one coupled with her own health issues but yet, departure is not entertained. Three of the students made connections between this year and other difficult times in their lives but these were stories that were infused with strength and determination, two of which related to previous maternal experiences. Both Stephanie and Catherine compared the difficulties of university with events that occurred in this personal domain, Catherine compares the level of *'pressure'* in the academic year as

similar to when she had *'postnatal depression'* and when her *'marriage broke up';* similarly Stephanie compares the emotional impact of the year to a time:

> …*when Susie* (daughter) *was actually born cos I had David* (son) *as a 17 month old and he was a sick baby and then I had her … and it was very emotional that year so I would say that would probably be the closest.* (Stephanie)

These references seem to bear some support for West's (1996) thesis, which suggests that women with children may be better prepared for the uncertainty and flux of the transition process as this echoes facets of birthing and mothering (as discussed in the previous chapter). However, having said that, I have no desire to impute an essentialist view of transition and persistence determined by gender or maternalism but rather simply wish to highlight how this experience resonates with individuals in a myriad of ways.

University seems regarded as a challenge or a battle that must be overcome and essentially beaten; synonymous perhaps with the concept of the Australian battler. In some cases, the battler motif is a recurring image in students' narratives and reflections about their previous life experiences; this is particularly the case with the mature age students but not limited to them. Collectively, when the older participants are examined, the term battler is most reflective of their life in general rather than what simply relates to their time at university. Kira is one such example, she has five children one with cerebral palsy and another with a severe form of ADHD, she has had to overcome problems in the past and is probably used to struggling or battling. Similarly, Katie had a child that has just been diagnosed with a degenerative disease, Sheila's daughter has a hearing problem and Stephanie's son had been diagnosed with autistic tendencies. While not enduring child illness, the four single parents with children living at home also have battles to overcome in terms of providing the necessary financial and emotional support. In three of these cases, the father is noticeably absent having limited contact with the children and frequently causing problems for the custodial parent. Despite such obstacles, each manages to overcome the hurdles and cross the metaphoric finish line of the first year of study.

Leaving the university

While sixteen of the students persisted to the end of the year, many noted how other students had not been so fortunate. By the second semester, eleven of the students had noted a decrease in student numbers, which in some cases had been quite dramatic; Susie estimates that the numbers in her class have dropped from 120 to about 30. The silent departure of other students from lectures must impact on students' own sense of resolution, witnessing others' departure may even have initiated a sense of unease or even a 'me next' syndrome. Personally, having never encountered attrition to the degree that these students highlight, I can only imagine the impact of departure not only on those that leave but also on those that are left behind.

For Sue, the issue around other people leaving related to the unexpected nature of this occurrence, there was no means to account for departures or find out destinations. Students that had been present one week seemed simply to disappear the next: *'people …have dropped out but you don't know if they have dropped out of uni or just dropped out of education'* (Sue, 03). When I started interviewing these students I did not know who would persist or who would choose to depart and as only one student left very early in the academic year, there was never an opportunity to explore the narratives of those who left. Instead, these sixteen students allowed me to accompany them on their first year journey and there was undoubtedly a whole gamut of reasons for their decision to stay and persist. However, one factor that they revealed as impacting positively on this experience was the research process itself. In the final interview, students were encouraged to reflect upon this process and these reflections are included as the final part of this analysis.

Reflecting: Thinking about the research process

The regular and ongoing nature of the research interviews undoubtedly impacted upon the students involved in this study and while I do not regard these encounters as being the only factor in their decision to persist; these meetings did have a positive influence on their university experience. All of the respondents indicated that the interviews and the research had positive repercussions. While outcomes that were articulated differed

between participants, some very clear patterns emerged. The research process was defined both on public or external levels as well as on a very personal basis, indicating how involvement was regarded as bringing rewards both to self and others. Overall, these benefits can be grouped under two broad categories being 'space' and 'opportunity'. The following discussion will highlight these complementary facets of this process by exploring the students' perceptions both of the research itself and also individual participation in this interview process.

The research process: Offering a space

'It is good to tell someone what it is like…' (Annie)

The word 'space' is being used in a similar sense to how the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as offering 'the freedom to live and develop as one wishes' (Soanes & Hawker, 2005, p.992). 'Space' then is not simply the physical location where interviews took place but rather represents a more metaphorical location for participants. Ten of the students reflect on how the interviews and the research provided a 'space' for a collective voice; in other words this process facilitated a means to negotiate the university experience as a group. While the interviews were conducted individually, all of the participants were aware that the study involved a number of women and that all of these were first in the family to come to university. This realisation seemed to engender a collective identity and the interviews were perceived as offering the means to negotiate experience in a broader sense:

> *…obviously you see other people to me who have very similar stories. I am no different to anyone else out there and…we are able to voice our opinion and say: 'Yeah this is why we are here, this is how important it is.'* (Heidi)

For some, this process was further supplanted by discussions held with other students after the interviews; in these cases the questions posed in our meetings provided the impetus for further conversations. While never disclosing the identity of the students involved in this study, the size of the campus and the fact that some students were studying the same course resulted in some self-identification. For example, Nicki explains how the interviews have initiated further discussions both with those involved in the study and other students beyond the interviews. Nicki perceives such collectivity as enabling the recognition that:

> *…our concerns were not just up here going around and around your head. We've been able to verbalise it and actually get it out and worked through some of it…everyone is going through the same thing so let's just talk about it and let other people know that you are going through the same thing as them.*

Such words are powerful indicators of the need for students' concerns to be validated by the university institution. For Nicki, there is a perception that such worries are hidden or silenced whereas the provision of a space to negotiate and explicate these provides a means to recognise the collective nature of this experience. Susie makes connections between the research and the potential for the production of, what she terms*, 'collective knowledge'* perceiving that this process has powerful repercussions for women considering university attendance. Involvement in the research is not simply translated on a local or personal basis but also in a broader sense, a conduit perhaps for positive change or as Susie explains, the study is *'helping women to get here, it is telling them a lot…like what other women go through'.* Similarly, Clara highlights the importance of being able to hear '…*what other people are going through and learning from it…'.*

The provision of a voice brings with it a degree of power but the collective nature of this voice makes it all the more powerful. Even when this is negotiated on an individual basis, providing a space for voice is beneficial. These students evolved from a state of silence, caused largely by a lack of knowledge and confidence, to emerge with a voice. The implications of such a movement will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Clara elaborates on how her involvement in the research made her feel *'important'.* Helen describes how the interviews have encouraged her *'…to let it all out and just talk about Uni, no-one would normally ask me these kinda questions…'* . The last point is particularly salient, emphasising how the lack of a knowledgeable other is an issue that travels with the student as they journey through their university program. As chapter five indicated, new students who are the first in the family to attend university, may have few people outside of university to discuss their experiences with but equally this lack should be recognised as an ongoing element of the university experience. For this cohort of students, there simply may be little interest in or communication about university beyond the campus, the interviews thus providing the space for such discussions to occur. Sheila explains how the research experience has been validating simply because

participating '…*makes you think well someone is interested in knowing, someone wants to know…'.*

Interviews were also perceived as facilitating a more personal connection with the university by enabling the space for the development of a personal relationship with a staff member. Perhaps, this indicates how the space was deemed safe enough to share the difficulties of first year without negative repercussions. Sue explains how the benefits of the interviews extend beyond just knowing someone to say *'Hi'*, to also providing the means '…*to tell you that I was struggling and things like that'*. This relationship was defined in purely pragmatic terms by two of the students both Annie and Catherine, indicating how these meetings provided much needed clarification and information about the university environment:

> *…like talking to you I found out that you can do those courses in the library and I think that was helpful and I think it benefited me talking about it with you*….(Annie)

My professional role on campus inevitably influenced how students perceived me and also impacted on the way in which students approached this first year. One student reflected on this relationship in more emotional terms, eloquently describing how this personal space and connection profoundly affected her attitude to the university environs:

> *…I looked forward to seeing you and I think I have got a relationship now. And it's nice to walk through and I think I know a face, someone who will say 'Hi' to me cos there are a whole lot of people who are really busy and don't look up and they don't know me…I feel like I have got a bit of a relationship and a rapport with somebody. I like that familiarity and I know that I am going to have that now every time I see you. And I am going to say: 'Hi, how are you going?' And even if it is just that, it's just to have, I guess, it's a sense of belonging…* (Katie)

This evocative statement echoes statements in chapter six, where students indicated the need to forge a personal connection with academics that was not totally mediated by electronic media. Clearly for some students the desire to have a relationship with university staff on a substantive basis is important. In Katie's case such interaction facilitates a 'sense of belonging' within the university environment. While I was not involved with teaching Katie in her degree program, facilitating the space to create a relationship undoubtedly furthered her engagement with the university. Katie's quote echoes Rendon (1998) who argues that for students regarded as non-traditional: 'That

certain glow, self assurance, and self-confidence develop because others reach out, validate them and enable their learning' (p.3). The interviews filled a perceived lack by providing the space where such an emotional connection could be facilitated.

The research process: Offering an opportunity

Not only did the interviews and research offer a space, whether collective or individual in nature, but also were perceived by students as offering an 'opportunity' to assist future students. Seven of the students mention how they regard the outcomes of the research as potentially enabling other students to experience university in a more positive way. Hence, participating provided an opportunity to altruistically help others who are yet to arrive at university. This sentiment echoes one of the motives to 'arrive' as defined in chapter five, which reflected students' desire to make a difference to future lives. Four of the students who explicitly mentioned this 'in order to' motive in the 'arriving' chapter, also indicated how the research provided a more immediate opportunity to 'make a difference' to others. Annie explains how the research facilitates the means to *'fix'* things for future students; her own initial experiences of university were so bad that she regards participation in this research as an opportunity to engender change:

> *…I think it is pretty hard for people and…most people don't really know what to do or what to expect so I thought it* [the research] *was good and I would definitely do it again.*

Annie's sentiments were echoed by each of the remaining six who identified this opportunity for change as a significant factor in both their decision to participate and also the perceived benefits of the research. The ethical principle of 'beneficence' as it applies to the benefits obtained by participants and described in chapter four, seems then to have been fulfilled.

Each of these participants reflected earnestly about their desire to both highlight the difficulties encountered by first year students and also, initiate positive change. For Susie and Stephanie, this desire is presented in vague or nebulous terms, suggesting how the research could provide the opportunity to *'help someone somewhere down the track'* (Stephanie) or *'other women at uni'* (Susie); whereas Katie and Rachel reflect on the research as affording the circumstances for tangible change. Katie hopes that the

information generated will assist *'in laying a foundation for some kind of framework to help someone else like me who first came'* similarly, Rachel expresses how:

> *I hope that this information that you have taken from me and everybody else makes some changes or at least gets some awareness of what does go on for first year students and particularly first year students that haven't studied before. I hope you do well.*

In reading this and the previous two chapters, hopefully an *'awareness of what does go on for first year students'* has been reached as this has been the intent of these chapters. The next chapter, chapter eight, will situate this awareness within the broader literature and highlight how the voices and perspectives of this group of female, first generation students studying at a small, diversely populated campus resounds with or differs from existing research and literature. The following discussion chapter will not only be framed by the relevant literature but is also informed by my own interpretative framework in order to negotiate Rachel's other request, which is that this research should engender *'change'*.

Change can be defined in a myriad of ways and it is the objective of this study to act as a 'change fulcrum' by initiating a deeper understanding of student experience and the conditions which facilitate student persistence and engagement. Before moving on to this discussion, the final section of this chapter will briefly highlight what happens next in the narratives of these students.

Reflecting: What next?

> *Yes, my word, I am going to wear one of those silly caps and capes. Yes, I am going to get there and I am going to prove that it can be done* (Nicki)

A sense of achievement and resilience pervaded this fourth interview; the obstacles and hurdles had been overcome and the students looked forward to returning to the university the next year. Each had managed to pass their courses, some had done very well and achieved beyond their initial expectations and others were a little dismayed with their final results. When asked to reflect on their thoughts about the next year, some spoke of it in terms of trepidation whilst others looked forward with a sense of excitement and anticipation. For myself, I was reluctant to sever the relationship that had developed between myself and the students and so had sought additional ethics approval for one

more interview. Before concluding the final interview with each of the students, I asked if they would be prepared to meet with me one final time at the end of the second year. Ten of the students responded to the invitation to meet and were re-interviewed at the end of 2007, all but one of these was still enrolled in university. Linda had departed the university and when we met, was contemplating enrolling in a distance learning course with another university as she remained unable to commit to the time demands required by on campus attendance.

The remaining nine reported a year that was similarly characterised by highs and lows, the 'rollercoaster' continued to run but equally there was a sense of recognition and familiarity with the motions of this ride. What struck me when talking with the students was how they were no longer being buffeted by the university but rather occupied a more equitable position. These individuals now had an understanding of the system and talked about strategies surrounding subject choice and approaches to study, no longer vulnerable to the system now they had expertise.

Perhaps it was the time of year but collectively there was less enthusiasm with regard to the upcoming year replaced instead with a sense of impatience for completion. The students did not explicitly talk about any fears about the third year, this emotion seems to have dissipated or perhaps, they felt less inclined to share these feelings given the break our relationship. At this stage, no one was contemplating dropping out instead the consensus was that having come this far, giving up simply was not an option. The second year of study is sometimes regarded as the watershed, as students struggle with being betwixt and between, the initial enthusiasm has dissipated and the program of study seems endless. Such feelings were a recurring theme in this final interview and it would be interesting to again juxtaposition these with the following year. However, in terms of this thesis, space and time restraints temporarily conclude the narrative at the end of the first year of study. At this stage, both myself and these students intend to continue to dialogue in recognition of the fact that such studies not only strive to represent the realities of individuals but should also engender *'a good story' (*Susie). The research in this thesis has not only sought to 'open up' these students' experiences revealing the unfamiliar in the familiar but has also attempted to follow Susie's ultimate dictum which advised the following:

> *…so if you sat down and wrote…everything you did through the year you would have a good story at the end of it….* (Susie)

Hopefully you have enjoyed reading these 'good stories' as much as I have enjoyed listening to them; there is nothing more powerful or inspiring than the words of individuals and I am glad to have provided a space for these to be presented.

Conclusion

This study has been informed by symbolic interactionism and to this end, has ultimately intended to 'study and report…situations as encountered and lived by others and ourselves' (Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997, p.209). The previous three chapters have presented university from the perspective of those involved, providing insight into how this environment is storied and experienced on a subjective level. For most of these students, the act of arriving at university was not necessarily straightforward, often leading to fundamental change within both private and public domains. Transitioning and persisting within this environment was also significantly influenced by relational and personal processes; often persistence was construed as occurring despite institutional structures rather than being supported by these. Finally, as students reflected on the year in this last chapter, the pluralistic and diverse nature of engagement has been identified. The next chapter will move to the discussion phase of this thesis, placing these ideas and suggestions within a wider interpretative framework.

Chapter Eight: Discussion of Findings

Introduction

The lack of research on the non-traditional cohort has been noted in the literature review; equally, there is little information on how students actually 'live' the university experience.

> There is a lack of qualitative information about how the circumstances of higher education are played out in the lives of students….(Winn, 2002, p.447)

The dearth of material relating to how students subjectively experience university and how they navigate the transition to this new environment has been previously identified as a recurrent gap in educational research (Fleming & Murphy, 1997; Krause, 2005; Leonard, 2001; Wilson, 1997). For example, in discussing research within the United Kingdom, Leonard (2001) identifies how there is a 'surprising lack of empirical research on student culture and experience at either undergraduate or postgraduate level…' (p.11). While Edwards (1993) describes how her own encounters with studies on the mature age female student experience only led to a feeling of detachment as these failed to reflect her personal experience of returning to education. This doctoral study recognises that if research is to be truly reflective of university reality then it is the students themselves that need to articulate this experience.

