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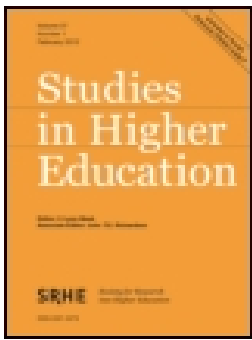
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# Competing worlds: the private lives of women nurse students and gender equity in higher education

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## ABSTRACT

A longitudinal qualitative study of undergraduate women nursing students demonstrated the profound and pervasive influence of the heterosexual intimate relationship on their university engagement and achievement. Hitherto, the importance of women's private lives have been underappreciated in the arenas of student equity and retention. The study showed that traditional ideas of gender held within the intimate relationship were highly detrimental to student autonomy and capacity to engage, and that the university's organisation and delivery of the curriculum exacerbated the situation. Participants made personal sacrifices, which, while enabling continuation of their studies, were deleterious to academic achievement and wellbeing. For eight women, this involved separation from their partners. These results have generic implications given the renewed focus on gender equity in higher education. They have specific implications for nurse education, given the rising numbers of mature-age women nurse students, and predicted nursing workforce shortages.

## KEYWORDS

Women; gender; intimate relationship; university experience; equity

## Introduction

### *Gender, student opportunity and the higher education equity agenda*

Recent changes in the HE equity agenda bring a heightened requirement of universities to evaluate their approach to gender equity through their teaching, organisational governance, culture, research and leadership. The extent to which universities achieve this is recognised in annual University Impact Rankings (Sustainable Development Solutions Network Australia/ Pacific 2017). Reducing inequity among women academics and support staff in HE is central to the Athena Swan Charter for Gender Equity in HE. Understanding how women students experience university, and the way their private lives influence their ability to graduate, is arguably fundamental to the achievement of gender equity.

Equity for women students relies on the HE sector recognising the complex nature of gender and its impact on opportunity. Gender is 'one of the central organizing principles around which social life revolves' (Kimmel 2004, 5). In the Western world, from the late 1800s, masculinity has largely been defined by men's paid work and femininity by women's relationships within the domestic sphere (Connell 2005). Although in many OECD nations these divisions have been continually diluted as women enter the employment market, in Australia, where many women work part-time, they

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remain strong (ABS 2016). These gender divisions are further polarised in heterosexual intimate relationships (Fischer 2013; Ingraham 2004). Such divisions have a substantial influence on a woman's autonomy, power and opportunity that disproportionately disadvantage them within society (WHO 2010).

Australian public sector organisations, including universities, have displayed a tendency to distance women's personal lives from their equity remit (Connell 2005). This distancing is also evident in the international student experience research. A key example is Vincent Tinto's body highly influential body of work on student retention and success (Dewberry and Jackson 2018). Until recently, Tinto perceived the student's private life as a secondary influence on retention and success, and as an issue beyond immediate institutional control. As such Tinto has regarded efforts to address its impact as limited in value (Tinto 1975, 1993, 2012).

Tinto's most recent publication 'Through the Eyes of the Student' (2017) acknowledges the impact of external responsibilities – including gender – on retention, however this is limited to a discussion of their influence on student perception. HE gender equity requires a wider focus that considers the influence of the university's processes and structures on women students' opportunity. To understand this, the study explored the university experiences of women nurse students who began university in a heterosexual intimate relationship.

## Background

### *Nurse students and their importance*

Nurses were specifically chosen for this study because of the intensifying nursing workforce shortage, which in Australia, is estimated to reach 27% by 2025 (HWA 2012). Against this uncertain future, it is essential to support the university success of nurse students. This requires an awareness of the factors influencing their success.

Nursing was also chosen because of the high representation of mature-age women students choosing the discipline. Women represent approximately 90% of nurse students in Australia (HWA 2012) and is increasingly attractive to older individuals. In 2014, nursing degrees in Australia attracted three times more mature-age students (aged 20 years or over on commencement) than school-leavers (aged 17–19 years old) (DET 2015). In the UK, the ongoing rise in older nursing students means they are now regarded as a 'rich and necessary source of recruitment for the nursing profession' (Donaldson, McCallum, and Lafferty 2010, 655).

This demographic change means more nurse students are likely to live in a household with a partner rather than a parent and will have roles and responsibilities associated with this relationship that compete with their studies.

