Women who Study: Balancing the Dual Roles of Postgraduate Student and Mother

Bailey Bosch

Edith Cowan University

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Women who Study:

Balancing the Dual Roles of Postgraduate Student and Mother

Bailey Bosch
Bachelor of Science (Honours)
Master of Counselling

School of Psychology
Faculty of Computing, Health and Science
Edith Cowan University

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the award of the degree of
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Edith Cowan University

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
BALANCING THE DUAL ROLES OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENT AND MOTHER

Abstract

Although the value of educating mothers has been established in the previous research, little is known about the experiences of mothers who participate in higher education. What is known supports a largely negative portrayal of the experience; it seems that it is a difficult journey, filled with tension.

This thesis reports on an exploration of the experiences of mothers who are postgraduate students in Australia. The research comprised of two phases: the first phase was a narrative study of the experiences of 14 Australian postgraduate student mothers. The second phase comprised of a Q-method study of 75 postgraduate student mothers, where Q-method is a technique that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative components. In addition, there was a precursor study was undertaken to ensure variety in the Q-statements, as well as a follow-up study which checked for confirmability of the Q-study interpretation.

The findings showed that studying impacted on almost every facet of a woman’s life. Postgraduate student mothers juggled childcare and timetabling issues and, for some, their main challenge was a lack of support. They overcame these difficulties with highly developed organisation and time-management skills, oftentimes with partner support, and by sacrificing sleep and recreation time. The women were strongly motivated by the desire for personal achievement, and the opportunity to create a better future for their children. Postgraduate education rewarded student mothers with a sense of freedom, growth, pride and achievement, as well as developing their professional identity.

The results of this research program demonstrated that postgraduate education provided women with a major opportunity to grow and develop their personal abilities while raising their children. This fresh perspective offers an alternative, and more positive snapshot of life as a student mother, and contrasts with the previously reported experience in the literature.
Copyright and Access Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

(i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

(ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

(iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signed……… ........................................

Date……20 July 2013…………………………..
Acknowledgements

I would sincerely like to thank my supervisors, Professor Lynne Cohen and Dr. Ken Robinson from the School of Psychology at Edith Cowan University. I would particularly like to thank Dr. Robinson for the help he has given me this year. Having a supportive and encouraging supervisor has made this overwhelming task achievable. I am incredibly thankful to all the women who participated in this research. Without their willingness to open their lives to me, none of this would have been possible. My hope is that other women reading their stories will be encouraged by their strength and tenacity and find inspiration in their words. I would like to sincerely thank Bev Lurie for putting so much time and effort into bringing this work up to an acceptable standard, and for all the assistance she has given me. Bev has also been an excellent support and source of encouragement and I thank her sincerely. I would like to thank my siblings, family and friends for their encouragement and faith in me, and my nieces and nephews for bringing me such joy. Kezia, Connor, Innika, Luka, Darcy, Adaley, Saul, Jessica, Havah, Zac, Danni, Zinzan, Maddox and Delilah, Colin, Aline and Sharon. Thanks everyone. I would like to make a special mention of my sister Darcy who has shown enormous courage and strength of character and is a source of inspiration to us all.

To my husband Alex, who has always done his best to help me during these years. He has taken the kids on many adventures, pounded the pavement with the pushchair and wandered around the shops - all so that I could work in peace. He has also cooked, cleaned and is an all-round excellent example of what a real man is. I thank him especially for his unwavering confidence in me and his pride in everything I do. This journey has been so much easier because of Alex and all he has done to help me achieve my goals. I only wish more women were as lucky as I am. I would like to thank my three children for
simply being! To paraphrase one of the women in the study - they are reason I work so hard. My hope is that when you are all older, you will look upon my efforts with pride.

I reserve my final and most heartfelt thanks for my mother and father. I was born to parents who raised us with approval, acceptance, encouragement and praise. I was given both roots and wings and learnt that any dream was there for the taking. I know with absolute conviction that I will always have a soft place to fall, and with that knowledge I have grabbed every opportunity I have wanted to. I know many people are not so lucky. These two incredible people have been the most brilliant role models I could ever have asked for. Words are simply inadequate to express how grateful I am for everything they have done for me, and particularly over the last year when they were literally and figuratively speaking, left holding the baby!

I dedicate this thesis to my parents who taught me to dream big and aim high, and most importantly, to work damn hard!
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Chapter One

The only thing better than education is more education.

From Progress to Freedom (1942) by Agnes E. Benedict, American educator
(1889 -1950)

Introduction

Higher education research is assuming greater importance at the present time. The underlying reason for this is that higher education itself is becoming increasingly valued in developed countries (Tight, 2012). It has moved beyond an elitist system of participation to one where mass participation is encouraged. Technological developments, globalization and increasing international competition have resulted in governments throughout the world increasing their investment in education, training and learning throughout life (Tight, 2012). A report by Thomson (2008) on the role of higher education in the development of countries, described the most basic and common ways in which higher education facilitates national development and social change (see Figure 1 below for a summary). Higher education facilitates the development of human capital which increases a nation’s capacity for economic growth. It also provides individual opportunities for learning and self-growth, and enables wider social and institutional change by bridging theory and practice through critical reflection and action (Thomson, 2008). In turn, research in higher education results in scientific innovations that drive economic growth, and social research provides solutions to specific social, political or legal issues. Higher education providers are well positioned to conduct research in collaboration with local and international organisations for development purposes, and therefore provide a community service (Thomson, 2008).
This thesis highlights the limited research literature on the experiences of postgraduate student mothers in higher education. It gives reasons why the experiences of these women are worthy of further examination, and details the benefits of higher education for women and their families. Given that this research was conducted in Australia, an overview of the Australian higher education system is first provided.

**Overview of the Higher Education System in Australia**

There are 39 public universities in Australia comprising 37 public and two private institutions (Bond University and the University of Notre Dame, Australia). There are also two Australian branches of overseas universities - the campuses of Carnegie Mellon University and Cranfield University in Adelaide.

As labour market demands shift, lifelong learners and older students seeking to upgrade, refresh or complement their knowledge, are entering universities in increasing numbers (Yelland, 2011). In 2010, there were 320,455 postgraduate students in.
BALANCING THE DUAL ROLES OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENT AND MOTHER

Australia, an increase of 4.1% over the previous year’s figures, and in 2011 this number increased by 0.5% to 321,958 (www.deewr.gov.au).

Higher education in Australia is overseen by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency which is the national regulatory and quality agency for higher education. It was established in July 2011 to operate as an independent regulatory body with powers to regulate university and non-university higher education providers, and to monitor and evaluate their quality and standards (www.deewr.gov.au).

The main types of postgraduate education offered in Australia are outlined in Figure 2 below, which shows that the first type of postgraduate education includes graduate certificates and diplomas, best suited to students wishing to build on the skills and knowledge gained from an undergraduate degree. The second type is a Masters degree, which can be based on coursework, research or a combination of both. Masters degrees provide students with specialised knowledge and training for a particular field of study or area of professional practice. Doctoral degrees, the third type of postgraduate education in Australia, consist of research doctorates or professional doctorates. Completion of a doctoral degree requires students to make a significant original contribution to a field of study.

**Figure 2.** Types of Postgraduate Education offered in Australia

Source: www.studiesinaustralia.com
Coursework masters degrees in Australia have a relatively recent history with government deregulation in 1987 leading to significant growth in the emergence and development of these courses (Forsyth, Laxton, Moran, van der Werf & James, 2009). Masters degrees changed from those that prepared students for academic research careers, to those that focused on professional education and training for part-time adult learners (McInnis & James, 1995). As a result, technology was increasingly used to deliver postgraduate coursework degrees (Beattie & James, 1997) to busy professionals who required more flexibility than typical undergraduate students (Forsyth et al., 2009). Postgraduate coursework is desirable because it can fill the gap between research and application by connecting researchers and professional practitioners, research and practice, academic coursework and professional training (Forsyth et al., 2009).

Research examining the history of the PhD in Australia revealed that, with the exception of 1948 when two-thirds of PhDs were awarded to female students, women were in the minority until 2009 (Dobson, 2012). A possible explanation for the 1948 outlier could be the gendered effect of World War Two military service. If that was in fact the case, it took a major social stimulus such as a world war, to change what appears to be an otherwise stable, recurrent and prolonged gender imbalance in PhD awards.

In 1988, women were awarded approximately 27% of all PhDs and were in the minority in all fields of study. By 2009, the number of females awarded PhDs was slightly higher than men by ten students, giving women a majority of 0.17% (Dobson, 2012). Further analysis revealed that an increase in female PhD students was not uniform across all fields of study, with the numbers of female students remaining stable in business, commerce and engineering. While it is relatively straightforward to obtain statistics regarding participation rates of women in the Australian higher education system, the same cannot be said for determining how many of those women are
combining their education and motherhood. The usual sources of information, such as
the Australian Bureau of Statistics, do not publish this data in their higher education
statistics tables, and in Western Australia where this research was conducted, universities
do not collect data on students’ parental status, either at the time of application or during
their candidature. Further attempts to obtain is information were made by the researcher
who contacted all of the universities in Western Australia and student organisations at the
Group of Eight. As the following section demonstrates, there is little research into the
experience of student mothers in higher education.

Research into Higher Education

In an overview of research on higher education, Tight (2012) analysed 567 articles
published during 2010 in 15 specialist academic journals focusing on higher education.
The two themes that dominated higher education research were course design and student
experience, with each accounting for over 100 articles, collectively representing over half
(55%) the articles under review (Tight, 2012). The other themes identified were academic
work, system policy, institutional management and quality, teaching and learning,
knowledge and research. Three methodologies dominated the research: multivariate
analyses (26%), documentary analyses (26%), and interview-based studies (21%). A
review of the themes in relation to the methodologies determined that multivariate
analysis (16%) and interview-based analyses (33.6%) were the most popular methods for
examining student experience. Tight also examined the 204 books on higher education
published in 2010, and determined that 12.7% focused on student experiences, with the

---

1 The Group of Eight consists of the Australian National University, The University of New South Wales,
The University of Adelaide, The University of Queensland, The University of Melbourne, The University of
Western Australia, Monash University and the University of Sydney.
balance predominantly focused on institutional management and course design (together they accounted for 57% of the total).

**Research on the Student Experience.** Tight’s (2012) review examined the research that focused on student experience, and found that it could be organised into six main subthemes. These are outlined in Figure 3 below.

![Diagram of student experience subthemes](image)

*Figure 3. Research into the Student Experience: Six Subthemes (Tight, 2012)*

The review found that the bulk of research into the student experience focused on undergraduate students, particularly full-time undergraduates, as these students made up the core of the student body at most universities (Tight, 2012). Research into “non-traditional” students focused on adult, mature, part-time and distance-mode students, women, international students and students from minority ethnic groups.

The postgraduate experience subtheme was of particular interest for this study. Most of the research in this area centred around the nature and quality of a research degree experience, whether it led to a successful outcome and how it did so (Tight, 2012). It is beneficial to the country as a whole to ensure that students enrolled in higher
education complete their degrees. Post-secondary education is regarded by both government and corporate sectors as a strategic tool to enhance the economic wealth of the nation, since highly qualified personnel are needed to create and maintain invigorated national research and development agendas (McAlpine & Norton, 2006). Determining why students succeed is important to institutions and funders of higher education, so that they can predict which students to support and which to deter from entering higher education (Tight, 2012). Apart from this rather calculated approach, determining why students succeed can provide other students with additional resources and information to apply to their own situations. Based on the review of research literature into the student experience, Tight (2012) recommended specific areas for further research. These are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topics for future research identified from a review of contemporary research into the student experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Examine the experiences of Masters degree students and the role that the Masters degree played in their lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study the experiences of students from minority ethnic groups and other under-researched groups such as those with disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undertake longer-term analyses of the effects of higher education on students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater emphasis on researching the non-vocational, rather than vocational impact, of participation in higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies of people who make repeated use of higher education during their lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigation into the ways universities and their departments select students for entry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further research into students’ social lives and their relation to course experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyses of the impacts of financial arrangements on students’ lives and performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative studies of the experiences of the increasing numbers of working-class students entering higher education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Not only did Tight’s (2012) review highlight the lack of research into the experiences of postgraduate students with children, he also did not include the experiences of these students as a topic for future research. Chapter 2 explains the importance of studying this group of students, and provides a rationale for why future examination of their experiences should be pursued. The main points that will be explored are that graduate student mothers report more role conflict (Pare, 2009) and practice more maternal invisibility (Lynch, 2008) possibly due to the demands of their course and the competitive nature of the postgraduate environment. Furthermore Lynch (2008) suggested that ‘good graduate students’ have an extra pressure to show devotion to their career, a requirement which conflicts with their mothering duties. As a starting point, this study aims to redress the exclusion of this group of students from research into higher education. Appendix P offers a context to the research and the researcher. An overview of the research follows.

Overview of Thesis Structure and Research Program

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the benefits of higher education for both the individual and society more generally. It examines the individual benefits of higher education for mothers as well as their children. This chapter discusses the importance of educating mothers and demonstrates the difficulties of determining how many women combine motherhood with higher education in Australia. Chapter 3 provides the reader with a review of the literature pertaining to mothers in higher education. It highlights the lack of research into student mothers in higher educational institutions, particularly postgraduate student mothers. Chapter 4 describes the research framework for this study and examines the theoretical perspectives that underpin the study. The difficulties of
determining a “best-fit” theoretical framework for the findings of this study are outlined, and a more detailed overview of the qualitative approach and narrative method, including their analysis, is provided.

There were two phases to this research (depicted in Figure 4 below). The first phase was concerned with understanding women’s experiences of combining motherhood and postgraduate study. The aim was to learn how women make sense of and give meaning to their experiences from their own perspectives, and discourse analysis was therefore the chosen methodology. There are many definitions of discourse and discourse analysis but for the purpose of this thesis, discourse is defined as the actual practice of talking and writing (Woodilla, 1998) and discourse analysis is the study of language in use (Gee, 2011). The narrative method was used to obtain the information, and this methodology is described in greater detail in Chapter 4, with the resultant narrative study in Chapter 5.

Figure 4. Overview of Research Program

The second phase of the study measured a group of postgraduate student mothers’ subjective viewpoints in a systematic, rigorous and quantitative way (McKeown & Thomas, 1988). Q-methodology was used to combine the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods (Brown, 1996). In his discussion of the qualitative and quantitative dichotomy, Brown (1996) critiqued the traditional view that researchers need to choose a method and adhere strictly to one or the other. Q-method offers researchers an
alternative, in that it incorporates both quantitative and qualitative components. Q-method emerged from factor-analytic theory in the 1930’s, and has since been used in a variety of different disciplines and subject matters (Brown, 2008). Chapter 6 bridges the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research, and describes how the statements used in the Q-study were generated. Q-methodology is still a relatively unknown method, so a full description is provided in Chapter 7. To further validate the findings of the Q-study, an additional study was undertaken, and this is presented in Chapter 8. Chapter 9 presents an overall discussion of the research program in its entirety and concludes with recommendations for future research. It has been an important element of my research to be aware of my own experiences and to ensure that I have viewed and interpreted the data I have collected from other mothers in an objective way. I commenced this research when my first child was around a year old and during the course of my degree I have been blessed with two more children. I have done my best to view the contents of this thesis with an objective eye and to ensure that I have not put my own interpretations on the data I have collected. In addition to the member-checking studies I undertook, my supervisor and I have also spent many conversations dissecting the findings and examining all the different viewpoints to ensure rigour in the reporting.
Overview

This chapter presents the benefits of higher education for the individual and for society as a whole. The Australian Government stated that “higher education is integral to achieving the Government’s vision of a stronger and fairer Australia. It fuels economic development, productivity and high skilled jobs, and supports Australia’s role as a middle power and leader in the region.” (Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System, 2009, p. 3). A report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Education at a Glance, 2012) showed that Australian university graduates are ranked sixth highest out of the 34 OECD countries in relation to the level of wages earned after graduation. Senator Chris Evans, Minister for Tertiary Education, stated that:

The higher education sector will play an increasingly important role in the growth and prosperity of the Australian economy. The most important thing a Government can do to boost productivity and economic growth is to ensure the economy has a high skilled and innovative workforce. We know that roughly a third of our workforce in coming years will require a Bachelor's degree or higher. It is an economic imperative that we tap into the talent and ambition of more Australians to ensure industry has access to the skilled workers it needs and to boost productivity. (12th September 2012)
Such statements make explicit the value that is placed on higher education in Australia in terms of national economic benefits. This chapter demonstrates that higher education offers individuals economic benefits in the form of financial independence. Other non-economic benefits of higher education, such as social capital, are also explored. Social capital refers to “the stock of active connections between people, as constituted by participation in, and knowledge of, civic affairs; trust in other people; and reciprocal help and support in the community” (Johnston, 2004, p. 21). This chapter argues for the inclusion of student mothers’ experiences in higher education research.

The following section discusses the benefits of higher education for individuals, specifically mothers, with a particular focus on postgraduate higher education. In doing so, it expands on the assertion that research into the experiences of student mothers in higher education is lacking and is worthy of further examination.

The Benefits of Higher Education

The wider benefits of learning are described as “encompassing both non-pecuniary private benefits, pertaining to the individual (such as improved self-esteem, health and quality of life) and those social benefits (or externalities) impacting on society as a whole (such as community regeneration and cultural development)” (Preston & Hammond, 2003, p. 211). Social benefits can include monetary aspects such as raised GDP, and non-monetary aspects, such as drawing satisfaction from living in an educated society (McMahon, 1998).

The benefits of education are outlined by Johnston (2004) and presented in Table 2 below. This table shows that higher education benefits both the individual undertaking the education as well as society.
Table 2

Benefits of Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Earnings Related Benefits</th>
<th>Wider Benefits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual Benefits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher wages</td>
<td>Healthier Individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Greater Life Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society Benefits</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher national income</td>
<td>Healthier Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Better Functioning Society</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Johnston 2004 p. 9

A literature review of the wider social benefits of higher education (Murray, 2009), cited longitudinal population survey studies from the UK (Bynner et al., 2003), USA (Brehm & Rahn, 1997) and New Zealand (Johnston, 2004). Time spent in education was linked to feeling other people could be trusted (an element of social capital, Brehm & Rahn, 1997), more faith in the political process (Bynner et al., 2003), and was negatively associated with crime and imprisonment (Murray, 2009). Murray (2009) reported that higher education encouraged tolerance and expanded social networks, and voluntary and charitable work was highest amongst people who had obtained a degree or higher qualification (Bynner et al., 2003; Vila, 2005). Moreover, people with higher educational achievement experienced better health and reported greater levels of wellbeing (Johnston, 2004), which supported an OECD (2006b) report into health and education, which showed that economic factors were responsible for approximately half the impact of education on health. These economic factors included less stress linked to financial hardship, access to better healthcare, and employment in jobs that were less hazardous and stressful (OECD, 2006b). Higher education provided individuals with benefits such as better health, better job prospects and higher social status, and this had “spin-off societal benefits, including less need for national spending on health and welfare and a larger tax base to provide national social benefits” (Murray, 2009, p. 240).
Individuals may improve their economic success by undertaking further education since it is associated with lower unemployment levels, higher earnings and more prestigious social standing (Le, Millet, Slutske & Martin, 2011). For example, bachelor degree graduates aged less than 25 and in their first year of full-time employment, reported a median annual starting salary of $50,000, which was 20.2% higher than that for all Australians aged between 20 and 24 (ABS, 2010). The financial gain for a university graduate over their working life is more than $1.5 million, or 70% more than those with only a Year 12 qualification, despite a university student’s lost earnings while they study (AMP, 2008). Further evidence is found in the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS, 2010), sent by all Australian tertiary institutions to students who qualified for their award (see Table 3 below). Graduates were asked to declare their gross (pre-tax) annual salary in Australian dollars, and postgraduates reported increased median salaries.

Table 3

Comparative Median Salaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Psychology</th>
<th>Nursing</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Civil Engineering</th>
<th>Law</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree graduates (no. of respondents)</td>
<td>$49 000 (3020)</td>
<td>$49 000 (4176)</td>
<td>$53 000 (6391)</td>
<td>$55 000 (756)</td>
<td>$50 000 (913)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Certificate/Diploma graduates</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>$61 000 (1305)</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters Coursework graduates</td>
<td>$67 000 (406)</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>$75 000 (406)</td>
<td>$75 000 (128)</td>
<td>$85 000 (409)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters Research/PhD graduates</td>
<td>$70 000 (225)</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>Not available</td>
<td>$70 000 (48)</td>
<td>$80 000 (29)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, what is not clear from these data or the ABS data presented earlier, is what effect family socio-economic status (SES) has on these figures. It is not possible to determine causation or attribute these individual economic benefits solely to the...
attainment of higher education. Factors such as SES can indirectly impact a child’s future prospects by, for example, impacting their early childhood educational opportunities.

The Growing Up in Australia Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) provides data that could be used to examine the relationship between higher education and an individual’s economic situation, over and above that accounted for by family of origin SES. The LSAC is a major project that follows the development of 10,000 children and their families across Australia. It commenced in 2004 and investigated the contribution of a child’s social, economic and cultural environment to their wellbeing and adjustment (www.growingupinaustralia.gov.au). The first cohort of 5000 children was aged between 0 and 1 year in 2003-2004, while the second cohort of 5000 children was aged between 4 and 5 years in 2003-2004. Data was and will continue to be collected from the children, their parents, carers and teachers every two years. The LSAC examined children’s attendance at early education/care programs and found that for the 2005 cohort, 10% of children from families in the lowest 25% socio-economic position (SEP) did not attend any education or care program, as compared with 3.5% from the middle 50% SEP and 2.1% from the highest SEP. Attendance rates from the second cohort (2009) found that 12.8% of children from the lowest 25% SEP did not attend any educational or care program, as compared with 5.3% from the middle 50% SEP and 1.8% from the highest 25% SEP. In both cohorts, the data demonstrated that children from the lowest socio-economic positions were more likely not to attend any education/care programs at all. Furthermore, children from poorer backgrounds were less likely to attend childcare with a pre-school program (20.5% for the lowest SEP group compared to 21.6% for the middle SEP group and 27.4% for the highest SEP group).

Additional research on this LSAC data (Harrison, Ungerer, Smith, Zubrick & Wise, 2009) showed that children from Indigenous, non-English speaking and single-
parent family backgrounds were less likely to attend formal early childhood programs. For example, Indigenous children were less likely (90.1%) to attend a centre or school-based program compared to non-Indigenous children (95.3%). Children from non-English speaking backgrounds were less likely to attend centre or school-based care/education settings (91.6%), compared to children from English-only speaking families (96%).

The benefits of early education include the advancement of children’s development, wellbeing, health and equality of opportunity for parents’ workforce participation; while also addressing poverty and social exclusion disadvantage, and arresting the intergenerational transmission of inequality (OECD, 2006). Furthermore, early childhood education facilitates social and economic mobility (OECD, 2006). Childcare has also been associated with cognitive and language outcomes. For example, the Sydney Family Development Project in Australia (Harrison & Ungerer, 2000; Love et al., 2003) showed that learning competence (measured by task orientation, creativity, and learning difficulties) in a child’s first year of school, was associated with attendance at formal, regulated care rather than informal, unregulated care during the child’s first two-and-a-half years of life. Therefore, it is possible that the role of family SES, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity and English fluency, all impact a child’s early childhood education, which in turn has implications for their later cognitive development. In this way, social inequality may impact a child’s education by limiting their opportunities for participation in higher education.

**Women and Mothers in Higher Education**

This section examines women in higher education in Australia and focuses particularly on mothers. According to Tight’s (2012) review of research into higher education (Chapter 1), women are still considered “non-traditional” students despite the fact that they make up approximately 60% of all undergraduate students and 58% of all
postgraduate students in Australia (Trounson, 2012). Grebennikov and Skaines (2009) presented evidence that female students in Australia outnumbered male students, outperformed them academically and chose fields of study in which they were previously under-presented, while their male counterparts continued to make traditional study choices, and concluded that women took higher education more seriously than men. Their study also deduced from current trends in student enrolment, retention, expectations and performance, that females are likely to be a majority customer group in the higher education market. As female students grow in importance, this increases the need to determine what attracts and retains them (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009). These authors’ survey of nearly 10,000 students at the University of Western Sydney in 2004 and 2005, revealed that female students placed higher importance on university services than male students. Moreover, as they advanced through their degrees from undergraduates to graduates and higher degree by research students, they became more demanding of the quality of these services (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2009). However, this research did not assess services directly related to students with children, such as childcare centres and family-friendly services, resources or infrastructure.

Postgraduate female students are likely to have children (Kuperberg, 2009). Female students in the late 1960s and early 1970s delayed having families to further their careers, while women educated in the 1980s expected a career-family balance (Goldin, 2004). More recently, childcare issues have become relevant for female postgraduate students when study coincides with childbearing years (Kuperberg, 2009). Having children whilst undertaking graduate studies can be an appealing strategy for educated women, as graduate school offers more flexibility than the formal labour market, and given the stage in their lifecycle, women may have reached a point where childbearing is desirable (Kuperberg, 2009). Kuperberg reported that graduate education is one of the
stages where women “leak” out of the occupational pipeline, and argued that, in order to compete with the non-academic world, institutions should address the specific needs of female students who wish to have children. This could take the form of establishing and improving maternity leave and childcare available to student mothers, and reducing penalties such as time limits for degree completion.

**Importance of Mothers who Study**

Student mothers are a distinct group and should be recognised and responded to accordingly by higher education providers (Walkup, 2005). Treating these students in the same way as a traditional 18 year-old undergraduate is inappropriate (Walkup, 2005), since this cohort of students has specific needs and multiple responsibilities in addition to their role as a student. It is therefore important to research and understand their experiences.

As indicated earlier, degree completion benefits individual students as well as their families. Research shows that the long-term benefits of mature-age study are not just related to financial and better employment prospects. Mothers have reported being better able to assist their children with homework and better able to understand their children’s experiences. Furthermore, their children were more motivated and serious about their studies as a result of their role modelling (Kelly, 1982).

In a study of women enrolled in bachelor degrees at an Australian university, Kelly (1982) separately interviewed forty women and their partners to examine the changes in parent-child and other family interactions, following the mother’s return to higher education. The findings revealed that the women believed their children had shown an increased interest in and commitment to their own school work, and that they felt they were providing a good role model of a hard-working student (Kelly, 1982).
Some of the mothers also reported that their children had shown a renewed interest in reading and attending school in general, as a result of her return to university. The research also suggested that some women believed their children displayed an increased respect for their mother’s abilities and saw her in a different light, based on her educational achievements (Kelly, 1982).

More recent research examining the impact of a mother’s return to education on her child’s educational aspirations and outcomes, showed that mothers could have a profound effect on their children’s outcomes, but only when they presented as a highly successful role model (Suitor, Plikuh, Gilligan, & Powers, 2008). In other words, children who saw their mother succeed in her educational pursuits were more likely to complete college education themselves. Suitor and colleagues (2008) interviewed 35 women at the beginning and end of their first year of enrolment at a large public research university in the north-eastern US, and again ten years later. Measures of their children’s educational outcomes were obtained using the average level of education of the adult children in each family, and from the number of school years completed at the latest point of data collection (children who were minors at the third interview were excluded). Women were asked to describe the effects they believed their education had on their children’s educational outcomes.

The children in families where the mother had completed a bachelor degree, were more than two-thirds more likely to have completed college, as compared with mothers who did not complete their degree (Suitor et al., 2008). Interviews revealed that mothers who completed their degrees, were two and a half times more likely to describe positive effects on their children as compared with those who did not complete their degrees. Most of the women who completed their degrees believed they had provided their children with a positive educational role model. While mothers who did not complete
their degrees reported that their enrolment had no effect on their children, a mother’s failure to complete her degree decreased the likelihood of her children completing college (Suitor et al., 2008).

In summary, a mother’s return to higher education affected her children’s aspirations and educational attainment, but only when she successfully completed her degree (Suitor et al., 2008). A limitation of this study was that it did not examine the effect of family SES on children’s educational attainment. It is likely that family SES has a large effect on these findings, especially given that the US Federal Government does not directly support higher education and students fund their studies through grants and loans. This is evidenced to some degree by an ethnographic study by Haleman (2004), on ten single mothers receiving education and welfare benefits in the US. Haleman reported that education increased self esteem and personal growth, and her perceived benefits to her children in the form of role modelling educational success. Using in-depth interviews and abbreviated life histories, the research aimed to determine how single mothers described and made sense of their educational experiences within the context of a wider society that typically judges them negatively (Haleman, 2004). The interviews were transcribed and the analysis revealed three major themes: 1) the mothers experienced stereotypes of single motherhood, 2) they actively contested these stereotypes, and 3) educational experiences and goals often served as important mechanisms for contesting and transforming the stereotypes (Haleman, 2004). Education was viewed as having an important instrumental purpose: a post-secondary education offered these women a realistic avenue for financial security. Education was also viewed as a catalyst for personal growth that transcended the financial and economic benefits. It increased the women’s self-esteem, became a source of pride, and allowed them to forge identities outside of being single mothers (Haleman, 2004). For several participants, studying
allowed them the opportunity to model educational success to their children. Educating mothers may therefore be a good strategy for social change.

Participation in higher education has also been linked to parents reading more to their children and their children owning more books (Bynner, Dolton, Feinstein et al., 2003), as well as the promotion of a stronger educational environment (Brynner & Egerton, 2001). What is not clear from these data is whether the level of parents’ higher education impacted on the educational environment they created for their children.

The level of parental education is positively related to reading and negatively associated with television viewing (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Using longitudinal data from a representative sample of American families, Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) examined the relationship between children’s time use, achievements in standardised cognitive and social-emotional tests, and demographic variables. The results showed that children from families with more educated parents spent more time reading for pleasure, had more books around the home, and actively encouraged their children to read (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Children of parents with higher educational achievements spent less time per week watching television than those with less educated parents.

In other research examining the influence of parental education on child achievement, Davis-Kean (2005) explored the indirect role of parental expectations and the home environment. Using longitudinal data on approximately 8,000 American families, David-Kean (2005) examined the relationships between parent and family characteristics, child characteristics, parental expectations, home behaviours and child achievement on reading and arithmetic measures. Home behaviours included material items such as the number of books, games and puzzles in the home, while non-material measures included parental warmth, praise and affection.
The level of parents’ educational achievement indirectly influenced their child’s achievements through their expectations and stimulating home behaviours (David-Kean, 2005). That is, the level of a parent’s education influenced how they structured their home environment and how they interacted with their children to promote academic achievement. The effect size was moderate in European families and small in African-American families. Parental expectations for schooling showed a moderate total effect on achievement in both samples. David-Kean (2005) also tested the direct influence of family SES and family background variables on achievement and found that a model allowing for mediation of behaviours or beliefs provided a better fit than the direct model.