The previous three chapters have provided an experiential tapestry which intricately weaves the disparate threads of these women's first year experiences. Beginning with an exploration of the processes around the decision to arrive at university, the first data chapter further enriches this examination by defining both the responses this decision engendered and the realities of this arrival. This choice to arrive brought with it both challenges and changes. The next layer of analysis explored the personal qualities and particular strategies demonstrated by students, providing an assessment of how these impacted on student engagement and persistence. An examination of relational matters, discussed in chapter six, indicated how these individuals regarded new and existing relationships; this focus provided further depth to this detailed embroidery of lived reality. Finally, the previous chapter reflectively explored the personal growth and changes narrated by students as well as the transformations engendered by this interview

process. This rich description translates into an intricate and detailed ‘weave’ or ‘fabric’ of life which provides an array of choice for further discussion. In recognising this, the following chapter will focus on an eclectic mix of ideas and categories which emerged from the data, positioning these within wider research and literature. This discussion will also highlight the implications of these areas in relation to the core issues of student transition, persistence and engagement within the academic environment.

In the literature on university attendance and experience, many terms have been used with little precise explanation, a situation highlighted in the literature review. Some of these names, such as lifelong learner and independent learner have become part of political discourse; other terms such as non-traditional are pejorative implying a negative difference. These terms and their meanings inform and construct student identity and so this chapter will initially focus on issues around identity formation in order to highlight one of the facets of the transition process. Transition involves change and the movement from one state or form to another but this is not an unproblematic or straightforward phase of life. While the year provided a time for growth and increased confidence, it was also a period characterised as being full of risk, frustration and confusion. Identifying the range and types of identities available to students reveals some of the hidden difficulties of this transition process.

The second section of the chapter explores issues and ideas that emerged around student persistence. The concepts of future and possible selves will be revisited in order to highlight how these ideations impact upon student success and progression. Additionally, how individuals position and articulate their relationships with higher education may provide explanation as to why some students choose to persist whilst others decide to go. Examining the place of university in students’ lives provides further insight into the nature of persistence and engagement behaviours and hence this chapter also interprets the repercussion of such positionality.

In investigating engagement, the chapter then turns to focus on how the institution itself constructs students and the ramifications of such constructions for this non-traditional cohort. Finally in interviews students outlined the changes, choices and challenges offered by university and this chapter will return to these in order to explore the implications for transition, persistence and engagement. While the chapter is structured

around the processes of transition, persistence and engagement this is not to suggest that these are separate or discrete. Students do not pass through these in a formulistic or determined order; instead, each process coexists as integrated facets of the first year experience and these processes do not mean the same thing for all people. Essentially, the ensuing discussion serves to reappraise taken for granted ideas around the nature of the first year experience and provide alternative interpretations on how transition, engagement and persistence coalesce in this initial stage of university study. The final chapter of the thesis, will then make some recommendations for change and practice based upon these findings.

Transition to university: Identity formation

This type of small scale, detailed qualitative research is ideally positioned to explore and disclose individuals' processes of becoming (Pascall & Cox, 1993) and how women are positioned in this process. Pascall and Cox (1993) argue that while gender and class may circumscribe an individual, even within such limits there are still choices to be made. Hence, the examination of historically positioned individuals becomes vital in order to understand these choices and intrinsic to this process is an understanding of identity and identity formation.

Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Foote (1951) highlights how the mechanics surrounding the acquisition and formation of identities is largely speculative; certainly theorisation around identity construction and identification continues within the literature. What is generally agreed upon though is that individuals have access to a range of identifications dependent upon the nature and range of experiences available. Individuals are not fixed or constrained by predefined and fixed identity, instead these terms can be used to 'signify the plurality, fluidity and complexity through which people perceive their sense of self' (Ivanic, 1998, p.11).

There is not a limitless choice in relation to identities only unlimited selves but individuals are restricted by the need to define and present a self that correlates with existing accepted identities. According to Foote (1951), identities 'accrue from more conscious

choice and pursuit of the values…discovered…in experience' (p.19). Once achieving an appropriate identity then individuals ideally gain acceptance and achieve an 'insider status' (Goffman, 1971). However, Giddens (1991) describes the process of sustaining coherent biographies in this era as a 'reflexive project of the self' (p.89); while the opportunity for experiment is more apparent this has to be completed in a time where nothing can be taken for granted. The culture of late modernity with its associated characteristics of change and uncertainty is reflected within higher education, where according to Perry and Allard (2003), change has initiated disruptions in 'traditional identities of place, time and community' (p.76).

Universities have a number of identities that first year students initially identify and then relate to existing selves. Students who are new to this environment or who have had little contact with university previously may have particular difficulty negotiating this process as these 'new' identities may not be clearly visible; they are tacit or implied rather than overt. Equally, the new identities available may not fit with students' existing selves and in some cases, may contradict the established self. Ivanic (1998) suggests that the expectation that students will change and adapt to the institution can result in a sense that their existing identity is devalued and somewhat excluded. Certainly, if universities are premised upon the ideal student type then this only serves to exclude those who do not or cannot fit with such preconceptions. What became apparent in these interviews was the multiplicity of identities embraced by the students, there did not appear to be one identity of a university student but rather this concept was constantly undergoing construction and deconstruction. The students in this research demonstrate a range of shifting identities but what differed was the legitimacy each had within university discourse. The following section serves to highlight some of the identities available to these students, indicating how identity is dynamic, complex and also, sometimes contradictory in nature.

Shifts in identity

Goffman (1963) distinguishes between 'social', 'personal' and 'felt' identities; the first is bestowed on an individual by someone else who does not know that individual well. Personal identity is based upon knowledge of the individual and includes unique qualities whilst the felt identity is a person's own perception of personal character and

also, personal situation. A central characteristic of felt identity is actual or perceived continuity; change of any kind with its resulting lack of continuity, is interpreted in terms of loss. In this situation, individuals seek ways to maintain previous identities or establish new ones to maintain this sense of continuity (Milligan, 2003). In the interview conversations, there was evidence of both maintenance and renegotiation of identity.

Initially, it was apparent that thinking of oneself as a student was a relatively innovative way to conceptualise identity; not surprising when we consider the first generation status of these students. In Annie's case she initially *'forgets'* that she is now a *'uni'* student: '[I]…*don't really like remember that I'm at uni…I should be saying uni student but I don't see it* (01). For Annie, the difficulty is remembering that she is studying at university now rather than TAFE; the student identity is not just commencing but rather has existed in previous educational contexts. Indeed, for all the students who had recently been engaged in studying, the transition to 'being a university student' is less involved, students like Annie have to do less 'identity work' (Mc Cormack, 2005, p.240).

However, for those who had been absent from education for some time, the process of identity construction differed considerably. While proud to be studying, six of the older women reflect on how the recent inception of this identity means that it is not a primary identifier. As indicated previously, Linda describes her identity as *'probably first and foremost…a single mum with two kids…'* (01). In Wakeford's (1994) study of mature age students, it was noted how some students adopted a strategic approach to identifying as a student based on the types of responses such naming would engender. Wakeford (1994) argues that identification was negotiated in relation to the potential for 'negative social consequences' (p. 245); this theme was also reflected in this study. For example, Clara describes how her status as a full-time student precludes her from seeking full-time employment; Clara is hesitant to mention her student status to friends and extended family in case she is construed as a *'bludger'* (01)*:*

> *I am thinking at the back of my head I am still thinking how they might be judging me yeah, cos of not working and I think that sometimes I may further justify it saying I just can't study and work at the same time*. (01)

Identifying the self as student is perceived by another student as connotating *'boasting'* whilst another reflects on such identification as necessitating a level of bravery. In the first interview, Nicki explains how she would avoid telling people that she is a university

student as she is *'not one to brag or anything'* (01); equally, Vicky reflects how *'…I don't think I'm ready to bravely say I'm a university student'* (01). However, the difficulty of negotiating the self as student extends beyond actual articulation as some of the participants reflected upon fundamental dichotomies in this process.

Student identity construction: Conflicts

> …entering higher education as a mature student is associated with change, difficulty, crises of confidence, conflicts of identity, feelings of strangeness, the need to discover the rules of an unfamiliar world. (Ivanic, 1998, p.7)

The mature age students in this study were arguably at a critical time in their lives, entry into higher education signified a dramatic change to their 'felt' identity (Goffman, 1963). Returning to study for older students can reportedly initiate redefinition and questions around identity (Britton & Baxter, 1999; Pascall & Cox, 1993). The older students were at a 'disjuncture' as they moved from a construction of self which is based upon, amongst other things, 'adults-without-higher-education' to one that needs to be renegotiated as 'adults-with-higher education' (Ivanic, 1998, p.24). Not all the students readily accepted this identity and some placed it as secondary to existing identities such as worker or mother.

Chapter seven briefly highlighted how there is sometimes a perceived lack of 'fit' between the available named identities and existing identity; illustrated by the three students who are aged between 21 and 25 years. Each of these participants revealed a certain disassociation between their perceived sense of self and the prescribed named university identity:

> *…sometimes people refer to me as a mature age student and I think, okay sounds a bit old…I don't know really where I fit in… (Clara, 03).*

The act of naming constructs students in a particular way and can forge links with existing identities or serve as a barrier to identification. Being named a mature-age student when you are still in your early twenties will have implications for identification and even though this can be dismissed simply as institutional discourse, the effects of such names are tangible within the student population, as indicated in chapter seven.

Baxter and Hatt (1999) suggest that the category of mature age student needs to be disaggregated. For the students who could not relate to the title of 'mature age', the possibility for conflict in identity acquisition becomes a real issue. This is echoed in Wakeford's (1994) study, who found that some of the younger mature age students regarded the identification as 'mature', as offering some level of 'risk to their social relationships' (p.247). The students perceived being labelled mature in terms of stigma and hence, rejected the connotations of this identity. This lack of 'fit' between existing identities and available names or categories may have implications for student engagement and persistence.

Conflicts in identity were also reflected upon by the students with children who struggled to maintain existing identities as mothers whilst simultaneously acquiring a student identity. George and Maguire (1998) report how some of their female students negotiated the mother/student identity by either 'playing down' the maternal or in some cases, refusing it by keeping both selves separate. Similarly, both Clara and Katie developed explicit strategies for keeping their student selves separate from their mother selves; thus, the domestic space remains the domain of parenting rather than studying. Clara demarcates times, setting out a '*certain time to do my uni stuff and then totally switch off …and maybe try not to speak about it'* (02); whereas Katie avoids *'friction'* (03) in her household by completing '*the bulk of my work, everything that I need to achieve…*[is] *done by 3'*.(03)

Cultural duality, an Interactionist term, can be applied to women's gendered identities and their simultaneous membership of other groups. Evetts (1994) explores this concept in relation to women and career, indicating how the norms and values expected in the workplace can often conflict with gender roles. In a similar way, the expectations of 'studenthood' may cause conflict in other spheres of identity. The learner identity may threaten the mother identity as it is perceived as outside the ideology of the feminine. For both Susie and Stephanie, their identities remain primarily as mothers; only in extended conversation or in response to explicit questioning would either identify themselves as university students. Such differentials further indicate how identity is not singular but rather multifaceted with people adopting different social selves in response to the social situation in which they find themselves located. Individuals have a number of selves which help them cope in different circumstances and situations (Britton &

Baxter, 1999; Cortazzi, 1993). In a similar fashion, the older participants in this study may use different self identities to move between different worlds, the world of university and the world of family and motherhood.

Identity formation and opportunities

This multiplicity of identities is not necessarily negative. West (1996) points out higher education can also offer a space for individuals to 'compose a new life, a different story and a more cohesive self' (p.10). This was most clearly explicated by those students that found themselves 'named' by society; university offered the means to rewrite the scripts imposed upon them. Chapter seven outlined how the single parents and those in receipt of social security payments embraced the student identity as a means to redefine a sense of self. Both Heidi and Linda highlight how their student status provides the means to renegotiate their social identity (Goffman, 1963). In both cases, self-identification as student reduces the negative connotations associated with being a single parent or a recipient of social security payment:

> '*…it's nice to be able to say, yeah I'm on a carer's pension yeah I am just a welfare recipient but…I go to uni and do a degree'.* (Heidi, 03)

In their study of mature age students, Britton and Baxter (1999) identify a recurrent theme of the 'latent or submerged' self that is 'waiting to be reclaimed' (p.185). This thematic concern positions education in a facilitative role, providing the means for individuals to either reclaim a previous self or become a desired self. This is a recurrent theme in the narratives of the older students, like Britton and Baxter's students, there is a commonality of experiences around opportunities for self which have been denied or refused. For example, Catherine was unable to come to university after school due to difficult family circumstances; similarly both Clara and Stephanie were denied this opportunity as a result of unexpected pregnancies. Hughes (2002) argues that returning to education can be perceived as a return to 'unfinished business' (p.415), perhaps a move towards realising a potential self that was abandoned due to an earlier or unexpected discontinuation of education. However, such high expectations can also impact upon student experience leading to disengagement if these desires or ambitions appear to be unreachable. Certainly, the reality of university where learning and social interaction are mediated by technology, large student populations and existing responsibilities, means that the opportunity to fulfil preconceived ambitions may indeed

be limited. It is perhaps not surprising then that students expressed such a level of discontent and disappointment in the initial stages of attendance, as chapter five so clearly indicated.

Adopting a student identity is clearly a complex process; it does not simply involve a spontaneous transformation as students walk through the university gates. This is an invisible process, which is assumed as taken for granted within the university environment. The inherent contradictions and difficulties of this process need to be exposed and normalised, particularly for older students. Davies and Williams (2001) argue that for mature students, coming to university is a high risk venture which entails a substantial degree of personal investment. For the older student, this return to education can be further complicated by pre-existing fragile learner identities (Brine & Waller, 2004) perhaps resulting from previous negative educational experiences. Arguably, the risks and challenges associated with this endeavour are not simply economic or material; but also reflect the huge personal investment that older students place in university.

Identity formation: Limits

Pascall and Cox's (1993) study on married women who return to education indicated how the participants regarded becoming a student as providing a stronger 'source of identity when being a housewife failed to perform that function' (p.76). As children grow up, a life experienced through a domestic lens can be somewhat lacking. In this study, while motherhood remained a strong facet of identity for all of the students with children, being a housewife was not perceived in quite the same way. Chapter six highlighted how as women laid claim to the role of student, the role of housewife and the attractions of domestic duties dissipated somewhat. This is clearly articulated in the 'Once upon a time' story that Susie narrated about her first year at university:

> *Once upon a time, Susie was just a little barmaid, at home doing the homely thing and trying to work and look after the kids. And now, Susie sorta more stands up for herself and tells her husband that: 'No, this isn't the thing no more cos I have rights in this world!'…So my once upon a time is changing that so he stays at home and I can go and work. Be like he was with me type of thing, just to show that women's life isn't easy you know. So once upon a time yeah, then I came to uni and everything changed for John* [husband]. *I got wise and I started learning a lot of things but it was for the better. (04)*

University could then offer the possibility of having a separate or distinct identity; in the educational domain, women gain some control over their lives. However, this opportunity is limited by pre-existing identity roles; the students who also had parenting commitments were unable to completely remove themselves from the domestic space. Instead most adopted a 'dual focus' (Merrill, 1999) as the responsibility for house and children still resided predominantly with the women, a situation echoed in an Australian study of mothers returning to higher education conducted by Burns, Scott, Cooney and Gleeson (1992). Kira describes how when she gets home after university she returns to *'mother mode'* (01) which requires her to:

> *Run in the door, dump everything, run out the door…yelling get in the car we are late…or I run in and take the washing off the line, leave it in a basket, dump it in the lounge room, it's like an obstacle course our house.* (01)

The division of labour in the household is explicit as she contrasts her frenzied life to her husband who *'can come home from work and sit on his butt, watch TV…'* (01).