### *The intimate relationship, the discipline of nursing, heterosexuality and traditional ideas of gender*

Gender as a social construct has a substantial influence on an individual's decision-making power, authority and opportunity (WHO 2010). It acts as a way society understands femininity and masculinity and the social hierarchy between women and men (Ingraham 2004). Individual gender perspectives can be viewed on a continuum from the highly traditional, which concurs with the idea of discreet gender roles, to the liberal, where this idea is less rigid (Baxter and Hewitt 2014). International evidence indicates women nurse students tend to align with traditional ideas of gender, and privilege their role as partner and mother above other life choices (Delnat 2019; Price et al. 2013). While nurses are increasingly autonomous and highly skilled professionals, evidence points to a continued subservience towards medical doctors that reflects traditional feminine and masculine gender expectations (Choperena and Fairman 2018; Treiber and Jones 2015).

A second social construct central to this study, and inherently interrelated to gender, is heterosexuality. In the late 1990s, scholars began to question the idea of heterosexuality as the norm, and increasingly viewed it as a variable that influences human interactions and outcomes (Ingraham 2004). Within society, gender is defined and organised from a heteronormative perspective, the patriarchal hegemony invoking power imbalances between women and men (Fischer 2013). By accepting heterosexuality as the dominant norm, rather than an 'organizing institution' gendered power inequality is accepted and internalised (Ingraham 2004, 4). If heterosexual couples marry, gender roles can polarise further into distinct 'masculine' and 'feminine' role. Within traditional constructions of marriage, men are expected to be the breadwinner. In this situation, the heterosexual intimate relationship enhances men's autonomy, while constraining women's (Ingraham 2004).

Socio-educational background is also associated with traditional gender beliefs (Baxter and Hewitt 2014). In Australia, nursing and mature-age women students often come from lower socioeconomic-status backgrounds (DET 2015), associated with more traditional ideas of their own position in society, with their role as home maker and mother central to their idea of femininity.

This body of evidence suggests women nurse student who are in an intimate relationship may be particularly aligned with traditional ideas of gender. This has potential implications for these students, who may find the demands of university incompatible with the responsibilities of their private lives.

### ***The university experiences of women students' in an intimate relationship***

Although research on the university experience of mature-age women students abound, few have focused solely on those who study while in a heterosexual intimate relationship. An integrative literature review in 2015, and revisited in 2020, found their experiences are usually reported within wider studies on the mature-age or first-in-family student experience, the latter referring to students who are the first person in their family of origin or current family to go to university (Andrew et al. 2015). The body of evidence presented here is largely drawn from such studies. To support the authenticity of this evidence, only findings clearly associated with women students who are in a heterosexual intimate relationships are included.

An analysis of the international literature demonstrates partner support as a crucial influence on women students' capacity to participate, cope and succeed at university. Studies on women's university experiences from the UK and Australia report inadequate levels of support from male partners (Kevern and Webb 2004; O'Shea 2014; O'Shea and Stone 2011; Wainwright and Marandet 2010). A further Australian study reported how 'an unsupportive husband or partner was cited by several female respondents as a cause of stress, impacting their ability to study' (Morrison and Cowley 2017, 6). In this mixed gender study, none of the male students reported a lack of female partner support. An earlier Australian study with women only as participants, reported one participant's description of women student peers who had been 'actively and passively sabotaged [by their husbands and partners] during their studies'. This participant reported her own husband's support as a 'luxury' (Debenham and May 2005, 97). The lack of support referred to in these studies concerns the imbalance in the division of household labour and family care. Wainwright and Marandet (2010, 460) identified a 'strong gender dimension' in the expectations of women students to continue a traditional role of home maker and main child-carer while at university.

The implications of this lack of support are two-fold. The first concerns the women's capacity to continue at university. Although rarely interpreted in depth, USA and Irish studies of mature-age women students have cited 'family responsibilities or issues' as major influences on attrition (Kevern and Webb 2004). The second concerns its impact on intimate relationship itself, with rising tensions and conflict reported for both first-in-family women university students in Australia and mature-age women in the UK (Kevern and Webb 2004; O'Shea 2014; Wainwright and Marandet 2010). These studies indicate women students in a heterosexual intimate relationship may be vulnerable to insufficient partner support and relationship difficulties that could impact on their capacity to

succeed at university. By interviewing successful students across their degree journey, this study aims to develop a meaningful understanding of these potential challenges as well as the factors that supported their success.