Augustine, Cavanagh and Crosnoe (2009) argued that maternal education accounted for the type of childcare a mother selected, over and above employment status and income. They examined how maternal education predicted childcare and then, within types, how it predicted quality and quantity. Using data from a large-scale longitudinal study in the US (the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development), the researchers examined bivariate associations between relevant socio-demographic and childcare variables, and categorical measures of maternal education, and then used multivariate analysis to assess the associations between maternal education and childcare type. They concluded that children of more educated mothers were more likely to be found in childcare arrangements that offered an overall academic advantage to her children.

In Australia, the LSAC (www.growingupinaustralia.gov.au) showed that there was one care and education arrangement that favoured children of mothers with lower education. Children of mothers with less education were more likely to attend preschool in a school setting, than children of more educated mothers. The data revealed that 23.2% of children with mothers educated to Year 10 or lower, and 19.4% of children whose
mothers had attained Year 11 to 12 education, attended preschool in a school setting, compared to 15.1% of children with mothers who had a trade certificate or diploma and 11.5% of children with university-educated mothers. It is likely that this was due to preschool programs being available in the public sector at little or no cost to families (Harrison et al., 2009). However, it should be noted that earlier research using the LSAC data showed that variation in the use of preschool programs and the affordability of these programs differed between states and/or territory (Harrison & Ungerer, 2005), so it is possible that the relationship between maternal education and access to school-based programs are mediated by income.

Summary

This chapter demonstrated the potential benefits of higher education for individual students, their families and for society, and provided a rationale for the present study. Specifically, the evidence demonstrated the benefits of maternal education for children’s educational and health outcomes, and highlighted the growing importance of women as a majority customer group in the higher education market. The research reviewed in this chapter suggested that the benefits of retaining students in higher education extend well beyond the individual, to their family and society as a whole, and generated both economic and non-economic benefits. Retaining mothers in postgraduate education may therefore provide similar benefits.

The literature review in the following chapter illustrates that there is relatively little international research examining the experiences of mothers who participate in higher education. Furthermore, there appears to be no existing research examining postgraduate mothers in Australia, as reflected in Tight’s (2012) findings on research into higher education. The research aims and questions of this study are also introduced.
Chapter Three

Review of the Literature on Mothers Who Study

Introduction

This chapter presents a literature review that covers three areas of research: (1) mothers who study at undergraduate level, (2) undergraduate and graduate student parents, and (3) mothers who study at postgraduate level. The review demonstrates that there is limited research on mothers who study, and to the best of the author’s knowledge, there is no research examining the experiences of postgraduate student mothers in Australia. The chapter provides a detailed examination of the existing research, and therefore adds to the limited body of knowledge concerning student mothers. It concludes with an outline of the research aims and questions associated with the research program described in this thesis.

Although there is a large body of literature on stay-at-home and working mothers (Dillaway & Pare, 2008), there has been little examination of mothers who study. The experiences of mothers pursuing higher education has received limited attention in the psychological and educational literature (Rico, Sabet, & Clough, 2009), the latter having mainly explored mature female students, reasons for returning to study (Leonard, 1994; McLaren, 1986; Pascall & Cox, 1993), barriers to education (McGivney, 1993), the differences between men’s and women’s experiences (Maynard & Pearsall, 1994), initial educational experiences (Edwards, 1993) and role conflict (Gigliotti, 2001; 2004a; 2004b; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006).
Research examining the specific experiences of mothers in higher education is also relatively limited (Burns, Scott, Cooney, & Gleeson, 1988; Colbry, 1995; Dyk, 1987; Estes, 2011; Gigliotti, 2001; 2004a; 2004b; Griffiths, 2002; Haleman, 2004; Home, 1998; Lynch, 2008; Pare 2009; Quimby & O’Brien, 2006; Reay, 2003; Ricco, Sabet, & Clough, 2009; Ricco, McCollum, & Schuyten, 2003; Ricco & Rodriguez, 2006; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996; Walkup, 2004, 2005; Vryonides & Visilakis, 2008; White, 2006, 2008). Of these, only the studies by Lynch (2008) and Vryonides and Visilakis (2008) focus on postgraduate students, and although Pare’s (2009) American study does include students in graduate programs, it does not examine that group exclusively. The most recent research study examined student parents (Estes, 2011) of which only a small proportion were studying at postgraduate level.

None of the Australian and New Zealand research examining mothers pursuing higher education (Burns, Scott, Cooney, & Gleeson, 1988; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996; White 2006; 2008) solely explores the experiences of postgraduate student mothers. The present research program is important because it focuses on the experiences of women combining motherhood and postgraduate study in Australia and therefore, it is argued, makes an original contribution to this field of study. Although this thesis addresses the role of mothers as postgraduate students, the literature on the role of undergraduate student mothers is relevant because it identifies that a major source of discontinuation of studies was due to family responsibilities. Arguably, this dynamic is operant for mothers enrolled in postgraduate studies as well.

Research on Undergraduate Student Mothers

A study of mature-aged female students with children, enrolled at an eastern Australian university (Scott et al., 1996), found that the inclusion of study in their already
full lives was a major challenge for them. This finding supported earlier Australian research which suggested that health problems, financial difficulties, lack of suitable childcare and general overload, when combined with a lack of family support and hostility, led to drop out (Burns, Scott, Cooney, & Gleeson, 1988).

Scott et al. (1996) administered a self-report questionnaire to 118 student mothers who had dropped out of university. An information letter and questionnaire were sent to potential female participants aged 30 years and older, who had discontinued their degree. Given that university records did not include information on parental status, a note was included asking that only women who had children when they commenced their studies should reply. A total of 941 questionnaires were sent out, from which the final sample size comprised 118 participants. Hence, of all female undergraduate students in this study, about 12% had children. The respondents were aged between 34 and 60 years old and 32% were single. The mean number of children was 2.4, and of these, 18% were preschool-aged, 55% school-aged and 27% were adult children.

The major reason for discontinuing studies was family responsibilities (73%, Scott et al., 1996), followed by lack of family support (35%). Women who had left school early were particularly likely to report family load as a reason for leaving study (93%). Having a partner or ex-partner with a degree or higher degree was a protective factor for women, with 57% of those participants reporting family responsibilities and 22% reporting a lack of support as reasons for discontinuing their degrees.

A life-cycle explanation of attrition in mothers who study was suggested by Scott et al. (1996). They used cluster analysis and reported that members of the Maternal Overload cluster were younger than the average participant, with reasons for discontinuing that were relevant to the care of young children: lack of self-confidence,
childcare difficulties, lack of money, lack of family support, weight of family responsibilities and associated health problems. Scott et al. (p. 250) suggested that “beliefs about the desirability of undivided maternal attention for very young children could also lead to uncertainty and guilt about the demands of study, which may account for the centrality of lack of confidence to this group’s reasons for discontinuing.” The largest cluster, the Role Overload group, left their studies as a result of the combined demands of family and work responsibilities. Women in this group left because of increased responsibilities, such as having a new baby, caring for sick family members, or because of expansion to the family business, or changes to her own or her partner’s employment.

The suggested solution was “the provision of better support services, such as childcare and financial support” (Scott et al., 1996, p. 251) for women burdened with family responsibilities, childcare and money issues. It is likely however, that this solution is simplistic and implies that these students deserve or need special treatment. The present author suggests that the findings may have been limited to those students with young children requiring care, or those who are experiencing financial hardship, and that not all student mothers have the same life circumstances. Moreover, the greatest limitation of Scott et al. (1996) is that the study was restricted to women who discontinued their studies, and therefore offers limited insight into the experiences of mothers who did not complete their degrees. No information was provided about those who succeeded.

A study concentrating on women who persevered in their studies, was undertaken by Reay (2003). She interviewed 12 working-class women attending an inner London further education college with the aim of highlighting the risks and costs inherent in the transition to higher education for those students. The study also examined the barriers these women faced and their attempts to overcome them. The context in which the
research was conducted is worth discussing, because it provides the backdrop for Reay’s argument; the difficulties faced by these women were due to social class disadvantage rather than individual deficit. Previous work by Reay (2002) described the transition from an “elite” system of higher education to a system of mass education over the previous twenty-five years. A government plan for the expansion and reform of higher education in the UK articulated an objective to recruit more non-traditional students based on age and entrance requirements (Reay, 2002). Social groups targeted were ethnic minorities, disabled and working-class people and women, and access courses were offered as an alternative pathway into higher education. Initially it appeared that participation by these targeted groups was increasing, but by 1998 the data revealed decreases in accepted applicants (Reay, 2002).

Reay’s aim was to explore the lived experiences of transition into the university sector of mature students, and concluded that class always plays a role in the transition process. She argued that social class is a primary influence on mature students’ transition to higher education because the students “powerfully articulated discourses on class and status.” (p. 414). For example, one of the participants described herself as “being a no-one” (Reay, 2002, p. 402) while another spoke of how she wanted to attend college in a particular area because, even though there would be “posh people,” she felt more comfortable there because she came from that area (p. 405). A further participant explained that she didn’t like a particular university because “it was a bit posh. Kind of upper class. Everything felt so separate, everyone felt separate.” (Reay, 2002, p. 413). These accounts led Reay (2002) to conclude that the working classes felt excluded from higher education.

Reay (2002, 2003) examined access to and choice of higher education. She concluded that access to higher education for non-traditional students was both under-
theorised and under-researched, and her studies were an attempt to redress that imbalance. Of the twelve women interviewed in her 2003 study, seven were mothers, and of those, six were single mothers. Only seven of the twelve had enrolled in higher education programs. Of those seven, three had progressed to higher education after 1 or 2 years of access study, and all of those women were child-free. The other four student mothers took between 3 and 6 years to finish their access courses. Five of the women had dropped out, and when Reay spoke to them 2 years later, four out of the five had still not succeeded in making the transition to higher education.

Despite their focus on students in pre-university access courses, Reay’s (2003) interviews revealed some important factors that motivated women to attempt higher education. All the women reported that it was the process of doing the degree that was important rather than the outcome, and that studying was seen as intrinsically worthwhile and interesting. The student mothers reported that by educating themselves, they would be able to give back to their communities.

Reay (2003) gave an account of the women’s descriptions of “survival” of both the experiences of studying and childhood poverty. She considered their difficulties to be a combination of both past experiences and current material circumstances. The women were caught in a constant balancing act between their domestic responsibilities, their need to earn money, and their desire to study. The “normal” student lifestyle with its combination of independence, dependence, leisure and academic work, was alien to student mothers. She argued that differences between middle-class and working-class mothers meant that for middle-class families, the load on mothers is reduced by easy access to cleaners, nannies, child minders and tutors, whereas in poor families, mothers do everything. This contributed to the “time poverty” these students experienced. She went on to argue that it is “the failure of social and educational policy, rather than
individual pathology that best explains these women’s inability to fulfill their aspirations. The problem lies not in the psychological dispositions of the women, but in the lack of sufficient social support to make it possible for these women to succeed without superhuman effort.” (Reay, 2003, p. 314). She concluded that “universities will need to change both structures and policies if they are to provide positive experiences for non-traditional students similar to the women in this study.” (p. 315).

Reay (2003) focused on students who had limited prior education and were undertaking access education as an alternative pathway into university. All of her participants were working-class women attending an inner London higher education college, and one of the primary aims of the research was to “problematise widening participation (in higher education) and to show that much more needs to change than the women themselves.” (Reay, 2003, p. 302). The focus on class was evident in Reay’s (p. 314) conclusion that “clearly, class still has its wicked way.” The findings were further limited by six of the seven participants being single mothers, which impacted on their experiences of combining education with, presumably, the full-time care of their children. Accordingly, while Reay’s research is useful in highlighting the difficulties faced by student mothers at pre-university level, it should be viewed within the context of the social class and access focus under which it was conducted.

A small-scale study was conducted by Walkup (2004) into the experiences of mothers studying at undergraduate level at a UK university and the findings reported in a series of conference papers (Walkup 2004; 2005; 2006). The research was guided by two main questions: (a) what were the experiences of mothers undertaking Early Childhood Studies and Education Studies modules at university; and (b) were there ways in which being a mother affected a student’s experiences of undergraduate study? The research was undertaken in two stages. Stage one involved interviewing six participants - the
information gained from those interviews was used in the second stage, the Q-sort study. Q-methodology is a research method used to study people’s subjectivity or point of view. A more thorough description and explanation of the methodology are provided in Chapters 3 and 6 of this thesis. The Q-sort was completed by 20 first-year students and 10 third-year students. Finally, a focus group consisting of 6 third-year students, was conducted in order to clarify the findings and check whether any issues had been omitted or if any new issues had emerged. Using the interview material, forty Q-statements were constructed. These were then ranked by participants according to “how like/unlike me” each statement was.

Walkup (2004) then coded the completed Q-sorts to represent the emergent themes of Good Mother, Primary Caregivers and Domestic Managers, Time Poverty, Self Statements and Ambiguous. The “Good Mother syndrome” is a term used to describe the socially constructed way that mothers are supposed to act and be (Arendell, 2000; Dillaway & Pare, 2008; Hays, 1996; Raddon 2002; Smythe & Isserlis, 2004). It is a mandate that directs women to mother exclusively, be completely child-centred and provide active emotional and physical support and entertainment for their children (Hays, 1996). This means that for women to be “good mothers” they need to spend their time with their child – and that implies they stay at home to care for them. A “good mother” is self-sacrificing and doesn’t place importance on her own needs and interests (Bassin et al., 1994; Ribbens, 1994; Thurer, 1993).

The themes of Primary Caregivers and Domestic Managers referred to issues concerning a woman’s primary responsibility for the children and the home; Time Poverty concerned the shortage of time available to complete their tasks; Self Statements related to personal development and experiences outside of the children and the home; and Ambiguous was used for all statements falling outside the other categories. The findings
BALANCING THE DUAL ROLES OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENT AND MOTHER

drew that 75% of first year participants’ Like Me responses were related to mothering concerns (Good Mother, Primary Caregiver, Domestic Managers, and Time Poverty categories) while 13% related to self development (Walkup, 2005). These results indicated that participants were preoccupied with the needs of their children and homes.

An issue not addressed by Walkup (2005) was the possibility that the “negative categories” outnumbered the “positive category” of self-statements. It is not possible to conclude that the final set of Q-statements was reflective of the topic concourse, because specific details about the questions that were asked at the interview are not available. In Q-methodology the concourse refers to a collection of all the possible statements that can be made about a topic of interest (Brown, 1993). A complete list of the forty Q-statements in Walkup’s (2005) study was not disclosed, so the possibility of bias cannot be ruled out. The author has contacted Dr Walkup but has been unable to clarify this limitation.

It is important to note that third year participants’ expressed more Self Statements. For example, 40% responded “Most Like Me” to the statement: “I see that I’m doing it for my child’s benefit as well as mine.” While Walkup (2005) cautioned that this may reflect individual differences in the participants themselves, she also suggested that it may point to a growing awareness amongst these women, of their own interests and development. In other related findings, Walkup (2004) reported that mothers in higher education experienced feelings of guilt, but some third year participants felt less guilty as their years at university progressed. This may have been because their children were getting older or that they themselves were nearing graduation.

The focus group stage of the study was an attempt to improve the rigour of the research, but it seems that rather than confirming earlier research, it revealed new findings. As reported by Walkup (2005), the focus group provided some new and interesting material, and for that reason it was a valuable research tool. The focus group
presented participants with the top five “Most Like Me” and “Most Unlike Me” statements for both first-year and third-year groups. The resulting conversation amongst focus group participants raised the issue of guilt, which included comments about nearly quitting, mothers in tears at having to leave their children, and that guilt was a part of their experience. One participant revealed that she felt less guilty now than she used to, and wondered whether it was her or the children who were coping better. Other findings to emerge from the focus group were the perceived failure of the university to provide for, and acknowledge mothers as a group, the increased confidence of students in the final stages of their degree, the importance of a strong sense of peer support, and the supportive and empowering experience of taking part in the focus group itself. Walkup summarised that being a mother who studies involves two processes: self-development and mothering; and that while the experience can at times be difficult and painful, it was also creative and productive, personal and rewarding.

Despite these interesting new data reported by Walkup (2005), it appears that an opportunity was lost with respect to enforcing rigour. For example, it is not explicitly clear if the focus group participants in Walkup’s (2005) study had participated in the previous Q-sort reported in Walkup (2004). If they had not participated in the earlier study, then they were providing feedback on perspectives that were not identified by their own Q-sort data, and unsurprisingly, the focus group would have provided new information if it comprised new participants. Failure to maintain the same participant set meant that the opportunity to validate the Q-sort findings and undertake member-checking was lost.

Furthermore, Walkup (2004) did not provide details of the interview process and despite attempts to obtain this information, it was not possible to determine exactly what the participants were asked. This is relevant because the wording of the questions may
have contributed to participants’ responses, particularly with regard to issues around the “good mother”. Walkup (2005) herself admitted that the research resulted from her own life experiences and from the experiences of her students who were in tears and racked with guilt about leaving their unhappy children in someone else’s care while they attended university. This lack of detail surrounding the interview process, the subsequent identification of emergent themes, and then the development of representative Q-statements, makes it difficult to undertake an explicit critique of the research. In addition, the research has not been published in any academic journals and details about the studies are only available in conference papers. Despite suggestions that the prospect of publishing the conference papers was a strong possibility (Walkup, 2006), recent correspondence with the researcher confirmed that this has not occurred. Furthermore, Walkup’s (2005) research is limited by small participation numbers, particularly in the Q-sort. The interview stage involved six women, the Q-sort was conducted by 30 students, and 6 women participated in the focus group. Furthermore, the participants were all from an early childhood and education background. In summary, it is difficult to make any definitive assessment of Walkup’s findings. While the research highlights some interesting and worthwhile issues, its value is tempered by methodological weaknesses and a lack of transparency in the interpretation of the interviews.

Other research on undergraduate student mothers was undertaken by White (2008), who examined student-teachers combining teacher education and motherhood. The aims of this research were to determine whether the experiences of mothers who were studying to be teachers, differed from mothers who were studying other discipline areas, and to determine if any problems these students experienced were different from those experienced by the general student body. White aimed to provide continuing
education providers with information on the specific needs of this group and suggestions on how these needs may be addressed.

It should be pointed out that White was approaching this task from the perspective that these students would struggle with studying and raising children, and that once their specific needs were highlighted, universities would be better placed to address these needs. This is evident in several of the statements made in the article. For example, in quoting Walkup (2006), who argued that the dissemination of research about student mothers should be easily accessible by those outside of academe, White (2008, p. 160) added that “such research should also make managers and academics in higher education aware of possible sources of student discontent.” White (p.162) also reported that one of her research questions “asked them what they thought their training provider could do to make life easier for them and their families while they were studying.”

The research involved interviewing six mothers who were enrolled in a pre-service teacher education degree at a New Zealand college of education. Participants were asked to share information about their children and to discuss how becoming a student had affected their children, family, financial status and their relationships with their partner, wider family and friends. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and using thematic analysis, four main themes were highlighted: (a) the women’s strong motivation for wanting to become primary school teachers; (b) the impact of studying on the lives of their children, partners and extended families; (c) the particular issues they faced while navigating the roles of student and mother; and (d) suggestions for tertiary education institutions to improve conditions for mothers wanting to study. The main reasons cited by these women for returning to education, was to improve their employment and financial prospects, to enhance their self-esteem and to improve themselves. The women reported that their desire and commitment to succeed in a field of employment overrode
their concerns about placing stress on their families. According to White (2008), their stories told of a desire for personal development. Various comments made by participants led White (2008, p. 164) to conclude that all six women considered teaching to be a career choice that fitted in with their role as mothers: “Primary school teaching,” they said, “provided hours, holidays and the type of satisfying work that would allow them to be at home for their children and husbands/partners.” In this way, White’s research supported the “good mother ideology” described earlier in this chapter. By choosing to study teaching, these women maintained their “good mother” identity, because they could work the hours that fitted around the schedules of their children and partners.

The mothers reported that their experiences with higher education had both positive and negative impacts on their own lives and the lives of their children, partners and families (White, 2008). The positive impact was felt mainly by their school-aged children, which may have been because learning was something the children could easily relate to. The negative impact that caused the most anguish for participants, was that their children wanted to spend more time with them when they were home. Mothers with younger children reported that their children were clingier and needier than before they began studying. White (2008) concluded that the negative reactions of their children were related to having their mother move out of the traditional role of being a mother at home. She based this conclusion on the mothers’ reports that younger children appeared to be clingier and needier, and another mother’s account of her child wanting to sleep in her bed and clinging to her when he was dropped off at pre-school. The children also had to adapt to changes in the family dynamic, with fathers taking on more “mothering” responsibilities. Evidence of this was provided by a single quote from a mother of four who explained that, when she had assignments due, her partner did the ironing and made the school lunches, as well as on White’s interpretation of the interviews. White reported
that the women in her study responded to these impacts on their children with feelings of guilt. Accepting support and practical help from others only added to the women’s feelings of guilt. What was not explored was why the women reported feeling guilty when they had chosen a path of study and career that was supposedly compatible with motherhood. White’s findings therefore seem to support the “good mother” ideology.

All 6 participants in White’s (2008) study revealed that money was a considerable concern, and even those who were eligible for government assistance, reported that it was not enough to cover the expenses they incurred studying full-time with children – especially when they were required to go on teaching placements. Five out of the 6 women undertook part-time paid employment to assist with meeting their family’s financial requirements. A major finding of the research was that all women reported difficulty in finding affordable childcare, which meant that they juggled their responsibilities as a student, with the emotional and physical demands of their children. Finding suitable childcare was especially difficult during those times when the participant was required to complete her practical training at a school or when her children were unwell. This double burden created guilt and anxiety.

The participants offered suggestions on how their institutions could support them to combine their various roles and responsibilities (White, 2008). These included inviting children and families to the university to participate in a few class sessions to provide them with a sense of involvement, providing child-friendly spaces for children after hours, offering priority to students with children for the campus Childcare Centre and after-school care program, organising talks by parents who managed to combine study, primary teaching and motherhood, and reminding lecturers and tutors that students with children need some leniency with regard to caring for sick children.
In summary, for women studying to be teachers, balancing the demands of their degree with motherhood could be difficult, and these difficulties and challenges were foremost in the minds of the participants (White, 2008). White acknowledged that the limitations of her research were the small sample size and the lack of follow-up research. A further limitation was the specific questioning of the women regarding what they “thought their training provider could do to make life easier for them and their families while they were studying” (White, 2008, p. 162.), because it introduced an element of bias by assuming that life was not easy, and that the university had a role to play in easing the difficulties of its students. As this critique of White’s (2008) research demonstrates, the significant limitations of the study prevent the author from drawing any meaningful conclusions about how the findings may apply to Australian postgraduate student mothers.

**Undergraduate and Graduate Student Parents**

This second section reviews recent research by Estes (2011) who explored how undergraduate and graduate students with children draw on cultural discourses associated with parenthood and education when discussing their childcare choices and education. The findings suggest that student parents want to be both good students and good parents.

In reference to dominant ideology defining proper childrearing as that based on the ideals of “intensive mothering,” Estes (2011) argued that the cultural norms and ideals of parenting are often contradictory to those associated with education. In addition to the ideological conflict that exists between the two roles, Estes pointed out that each role requires large emotional and time commitments. Therefore, the roles of student and parent intersect on a daily basis leaving these students feeling torn between conflicting ideals and normative expectations (Estes, 2011). Student parents face an identity
dilemma because they lose valued attributes associated with the parent and student identity: they do not fit into either ideal (Estes, 2011). According to Estes, the participants managed this dilemma by joining their identities as students and parents to create a new identity: the good student-parent identity. Twenty-six students with children from a large midwestern university in the USA were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. The participants had at least one pre-school aged child. Twenty-one were mothers and five were fathers. Nine participants were graduate students but it is not clear how many of these were mothers. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using grounded theory methods.

While Estes (2011) reported the common themes that emerged from the interviews, she commented that the participants had very different experiences depending on their social positions and access to support and resources. Estes noted that participants drew on common ideas of what it meant to be a good student and a good parent, that is, they took their cultural understanding about what it means to be a successful parent and student into account when interpreting and constructing their activities and identities. The participants often referred to the “intensive mothering” ideals (Hays, 1996) when talking about their expectations of themselves as parents – and interestingly, fathers as well as mothers, took these cultural expectations into account. The men’s understanding of “father as a provider” expanded to also include providing children with emotional and financial support, time and attention. All parents believed that their children should come first, but what this actually meant, changed as parents tried to fulfill their student responsibilities. Being a student interfered with their ability to meet their intensive parenting expectations and, while both fathers and mothers experienced this conflict, Estes (2011, p. 208) concluded that “there is presumably a greater pressure on mothers to manage the parenting side of this equation successfully.” This seems at odds with her
preceding statement: “Although both the mothers and the fathers I talked with seem to feel implicated in the ideology of intensive parenting and both experience some ambivalence as they try to fulfill their roles as parents and students” Estes’ (2011, p. 207). Estes nevertheless concluded that this was most strongly felt by mothers.

The participants also reported that they wanted to be good students and that they valued education. They were motivated by a desire to improve their own and their family’s lives and to excel. Some participants reported that they felt they had to work harder because of the stigma attached to being a student-parent. Moreover, some mothers spoke about the tendency of some students to use their children as an excuse for not meeting their expectations as a student and in doing so, they stigmatised all student-parents. Estes (2011, p. 209) presented evidence that student parents felt they had to work harder than other students because of the stigma attached to their identities. For example, one participant said: “I’m expected to be a bad student because I have a child” and another believed that “Professors’ expectations are generally lower once they realise that you have kids…You get sort of this bad rap as student-parents, that your kids are going to interfere and they are going to take away from the time you could be studying.” These comments suggest the situation is complex and seem to contradict Estes’ conclusions that these students resolved their identity dilemmas.

Estes (2011) suggested that parents found themselves in a situation where the cultural ideals and normative expectations associated with their identities were in conflict and were contradictory, and as they constructed both identities simultaneously, they found it difficult to fit into either ideal. According to Estes, the way they resolved this was by constructing a new identity: that of the good student-parent. This involved three major components: (a) education was viewed as beneficial to the children; (b) childcare
was viewed as beneficial to the children; and (c) parenting was viewed as beneficial to education.

The present author argues that there is no explicit evidence for a blended identity other than Estes’ (2011) interpretation of the data. Of particular concern is that the core argument, that student parents resolve their identity dilemmas by creating a new blended identity, is based solely on Estes’s interpretation of the interviews. There was no evidence from the participants to indicate that they had actively constructed a new identity by blending aspects of their parent and student identities.

The parents explained that they were better parents because they were students, that their education would benefit their children because it would allow them to pass on knowledge, and in future, would afford them more time with their children because they would have better jobs and opportunities (Estes, 2011). They also reported that being a student allowed them to set a good example for their children and would provide future financial benefits. The participants viewed childcare as beneficial to their children in that it provided them with exposure to different people and environments, as well as an opportunity for social interaction with other children. By reframing time away from their parents as being beneficial for the children, the participants were able to assert their identities as good parents and diffuse negative aspects of the student-parent identity (Estes, 2011). Having made the decision to use childcare as an expansion of the ideals of intensive mothering, participants viewed the child carers as experts who delivered educational care and promoted their children’s development. Finally, the parents reported that parenting was beneficial to education: because they were parents, they were better students. Being a parent meant that students were committed, efficient and motivated; many reported that their motivation to excel developed after they had children.
While the research shows that the students reinforced aspects of “intensive mothering,” according to Estes (2011) they also adjusted this ideology by suggesting that childcare should be the responsibility of mother, father and sometimes the community. Furthermore, they added an extra facet to good parenting - the expectation that parents should be educated - adding to the pressures and demands of parenting. These students also contributed to the student ideology in their reconstruction of the good student, as it is not sufficient to attend college without ambition (Estes, 2011). Estes asserted that, “in the end, to fit themselves into parent and student ideals, they make it harder for others to fit. They end up reinforcing and supporting the ideologies and institutions that marginalize them” (p. 217).

While Estes’ (2011) research is valuable in that it opens up discussion into the ways that student parents view themselves and how they perceive others view them, it has several limitations. First, the majority of the participants (17 out of 26) were undergraduate students so it is difficult to ascertain whether their sense of identity was impacted by the time spent at university and the experience gained during that time. In addition, the university at which the participants were studying could be described as being “parent-friendly” in that it offered resources to students such as family housing, campus childcare centres and non-traditional student services. While Estes reported that students faced difficulties in accessing these services, their very existence is not common in higher educational institutions. Therefore, the setting in which the participants with children were studying, was possibly more conducive to blending identities than other more traditional university settings. The participants also reported that the culture of their departments and campuses were inclusive and welcoming of their families, which is at odds with the results reported in the literature.
This author’s critique of Estes’ (2011) research, centres around the evidence she provided of participants blending their identities. That conclusion is based on the researcher’s interpretation of statements made by participants which show that they viewed parenting as beneficial to education, and education as beneficial to parenting. Estes did not provide any statements that demonstrated participants explicitly blended their identities. No follow-up research or member-checking was conducted to authenticate her interpretations and conclusions.

Estes (2011) provided examples from nine participants to support their view that education is beneficial to their children. Two examples related to the fact that education can provide parents with knowledge to pass on to their children, and assist them to better care for their children. These examples illustrate that the parents regarded their education as providing a role model for their children. Estes reported that the financial benefits of obtaining a degree were noted by many participants, and she cited four examples to highlight this point. She observed that those parents who were able to support themselves without taking on additional work, reported that studying allowed them the benefit of spending more time with their children. It was not clear from the research which parents did not need to work, but their views that education benefitted their children because it allowed them to stay at home, seems to support the tenets of intensive mothering, specifically that mothers should spend most of their time with their children. These statements were offered by Estes as evidence that the students blended their identities, however an alternative explanation might be that the statements simply reflected a reframing of good mothering. A similar explanation has been advanced by others. For example, Collin (2000) stated that, in contrast to the traditional ideal where paid work is defined as being incompatible and in opposition with motherhood, for African American mothers, work is an important and valued dimension of motherhood. Conceptualisations
of motherhood for women of Mexican origin have also incorporated the role of provider for one’s children (Segura, 1994). Estes’ assertion that statements about education being beneficial to children provided evidence of blended identities, are more likely to show that the participants (of whom eleven were African American, one was Hispanic and one was Native American) were reframing good mothering to incorporate the role of provider, and were confirming the ideal of a good mother as one who spends the majority of her time with her children.