This pattern of expectation around domestic responsibility is not limited to women who return to university equally, similar expectations exist for those women who return to work. Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2006) argue that norms around parenting and housework are still very traditional in nature, their study on work and family concluded that women did the majority of child-care and domestic duties; even when both partners were working. For the students who are also mothers, there was an unspoken expectation that they would 'take on the "second shift" through maintenance of children and home' (p.489). Clearly, while mass participation may widen women's access to university; the decision to attend is still situated within limits imposed by wider patriarchal ideologies.

Brine and Waller (2004) argue that the return to education for women has the possibility of challenging 'classed femininities' (p.99) which embraces the ideologies of (hetero) sexuality, maternalism and domesticity. In contrast, this research indicated that while attending university can offer older returning students the chance to explore alternative selves this exploration is constrained and defined by pre-existing circumstances. The persistence patterns of the older students may be contributed, in part, to the life circumstances and skills they have acquired. Such experiences seem to be reflected in

the determined persistence enacted throughout the academic year. However, academic pursuits are still expected to fit around existing roles and identities rather than offering a means to completely rewrite such positionality. The older women remain conscripted by the number of roles they are expected to juggle and while the move to university offers opportunity, this is clearly constrained.

When examining the range of identity positions, one is struck by their variety and diversity. Individual self and biography in modernity can be defined in relation to a range of possibilities; the assumption of a fixed or ascribed self is no longer apparent (Britton & Baxter, 1999). Achieving self-identity is characterised by fluidity but what these early interviews did indicate was some patterns in the shifting ebb and flow of identity positions, which will be defined in the following section of this chapter.

First generation student identity: A possible typology

Despite complications and limitations, the process of identity change was very apparent in this study. By the second interview, students were becoming more familiar with their life as students and the progression of their student career was marked by changes in attitudes, understandings and behaviour. Merrill (1999) highlights how institutional life becomes meaningful when it is explored from the 'perspectives of the actors' involved (p.203). The intricacies of the student career are revealed when the stories are those of the students but equally such insights need to be grounded within macro theories.

The previous sections have highlighted the multifarious nature of identity formation and indicated how identity can no longer be conceived as a singular entity. Instead students mediate a number of selves, accommodating conflicts and challenges through processes of separation and negotiation. To understand the process of becoming a student more clearly, the chapter will now highlight two alternative identity positions that presented themselves repeatedly in the interview data. This is not a comprehensive overview of identity; such a thing is not possible within the confines of this thesis, but rather this explication provides a means to further explore how students initially engaged with this environment and also further details the characteristics of transition.

First generation student as refugee or migrant

> *I was very nervous before the lecture I was up most of the night feeling sick in the stomach and then I walked in on my own and thought why am I doing this on my own?...You see the younger ones and they come in, in their groups and have friends here I walked in knowing no-one so that was a bit daunting….* (Stephanie, 01)

Stephanie's reflection on her first day at university is mindful of a migrant in a new country; her alienation and isolation echoes those who find themselves located in a place where the expectations and rules remain hidden. This feeling of otherness is engendered by both her age and also, the lack of previous connection with university.

Much of the early research on non-traditional students treats this category as a homogenous group and emphasises the difference to the traditional student (Britton & Baxter, 1999). Equally, there is an assumed synchrony between this non-traditional status and older participants, ethnic diversity and low SES; however, this study used the predicator of first in the family status and so the sample was not bounded by age, social groupings or ethnicity. Within this group certain similarities of experience emerged across age groups arguably the commonality of first generation status can be compared to a migrant experience; a refugee identity. Scheukel (2005) likens this positionality to:

> …travelling in a foreign country where you don't speak the language – you might do OK without a guide but it won't be the experience it should be... . (cited in Jaschik, 2005, para. 14)

The transition to university study can be compared to other cross-cultural experiences as students are expected to master an alien language within an environment where the expectations and requirements may remain tacit and somewhat invisible (Lawrence, 2005). University is a site of negotiation as students endeavour to become literate in this new domain (Flower, 1994).

The concept of habitus is helpful when examining the experiences of students and locating this within wider social and political domains. Bourdieu's (1977) theory of social practice positions individuals as agents placed within fields characterised by symbolic struggles for position and power. Such struggles are informed by their dispositions (habitus) and also their social, cultural and symbolic capital. Bourdieu's concept of

habitus perceives individuals as complex mixtures of the past and the present, a mixture which is never totally complete. Such an understanding is premised on a continuous and dynamic reconceptualisation of identity but equally recognises the intrinsic effects of family and personal history on understandings of identity.

> …if people entering higher education experience an 'identity crisis' it is not because of any inadequacy in themselves, but because of a mismatch between the social contexts which have constructed their identities in the past and the new social context which they are entering. (Ivanic, 1998, p.12)

This mismatch was reflected upon by most of the students in the first set of interviews outlined in chapter five. Acculturating to this new environment was overwhelming, the alien nature of the campus informed further by false expectations and a lack of understanding. Just like those who arrive in a new country, non-traditional students may have 'cultural capital' but the difficulty is that this might be in a different 'currency' further embedding their outside status (Reay, Davies et al., 2001, p.870).

The decision to come to university for those with little experience of this institution has similar demands to that of a cross-cultural experience involving a different language, new expectations and tacit understanding. Vaynshtok (2001), a refugee counsellor, reflects how sometimes the relief associated with arriving at a chosen country means that there is little recognition of the difficult journey that refugees have undertaken to get there. Similar to those who migrate to a new country, my students also reflected on the confusion and loss that they experienced on arrival to the university; a situation which led to feelings of '…frustration and a sense of helplessness and when an adult person feels like a helpless child, it shatters and demoralises even the strongest and most confident individual' (Vaynshtok, 2001, p.27). Just as the psychological implications of transition need to be addressed in refugee education, I would argue that this is vital for adult learners entering the university landscape as well. Such a psychological aspect would explicitly recognise and respect the very difficult journey that individuals have undertaken in order to arrive at this point in life. Recommendations around the provision of such a strategy are provided in the concluding chapter that follows.

First generation student as nomad

The identities available to these students are not necessarily oppressive in nature. It would be wrong to assume that students are buffeted by forces beyond their control; rather students also revealed how these constructions can be both disrupted and renegotiated. Education may also be regarded as offering the possibility of transitioning to a new 'state of being' (Hughes, 2002, p.420) but this may only be a temporary state, the ideologies of class, race and age acting as agents which ultimately return students to their origins. For some of the participants in this study, perhaps the recognition of the undesirability of such return and the desire to maintain this new self engendered the desire to remain safe within the university domain. Chapter seven highlights how both Heidi and Katie do not intend to 'return' instead they hope to remain, dwelling within the university environment. As Katie declares in the third interview:

> *I want to live here I don't ever want to leave I am planning a postgraduate degree and everything from here, I'm not planning on going anywhere...* (03).

While Katie and Heidi embrace and rejoice in this migrant identity, some of the other women might be better conceptualised as nomads (Hughes, 2002). This is a useful concept as it engenders the flux and transient nature of this identity work. Some of the older women preferred to maintain existing identities rather than jettisoning all they know to 'migrate'. Hughes (2002) identifies the nomadic subjectivity as offering an alternative to the perception of women as oppressed, the nomad 'desires a subjectivity comprised of transitions' as this offers a way of 'resisting assimilation' (p.414). 'Nomadic moments' are one way of understanding the pleasure and joy derived from academic pursuits; such moments are characterised by the multiple transitions to new forms of knowledge as well as 'moments of pleasure in just being and becoming' (p.418). Certainly this joy is demonstrated by the women in this study as they reflect on the stimulating nature of this intellectual engagement, 'the joy and pleasure of…nomadic moments', (p.421) clearly encapsulated by Nicki when she reflects how university is '*…a very big self-discovery'* (04) facilitating knowledge on a number of levels. Nicki sums up this academic venture as being:

> *…worth it because the end result will be so much worth it. Even if I don't become a teacher, even if I can't get a job as a teacher I think that this has been such a learning experience that I have changed my thoughts. I have changed who I am…* (04)

Similarly, Catherine's joy and pleasure is no longer about '…*whether I become a nurse or not…but it is actually getting the degree…that satisfies or completes something that hasn't been done before…'* (04).

Quinn (2005) highlights how university can provide students, particularly those who have returned to education, with an 'imagined space'. In Quinn's study, she explains how university 'belonged' to the students rather 'than them belonging to the university' (p.10). University was a means to resist dominant discourses shaped by 'supermarkets, call centres and lonely train stations' (p.11). By returning to education, women particularly older women, are able to reimagine and legitimate the self in relation to other members of this academic environment. This seems reflected in comments like Susie's who perceives university as *'needing'* a certain type of women and exhorting her friend to enter this environment (04). Susie feels not only part of this community but is also able to recognise the intrinsic qualities that confer membership with others. Susie's perspective seems to represent what Quinn (2005) terms 'liminal space' which enables individuals to dream new possibilities and share these with others. In Susie's case, this liminal space is one that is characterised by strong women committed to changing the world:

> *I said to her: 'We need women like you at uni.' And she looked at me and she said: 'What?' And I said: 'Women like you need to be at uni…cos you need to find out how men oppress you'.* (04)

All these women were largely alone in constructing a student identity as there was no one available within the family that could relate to or provide advice on transition. How students managed this process of reconceptualisation differed; for the younger students the transition to student identity seemed less effort as they had so recently been engaged in other educational pursuits but the older women struggled with these patterns of identification. Some like Vicky, who departed, may never feel like they truly belong; a reluctant migrant who desires a return to the old country. Other students seem able to travel between identities despite the pressures, on the understanding that this is a temporary state. While a minority, appear to have metaphorically 'unpacked their bags' never desiring a move beyond this academic landscape.

The diversity of experiences and the multiplicity of factors effecting processes around transitioning to a new state of 'becoming a student' are also reflected in how individuals

managed persistence and engagement in this environment. The following section of this chapter identifies some of these influences on persistence behaviours as indicated by the students and reflected in the research.

Persistence at university

Why one person chooses to persist at university and another makes the decision to depart can never be precisely explicated; such decisions are multifactorial and often the reasons given by students are not necessarily reflective of actual personal reality (Longden, 2002). As the literature review highlighted there are a whole gamut of possible factors that determine persistence and attrition. The following discussion presents two factors that emerged from the interviews that are worthy of further exploration in this context: these are the role of future selves in the act of persisting and ideations around student learning careers. Both of these areas remain under-researched in the literature and their unbidden emergence from these interviews suggests the need for additional attention.

Future or possible selves and student persistence

Future or possible selves represent students' hopes or desires and if positive, may provide the impetus for persistence. Individuals are regarded as having both 'now' selves and 'future' or 'possible' selves, some of the former may be clearly conceptualised whilst others may be vague and ill-defined. Possible selves are representations of what individuals might become, would like to become or what they are fearful of becoming. Markus and Nurius (1986) argue that this concept provides the 'conceptual link between cognition and motivation' (p.954); as it positions individuals in the future and reflects their desires and ambitions. Symbolic Interactionists regard the self as future orientated and regard behaviour as organised accordingly. Hence, the creation of future possible selves can be seen to inform present actions and this was certainly reflected in chapter five's section on 'in order to' motives. These selves are both constituted from the self in the past and the self in the future as well as being strongly linked to the current representational self indicating personal fears, hopes and desires.

However, possible selves do not exist outside the social restraints an individual exists within, while involving active choice the range of selves can be limited, such as those available to the older women in this study. Thus, while possible selves can offer a liberating agenda engendering hope and suggesting change; equally, such conceptions can be 'powerfully imprisoning' and limit success (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p.971). The participants in this study who did make reference to possible selves largely reflected on positive images of self, but the interviews also revealed the fragility of these conceptions. For example, poor marks on assignments could challenge a student's self-concept and lead some individuals to revisit their perception of self. Markus and Nurius (1986) explain that while a poor grade on assignment will not 'permanently challenge' an established sense of self, it may provide the impetus for an alternative self constructed as 'drop-out' or 'a failure' (p.958). This is indicated by students' reflections on assignment results; such occurrences impact upon individual's self-concept and perhaps for some, the motivation to persist is significantly effaced.

The effects of possible selves on persistence are difficult to define precisely but the limited research on this area suggests possible selves combined with self-efficacy can effect positive influences. Horstmanshof and Zimitat (2003) identify how the full-time students in their study identified future selves that have better employment opportunities and better life-styles; such conceptualisation then assist persistence at university. This argument is echoed in a study by Leondari, Syngollitou and Kiosseoglou (1998), while this research focused on high school students, they conclude that those who imagined themselves as successful in the future and defined positive possible selves were more academically successful than other groups.

> When an elaborated positive self is active it will organize and energize the individual's activities in pursuit of it. It will also render all other competing selves less accessible. (Leondari et al., 1998, p.155)

Positive possible selves are linked with the perception of high levels of personal control whilst the inverse relationship holds for negative possible selves.

Diversity of selves and persistence patterns

Horstmanshof and Zimitat (2003) propose that students have an increasing number of selves, both now and future, that have to be satisfied and that these selves can compete

for investment of time and effort. This is particularly interesting for those students who indicated that they had a clearly defined 'now' self that existed outside the university. For example, students like Helen and Rachel who articulated a self informed by work rather than study, placing university as an adjunct to this rather than as a facilitator. In this type of articulation, university was positioned as a necessary *'stepping stone'* to the realisation of this worker self so arguably, the investment in a student self lessens. For Helen and Rachel, the 'worker-self' appears to be the dominant identification and while both persist at their university studies, engagement with the environment seems considerably less important.

In both these cases, it is their current employment and potential for career progression that appears to provide the impetus to persist; as Helen explains in the last interview succeeding at university is more about *'achieving the goals that I want to achieve'*; her continued persistence is not just about *'…going to university, it is learning the career path that I want to do'* (04). Similarly, Rachel acknowledges that her future self is:

> *…myself with a degree, working in the job that I love with people that I enjoy working with and then from there maybe working my way through the organisation…* (02)

Students' decisions and behaviours are partially shaped by how they perceive their roles within higher education and what place the institution has in their life. These factors dictate decisions about how time and energy should be spent. Both Helen and Rachel reflect on a level of 'synergy' between university and work and this may be one strategy used to negotiate the demands of different spheres of life. Similarly, Rachel remains adamant that she is not interested in the social environment of the university suggesting that the nature of her engagement differs from students who perceive this as vital to academic success. Rachel's future and now selves are firmly located within the workplace and so the need for engagement in the university environment lessens considerably.