## **Methodology – employing a hermeneutic approach to understanding**

The application of Gadamer's philosophy and its central tenets of language and conversation, authority, reflection and prejudice (1965) underpinned the study's design and supported a nuanced interpretation of the participants' university experiences.

The study's qualitative approach was particularly suited to research with previously unconsidered population groups, such as women students in heterosexual intimate relationships in HE (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). Taken from the participant's perspective, this approach has supported the development of an authentic understanding of these students' university experience.

## ***Data collection and analysis***

The study took place in a large Western Australian University between 2015 and 2016. Ethical clearance was gained through the University's Ethics Board, and anonymity was ensured through pseudonyms. As conversations may have elicited emotional recall of personal events, participants were made aware of student counselling services. The first author, who completed all interviews, was not employed in the School of Nursing. This reduced the risk that the students may feel obliged to take part, or be influenced by the dependent or unequal relationship of teacher and student. Purposive sampling was used to recruit women students enrolled in the Bachelor of Science (Nursing) degree. Only women who began their studies while in a heterosexual intimate relationship (married or de facto) were selected. As the study was interested in understanding the experiences of Australian women, students on temporary international visas were excluded. Participants were recruited through student university social media and university email. The first author also promoted the research during lectures in core units. A participant letter was shared with interested students, detailing the aim of the study.

Research intent on understanding women's experiences must employ a non-hierarchical approach to interviewing that encourages cooperation, trust and co-construction of meaning (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). This was facilitated in the form of one-to-one, in-depth conversational-style interviews between the participant and first author. Interviews were loosely structured around three main questions:

- (1) Tell me about your decision to come to university? Is there a particular story around it that you would share with me?
- (2) Let's talk about your experiences at university and what you feel influenced these experiences?
- (3) What were the main influences on your degree journey?

Twenty-nine participants completed an initial interview in their second year of study, with 23 of these women taking part in a second interview in the final semester of their degree, usually around 12 months after the first interview. The other six participants were either abroad (2) or unable to complete a second interview due to study and work commitments (4). In the initial interview, participants recalled their degree journey from commencement to date (Questions 1–3). In the second interview, they focused on current and future issues as they moved towards graduation (Questions 2 and 3); while also reflecting on earlier events (Question 1). Rigour was embedded through a range of strategies. Conversations were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Prolonged engagement was achieved, with interviews lasting between 50 and 90 min. Data saturation was determined after four successive interviews provided no new information to support the creation of understanding. Member checking was also undertaken,

with a summary of an interpretation of each conversation shared with every participant. Participants reported a high level of agreement with this interpretation and minimal adjustments were needed.

The 52 in-depth interviews were thematically analysed using Gadamer's ideas of the hermeneutic circle and fusion of horizons. The analysis took place concurrently with data collection. Ideas that emerged from this process were included in successive interviews through a series of prompts.

The text was studied using a circular process, which involved the first author reading the whole transcript and then moving to a detailed examination of words and sentences and back again. Initial codes were added to phrases and sentences. As successive interviews were transcribed new codes were created and added data to existing codes. In comparing and contrasting codes, subthemes were developed and expanded. From this, an interrelationship between subthemes and overarching themes were developed. Interview transcripts were revisited multiple times for further examples. This process continued over many months, both during and after the data collection period.

To create authentic and credible findings, an awareness of researcher bias is essential. According to Gadamer, prejudices can enhance or inhibit the process of interpretation (Gadamer 1965). Throughout the research process, the first author recorded her understandings and changing views. Reflection on this material promoted an examination of perspectives from other angles and led her to visit and revisit theoretical viewpoints that could enhance her understanding of participants' perspectives and social reality. NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software supported data management and initial organisation into codes and categories. The analysis of data was not separated into interview 1 or 2, as data from each often overlapped. Some women discussed commencement factors in their second interview, for example. Instead, data were analysed and organised into themes, which often reflected the student journey but did so in an organic, evolving manner.

## Findings

### *Participant demographics*

Using the definition adopted by Bradley et al. (2008), 28 of the 29 participants were mature-age students (aged 20 years or over on commencement), mean age 34.5 years. All were in a heterosexual intimate relationship, most were married, and 22 had dependent children living at home aged under 18 years. The majority were first-in-family students, with 27 participants being the first generation of their family of origin to go to university, and 23 the first sibling in their family of origin to attend university. In addition, 23 women were the first partner in their current family to go to university.