Estes (2011, p. 215) quoted one of her participants (Sherry) as evidence that participants blended their identities. Sherry revealed that she was not just going to school for herself but also for her daughter, “to make her life better.” Once again, this could be evidence of reframing good mothering by incorporating a provider role rather than a blending of identities. Estes concluded that participants’ acknowledgement of being better students because they were parents, effectively linked their identities as students and parents. While she acknowledged that the participants’ accounts reinforce “intensive mothering,” she explained that they adjusted this ideology by blending their identities.

An alternative explanation of Estes (2011) may be that these student-parents reframed “good mothering” to incorporate their student role rather than creating a new blended identity. While the statements provided by Estes supported her claims that the students see education as beneficial to parenting and parenting as beneficial to education, it is questionable, on the basis of those statements alone, whether the participants integrated their identities to allow a new identity of the good student-parent to emerge. It would appear that Estes’ evidence of blended identities was based upon her interpretation of the participants’ statements. None of the students indicated that they had created a new identity, and no follow-up research was conducted to authenticate the researcher’s interpretation. The rigour of her studies and her subsequent interpretations would have
been strengthened by conducting a focus group and undertaking member-checking, but these steps were not included in the reported work. Nonetheless, the findings make a valuable contribution to limited knowledge of students who combine education and parenting. The present research aimed to build on Estes’ (2011) findings by focusing exclusively on postgraduate student mothers, and ensuring that member-checking was undertaken.

In summary, the research reviewed so far has shown that while some positive aspects of studying when raising children were indicated, the overall tone tended to be negative. It was unclear whether this came from the participants themselves or from the researchers and the way their research was constructed and executed. Furthermore, the rigour of the research would have been improved by member-checking, especially since much of what was presented as evidence was based on researcher interpretation rather than first-hand evidence, and critical details such as the interview questions were not reported.

The third and final section of this review critically examines what is known about mothers studying at postgraduate level. Lynch (2008) cited findings from the National Centre for Educational Statistics (2005) that identified graduate student mothers as being at a higher risk of attrition than nearly any other group in American academe. Therefore, understanding more about this group of students will contribute to knowledge about why they discontinue their studies, and more importantly, why they succeed.

**Research on Postgraduate Student Mothers**

As foreshadowed earlier in this chapter, there is minimal research examining the specific experiences of postgraduate student mothers. This section reviews three studies. The first is American research by Pare (2009) that examined the experiences of student
mothers; the second examined the experiences of Greek student mothers (Vyronides & Visilakis, 2008); and the final study (Lynch, 2008), explored how graduate student mothers in the USA combined the two identities of mother and student.

**Lived Experiences of US Student Mothers.** Recent research by Pare (2009) was aimed at understanding the lived experiences of twenty-four student mothers – ten of whom were studying at postgraduate level. Given that the research was conducted in the US, the terminology of the original study will be adopted: *university experience* will therefore be referred to as *college/school experience*. The participants were mothers aged between 18 and 30 years old, enrolled on at least a part-time basis in an undergraduate or graduate program, and were primary caretakers of one or more dependents aged 5 years or younger. Four participants lived alone, fourteen lived with a spouse, four lived with parents and two lived with parents and/or extended family members. The women had between one and four children ranging in age from 12 weeks to 6 years old. When asked about their childcare responsibilities, all graduate students reported they were responsible for the majority of childcare.

Participants were interviewed either in person or over the telephone and completed a short survey to gather demographic information. The interview adopted a semi-structured approach and asked questions about how the participants felt about being a mother, why she was a mother, how her family felt about her decision to study and whether they offered help, whether her family life interfered with her studying schedule, what networks she had on campus, how she spent her time each day, how well she juggled motherhood and study, and questions about support. Questions were also asked about her student role, and the interview schedule reflected an equal balance between questions related to the student and mother role. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysis revealed three main themes: (a) how women think about and
experience their role as a mother; (b) how women think about and experience their role as a student; and (c) the social support they were receiving or needed.

The women in Pare’s (2009) study revealed that the role of mother was of primary importance in their lives. Pare observed that the social expectations of motherhood were not challenged by these women and that the role of mother subsumed all other roles and identities of the participants. She revealed that the women had embraced what Douglas and Michael (2004) had termed the ‘new momism’ which required mothers to give their entire physical, psychological, emotional and intellectual beings to the role of motherhood. All of the participants regarded motherhood as their primary social role, and other roles such as student, worker and wife, as secondary. This finding contrasted with Estes’ (2011) research which showed that student parents blended their two roles to form a new identity of the good student-parent. Pare found that all the women had made a conscious decision to prioritise motherhood, fearing they could ruin their children quickly, whereas school/college could not be ruined in the same way – an observation which led her to conclude that the social construction of motherhood, encompassing the notion that “good mothers raise good children” and “bad mothers raise bad children,” may have influenced this decision. Married women in the study believed motherhood was intrinsically linked to being a wife, which Pare suggested may be linked to the social expectations that motherhood fulfils womanhood and is an extension of heterosexual marriage. The research sample did not include any same-sex parents, nor were same-sex parents considered in the interpretation.

The women in Pare’s (2009) study experienced spill-over in their roles as mother and student, which required them to prioritise and compromise on a daily basis. Graduate students experienced more student-mother role conflict than undergraduate students, possibly because of the intensity of their program of study. Twenty-one of the women
felt that not every mother could manage both roles of mother and student because of the intrinsic difficulties. The major reason for this was that motherhood was a woman’s first priority and would therefore interfere with paid work and education. This finding also illustrated how the participants adhered to the social construction of motherhood that positioned the mothering role as central to a woman’s identity. Pare concluded that the participants in her study considered motherhood as central to their identities, and that studying interfered with “good mothering.” She added that while this was especially the case for married mothers, studying enabled unmarried women to be “good mothers” because gaining a degree would allow them to provide for their children in the future. The role of student was therefore only important when it bolstered or became an extension of good mothering (Pare, 2009).

Whilst the participants in Pare’s (2009) study considered motherhood to be their primary role, they also highlighted that there was no definitive way to separate the various roles they took on. Consequently, role spill-over led to additional role conflict. Role overload occurs because of constraints imposed by time: as role obligations increase, a time barrier is encountered which forces the person occupying the roles to honour some at the expense of others. Role conflict occurs when the expectations of each role are discrepant, irrespective of time constraints (Sieber, 1974). The women reported experiencing both school-to-family and family-to-school spill-over. Some participants explained how they made decisions about their studies based on their expectations of motherhood. For example, one participant changed her course because she wanted to breastfeed her child and felt that her original, accelerated program of study would interfere. When family life spilled over into college life, the women in this study made the decision to prioritise family over college work. This extended from basic issues such as foregoing class attendance to do the grocery shopping, to more major reasons such as
withdrawing for a semester to care for a newborn. School-to-family spill-over was also reported by mothers trying to do their college work at home while caring for their children. Pare (2009, p. 122) observed that “school-to-family spill-over was especially conflicting in women’s minds because the boundaries of motherhood were no longer protected and it was difficult to maintain the primacy of motherhood in these situations.”

Not all participants described their experiences with role spill-over in terms of role conflict - role enhancement was reported by six of the women in Pare (2009). They argued that being a mother gave them additional skills which enhanced their abilities as a student. For example, they planned ahead, established routines and cited the fact that their children looked up to them as motivation to continue with their studies. All the participants who talked about role enhancement discussed the importance of “good mothering,” expressed in terms of being organised enough to prepare wholesome food for the family or by being an organised and motivated student in order to be a good role model for one’s children. Pare suggested that women actively constructed their multiple roles in order to avoid being “bad” mothers or “bad” students, thereby avoiding mother blame. Being motivated, organised and providing nutritious food for her children allowed a woman to feel like a “good mother” because her children remained central to her focus. This suggests that it is possible to support this group of women to feel like “good mothers” by potentially offering interventions and strategies to assist them, such as time management training or practical advice on the preparation of family meals. However, it must also be noted that none of the mothers specifically used the term “bad mother” and that the use of this term reflects Pare’s interpretation of their comments. Specifically she stated “Martina’s discussion on ‘bad food’ inferred ‘bad mothering’: she gave her child ‘good food’ because it was part of ‘good mothering’ and ‘bad food’ was like ‘bad
mothering,” in that it can have a long lasting negative effect on the child” (Pare, 2009, p. 129).

Pare (2009) reported “mother guilt” as a feature of combining motherhood with education. The women feared being seen as “bad mothers” because they did not devote all their time, energy and attention to their children and the role of mother. The women internalised guilt and at times saw themselves as “selfish” for studying (Pare, 2009). This was explained by Pare as being fearful of being a “bad mother” and therefore linked to the social expectation that “good mothers” devote all their time to their children and in doing so, produce “good children”. Related to this conceptualisation of a “good mother” is whether the woman viewed her decision to study as a choice or a necessity. For the mothers in Pare’s study who had previous higher education to fall back on, returning to college was seen as more of a choice. For those with no previous education, attending college was considered to be more of a necessity, and enabled them to “define it almost as an extension of their good mothering” (Pare, 2009, p. 98). These women felt that obtaining a higher education was the only means by which they could provide for their families. The married women in Pare’s study reported that their role as a student provided them with an identity outside of motherhood (p. 107), but this was not evident from the women’s comments. Single mothers placed more importance on the fact that a degree could provide them with immediate benefits such as an income, but according to Pare, they also considered the creation of an identity outside of motherhood to be a secondary benefit. The lack of participant commentary directly related to this topic suggests that the issue of identity came from Pare’s interpretation of the interviews, and raises the possibility of researcher bias in the findings, since no follow-up research or member-checking was conducted.
When Pare (2009) first questioned the women about the family support they received, all initially reported that they received enough support to be “good mothers” and “good students.” However, later statements contradicted this information and revealed that in fact, they did not receive the support they needed and that when they did, it was not necessarily beneficial and came with “strings attached.” An important finding by Pare was one woman’s description of support from her husband as akin to permission: if she wanted to go to college, then he said she could. Later evidence suggested that the husband did provide some emotional support when the student considered withdrawing, but in general, offered no emotional or practical support on a daily basis. When discussing support, the women in Pare’s study focused on the necessity of childcare and did not describe the fathers as “co-parenting”. Rather, they considered themselves to be helping out with childcare or watching the children. The implication was that childcare was very much the responsibility of the mother and if he helped, the father was merely assisting her with this task. Pare’s findings showed husbands have lower levels of caregiving involvement despite the modern age of “involved fatherhood”. However, there were exceptions, as three of the married women described their husbands’ behaviour and attitudes in a way that reflected “co-parenting”. Single mothers who lived with their parents or family members reported additional difficulties of engaging support, such as having these family members overstep the boundaries and infringing upon their mothering role. In general, the women did not indicate that they had strong support systems and did not report receiving any significant emotional support from their partners and family. Some participants reported receiving instrumental support in the form of practical help with childcare, financial assistance or accommodation from their families, but that the extra time spent organising such assistance distracted them from their college work.
Whilst the undergraduate participants indicated a desire for the establishment of a support group for student-mothers, the graduate participants thought it would be positive but not essential to their success as students. The reason for this stemmed largely from a reported desire not to be seen as different from other students by having motherhood interfere with college. This finding is similar to that reported in Estes’ (2011) research - that student-parents valued their education and wanted to be seen as good students. One woman in Pare’s (2009) study spoke about the competitiveness of graduate programs and the importance of being equal to childless students. Another graduate mother stated that all students should be treated equally, and if a woman chose to be a mother and a student, then she needed to juggle.

Unlike the undergraduate participants, the graduate participants did not believe that the university should provide emotional and instrumental support. Pare (2009) concluded that this stemmed from a desire not to be “different” from childless graduate students, and wanting to be seen as good mothers who can manage both roles with minimal assistance. However if that were the case, then no differences should have been reported between the undergraduate and graduate cohorts. The implicit argument in Pare’s conclusion is that graduate mothers wish to be seen as good mothers, but based on her previous data which suggested that undergraduate mothers believed they were good mothers because they were obtaining a university education, this desire should be less, not more. Following that logic, postgraduate mothers already have a degree and have therefore already demonstrated that they are good mothers.

An alternative explanation may be that Pare’s (2009) finding has nothing to do with the desire to be seen as good mother, but is related to the fact that these students do not want to be singled out as being less capable in the competitive graduate environment. Given Mason’s (2006) findings that female doctoral students spend less time on their
studies than their male counterparts in the degree program, the possibility that these students did not wish to further distinguish themselves from the student group by asking for additional support, appears to be a valid alternative to the “desire to be seen as a good mother” explanation advanced by Pare (2009).

Pare (2009) called for more understanding of what student mothers experience to help develop more effective tools to assist student mothers achieve their goals. Pare’s research provides valuable insight into the experiences of student mothers, but was limited to mothers of children aged five years and under. Young children typically require greater levels of care from their parents and are not old enough to attend educational institutions such as schools. Therefore, the experiences of mothers in Pare’s study may have been influenced by the age of their children. This thesis builds on the knowledge gained from Pare’s research by examining mothers with children of varying ages. A mother with school-aged children, for example, may not feel as pressured by childcare concerns because her children attend school during the day.

**Experiences of Greek Postgraduate Student Mothers.** One of the few studies specifically examining postgraduate students was conducted in Greece by Vyronides and Visilakis (2008). The University of the Aegean launched a new postgraduate program in the 2004-2005 academic year, that was delivered through an e-learning education platform. The course instructors started researching the program in an attempt to determine how students were coping with the demands of the course. Vyronides and Visilakis discovered that one particular group emerged as being especially important: women who at the time of their studies were simultaneously occupying the roles of mother, wife, professional and postgraduate student. The subject of the program was *Gender Issues in Contemporary Social Life* - the researchers therefore considered that the
experiences of the students were in many ways reflecting the content of the course, and that their investigation would serve as a reflective exercise for the students.

Students were asked to respond to an online structured questionnaire about their experiences with the new program, including how they handled the pressures and demands of the course, as well as alternative forms of education (Vyronides & Visilakis, 2008). After the responses were analysed, the researchers determined that the study patterns of women with families were distinctly different from other groups of students, and so asked those women to take part in an interview. Exactly how their study patterns differed was not reported in any detail. A total of eight women agreed to participate in an in-depth interview. As noted by Vyronides and Visilakis (2008), it is important to highlight that the participants were interviewed by their course tutor and were studying a gender-based course - two factors that may have impacted on their awareness and sensitivity to the issues and their willingness to share their stories. The interviews were transcribed and their statements categorised. The results were presented in the following sections: (a) profiles of women students and their reasons for returning to higher education; (b) views on marriage, career and motherhood; and (c) managing time amidst conflicting roles and familial support.

The majority of the women (seven out of eight) were teachers with between 7 and 16 years of work experience. The remaining participant was a social scientist working for an equal rights non-government organisation. All the teachers reported that their job was appropriate for balancing career and family, and that it was not their preferred career choice but rather a compromise, educationally and socially achievable. Vryonides and Visilakis (2008) suggested that participation in the postgraduate program could be viewed as an attempt by these women to fulfil life-long educational and social aspirations. For example, two participants revealed that they had wanted to study medicine and law but
were prevented from doing so by their parents. The participants had between one and
three children whose ages ranged from 2.5 to 17 years old. The fact that the course was
available through electronic distance learning was the reason almost all of the women had
selected it. An additional reason for selecting postgraduate education was suggested by
Vryonides and Visilakis, as being an attempt to break out of the typical female teacher
profile of low-grade positions. This was highlighted by one participant who was the head
teacher of a primary school and believed that she had been appointed to this position
because there were no suitable male candidates at the time. Her appointment was viewed
with skepticism by parents and colleagues at the school and she felt that postgraduate
education would strengthen her professional status. Vryonides and Visilakis reported that
prestigious education empowers women to not just “escape” from traditional female
expectations, but also to enhance their career prospects. The women did not report that
the course topic (gender) was central to their decision to enrol in the program, and it is
therefore likely that the participants chose the course predominantly because the mode of
delivery allowed them to fit it around other work and family responsibilities.

In Greek society women are expected to find fulfillment in domestic roles as
opposed to public careers (Vryonides & Visilakis, 2008). The participants revealed that
motherhood was a pleasurable experience but “they were forced to carry the heaviest
burden of raising the children” (Vryonides & Visilakis, 2008, p. 204). This is reflected in
the women’s comments that family members did not support their pursuit of further
education because doing so would interfere with their domestic responsibilities. For
example, one participant commented when she told her mother she was planning to
undertake further education, “my mother…almost swore at me because she regarded that
I wouldn’t do my job as a mother properly” (Vryonides & Visilakis, 2008, p. 204.) These
participants felt that postgraduate study was a luxury that needed to accommodate their
family obligations. For example, they only studied at times that wouldn’t impact on their families (such as when the children had gone to sleep) and sacrificed sleep, time for themselves and time spent on housework. How effectively the women resolved these competing demands depended on the familial support they received. Two women reported that the support they received from their husbands - both emotional and practical - was vital during times of stress and tension, but for other women, their husbands actually added to their stress. Vryonides and Visilakis suggested that the unsupportive attitude of some husbands is partly explained by the traditional gender expectations of the role of the mother in Greek families. The findings of this research therefore, need to be understood within this cultural context. Greek society, as reported by Vryonides and Visilakis, appears to be more traditional than Australian society, and for this reason the findings may not reflect the experiences of Australian student mothers.

The aim of Vryonides and Visilakis’s (2008) study was to highlight the social conditions that obstructed some students’ attempt to participate in further education. The value of their study lies in the fact that it provided a rare insight into the lives of women attempting postgraduate education. It is however limited to a specific location, culture and education program. Furthermore, and possibly due to the cultural context of the research, there was no discussion or exploration of alternative understandings of what it meant to be a good mother or, for that matter, a good student. The findings contributed to the meagre knowledge about student mothers in general, but offer little insight into understanding the Australian postgraduate student mother experience.

**Doctoral Student Mothers in the US.** A study examining postgraduate student mothers in the United States of America (Lynch, 2008), was intended to understand more about attrition rates for this group of students. The research study was based on interviews with 30 graduate student mothers enrolled in doctoral programs at five
separate universities. Lynch examined how public and private mindsets concerning the meanings of “graduate student” and “mother” identities can jeopardise women’s educational attainment and impact on the advancement of women in American academe. According to Lynch, in order to understand the position of graduate student mothers in the American higher education system, it was necessary to understand the wider cultural assumptions about motherhood within American culture. The ideals and assumptions of what made a “good mother” were highlighted by Lynch in her outline of the dominant cultural portrayal of mothers in the US that involved “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996). Lynch claimed that while not all mothers practiced every aspect of what this concept encompassed, it was implicitly or explicitly understood by the majority of American women to be the proper way to raise children. The fact that employed mothers were still responsible for the daily care and wellbeing of children and for running the household despite working outside the home, is evidence of the dominant cultural assumption of what motherhood involved (Lynch, 2008). Even the terminology “working mother” showed that employment and family were dichotomous terms for women, whereas for men, employment was part of what fathers do: they worked to support their children and families (Garey, 1999, cited by Lynch, 2008).

The study by Lynch (2008) aimed to explore how graduate student mothers combined the two identities of “mother” and “student,” and to understand how this unique role combination affected attrition rates in this group of students. The study aimed to examine how institutional factors and personal practices both eased and complicated this unique role combination, and to explore the strategies and resources deemed necessary for success in both roles. Participants comprised 30 women enrolled in doctoral programs across 18 separate academic departments in five universities in north-eastern USA, with an average of two children at an average age of 4 years. The graduate student mothers
were asked 75 questions during a taped interview session with the researcher. The interviews were transcribed and coded, and the results were presented in two categories: Structural Environments and Socio-Cultural Identities.

The section on Structural Environments encompassed two key areas of mismatch between status as “mother” and position within academe: financial support and childcare. The Socio-Cultural Identities section encompassed two socio-cultural practices inherent in the construction of the “student/mother” identity: identity practices and identity support. Insufficient financial aid was the most common complaint from participants about their university. Financial aid was seen as being better suited to single, childless students - this was particularly evident when a number of women changed their enrolment to part-time following the birth of their children, and found that they were not able to access funding opportunities because of their reduced enrolment status. Women with supportive families and spouses felt privileged to have those resources available to them, and therefore viewed traditional marriage positively because it provided them with the financial security to pursue an advanced degree. Every participant identified affordable childcare as a pressing concern, and agreed that the American higher education system offered “no real support” in this area. Participants paid for expenses associated with childcare and reported having been told that childcare costs were not recoverable through any grant or fellowship application. One participant revealed that her supervisor suggested increasing the budget on her grant application, by adding items like staples, paper-clips and gas for her car. When she added childcare costs, an essential and significant expense, she was told “no way, it just isn’t done. I can’t sign off on it” (Lynch, 2008, p. 593). Other childcare issues that were reported concerned the cost and availability of on-campus services, and the need for after-hour childcare for evening classes. Lynch (2008) concluded by saying that changes in the enrolment patterns of
women had done more than just create new opportunities: coupled with old patterns of structural support, new and intensified social conflicts and personal dilemmas had been created.

A lack of structural support alone did not adequately explain attrition in graduate student mothers. Lynch (2008) also examined the social-cultural expectations in relation to which these students constructed their lives. The findings identified two themes that explored how the “student/mother” identity is constructed: identity practices and identity support. Significantly, Lynch’s (2008) study revealed how graduate student mothers avoided role conflict and ensured success in both roles. This involved employing two strategies: maternal invisibility and academic invisibility, depending on the situation. Lynch argued that graduate student mothers downplayed their maternal role at university, and downplayed their student role outside university, and suggested that understanding the ways in which “graduate student” and “motherhood” were conceptualised in dominant American culture, explained their behaviour. “Good students,” particularly at graduate level, were judged on their devotion to their career path and “good mothers” were judged on their devotion to their children; therefore each role demanded total commitment resulting in inherent conflict for women who had striven to pursue both (Lynch, 2008). This meant that in a cultural context, where the two roles were in conflict, women actively tried to represent either identity. Maternal invisibility refers to mothers who hide their maternal status from public view, by allowing themselves to appear as “just a student” and preserving the cultural norm of the graduate student who is 100% committed to her studies 100% of the time (Lynch, 2008). For example, participants revealed that they didn’t keep photos or mementos of their children at university, and asked their partners not to telephone them to avoid anyone overhearing them having conversations about their children. They also employed a strategy of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” maintaining
their *maternal invisibility* by avoiding all public displays of motherhood while at university (Lynch, 2008). Lynch highlighted that these actions contributed to the lack of response from academe to effectively meet the needs of this group, because they were essentially keeping their mother identities hidden. By suggesting that women should make their mother identity more visible, Lynch implicitly supported the notion that the problem lies with the individual rather than with the higher education system as a whole.

While the present author acknowledges that systemic issues need to be addressed, particularly those pertaining to childcare availability and affordability, individual student-mothers also need to challenge the supposed ideals of intensive mothering, and assert their rights to an identity outside of motherhood.

Estes’ (2011) research demonstrated that student-parents valued both parenthood and education, and to resolve the dilemma of being torn between their student and parent identities, they created a new identity: the good student-parent. The proactive, empowered approach adopted by the student-parents in Estes’ research, provided a positive alternative to the somewhat passive and accepting stance supposedly taken by student-mothers in previous studies (such as Lynch, 2008; White, 2008). Estes’ student-parents actively created a new and blended identity, whereas there was no evidence that the participants in previous studies challenged dominant mothering ideology, or sought to minimise its harm on their decision to obtain an identity outside of motherhood.

The findings of Lynch (2008) revealed that outside of academe, the respondents aimed to publicly appear as “stay-at-home” mothers, leading to a condition of *academic invisibility* in the public sphere. This was achieved by working at night, telling teachers they were at home and available should their children need them, being home to prepare meals, finishing early to collect their children from school, taking them to activities and mingling with other mothers during the day. Lynch argued that by employing a strategy
of academic invisibility, the women appeared to be full-time mothers, both privately and publicly, thereby preserving the notion that the “good mother” was 100% committed to her children. One participant, a single parent and primary earner in her family, became the “room parent” in her children’s classes in order to maintain both her private and public persona as a dedicated mother. She said “it’s time consuming, definitely, but I feel like a better mother because of it” (Lynch, 2008, p. 598). Lynch concluded that while these women regarded themselves privately as student mothers, they rarely presented both identities to academe or society at large. This directly contrasts with the blended identities of the student-parents in Estes’ (2011) study, and also suggests a negative coping strategy insofar as the only way these women could combine motherhood with education was to keep their two identities separate, a seemingly stressful task that required concerted effort to maintain, and a strategy that is quite different from the blending strategy suggested by Estes (2011).

The second section of Lynch’s (2008) findings reported on the support that students received by combining their two identities. Most participants reported feeling intellectually supported by their university, faculty and supervisor, but not supported emotionally. The importance of emotional support was highlighted by exception, through one participant who revealed that her supervisor would send her son a birthday card every year. She said “and I’ll tell you something, sometimes I think those $1.50 cards have kept me in this program. I am lucky to have him” (Lynch, 2008, p. 600). Others reported receiving less support, even at times damaging and hurtful comments from their supervisors. Lynch (2008) suggested that gestures of support from the university and its staff could help reduce the attrition rates of student mothers. This suggestion by Lynch points to the role of the system in student attrition, whereas her previous findings and
interpretations suggested that the individual was responsible for the system’s lack of response, because they kept their mother identities hidden.

Social support was also reported by Lynch (2008) to be helpful. Participants who interacted with other student mothers reported greater satisfaction in peer relationships. Levels of satisfaction decreased when participants were the only, or one of the only, students in their department to have a child, or when they had little or no contact with other graduate student mothers.

Lynch (2008) concluded that it was the way in which motherhood was conceptualised in American culture that helped explain the high attrition rates of graduate student mothers. Lynch argued that American women constructed their lives according to an ideology of “intensive mothering.” The women in her study embraced the ideals of culturally appropriate motherhood and tried to be “good mothers” by reducing the time they spent studying. She commented that the “graduate student mothers conform to the ideals of “intensive motherhood,” both because they found it satisfying and because they believed that refusing to assume the responsibilities convention assigned them, would harm their children” (Lynch, 2008, p. 603). A strategy of maternal invisibility was necessary for these women, because motherhood was perceived to be at odds with other interests and pursuits. Because the nature of both roles was in conflict with their contexts, participants felt fortunate when they are able to openly show and be supported in their blended identity, which was rare (Lynch, 2008).

Lynch (2008) suggested that one reason why participants did not take a collective stance to confront the issues that prevented them from openly revealing their blended identities, was because the women came from varied backgrounds, fields, lifestyles and parenting/studying approaches, making it difficult for them to perceive a unified,
internally consistent set of interests. Hence, it seems unlikely to the present author that these students had indeed “blended” their identities in the manner described by Estes (2011). Instead, it seems that these women took on different identities depending on their circumstances, so for example, when at university, the student identity was at the fore.

**Theoretical Perspectives of Previous Literature**

The following diagram presents an overview of the research literature presented in this chapter and their various theoretical perspectives, to help understand the implications of previous research. As this diagram illustrates, the studies reviewed fall into four categories. The first concerns “intensive mothering” ideology (Hays, 1996) and its impact on what women think mothers should be. The second concerns negative coping and explains how individuals use cognitive, emotional and behavioural efforts to manage external and internal demands (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The third category posits that the difficulties student-mothers encounter, can be explained by institutional issues and deficits. The final category holds the individual responsible for the difficulties they encounter, and suggests that the solutions are within the control of the individual student-mother.

Figure 5. Overview of research literature on the student mother.

**Intensive Mothering.** According to Arendell (2000) who conducted a review of a decade’s scholarship into motherhood, “intensive motherhood” is the prevailing ideology of motherhood in North America and in many other western countries. Ideologies are
considered to be patterns of beliefs, ideas, opinions and values that people use to create meaning in their lives (Freeden, 2003).

Despite cultural contradictions and diverse practices, the present author argues that the “intensive mothering” ideology continues to be the normative standard by which mothering is evaluated (see for example, Arendell, 2000 for an earlier, but similar view). The “good mother syndrome” is reinforced by several myths around mothering. For example, anything less than full-time mothering is detrimental to a child; a mother sacrifices her own life, needs and interests for those of her child, and she believes that caring for her family is more important than paid work (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Cannold, 2005; Maher & Saujeres, 2007; Smythe & Isserlis, 2004; Villani & Ryan, 1997).

Dillaway and Pare (2008), in their examination of the “stay-at-home mother” ideology, concluded that because a “good mother” forgoes any involvement in paid employment and that mothering must be her sole activity, mothering must take place within the confines of the home. Dillaway and Pare explained that cultural discourse defined stay-at-home mothers as being physically located in the home and not involved in income-producing activities that distracted from their ability to offer “quality” childcare for their children. Hays (1996) suggested that stay-at-home mothers were expected to practice “intensive mothering” and that to be a “good mother,” women must adhere to three main principles. These were: (a) the mother was primarily responsible for childcare; (b) childcare should be child-centred; and (c) children “exist outside of market valuation and are sacred, innocent, pure, their price immeasurable” (Hays, 1996, p. 54).

According to “intensive mothering” ideology, mothers should be available to provide age-appropriate stimulation and interaction, and should monitor the emotional and cognitive development of their children (MacDonald, 1998). In today’s society, a
“good mother” needs to be both physically at home with her offspring and supporting their proper development by spending quality physical and psychological time with them (Dillaway & Pare, 2008). This was because stay-at-home mothers were considered to be essential to raising healthy, well-adjusted children (Raskin, 2006). Russo (1976) described the stereotyped expectations for women as the “motherhood mandate” which is based on the cultural belief that, to be a complete and successful female, a woman must have children and spend all her time caring for them. “Intensive mothering” provided a cultural context for western women’s experiences of motherhood in Pare’s (2009) and Walkup’s (2005) research. Those studies argued that the ideals of the “good mother” influenced women’s experiences of combining motherhood with education.

As this review of the literature showed, the ideals of “intensive mothering” appear to have remained unchallenged in some research examining student mothers. It is the present author’s opinion that the previous literature does not reflect the reality of contemporary child-rearing, and that not questioning this supposed cultural ideal of mothering, maintains the status quo. Pare’s (2009), Walkup’s (2004, 2005) and Lynch’s (2008) research did not challenge the status quo of mothering ideology or present any alternative definitions.