What such observations indicate is the very different orientations that learners have towards their involvement with university, or as chapter six highlights, the very different place of university in students' lives. The diversity of the student population means that levels of engagement with this environment will differ dramatically; not all students seek a strong student identity nor expect close affiliation with the institution. The difference in

engagement between those students who identify as students and those who obtain primary identification from their work, remains under-researched in the literature on transition, persistence and engagement. Given the vocationally motivated goals of students and the increasing credentialism of the workplace, the ways in which workplace and university interface in student experience is worthy of further exploration.

The majority of students in this research indicated a student identity but the dichotomies surrounding this concept did make for a contradictory and alienating relationship in relation to the institution. This is not surprising given that universities may present:

> …a particular construction of studenthood which for some students is almost impossible to become…it is often easiest for the young, white, middle-class male to be constituted as the good student because the characteristics of this position sit most snugly with his other subject positions.' (Grant, 1997, pp.102,105)

The next section of this chapter explores the difficulties of fitting in with the ideology of the student-learner career and relates this to the process of persistence.

Deconstructing the student learning career

Symbolic Interactionism identifies the concept of careers as a metaphor for understanding the self and its interaction with the social world (Becker, 1963). Goffman (1961) reflects on the 'moral career' of mental patients and explores the subjective aspects of this career development as well as the meanings ascribed to experiences and the act of becoming. The term career is not limited to the workplace; interactionist sociologists have applied this concept to a number of areas that are characterised by the 'progress of individuals through a linked set of role-learning experiences' (Evetts, 1994, p.8). Just as people can have an occupational career so too, can the university experience be categorised as a student career. The student career shares many facets with occupational career. For example, the expected and desired career path is one characterised by continuous service, where success is marked by progression and achievement; careers that do not reflect this pattern are perceived as aberrant. The model of student career assumed in most universities is one of linear progression where students enter the institution and then progress efficiently until completion.

The traditional notion of career based upon this upward trajectory, with certain levels of progression or stages, reflects the experiences of only a small section of the student population. While perhaps indicative of the learning careers of younger students who come to university after completing school; such assumptions fail to recognise the very different pathway taken by other groups of learners. Crossan et al. (2003) highlight how the learning careers of adults do not necessarily reflect such linearity but rather are 'complex' and 'multi-directional' (p.65), mirrored by the 'volatility' of learner identities (p.66). Certainly, the academic year that this research focused on was one characterised by change, disrupting the idea of a 'straightforward linear developmental path through…degree courses and conveys a strong sense of students struggling to succeed against the odds.' (Leathwood & O' Connell, 2003, p.603)

Assumptions around student learning careers did not reflect the reality of any of the women in this study. Regardless of age or stage of life, all the students were engaged in a delicate balancing act. As a result, university was, by necessity, often placed low on the list of priorities. Just as with occupational careers, breaks in student careers are defined in a deficit manner; a problem or handicap that must be dealt with rather than a fact of working or student life. In terms of student career the positive implications of such breaks have not been explored nor how institutional recognition of these might assist in facilitating student persistence and engagement. Rather than label students and oversimplify life histories, it is vital to open up these categories and expose their constructed nature. Such deconstruction assists in creating a better understanding of student experience and the reality of persistence patterns in the current education climate. Instead of placing unrealistic expectations on students around desired patterns of persistence, recognition of actual lived experience should be used to inform university policy around attendance. When institutional expectations actually mirror student reality then undoubtedly the opportunity for persistence becomes a probability rather than just a possibility.

Engagement with university

The students' dialogue, in combination with the interpretations outlined in previous chapters, reveals the variety and diversity of relationships that students had both with the institution itself and those located within it. Such incongruity translates into various levels of engagement with the university; while each of the participants desired some measure of success within this environment and all but one managed to complete the first year, this was achieved in a myriad of ways. The following section serves to explore the concept of engagement from the perspective of the students indicating how this both reflected and differed from institutional preconceptions. These observations suggest the need for alternative conceptions of engagement and some possibilities are explored in the next chapter.

Relationships and belongingness

Chapter six touched upon the relationships that students anticipated within the institution and also highlighted how the nature of these differed depending on the students themselves. Clara was an example of a student whose viewpoint on relationships differed to that expounded and accepted within some of the literature on student engagement. Due to both time and external commitments, Clara rejects the social facets of university displaying what I have termed a 'social strategist' perspective on relationships. This outlook contradicts those theorists who perceive transition to university and persistence in this environment as being facilitated by social engagement (Bank et al., 1990; Kantanis, 2000; Rendon, 1994). Instead, the types of relationships that students desired varied and often these were instrumentally focused rather than being regarded as a means to engender belonging.

Somers (1999) defines belongingness as:

> the need to be and the perception of being involved with others at differing interpersonal levels…which contributes to one's sense of connectedness (being part of, feeling accepted and fitting in) and esteem (being cared about, valued and respected by others).
> (cited in Levett-Jones, Lathlean, McMillan & Higgins, 2007, p.163).

Students may need to have a sense of belongingness within the institution and this is partially derived from personal connections with others, but this sense of belongingness can also be derived from amongst other things, perceived success in assignments, connection with university staff and having a sense of student identity. While friendships and relations with other students are undoubtedly a part of this, it should not be overestimated or assumed to be a need that is generally required. Instead, the call for increased social connection for students may in fact be reflective of the growing numbers of students. Certainly, the existence of strong social affiliations lessens the dependency on academics to provide support and clarification, decreasing work loads that may be unfeasibly large due to growth in student numbers.

The previous chapter indicated how the personal interaction facilitated by the research interviews engendered a sense of belonging and offered an opportunity to 'make sense' of the university experience. The students clearly welcomed the 'space' to reflect on this process; their first generation status suggesting that this chance may not have been available outside the institution. The lack of significant other, who has some experience of university, is a limiting facet of student experience. The interviews filled a gap between reality and expectations; the possibility for sense making seemed to positively influence persistence and engagement. While the desire to have a connection with other students varied, all the students articulated how the opportunity to connect with a staff member was positive. In an environment where the increasingly large numbers of participants can lead to feelings of anonymity, the interviews provided the space to present an individual perspective, which perhaps engendered a better sense of belonging or connection with the institution. For many students, the need for such personal contact and communication cannot be underestimated. Rather than individuals purposively seeking out connections or acquaintances beyond the class-room or lecture theatre, the interviews indicated that what many students valued more was a relationship with university staff. However, there is a role here for all staff not just those in a teaching or academic position. Such a conclusion is not new but rather further supports what literature in this field has indicated, the final chapter in the thesis will further define the nature and role of such relationships.

Locating a sense of place

For some of the women in this study, the dislocation and isolation engendered by the contemporary university environment was limited somewhat by the number of other non-traditional students at the campus. This finding is echoed by Read et al. (2003) who highlight how mature students welcome the presence of students 'like them'; a recognition that initiated a greater sense of belonging despite the isolation imposed by the 'culture of the institution' (p.269). In my interviews it became clear that the student population was not simply named by the institution but also, the students themselves actively demarcated between different cohorts, reflective of the age and stage of the participant. The effects of differentiating between people purely based upon a young-old divide have been explored earlier in this chapter, which indicated how the available names, rather than the act of naming, can lead to conflicts in identity formation. On the other hand, the act of naming can also provide students with a clearer sense of place and their position within this environment. This is most apparent in relation to the mature age students in this study who tended to stereotype younger students, using this to comparatively construct their own identity.

Learning is a contested space which involves not only getting to university but also legitimising the self at university, this was particularly important for those who might be regarded as 'other' (Andruske, 1999). For the older students, one of the ways this legitimacy was demonstrated was by positioning their identity in opposition to the younger students:

> *...I'm focused, I know what I want to do…some of the kids just come out of school… haven't really experienced much of life…and don't have the maturity to be focused on it* [university] *properly.* (Sue, 02)

> *If you don't want to be here don't be here but don't waste my time and my money while I am here…I am there to learn and discuss. I don't want to be interrupted by what they did on the weekend or my friend has this condition. It's not relevant; go away it's my time.* (Katie, 03)

Contrastive rhetoric is used to signify what is acceptable or normal behaviour by the introduction of 'alternative practices and social forms in stylized, trivialised and generally pejorative terms which connote their unacceptability' (Hargreaves, 1984, p.218). This type of rhetoric serves to engender the framework of what is considered acceptable and this is certainly highlighted in the ways that the older students refer to the younger

students. The behaviours and actions of this group are classed as somewhat deviant and unacceptable. Contrastive rhetoric defines what is construed as 'normal practice'; alternatives are trivialised and to a certain extent demonised in order to signify what is desired. While Hargreaves (1984) argues that contrastive rhetoric is largely perpetuated by those who are dominant in the institution, I would suggest that it can also be utilised by those attempting to find their place within the institution; articulating what is regarded as not acceptable serves to position individuals as acceptable.

> In higher education the discourses of access and selectivity have been taken up and have created the institutionalised naming of 'normal', 'abnormal' and 'alternative'…the simultaneous location of being neither fully part of one culture nor another means that such students experience the more general feeling of dislocation… (Hughes, 2002, p.419)

Hughes' quote highlights the ramifications of institutional naming but what this study indicates is that naming is not simply imposed by the institution but is also used by the students themselves to identify their position and identity. However, what can be limiting are the actual names available, student populations are richly diverse and there is a need to celebrate this plurality rather than hide it. This need has been recognised in the literature and research on transition and engagement (Darlaston-Jones, 2004; hooks, 1994; Howells, 2003). Yet, the culture and ethos of modern institutions can often be built around the idea of relative homogeneity, an outdated and false perception.

The idyll of community

Tinto (1987) regards tertiary institutions as a type of human community comprised of both social and intellectual groupings. Thus, successful engagement with the institution results from establishing and maintaining 'membership in those communities' (p.120). In recognition of this community focus, Tinto proposes a model of academic organisation that seeks to reorganise and reorientate the entire first year of study, which has become known as a 'learning communities approach'. This approach attempts to facilitate student involvement and engagement with both the academic and social spheres of university by encouraging collaborative learning and redefining curriculum structures on a longitudinal basis. In adopting a block schedule organised on a thematic basis, learners have a greater opportunity to experience what Tinto (1998) terms as 'shared knowing' whereby learners are encouraged to 'construct knowledge together' (p.170). In

this way, students not only become academically integrated but also socially integrated as this collaboration creates a space for personal relationship building.

The implications of naming the university as a community or learning community is that such categories fail to recognise or problematise inherent differences. Idealised conceptions of community do not embrace diversity and such conceptualisations simply retard growth and change. Tinto (1998) may perceive the ideal of community as offering a space for students to belong, a supported environment which is premised on the ideal of equal involvement; however, if the students themselves recognise the differences in the student population, why then should universities endeavour to create this false sense of place? Hyland and Merrill (2003) also question the use of the word 'community' saying that while this is used in university rhetoric, it is a 'nebulous, problematic and contested concept' (p.113). Community conveys a sense of safety, a 'paradise lost' (Bauman, 2001 cited in Hyland & Merrill, 2003, p.112) however such idealisation hides the 'repressive and exclusionary' nature of communities (Hyland & Merrill, 2003, p.117).

Quinn (2005) argues that while Tinto's perspective reflects much of the thinking and theorising around widening participation, it is Young's definition of community that is most useful when examining how certain student cohorts experience universities:

> Community is an understandable dream….But politically problematic…because those motivated by it will tend to suppress differences between themselves, or implicitly to exclude…persons with whom they do not identify. (Young, 1990, p.300)

Learning communities are neither equal nor power free but instead simply assist in making divisions and inequalities invisible, hidden beneath an ideal of togetherness. Such categorisation seems to oversimplify the reality of student experience and for those deemed to be non-traditional, ultimately serving to exclude their experiences rather than promoting inclusivity. While the ideal of a university community is not completely redundant, the following section provides some suggestions around how notion of community and student involvement in this community can be reconceptualised.

Alternatives for engaging and connecting

There is a clear need to reconsider ideas around student relationships and belonging within the university community. Pascall and Cox (1993) identify how some of their

participants seem to struggle with the dichotomy of wanting change, desiring more knowledge and confidence but simultaneously remaining the 'same essential person, the unchanging self' (p.89). Engagement or affiliation with the university environment, whether social or academic in nature, is regarded as intrinsic to successful transition of students (Bank et al., 1990; Kantanis, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1979; 1991; Rendon, 1994; Tinto, 1998). However, the students in this study articulate different types of engagement, some of the students do not strive for social engagement preferring a more instrumental and focused approach to their academic endeavours. Others perceived this social affiliation as intrinsic to their complete student experience. With the evolving nature of learning technologies and the increasing external commitments of students it may be more effective to reconfigure traditional notions of student engagement and instead recognise that this process is prefaced by individual student need and expectations. The meanings and actions conceived around engagement are worthy of further exploration and delineation.

In renegotiating the concept of engagement perhaps understandings around student connection or belonging also need to be revisited. For example, rather than conceiving of university attendance as involving a move away from former allegiances and a movement into or acculturation to a new community, it might be more accessible to locate the university within a common framework of identification. Brah's (1996) concept of 'diaspora space' offers an alternative to conceptualising the university as a discrete community. Brah contends that individuals are no longer fixed by their origins or homeland; instead an imagined space enables those regarded as native and those regarded as alien to coexist, placing emphasis on movement and relationship between different identities and allegiances. Brah (1996) uses the idea of diaspora space to explain the realities of migration within a global context, which has become a necessary condition of modern living. This diaspora space is a useful concept when discussing women and their movement within the university landscape.

Diaspora space does not differentiate on the basis of membership; people have mixed allegiances, they transition in and out of identities. The contemporary university landscape no longer places limits upon who can cross educational borders so its student population no longer has a preconceived or 'fixed origin', instead students are derived from a diversity of 'homelands' (Davis & Lutz, 2000, p.370). Conceiving of university as a

diaspora space would reject the elevation of one set of experiences over another and instead provide 'a space to understand self and others somewhat better' (West, 1995, p.150). Students would no longer be differentiated on the basis of who is a migrant and who is native or in university speak who is traditional or non-traditional. Instead, the removal of such restrictive boundaries would engender a common citizenship where no one is positioned as outsider or othered. Diaspora space removes the need to be identified in a singular way, rewriting university discourse to reflect this diversity would initiate an inclusive space rather than separatism.

Removing the dichotomy imposed by the act of naming and creating a more open and inclusive space may be one way to facilitate transition and encourage engagement but it does not necessarily equate to success within this environment. The multifaceted nature of identity and identity formation explored in this chapter may offer insight into student persistence but this does not clearly indicate how students succeed. Highlighting how students translate this academic culture and also, defining the changes, choices and challenges resulting from participation in this environment can further assist in conceptualising the realities of this experience. The following sections also provide an immediate context for the recommendations that follow in the final chapter.

Reflections: Changes, choices and challenges

During the interviews, students reflected on their university experience in a multifaceted way and as the year progressed there was a chance to revisit and further elaborate on these reflections. This concluding section reviews students' perspectives on the changes engendered by university, the choices that resulted and also the challenges associated with pursuing these academic ambitions. The implications of such observations will be both situated within the literature and also used to provide further insight into the variables and the factors that impacted upon the success and progression of this particular student group.