Most participants had not studied formally for many years, and had used non-traditional pathways into university, such as a portfolio of experience. These participants could be categorised as non-traditional students – a group known to face disadvantage at university (Thomas and Quinn 2007) and who are likely to hold traditional ideas of gender (Baxter and Hewitt 2014).

### *Themes*

Six themes were identified from conversation analysis and interpretation. These themes demonstrate the central influence of gender and the university's structure and processes on the women's commencement, capacity to engage, continue and achieve in their degree. Direct quotes are organised as follows: quote (pseudonym, relationship status and length in years, and number of dependent children living at home).

### *Ideas of gender within the intimate relationship*

Participants discussed how before they began university, the responsibilities within their intimate relationship were set along traditional gender lines. Each had carried the burden of domestic

work and childcare – independent of additional duties, such as paid work. Typically, partners' responsibilities were described as 'outside' the house:

He'd do the garden ... I'd cook and clean and do the washing and the shopping. (Charlotte, 30, cohab 2, ch 1)

The interviews revealed a strong identification with traditional gendered norms among participants:

I'm a traditional person ... even from being a teenager, I always just wanted to get married and have kids. (Frankie, 32, m 14, ch 3)

These women appeared attracted to the aspects of nursing regarded as 'traditionally female', often describing themselves as caring, and nurturing, and associating these qualities with their idea of the nursing role:

I guess just the caring, the thought that is what I was good at. [Nursing] It seemed like an obvious choice. (Paige, 23, cohab 3, ch 0)

Participants described their partner as having traditional ideas of gender, seeing themselves as the family breadwinner.

### *'Putting off' university to meet the needs of the family*

Paradoxically, although the participants' identification with traditional female roles drew them to nursing, their commitment to these responsibilities delayed their decision to begin their degree. Those with children saw their principal role as a mother and main caregiver, and few began university before their children were at least primary school age. These mothers were unequivocal in rejecting the possibility of starting earlier. A commonly expressed belief was that young children needed their mother's full attention, making commitment to study impossible:

I certainly wasn't going to do it until my youngest ... I just thought you know, I'll put that on the backburner and wait till my youngest goes to school. (Candice, 40, m 14, ch 3)

The idea of the man as the main earner was also implicated in the decision to delay commencement. From the participants' perspective, their partners' careers took precedence. Complementing this, most participants adopted stay-at-home roles, or took more menial part-time positions that fitted around the family:

I wanted to be a stay at home mum if I could, so that was the decision that was made. So I raised my kids, had sort of small odd jobs to fit into school hours once they started school. (Kim, 40, cohab 2, ch 2)

Participants described moving from location to location following their partners' employment, and taking flexible paid work that 'fitted around' his job:

I've always been the one that's compromised in whatever I've gone, and [whatever I've] done as a job. (Elise, 34, m 4, ch 2)

This combination of priorities created a situation in which these women compromised their nursing career ambitions, often for many years.

### *Maintaining the gendered status quo within the home following commencement*

The extent to which internalised traditional gendered norms existed in the intimate relationship is evident in the finding that only three women and their partners renegotiated their domestic duties after commencement. A shared theme among these three women was adopting non-gendered roles before they began their relationship with their current partner. These women reported they found it relatively easy to share household tasks with their partner, and therefore devote more time to their study.

The other 26 women continued to perform the bulk of domestic responsibilities. In the early stages of their degree, few questioned this division of roles, describing it as the norm within



male/female relationships. These women described their initial reluctance to seek help, which seemed to be underpinned by their desire to continue to fulfil their traditional female roles at home:

It's my personal thing of wanting to be the perfect wife and mother. (Frankie, 32, m 14, ch 3)

The women commonly talked about feeling guilty about their decision to study and perceived it a selfish act. They therefore wanted to minimise the impact of their decision on their family. Participants' justified their reluctance to ask for help by their reported belief in their partner's inability to adequately complete domestic tasks, with stories of domestic disasters, such as burning shirts while ironing commonly recounted. Participants often attributed their partners' inability to complete housework to their gender. For example, Paige (24, cohab 3, ch 0) explained her partner's inability to work the washing machine with the words: 'he's a boy ... so he's not really domestic', while Anne (38, m 15, ch 3) described her partner's lack of parental involvement by saying: 'he's a real boy ... he doesn't connect on the same level [with the children's needs]'. Many women described how their partners lacked awareness of the work requiring attention in the home. Chantelle's (38, m 8, ch 3) description of this as 'male selective blindness' suggests a perspective that this was not an inherent masculine trait, but was a strategy her husband adopted to avoid doing domestic work.