**Negative Coping.** Lynch’s (2008) research demonstrated that student-mothers coped with their conflicting identities by practicing maternal or academic invisibility, depending on the situation. Coping is the process of attempting to manage the demands created by stressful situations that are judged as taxing or exceeding an individual’s resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It explains how individuals use cognitive, emotional and behavioural efforts to manage external and internal demands (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The two major functions of coping are dealing with the problem that causes the distress (cognitive or problem-focused coping), and regulating the emotions in
order to minimise the distress caused by the stressors (emotion-focused coping) (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010).

It is conceivable that some coping strategies mainly relieve or exacerbate distress (Yael et al., 2008). This author argues that the coping strategies employed by the mothers in Lynch’s (2008) research were examples of negative coping, and that practicing identity invisibility mitigated the distress of trying to balance two otherwise conflicting roles. The women did not feel that they had the freedom to enjoy both mother and student identities. They actively hid their academic identities by, for example, telling their children’s teachers that they were available during the day, and hiding their maternal identities by refusing to display photos or mementos of their children at university (Lynch, 2008).

**Institutional Failure.** Other research suggested that the difficulties student-mothers encounter were institutionally based (Walkup, 2006; White, 2008; Reay, 2003). That is, with improved support from their education provider, student mothers might better balance the roles of mother and student. While it has been suggested that this literature has methodological limitations, the work nevertheless highlights the importance of the role of the education provider. Reay (2003) examined the responsibility of the individual university, and broadened her perspective to include the higher education system and the role that social class played in students’ access to higher education. This is plausible, given that in both liberal and conservative nations across the OECD, there was a shortfall in the number of quality affordable childcare places available, making it difficult for mothers of preschool-aged children to return to full-time employment (Briar, 2005). A lack of affordable childcare also impacted on the mothers’ ability to participate in higher education. In this context, the higher education institution plays a significant role in assisting women with children to combine motherhood with education (Walkup, 2006; White, 2008; Reay, 2003).
Individual. Finally, recent research (Estes, 2011) confirmed that student-parents do have difficulties combining parenthood with higher education, but that they resolve this conflict by creating a new identity, which blended their parent and student identities into one of the good student parent. Estes (2011) suggested that combining parenthood and education was an individual issue: the student could resolve the tension caused by conflicting roles by actively constructing a new identity. As highlighted by Estes, this put additional pressure on the individual in that it created new expectations. Good parents should further educate themselves and have a source of motivation similar to that which children provide for student parents. Estes placed the task of resolving these conflicting roles solely on the individual student, and in doing so, did not acknowledge other factors such as institutional support. This is particularly salient, given that the institutional context in which Estes undertook her study was especially conducive and supportive of student mothers. Estes’ perspective was founded on liberal ideologies which suggest that “the individual makes their own experience in the world and ignores structural issues such as discrimination and other systemic problems” (Manathunga, 2005, p. 220).

Summary and conclusion

It was argued in this chapter that the research literature examining mothers who study was strongly affected by ideology – whether it be good mother, social advocacy or individualism. Previous research suggested that mothers undertaking higher education felt guilty and experienced role conflict and role overload. However, despite this tension, these women continued with their studies.

Given that raising children and postgraduate study are both time-consuming activities, there is no disputing that managing the demands of motherhood and postgraduate education simultaneously can be difficult. The research program described
in this thesis is aimed at exploring the reasons why these students continue with their
degrees, despite the conflict and tension that come with doing so. The existing literature
does not adequately address this obvious contradiction, and offers little explanation of
how women resolve this tension. Furthermore, the literature appears to have relied
heavily on the researchers’ own interpretations, rather than on the actual data presented
by the participants. For example, Estes (2011) concluded that student parents blend their
identities, but provided no evidence that any of the participants spoke of having a blended
identity. In addition, Pare (2009) concluded that married women participated in college
education to forge an identity outside of motherhood, but provided no direct evidence that
the women mentioned this in their interviews. Member-checking, to ensure authentication
of interpretations from the data, is also lacking.

The Australian higher education system differs significantly from that in the USA
where two of the major studies reviewed in this chapter were conducted (Lynch, 2008;
Pare, 2009). Australian students have the option of deferring their university fees, they
have access to subsidised health and childcare and, if eligible, can receive parenting
payments while studying – all factors that help ease the financial burden of studying with
children. Therefore, some of the pressures faced by student mothers in previous research
studies may not be experienced to the same extent by women in Australia.

The existing literature presents a bleak picture for potential mothers considering a
university education, as the focus tends to be on the challenges and difficulties these
students face within institutions that do not cater for students with children. It is not the
intention of the author to dismiss or minimise the difficulties some women with children
encounter in trying to balance the dual roles of mother and student, nor is it the intention
to deny that some educational institutions do not cater for the distinct needs of student
parents. Rather, the author aims to contribute to the overall knowledge of this group of
students by examining the specific experiences of mothers who study at postgraduate level.

The present review demonstrates that the overall tone of literature on the topic of student mothers is somewhat negative, and presents a bleak picture for potential students. What is not clear is whether this negativity reflects the actual experiences of the women themselves, or whether it reflects researcher bias from the way the research was constructed and the findings interpreted. The research in this thesis was designed to contribute to understanding what student mothers experience, so that this issue may be addressed.
Chapter Four

Methodology

Research aims and questions

The aim of this research program is to examine the individual experiences of postgraduate student mothers in Australian universities, and therefore understand the experiences and activities of mothering for contemporary Australian women who are also postgraduate students. The questions this study attempted to answer are:

- What are the experiences of postgraduate student mothers in Australia?
- How do Australian postgraduate student mothers resolve the tension of combining motherhood with education?

This chapter provides a detailed description of the methodology used to answer these questions. An overview of the research framework is given below to provide a foundation on which this chapter is based.

Overview of Research Framework

A scaffolding research framework, incorporating four elements that inform one another, has been suggested by Crotty (1998). These elements are epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods. Epistemological decisions inform theoretical perspective that in turn informs the methodology and methods used in the research study. Crotty’s (1998) framework is illustrated in Figure 6.
According to Crotty (1998), *epistemology* is the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology. Epistemology provides a “philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible” (Maynard, 1994, p. 10). The epistemology chosen for this research, constructionism, holds that there is no such thing as an objective truth; meaning is constructed, rather than discovered (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, different people will construct different meanings for the same phenomena. Constructionism is the epistemology that qualitative researchers tend to adopt (Crotty, 1998).

*Theoretical perspective* is the philosophical stance informing the methodology, and provides a context for the process and grounding its logic and criteria. The theoretical perspective encompasses these assumptions. It is necessary to outline the author’s view of the human world and the social life within it, to account for these assumptions and to provide for their justification (Crotty, 1998). The theoretical perspective for the current research study is social constructionism. Social constructionism explains how people create their view of the world, depending on the time and place in which they live. It should be noted that social constructionism differs from social constructivism. Both
constructs explain the ways in which social phenomena develop, but they differ in that social constructionism refers to the development of social phenomena relative to social contexts, whereas social constructivism refers to how individuals make meaning of knowledge within a social context (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructionism is explained by Gergen (1985, p. 266) as the theoretical framework “concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world…in which they live.” This means that the view people hold of the world is a social construction. Therefore, knowledge is contextual and depends on the social, historical and cultural time and location in which it is created (Gergen, 1985); and narrative, dialogue and diverse viewpoints are critical to constructing meaning (Gergen, 1999). In the context of this research, social constructionism provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding what women think mothers “should be”.

Methodology refers to the strategy, plan of action, process or design behind the choice and use of particular research methods, and links that choice. In this research, the methodologies have been chosen to obtain the experiences directly from the women themselves. Discourse analysis was chosen for the first major study (Chapters 5 and 6), and Q- methodology was chosen for the second major study (Chapters 7 and 8).

The method, that is the specific technique used, was narrative method in the case of the first major study (Chapter 5), and this is further described later in this chapter. After consideration of various theories to underpin this research, it was concluded that no one theory adequately provides a framework for this investigation or for interpretation of the findings. As a result, elements of several theories apply, and these are presented below.
Social Constructionist Explanations of Mothers Studying at University

The experiences of mothers studying at university are complex. The previous chapter has shown that meaning may be attached by the theoretical perspectives of the researcher. Although the theoretical perspective that underpins the present research is social constructionism, there are differing explanations of how people create their view of the world. The present section provides an overview of those explanations. A detailed discussion of the explanatory power of the various social constructionist approaches incorporating the findings of this research is provided in Chapter 9.

Social Constructions of Motherhood

In western society, good mothers are considered to be stay-at-home mothers (Hays, 1996) who forsake any activities (such as employment) that detract from their ability to provide constant care for their children. Both the “good mother” stereotype and the social construction of motherhood provide a social context in which women who study at postgraduate level may have understood their experiences. Studying requires significant time and energy commitments, and by undertaking postgraduate education, women are reducing the resources they have available for “mothering” their children.

Coser (1974) described family and workplaces as “greedy institutions” because of the demands they place on an individual’s time and energy. According to social constructions of motherhood, this could leave women feeling that they are not good mothers, because they pursue activities and roles outside of the domestic sphere and realm of motherhood.

The notion of what motherhood means was considered relevant to the current research because of its potential to influence how a woman considers combining motherhood with education. Researchers such as Phoenix and Wollett (1991, p. 13) argued that psychology has been “instrumental in constructing the ways in which
motherhood is seen and in maintaining mothers in their current social position.” They argued that psychological and social constructions of “normal” mothers (meaning good and ideal mothers) are contradictory to the real-life experience of many mothers. Hence “many mothers are socially constructed as pathological and differences between mothers are not adequately studied or written about” (Phoenix & Wollett, 1991, p. 13).

**Gender Role Theory**

Gender role theory was considered by the author as a potential theoretical explanation for understanding how women give meaning to their experiences of combining motherhood and education. This is because it explains why childcare predominantly falls into the domain of motherhood, thereby limiting their opportunities to pursue activities outside of mothering. Gender-role theory proposes that society holds stereotyped expectations of the appropriate behaviour that men and women should exhibit. Specifically, men are expected to be breadwinners and women are expected to be caretakers (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999). Given that a woman’s pursuit of higher education distracts from her mothering role and may increase her breadwinning capabilities then, according to gender role theory, mothers who are students may not be perceived as positively as women who discontinue their education to have children (Mottarella, Fritzche, Whitten, & Bedsole, 2009).

**Role Conflict Theory**

Role conflict theory was explored as a potential theoretical explanation for understanding the experiences of mothers who study at postgraduate level. Women may assume several roles at the same time, such as mother, partner, employee and student. Role conflict may occur when women attempt to fulfil multiple roles. Goode (1960) introduced the term “role strain” to describe the resulting strain that occurs when an
individual tries to meet the demands of multiple roles. Sieber (1974) identified two problems that contribute to role strain: role overload and role conflict. Role overload is mainly associated with time constraints: if an individual has too many roles to perform, a time barrier will be reached whereby the person will have to choose which role to perform at the expense of the other. Role conflict occurs when the expectations of each role are discrepant, irrespective of time constraints (Sieber, 1974). Essentially, role conflict occurs when roles are in direct opposition to each other. Role conflict theory offers an explanation why some women struggled to combine motherhood with study, as argued in previous studies (such as Lynch, 2008; Pare, 2009; White, 2008).

**Identity Theory**

Identity theory was considered as a potential theoretical framework and was used in Estes’ (2011) research where student parents created a new blended identity. The term “identity” is contested and interpreted in a variety of different ways across different disciplinary fields (Hall & Burns, 2009). Traditional approaches to identity, such as Erikson (1968), have presented it as a singular and stable cognitive construct, while other theories present it as highly relative, changeable and multilayered (Lin, 2008). For example, personal identity was defined by Gecas and Burke (1995, p. 42) as “the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others”.

The present research draws on sociocultural and anthropological perspectives of identity which hypothesise that identities are not fixed, but fluid and continuously constructed, co-constructed and reconstructed over periods of time (Egan-Robertson, 1998). Social and cultural factors influence identity development (Alsup, 2006) but individuals control their identities based on their social and academic goals (Gee, 2006).
Estes (2011) argued that it was difficult for student parents to be both good students and good parents and this presented an identity dilemma for student parents. She suggested that “identity dilemmas result from losing valued attributes...and their corresponding valued identities, i.e. positive definitions of the self, including socially conferred and personally defined positive identities” (Charmaz, 1994, p. 296). When individuals became student parents, they faced an identity dilemma because of the practical and ideological conflicts that occurred with the intersection of the student and parent identities: as student parents they could not fit the ideals of either identity (Estes, 2011).

**Positive Psychology**

The findings of the present research program sit more easily within a social constructionist approach informed by positive psychology. This approach has not been considered by the previous research reviewed in Chapter 3, which suggested that the outlook was generally bleak and emphasised the difficulties and negative aspects of studying while mothering.

Postgraduate education offers mothers growth opportunities, and so positive psychology can offer an explanation within the theoretical framework of social constructionism. Positive psychology was first coined in 2000 by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi. It has been described as “the study of human strengths and optimal functioning” which aims to “foster research on the positive personal traits and dispositions that are thought to contribute to subjective wellbeing and psychological health” (Darity, 2008, p. 385). This approach directly contrasts with the traditional psychological method of studying people’s distress and maladaptive functioning, and signals a shift from a “disease model” of human functioning to one of “human strengths”.
BALANCING THE DUAL ROLES OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENT AND MOTHER

(Darity, 2008). Positive psychology is a deliberate correction that moves the focus away from problems (Peterson, 2009) to human strength and resilience, in order to “reorient psychology back to its two neglected missions - making normal people stronger and more productive, and making high human potential actual” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Summary

In conclusion, several social constructionist explanations were explored by the researcher to understand the experiences of women who combine motherhood and education. As indicated in the previous chapter, the experience is far more complex than a linear construction of cause and effect. The importance of interpretation and theoretical explanation has been demonstrated, and this has been argued to characterise the existing literature. The next part of this chapter explains the particular methodological approach used in the narrative study reported in Chapter 5.

Qualitative Phase Methodology

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), a quiet methodological revolution has been taking place in the social sciences over the last four decades, with an increasing focus on an interpretive, qualitative approach to research. Qualitative research draws on the theoretical perspectives from a variety of areas, including phenomenology, cultural studies, psychology, symbolic interactionism, and feminism. It includes a variety of practical techniques such as narrative analysis, interviewing, ethnography and focus groups (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000a; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Seale, 2004). Many texts describe qualitative research techniques in great detail (see for example, Cresswell, 1997; Flick, 2002; Liapputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 1998; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Silverman, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In
addition, there are texts that address specific types of qualitative research, for example ethnography (see amongst others Atkinson et al., 2001; Taylor, 2002; Willis & Trondman, 2002), in-depth interviewing (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Wengraf, 2001), and focus groups (Bloor et al., 2001; Greenbaum, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Litosseliti, 2003; Puchta & Potter, 2004) to name just a few.

In their summary of features common to qualitative research, Rossman and Rallis (2003) explained that qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive and is emergent rather than prefigured. Qualitative methods are useful to gain insights into how people make sense of their experiences, and are often used in the exploratory phase of a research program, as was done in this study. Denzin (1989a, p.10) identified that “a basic question drives the interpretive project in the human disciplines: how do men and women live and give meaning to their lives and capture these meanings in written, narrative or oral forms?”

Qualitative research is considered to be a more fluid and flexible approach compared to quantitative statistical methods (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Qualitative data “documents the world from the point of view of the people studied…rather than presenting if from the perspective of the researcher” (Hammersley, 1992a, p. 45). Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) caution that the person who becomes obsessed with techniques has missed the point of qualitative research: that is, putting the interpretative process at the centre of the study.

The current research study focuses on the interpretative process: how mothers who study interpret and give meaning to their experiences as postgraduate students in an Australian university. Given the aims of this study and the desire to gain a rich, in-depth understanding of these women’s experiences, a qualitative method was deemed the most suitable for this phase of the research. The major aim of this study was to understand
more about the experiences of mothers who return to postgraduate education and to learn more about these women and their experiences. Chase (1995, p.3) stated “if we want to hear stories rather than reports, then our task as interviewers is to invite others to tell their stories, to encourage them to take responsibility for the meaning of their talk.” Therefore the narrative method was chosen as the most suitable method to conduct this phase of the research program. The following section describes the method and its analysis in more detail.

**Narrative Method.** By creating stories about past events and actions involving the self, individuals are able to make sense of their lives (Bruner, 1991; Linde, 1993). Narrative inquiry refers to a group of qualitative research approaches that use stories, or narratives, to describe human action (Polkinghorne, 1995). A narrative is an oral or written account of personal experiences that has the structure of a story. Like a story, a narrative has a beginning, middle and an end. A narrative refers to a form of discourse whereby the events and happenings are made into a temporal whole by means of a plot (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative analysis takes as its object of investigation the story itself (Riessman, 1993). According to Riessman (1993), the purpose of this method is to see how participants make sense of events and actions in their lives, to examine how the story is put together, and what cultural and linguistic resources it draws upon. By casting it into a narrative form, individuals are able to make sense of an experience (Bruner, 1990). A precise definition of a “personal narrative” remains ambiguous, but Riesman (1993, p. 67) suggests that it “generally refers to a particular kind of text organised around consequential events in the teller’s life”.

According to Mishler (1986), mainstream research methods suppress narrative accounts, which are often coded as irrelevant “asides.” Furthermore, Marecek (2003) argued that the publication guidelines of the American Psychological Association (2001)
require researchers to report their studies as an orderly sequence of activity, but that producing such a smooth story involves much re-description and omission. In addition, questionnaires using traditional Likert-type response scales are not ideal for capturing people’s innermost thoughts, hopes and feelings (Smith, 2000). Riessman (1994) suggested that if respondents are not interrupted with standardised research questions, they will hold the floor for long periods of time and will naturally organise their replies into stories. Furthermore, narratives can elicit themes that the researchers did not even consider (Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2002).

The present research was designed to encourage women to discuss their whole experience of being a mother who returns to postgraduate study. This allowed participants to discuss their experience in a way that respected its complexity and diversity, and the uniqueness of each woman’s history. Qualitative studies allow participants to voice the meaning of their lived experiences (Cresswell, 2003) and qualitative researchers “take seriously what participants say: they leave the way open to hear what they did not expect” (Marecek, 2003). Therefore, aside from the rich data obtained from the narratives, this method provides women with the opportunity to “tell their story” and give a voice to their experiences, which of itself, can be beneficial.

When using a narrative approach, the agenda is open to change and development, and depends on the narrator’s experience (Holloway & Jefferson, 2008). An encounter with a research participant using a narrative approach differs significantly to structured or semi-structured interviews, as the agenda and direction of an interview is set by the interviewer. According to Bauer (1996, p. 2), using an interview method imposes the interviewer on the information in three ways: “by selecting the theme and topics; by ordering the questions and by wording the questions in his or her language.” Some narrative researchers consider the narrative itself to be the objective or narrative analysis
(see for example, Bauer, 1996), whereas others examine the events or experiences being narrated. For example, Holloway and Jefferson (2003) use narrative analysis to find out about the people telling the stories, that is, the stories are a means by which they can understand their subjects better. Like Holloway and Jefferson (2003), this research study took the approach of using the narrative analysis to learn more about the experiences being narrated.

**Thematic Analysis.** A variety of strategies can be used to analyse narratives (for examples see Labov, 1982; and Riessman, 1993). Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) suggested a two-dimensional model for the classification and organisation of the different types of narrative analysis. The first dimension concerned the unit of analysis, that is, whether the analysis concentrated on the narrative as a whole or whether it focused on specific statements. According to Lieblich et al. (1998), analysing the story as a whole is more appropriate when trying to understand the person as a whole. Furthermore, the categorical analysis may be more appropriate when examining a phenomenon shared by a group of people. The second dimension of the Lieblich et al. (1998) model is concerned with the difference between examining the content and the structure/form of the story. Larsson and Sjoblom (2009), in their examination of the use of narrative methods in social work research, suggested that a good strategy would be to combine an analysis of both the structure and content of a narrative. Given that the major aim of this study was to understand a specific phenomenon shared by a group of women, that is the experience of combining motherhood and postgraduate education, a categorical analysis was deemed to be the most suitable strategy to examine the narratives. To do this, the data collected in Study One – the Narrative Study – was subjected to thematic analysis. The following section describes this technique in more detail.
The process followed in Study One for undertaking a thematic analysis was explained by Smith (1995) as follows: The manuscript was read multiple times and the researcher made notes in one of the margins about the content. The notes were summaries, associations, connections and highlighted points of interest or significance. The other margin was used to document emerging themes using key words to capture the essence of what was found in the text. On a separate piece of paper, the researcher started to list the emerging themes and looked for connections between them. Some themes clustered together and others were master or subordinate themes. As new clusterings of themes emerged, the researcher referred back to the transcript to ensure the connections were consistent with the primary source material – that is, what the participant actually said. The researcher was then able to produce a master list of themes in a coherent order. This list also included identified subthemes associated with each master list theme. The researcher then assigned an identifier of instances. This allowed her to indicate where in the transcript an instance of that theme could be found for each master theme. This was be done by providing key words or extracts, the page number from the transcript, or by allocating an identifying code to each theme. This type of analysis was cyclical, so it was necessary to repeat the process several times. Themes were also added, removed or amended throughout this process.

The first five narratives were analysed as described above, with each narrative generating its own master list of themes. These master lists were then read together and a consolidated list generated for the group. Smith (1995) suggested that when the number of participants is greater than six, the analysis system needs to grow, because it is not possible to mentally retain an overall sense of the connections between individuals and themes.
The process for continuing the analysis, as explained by Smith (1995), was as follows: the researcher produced a code for each theme such as an abbreviation or key word. She then went through the additional transcripts looking for instances of each theme – marking its location in the margin with the code. The coded transcripts were photocopied and the master copies put to one side. Starting with the first photocopied transcript, the researcher cut out each section of text that had been coded, along with the identifying code from the margin. Then on the back of the cutting, she wrote where it came from in the transcript (for example, A2 may represent interview A page 2). This was continued with all the transcripts. The cuttings were then arranged into themes and placed in separate folders. Next, the researcher refined the themes. Each theme and connection was re-examined and adjusted, amended, removed or added as necessary. This process was iterative and creative. The researcher was then able to create an index of themes that provided information about where instances of the theme could be found and how to locate them (Smith, 1995).

Once the narratives were transcribed verbatim, a number of themes and summary statements were extracted by means of data reduction (Hayes, 2000). Researcher bias was reduced by having the project supervisors act as independent co-analysts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Research supervisors cross checked the list of themes and subthemes with a random selection of the transcribed narratives. This method, of having two different people cross check the data independently of each other, ensured data authentication and consistency in the comparative processing (Grbich, 1999). Given the researcher’s own experience of being a student-mother (see Appendix P) this step was considered particularly important.
The result of the thematic analysis was a list of themes and subthemes and a collection of quotes or statements from the narratives that represented those themes. This data was used to inform the “Findings” section of Chapter 5.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the research framework for this research program. Theoretical perspectives that potentially inform the current research have been reviewed, and the difficulty in obtaining a “good theoretical fit” described. As outlined in the introduction in Chapter 1, there were two main phases to the current research. The first or qualitative phase has been described in this chapter, together with a summary of narrative methodology and thematic analysis. The following chapter describes the narrative study and presents its findings.
Chapter Five

Narrative Study

Introduction

This study was a descriptive, qualitative investigation into the experiences of postgraduate women with children. The aims of the narrative study were to understand the experiences of mothers who study at postgraduate level, and to learn how they resolve the tension of combining motherhood and postgraduate education. By examining the narratives of individual mothers, the researcher sought to achieve the following two objectives: 1) to learn more about the experiences of mothers who study at postgraduate level, and 2) to understand how Australian postgraduate student mothers resolve the tension of combining motherhood and education. In addition, there was a third objective, which was to use the data obtained from this study to develop a set of statements for use in the second phase of the research program.

Participants

The participants comprised 14 female postgraduate students studying at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia. The women ranged in age from 29 to 50 years old, and the number of children each woman had ranged between two and ten children. The participants’ children were aged between 5 months and 38 years. Seven of the participants were enrolled in a Masters program, three were PhD students, one was completing a professional doctorate, two were completing Graduate Diplomas and one woman was completing a combined Masters/PhD program. Appendix A provides further demographic information about the participants and their children. A brief composite biography of four typical participants is provided below. The composites were created by combining various elements of the participants’ biographies, to avoid lengthy and
repetitive descriptions of each individual participant. Any identifying information has been removed from these biographies and from any examples and quotes used throughout this chapter.

Sara had financial difficulties, illness, death and domestic violence to contend with during her studies. She believed her return to postgraduate education led to the breakdown of her marriage. Her husband actively tried to sabotage her efforts to study and attend classes, and his behaviour ultimately led to their separation and subsequent divorce. She described it as follows: “when I began studying, it was a real empowerment and I changed. He couldn’t cope with me becoming an independent woman.”

Sarah suffered financially raising children on her own and needed to work while studying. She felt that her return to education had impacted negatively on her children and she called them “latch key kids” because she was at work or university when they returned home from school. She had always dreamt of pursuing postgraduate education but when she did, the result was the deterioration of her family relationship.

Sara’s story highlighted the negative effect studying can have on a woman’s relationship with her partner, and the significant impact it had on her children. She persisted with her studies because she believed that she would have something to offer when she graduated, and hoped that she was teaching her children to follow their dreams and not feel restricted by boundaries.

Diana enrolled in university for the first time after the break-up of her marriage. She believed that her husband would have felt threatened if she had pursued tertiary education so when he left, she thought “this is my chance.” Her major difficulties during her studies were financial, and there were times when she said “I didn’t know how I was going to feed the kids.” Diana acknowledged that her children had suffered at times as a result of her studying, especially from financial disadvantage. She hoped she had taught
her children about hard work, persistence and the importance of having a good work ethic. Studying had increased Diana’s confidence and self-esteem and she looked at the bigger picture of providing for, and supporting her children throughout their high school and university years.

**Amanda**’s husband was very supportive of her decision to return to study and she was mainly motivated by an interest in the subject and a desire for knowledge. She didn’t expect her qualifications to lead to employment and was doing her studies for the personal satisfaction and enjoyment she derived from the experience. She did not have any financial concerns and worked occasionally for the social interaction. Her children were school-aged and less dependent on her.

**Anna** was motivated to improve her career prospects so that she could provide her children with a financially secure future, and the opportunities she wanted them to have. She had struggled financially during her studies and found organising childcare difficult. She suffered from fatigue and generally could only devote time to her studies when the children were asleep or at school. Her main motivation was that she “didn’t want to be stuck in a dead-end job with two little kids. I really wanted to better myself”.

**Ethical Considerations**

This research was approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants were provided with an information sheet (Appendix B) outlining the aims and rationale of the research, were informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage and without any consequence. Participants were assured that any information they provided would be presented in a general way and that any identifying data would be removed from the final analysis. Pseudonyms were used throughout the process of investigation and in this thesis.
Procedure

Several methods were used to recruit participants. Advertisements (Appendix C) were placed around the Mt Lawley and Joondalup campuses of Edith Cowan University inviting postgraduate female students with children to participate in the study. The advertisements were placed on student notice boards in the libraries, coffee shops, the parenting bathroom and the gym crèche at the Joondalup campus, and on faculty notice boards. Word-of-mouth and snowball sampling was also used to recruit participants.

Participants contacted the researcher via email and telephone indicating their interest in the study. After ensuring potential participants were eligible to participate, they were sent additional information outlining details of the study (Appendix D) prior to agreeing to participate. Interviews were conducted at a time and place that was mutually acceptable. Participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the research and signed a consent form prior to the commencement of the interview (see Appendices D and E). The researcher also verbally explained the study and assured participants that no names or identifying information would be reported. Interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and following each encounter, brief notes were made of each session. A relaxed conversational style was adopted by the researcher to create an informal and comfortable atmosphere.

The session began with an explanation of the aim of the study which was to explore the experiences of postgraduate mothers. The process of narrative methodology (Smith, 1995) was briefly explained and the fact that there were no set questions to answer was highlighted. Participants were encouraged to provide the researcher with an oral account of their personal experience of balancing motherhood with their studies. Probing and clarifying questions were asked when required, but otherwise the direction and content of the narrative was determined entirely by the participant.
Analysis

The digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis techniques (Creswell, 2003) were used to examine the content. A thematic content analysis was conducted to identify recurring themes in a logical and systematic manner (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This was described in the previous chapter. The thematic analysis generated a list of themes and subthemes, and a collection of quotes or statements from the narratives that represented those themes (see Appendix F and Table 4). Detailed descriptions of each theme and subtheme are presented in the following section.

Findings and Interpretations

Participants identified a number of issues and themes that were relevant to the experience of balancing motherhood and postgraduate study. A summary of the five major themes are presented in Table 4. Several sub-themes emerged from the master themes and within those sub-themes, salient issues were identified. This section reports in detail on the findings for each theme and accompanying subtheme, and explores the relationship between themes.

Table 4

*Major Themes and Subthemes that emerged from the Narratives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Challenges and obstacles:</td>
<td>• Organising Childcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“My juggles and struggles”</td>
<td>• Timetabling and Mode of Delivery Issues</td>
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<td>• Age</td>
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<td>• Lack of Support</td>
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Challenges and obstacles. The women in this study became extremely adept at juggling and balancing their various commitments and responsibilities while simultaneously studying and raising children. Claire, Mary and Emily all spoke of feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of their loads, and Hannah described it as being “spread really thin, like margarine. I’m trying to give lots to lots of different people.” This feeling of being under immense pressure was even felt by Amanda who was studying purely for her own pleasure. She said:

*I tend to burn the candle at both ends and in the middle as well. I’ve put everything else first and myself has sort of come second. There’s always washing to do and there’s always cooking to do and husbands and children to tend to.*
The findings of this study were consistent with those of Mason (2006) that female doctoral students with children undertook the majority of caretaking and housework duties. They also concur with Reay’s (2003, p. 308) assertion that “…women…especially those with children were caught up in a constant balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities, and needing to earn money…” For these women, the key to balancing study with their family obligations was to be extremely organised, and they arranged their lives so that they were able to meet all of their competing commitments. Two subthemes referred to the organisation of childcare, timetabling and mode of delivery issues.