Personal and public changes

Chapters five and six highlight some of the changes that occurred when these students arrived at the institution, these changes were experienced in relation to self and others. The following paragraphs initially explore personal change before analysing broader changes, discussing the possible implications of these for institutions and students alike. Change was articulated both in relation to instrumental factors such as a better job or more money but also, change was described in more personal terms. Courtney (1992) highlights how adults participate in education for a number of reasons and often this is associated with the management of change and crisis, both public and personal in nature; crises that include illness, depression or changes to relationships. Education then is not only about acquiring knowledge but can also provide the means to restore a sense of self or identity. Change can occur at the most fundamental level, even as an attempt to rebuild a life or just the opportunity to tell a 'better' story (Luttrell, 1997). This certainly featured in the narratives of the older students many of whom had experienced profound change in the time leading up to university enrolment. Despite the substantial financial, emotional and temporal changes demanded by university, the outcome of this endeavour was more than just the opportunity to obtain better employment or earn more money; instead university offered an emotional return improving self-confidence and esteem.

As the year progressed the emphasis on the personal over the instrumental became more apparent; university attendance also facilitated growth and personal change. The most fundamental transformation that occurred for the women in this study was the impact upon inner self; often this was an unexpected development. Changes were noted both in the ways in which individuals defined the self and also how the self was perceived publicly during interactions with others. While starting university may have engendered fear or foreboding at stages during the year, overall at the year's conclusion this activity was perceived in a positive sense. The desire for education was regarded by some at a very fundamental and intrinsic level, a need requiring fulfilment. Pascall and Cox (1993) also identify how their older participants defined a similar 'elemental' need, a 'belief that at the very core of themselves was something needing education' (p.82). These authors highlight how the need for education was described in terms of an 'addiction' which was 'difficult to resist' (p.83). This observation resounds with how some of the students chose to explain their relationship with education; this elemental need so

succinctly espoused by Heidi who describes the personal change that has been engendered:

> [I feel] *stronger…I think more emotional (laugh), definitely stronger, definitely a lot more confidence in myself definitely. I think, yeah, just have more strength, more goals and direction…it was such a hard time when I got poisoned and I really couldn't get out of bed for 15 months. I lost a lot of myself, so for me, University has given me back what I lost but plus, plus more. Yeah, so it's been very important for me not just academically…it's bringing back what I have lost.* (02)

This research did not only recognise the significant changes in the students but also highlighted the need for change within the university itself. The chapter has already reflected on the implications derived from the naming of students into dichotomous categories but change is also required in relation to knowledge capital. In higher education systems, knowledge assumes a 'taken for grantedness', the realisation that these discourses are not naturally conceived can provide the impetus for active renegotiations. Instead of accepting established structures, it is necessary to challenge the structure of this knowledge and thereby highlight the ideologies and interests that keep such frameworks in place. By positioning students outside intellectual or ideological boundaries, the university landscape is seen as something that needs to be entered and accepted, leading to conformity to predetermined restrictions; resistance possibly leading to disengagement or alienation. Again, for those students defined in the minority, the implications for successful transition and engagement are manifold.

While these students expressed change in relation to their selves, this change was negotiated in relation to pre-existing university knowledge domains and acceptance of the terms of membership of the university community. These women are not silenced but they have to learn to speak the right language; even if reluctant participants. While seemingly embracing these expectations and requirements, Sue indicates just such reluctance:

> *…creative writing…I loved that. It was a pleasure to do and…it's none of the academic writing and all that sort of rubbish… (*Sue, 04)

However, Sue seems to recognise the choices available to her and perhaps with such recognition also comes a level of control and possibly, power.

Choices

> Education had played a key role in enabling new choices to be made about the balance between private and public life.
> (Pascall & Cox, 1993, p.143)

Choice was expressed in this study both in the decision to come to university and the choices offered by university. As previously mentioned, the recent inception of this university campus had offered many individuals the opportunity to attend university, many of whom may not have contemplated such an endeavor previously. Yet, these individuals are not unique; across the western world women have responded to the call to higher education in large numbers. Women undergraduates outnumber males in the UK, in many European countries and in Australia (Quinn, 2005). This increase can be partially explained by the relocation of training for classically female employment such as teaching, nursing and social work from the vocational to higher education sector. Hence, while the choice to attend is seemingly voluntary, it also related to the need for women to obtain professional qualifications just to work, or in some cases continue to work, in areas regarded as traditionally feminine. Hence the choice to attend university needs to be understood in relation to the wider public domain.

Government discourse presents access to university as offering the possibility of greater future financial security and occupational gains; the choice to attend seems negotiated on an individual level. However, the increasing access to university for women is not only beneficial to the women involved but also represents the economic need for 'women returners' in the work force (Giles, 1990, para. 2). George and Maguire (1998) echo this sentiment when they suggest that women are regarded as the 'reserve army' of the workforce 'able to move in and out of employment as the economic need arises' (p.418). The older women in this study were not simply responding to their own particular needs and desires; instead this choice also reflects the needs of more powerful interests. The increase in women's participation in higher education has also not necessarily altered the inequality that exists within higher education (Couvillion-Landry, 2002-2003; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002). This is a system which is also measured by inputs rather than what expansion and accessibility actually mean for the individuals involved (Acker, 1994). While this campus offered people the choice to attend university; the courses available are largely limited to those that perpetuate the status quo. For example, Linda confines her choice of career to what is available at this campus and

what attracts the lowest costs (teaching is in one of the lowest HECS bands). Many of the students with personal commitments similarly reflected on how they were unable to travel due to family or work responsibilities and again this further limited choice.

Such limitations ultimately uphold and enforce the 'hierarchies of distinction and differentiation' that exist in higher education (Reay, Davies et al., 2001, p.862). If such limitations remain invisible then success or failure within this environment becomes the responsibility of the individual rather than the institution. If universities are genuinely committed to providing positive experiences for non-traditional students then changes in how universities conceptualise this student population is possibly the most pressing change required, a theme which the final chapter will revisit.

Challenges

The women in this study all faced challenges at various junctures of the year both within the public and private domain. For some, just staying and persisting at university became their ultimate challenge. This is not surprising when you consider that the rate of drop out has consistently exceeded 20% in the period 1994–2002 (Lukic et al., 2004). While the attrition data does not differentiate between those who decide to go to TAFE, change universities or decide to take a break, this figure remains high. This thesis has detailed the many obstacles that one particular group of students encountered and if these are the experiences of those who persist, then some indication of the difficulties faced by students, both traditional and non-traditional, who make the decision to depart can only be imagined.

The challenges experienced by the students were not always tangible or clearly articulated. Brookfield (1991) argues that challenge or risk is an intrinsic facet of the university environment, the nature of this educational journey necessitates a level of personal exposure not previously conceived. One challenge is overcoming the 'imposter syndrome' which clouds the perspectives of students when they initially arrive at university; beginning students fear that an inadequacy or lack of ability will be revealed (Brookfield, 1991, p.44). Such perceptions can only be exacerbated for those who are othered as non-traditional. Reay, Davies et al. (2001) suggest that in order to minimise the risk involved in studying, students will tend to apply to universities where they

perceive they will be accepted and welcomed. Certainly, the idea of fit between my students and the campus was discussed in interviews, the mature students highlighting how the number of other older students assisted their choice, whilst the familiarity and proximity of the campus further served to assist in decision making. The location and nature of the campus can be regarded as limiting in terms of the choices available but within such limitations was also the means to be accepted due to the diversity of the student population.

This thesis has highlighted the challenges around simply being a student who is first in the family to come to university as well as the complexities of identity formation and the dislocation informed by family constraints and university demands. For the women with children, the difficulty of accommodating everyone's needs was also clearly articulated. Both family and university have 'legitimate claim' as the women have chosen to have both in their lives (Edwards, 1993, p.65). This inevitably led to an inherent strain for the women, which was largely articulated in terms of guilt. Three of the women reflect extensively about the guilt associated with studying; one student mentioned guilt at each interview, this feeling traveled with her throughout the academic year. The stories of the older women in this study illuminate the background struggles required to not only meet the challenge of study but also, the difficulties imposed by domestic obligations. A duality of challenge summed up by the personal reflections of Giles (1990), a mature age entrant who moved into an academic career, when she describes rushing 'from lectures to cooker, determined that [this] new life would not cause the family to suffer from my neglect' (para. 5).

Adults participate in education for a number of reasons and these interviews indicated how this can be associated with the management of change and crisis, both public and personal in nature. Crises included illness, depression and changes to relationships, these further challenged the students. However, overcoming these difficulties is truly empowering; a sense of accomplishment can be derived from succeeding in activities previously regarded as too difficult or overwhelming. University attendance may present a 'risk of rupture' with existing relationships and identity (Brine & Waller, 2004, p.111) but equally this is an 'emancipatory' experience (Merrill, 1999). Being a student may not radically shift the gender and class inequalities experienced by female students but the

decision to arrive and the resulting choices, changes and challenges should not be dismissed.

Conclusion

The women in this study have told their individual stories but this discussion chapter has indicated how their stories are echoed by others who are currently marginalised and differentiated from the norm. In sharing these stories, hopefully a deeper understanding of the student experience has emerged, one that is informed by student reality rather than institutional discourse.

The stories of women who are the first in their family to come to university are not frequently told. Richardson (1990) highlights how certain groups of women have remained absent from female discourse as they have been denied a space to tell their stories. The student experience for those who have no family background of university attendance differs from those who are older or who have entered university from alternative entry routes. There exists little literature on this particular student group and discussions in this thesis highlight the limits of imposing taken for granted knowledge on these students' stories.

This research project has indicated the richness and diversity of this experience, which can be used to inform changes to current practice and thinking. The final chapter of this thesis will highlight some practical strategies and changes that could be adopted in order to address the needs of this particular student group. Whilst the data sample is small the material derived from the study is large in its rich descriptive detail. The following recommendations are designed to move the discussion from theoretical implications to practical applications. The suggestions are grounded within the experiences of this cohort and so, have a level of immediacy sometimes missing from literature on this area.

Chapter Nine: Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

Like a photographer, a researcher can choose to zoom in on certain aspects of a phenomenon and then zoom out again. Equally by applying different lenses the various contours and particular textures of an environment can be enhanced. However, it is possible to set up a shot and have a preconceived idea of what the image will look like but you can never know what the result will be until the image has been taken. Similarly, in qualitative research there is no certainty about where the study will go or what the outcomes will be. The Interpretative tradition, particularly as it relates to Symbolic Interactionism, moves beyond simply replicating existing knowledge or beliefs and instead, negotiates ideas and theories that may ultimately challenge the researcher's perspective as well as those generally dominant or accepted within society. While this project began with a number of questions and a predefined direction, there were no absolutes or certainties. This final chapter seeks to examine the ideas and concepts that emerged from the data and identify some practical suggestions and applications that are suggested by this narrative discourse. These outcomes are grouped in relation to the core thematic concerns of the project, namely transition, persistence and engagement; each section provides a series of conclusions followed by some recommendations for future practice. These recommendations both support and add further insight to perspectives outlined in the literature. Ultimately though, this thesis presents a snapshot and what is derived from the data presented will depend on the individual reader. The study is finely grained in the sense that it is focused on a particular space at a precise point in time and like a photographic image, it is bounded by time and context. This and other limitations of this study will be examined at the end of this chapter and form the basis for suggestions for future research.

Transition

Chapter five outlined the initial steps that students took along the pathway of this first year of study, the students' narratives indicated that their transition to university did not

necessarily commence once they arrived on campus but, for some, this process may have been initiated some time prior to arrival. Many of the older students indicated how arriving at university was representative of a long-held desire and ambition. For some of the women, multiple adjustments in relation to self and others were required to simply facilitate entry into this new environment. The difficulties associated with identity construction further highlighted the ongoing nature of transition. Clearly this process did not cease once the students arrived at university and instead the year can be viewed as a series of transitions as the women navigated the various challenges and changes that the year brought. The word transition implies a discrete process which is bounded by both time and context but it seems more accurate to conceive of undergraduate study as containing a series of 'critical moments', which can disrupt the transition process at any stage of this first year and beyond.

Critical moments

'Critical moments' can be defined as times of risk where individuals feel more vulnerable to obstacles or difficulties that are encountered in a new environment (Nutt, Skinner, Tidd, Poras & Scott-Marshall, 2005). Reflecting on these critical moments within the university context and alerting students to the characteristics of these along with support strategies designed to assist students through these stages, may reduce the possibility of attrition.

The literature review indicated how models of student retention are largely concerned with identifying the variables of the departing students however, the reasons why students choose to persist in their studies relate to more than individual traits or characteristics. Nutt et al. (2005) highlight how reducing students to typologies or simply identifying variables or characteristics that might indicate departure is a limiting concept. By recognising the first year of study as a series of critical moments, the process of adjustment is negotiated as an ongoing facet of this experience rather than something that occurs in the initial weeks or months of study. These critical moments are not limited to the first year of study but rather are more obvious at this stage. The research in this thesis suggests that students do not experience transition as a time-bounded phase but instead the year is characterised as a series of highs and lows, distinguished by a period of building up, often accompanied by some sort of emotional high, a possible low and

then the whole process repeats itself; similar to the rollercoaster ride explicated in chapter seven.

This undulating landscape resembles a series of critical moments which may include initial arrival, adjustment to learning, acculturating to a new social environment, forming a student identity, navigating assignment due dates, recommencing the new semester or academic year, participating in exams and so forth. These critical stages may have some consistency across student cohorts and institutions but ultimately the level of importance and emotions attributed to these will differ according to the program choice and so, are best articulated at a faculty or school level. Making the repetitive and ongoing nature of these moments explicit to students is necessary so that individuals are better prepared for the somewhat volatile and changing nature of the university experience. With such knowledge and understanding, students may become better equipped to persist in this environment.

The nature and form of critical moments cannot be generalised, there is no one typology of critical moments that can be applied universally. Indeed, for some students, these critical moments may occur prior to arriving at university, which makes the recognition of personal life histories another important facet of this arrival process.

Personal histories

In order to assist students, particularly those who are older or more culturally diverse, it may be necessary to seek out and explore the personal journeys that individual students undertake in arriving at tertiary study, rather than dealing with new students as an amorphous mass. Students come to university with existing 'wounds' and need to be assured that they are capable of being there and accepted (Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison & Gregg, 1994). Zwerling (1992) echoes this need and suggests that students should be encouraged to reflect on and define their life stories in order to avoid finding '…themselves trapped in those histories' (p.54). Such a strategy not only allows individual students to recognise how their world-view has been influenced by previous experiences but also enables practitioners to understand the length of the journey undertaken already and so provide validation or encouragement to help overcome future obstacles.

Such reflection is possible within programs and strategies designed to assist students to orientate to the university environment. However, the success of this approach relies on redefining orientation and transition in a more holistic manner, recognising the individuality of learners. Howells (2003) suggests that orientation programs should avoid emphasising the acquisition of yet to be negotiated academic tasks and obligations, as this simply serves to position the learner in the future. Such an emphasis, Howells argues, fails to reflect what the student brings to the learning context. Bamber and Tett (2000) discuss the notion of 'entitlement' and the need for educators to contextualise learning and position this in relation to students' existing knowledge. Strategies that engage with beginning students need to recognise and build upon previously acquired skills and knowledge. Howells (2003) contends that one of the most disorientating experiences for first year students, particularly those who are more mature, is the lack of voice or recognition given to existing knowledge or sense of self.

> If our assessment of the value of orientation programs is dominated by students' performance on future tasks we may miss the very questions and answers that are needed to assist students to get off to a good start. (Howells, 2003, p.12)

Thus, instead of focusing on the acquisition of atomized skills, orientation programs need to be rooted within existing student self-identity, highlighting the affective and behavioural aspect of the learner. Validating learner's internal experiences would assist in ensuring students, particularly those who have no family tradition of attending university, feel more 'comfortable' or 'accepted' on campus. However, as Jackson (2000) has argued too often such experiential learning is not valued within academic discourse or institutional frameworks.