The interviews suggested that partners also desired to maintain the status quo. According to participants, none volunteered domestic support when they began university. Participants often suggested this was due to their partner's ongoing identification with the role of breadwinner:

In his eyes he works long hours and so that's not his role. (Maureen, 48, m 22, ch 2)

These findings describe a situation where participants and partners were passively complicit in maintaining the existing state of affairs, with traditional gender ideas sustaining the dynamic where partner support was neither sought, nor was readily available.

### *Navigating the single student's habitat of higher education*

The participants tended to begin university with limited academic literacy. This, and a lack of computer literacy limited their capacity to engage in learning materials. Even the few participants who had previously studied at university struggled with the electronic learning environment:

When I studied last time, everything was paper. We handed in a paper assignment, you went to the library etc. Now everything's online and the learning of Blackboard and the library system and looking at journals. It was mind boggling for me. (Kim, 40, cohab 2, ch 2)

The university offered academic and computer skills support services, however, as they were not embedded in classroom sessions, competing family demands limited their accessibility.

I actually haven't gone to any (workshops) yet, I've always wanted to but of course hard because the times they are on, I'm working or doing something else, because they're only on certain days. (Marla, 21, cohab 2, ch 0)

A lack of timely delivery of learning materials also affected the accessibility of learning opportunities:

It [lecture content] was always by 5pm on the Friday before the following week, it was meant to be up, and the amount of times over the last year that they were never up and it was really frustrating. It's about organisation isn't it? Because you know, I think maybe they think we can do it the day before but you have to plan your life around your family and your uni, around your life. (Ros, 40, m 7, ch 2)

The timing of lectures and tutorials were also problematic, especially for participants with dependent children. Evening classes were unpopular:

I never got to evening lectures ... I think critical care 5.30 to 7.30 that was just ridiculous to think anybody can get there at that time who has got kids ... that's football time dinner time you know people are out and about. (Michelle, 40, m 10, ch 2)

From the second semester, students spent increasing blocks of time in clinical practice placements. To be accessible, paid work, family time, childcare and study time required careful planning.

Insufficient partner support meant this organisation was often the participant's sole responsibility. The university released details of clinical placement dates and locations at the start of each semester. Placements early in semester left participants just days to find childcare and reorganise paid work. Perhaps not surprisingly, participants with dependent children found this particularly difficult:

You have one week at uni and then you're supposed to be going out on prac, well when are we supposed to find out when we are going? And organise child care and all that sort of stuff. There's no flexibility there. (Elise, 34, m 4, ch 2)

The timing of the release of participants' shift rosters within their clinical placement was also problematic. Most students were informed one to two weeks before they began, with some informed on their first day. Again, childcare and paid work were disrupted, causing additional stress:

Pracs [are] horrendous when you've got a young family ... that is crazy you are given a time to turn up for your first day and you are told there and then you are given your off duty ... you can't organise. I hate that aspect of it ... I think until (the university) and the hospitals understand that they've lost some really good people ... because it's too hard to organise the family sometimes. (Candice, 40, m 14, ch 3)

Clinical placement locations were not planned with the student's home address in mind. Participants commonly described their frustration at these logistical issues:

That just seems to be a logical thing for me ... that everyone gets put into area of post code and the closest one possible. I know it's not always possible but most of the time surely. I'm sure there are situations where one girl is travelling two hours this way and another girl is travelling two hours that way ... that may be their breaking point, they might go 'I can't do this'. (Keturah, 20, cohab 2, ch 0)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the clinical practice period became a significant source of stress across the course of the degree.

### *Testing gender roles within the intimate relationship*

The ongoing pressure of competing family demands took their toll on the women's capacity to manage their degrees. As the situation became untenable, participants described a gradual 'waking up' to their circumstances and a growing realisation of the need for change in their home life:

It was a rude wakeup call ... eventually I was like, I can't be superwoman all the time. (Maggie, 44, m 20, ch 2)

Over time, partners' refusal to provide practical support became a major source of relationship tension:

I think probably the hardest thing is, when I'm studying I just think 'just take the kids out, just for a couple of hours, do something with them'. He hasn't done that, you know you sometimes just think 'oh come on'. (Ros, 40, m 7, ch 2)

As practice placements lengthened from one to nine weeks across the curriculum, time away from home was met with increased resentment from partners. Participants also experienced increasing complaints from children:

My children said to me at the end of the six weeks: 'Oh we haven't seen you for weeks, we really missed you'. I don't know whether they missed me or whether it was that fact that they had to fend for themselves. They didn't like it, no, no, they didn't like it. (Jilly, 45, m 18, ch 2)

Participants described how the resultant stress further reduced their capacity to devote time to their degree:

I'm aware that I'm being pulled in these different directions, and I'm quite aware that I'm getting stressed out and the knock on effect that it's having. (Anne, 38, m 15, ch 3)

Family tension presented an ongoing challenge to the women's progression, with many describing how by the end of the degree, their relationship was in severe difficulty. Kylie, for example, described how she and her partner were 'just hanging on together', while Sharon reported her relationship as 'falling apart and getting really bad'.

### *Sacrifice and compromise as strategies for success*

Where partners appeared unwilling to concede, the women adopted a range of ‘work around’ strategies that generally involved personal sacrifices and compromises in order to continue their degree. For example, sleep was fitted in around family responsibilities so deadlines could be met:

It [study time] could be 12, 12.30, last night it was more like one I think it was so it's late pretty much every night. When the kids are there it's just too hard. (Rebecca, 43, cohab 20, ch 4)

Participants also described how they had cut out exercise, hobbies and socialising to fit in study, and observed their health suffered as a result. Unwanted weight gain resulted as physical activity was rationed and fast food increasingly relied on. Emotional health was also affected; women commonly recalled highly stressful situations where they felt unable to cope with multiple duties and feelings of guilt, resentment and tension at home.

Once participants became more computer literate, online learning became an option. For some, this was essential to their ability to continue. Again, however, notions of gender challenged the women's capacity to fully engage:

If I'm at home and I'm listening to it ... my attention isn't as focused ... I'm thinking, 'I'll put a load of laundry on'. Being here [on campus] it's focus time, I can't do anything else, I can't do laundry, I can't vacuum, can't cook dinner. (Kim, 40, cohab 2, ch 2)

Further problems with online units included the use of old materials and unclear audio recordings of lectures:

I felt like on-campus you know, you sit in a classroom and least you've got your tutor there, you can bombard her with questions. I feel like if you're in class, the content that they are teaching is towards exams so you've got an advantage, whereas I feel that on-line you've got to sort of work out which ... [is important]. (Marla, 21, cohab 2, ch 0)

Although some participants described how online learning lowered their achievement, they also described it as a necessary compromise that enabled their continuation.

Most participants described how they initially strove for top grades and a deep understanding of course content. Over time, the impact of their life outside the university affected their ability to achieve this. Ultimately for some, personal expectations were consciously lowered:

My aim was to get an HD in everything if possible, but then when everything was thrown at me, work and everything, I realised it was not possible for me to put in the time. So I have to compromise. (Ruth, 38, m 14, ch 1)

For eight participants, the tension in their relationship eventually led to separation from partners during their degree. Most described how they had initiated this separation in order to stay at university. The relationship breakdown had a mixed, but profound effect on progression. These women had rarely received any help at home with domestic work and had coped with resentful and sometimes obstructive attitudes. In this context, separation enabled them to refocus on their studies. Some expressed relief:

I know it sounds terrible like I'm winning from the separation. I'm still doing everything that I always did, you know. But now I have more time 'cause he takes the kids ... [at weekends]. I don't feel like I have to walk on eggshells all the time, because me saying I have to study all the time would get his back up. (Lauren, 32, m 4, ch 4)

Separation nevertheless raised new challenges. Participants struggled with its emotional impact. Chantelle (38, m 8, ch 3) recalled how she ‘almost screwed up’ [her studies] in the semester she and her husband separated.

The challenges of becoming a ‘single-parent student’ were manifold. Access to clinical placements became a key issue. The university's response to requests for support varied, with Frankie's request for more late shifts – required to meet her childcare needs – denied. This participant recalled

how an academic staff member described nursing as a 'non-flexible degree' in a 'non-flexible environment' (Frankie, 32, m 14, ch 3).

Three of the women who separated from partners had seriously considered leaving university. To continue, each had to transfer to part-time study and accept help from extended family.

## Discussion

In following the journey of successful students, this study has revealed a series of challenges to progression and achievement as well as strategies and support mechanisms essential to success. The findings demonstrate the interwoven importance of the individual, the intimate relationship and the university's structures and processes.