**Organising Childcare.** The main issue for almost every participant in this study was the difficulty of organising childcare, and this concern dominated the narratives of those participants whose children were pre-school aged at the time of this study: Valerie, Natalie, Lucy and Grace. The options available to parents of pre-school aged children are family daycare, centre-based childcare or privately arranged care. There are three childcare centres at Edith Cowan University, one at each of the three campuses, however, this service is extremely popular and there are long waiting lists for vacancies.

Valerie and Grace both spoke about how they tried to obtain on-campus care for their children but were unable to, because the centre was always full. Grace said she “rang the daycare at ECU and they were fully booked so that was another barrier.” Valerie had been on the waiting list on several different occasions and had never once been called with the offer of a place. Natalie and Diana, whose children were school-aged at the time, resorted to bringing their young children with them to university, because they were unable to find anyone to care for them. Natalie said she felt guilty when her children were noisy in the library and they disturbed other students, but felt that she had no other choice. Diana said:
It would be great if there was a crèche or playground for older kids because even though they went to school when they were older, there were times I still had to bring them in with me.

For students with children, many of whom were already struggling financially, the additional cost of daycare was a further burden. While students are entitled to government rebates for approved childcare, there is still a gap that parents need to pay. The issue of affordability is becoming even more relevant, as recent changes to the childcare system require centres to employ early childhood education specialists – a cost that is passed on to parents without any corresponding increase in government rebates.

International students like Natalie, do not receive any government rebate on their fees. In order to receive the Child Care Benefit, either parent needs to be an Australian citizen or permanent resident. Natalie said:

I definitely can’t afford to have my son in childcare. For postgraduate students there should be some kind of support for childcare costs at least. I don’t know why it’s so expensive.

Her solution was to study at home, a less than ideal situation, or place her son in the crèche at the campus gym for three hours while she attended lectures, met with her supervisor, or did photocopying and other essential tasks. She said of this arrangement:

To work at home with a two year old little boy is not easy at all. Sometimes he goes away and leaves me alone, but other times he wants me to cuddle him. I know he just needs someone to play with him.
Issues facing female international postgraduate students have been largely under-researched (Bullen & Kenway, 2003), and the findings of this study suggest that particular attention should be paid to the childcare needs of this group of students.

All mothers acknowledged the difficulties of trying to arrange childcare for younger children. This topic was even raised by those mothers with older children, because studying on a part-time basis can take many years. Women may start their educational journey with pre-school aged children, but by the time they graduate, those children could be teenagers. Most mothers agreed that studying at home with very young children required a significant amount of planning and was at times, very difficult. For example, Lucy would set up stations around her house with activities like colouring, playdough, and Lego, so that she could sit at the kitchen table and work on an assignment while her son played.

Anna, who had been studying since her children were very young, believed that while mothering responsibilities changed as the children got older, they did not reduce. Even with older children she still needed to “be around for dentist appointments and snacks and to take them to the park or sport or to do something with them after school”.

In conclusion, daycare allowed women the opportunity to pursue their studies while their children were being cared for outside the home, and in most cases, with government fee assistance. Based on the findings of this study, affordable and available daycare is vital for women who want to study while raising their children. This is particularly true for mothers of pre-school children, although it remains important when children enter school and require before and after-hours care. Affordable childcare is especially important for international students who do not receive any government fee assistance. The availability of affordable and appropriate childcare was one of the major concerns for the students in this study, and this is consistent with previous research on
both undergraduate (Scott et al., 1996; White, 2008) and postgraduate student mothers (Lynch, 2008).

**Timetabling and Mode of Delivery Issues.** Timetabling was mentioned by almost all participants, thereby highlighting the significance of the issue. Last-minute changes to the timetable were especially difficult for participants, as they had often invested considerable time and effort to organise their children around the original timetable. Areas of improvement mainly centred around timetabling, which was particularly problematic during school holidays. Mary proposed coordinating the university timetable with the school holiday timetable\(^2\). This point was also mentioned by Jodie and Diana, both mothers of school-aged children. Jodie said:

*The timetabling is bad...especially for the school holidays. It would be good if it (the university timetable) matched the school holiday timetable like TAFE matches the school holidays. It's just easier for Mums because (then) they've got two weeks off looking after the kids, they (the kids) go back to school and then you can go back to TAFE, it's more parent friendly.*

“Mode of delivery” refers to how course content is delivered, for example face-to-face on campus lectures and tutorials, or online remote learning. The way in which units are delivered by the university also emerged as having a significant impact on women’s ability to balance their family life with their studies. Units available for external study were particularly attractive to this group of students, as was having the option to communicate with teaching staff via the telephone and internet, to allow some mothers

\(^2\) This issue has been resolved with Edith Cowan University semester breaks now corresponding with Western Australian school holidays. Moreover, timetabling occurs at least 12 months in advance, and time changes are now relatively rare.
the option of studying while staying at home with young children. Grace, who had a weekly telephone meeting with her supervisor, highlighted the importance of having a flexible supervisor and online communication. She said:

*I would never actually go to the university campus because I couldn’t get there and had no-one to look after my kids. My supervisor would ring me every week when my kids were asleep.*

For others it was the ability to enrol part-time or attend classes after hours that assisted them to combine study with motherhood. Hannah said:

*I think the key ingredient for me to be able to achieve this was doing it part time, having my second major as an external study and studying at night...choosing the lecture times that were sort of in the evenings so that my husband could look after the children or during school hours.*

Access to technology was also highlighted as an important aid for allowing mothers to continue their studies. Reducing the amount of time mothers need to physically be on campus will assist these students with trying to combine motherhood and postgraduate study. Grace, Eve and Sara all spoke about the benefits of the internet on their ability to study from home. Emily, who started her studies in the 1980s, commented on the impact of improved technology on a mother’s university experience:

*It’s much easier to get the information. You come to campus to get some hands-on stuff and some face-to-face work with your lecturers, but you can learn so much now via the electronic media.*

Timetabling and mode of delivery both impacted on a mother’s ability to balance studying with raising children. The university assisted these students by offering part-time
and external enrolment, and by staff allowing students to minimise their time on campus wherever possible. The importance of offering a flexible mode of delivery was also highlighted by Vyronides and Visilakis’ (2008) study, which showed that mode of delivery was the major reason the women selected the course. The topic of study was less important to the students than the fact that they had the option of studying via electronic distance learning, allowing them to fit their education around their other work and family responsibilities (Vyronides & Visilakis, 2008). The importance of offering student mothers the ability to enrol on a part-time basis without penalty, was raised by Lynch (2008), who found that student mothers who switched to part-time status following the birth of their children, felt the decision cost them in terms of immediate funding opportunities, and therefore in terms of future eligibility for funding. However, the findings of this study show that the women students did not feel penalised for studying on a part-time basis, and instead spoke positively of having the opportunity to do so. This is further evidence of the differences between the American and Australian higher education systems. While this finding is limited by the fact that only students from one Australian university were included in this study, it does highlight the possibility that students studying in Australia may not face the same financial and funding difficulties as their US counterparts.

**Strategies used.** The findings of this study show that studying while raising children involves a lot of juggling, and this led the researcher to consider the strategies used to do this successfully. Participants’ success appeared to be based on being organised and making sacrifices in other areas of their lives.

**Organisation.** Every participant spoke about using their time carefully and meticulously planning their day. The women in this study all worked to a strict routine, so they knew when they could focus on their studies and when they were available to their
families. Eve and Emily said the most important factor that allowed them to study with children was “time management”. Lucy said it was “very important from a study perspective to have a routine for myself, so I know when I can completely give myself to my studies.”

Anna was also well organised, but she recognised that it was “a bit full-on just trying to tee up your classes with picking the kids up from school and daycare.” Claire, who juggled full-time work with studies and children, made use of every bit of her time: “I finish work around lunch time and drive to university. Lunch time is my driving time so I drive and eat.” Another technique used by mothers who study was sacrifice.

**Sacrifice.** The participants sacrificed sleep, time with their family and friends, recreation time and time spent on physical activity to focus on their studies. Every participant spoke of the fatigue that accompanied trying to balance studying and motherhood. Time was considered a precious resource, and these students often worked late into the night when their children were asleep, or early in the morning before they awoke. Grace, a mother of two children under three years of age said: “tiredness is probably the major factor that holds me back. Physically I cannot stay awake. I’ve been extremely knackered most of the time.” Diana, who admitted to regularly sacrificing sleep to study, said:

> It was often at the stage where I would have to say to myself ‘you actually have to go to bed now’. I have been known to study all night and go two days with no sleep. I’ve been much more mindful of the hazards now this year and I’ve been much more particular about making sure I get enough sleep.
Another sacrifice was time spent socialising. Amanda, Mary, Sara and Lucy spoke about how they missed out on socialising with their friends because they were too busy studying. Sara said “you lose all your friends as you go through uni, there is no time for them. Every bit of time is allocated.” Mary didn’t go to the morning teas and social events organised by the mums at her children’s school unless it was university holidays, and Lucy said she felt left out by full-time mums and that “sometimes I am not enjoying my life.”

For some of the women having to spread their time between so many commitments meant that they often neglected their physical health and reduced the time they might otherwise have spent on physical activity, in order to meet their study commitments. Lucy said “I was quite a fit and healthy person who liked to go to the gym three or four times a week, and now I only get to play netball once a week”. Hannah said she has lost fitness as a result of studying, that women really need to be fit, and that:

Exercise is really important when you are sitting at a computer for so long. You get really tired and really stressed and exercise helps you to stop obsessing, because when you are reading there are a lot of ideas going on.

This finding is consistent with previous research on student mothers (Reay, 2003; Walkup, 2004), and with research on employed mothers (Craig, 2007; Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001) which suggests that sacrificing sleep and time spent on recreation and physical activity is part and parcel of motherhood, especially when the children are younger.

For almost all the participants, the most difficult sacrifice they made was time spent with their children. This was especially difficult as many of them were studying for what they believed would be an improved future for their children. Natalie said that even
though she is physically at home with her son, she was “not even looking at him. I do feel guilty but I just say to myself it is only for a little while.” Mary said:

*When I am trying to write a paper the last thing I want to do is go home and cook, do the reading, do the baths and the rest of it. I just want to get on the computer and start while the ideas are still there...*

Hannah felt that even though she was physically present with her children, her mind would be on her studies. She said: “I am there but I’m not really there.” Women using daycare felt particularly guilty that they were not spending the day with their children. With the exception of Anna, who said she “loved daycare, it was my saviour”, the mothers who used childcare all spoke about how conflicted they felt about doing so. Mary described dropping her son off at daycare as “dumping him,” and Valerie described her experience with daycare as follows:

*In the first year I had Jess at daycare and I didn’t like it at all. I don’t know many people who do. I found that very hard. I felt like I was pushing her out the door and I just hated it. Just taking them there and leaving, you feel selfish.*

Lucy’s children were initially cared for by her parents when she was on a teaching practical, but following her mother’s battle with cancer, she was forced to put her children into childcare. She only felt comfortable with childcare because she knew the centre manager.

It is clear from these findings that, even though childcare allowed women to physically separate from their children to attend classes or meet their educational obligations, they felt guilty using these services. Valerie described it as feeling “selfish”.
This is consistent with previous research (Pare, 2009; Walkup, 2004; White, 2008) which reported that student mothers felt guilty that their studies took them away from their ability to provide maternal care for their children.

**Barriers to Combining Motherhood and Postgraduate Study.** Some women faced additional barriers in their attempts to juggle postgraduate education with their family responsibilities. The barriers identified in this study were 1) being of an older age, 2) a lack of support from those around her, and 3) active sabotage from a partner.

**Age.** Issues related to ageing were raised by several women as having an impact on their experience as a mother studying at postgraduate level. Rachel and Mary spoke of physical considerations such as deteriorating memory and lack of stamina that impacted on their studies. Rachel said “After the exams I was exhausted. I had never sat exams before,” and Mary commented that “there are quite a lot of things to remember, and nowadays I don’t think my memory is…it’s not as good as it used to be.”

However for other participants, Emily and Claire, being older had its advantages in that they felt they could contribute more to class discussions and took more from their studies, as they could apply the knowledge to real life experiences. This finding has been reported in Reay’s (2003) research, but has not been identified in previous studies examining mothers studying at postgraduate level (such as Pare, 2008; Lynch 2008; Vryonides & Visilakis, 2008)

**Lack of support.** Another challenge for some participants was the lack of support from those around them. This was experienced to some degree by almost all participants at various times during their studies. One of the major themes to emerge from the research was the issue of support, also reported in previous studies (Lynch, 2008; Pare, 2009). Noticeably lacking from the women’s responses in this study, was any reference to community support for their endeavours. This was of a particular concern given the
influence a mother’s education has on many aspects of her children’s lives (for example Hopcroft, 2005; Kelly, 1982; 1987; Suitor et al., 2008). Increased community support for this group of mothers would therefore benefit not only the women themselves, but indirectly also their children and the wider community (for example Haleman, 2005; Suitor et al., 2008; Le et al., 2011; Johnston, 2004).

Supportive Timetabling and Practicum Placement Policies. Some participants felt that a lack of support from the university placed unnecessary obstacles in their path to attaining postgraduate education. Jodie, an education student, was angry with the university, and had a particular issue with the staff who dealt with student placements and timetabling. Her issues centred around the university scheduling exams for major units on public holidays when childcare options were limited for those parents without family or friends to rely on, and on the allocation of placements for Education students. Jodie, who lives in a regional town, was required to do her teaching placement at a school that involved a 150km round trip. She described what happened when she raised her concerns with the staff involved:

The conversations I have had with her in terms of my requirements were met with some bewildering statements like “people without children and people without these special requirements always get put to the back of the list. When is it their turn? Therefore I am not going to give you any special preference.

Jodie had already completed one practical at a school that was far from home and to cope on that occasion, her children moved in with her mother and she did not see them for three weeks. She felt that a lack of support from the university created an unnecessary barrier to combining motherhood and postgraduate study. Claire also felt that the
university did not support her efforts to study, work and raise her children. When she questioned why the timetables were changed at the last minute requiring her to reshuffle her work and childcare arrangements, her commitment to her studies was questioned by some staff members. The findings of this research reveal that for some women, a lack of support from the university itself is an additional difficulty when trying to juggle the role of mother and student. Lack of support from the university was also identified in previous research as being a concern for other student mothers (Lynch, 2008; Springer et al., 2009).

**Role of Partner.** For most of the participants who were in relationships, their partner played an important role in successfully combining their roles as mother and postgraduate student. A genuinely supportive partner was rare for the women who studied at postgraduate level. Only four participants, Mary, Valerie, Emily and Amanda described unconditional partner support that was freely given and did not require hard-won or delicate negotiation. Partners were invaluable to these women in providing them with expressive and instrumental support. For example, Amanda’s husband provided the financial means for her to study as well as emotional encouragement. He had encouraged her to apply for university in the first place and she said of his support: “he’s known it’s been one of the things that I’ve always wanted to finish (her degree) so he was very supportive.” Both Mary’s and Amanda’s husbands were educated professionals themselves, and Emily’s husband was self-employed. Valerie’s partner came from a family that did not value education, nonetheless Valerie felt he gave her his utmost support. She said that when she has finished her degree he was considering applying for university himself. Emily said “I couldn’t have done it without him. If my husband hadn’t been supportive of it... I don’t know what I would have done.” She went on to say that
“having a supportive and flexible husband was pretty critical” to her ability to study with children.

What is evident however is that women can’t always rely on, or expect their partners to support their decision to return to postgraduate education. The early stages of Natalie, Eve, Hannah and Lucy’s stories initially portrayed husbands who were supportive, but as the narratives developed, it became clear that in many, possibly subtle ways, their partners did not whole-heartedly support their wife’s time away from the home and children. Natalie started to explain how her husband supported her by “helping out with the housework and picking the kids up from school” and that he “does all my editing and he helps with the house and everything.” Yet towards the end of her narrative, her comments contradicted her original portrayal of her husband’s practical support:

My typical week is, I wake up in the morning, do a little housework and get the kids ready, take my daughter to school and then I am back before nine. I start working on whatever I have to do. I have my lunch and then back again until I go pick up my daughter.

When talking about the impact studying has had on her relationship, Natalie said:

Sometimes it has been bad. You know when you are doing your research you can’t really concentrate on housework…and my husband is very, um, I don’t know the word, you know a person who wants everything in the right place and all that. He’s like that and at some points he’s been, I would say not very supportive. He says that he has been pushed out of focus ‘cos I’ve been concentrating more on other things (my studies) instead of the main thing (him). He wants me to be a housewife and I need to be a researcher.
For most of these women, the support they received from their partners was conditional and required continual monitoring and negotiation, but did not necessarily pose a significant obstacle to their educational journey. However, that was not the case for all women with unsupportive partners.

A concern that emerged from this research was that some women faced active resistance from their partner to their decision to study. Furthermore, two participants were confronted with sabotage, which had the potential to end their postgraduate education. While most women with partners reported, either explicitly or implicitly, that they had felt unsupported by their partner at various stages, women like Claire and Sara experienced extreme reactions from their partners, which at times translated into sabotage of their attempts to pursue their educational dreams. Claire had great difficulty trying to combine her desire to study with her responsibilities as a wife and a mother. While it is entirely possible that the same outcome may have arisen regardless of whether or not she returned to study, it is significant that she believed it was her return to study that resulted in the demise of her marriage. She said:

*He didn’t want me to go out and study. He wanted me to stay at home and be under his thumb...He used to do everything to sabotage my uni stuff. He would get drunk in the afternoons so I had to leave two kids with him while he wasn’t really in a fit state to be caring for them... and that was a very difficult choice. I was thinking to myself, well what do I do here? Do I give up?*

Sara also recalled her experiences with an unsupportive partner. She said: “*he was very anti me studying. Very anti. And I think this is why it escalated into physical*
violence.” She tried to use the skills she learned at university to improve her communication with him:

I always thought everything was my fault ‘cos that’s what he told me, everything was my fault. Everything that was wrong was my fault. The more I tried to work on fixing myself and trying to get myself across and change myself, the more aggressive he got. By the time I was in my third year he actually broke my finger, you know he sort of assaulted me. I think that combined with my study, he had got very nasty.

For Claire and Sara, their partners’ hostile reactions exacerbated the difficulties of trying to balance motherhood with study. Fortunately they managed to overcome this barrier and continued on, despite the personal hardship and turmoil of doing so.

In conclusion, for mothers who return to postgraduate studies, everyday life involved struggling to balance the various demands placed on their time and their mental and physical capacities. The findings from this study highlight the importance of childcare and good timetabling in assisting women to study while looking after their children. These students made daily sacrifices to complete their studies, and some faced additional, significant obstacles along the way. The following section outlines the areas impacted.

The Impact of Postgraduate Study on a Woman’s Life. Almost every facet of a woman’s life is impacted by her decision to return to postgraduate study, and this is consistent with previous research (Lynch, 2008; Pare, 2009; Walkup, 2004; White, 2008). Finances, family life, children and partners are all influenced considerably by a woman’s return to university.
Financial Impact. For all but one participant, returning to study resulted in financial sacrifice and strain on the family budget. The one woman who was not impacted financially was Amanda, who was studying for her own enjoyment, and was financially supported by her husband. For all the other mothers, returning to postgraduate education resulted in financial hardship. The following quote from Diana reveals how difficult it was to live on a limited student income while supporting children:

*It's been a huge burden. When I was doing my Honours there were times I wouldn't know how I was going to feed my kids... The most challenging aspect is the financial aspect of it. Having to delay paying bills and wondering what you are going to feed the kids other than rice or bread.*

Lucy’s husband worked two jobs so that they could afford her university expenses, and she started up a cleaning business during the holidays to pay for her books. Mary felt guilty that she couldn’t afford for her son to play sport like the other children in his class. Many mothers who had returned to study were reliant on financial assistance from the government. For example, Sara had struggled with Centrelink\(^3\) throughout the course of her studies:

*Centrelink has been a continuous struggle. Centrelink has been the bane of my existence throughout because by the time you get into postgraduate level they don't like you to be studying, they like you to be working and you have to meet all of these participation requirements and there’s no extra funding (for postgraduate study)....so you are on the supporting parent pension and you have to work 30 hours every fortnight otherwise*

\(^3\)Centrelink is the name given to the Federal Government department that administers welfare payments in Australia
they don’t let you have the pension so it turned into a real struggle going through the Masters because I was paying a mortgage and trying to support my children. I’ve been obliged to work 30 hours a fortnight and you can’t do that and study full-time.

Mary mentioned that she could not get financial assistance from Centrelink because her partner’s earnings were deemed too high even though he was receiving an apprentice’s wage, and supporting her and two children. She expressed dismay at the way in which Centrelink calculated income brackets: “he earns $500 take-home a week and they said we are not entitled to anything from the government. We get our family endowment which is $40 a fortnight but that’s it. $500 for a family of four. It’s just crazy.” Rachel summed up the financial effect of studying on a woman and her family’s finances: “Honestly you give up so much and you lose everything except the core of what you are aiming for, and I think that’s how you survive it...you cut down to the bare necessities.”

Impact on Family Life and Children. Every participant spoke of the impact that studying had on her family life and her children. Lucy was very concerned about this. While she did identify some positive aspects of her studying on her children, she considered that the impact was mainly negative, and said that it was just “way too much for me and the family”. Every participant spent a significant amount of time talking about the effect of studying on their children. Whether they felt the effect was negative, positive, or a combination of both, the women were acutely aware that their decision to study impacted on their children’s lives significantly. Emily, who raised ten children, said:
When I sit back and think about whether my children have benefited from my study I can say, on the one hand, yes, because of the knowledge I gained to apply to my parenting...on the other hand, the children have certainly missed out on that psychological availability and to a certain extent that has been a disadvantage to them.

For Natalie, who often studied at home with her two year-old son, the biggest effect on her children was the reduced amount of time she had for them: “I don’t really have time to help my daughter because she is going through a difficult time with her language...There is a negative effect on the kids because they don’t get enough affection.”

The negative impact on the children was more acute at particular times during semester, such as when assignments were due or examinations were imminent. Sara said: “when I was doing assignments I’m not even available, so they’ve had a certain amount where I haven’t been available at all. A lot of the time you have to say ‘I can’t talk to you now, I’ve got this assignment to get in.’ It’s hard on the kids – them being dragged through life by me.” Mary also said that “towards the end of semester you’re just busy trying to get those assignments in and your children probably have to take a bit more of a backseat.” Diana also felt this way and said: “the children really feel it by the end of the semester. I’m starting to see behaviour changes in them, and that’s just them wanting to have more of my undivided attention.”

While the previous statements highlight the negative impact a mother’s study has on her children, there were also many examples in the narratives that emphasised the positive impact of having a mother who studied. Diana, Claire, Sara and Eve all spent considerable time talking about the positive impact of their study on their children. Claire said:
It teaches my kids to follow their dreams. It teaches kids that whatever the time is in their lives they can make choices about what they want to do, they don’t have to be held back by other people’s boundaries and rules around what they think they’re capable of.

Consistent with previous research (for examples, see Haleman, 2004; Suitor et al., 2008), the participants spoke of the role modelling they were providing for their children. Diana said: “it’s a really good model for them, to see their mum go through this – particularly being solo the whole time.” Mary said that “once they’ve seen that sort of modelling well... they just automatically do it” and Rachel was proud that her teenage son had university ambitions of his own, and said “it’s been an intrinsic motivator for them just by seeing me. That’s one of your dreams for your kids, to go to uni and for them to want to do it for themselves.” For other mothers like Grace, the benefits to their children were that they felt better about themselves and in turn, were better able to parent their own children. She said of her studying: “it’s benefitted them because I don’t go nuts at them. I am (not) frustrated because I need to talk to adults.” Hannah, who was from regional Western Australia, believed the benefits of her studying were felt not only by her own children, but also by their friends and other young people she was in contact with. She said:

For my kids I think just having somebody who’s done it and the fact that they’ve come to the university and they’ve been there makes it less mysterious. I think, especially in regional areas, kids scale back their expectations to (match) what they see around them. I’ve seen that in my friends’ kids. Like, they don’t even think about going to university because until they met me they’d never known anyone who had.
Another positive effect of a mother’s return to study on her children was revealed by Anna and Lucy who believed their absence from the family while studying provided the opportunity for their partners to take on a more active parenting role. Anna said “he spends extra time with them because I am busy…my hubby will go and take him to footy and watch him so I’ve got the whole day to study.” Lucy related: “it has also taught my husband to care for the children…have that one on one time with them which he wouldn’t have got the opportunity (to do) if I wasn’t studying.”

**Impact on her Relationship with her Partner.** Studying also impacted on a woman’s relationship with her partner and the findings of this study revealed three different ways in which that impact could be felt. First, for those women with supportive partners (Emily, Mary, Amanda, Lucy, Hannah and Valerie), their return to study at times put strain on their relationship, but it did not pose any long-term threat to the partnership. Second, returning to study led to their relationships breaking down. Third, studying enabled them to leave their relationships. The impact of a university education on a woman’s relationship was also highlighted in White’s (2008) study, where one woman reported her marriage nearly broke down as a result of her return to university, and that it was an unexpected strain. It is important to note that none of the previous studies on postgraduate mothers identified the significant impact of studying on a woman’s relationship to the same extent as this current study. This may be attributable to the narrative method that was employed in this research as it would appear that a similar, unstructured interview approach had not previously been used in this area of research.

For Claire and Sara, returning to study led to the breakdown of their relationships. Claire says of her husband “he didn’t want me to go out and study. He wanted me to stay at home and be under his thumb,” and as reported previously, Sara believed that her return to study was the cause of domestic violence in her relationship. Both had
controlling husbands who wanted their wives to stay home and dedicate themselves to domestic duties. Closer examination of the narratives revealed that their husbands did not object to their engagement in paid employment, which suggests that they found something inherently threatening about a woman pursuing further education. For others like Sara, studying enabled her to leave the relationship. She credited her studies with providing her with the skills and knowledge to leave her abusive relationship: “so I did it. It’s like it (studying) helped me end the relationship which was good. I realised it wasn’t actually me. Yeah, so it gave me the strength to get out in a lot of ways.” Claire also said: “You know, definitely, I think part of my escape, from my relationship...in fact was that studying supported me to get out.” For Eve, the outcome of her studies led to her marriage breakdown. Completing her university degree enabled her to embark on a successful career, enhanced her confidence and self-esteem, and it was for those reasons that her marriage broke down. She said:

*Studying had a huge impact on my marriage. I married young, I married at 18. I was very young, very naïve and my husband was a bit older. I think when I began studying at 30 it was like a real empowerment and...suddenly... I changed. Because I had a real belief in myself and I knew I could do things. My husband didn’t change and there was no need for him to change but I think that was to some degree the beginning of the end. I think he couldn’t quite cope with me becoming an independent woman, having a strong voice...*

Hannah talked about the impact of studying on relationships and as previously mentioned, while she considered her partner to be supportive of her studies, she realised that his support came with conditions. She was very aware that he could withdraw his
support at any time and indicated that she couldn’t afford to take him for granted as he could be gone at any time. Most tellingly, Hannah recalled a warning from a university staff member:

*At the beginning of my study career a very wise student skills advisor said to me out of the blue “How’s your marriage?” I said “Well it’s okay today. I’m not sure where we are going with this?” And he said “you’re going to learn how to argue and you’ll know how to argue your husband into the ground because that’s what you are learning how to do. The trick is you have to ask yourself how you are going to use that in your marriage.” And that’s haunted me for a really long time.*

For Eve, studying enabled her to earn her own money, and this also played a role in her decision to leave her marriage. She explained:

*And also just that knowledge towards the end of our relationship that financially and emotionally I was able to support myself, it was huge. It was absolutely huge and without this study and without the money that came along with it I don’t know if I would have been able to do that. It gave me choices. Lots and lots of choices.*

Like some of the mothers in White’s (2008) research, the findings of this study revealed that a university education had a significant impact on a woman’s relationship with her partner. The fact that a university education improved Eve’s self-esteem to the point that, by the end of her degree she felt she had the choice to leave her marriage, is consistent with previous research that shows the longer women stay in higher education, the more confident they become (Walkup, 2004).
Minimising the Impact of Postgraduate Education. While the effects of studying on different aspects of the participants’ lives have been discussed, nearly all the women spoke of the ways in which they attempted to minimise the effects of their educational commitments on their families. This is consistent with previous research by Vyronides and Visilakis (2008), where the women tried to keep their studies from invading their family life by studying at night when their children were asleep. Grace said “I think I’ve kept it quite separate from being a mum and a wife” and Hannah said “I have to work really hard to not let it seep into the family too much.” Emily kept a strict routine that ensured a clear allocation of her time between family and study. For Hannah, trying to separate her role as student and mother was not as easy. She said:

What I find the hardest is that you’ve always got study floating around in the background, so you are not as totally engaged with the children as what you would be and I hate that. I find that really challenging, because I like to be able to just chop it off and be there.

Lucy tried to minimise the impact of her studies on her family. She said “studying is not fair on the family. The first thing to suffer is the family and the family home which is not right.” For some women like Lucy, maintaining their home and ensuring they served home-made meals to their families was incredibly important to them, so they planned their time with extra care to ensure that these tasks were accomplished each day. To do so, Lucy made everyone’s lunch at night, did the dishes and the washing, and then once the children were asleep, she began studying from 10pm. She also “had to make time for cooking as well” but said she was lucky, because when she was “falling behind, my husband bought me a slow cooker so I would make a casserole and put it on in the morning and when we got home it was ready.”
These findings suggest that studying significantly impacts a woman’s life, both positively and negatively. The dedication and commitment of these women to their studies is evidenced by their persistence and it is therefore important to understand what motivates them. The following section describes their motivation to pursue the goal of postgraduate studies.

**Importance of Motivation.** The women were highly motivated from the time they first applied and throughout their studies. The narratives indicated that while this motivation and focus waxed and waned, as would be expected for any individual experiencing the ups and downs of student life, it was always sufficiently present to ensure they remained enrolled and kept going. Hannah said “the key thing is you really have to want it. You have to keep the fire and the energy in it...you really do have to want it.” To understand what motivated these students is to embark on a journey into their relationships, fears, and dreams. It involved picking through superficial statements such as those made by Claire, like “you do these crazy things and you do it because you have a purpose, you have a goal” that formed part of a much more complex truth. Given their commitment and persistence over the years, it is important to understand their motivation throughout their journey until they finally graduated. The central theme to emerge from the narratives was that at postgraduate level, women were motivated by a desire for personal achievement and self development.