For the students in this project, one unexpected way this type of self validation was facilitated was within the research process itself. The opportunity to reflect upon inner thoughts and desires enabled students to situate themselves within the university landscape. Ten of the students positively welcomed the chance to articulate and reflect upon the nature of the university experience; the interviews allowed discussions that did not occur in other spheres of students' personal lives. Helen's quote sums up the importance of such dialogue:

> *…it has been good for me to be able to say, just to express that I have had a bad time here and a good time here and talk to someone who*

> *understands rather than trying to talk to my boyfriend or something.* (Helen, 04)

Other students mentioned how the interviews made them feel important, as their personal opinion was regarded as both legitimate and worthwhile. Quite simply, this type of interaction made individuals feel that their existing selves were credible, that acceptance in this university environment did not necessarily require complete or radical personal change. However, if this type of acceptance or recognition of existing self is not forthcoming from within the institution, it is perhaps not surprising that feelings of alienation, disengagement and disorientation may result.

Given current class sizes and the limited time available to teaching staff, there is literally no opportunity to provide students with this type of individual assurance however, even having an academic mentor assigned to a group of students would certainly assure individuals that someone is out there and listening. Alternatively, this legitimation of self could equally be accommodated via a combination of carefully managed online discussion threads, reflective assignments or journal keeping, student driven committees and activities. Creating a culture of reflection can also assist in identifying commonalities within differences. When espoused at a school or department level, this culture of reflection provides a space for collective voice, giving individuals a clear indication that their opinions are valued and worth listening to. Once students feel like they count and 'matter' as individuals, then the motivation to persist and continue in this environment may follow. This conclusion seems borne out by the students' vindication of the space afforded by this research process and their continued persistence at university.

Persistence

During the initial semester and as the students proceeded through the year, it became clear that persistence was linked to how students navigated the multiple transitions occurring both within and outside the university. Students perceived the year in two related but discrete ways, either something that needed to be 'survived' or something that would facilitate personal 'success'. This distinction emerged spontaneously from the interviews and is not only representative of personal perception but also indicates the

different level of investment that students articulate in relation to their university study. Whilst this research was unable to draw any firm conclusions regarding these alternate perspectives on the year and individual academic success, how such preconceived attitudes contribute to persistence and success in this environment is an area worthy of further research and examination.

The normalisation of what students are experiencing also emerged as a key process in this first year of study; the students in this project highlighted a need to have their fears and apprehensions both recognised and validated. Validation can engender a sense of self-affirmation whereby students feel more competent and in control of their environment. Frequently, the students in this project looked to academics or others within the institution as possible sources of such validation but the culture and workings of the university did not accommodate such expectations. For example, the students indicated how assignments provided an initial means to assess their own belonging and suitability to this environment; poor marks led to questions and self-doubt. For first year students, who often have unrealistic expectations of their abilities, measuring competence via assignments is not appropriate. Instead, this is a skill that emerges over time and it is this type of expectation that should be made explicit to students. Perry and Allard (2003) also outline the need to normalise the fears of students and incorporate the exploration of these into the learning context rather than ignore them. For example, the process of transition to university can be explained in terms of its centrality in life, a process familiar to students, which they have encountered before, albeit in a different location.

The distance maintained between some academics and students was reflected upon at length in the interviews. As adults, many of these students expected a level of personal involvement with academic staff. Thomas (2002) argues for an institutional habitus that promotes inclusivity by celebrating and recognising the heterogeneity of the student population. A starting point for this, according to Thomas, is a renegotiation of relationships between students and lectures; in developing a habitus more conducive to student need, Thomas outlines the importance of psychological support. This might take the form of encouraging positive self-esteem, personal growth or boosting levels of self-efficacy. Aside from psychological support, teaching staff can also assist in skilling

students in areas beyond the particular discipline focus, providing knowledge that can assist individuals as they proceed through the institution.

'Skilling' students

> University teachers can, in fact, make the difference: helping their students to develop the skills that 'an expert' student demonstrates, attuned to and learning confidently and competently in the new university culture. (Lawrence, 2002, para. 24)

Chapter six outlined the strategic nature of relationships that students formed on campus and how these related specifically to other students rather than teaching staff. However, educators also have a key role in creating strategic students. Darab (2007) highlights how students need to be made overtly conscious of their 'capacity for agency' (p.18); a particularly difficult concept for older women who may be used to responding to situations rather than initiating change. One approach to this is making the culture of university explicit to students by demonstrating the rules and expectations of this environment. Quite simply, students need to be informed about how to enact successful persistence as such strategies are often implicit and require clear articulation.

For example, Martinez and Munday (1998) highlight how 'clear progression goals' (p.79) are one of the major reasons why students persist at a tertiary level. Similarly, Long et al. (2006) indicate that a lack of clear goals around reasons for enrolment significantly informs decisions about leaving university. In this study, some of the women described a strong sense of future self and this would seem to positively influence persistence patterns. Yet the need for individuals to reflect upon these types of objectives is often hidden. Beginning students may not have the necessary skills in 'help seeking' and so these types of behaviours may need to be taught and made explicit. Incorporating this and other strategies for success into lectures adds to their significance and value. Another way that university staff can distill this expert status is by making explicit the tensions and contradictions that are apparent within the university environment.

Revealing tensions

This study has revealed a number of tensions within the higher education environment including the expectations of students compared to the realities of the environment, the

ambiguities of student identity and the processes around maintaining equilibrium in public and private lives. There is also tension in today's university environment between perceiving study as some type of process with a measured output or as something that engenders change on a far more fundamental level. While both these outcomes do not exist in a dichotomous relationship, I would argue that this represents a disjuncture for undergraduate students who often initially regard university study in terms of vocational outcomes but actually experience change on a more personal or private level. Making this type of outcome explicit at the onset of study may better prepare students for the changes and transformations that university study actually engenders.

Scott (2006) also identifies the need to make potential students aware of the realities of higher education and provide direction around expectations and requirements. Indeed, generally if students enter university with a clearer understanding of what they can expect to get out of this process, the inconsistencies in university experience will become less apparent. This knowledge of 'what to expect' should include practical guidance around course expectations so that students are not relying on ill-formed sources for information, for example television serials. This information should be disseminated through a variety of mediums including the traditional hardcopy prospectus but also include video presentations and engaging online activities or quizzes as well as access to existing university students or peers.

Inconsistencies are also apparent on a more public level such as the tensions that exist within the seemingly contradictory aims of mass participation or widening access. Whilst universities may publicly encourage students from non-traditional backgrounds to enrol, the necessary renegotiations within policy and curricula rarely ensue. If the purpose of university is simply to 'churn out' qualifications then this should be made explicit and inform students' expectations accordingly. If universities are also committed to the ideology of access and the desire to facilitate personal growth, then this again should be made clear.

Change also needs to be incorporated into the content and structure of curricula that recognises the different backgrounds and levels of skills between cohorts of students. For example, older students may be better able to negotiate, and indeed may welcome, independent research earlier in their degree. The idyll of the 'turbo student', or those

mythic individuals who obtain the degree in the minimum amount of time and require little institutional support (Von Prummer, 1993 cited in Kirkup, 1996, p.155), needs to be deconstructed. Instead, it becomes necessary to reveal that students frequently take longer to complete their studies and often have breaks or changes during their degree progression. The nature of attrition requires more accurate definition, dropping out is not necessarily a negative occurrence and may be the most appropriate option for the individual concerned. Leaving one university cannot be assumed as indicating a complete departure from the higher education sector and so, a better system of tracking students is needed if a true understanding of attrition is to be achieved. Indeed, just acknowledging and exposing these types of tensions can do much to limit the disjuncture and displacement that students indicate when their experiences deviate from what is commonly perceived as the norm. For example, in terms of attrition improving and simplifying credit transfer arrangements would better accommodate the needs and requirements of students as well as normalise the act of 'moving on'.

Equally, the contradictions surrounding the status of the students should also be articulated. Leathwood (2006) argues that dominant ideologies around the concept of independent learner are both gender and culturally biased; this concept is not neutral but rather responds to changes in educational practices and sources of funding. The call for independence is a key facet of the neo-liberal political discourse, where subjects are constructed as 'individual customers in an educational market' (p.615). The almost mythic qualities of the independent learner reflect the current economic and material contexts of higher education, engendering an ideal type of student who can proceed efficiently through the course. Such idealisation extends beyond the student to the nature of engagement with the institution, which is often presumed to efface other areas of student life. However, what the students in this study indicate is that university is only one of many competing activities in life. This is a far cry from my own undergraduate experiences, detailed in the first chapter, where university was experienced in more holistic terms, assuming a level of complete involvement. Instead, the notion of engagement as it is played out in students' lives also necessitates alternative perspectives around this process.

Engagement

The findings of this study indicate that it is the total experience of university that students reflect upon, this includes what occurs in the class-room, what happens outside of it, how the course is structured, how the academic interacts with the students; it is the multiple facets of the institution that ultimately affect how students rate their learning experience, a finding echoed by Scott (2006). The obstacles that students encounter even before arriving at the campus, for example, difficult or unintelligible enrolment systems, have a cumulative effect on their engagement with the institution. If relatively minor occurrences are combined with other negative experiences, this may be enough to provide the catalyst for departure; regardless of the relative importance of each event. In other words, the student experience can be conceived of as a delicate balancing act, an old fashioned weighing scales, where one side represents the student experience and the other the institutions. It is unrealistic to expect the institution to control every facet of this experience, the total experience, but rather what institutions need to strive for is to maintain the balance in their favour in order to compensate for the inevitable negatives.

The data chapters indicate how there is a real need to appropriately 'manage' student expectations once they arrive. The clarification of both what students can expect and what the institution can provide; will assist in removing unrealistic expectations from all parties. Just as a student can no longer expect the level of connection facilitated during the era of small lecture and tutorial sizes or when individuals were known by first names; the institution cannot expect students to accord academic activities primacy in their public and private lives. Rather than reflect upon a prerequisite level of 'engagement' which is defined as 'the state of being involved with someone [or something]' (Soanes & Hawker, 2005, p.329) it might be more realistic to conceive of the relationships between student and institution as consisting of a series of gradiated links. At the onset of studies these links may be quite tenuous but as individuals proceed in their studies and the explication of both the possibilities and limitations of this environment are presented, so also do these links evolve. This organic process, not unlike the tentacles of a plant rooting in the soil, better conceptualises how students come to be connected to the

university environment; a dual process with responsibilities lying with both individual and institution.

The data in this thesis also points to the need to differentiate between the nature of these links rather than assume that all students strive to be involved both academically and socially within the campus community. Making links or engaging is a constant process and modified by a range of factors including the individual student, the particular stage of the semester and the nature of the actual academic experience. The type of connection perceived as important or even desired before arrival at university may radically change once students are immersed in the environment and other factors come into play. Therefore, whilst student expectations around what the university can offer need to be explained and clarified; equally the university may need to redefine assumptions around the level of engagement expected of students. For example, the need to move from just tolerating students with external commitments, such as family and work, to actively assisting and supporting them.

Krause (2003) argues that instead of simply reacting to student demands, universities should be proactive in their approach to students, addressing need on a consultative basis rather than in isolation. Entering into ongoing and sustained dialogue with students may assist in meeting expectations and clarifying possibilities. Initiatives aimed to improve the student experience should not finish with the first year of study rather these schemes and activities should recognise the ongoing and evolving nature of engagement. Indeed, the importance of such initiatives across the year levels suggests a need for cultural change on a university-wide basis. There is not only a need to create programs that cater for students as they move through the degree program but also to assess these and disseminate the findings at a national level.

Further research

This study adds to the collective knowledge about the student experience but it is vital that these conclusions do not assume that student populations are homogenous; the needs of individual learners can never be completely accommodated within universal paradigms. Swaminathan and Alfred (2001) argue that any emphasis on ‘commonality’

can ultimately ‘promote invisibility’ (p.30). Whilst these authors are talking particularly about the experience of immigrants, there is correlation with the experiences of university students as well. Stressing what people have in common actually ‘devalues the diverse contexts, struggles and experiences’ that individuals have encountered’ (p.30). Instead of locating difference within a deficit framework, Swaminathan and Alfred (2001) argue that such differences can enrich and inform the learning environment, in this way diversity is promoted as an asset. The recognition of this plurality also indicates the need for ongoing investigation into this area; how students qualitatively experience university necessitates continuing, focused research. This research can occur on an individual institutional basis but there is also a demand for larger comparative studies. Further research needs to be representative of both national contexts and as the global education market expands, should also articulate how this internationalisation is conceived at an individual student level.

While this study is qualitatively focused, there is also a need to adopt mixed method approaches to studying this area. There is a lack of research on higher education that serves to combine ‘big picture’ statistical analysis with distinct and sharply focused qualitative detail. The complex nature of this area lends itself to this more holistic approach, which can present various levels of analysis and so ensure a deeper understanding of this field. Some of the areas of research that would benefit from this approach include an analysis of how students conceptualise the outcomes of university study before commencing and how this compares to the actual outcomes identified by students at the end of the degree. In this study, it was interesting that what was initially perceived in vocational terms later assumed a more experiential and personal effect. How these expectations and ambitions differ between student cohorts, for example younger and older students, would also make a valuable contribution to this field. Future research that concentrates on the particular is most appropriate given the plurality of university environments. This focus should not only recognise different student cohorts but also different types of institutions. For example, student experience at regional and rural universities is qualitatively different to that negotiated within an urban environment.

Limitations

Like any research project, this study has inherent limitations. One of the major limits is the fact that only the perspectives of those students who managed to persist through the year are included. The voices of those students who depart are absent from these accounts; such perspectives would have impacted significantly on the results. Instead, the one student that did depart chose not to continue with the interviews. The students interviewed have a particular viewpoint that is informed both by their personal qualities and also, by the fact that they continued to persist despite difficulties or obstacles. This is a form of bias and needs to be acknowledged as an intrinsic part of this study.

There is a disjuncture between women's lives and the actual words that are available to describe this reality; an example of this gap was highlighted by the ways in which the women reflected upon the support available from their husbands. As chapter six revealed what was described as support in fact indicated a level of implicit bargaining; this was not unconditional but rather was either tied to possible outcomes for the husbands or dependent on the women's abilities to maintain household equilibrium. Devault (1990) refers to such gaps as 'linguistics incongruence' and suggests that certain groups have greater difficulty using existing language forms to truly represent personal reality. Language meaning is not transparent (Polkinghorne, 1988) but instead it is '…persistently slippery, unstable, and ambiguous…' (Scheurich, 1995, p.240). In order to better facilitate understanding of these women's worlds, not only have words and phrases been reproduced faithfully but the meanings of these have been contextualised through reference to the words of other women in the study. Rather than impose meaning upon the female participants, meaning and understanding is grounded within various narratives.

Most qualitative approaches to research have inherent flaws and limitations, particularly in relation to issues of reliability and validity. In order to prevent such criticism, this type of research should provide precise definitions of investigation and measurement. Researchers need to be precise about their positioning in relation to the participants in case this status infringes upon or influences the results. My own position on campus was described in chapters one and three. This role may have impacted upon the responses received by students but the candid nature of the interviews as well as the level of

personal disclosure present in these accounts, suggests otherwise. Indeed, this role may have further facilitated a personal connection between myself and the students. As chapter four indicates, a further limitation is how the external validity of parts of this study are limited. The experiences of this particular group of first year students do not necessarily relate to those engendered by other tertiary settings.