Of central importance is the women's private life and the perception and expression of gender within the heterosexual intimate relationship. In many ways, the undergraduate nursing degree represented 'a perfect storm' of challenges for these women, who, like students in previous nursing studies (Delnat 2019; Price et al. 2013), began their degree with traditional gender role ideas. While these ideas attracted them to nursing, they also influenced their prioritisation of family, delayed their degree commencement and inhibited their capacity for optimum university engagement. Similarly, partners' fixed ideas of themselves as breadwinner left them reluctant to share domestic roles.

These women also began their degree with limited academic and computer literacy, common in first-in-family students (Thomas and Quinn 2007) and intrinsically linked to student success (McKay and Devlin 2014). This situation can be conceptualised in terms of cultural capital: the language, values, experiences and ways of knowing recognised by HE (Bourdieu 1986). The women's lack of cultural capital expected by the university meant they were initially poorly equipped to navigate the expectations of HE, and the university's reliance on extra-curricular support sessions reduced their capacity to remedy this.

The situation was exacerbated by the university's lack of timely communication of information and unhelpful class timetabling. Previous research on mature-age nurse student retention has highlighted the importance of timely and explicit communication of placement information (Kevern and Webb 2004). In denying this communication and the opportunity to influence decisions around placement times and locations, the university disempowered these women of their ability to effectively organise and plan their clinical experiences.

To continue to graduation, these women were compelled to make a series of compromises. As with the mature-age women in the study by Stone and O'Shea (2013), they sacrificed leisure time, exercise, hobbies and social interactions to squeeze in time for study around family responsibilities. The finding that some participants felt their health had suffered as a result of these compromises is important, given that previous research has highlighted a reciprocal relationship between student wellbeing and engagement and learning (Kahu, Nelson, and Picton 2017). Although not directly discussed by participants, these compromises are also likely to have had a negative impact on achievement.

In the present study, the stress within the family home reduced participants' capacity to engage with study and achieve the grades they desired. Ultimately, these women consciously lowered their personal achievement ambitions. This 'adjustment of sights', previously reported among women mature-age students (Kevern and Webb 2004), was necessary to allow continuation.

For eight, the ultimate sacrifice was separation, which while freeing the women to study, nevertheless had significant financial, emotional and practical ramifications. While it's arguable that every student is likely to make some compromises to succeed, the severe and sometimes life changing nature of the compromises these women made seems inequitable.

In choosing to study nursing at university, these women entered an education system originally designed for single men, to prepare for entry into a profession initially reserved for single women. These findings suggest university nurse education continues to be informed by the vision of the

student as a single, fully autonomous decision maker, able to prioritise university over family and plan schedule changes at short notice.

These findings are incongruous with today's focus of equity in HE. Australian and international universities are increasingly signing up to the Athena Swan equity agenda, and pursuing its prestigious bronze and silver award schemes (Advance HE, nd). As a result, the influence of gender on the career journeys of women in HE is increasingly under scrutiny. In contrast, the influence of gender on the university journey of an increasing population of mature-age women students is relatively neglected and women student such as those involved in this research continue to experience significant challenges. To address this, a greater focus is required on providing accessible quality learning opportunities, informed by an understanding of the influence of women students' private lives on their autonomy and opportunity in HE.

## Limitations

This study required participants to recall past events, and so was dependent on memory. Findings reflect the participants' perspectives, and not those of partners. Although this limits a full understanding of relationship dynamics, it ensures the findings remain true to the study aim, which was to understand from the woman's perspective.

The study is contextualised to Western Australian women nurse students. While specific findings may not be transferable, what can be transferred with some confidence is that gender issues can lead to inequity of opportunity for women who study while in a heterosexual intimate relationship. This makes the findings highly pertinent to other vocational courses such as paramedicine and education.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The university's approach described in this study is becoming less congruent with the needs of the nurse student demographic and the re-emerging agenda of gender equity. This is concerning, given the growing dependence on mature-age women students to supply the nursing workforce that will be increasingly important in an ageing population.

Although scholars of the university experience have questioned the value of efforts to reduce the disadvantages associated with women students' private lives, this study has, by listening to women's voices, identified practical actions that universities can adopt to make a difference. The use of timely communication, the embedding of academic and computer skills and the considerate planning of mandatory classes and practice placements would better support engagement opportunities for mature-age women nurse students. More broadly, a shared awareness of gender as a factor reducing women students' autonomy and choice, and further dedicated research into this, is required.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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