**Personal Achievement and Self Development.** The findings of this study demonstrate that women who engage in postgraduate education do so because of a sense of personal achievement and self development that comes with learning at an advanced tertiary level. For many of the participants, obtaining a university education allowed them to develop their sense of professional identity and their self-confidence. The concept of professional identity was outlined in Chapter 2. Being exposed to new ideas and
knowledge gave some women their first taste of freedom and life outside of the domestic sphere and encouraged them to think of themselves as independent identities for the first time. Rachel described it as being free on campus – of being a student and not just someone’s mother. Hannah, Natalie, Sara and Emily all used the words “freedom” and “liberation” when discussing how they felt about studying. These findings reinforce Parr’s (2000) assertion that a woman’s return to education is primarily due to issues of identity, self esteem and the desire for personal control.

Postgraduate study gave the women a sense of pride and achievement. Eve felt this even before she enrolled: “that I had the confidence to even imagine that I could go and do this one thing that I had never done before, that made me proud.” Looking back on her years of studying as a single parent, Anna said she was “amazed that I could do it”. Other examples were: “I was proud of myself along the way. I have felt a sense of strength that has just grown and developed over this period. I have loved watching me grow” (Sara). And:

It’s amazing really. I look back and go ‘How did I do that?’ It’s bizarre I look back on those seconds of my life and think ‘gosh’. Sometimes I am amazed that I’ve been that person and I’ve been there and done that.

(Claire)

Studying allowed Eve to forge an identity outside of “John’s wife”. She said: “I changed, I had a real belief in myself.” She went on to say “I don’t think I ever suffered from bad self-esteem before... but what studying did was it made me aware of what I could do.” Later in her narrative, she said “I think I have achieved things that I just...never dreamed of.” Anna said that finishing her first degree gave her confidence because “you’ve been there, you’ve done all that hard yakka.”
The women in this study revealed how important a sense of achievement was in motivating them to continue with their studies in the face of adversity. Claire, whose husband vehemently opposed her decision to attend university, explained:

*You can make choices, you can make decisions around what you want to do and you can follow your dream. Dreams aren’t just about making money or being materialistic. It’s about self-fulfilling stuff too, you know?*

Several participants spoke about how a thirst for knowledge motivated them to persist with their studies. This idea is connected with the theme of self-development and was especially true for Amanda, who was not studying to improve her employment options or career prospects. Her main motivation was that she loved the subject she was studying and had a genuine interest in the content of her course. She said “*I love learning. That’s the whole reason I’m doing it. It was not for anything else just my own interest, my own sense of self-achievement.*” This finding was consistent with previous research that showed mature women students stated their primary reason for further study was a love of learning (Reay, 2003). Emily, who first embarked on a university education to learn more about the behaviours of her foster children, said: “*I have found so many answers I have to be honest, I found even more questions which really added to my desire to do my PhD and do further research*”. Diana said: “*I like the learning and being exposed to different viewpoints. I just like the expansion.*” Personal achievement and self development both played a role in Diana’s motivation to study at postgraduate level. She spoke about how she first applied for university following the break-up of her marriage. She said:

*I came into study after my marriage broke up and I decided that I wanted to go to uni. It was now possible to go to uni so that’s what I did. For me*
my undergrad was about saying to him 'ME, ME, ME. LOOK I CAN DO IT'!

Diana’s narrative is an example of how a desire for personal achievement motivated her to continue with her postgraduate education:

I was married to a narcissist and it was all about him. I was allowed to go to TAFE so I got a certificate. He needed to be number one and having a uni degree would make me in his eyes better than him. So he went to uni and I went to TAFE. When he finished his first degree it was like, well, ‘I think I might like to do that.’ I just started to think that ‘perhaps I might like to do that’ when he went on to do his Masters so it meant that I still couldn’t do it and well I probably could have done it but the situation didn’t allow me to do it. So when he left one of my first thoughts were, I am going to go to uni. I don’t know how, but I’m going.

For Diana, achieving her university graduation involved a significant sense of personal achievement and the forging of a professional identity outside that of a mother and (ex) wife. She commented: “I have grown confident in myself and my abilities. I’ve learnt about boundaries, about talking to people and I’ve learnt that I need to be more assertive.” Later in her narrative she said of postgraduate study: “I think the whole thing of studying and learning and developing yourself has really helped me.”

It is possible that the women who experienced dissatisfaction with their personal relationships found particular fulfillment from study, as it afforded them a sense of control and success over their own lives. However, the sentiment that studying is something of a personal reward or gift was not solely experienced by the women who had relationship concerns, and therefore leads one to conclude that studying also fulfilled
other needs. Given the scarcity of previous literature examining this group of students, it is not possible to evaluate this possibility in the light of previous findings, and future researchers may explore this further. Amanda, who appeared to “have it all” – three children, a supportive husband and comfortable lifestyle free of financial concerns - still viewed studying as something she could do just for herself. This woman could buy or do anything she wanted, and when she saw her motherhood responsibilities lessen as her children became teenagers, she considered her reward to be further education. She said:

“when I first made my decision to go back to study it was well... now time for me! Time to do the things I want to do. This is what I want to do so this is what I am going to make happen.” There is something uniquely self-fulfilling about the experience of studying as a mother.

While postgraduate study helped women develop a sense of pride, achievement and a professional identity, the background from which some women entered the university system made them particularly vulnerable to challenges and barriers. Often these students commenced with little self-confidence. Diana for example, recalled a story about how her husband, who had attended university, advised her that when she met his friends for the first time, it was best that she didn’t talk to them because she was not educated. She agreed at the time and didn’t speak to them. In that context, it was quite understandable that she said:

I was asking my referee to write me a report and he said ‘why aren’t you applying for Honours?’ I said ‘because I don’t cut the mustard.’ He said ‘don’t be ridiculous, you are really dedicated and disciplined and you need to apply for Honours,’ so I applied and got in. That was mind blowing really.
Despite having completed Honours, Diana still doubted whether she could go further. She said:

*My goal was to be a clinical psychologist but I never thought that I would cut the mustard. But I got into clinical psych which was just amazing, it was very exciting. I’ve achieved things I just never thought... dreamed of...but I was just never sure that I’d ever get there.*

Such stories highlight the importance of encouraging this group of students, who may be lacking in confidence especially at the beginning of their degrees, to apply for courses. In Diana’s case, if it weren’t for her referee’s encouragement, she would never have applied for the Master’s program. Claire too, recalled how her husband tried to make her doubt her ability to study: “every day you are told you are stupid and that you can’t do things and you won’t manage.”

The sense of achievement and self development that motivated these women is best reflected by the following quote from Claire: “*I really do think in the long term it will benefit me personally, because I will be a better individual, because I will be a person who is following her dreams.*” The results of this study demonstrate that a major factor motivating a woman’s return to postgraduate education is a sense of achievement and self development which contribute to a professional identity and transformation. While echoing some of the findings of previous research (Pare, 2009; Reay, 2003; Vyronides & Visilakis, 2008; Walkup, 2004; White, 2008), this study is the first to report on the specific rewards of combining postgraduate education and motherhood. It provides an opportunity for future research to build on this knowledge and bring a better balance to the literature examining student-mothers, which to date, focuses heavily on the negative aspects of the experience (Chapter 3).
Opportunity. Some women were motivated to study at postgraduate level because of the opportunities it afforded them. The theme “opportunity” emerged from the narratives in two ways: 1) life circumstances allowing women to pursue education, and 2) available educational opportunities.

Participants mentioned being motivated to study because that opportunity was possible, for example, their children were older, or they were no longer with a disapproving partner, or they had gained admission into a particular course. Diana, for example, came to undergraduate study because she was no longer with her husband, and continued on to postgraduate study because she was offered a place and took that opportunity. Several women spoke about how they had never before had the opportunity to study, so when the time was right and the circumstances favourable, they were motivated to apply for admission to university. For some women, despite a desire to study at university, life circumstances did not always allow them the opportunity to do so. For example, Valerie spoke about how all her plans changed with the early arrival of her daughter: “so I had it all worked out that I would give birth just before uni…So she came early, totally blew my plans out, so I deferred for a year and I went back when she was one.”

Hope for a Better Future for their Children. Another major factor that motivated these students was the hope for a better future for their children. Overwhelmingly, the women spoke about returning to study in order to provide an improved lifestyle for their families, specifically for their children. The belief that by educating themselves they could enhance their ability to provide for their children, helped to reconcile the negative impacts of their decision to study on their children. For example, Mary said she felt guilty but told herself “it is only for a short time.” By becoming more qualified, the women hoped they would enjoy better career prospects and higher salaries. While this was true
for all participants except Amanda, the desire to provide financially for their children was especially noticeable in the single-parent participants. Natalie, Diana, Claire and Anna all spent a significant amount of time talking about putting themselves in a position where they could support their children and provide them with enhanced life opportunities.

The desire to provide a better future for their families was also expressed by women with partners. Lucy’s husband worked two jobs to help assist with her university costs, as she wasn’t eligible for any government payments. Aware of the financial sacrifices her family was making, she was keen to better their financial future, a sentiment echoed by Emily and Mary. The desire to provide a better future for their children is also linked to another motivating factor, better employment opportunities, as every one of the participants except Amanda, spoke of their postgraduate studies allowing them to enhance their career prospects and providing a more financially secure future for their families.

Returning to study at postgraduate level was motivated by the desire to secure a better paid and more interesting job (with the exception of Amanda). Anna, who left school in Year 11 to have her first child, was working for the government when she decided to apply for university. She said “I was working in a dead-end job. I could go up a little bit but it wasn’t for me. I knew I could go to uni and get something better. I didn’t want to be stuck in a dead end job with two little kids and be a single mum as well. I really wanted to better myself.” Rachel, Grace, Sara and Claire all spoke of their hopes for a better job upon completing their studies. This finding was consistent with reports in the published literature (Estes, 2011; Pare, 2009; White, 2008).

The main factors that motivated women to commence and persist with postgraduate study were opportunity, hope for a better future, and better career prospects. Their desire for personal achievement and self development, coupled with the opportunity
to pursue these goals through postgraduate education, were also significant. The following quote from Claire summarises:

*I don’t think what I’m doing is heroic which sometimes people say. “Oh my god, you’re so amazing. How do you do all that?” I think “I choose this”. It’s not heroic. It’s crazy, in some ways a little bit stupid but it’s just that I want to do something really important to me and something that I think will benefit my family.*

The importance of being able to financially provide for their children, emerged as central to why some of these women persisted with their postgraduate education, despite the short-term difficulties. These mothers reframed the negative impact of studying on their children by saying it was only for a short period, and the long-term benefits were worth the short-term pain. The following section looks at the support required for student mothers to succeed in their postgraduate education.

**Factors that Help Women Succeed.** This section describes the factors that help women balance motherhood and postgraduate education, namely individual factors and support, which encompassed six sub-themes: 1) partner support, 2) support from the university and its staff, 3) family support, 4) support from children, 5) support from others, and 6) seeking support.

**Individual Factors.** All participants demonstrated strength of mind that sustained them throughout their challenges and difficulties when coping with family and study. Most mentioned being determined, strong-willed, disciplined, high-achieving, persistent, and ambitious. During each narrative, the women referred to an inner sense of determination that helped them through the difficulties of studying with children. This is
consistent with the major finding of this study, that women who enter postgraduate education are motivated by a desire for personal achievement.

Support. For some participants, the most important determinant of their success and wellbeing was receiving support from the university, from their supervisor and from other academic staff. As reported earlier, Grace was able to talk with her supervisor every week by telephone, so that she did not have to attend on-campus meetings and find someone to care for her children. Mary also believed the encouragement and support she received from her supervisor was a primary contributor to her success. The majority of participants agreed that the university was supportive of their efforts to juggle their studies with family life and tried to accommodate them wherever possible. Hannah, Lucy and Claire all spoke about how helpful they found the university during their studies.

For some participants, support from their families was crucial to their ability to juggle motherhood and postgraduate study. Mary’s twin sister looked after her children while she attended night school to gain university entrance, and then provided her with both practical and emotional support throughout her studies. Sara, Jodie and Mary all reported that they received practical help from their families. An encouraging finding from this study was the support mothers received from their older children. Rachel’s story is an example of the ways in which children can offer their mother crucial support to carry on when times get tough. This is especially true when the mother is a single parent – like Rachel. She explained:

*When I’m stressed, they’ve been fabulously supportive and that’s been a wonderful thing, so we have had that understanding which has been really good, very powerful actually. The last lot of exams I just sat I was very, very stressed and the kids were home and they took off in my car and came back an hour later and they stood at the door and Rick had a block of*
chocolate and a bottle of champagne and they had a facial voucher. I burst into tears. They were saying it would be OK.

Some of the women were only able to combine motherhood and postgraduate education by paying for support – in Valerie’s case this involved paying a family member. Valerie’s sister cared for her children two days a week, an arrangement that started when her second baby was four months old. She had a neighbour who cared for them the other two days of the week. However, Valerie paid her sister and the neighbour “what a normal daycare would cost” so it would not be entirely accurate to consider this “family support” as it was a formal, paid arrangement. Nonetheless, Valerie was very happy with the support she received from her sister and neighbour, as she didn’t like putting her child into daycare. Valerie said that if her sister wasn’t a stay-at-home mum “there would be no way that I could have been able to do the things I do.” Diana, who raised her children on her own and had studied for the past eleven years, did not have family to help, so she paid for all the support she received. She said:

Nobody in my family has been right there for me...In terms of the support that I’ve had, it’s come from paid people. I’ve had to have family daycare, in home daycare and now I have my rent-a-granny.

Diana’s “rent-a-granny” was an older woman who cared for her children after school and at night when she was at university until 10.30 pm. Lucy’s parents helped with childcare while she was on her placement. She explained:

I also did my second prac which was four weeks in a classroom and mum and dad would meet me in the car park at the school and pick the kids up for the day and at the end of the day we’d just meet back in the car park.
A few participants reported that they had received support from neighbours, friends and fellow students at some stage throughout their studies. For example, Natalie had a neighbour with whom she shared childcare on occasion, and Valerie had friends who were also studying, so they cared for each other’s children. Even friends who could offer no practical help were still essential to women like Claire. Her good friend of twenty years lived overseas but still offered her valuable support and encouragement to balance study with motherhood.

*She’s always been very supportive of me and...I’ve always been very supportive of her. And I think it’s important to have people like that. She’s always believed in me...believed that I can do whatever it is I want to do.*

(Claire)

Support from fellow students was mentioned by three participants as having been essential to their wellbeing during the course of their studies. This support was both practical and emotional. Natalie, Rachel and Jodie all had friendships with fellow students that involved helping each other with childcare and transport, as well as with emotional support and encouragement. Rachel said: “I’ve made some lovely friends within the course and everyone helped each other.”

Most women did not mention any community-based or peer support. Those women who did report receiving practical and emotional help from a classmate (Rachel and Jodie), were Education students, and by nature, their course involved more student interaction than higher degree by research programs. It is possible that little mention of support from fellow students and the wider university community is a reflection of the independent nature of the work at postgraduate level, and that many participants were combining education with other activities, and therefore did not have the time to build...
and nurture community networks and relationships. Previous research by Lynch (2008) and Pare (2009) suggested that student mothers studying at graduate level tried not to differentiate themselves from other students because of the competitive nature of postgraduate studies. They actively prevented motherhood from interfering with their university education. However, it is also likely that these women simply did not have the time to seek out support. As the findings of this study revealed, postgraduate student mothers are time poor and struggle to meet their different commitments, which suggests that seeking support may not have been an immediate priority.

The women in this study received support from a variety of sources: their partners, children, families, friends, the university, fellow students and neighbours. The quality and quantity of this support varied, but in some cases it was this support that proved essential to their ability to cope well with both roles of mother and student. There is therefore an opportunity for universities to develop the support services they offer to postgraduate students, particularly around issues of timetabling and practical placements. In particular, this study shows that there is a justifiable case for developing services that are quickly and easily accessible by student mothers.

**Summary and Conclusions**

The motivation for women who study at postgraduate level while raising children, is a desire for personal achievement and self satisfaction. Moreover, postgraduate study provides them with an opportunity to develop a professional identity. These findings are consistent with previous research, which showed that combining motherhood and education is difficult and requires “juggling and struggling.” Unlike Estes (2011) who proposed that this tension was managed by creating a new identity, the present findings suggest that student mothers demonstrated positive coping strategies to overcome these difficulties. The following sections summarise the experiences of postgraduate student
mothers in Australia and demonstrate how they used positive coping strategies to manage both roles.

**The Experience of Being a Postgraduate Student Mother in Australia.** Being a mother who studies at postgraduate level involves many “juggles and struggles.” The findings of this study demonstrate that mothers who study make many personal sacrifices to cope with competing demands. Studying impacted almost every facet of a woman’s life, both negatively and positively. How women felt about their decision to return to postgraduate study varied, depending on its impact on their lives and relationships at that time. For example, there was a positive effect during those periods when mothers felt that their children were benefiting from their studies, such as when they were able to provide educational support. However, when they were stressed by completing assignments and preparing for exams, the effects on their children were negative, as they were unable to provide their children with the attention and care they wanted.

Mothers who study experience contradictory feelings about being a student, and try to minimise the negative impact of their studies on the family. This is consistent with Estes’ (2011) findings that, while student parents believed that their children were a priority, this changed as they tried to fulfill their responsibilities as students. The women in this study needed to make their university work a priority but did not want to harm their “good parent” identity while doing so. This study also revealed that postgraduate student mothers in Australia experienced financial stress. In every case (with one exception), the financial burden of studying whilst raising children was significant. These students reconciled the financial sacrifices with the belief that in the long term, they would have more career options and would be better able to provide for their children and families.
Studying also impacted significantly on women’s relationships with their partners. In some cases, the impact was positive; the partner provided support and encouragement to the student and practical assistance with running the household and caring for the children. In others, women experienced hostility and opposition from their partners. For some women, the breakdown of their relationship gave them the opportunity for further education because their ex-partners prevented them, either directly or indirectly, from studying while they were in the relationship. White (2008) found that for one woman, returning to education challenged her marriage, resulting in a near breakdown of the relationship. This specific finding, that leaving the relationship allowed a mother to undertake education, has not been reported in previous research on student mothers.

The student mothers in this study greatly appreciated the support offered to them by the university, either in the form of support from individual staff, such as PhD supervisors, or more broadly from the university offering alternative study options, such as part-time and external modes of enrolment. Supportive academics who were flexible and understanding, were also important to the student parents in Estes’ (2011) research.

The option to study from home was vital for some student mothers who weren’t able to leave their children and therefore could not participate in on-campus activities. An important finding to emerge from this study was that while many of the mothers recognised support was available from the university, they did not have time to seek out support. This could potentially be addressed by offering students more easily accessible online resources and creating virtual communities for student parents.

It is noteworthy that the student mothers’ experiences with role conflict and overload changed over time. The difficulty with the existing literature is that none of the studies were followed up by research into student mothers. This is problematic because it often takes student mothers a number of years to complete their degrees which means that
their experiences and perspectives can change significantly over a period of time. For example, Diana started studying when her children were babies, and at the time of this research study she had been at university for 11 years. Anna had also been studying since her children were toddlers and now in their teenage years, she had remarried. She had spent over ten years in the higher education system. Emily started her undergraduate education in the 1980s and at the time of this study she had just completed her PhD thesis. An issue not mentioned by participants was that undertaking a PhD over an extended period of time negatively impacts completion, because the literature review conducted in the early stages of candidature will in all likelihood need to be updated. Similarly, the changes that can occur in a woman’s life over the course of her degree are significant and may impact her experience. Future research following up on participants to examine how their experiences change over time, will be useful to address this issue. It is particularly recommended that researchers follow up on mothers of young children, to determine how the increasing age of children impacts on academic progress. Such research would also contribute to knowledge about the fluidity of the good student parent identity across time and circumstance (Estes, 2011).

Combining postgraduate study with motherhood rewards women in tangible and intangible ways. Further education provides women with more career options, the potential for financial freedom and better employment opportunities. It also provides intangible rewards in the form of personal growth, pride and a sense of achievement. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies (Vryonides & Visilakis, 2008; Walkup, 2004; White, 2008). Some women reported that studying provided a sense of freedom and excitement from being exposed to a vast amount of knowledge. It was this sense of personal achievement and self development that emerged from the narratives as being a driving force for women with children to study at postgraduate level. For the women in
this study, postgraduate education gave them the opportunity to challenge themselves academically, emotionally and physically, and each success increased their sense of personal achievement.

Postgraduate study also allowed the women to develop an identity outside of their roles of mother and wife, and for many, this was an empowering transformation and part of their continued self development. This finding is consistent with previous research which showed that one benefit of higher education for mothers was the opportunity to develop an identity outside of motherhood (Pare, 2009). This research showed that postgraduate study rewarded women with the opportunity to develop a professional identity, and allowed them to view themselves as more than “just partners or mothers.” The experience of combining motherhood and postgraduate education involved challenges, motivation, sacrifice, financial hardship and time management, and while it impacted every aspect of a woman’s life, it also provided her with tangible and intangible rewards.

What motivated these student mothers was a desire to provide for their families in the future by ensuring they had better employment opportunities, and a desire to develop a professional identity outside of motherhood. The participants considered that postgraduate education would enhance their career prospects and therefore, improve their earning power and financial security upon graduation. The belief that postgraduate study would benefit their family in the long run helped them to reconcile the short-term financial disadvantages for their families. This is also consistent with Estes’ (2011) finding that participants were motivated to finish their education in order to make life better for themselves and their families. The women felt that they were being “good mothers” despite the short-term difficulties they encountered, by positioning themselves to provide for their children and improve their standard of living in the future.
Postgraduate education allowed these women the opportunity to develop a professional identity. The mothers considered role-modelling for their children part of being a good mother, and that their pursuit of an identity outside of motherhood taught their children to follow their dreams. This also extended to other children, as was the case for Hannah, who believed she was setting an example for the children in her regional town.

These postgraduate student mothers did not rely heavily on other people, and in most cases, did not actively seek out support. They tended to be self-reliant and struggled through their challenges and obstacles. Their struggles to balance the dual roles of mother and postgraduate student were, in most cases, solitary. It could be argued that this was indicative of their desire to be seen as both a “good mother” and a “good student,” however it is the author’s hypothesis that seeking help takes time, which these women were not willing to spare. As noted in Chapter 2, it is also possible that these student mothers were aware of the competitive nature of graduate education and were unwilling to differentiate themselves further by seeking help. In this context, their unwillingness to seek help may not have been motivated by a desire to be seen as a “good mother,” but rather by a desire to be seen as a “good student,” particularly in the competitive environment of graduate education. Furthermore, it might simply be that these students have neither the time nor the inclination to seek help, as that would have involved an additional task, over and above their already full workloads.

The postgraduate student mothers in this study were coping without external help and demonstrated that they could manage on their own for the most part. Future research could potentially examine those mothers who have withdrawn from their degree programs and might otherwise have completed, if help had been available to them.

The experience of undertaking postgraduate education rewards mothers in tangible and intangible ways. This study demonstrates that they are able to cope with the
demands of combining motherhood with education and as the following section argues, these student mothers displayed “positive coping” by reframing their studying to eliminate its negative impacts. Unlike the women in Lynch’s (2008) study, there was no evidence that these women attempted academic or maternal invisibility in an effort to cope with the tensions of combining motherhood and education. Contrary also to Lynch’s (2008) suggestion that student mothers employed “negative coping” strategies, the second major finding of this study was that student mothers resolved the tension of combining motherhood and postgraduate education, by employing “positive coping” strategies. This is summarised in the following section.

**Resolving the Tension: Positive Coping.** Similar to the student parents studied by Estes (2011), the women in this study valued education, wanted to be good students, valued their roles as parents, and aspired to being good parents. However, while Estes reported that the students created a new “good student-parent” identity, this study showed no evidence of an attempt to blend identity. Instead, the findings suggest that postgraduate student mothers coped with the demands of both their mother and student roles. There was little evidence to suggest that any of the women were excelling, or easily combining postgraduate study and motherhood – rather, they coped. Coping is the process of attempting to manage the demands created by stressful situations that are judged as taxing or exceeding an individual’s resources (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It explains how individuals use cognitive, emotional and behavioural efforts to manage external and internal demands (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). The two major functions of coping are to deal with the problem that is causing the distress (cognitive or problem-focused coping), and to regulate the emotions in order to minimise the distress caused by the stressors (emotion-focused coping) (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010).
This chapter shows that the women employed both cognitive-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies. For example, some mothers felt studying impacted on the time they had available to spend with their children, so to cope with the distress that this caused them, they reorganised their day to ensure they studied when their children were asleep. In order to meet their student obligations, the women made sacrifices in other areas of their lives. They coped by reframing their education as something they were doing to benefit their children economically, and in this way the women reduced the distress caused by combining study with motherhood.

Engagement in higher education was motivated by a desire to improve employment prospects and therefore their family’s financial situation. Mary and Natalie said “it was only for a short time” when they felt guilty and distressed about not spending enough time with their children. This was especially true for Anna, who as a single mother, did not want to be stuck in a “dead-end job” with two young children. Her hopes for a better future for her children helped her to cope with the difficulties and challenges of studying.

Hope is goal-directed thinking and comprises two components: pathway thinking and agency thinking (Snyder, 2002). Pathway thinking refers to an individual’s perceived capacity to generate pathways for attaining one’s goals while considering barriers and obstacles; while agency thinking refers to an individual’s perceived capacity to initiate and sustain movement along the path towards their desired goal (Snyder, 2002). Claire spoke of persisting despite the challenges because “…you have a purpose, you have a goal.” The findings show that these women did think of studying as a “pathway.” For example, Sara said she was proud of herself “along the way”. The findings reported in this chapter support Walkup’s (2006) contention that for women, higher education is a journey. Evidence of agency thinking came from comments such as “…I have felt a sense
of strength that has just grown and developed over this period” (Diana), and “…you can make choices, you can make decisions around what you want to do and you can follow your dream” (Claire). Similarly, Amanda said: “…this is what I want to do, so this is what I am going to make happen.”

It is well known that previous experience of personal success and goal achievement, social support, personal strength, and competency are all factors that predict hope (Synder, 2002), and is true for the women in this study. For example, Anna said that finishing the first degree gave her confidence because “you’ve been there, you’ve done all that hard yakka.” It is also known that individuals who have hope will judge stressors to be challenging rather than threatening, and that they are motivated to find solutions to eliminate feelings of stress, thereby resolving the cause of the stress (Roesch et al., 2010). Similar findings were reported in the present study. For example, Diana had no family help with childcare so she employed a “rent-a-granny”. Her goal was to be a clinical psychologist, so to achieve that goal and resolve the conflict between her student and family obligations, her solution was to pay for help.

Concluding Reflections

The findings of this research differed from previous research literature in four major ways. First, Pare (2009) did not challenge the ideology of intensive mothering and his findings were presented in terms of the “good mother.” This study suggested that mothers challenged these expectations to incorporate a provider role, which is in itself incompatible with the traditional notion of a “good mother.”

Second, Lynch (2008) suggested that the tension caused by combining motherhood and education was mitigated by hiding the mother identity in an academic environment and hiding the academic identity in a mothering environment. This negative
coping strategy was not apparent in the student mothers in this study, who instead, used positive coping strategies, such as reframing education.

Third, previous research (White, 2008; Springer et al, 2009; Reay, 2003; Walkup, 2006) proposed that the difficulties of combining motherhood with education, was an institutional issue. That is, if universities offered mothers more support, the difficulties that they faced might be eliminated. The present findings suggested that postgraduate student mothers, while appreciative of institutional support, were not reliant upon it, and managed to cope and continue on even in situations where they felt unsupported by their institution.

Fourth, Estes (2011) suggested that graduate students blended their parent and student identities to create a new identity - the good student-parent. The present study found no evidence of student mothers blending their identities, but rather that they resolved any tension by employing positive coping strategies.

This chapter described and interpreted the experiences of mothers who study at postgraduate level, and showed how they resolved the tension of combining postgraduate education and motherhood. One major finding to emerge from this research was that women studying at postgraduate level were predominantly motivated by a desire for personal achievement, self development and professional identity. Another major finding of this research was that student mothers resolved the tension of combining motherhood and postgraduate education by employing positive coping strategies.

This chapter also offered some insight into the rewards of postgraduate education for mothers, an aspect that has not previously been addressed in the literature. The mothers in this study were motivated to overcome the challenges they encountered and achieve their dreams of postgraduate education. While the findings showed that role conflict and overload were part of the experience of a mother who studies, they also
showed that postgraduate education offered women numerous benefits. It demonstrated that the women valued education and wanted to be good students, but also valued parenting and wanted to be good parents. The findings therefore provided some qualified support for Estes’ (2011) research on student-parents. However, instead of blending identities, the parents in this study used positive coping strategies for each of their identities.

The current research was intended to be an exploratory examination of postgraduate student mothers in Australia. Given that no other research has examined this group of students, this work provided some information about what it is like to be a mother and postgraduate university student in Australia. The rich qualitative data obtained from this phase of the research program allowed the author to create a set of statements that reflected the main themes and issues which emerged from the women’s narratives. These statements informed the second quantitative phase of the research. The author ensured qualitative rigour by discussing the interpretations with her supervisor, and being alert to possible researcher bias throughout the process (see Appendix P). Further member checking was accomplished by the research conducted in the second, third and fourth studies outlined in this thesis. These studies provided participants with the opportunity to determine the relevance of the author’s interpretation to their experiences and were part of the author’s strategy and commitment to qualitative rigour.
Chapter Six

Study Two: Statement Selection Study

*The selection of Q-statements is “more an art than a science”* (Brown, 1980)

Overview

The aim of this chapter is to provide a transition from the qualitative phase to the quantitative phase of the research program. It is a research-in-progress chapter, as it explains how the findings of the qualitative research – the narrative study - were used to inform the quantitative study – the Q-study. Q-methodology is described, and as this overview demonstrates, the selection of suitable statements to be used in a Q-study is fundamental to the process. In order to obtain the most appropriate statements from a list derived from the narrative data, it was necessary to conduct a study to select the statements that were most representative of a range of viewpoints. This also ensured qualitative rigour and reduced the possibility of researcher bias (see Appendix P).