Despite these limitations, the methods used do provide a forum for in-depth analysis that is informed by individual experience. The intent of this study was never to suggest universal application but rather elicit a subjective response to this experience and so initiate further discussion and debate on this area. The qualitative nature of the interview also enables a more personal interpretation of situations providing information that can be negotiated on both a local and a broader, universal level. Hence, the legitimacy and usefulness of this approach will ultimately be both assessed by the readers of this thesis and also, the participants in this study, many of whom welcomed the opportunity to reflect upon and translate this experience.

Conclusion

The objective of this research was always to move beyond the creation of typologies and instead, produce results which can be used to inform understanding about the nature of student experience. The data analysis chapters highlighted the women's narratives in terms of what Richards (2005) terms as 'synthesis' and 'difference'. Synthesis occurs when the complexity of life is distilled to what is central or crucial and this study resembles a 'pathway', where the steps or stages taken in the 'social career or journey' of being a student have been identified (Richards, 2005, p.132). As the opening quote in this thesis indicates, the participants in this study not only choose to share '*a time*' and '*a place*' with me but most importantly, I was invited to accompany them on '*a journey*'.

The stages of this journey have been named and the factors that contributed to this path have been highlighted. In examining a landscape I am very familiar with, the main thrust of this study was to conceive of this from another perspective. In order to capture such an alternative, the words and experiences of the students have formed the basis for this

imagery but the result has been a particular version of reality rather than a unique or panoramic view. The stages of the pathway that students took to come to university and the ways in which students chose to travel through the year, have been grouped according to processes related to transition, persistence and engagement. This is not to suggest that these are discrete stages in this journey, instead this process is better conceptualised as a continuum, simultaneously navigated at a number of different levels. In the interests of consistency, the recommendations in this chapter have also been grouped according to these categories but again, this is not intended to suggest discrete processes but rather facilitate textual coherence.

Indeed, examining transition, persistence and engagement through the lens of the first year experience has questioned the suitability of these categorisations. Instead, it seems more appropriate to resist such demarcations and regard arriving at university as initiating an ongoing assimilation to the culture and working of the institute. A process that does not cease at the end of the first semester or the first year but rather remains a constant facet of university life evolving in tandem with the individual stage of the student. There is certainly a need to focus on the first year of study but it is also important to recognise the totality of this student experience and extend the attention beyond the first year to how students cope and persist as they travel through the institution. This is not to diminish the importance of the first year but rather to place it within a wider, more embracing context.

Finally, the students were not the only ones participating in this journey; as a researcher, this process has engendered a similar personal odyssey. Just like any journey in a foreign landscape, it is often difficult to know at the beginning of a study exactly where you will end up; no matter how precise the itinerary, detours and wrong turns are inevitable. As this journey reaches a conclusion, new insight and knowledge has emerged albeit in different ways to what was initially imagined or anticipated. Ultimately, this study set out to present a student perspective on the experience of attending an Australian university, this has been achieved through the presentation of layers of rich, descriptive detail. The voices and words of individual students have been used to open up this process in order to acknowledge the multiplicity of choices, changes and challenges engendered for the individuals involved.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Data analysis in NVivo

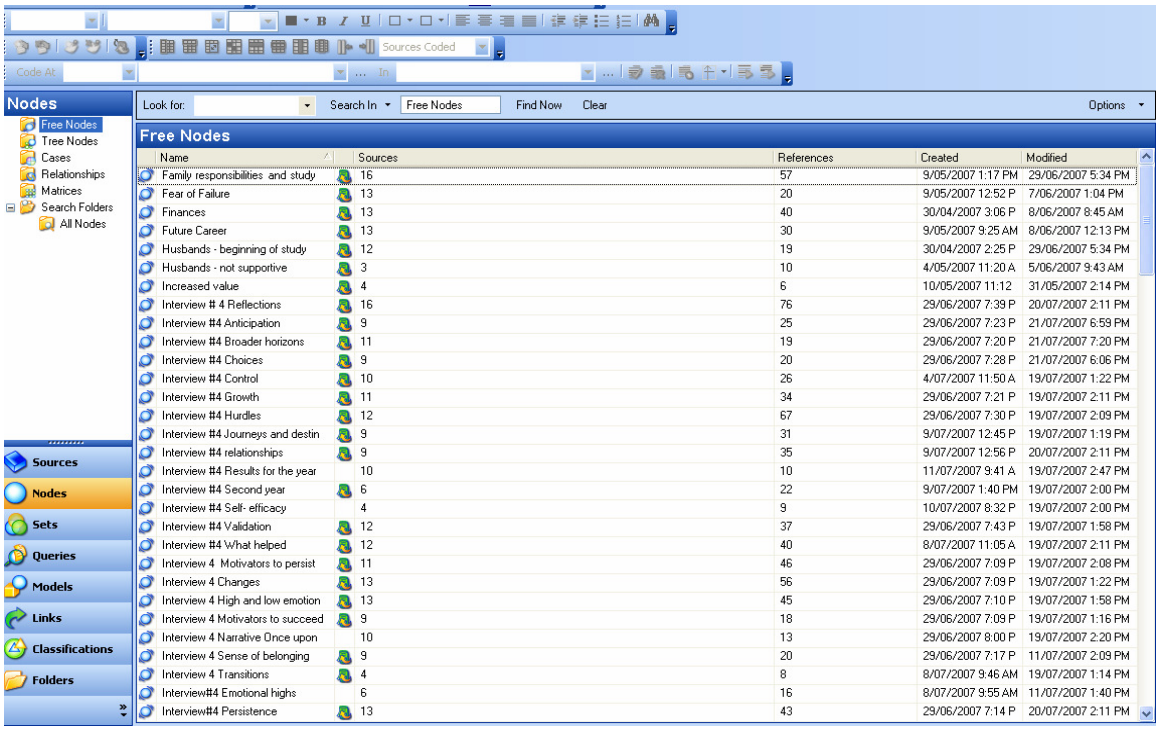

Figure 1: Early stages of the project indicating the number of free nodes generated at the 'initial coding' stage

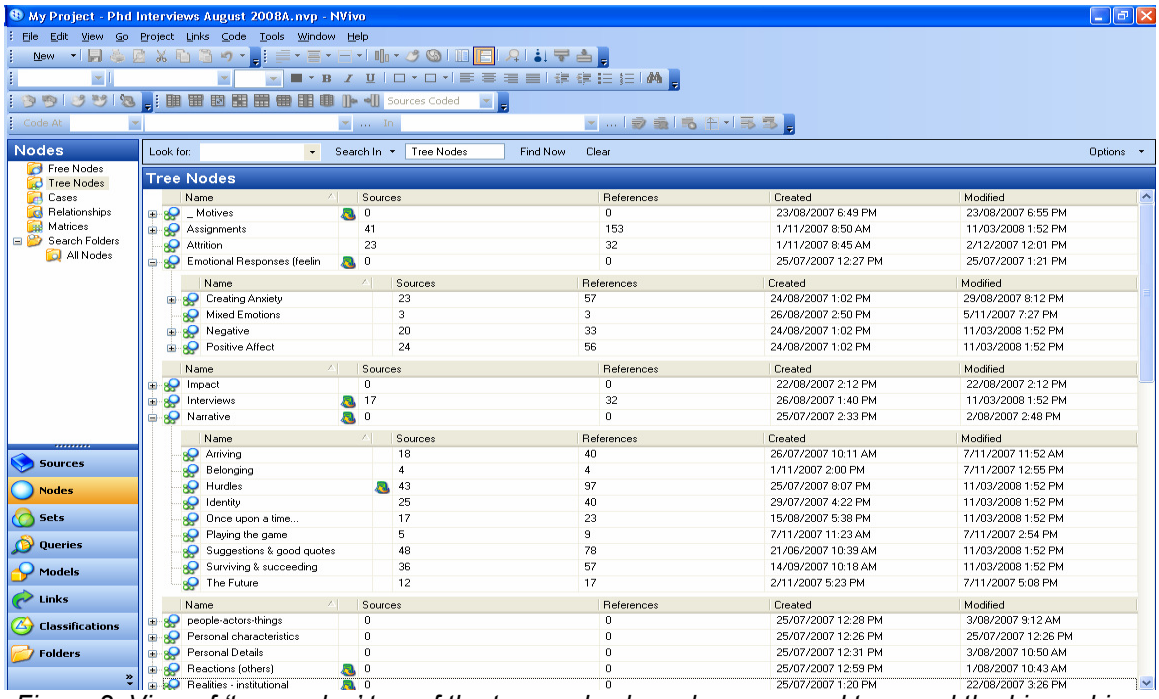

Figure 2: View of 'tree nodes' two of the tree nodes have been opened to reveal the hierarchies.

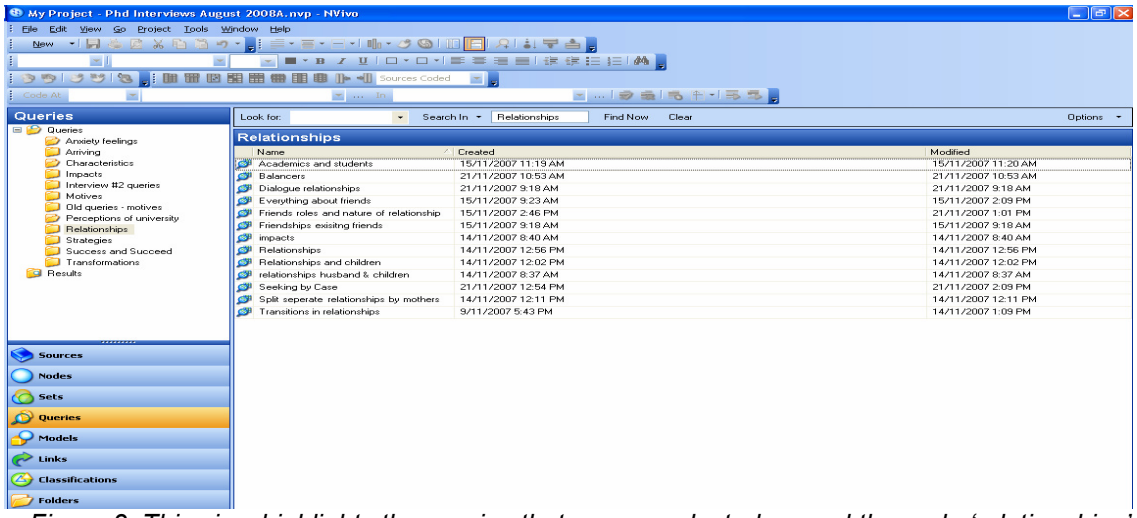

Figure 3: This view highlights the queries that were conducted around the node 'relationships'

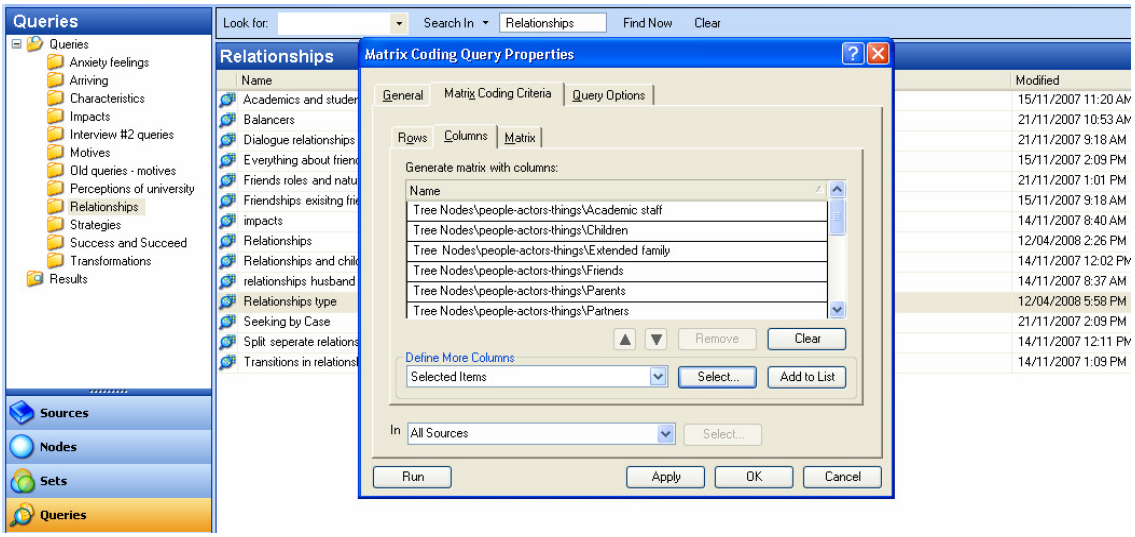

Figure 4: One of the matrix coding queries conducted for relationships

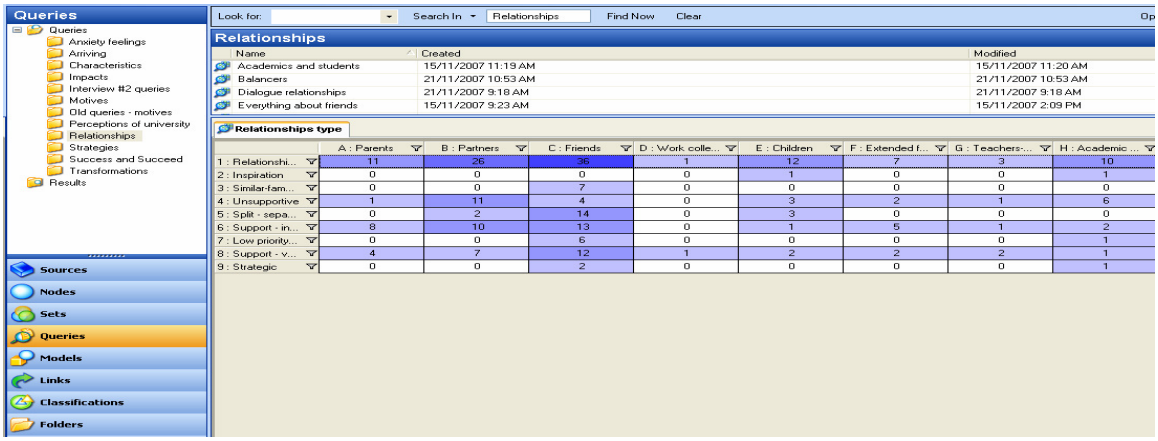

Figure 5: The results of the matrix coding query indicating the frequency counts for relationship types and people involved limited to the first set of interviews

Appendix B: Expressions of interest

Please return by either giving to the student mentors, dropping into the Student Support Unit or posting to Student Support Unit, PO Box 127, Brush Rd, Ourimbah 2258.

HELP!

Volunteers Wanted!

Are you a new, female university student?

Are you the first in your family to come to university?

Are you happy to talk about your first year of study?

If you answered yes to the above questions and would be interested in someone contacting you to discuss some research being carried out on first year students, then please complete the details below:

Name: _____

Phone: Mobile : _____

Home : _____

Email: _____

Alternatively, please contact Sarah O' Shea on [redacted] or email sarah.oshea[redacted] to find out about a study that is researching people just like you – first year students at [redacted] who are the first in their family to come to Uni.

Thanks for taking your time to read this and congratulations on gaining a place at [redacted] Campus!