Background to Q-methodology

Q-method allows the researcher to study an individual’s point of view and may therefore be regarded as the study of “subjectivity.” It was introduced to the scientific world in 1935 by William Stephenson. Stephenson was an assistant of Charles Spearman, the founder of factor analysis. Since its introduction until quite recently, Q-method has been controversial, and for the most part ignored as a research tool in psychology (Brown, S., 1999b). In the 1980s, McKeown and Thomas (1988, p. 11) described the method as retaining “a somewhat fugitive status within the larger social scientific community.” In other areas such as psychiatry, Q-method received a somewhat more positive reception for its ability to allow the study of a single case.
The use of Q-method has increased significantly in recent years in many diverse areas of study, such as US foreign policy (Aleprete & Rhoads, 2011), dream research (Parker & Alford, 2010), tourism (Hunter, 2011), television programming (Khoshgooyanfard, 2011), leadership (Militello & Benham, 2010), sexuality and disability (Brown & Pirtle, 2008), women and mathematics (Oswald & Harvey, 2003), health care reform (Sylvester 2011) and post-pregnancy body image (Jordan & Capdevila, 2005). The use of Q-method by university research students is also increasing, with recent dissertations examining subjects as diverse as Thai Buddhist monks (Pacharoen, 2010), university student retention (Darlaston-Jones, 2005), and recreation (Wilson, 2005).

The following section provides an overview of Q-method. There are many texts that provide a more detailed examination of the method than is possible in this chapter (see for example Brown, S., 1980; McKeown & Thomas, 1988; Stainton-Rogers, 1995; and Stephenson, 1953). Several texts are also available in languages other than English, highlighting the increasing prevalence of this method around the world, for example, the Persian text by Khoshgooyanfard (2008) and the Korean text by Kim (2008). Other texts providing detailed introductions to Q-method, are also available in Romanian (Iliescu, 2005) Chinese (Lou, 1981) and Thai (Prasith-rathsint & Sookasame, 2007).

**Q-method: An Overview.** Q-method is a research method used to study people’s subjectivity or point of view, and considers participants to be collaborators rather than subjects under investigation (De Mol & Buysse, 2008). Using factor analysis (outlined in greater detail in Chapter 7), Q-method provides the researcher with a systematic and rigorous quantitative method for examining human subjectivity. McKeown and Thomas (1988, p.5) stated that “Q-methodology encompasses a distinctive set of psychometric
and operational principles that, when conjoined with statistical applications of correlation
and factor-analytical techniques, provides a systematic and rigorously quantitative means
for examining human subjectivity.” McKeown and Brown (1988, p. 12) described the
method as “fundamentally…a method for the scientific study of human subjectivity.
Subjectivity in the lexicon of Q-method means nothing more than a person’s
communication of his or her point of view.”

Unlike other methods (such as surveys) whereby participants are randomly
selected to represent a population, in Q-method participants are chosen intentionally. The
aim of a Q-study is to ask people with widely differing opinions to express those opinions
with the Q-statements. This allows the researcher to summarise many individual opinions
into a few shared perspectives. Brown (1986, p. 58) stated that “only subjective opinions
are at issue in Q, and although they are typically unprovable, they can nevertheless be
shown to have structure and form, and it is the task of Q-technique to make this form
manifest for purposes of observation and study.” Therefore, participants who complete a
Q-sort give subjective meaning to the statements, thereby revealing their subjective
viewpoint (Smith, 2001) or personal profile (Brouwer, 1999). The goal of a Q-study is to
describe a population of ideas and not a population of subjects (Risdon, Eccleston,

Once collected, the individual viewpoints are subjected to factor analysis which in
Q-method is an inversion of conventional factor analysis as people, rather than tests, are
correlated (Stephenson, 1935). Essentially this means that rather than giving a large group
of people a small number of tests, a small group of people are given a large number of
test items. Because people’s responses are correlated with each other – as opposed to test
results – the researcher can obtain information about the similarities and differences in
viewpoints regarding a particular topic. Stephenson (1935) explained that if individuals
all had different likes and dislikes, their profiles would not correlate, but if significant clusters of correlations did exist, these correlations could be factorised and described in terms of common viewpoints. Individuals could then be measured against these ‘factors’ or common viewpoints. Consequently, the results of a Q-study describe a population of viewpoints and not a population of people (Risdon et al., 2003). An important concept that underpins Q-method is that only a limited number of viewpoints on any topic exists (Brown, 1980).

A basic outline of what is involved in conducting a Q-sort is as follows: 1) define the concourse, 2) develop the Q-set, 3) select the Q-participants, 4) conduct the Q-sort, and 5) analyse and interpret the data. A more detailed examination of each step is outlined below.

**Defining the Concourse.** The starting point for a Q-study is to identify the concourse – that is a collection of all the things people are saying about the topic of interest. This collective knowledge can come from many and varied sources such as magazines, newspapers, media reports, books, personal communications, interviews and the like. Often the concourse is described as being the “raw material” in a Q-study. The narratives obtained in Study One provided the concourse for the Q-study conducted in this research program. As shown in Table 4, thematic analysis of the narratives revealed a list of themes and subthemes. Statements that were representative of each of these themes were selected to create a list of 100 potential Q-statements. Therefore, the concourse in this research program was the narratives, and through thematic analysis, this concourse was refined and made more manageable by reducing the entire narrative study to 100 statements that represented the major themes and subthemes.
**Developing the Q-set.** Once the concourse has been generated, the researcher then draws a number of statements from it. This set of statements is called the Q-set or Q-sample (see Table 5). Typically the Q-set consists of 40 – 50 statements, but it can include more or fewer items. McKeown and Brown (1988) refer to two distinct types of Q-sets: naturalistic and ready-made. Statements taken from participants’ oral or written communications are considered naturalistic, whilst those extracted from sources other than their own communications, are ready-made. As McKeown and Brown explained, statements from both sources can be combined to form hybrid samples. Unlike other research methods that require participants to be representative of the population, in Q-method the statements are representative of the knowledge related to the topic of interest. Study Two, which is explained later in this chapter, attempted to ensure the Q-set was representative of a diverse range of viewpoints. Essentially, a set of statements that every participant agrees or disagrees with will not be representative of a variety of viewpoints. Statements should be short stand-alone sentences that express an idea simply and clearly and can be easily read and understood, but most importantly, the statements should be something that people are likely to have an opinion about (Webler et al., 2003). Statements are assigned a random number and are printed onto separate cards along with their number – the Q-deck.

**Selecting the Q-participants.** As mentioned previously, Q-participants are not selected to be representative of a population. Rather, they are a structured sample with a clear and distinct viewpoint and may therefore define a factor (or profile). In this research, female postgraduate students who were studying in Australian universities and who had children were invited to participate. The number of participants required for a Q-sort is not strictly prescribed, and there are several “rules of thumb” for selecting the number of participants (see Webler et al., 2003). This research was intended to be an
“extensive” study (McKeown & Brown, 1988), and in order to obtain the greatest
diversity of viewpoints, over 100 mothers were sent the materials and invited to
participate (further described in Chapter 7).

The Q-sort. This requires participants to rank a set of statements according to a
rule or condition of instruction (Brown, 1993). This can vary from ranking how strongly
they agree or disagree with the content of the statement, or as was done in this research,
how relevant each statement was to their experience. Participants were given a “scoring
sheet” which, in this study, was a blank normal distribution-shaped grid (see Appendix
G). According to Stainton-Rogers (1995), a fixed quasi-normal distribution is efficient,
more user-friendly and aids data collection. Next, participants were given the pile of
statement cards and placed them into negative, positive and neutral piles. They were then
asked to create a layout that matched the provided grid. Cards with numbers on them such
as -6, -5, -4, and +4, +5, +6, were placed on the table to form the base of the grid.
Participants then set about placing the remaining cards into the grid. For example, the
statement that was most relevant to their experience was placed above the +6 base card,
and the statement most irrelevant to their experience was placed above the -6 base card.
All cards were assigned a place in the grid. Figure 7 provides an illustration of this
process. Participants were free to move the cards around until they are satisfied with their
final rankings. The specific instructions given to participants in this study are described in
greater detail in Chapter 7, the Q-study, and can be found in Appendix H.
Analysis and Interpretation. Data analysis in Q-method is accomplished using statistical procedures – typically correlation and factor analysis. According to Brown (1993, p. 110), “few statistical procedures can be more daunting than factor analysis, but in Q-method there is little more reason to understand the mathematics involved than there is to understand mechanics in order to drive a car.” Brown (1993, p. 111) further explained that correlation, factor analysis and statistical rotation allow the researcher to determine “how many basically different Q-sorts are in evidence.” According to Brown, Q-sorts that are closely related to each other have a family resemblance, and it is factor analysis that allows us to determine how many different factors or families there are. Essentially what the researcher needs to know is that each factor includes participants who “tended to evaluate and sort the Q items in a similar way, thus indicating some similarity in attitude” (Schlinger, 1969, p. 56).

Factor analysis, a statistical technique, allows researchers to obtain patterns in a large set of data. Modern software programs, can perform these analyses relatively simply and quickly. For a thorough and technical overview of the analysis of Q-data, see Brown
(1980; 1993). In the first instance, a correlation matrix of all the Q-sorts is computed: this shows the level of agreement or disagreement between the individual Q-sorts, that is how similar or dissimilar the participants’ viewpoints are. The correlation matrix is then factor analysed. The purpose of the factor analysis is to determine the amount of natural groupings of Q-sorts and essentially, how many different Q-sorts exist (Brown, 1980; 1993). What this means is that people with similar viewpoints will share the same factor. Each Q-sort is assigned a factor loading which indicates how strongly that Q-sort is associated with that factor. The number of factors in each set of Q-data will vary but Brown (1980) recommends that for the following stage of the analysis, factor rotation, the magic number 7 is generally suitable to preserve as much variance as possible. Factor rotation can be objective or theoretical. Objective rotation is done according to statistical principles (i.e., varimax rotation) while theoretical rotation is guided by a prior knowledge. Factor rotation mixes the different viewpoints to allow them to be examined from different perspectives. Depending on what type of rotation is carried out the investigator is looking for confirmation of a theory or for statistical criteria to be met. The result is that for each of the final factors a group of individuals whose viewpoints correlate highly with each other (but are uncorrelated with others) can be identified. The analysis of the Q-data in the current research is explained in Chapter 7.

The aim of interpretation is to reveal, understand and describe the viewpoint or perspective captured by that factor and shared by all participants who load onto that factor. How the factors are actually interpreted is a challenging process to describe. Essentially what factor interpretation involves is the reverse of what participants did in the Q-sort: the latter took their views and translated them into an arrangement of cards, while in factor interpretation, an arrangement of cards is translated back into a viewpoint (Webler et al., 2007). There are several ways to approach factor interpretation. The
technique used in this research involved the “crib sheet system” (Watts & Stenner, 2012) and full details are provided in Chapter 7, the Q-study.

**Q-method Summary and Conclusion.** The table below summarises some of the terms commonly associated with Q-method and their descriptions, as reflected in the literature.

Table 5

*Glossary of Common Q-method Terms*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concourse</strong></td>
<td>Brown (1993) describes the concourse as “the flow of communicability surrounding any topic” in “the ordinary conversation, commentary and discourse of everyday life.” Essentially the concourse is a collection of all the possible statements that can be made about the topic of interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q-participants or P-set</strong></td>
<td>The group of individuals who will carry out the Q-sort. They are not a random set of people representative of the population, rather they are knowledgeable about the topic and have been purposefully selected for the diversity of their opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Item</strong></td>
<td>These are the statements that are used in the Q-sort. They are taken from the concourse and should be short, stand-alone sentences that express an idea simply and clearly and can be easily read. The statements should be something that people are likely to have an opinion about.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q-sample</strong></td>
<td>This refers to the entire collection of Q-items or statements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conditions of Instruction</strong></td>
<td>The instructions that are given to the participants are referred to as the Condition of Instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q-set</strong></td>
<td>The Q-set or Q-deck refers to the set of cards that participants sort into the grid. The Q sample statements are printed on blank cards along with a randomly assigned number.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q-deck</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Q-sort data</strong></td>
<td>The results of sorting the Q-statements. This data represents the person’s subjective viewpoint.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Study Two: Statement Selection Study

The aim of this study was to select the Q-statements to be used in the Q-study. As previously described, the set of statements used in a Q-method research study is known as the concourse or Q-sort deck. Once obtained, it is essential that the concourse is reviewed to ensure that the statements selected are appropriate. It is important that the wording and language used in the statements are familiar to the population from which the participants will be drawn (Brown, 1993; Denzine, 1998). Given that the intention of a Q-study is to examine subjectivity, the concourse should consist of a variety of perspectives and opinions. Therefore, the concourse needs to contain a range of statements with which participants can both agree and disagree (Woosley, Hyman & Graunke, 2004).

In Q-studies, it is common practice for the researcher to create the statement list and review it alongside other researchers or academics – such as course supervisors. In other studies, researchers supplement their statement list with items suggested by knowledge of the subject or from literature on the topic. For example, Kitzinger and Stainton Rogers’ (1985) study of lesbian identities used statements that lesbians had made about themselves for the majority of the items, but increased their list with other items derived from external sources. Other studies rely only on statements derived verbatim from participant interviews or narratives, such as Oswald and Harvey’s (2003) examination of women’s subjective perspectives on mathematics. In that study, all 90 statements were taken verbatim from recorded participant interviews. In another study examining women’s post-pregnancy body image, statements were derived from sources such as academic literature, media sources (television, film and internet) as well as from informal discussions with new mothers (Jordan, Capdevila & Johnson, 2005). A pilot study was then conducted, in which ten women were asked to indicate for each statement
whether they agreed, disagreed, were uncertain or unclear about the statement. Based on that data, the final sample of 60 statements was identified (Jordan et al., 2005).

Although only a limited number of comparative studies have been done, they nevertheless show that different sets of statements structured in different ways can come to the same conclusions (Thomas & Baas, 1992). What is essential though, in order to rank the statements effectively, is that each statement is subjective (Brown, 1993). To maximize the subjectivity of the statements used in this study, the present study was devised to ensure that the final set of Q-statements represented a variety of opinions and points of view. As mentioned previously, the concourse consisted of the narratives obtained in Study One, and thematic analysis identified themes and sub-themes. A set of 100 statements that represented these themes, was created (see Appendix H).

**Ethical Considerations**

This research was approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics committee. Participants were provided with an information sheet (Appendix I), outlining the aims and rationale of the research, were informed that participation was voluntary, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequence. Participants were assured that any information they provided would be presented in a general way and that any identifying data would be removed from the final analysis.

**Recruitment**

Those women from Study One who had indicated that they were interested in participating in the later stages of the research, were approached. Of those women, nine agreed to participate in this study. The other five participants were recruited through word-of-mouth and snowballing.
Participants

Participants comprised fourteen female postgraduate students with children who were studying at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia. Their ages ranged between 24 and 50+ years – specific age data were not collected. The number of children each woman had ranged between one and three children. The ages of their children ranged from eighteen months to 30 years.

Procedure

One hundred statements were selected to represent the major themes identified in Study One (see Appendix I for the full statement list). Participants were asked to indicate whether each of the 100 statements were relevant to them, by selecting YES or NO on an electronic questionnaire. This was deemed the most useful method of enquiry to reduce any inconvenience to participants.

Analysis

The results were collated and examined to determine which statements participants agreed or disagreed with. Statements with which participants indicated high levels of agreement or disagreement were eliminated, and those with responses that were evenly distributed, were retained.

For each statement, the total number of NO and YES answers were tallied (see Table 6). Those statements for which 100% of participants agreed or disagreed were eliminated. This reduced the statement list from 100 to 89. The next stage involved eliminating those statements with which roughly 93% of participants disagreed (NO = 13, YES = 1). This further reduced the statement list to 77. Next, those statements with which roughly 86% disagreed (NO = 12, YES = 2) were eliminated, reducing the list to 65.
Finally those statements with which roughly 79% disagreed (NO = 11, YES = 3) were eliminated, resulting in a statement list of 48.

Of the remaining statements, two pertained to daycare: “I love daycare, it has enabled me to study” and “I dislike daycare”. Given that these statements accessed the same information (an opinion about daycare), one of them was deleted from the final list and the statement: “I dislike daycare,” retained.

The final total of 49 statements were obtained by adding two extra from the original: 1) As a mum it is important to have something else in your life for when your children grow up; and 2) I think being a mother has been a great advantage for my studies. These statements were chosen to touch upon a woman’s identity as a mother. The first statement examines the idea that when children grow up and motherhood duties are no longer the primary activity in a woman’s life, it may be important to have an additional aspect to her identity. For example, in Study One, Iris talked about showing her daughter that you can have both a family and a career. She said:

While I think it’s important - my job as a mum - I think I need something else in my life, because at the end of a day your children grow up. And then, what you’re going to do? You’ve been a mum for the last twenty years, you know, and then you have to restart again. You can still be a mum, plus have something else.”

The second statement relates to the significant influence of motherhood on a woman’s identity, and examines whether that contributes to what they take from their education. In the narrative study, several participants suggested that being a mother provided them with a richer understanding of the topics studied, and also benefitted younger class mates who could learn from their life experiences. The final statements
were then numbered from 1 to 49 and formed the Q-statements that were used in the Q-card sort study (Study Three). The following chapter describes the Q-study in greater detail. The statements that were used in the final statement set are indicated with an asterisk in Table 6.

Table 6
Statement List and Number of "No" Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement Number</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Number of “No” Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>I don’t have any family I can fall back on</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Family members don’t understand</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>I have friends that are supportive and helpful</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>I’ve pretty much done this on my own</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>I couldn’t have done this without the support of my partner</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>The support is there you just need to ask for help</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>People don’t volunteer their help so I have had to learn to ask for help</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>The main support I have had has been from my Supervisor/Lecturers</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>The university goes out of its way to assist students</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>The kids have been supportive of me</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>The kids are not that supportive</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>People see me as some sort of ‘super-mum’</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>My family and friends are really proud of me</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>My friends are concerned I push myself too hard</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>People think when you study you have loads of free time because you don’t work</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Timetabling has caused many problems for me during my study</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>You have to learn self-care when you are a mother who studies</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement Number</td>
<td>Number of “No” Responses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I am reasonably strong willed</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. There is no way I am giving up</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. You study because you have a purpose, a goal</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I have had moments where I have thought ‘why am I doing this?’</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. I love learning</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. I need to support my kids</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Study will give us some financial freedom</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. I am doing this so I can get a better job</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. I am just doing this for me *</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. I try to take it one day at a time and stick in there</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28. You have to keep the thirst and energy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29. You really do have to want to study and be interested in it</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30. Money is very tight</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Financial concerns have impacted on my study decisions*</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. It has been a really liberating experience *</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Studying has been an amazing journey for me*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. I have grown confident in myself and my abilities as a result of my studies</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. I am proud of myself and what I have achieved</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. I have so many roles and I try to keep them Separate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. I studied despite my partner’s objections</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. My study always comes second to what my husband/partner wants</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. As a mum it is important to have something else in your life for when your children grow up *</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. I have to negotiate the help I get from my husband/partner</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. Sometimes I feel complete despair and feel like I must be crazy trying to juggle all this*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement Number</td>
<td>Number of “No” Responses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. Persistence is the key</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43. You just do the best you can</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44. I am learning skills that I am able to use with my children</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45. I try and do my studying at night time so it doesn’t impact on my children</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46. Studying is not fair on you or the family *</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47. There were positive and negative impacts on my children as a result of my studies*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48. My children have learnt to be quite autonomous*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49. My studying teaches the kids to follow their dreams*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50. I am hoping I have taught my kids that you can survive, that you can be resilient</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51. I don’t particularly want to put my kids into childcare but I have to *</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52. I do feel guilty about studying especially when I have assignments or exams*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53. I am not enjoying my life</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54. The study has allowed me to heal from my marriage/relationship *</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55. I have got competing priorities</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56. For a mother to study there is a lot of pressure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57. I do sometimes feel left out when my friends socialise and I can’t join them*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58. I have lost fitness as a result of my study commitments *</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>59. Getting time for yourself is difficult</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60. I tend to burn the candle at both ends and sometimes in the middle as well</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61. I feel very mentally drained</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62. Physically I cannot stay awake to do the study I need to do*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63. I think being a mother has been a great advantage for my studies *</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64. Having children stopped me from studying further*</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65. I feel under too much pressure*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement Number</td>
<td>Number of “No” Responses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66.</td>
<td>It is hard when everyone wants a piece of you</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67.</td>
<td>I am always trying to make it work for everyone else but sometimes it doesn’t work for me</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>68.</td>
<td>My family don’t drop their demands just because I am busy studying*</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69.</td>
<td>Studying would have been much easier without Kids</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70.</td>
<td>My memory is not as good as it used to me which makes studying harder*</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71.</td>
<td>The order I have done things in my life has been totally appropriate for me *</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72.</td>
<td>It has got a bit easier the older my children get*</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73.</td>
<td>My partner does not approve of my studies and tries to make it difficult for me *</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74.</td>
<td>Postgraduate study is a better choice for me because of the flexibility it offers over undergraduate study</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75.</td>
<td>Postgraduate courses are shorter and therefore more manageable *</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>76.</td>
<td>With undergraduate study you can completely focus on the needs of your family, whereas postgraduate study is a 24-hour a day occupation of the mind</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77.</td>
<td>I don’t think I could have done postgraduate study with young children</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78.</td>
<td>There is no flexibility in undergraduate study*</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79.</td>
<td>Postgraduate study is hard especially without government financial assistance *</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80.</td>
<td>While I have interacted with fellow students I haven’t really made friends*</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>81.</td>
<td>I don’t have time to partake in the social side of university life</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82.</td>
<td>When you work/study from home you feel alone and isolated*</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>83.</td>
<td>I have made some really lovely friends during my study*</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84.</td>
<td>The load is enormous</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85.</td>
<td>My life is pretty full on</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86.</td>
<td>I have had my meltdowns throughout it</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87.</td>
<td>In terms of juggling my family and studies I think I</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement Number</td>
<td>Number of “No” Responses</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>91.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>93.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>94.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95.</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>96.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>97.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>99.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Statements used in final statement list are indicated by an asterisk *

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to obtain a set of statements that would yield a variety of different perspectives. In order to do this, it was necessary to determine which statements elicited a general consensus of opinion. Asking participants to indicate whether each statement was relevant to their experience or not, made it possible to identity those statements with which most participants agreed or disagreed, and indicated the relevance of that statement to their own experience of combining motherhood and postgraduate education. Statements with which roughly half participants agreed and half disagreed were selected for inclusion in the final statement list that was used in the Q-
study. The next chapter (Chapter 7) provides more details about the Q-study and presents the findings and a discussion relevant to that phase of the research program.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided a transition from the qualitative to the quantitative phase of the research program. It explained how the final set of statements in the Q-study were chosen, and in doing so, demonstrated how the conclusions of the qualitative narrative study informed the quantitative Q-study. This detailed description also illustrated the suitability of Q-methodology for managing the transition between the qualitative and quantitative approaches taken in this research program.
Chapter Seven

Study Three: Q-study

Introduction and Objectives

The aims of the Q-study which will be presented in this chapter are to examine the experiences of mothers who study at postgraduate level, and to identify the factors that are relevant to that experience. The study was designed to determine the “points of view” or perspectives that define the experience of combining postgraduate study with motherhood.

As outlined in Chapter 4, this research program adopted a social constructionist epistemology, where reality is constructed through social interaction and reflects the co-participants’ negotiated creation of meaning (De Mol & Buysse, 2008). A social constructionist approach requires a methodology that can investigate the variety and diversity of understandings within a particular culture, and Q-methodology meets these requirements (Stainton Rogers, 1995).

Q-methodology requires participants to rank a set of statements on a quasi-normal distribution grid according to how relevant or important they are to their own experience (in this case, the experience of combining motherhood and postgraduate study). The completed Q-sorts are then subjected to factor analysis, with the aim of identifying distinct and shared understandings of the research subject (De Mol & Buysse, 2008). Q-methodology aims to describe a population of ideas, not a population of subjects (Risdon et al., 2003).

There are four stages to a Q-study: (1) selection of the Q-statements; (2) selection of the sample of participants; (3) the Q-sorting process; and (4) factor analysis and
The Q-sort process (stage 3) described in this chapter, allowed participants to reflect on their views, beliefs and experiences and rank the statements in relation to one another. Factor analysis and factor interpretation (both later described in this chapter) revealed a small number of underlying perspectives or factors in the completed Q-sorts. The analysis allowed a structure to be developed that presented the different understandings of the research topic, by bringing together commonalities and correlations between the Q-sorts and thereby revealing areas of distinction (Eccleston, Williams, & Stainton Rogers, 1997).

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the final three stages of the Q-sort study: participant selection, the Q-sort process and factor analysis and interpretation. It concludes with a brief discussion of the limitations of the methodology.

**Method**

**Participants and Materials.** The participants of the Q-study were recruited from universities across Australia, by placing notices in graduate school newsletters, on graduate association bulletin boards, by word-of-mouth and snowball sampling. This advertising resulted in 106 potential participants, who emailed the researcher indicating their interest in the study. Those women were then sent an instruction sheet, consent form, demographic questionnaire, blank Q-grid, 49 statement cards and a self-addressed envelope for returning the completed Q-grid (see Appendix K). The final number of participants who returned a completed Q-sort was 75 (response rate of 71%), after three follow-up reminders to obtain the completed Q-sorts from the participants. Appendix L provides demographic details about the Q-sort participants.

**Procedure.** Participants completed the Q-sort in their own time and in a location of their choice. Detailed descriptions of the process were presented in Chapter 6, and the
specific instructions given to participants may be found in Appendix J. The Q-sort took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Participants were advised that, should they require extra assistance or instruction, the researcher could be contacted by telephone or email; three participants made contact to clarify what was required to complete the Q-sort. Figure 8 below shows an example of a completed Q-sort. Participants were required to record the number of the statement cards on the grid provided, and a completed example is presented in Appendix L.

![Figure 8. Example of a completed Q-card sort](source: www.c-niip.net)

**Analysis.** This section gives a brief overview of how the Q-data were factor analysed, as software programs can perform these analyses relatively simply and quickly. Brown (1980; 1993) provided a thorough and technical overview of the analysis of Q-data. Factor analysis allows researchers to identify patterns in a large set of data. In the first instance, a correlation matrix of all the Q-sorts was computed to show the level of agreement or disagreement between the individual Q-sorts, that is, how similar or dissimilar the viewpoints of all participants were. The correlation matrix was then factor
analysed to determine the amount of natural groupings of Q-sorts: in other words, how many different Q-sorts existed (Brown, 1980; 1993). What this means is that people with similar viewpoints share the same factor. Each Q-sort was assigned a factor loading which indicated how strongly that Q-sort was associated with that factor.

The number of factors in each set of Q-data varies, but Brown (1980, p. 223) recommends that for the following stage of the analysis, factor rotation, “the magic number 7 is generally suitable” in order to preserve as much variance as possible. Factor rotation can be objective or theoretical. Objective rotation is done using varimax rotation, which assumes factor orthogonality, whereas theoretical rotation is guided by a prior knowledge. Factor rotation mixes the different viewpoints to allow them to be examined from different perspectives. Depending on what type of rotation is carried out, the investigator is looking for confirmation of a theory or for specific statistical criteria to be met. The result is that for each of the final factors a group of individuals whose viewpoints correlate highly with each other (but are uncorrelated with others), can be identified.

Q-sorts that significantly load onto the same factor alone are called factor exemplars (Stenner, Dancy & Watts, 2000). It is standard practice in Q-methodology to generate factor arrays from the factor exemplars that represent a factor. These are “ideal” Q-sorts and are generated by calculating the z-scores for each statement defining that factor and then, based on the z-scores, attributing the statements to the original quasi-normal distribution grid (De Mol & Buysse, 2008). A factor array is an “ideal” Q-sort, the Q-sort of a hypothetical respondent with a 100% loading onto that factor (De Mol & Buysse, 2008).
The analysis of this study proceeded to turn factors (shared viewpoints across each individual participant) into factor arrays. Factor arrays are described by Stenner et al., (2003) as follows:

Factor exemplars that are merged to form a single ideal-typical Q-sort for each factor are called a factor array. The factor array is calculated according to a procedure of weighted averaging…i.e., higher loading exemplars are given more weight in the averaging process since they better exemplify the factor. Being a merged average, the factor array looks like a single complete Q-sort. (pp. 2164-2165).

The next stage of the analysis was to move from factor arrays to factor interpretations, a process that “takes the form of a careful and holistic inspection of the patterning of items in the factor array” (Stenner et al., 2003, p. 2165). The interpretation sought to reveal, understand and describe the viewpoint or perspective captured by that factor. The viewpoint is shared by all participants who loaded onto that factor. Watts and Stenner (2012) provided a useful method for factor interpretation, called a crib sheet system, which was developed by Watts during his doctoral studies. It is a system of organising the factor arrays that encourages holism, by forcing the researcher to engage with every item in the factor array (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Using the crib sheet system, four categories of items were created: items ranked + 6; items ranked higher in factor X array than in other factor arrays; items ranked lower in factor X array that in other factor arrays; and items ranked - 6. This was done for each of the three factors. An example of this process is shown in Appendices M and N. For a full description of this process, see Watts and Stenner (2012, p. 150-154).

In the current study, 75 Q-sorts were inter-correlated and factor analysed using the computer program PQMethod (Schmolck, 2002). Three factors were rotated and in
combination they explained 35% of the study variance. Sixty-one of the 75 Qsorts loaded significantly onto one or other of these three factors (see Appendix N). Factor loadings of \( \pm 0.38 \) were deemed significant at the \( p<0.01 \) level. See Appendix Q for a full list of factor loadings.

**Results.** Each of the individually completed Q-sort grids was entered into Schmolck’s (2002) PQMethod 2.11, and underwent a three-part analysis: correlation; factor analysis plus rotation; and the calculation of factor scores. Using the Q-analysis software program, the data were subjected to Principal Components Analysis (PCA). The author is aware that PCA is not technically the same as factor analysis, and PCA is the preferred method of extraction (Schmolck, 2002). It is presently common practice to interchange factor analysis for PCA in the Q-sort literature, and the author has followed this practice.

A three-factor solution was chosen to best represent the full set of Qsorts and offered the “best fit” for the data. Following the factor analysis, varimax rotation was used. Given the orthogonal rotation, correlations between the factors were low (see Table 7 below).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
<td>0.3305</td>
<td>0.2451</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.3305</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
<td>0.3267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.2451</td>
<td>0.3267</td>
<td>1.0000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The three-factor model accounted for 35% of the variance of which factors 1, 2 and 3 explained 14%, 13% and 8% of the variance respectively, given the order of entry. Appendix N shows how each Q-sort was identified as loading onto one of the three factors.