Appendix C: Interview and email schedule

The University of Sydney

School of Policy and Practice

NSW 2006 AUSTRALIA

Faculty of Education & Social Work A35
College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Dr Lesley Scanlon

Telephone +61 2 9351 6380
Facsimile +61 2 9351 4580
Email: l.scanlon@edfac.usyd.edu.au

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Interviews will be conducted at the [redacted] in a private area nominated by the students. Each interview will last approximately 45 – 60 minutes and subjects will be interviewed twice during each semester with the first interview occurring the week beginning 27th February 2006.

TIMELINE FOR INTERVIEW AND EMAIL CONTACT

Factors influencing the socialisation and transition of first year students within a tertiary learning environment – An ethnographic study

Check Groupwise

Dates / Timeframe. Week Beg.	Type of Contact	Time interval between contact
February 2006	Email – Welcome to the study	N/A
27th Feb – 17th March	First Interviews with subjects	Approx 2 weeks
8th May 2006	Second email – reminder about upcoming interview	6 weeks
11th May – 25th May 2006	Conduct second interviews	1 - 2 weeks
18th June 2006	Third email – thank you for participation and reminder about third interview in August	6 weeks
14th – 1 September August 2006	Third Interview	7 weeks
24th September 2006	Fourth email – thanks	3-4 weeks
23rd October 2006	Final email reminder about the final set of interviews	4 weeks
November / December 2006	Final Interview	4-6 weeks (approx)

Interviews adopted a semi-structured approach and while the interviewer prepared some questions beforehand these changed depending on the direction of the interview. Thus, the researcher explored issues that subjects identified in personal narratives rather than imposing ideas or themes upon interviewees. However, some of the initial questions that were asked have been outlined below:

Questions used in the initial interviews

Can you describe to me some of the new experiences you have encountered in this first week of university?

I'd really like to get a 'feel' for your first day at university – can you describe it to me , maybe start from the moment you got up!

What types of feelings do you associate with the different parts of that first day?

If you were to offer any advice to another student starting university what would it be? Why do you say this?

After spending this week(s) at university, is there anything that you would do differently , say perhaps you have been given the opportunity to relive the week?

Can you describe to me your reasons for applying to a university course?

What were your reasons for choosing this particular campus and your particular course?

What do the other members of your family feel about you attending university?

Have your friends expressed any feelings about you enrolling in university?

Do you have any ideas why people / individuals have said / done / suggested (or not as the case maybe) these things?

What are you expecting to encounter in the next few weeks in terms of learning?

What are you expecting to encounter in the next few weeks in terms of your social life?

If asked , would you feel comfortable describing yourself as an university student? Why/why not – what other terms would you use to describe yourself?

How do you anticipate your life will change now that you are a university student?

Can you imagine the worst possible thing that could happen in the university setting and describe it?

What fears do you have about attending university?

Mid-year questions

Looking back over these initial weeks of university study, can you name some of the problems or difficulties that you encountered?

If you had to rate these from worst to best, which one do you feel was the worst experience and which of them the least negative experience.

Can you describe a high point and a low point that you encountered at university in the last few weeks?

In relation to these experiences, can you describe some of the feelings you associate with them?

Do you feel you have overcome all these issues? Why/why not?

What would you do differently if you encountered such issues again?

What sort of advice would you give a student so that they could avoid some of these situations?

What could the university do to prevent other students from encountering some of these difficulties ? Why do you think this might help?

Have you formed any friendships or relationships with other students?

Explain to me how students at this campus get to know each other?

Generally, do you find it easy to meet new people? Do you think it is easier or more difficult to make friends or meet people at this campus?

Do you think that groups or cliques exist at this campus – have you experienced any sort of exclusion?

In the last few weeks, what things have helped you get use to university demands?

What things have hindered you in this process?

What things have you found helpful in adapting to this new environment?

Has any particular person done anything that 'stands out' as an aid or a help in your transition to university life?

After experiencing university for a few weeks, are your feelings more positive or more negative feelings compared to how you felt that initial week? Why?

Do other students appear to have had similar or different experiences to you?

Do you feel others are coping better to you? Why/Why not?

If you were running this university, what strategies would you put in place to help commencing students?

Again , if you were in university management, what changes (if any)would you make?

Appendix D: Participant information sheet

The University of Sydney

School of Policy and Practice

NSW 2006 AUSTRALIA

Faculty of Education & Social Work A35
College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Dr Lesley Scanlon

Telephone +61 2 9351 6380
Facsimile +61 2 9351 4580
Email: l.scanlon@edfac.usyd.edu.au

Information Statement for the Research Project entitled:

Factors influencing the Socialisation and Transition of First Year Students within a Tertiary Learning Environment – An Ethnographic Study

You are invited to take part in the research project identified above which is being conducted by Sarah O' Shea, Manager, Learning Development Service at [redacted]. Sarah is conducting the research as part of her Doctor of Philosophy studies at The University of Sydney under the supervision of Dr Lesley Scanlon.

(1) What is the study about?

The purpose of this research is to explore how first female year students who are the first in their family to attend university studies adapt to the academic environment. In the research study, female students will be interviewed during the first year of academic study in order to produce an in-depth analysis of the influences and factors that impact on individuals in this new environment. First year students in an university setting often encounter a range of unforeseen situations which may make individuals vulnerable to failure. To combat this, the last decade has seen many university's implementing a diversity of strategies and studies in order to aid successful transition into academic study. However, despite the recognition of the importance of this period of adjustment and the range of research projects that focus on the application and success of individual programs, attrition rates do remain consistently high. This study intends to focus on individual female student experiences in the first year in order to highlight some of the issues encountered on a local, specific level.

(2) Who can participate in the study?

We are seeking first year female students who have enrolled in an undergraduate (degree) program for the first time in 2006 and who are the first in their family to come to university. The study is open to any age group and participants will be interviewed quarterly throughout the academic year and will also engage in some email communication with the researcher.

(3) What choice do you have?

Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only those people who give their informed consent will be included in the project. Whether or not you decide to participate, your decision will not disadvantage you in any way. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason.

(4) What would you be asked to do?

If you agree to participate you will be asked to attend four interviews conducted by Sarah O' Shea at [redacted] of the [redacted].

The first interview would occur after commencement of lectures, another will occur after the mid semester break, the third interview will be conducted in Semester Two while the fourth interview will be held at the end of the year. In addition, participants will be asked to maintain some email contact with the researcher, who will request some feedback during the semester via this electronic medium.

(5) Will the study benefit me?

Participation in this study is voluntary and there is no financial reward for participation.

(6) How will your privacy be protected?

All personal aspects of the study will be strictly confidential and only the researchers will have access to personal information on participants. A report of the study may be submitted for publication or be made available to the management or relevant administration bodies of The University [redacted] , but individual participants will not be identifiable in any such reports.

(7) How will the information collected be used?

The results of this study will be published in a PhD thesis to be submitted for Sarah O' Shea's degree, however, data generated from the study may also be disseminated through academic publications such as articles. All data will be stored in a secure locked site, access to this will be limited to those involved as researchers in the study.

(8) What do you need to do to participate?

Please read this information statement and be sure you understand its contents before you consent to participate. When you have read this information, Sarah O' Shea will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Sarah on [redacted] or via email: sarah.oshea@[redacted]

(10) What if I have a complaint or concerns?

Should you have any concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or you have a complaint about the manner in which the research is conducted, it may be given to the researcher or The Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, [redacted] This project has been approved by The [redacted] Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H- 069 – 0705.

Thank you for considering this invitation
This information sheet is for you to keep

Signed

Dr. Lesley Scanlon Chief Investigator	Sarah O' Shea Researcher

Version 3 – 8 September 2005
2 of 2

Appendix E: Participant consent form

The University of Sydney

School of Policy and Practice

NSW 2006 AUSTRALIA

Faculty of Education & Social Work A35
College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Dr Lesley Scanlon

Telephone +61 2 9351 6380
Facsimile +61 2 9351 4580
Email: l.scanlon@edfac.usyd.edu.au

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, ...,
Name (please print)
give consent to my participation in the research project entitled : **Factors influencing the Academic and Social Transition of First Year Female Students who are the First in the Family to attend University** being conducted by Sarah O' Shea at [redacted] under the supervision of Dr. Lesley Scanlon of The University of Sydney (Ph: 9351 – 6380)

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me, and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have read the Participant Information Sheet and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher(s) now or in the future.

4. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential and no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

Name: .....
(PLEASE PRINT IN BLOCK CAPITALS)

Signed: .....

Date: .....

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact The Human Research Ethics Officer, [redacted] or email: Human-Ethics@[redacted].

This project has been approved by the [redacted] Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H-069-0705

Version 2 – 8th September 2005

Appendix F: Advertisement

HELP!

Volunteers Wanted!

Are you a new, **female** university student?

Are you the first in your family to come to university?

Are you happy to talk about your first year of study?

If you answered yes to the above question then please contact Sarah O' Shea on [redacted] or email sarah.oshea[redacted] to find out about a study that is researching people just like you – first year **female** students at [redacted] **who are the first in their family to come to Uni.**

The study will involve some email contact and two informal interviews each semester which will focus on your experiences at university during your first year of study

Please contact Sarah on [redacted] for more information

Version Two - 3 May 2005

Appendix G: The research log and memos in NVivo 7

Sources
Documents
Coding things
Interviews
Literature
Presentations
Retrospective Journal
Themes from Interview O
Themes from Interview T
Externals
Memos
Search Folders
All Sources

Sources
Nodes
Sets
Queries
Models
Links
Classifications
Folders

Look for: Search In Retrospective Jo Find Now Clear

Retrospective Journal

Name	Nodes
Key research areas and questions	5
Preliminary thoughts	0
Results	0
Results Journal	65

Key research areas and questio

should I code them as one? I am interested in what it is that makes students persist as wel
as the experiences that they encounter throughout the year so I will need to think about how
I will code these interviews??

10/05/2007 12:57 PM

It is really interesting to explore the role of future career in relation to university as even afte
coding four of the interviews there are a few patterns emerging. For CWil & CM explici
reference is given that suggests in terms of future career , university is seen as a means t
obtain security , for Catherine this is something that she craves after many years o
uncertainty in her life and her jobs. For CM, she desires the job security that she has seer
her cousins enjoy after graduating from uni - this is a way for her to obtain what she sees
other members of her extended family enjoying.

However, CR regards university almost as a 'necessary evil' something she must do t
reach her goals, (see NB as well) she is already working in the job that she wants but ir
order to proceed she must gain this qualification and she admits that the job she wants is
the Director of the Rehab Centre where she works - this is her goal. University is not the
primary focus in her life , she identifies more with her job and what she does there.

So perhaps a tree node around the question

What is the relationship between University and long-term career plans?
- University as security (by doing this I will secure a better future for myself and my family) -
this is recurring amongst the single parents (CWilk/ Cwin/ LB)
- University as a 'necessary evil' (I don't really want to do it but I have to) - certainly this is

Figure 6: The key research areas and questions log that highlights one particular step in the research process.

Retrospective Journal

Name	Nodes	References	Created
Key research areas and questions	5	5	4/05/2007 11:30
Preliminary thoughts	0	0	4/05/2007 11:27
Results	0	0	5/09/2007 3:04 P
Results Journal	65	103	9/08/2007 8:28 A

Preliminary thoughts

dream; realising her potential (external and internal)
HN : This is very much tied up with work as well - she is detemined to get this so that she can get her degree
JL: at this initial interview, I get the impression that JL is so caught up in other aspects of her life that her determination is to survive
KH: Is use to battling in life and she regards university as just another battle
SA: recognition of the sacrifices that family have made and so she is determined to get through the course alse she is focussed on your future goals - she can see herself teaching

31/05/2007 10:00 AM

In fact, that suggests two possible alternatives mentioned by students; either:
- A determination to survive first year (CM; CR; JL; CW; KH, LB, NB, SA
- A determination to succeed in first year (CWilk; HN; CS; AA, KG

As SA says:

I'm just aiming to pass, aim to pass and that way you will be surprised with your results I reckon yeah but yeah just a lot of hard work in the next four weeks

FUTURE SELF: Refer to Hostmanshof and Zimitat and their writings on future selves - I mention this in the reflective journal from last year.

Figure 7: The 'Preliminary Thoughts' journal was used to reflect upon emerging links between the data and the literature.

Retrospective Journal

Name	Nodes
Key research areas and questions	5
Preliminary thoughts	0
Results	0
Results Journal	65
Retrospective Journal	0

Results Journal

9/08/2007 8:29 AM
This results journal will provide the following in relation to queries

Time the query
Explain / describe the query
Outline the results
Explore the significance
9/08/2007 9:41 AM

I starting on my first model and I decided to look at each of the participants individually and look at items coding each of the participants in relation to:
Motivations to arrive
Motivations to persist
Personal feelings
Personal characteristics

I have modelled for both Catherine and Annie and I am already struck by the number of things - firstly both of these students have been coded at resolute and determined and both have a combinations of *tangible and intangible* factors leading to their decision to attend - Not sure if this is exactly the right word(s) but I am thinking about measurable specific goals like a better job or to help people, as opposed to having a love of learning and a need or desire? I may need to consider this further

However, I have just realised that these models may not just specfically relate to the beginning of the journey as I did not run queries according to the time of the interviews.

Figure 8: The results journal that enabled the data to be examined conceptually and analytically.

Sources Coded
Code At ... In ...

Links
- Memo Links
- See Also Links
- Annotations

Look for: Search In Find Now Clear

Memo Links

Item Name	Item Folder	Memo Name	Memo Folder
NB01	Documents\Interviews	Memo to NB	Memos
people-actors-things\Children	Tree Nodes	-Children-	Memos
Personal characteristics\Determined	Tree Nodes	Persistence determination	Memos
Personal Details\Beliefs	Tree Nodes	Beliefs	Memos
Personal Details\Beliefs\University as op	Tree Nodes	Memo to reason for doing this course (2)	Memos
Personal Details\Education	Tree Nodes	Educational Background	Memos
Personal Details\Failing = worst thing	Tree Nodes	Fear of failure	Memos
Personal Details\Finances	Tree Nodes	Investment - financial	Memos
Personal Details\Personal - Family detail	Tree Nodes	Memo to First in the family status	Memos
Personal Details\Why here-course	Tree Nodes	Why here	Memos
Personal Details\Work Descriptive	Tree Nodes	References to current employment	Memos
Reactions (others)	Tree Nodes	Reactions	Memos
Realities - institutional	Tree Nodes	Realities	Memos
Realities - institutional\Assumed knowle	Tree Nodes	Memo to Barriers Internal	Memos
Realities - institutional\Confusion	Tree Nodes	Memo to isolating Institutional frameworks	Memos
Realities - institutional\Different to expect	Tree Nodes	Memo to Expectations	Memos
Relationships= nature & role	Tree Nodes	Relationships	Memos
SA01	Documents\Interviews	Memo to SA	Memos
SP01	Documents\Interviews	Memo to SP	Memos
SS01	Documents\Interviews	Memo to SS	Memos
Stages\Assignments	Tree Nodes	Assignments	Memos
Stages\Before arriving	Tree Nodes	-Before arriving-	Memos
Stages\Beginnings (wk1 - 6)	Tree Nodes	-Beginning stages of study-	Memos
Strategies = students	Tree Nodes	Strategies-	Memos

- Sources
- Nodes
- Sets
- Queries
- Models

Figure 9: A list of memos that are hyperlinked to the tree nodes and interview transcripts.