PQMethod (Schmolck, 2002) displays results in a number of output tables such as factor matrices, normalized factor scores for each factor, distinguishing statements for each factor, and consensus statements. Distinguishing statements differentiate between the factors and are used for factor interpretation. The score for a distinguishing statement for a factor is significantly different from its score on the other identified factors (Akhtar-Danesh et al., 2008).

Three main factors on how women characterise the experience of studying at postgraduate level while raising children, emerged from the Q-study. The following section provides an interpretation of each factor. Factor interpretations in this study are presented according to the method suggested by Stenner et al. (2003, p. 2165):

A description of each factor is presented with summary demographic details of the participants who loaded significantly on the factor. Rankings of relevant items are provided. For example, (41, +6) indicates that item 41 is ranked in the + 6 position, in the factor array Q-sort for factor 1.

**Factor One: Juggling Multiple Commitments.** Twenty-four women loaded onto this factor. Of these women, 20 were engaged in paid employment during their studies, and 19 had live-in partners. Moreover, of the 24 women who loaded onto this factor, 18 had pre-school aged children (aged four years and under), and 20 were enrolled in a Doctor of Philosophy degree program. Defining statements for this factor are shown in Table 8.
### Table 8

**Defining Statements for Factor 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>1 Rank</th>
<th>1 Score</th>
<th>2 Rank</th>
<th>2 Score</th>
<th>3 Rank</th>
<th>3 Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I couldn’t have done this without the support of my partner*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes I feel complete despair and feel like I must be crazy trying to juggle all this*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.95*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You feel guilty all the time like you are not doing enough for your children*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.84*</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.67</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel under too much pressure*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.64*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other commitments seem more immediate and important than my studies do*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.59*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am spread really thin, I feel like margarine*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.54*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically I cannot stay awake to do the study I need to do*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.37*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am always trying to make it work for everyone else, but sometimes it doesn’t work for me</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.99*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There were positive and negative impacts on my children as a result of my studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studying has been an amazing journey for me*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.88*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My memory is not as good as it used to be which makes studying harder*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.79</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I didn’t balance it well*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.36*</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-0.99</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing procrastination is a difficult thing for me*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a Mum it is important to have something else in your life for when your children grow up*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.94</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate study is hard especially without government financial assistance*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>*0.16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have lost fitness as a result of my study commitments*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have made some really lovely friends during my study*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My studying teaches the kids to follow their dreams*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.20*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The core belief of this factor was that studying at postgraduate level while raising children is a juggling act that is only made possible with partner support. This factor also indicated that studying resulted in feelings of guilt because of the time it takes away from one’s children, and that studying adds further life pressures, resulting in feelings of being

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4 It must be noted here that while partner support is particularly relevant in this factor, the label of this factor credits the individual with managing to balance her various commitments and demands. The reason for this is because statements 18, 44 and 41 (the next most relevant statements) point to individual issues. Further analysis will attempt to clarify this distinction further.
“spread thin”. The statement identified as being most relevant (+6) to their experience was “I couldn’t have done this without the support of my partner” (4); while most irrelevant to their experience (-6) was the statement “study has allowed me to heal from my marriage/relationship” (25). The women who loaded onto this factor did not consider that the support of their supervisor or lecturer was relevant to their experience, nor did they think that their children were particularly supportive of their educational endeavours. Despite this, they did not feel that “they had done this on their own” (3: -4).

While these women felt that studying had been an amazing journey (16: +3), at times they felt despair trying to juggle all of their competing demands (18: +5). They felt under too much pressure (31: +4) and spread really thin (45: +4). They felt guilty that they weren’t doing enough for their children (44: +5) and believed that studying had both positive and negative impacts on their children (20: +3). They used daycare but weren’t particularly happy to do so (23: -1). These women were always trying to make it work for other people at their own expense (48: +4), and felt that other commitments were more important than their studies (48: +4). They felt that they physically struggled to stay awake to study (28: +3) and that their memory was not as good as it once was (34: +2), which added to the difficulties of postgraduate education. Financial concerns impacted on these women’s study decisions (14), but the statement that “postgraduate study is hard without government financial assistance” (39: 0), was least relevant in this factor as compared with the other two. Timetabling did not pose any significant issues for these women (12: -4), probably because the majority (20 of the 24) were Doctor of Philosophy students. This was also likely related to participants reporting a negative ranking for the statement “postgraduate courses are shorter, and therefore more manageable” (37: -5).

Women in this factor did not consider postgraduate study to be as liberating (15: -1) and amazing (16: +3) as women in the other two factors. Compared to the other two
perspectives, they considered having something else in their life for when their children grew up (17:+1) as being less relevant to their experience and, they did not rank being a mother as an advantage to their studies (29:-3). The statements that “studying teaches children to follow their dreams” (22:0) and “to become autonomous” (21:-3), were also ranked as being less relevant than in the other two factors.

**Factor Two: Benefits of Higher Education to the Individual.** Twenty-two participants loaded onto this factor. An examination of the personal context of the women loading onto this factor showed that 14 of the 22 had pre-school aged children (aged 4 years and younger) and that 12 were engaged in paid employment. Fourteen of the women were enrolled in a Doctor of Philosophy degree program, and 18 had live-in partners. Defining statements for this factor are shown in Table 9.

**Table 9**
**Defining Statements for Factor 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As a Mum it is important to have something else in your life for when your children grow up*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.94*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I couldn’t have done this without the support of my partner*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The order I have done things in my life has been totally appropriate for me*</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.66</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.60*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am just doing this for me*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.37*</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My studying teaches the kids to follow their dreams*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.99*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think being a mother has been a great advantage for my studies*</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-0.95</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.95*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The support is there you just need to ask for help*</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.64</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.76*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It has got a bit easier the older my children get*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other commitments seem more immediate and important than my</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.68*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Score</td>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Score</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>studies do*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47 Managing procrastination is a difficult thing for me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.62*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 The main support I have had has been from my Supervisor/Lecturers*</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.61</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.47*</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-1.71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 I have made some really lovely friends during my study*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 People don’t volunteer their help so I have had to learn to ask for help*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.37</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 The kids have been supportive of me*</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.70</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.07*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 The University goes out of its way to assist students*</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.93</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.04*</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1.04</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 There were positive and negative impacts on my children as a result of my studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.03*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 I feel under too much pressure*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.12*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 I am spread really thin, I feel like margarine*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.14*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 Physically I cannot stay awake to do the study I need to do*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 I have lost fitness as a result of my study commitments*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Sometimes I feel complete despair and feel like I must be crazy trying to juggle all this*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.35*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44 You feel guilty all the time like you are not doing enough for your children*</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.67*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 My children have learnt to be quite autonomous*</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1.04</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.72</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34 My memory is not as good as it used to be which makes studying harder*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>*-0.79</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 I do sometimes feel left out when my friends socialise and I can’t join them*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.80*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 I do feel guilty about studying especially when I have assignments or exams*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-0.94*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 I don’t particularly want to put my kids into childcare but have to*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-1.16*</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-1.99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 The kids are not that supportive*</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-1.47*</td>
<td>-6</td>
<td>-2.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 The study has allowed me to heal from my marriage/relationship*</td>
<td>-6</td>
<td>-2.34</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-1.57*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Timetabling has caused many</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-1.16</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-1.82*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BALANCING THE DUAL ROLES OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENT AND MOTHER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>1 Rank</th>
<th>1 Score</th>
<th>2 Rank</th>
<th>2 Score</th>
<th>3 Rank</th>
<th>3 Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>problems for me during my study</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Studying is not fair on you or the family*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.50</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-1.86*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Having children stopped me from Studying further*</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-1.31</td>
<td>-6</td>
<td>-1.91*</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-1.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(P < .05; Asterisk (*) Indicates Significance at P < .01) Both the Factor Q-Sort Value and the Normalized Score are shown.

This factor focused on the benefits higher education offers the individual student mother. For these women, support, timing, and age of children were all important factors to their experience. Support from one’s partner (4: +5) was ranked as being extremely relevant, and these women believed that support was available if requested (5: +2).

Studying was seen as something she was doing just for herself (13: +4), and these participants believed that it was important for a mother to have something else in her life when her children grew up (17: +6). The women who loaded onto this factor believed that the order in which they had done things in their lives was totally appropriate (35: +4) and that studying became easier as their children got older (36: +2). They felt strongly that having children had not stopped them from further study (30: -6) and did not agree that studying with children was unfair on the family or on themselves (19: -5). According to this factor, being a mother was an advantage to one’s studies (29: +3) and taught one’s children to follow their own dreams (22: +3)

Compared to the other factors, these women did not feel under too much pressure (31:0), did not feel guilty (44:-2) or spread thin (45:-1). Less relevant to their experience compared to the other factors, were feelings of despair at trying to juggle all their responsibilities (18:-1). Of all the factors, the women in this group found the statement “studying was not fair on you or the family” (19:-5) the least relevant, as was the case with the statements pertaining to the impact of studying on their children (20:0 and 21:-
2). Managing procrastination was more relevant in this factor than in the others (47:+2). Timetabling (12:-5) and difficulties with memory (34:-2) and tiredness (28:-1) were ranked as least relevant for this group as compared with the others.

**Factor Three: Benefits of Higher Education to her Children.** Fifteen participants loaded onto this factor. The demographic details of these women revealed that 9 of the 15 had at least one child who was school-aged or older, 13 were engaged in paid employment and 11 had live-in partners. Seven were enrolled in a Doctor of Philosophy degree program. Defining statements for this factor are shown in Table 10.

Table 10

**Defining Statements for Factor 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rank</strong></td>
<td><strong>Score</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 My studying teaches the kids to follow their dreams*</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 The kids have been supportive of me*</td>
<td>-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 My children have learnt to be quite autonomous*</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 I have lost fitness as a result of my study commitments*</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 I think being a mother has been a great advantage for my studies*</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44 You feel guilty all the time like you are not doing enough for your children*</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 As a Mum it is important to have something else in your life for when your children grow up*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42 I have made some really lovely friends during my study*</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 I feel under too much pressure*</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 There were positive and negative impacts on my children as a result of my studies</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Sometimes I feel complete despair and feel like I must be crazy trying to juggle all this*</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Timetabling has caused many</td>
<td>-4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Statement Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am spread really thin, I feel like margarine*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.48*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My family don’t drop their demands just because I am busy studying</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physically I cannot stay awake to do the study I need to do*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My memory is not as good as it used to be which makes studying harder*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.79</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The study has allowed me to heal from my marriage/relationship*</td>
<td>-6</td>
<td>-2.34</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-1.57</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other commitments seem more immediate and important than my studies do*</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I try to give a lot to a lot of different people*</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The support is there you just need to ask for help*</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.64</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.21*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing procrastination is a difficult thing for me</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>0.44*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am just doing this for me*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.48</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you work/study from home you feel alone and isolated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-0.96*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While I have interacted with fellow students I haven’t really made friends*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.64</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1.11*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I couldn’t have done this without the support of my partner*</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People think when you study you have loads of free time because you don’t work*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-1.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The main support I have had has been from my Supervisor/Lecturers*</td>
<td>-2</td>
<td>-0.61</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-1.71*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t particularly want to put my kids into childcare but have to*</td>
<td>-1</td>
<td>-0.51</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-1.16</td>
<td>-5</td>
<td>-1.99*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The kids are not that supportive*</td>
<td>-3</td>
<td>-1.03</td>
<td>-4</td>
<td>-1.47</td>
<td>-6</td>
<td>-2.14*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(P < .05 Asterisk (*) Indicates Significance at P < .01)
Both the Factor Q-Sort Value and the Normalised Score are shown.

This factor focused on the benefits of higher education to a woman’s children.

Women who loaded onto this factor believed their children were supportive (9: +4) and that her return to study taught her children to follow their own dreams (22: +5) and be
autonomous (21: +4). Furthermore, they did not feel they were “just doing this for me” (13: -2). Being a mother was an advantage to one’s studies (29: +3) and support from their partners (4: -3) and supervisors/lecturers (7: -5) were not considered relevant to their experience. The women in this group were the least likely to think that the university goes out of its way to assist students (8:-3). Compared to the other factors, the statement that study allowed her to heal from her marriage/relationship (25:0) was more relevant. These women were more likely than the women in the other groups to have made good friends during their studies (42: +3), and to have lost fitness due to their study commitments (27: +4). The statement “having children stopped me from further study” (30; -4) was more relevant for this group compared to the others. Statements pertaining to daycare (49:-4, 23:-5) were least relevant to this group, as was the statement that it became easier as the children got older (36:0). The women in this group were also the least likely out of the three groups, to find procrastination a problem, and did not have difficulty making their own needs a priority (46:-1, 48:0).

**Consensus Points.** Three of the 49 statements failed to distinguish between the four factors. These are called “consensus items” and are presented in Table 11.

Table 11

*Consensus Items Showing Factor Rankings and Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial concerns have impacted on my study decisions</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no flexibility in undergraduate study</td>
<td>-1.26</td>
<td>-1.14</td>
<td>-0.85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I dislike daycare</td>
<td>-0.98</td>
<td>-0.92</td>
<td>-1.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: All items are non-significant at .01 and items marked with * are also non-significant at .05
All three factors agreed that financial concerns impacted on their study decisions, but was not highly ranked (14: +1, 0, 0). All three factors agreed that the statements ‘I dislike daycare’ (49) and ‘There is no flexibility in undergraduate study’ (38) were less relevant to their experiences (-3, -3, -4).

**Points of Disagreement.** There was one main point of disagreement among the three factors: the role of her partner in enabling a woman to study while raising children. The views expressed in the first and second factors were that, without the support of her partner, the woman would not have been able to undertake her studies. This statement was ranked -3 in terms of relevance for the women who loaded onto factor three.

**Non-significant Sorts.** Fourteen participants out of the total 75 did not load significantly on any of the factors. Table 12 depicts these factor scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Number</th>
<th>1 Score</th>
<th>2 Score</th>
<th>3 Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.1651</td>
<td>0.1073</td>
<td>0.1481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>-0.1712</td>
<td>0.4262</td>
<td>0.4029</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.1096</td>
<td>0.0812</td>
<td>0.2113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>0.2675</td>
<td>0.2713</td>
<td>0.1507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>0.4674</td>
<td>0.4833</td>
<td>0.2896</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>0.0695</td>
<td>0.2211</td>
<td>-0.1636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>-0.0428</td>
<td>0.0844</td>
<td>-0.1806</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42</td>
<td>0.0340</td>
<td>-0.0602</td>
<td>-0.2467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>0.3475</td>
<td>0.2181</td>
<td>-0.3288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>58</td>
<td>0.4323</td>
<td>0.4429</td>
<td>-0.1705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>0.4886</td>
<td>0.4873</td>
<td>0.2903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>67</td>
<td>0.3528</td>
<td>0.4651</td>
<td>0.4811</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>69</td>
<td>-0.0034</td>
<td>0.1327</td>
<td>0.0853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>0.2306</td>
<td>0.0860</td>
<td>-0.0740</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As can be seen from the above table, five participants (numbers 16, 58, 62 and 67) loaded on to two factors (factor loadings of +0.38 or -0.38 were deemed significant at the $p < 0.01$ level) and these are said to be “confounded.” These Q-sorts are not typically used in the construction of any of the factor estimates (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Discussion

Given that the findings of Q-methodology are of a first-person and holistic nature, big claims and conclusions can be difficult to make (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Q-methodology “delivers holistic statements of opinion in the form of viewpoints and these viewpoints invariably have something to say about most of the key themes in the literature” (Watts & Stenner, 2012, p. 183). The following section provides a brief summary of the three viewpoints found in the Q-study data, and discusses the findings in relation to current research literature and the findings of the narrative study described in Chapter 5.

**Juggling Multiple Commitments.** The core belief in this factor was that studying at postgraduate level while raising children was a struggle, only made possible with partner support. This confirms the findings of the narrative study where several women made comments such as: “I couldn’t have done it without him” and “if my husband hadn’t been supportive of it…I don’t know what I would have done.” This factor also maintains that studying results in feelings of guilt because of the time it takes away from one’s children, and confirms the findings of the narrative study, with one woman declaring “when I was doing assignments I’m not even available to them…at lot of the time you have to say ‘I can’t talk to you now’.” It also supports previous findings by White (2008) that identified guilt as a major component of the student-mother experience.
This factor was characterised by the additional pressure that study adds to the student mother’s life and feelings of being “spread thin”.

Again, this confirms statements revealed in the narrative study, such as “I have been known to study all night and go two days with no sleep” and “it’s a bit full-on trying to tee up your classes with picking the kids up from school and daycare” and “I finish work around lunch-time and drive to university...so I drive and eat.”

Women in White’s (2008) research also spoke of a double burden of trying to juggle family responsibilities with their studies, as did participants in Pare’s (2009) work. The women in Vyronides and Visilakis’ (2008) study reported sacrificing sleep in order to study after their children had gone to bed. Student mothers in Kelly’s (1982) research reported cutting back on sleep and leisure time in order to fit their studies into their already full lives.

**The Benefits of Higher Education for the Individual.** While the first factor focused on the difficulties and struggles of combining postgraduate study with motherhood and the quality of the relational partnership, the second factor focused on the benefits of higher education to the individual student. This factor mirrored the findings of the narrative study that postgraduate education provided mothers with a sense of identity and purpose outside of the domestic sphere. For some women, returning to education was not necessarily an experience characterised by guilt, pressure and self-sacrifice, but rather provided the opportunity for them to pursue something that “is just for me” and “something” outside of motherhood. This supports previous research that highlighted the benefits of higher education to individual student-mothers, such as Walkup (2004), Reay (2003), Pare (2009) and Vyronides and Visilakis (2008).

Women with this perspective ranked partner support as highly relevant to their experience, which was also a feature of those juggling multiple commitments. Similarly,
many of these women had young, pre-school aged children, and they considered that “the order I have done things in my life has been totally appropriate”. As reported in the narrative chapter, some women believed that returning to higher education when their children were young was a good option, because it allowed them to remain at home on a more flexible timetable, than was offered by paid employment. This finding supports previous research by Kuperberg (2009), who suggested that having children during higher education can be an appealing strategy for highly educated women, as graduate school is more flexible than the formal job market, and the timing of graduate education often coincides with the childbearing stage of a woman’s life.

The benefits of higher education for her children. The third factor focused on the benefits of higher education for a woman’s children. The core belief in this factor was that children benefitted from having a mother who studied, which is consistent with one of the subthemes of the narrative study, that some mothers were motivated to study at postgraduate level by the hope of a better future for their children. The women in the narrative spoke overwhelmingly of the desire to provide an improved lifestyle for their children and about the importance of putting themselves in a position to support their children and provide them with enhanced life opportunities.

Like the narrative study participants who spoke of role-modelling, the item ranked most relevant to the women who loaded onto this factor was that “studying teaches the kids to follow their dreams”. These women were least likely to find procrastination a problem. This could be attributed to their belief that their studies would benefit their children, and provided the impetus to study, even when they were perhaps lacking motivation. The notion that studying benefits her children is reiterated in the ranking of the statement “just doing this for me” – a statement that was ranked less relevant by this group as compared to the others. They did not regard a return to education as a pursuit
that provided only individual benefits. According to this factor, higher education brought with it rewards that extended beyond the individual and into their families, supporting previous research on the influence of a mother’s education on her children (for example, Haleman, 2004; Suitor et al., 2008).

Unlike the other groups, the statement “having children stopped me from studying further” was most relevant to this group. Considering the significance these women placed on the benefits of higher education to their children, it is possible that they changed their education plans according to the needs of their children. It is likely that these women, like those who believed in the benefits of higher education for themselves, as individuals, also planned their studies to best fit with their circumstances and the needs of their children. Of these women, the majority had at least one school-aged child and they reported that their children were supportive. Having older, supportive children may have reinforced their belief that higher education was of benefit to her children. A thorough examination of the planning that goes into how and when a woman combined motherhood and postgraduate education is not possible with the data obtained in this study, but would make for interesting follow-up research.

Consensus Statements. One of the consensus items to emerge from this Q-study was that financial concerns impacted on the students’ study decisions. This finding is consistent with those from the narrative study, where all but one participant reported that a return to higher education had resulted in financial sacrifices and strains on the family budget. For example, one of the narrative participants revealed that “the most challenging aspect is the financial aspect of it.” Given that this emerged as a consensus item in the Q-study, it highlights the impact of financial concerns on the experience of combining motherhood and postgraduate study and supports previous research that highlighted the
financial burden of combining study with family, especially in those courses that require unpaid practical placements, like the student teachers in White’s (2008) research.

**Distinguishing Statements.** The role of partner support was the one major issue that distinguished between the factors. For women who loaded onto the first and second perspectives, partner support was essential to their ability to combine motherhood and postgraduate education. The importance of partner support was not evident in the third factor, with the statement (4) ranking -3 in terms of relevance even though 11 of the 15 women reported that they had a live-in partner. A possible reason for this may be the positive motivation the children provided for the woman to undertake her studies. Further research could potentially examine the importance of “children support” related to the ability of these women to combine motherhood and postgraduate education. As they believed their education would benefit their children, it would be interesting to examine the impact of a lack of offspring support on a woman’s continuation and completion of her degree.

**Limitations.** While the use of a purposive sample follows typical Q-methodology protocol, these findings could not be considered definitive. Q-sort stories or interpretations are only as valid as the concourse provided, which in this case is represented by the findings of Study One: the narrative study. Efforts were made to ensure the statements reflected a variety of opinions (such as the inclusion of Study Two: the Q-Statement Selection Study), yet it is possible that a full range of experiences were not captured by the original concourse, and therefore by the resulting statement pool. Further discussion about the limitations of Q-methodology is presented in Chapter 9 of this thesis. Nonetheless, given the dearth of research examining the experiences of postgraduate student-mothers, the findings of this study are valuable in providing preliminary information upon which to base future research. Furthermore, these findings
provide some verification of the findings presented in the narrative chapter and previous literature.

**Conclusion.** As Stenner and Watts (2012) highlighted in their guide to Q-methodology, it is important to appreciate the general nature of Q-study findings. The findings presented in this chapter represent statements of opinion from a select group of postgraduate student mothers, obtained at only one point in time during their candidature. Moreover, the interpretation of the findings are based on the author’s subjective analysis of the defining, distinguishing and consensus statements, and limited knowledge of the participants’ personal situations and family structure. While the author had an insight into the experience (see Appendix P) which aided her analysis and interpretation it remained important to limit the possibility of researcher bias. In order to improve the rigour of this stage of the research program, an additional study was conducted to seek feedback on the researcher’s factor interpretation, and this is presented in the following chapter. This was an important element of the research program to prevent researcher bias (see Appendix P).
Chapter Eight

Q-Interpretation Feedback Study

Introduction

The study described in this chapter aimed to expand on the findings of Study Three, the Q-sort, by providing participants with an opportunity to comment and provide feedback on the factor interpretation. It was designed to add rigour to this stage of the research program, as good qualitative research must be verified reflexively at each step of the analysis, and when conducted properly, is self-correcting and rigorous, and produces strong results (Morse, 2006).

Reliability and validity are not much discussed in Q-methodology, whereas they are central concepts in R-methodology (Watts & Stenner, 2012). R-methodology refers to popular psychometric techniques in psychology (Watts & Stenner, 2005) that use traditional statistical methods involving the use of correlation. R refers to Pearson’s product moment correlation: r (Baker, Thompson & Mannion, 2006). According to Stephenson (cited in Brouwer, 1992/1993, p. 3) “validity (and reliability) should not be held...relevant to problems in Q”. Brown (1980, pp. 174-5) explains it thus: “the concept of validity has very little status [relative to Q-methodology] since there is no outside criterion for a person’s own point of view.”

In Q-methodology the issue of rigour is addressed by obtaining feedback from participants (Watts & Stenner, 2005). This is done by asking open ended questions either in a post-sort interview or post-sort questionnaire. The aim of such an investigation is to a) understand how the participant has interpreted the items in the Q-set, particularly low or high ranking items; b) determine if there were any other items they would have
included in their own Q-set; and c) any other comments relating the Q-statements and process (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

The rationale for this chapter is to establish rigour in the Q-phase of the research program. Its purpose is to determine whether the factors identified in the Q-study accurately reflected the experiences of the participants. The Q study confirmed the initial narrative study which demonstrated that Australian postgraduate student mothers employed positive coping strategies to meet the challenges of studying whilst raising children. It also showed that higher education provided women with individual benefits as well as benefits for their children.

This chapter represents the final stage of the research program to ensure that the interpretations made by the researcher are an accurate reflection of the research findings. This added element of rigour was lacking in previous literature on the topic, and where it had been attempted, as in the case of Walkup’s (2004) focus group, feedback was not obtained from the women who participated in the original research.

**Ethical Considerations**

This research was approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants were assured that any information provided would be presented in a general way, and that any identifying data would be removed from the final analysis.

**Method**

Participants were asked to indicate on their completed Q-sort if they were willing to provide feedback to the researcher on the findings of the Q-study when the data became available. All participants agreed to further contact. Following analysis of the Q-data, the researcher made contact with every participant who loaded onto one of the three
Factors, either by telephone or email. A maximum of two follow-up attempts were made. Participants were emailed a brief overview of the three factors that emerged from the Q-data and were told what factor they loaded onto according to their responses to the Q-sort. The researcher invited the participants to comment on the findings.

**Participants.** A total of 21 out of the 61 eligible participants provided feedback (response rate of 34%). Appendix O provides demographic details about the participants. All names have been changed to protect the participants’ privacy. Only one participant, Alice, did not wish to provide her details.

**Results.**

All participants agreed with their particular factor placements, but six placed caveats on their agreement. These are discussed below. While participants didn’t always agree that their experience solely belonged to their assigned factor, this study confirmed that the perspectives identified in the factors were valid reflections of the experience of combining motherhood and postgraduate study.

The women who responded appreciated the opportunity to provide feedback to the researcher. For example, one participant said:

*I would like to thank you for your research, and for providing an opportunity to give studying mums a voice. Carers' rights have just started to be legally recognised and protected in the workplace - but do not exist in post-grad life. Your investigations will hopefully help make motherhood AND study easier for younger generations of women.*

**Interpretation Feedback: Juggling with Multiple Commitments.** As reported in Chapter 7, this factor was characterised by a sense of juggling and feelings of guilt and
pressure. Of the participants who loaded onto this factor, three emphatically identified with this factor. For example, Sarah said “yes, you are absolutely spot-on! I identify/relate to category one most strongly.” She explained that she needed to withdraw from her PhD candidature as she ran out of time, and her department was not flexible and supportive of her mothering responsibilities. She said “I felt as if I had two full-time jobs, and was performing badly in both.” However she planned to return to study at a later stage.

Lorraine said that juggling with multiple commitments explained her experience accurately. She said “yes, that sums it up well!!” She added: “although I can see that there are definitely elements of 2 and 3 in my life, at that particular time in my life” this category “defined it perfectly!” Ruby said that she was “definitely a number one.” She reported that she struggled with the “guilt associated with my studies and academic career versus child rearing.”

Others felt that simplifying their experience as being a struggle was too narrow, and failed to incorporate some elements of the other two factors. For example, feedback from Tammy was that, while she agreed her experience fell into factor one, her “feelings encompass both categories 2 and 3 quite strongly” and felt that “the struggle will be worth it in the end with the benefits of the outcome far exceeding all the trials along the way to get there.”

Alice explained that while she agreed with the main points of factor one, she “wouldn't say that I feel guilty about spending time away from my children through study, as it fits in better with child-rearing than paid employment.” She explained that with study she was answerable only to herself and her family. She did however, struggle with:

... a) turning a blind-eye to housework so that I can focus on thesis-writing; and b) keeping my head in the intellectual zone required for PhD
thesis writing; and c) financial costs. I don't have a scholarship and so have to juggle child-rearing, consulting and study. It's bloody hard and sometimes I wonder why I decided to do it. The reason, of course, was that study gives me a level of intellectual engagement that nothing else in life brings.

Isabella also made this point. She said that while she found studying with two young children involved a challenging juggle, the only reason she persisted was because of factors one and two. She said:

To be honest, I don't see how you can place studying mothers into just a single one of your three categories. I think that higher education for mothers is about all three of your categories. It is an enormous struggle at times, especially when deadlines are looming and you still have to bath, feed, cook, shop, make lunches, take kids to soccer training, work etc. But the main focus for me is that this is something important that I need to do for myself, for my future as a professional, and for my personal development. I also hope it is a good example for my children about valuing education, striving for and achieving goals, and that making time for aspirations and study/work commitments should not be so gender biased (as they often still are for mothers in particular).

She went on to explain that if she had to choose a category under which to place her experience, she would have chosen factor two because: “yes I am struggling, but the main reason I'm still here (and nearly finished hopefully!!) is because I want to further my education and achieve my goal and complete my research project.”
Interpretation Feedback: Benefits of Higher Education to the Individual. This factor was characterised by recognition of the individual benefits of higher education. Studying was something that was done “just for me” and was personally satisfying and enjoyable. Support, timing, and age of children were all important factors. However, as one participant commented, individual benefits translate into benefits for the wider family unit. Grace said:

I agree. I think I do come into category two. However my primary goal of benefits of education to individual comes from a place of "happy and fulfilled mum = happy children and family".

She went to explain that while she believed “if you role model to your children and family, that mums have individual needs too, and hence set up healthy boundaries on time and energy allowances. Then the context of your family life is less stressful and more meaningful because everyone is equal and have equal needs met."

Interpretation Feedback: Benefits of Higher Education to the Children. As reported in Chapter 7, factor three was characterised by the benefits of higher education to student mothers’ children. According to this perspective, the mother’s return to study taught her children to follow their own dreams and be autonomous. The mothers did not feel they were studying “just for me” and regarded being a mother as an advantage to their studies.

One participant, a mother of five, felt strongly that this factor best described her perspective. She said: “you hit the nail on the head when you placed me in this category! Definitely agree with the comments and relate well to them. Leading by example, I believe, is the best teaching method to date.” (Linda).
Another participant, after agreeing that factor three most accurately described her experience, added:

*Whilst studying I was trying to balance life with (child) and she always came before my studies. I still see my education as a benefit to my child as I am a role model for her and other children in my family. As a single mother I also believed I pushed myself harder because of (child) I knew I would get a well-paying position with a PhD and of course this would benefit (child) not only materially but also personally.* (Ivy)

One of the participants who loaded onto factor three, revealed that she was the mother of four children, two had recently completed their PhDs and the third was completing his second university degree. She said:

*I was raised by a mother who taught me that education was the way out of poverty for women, the only insurance against dependence on a man, and the way to see the world in a wondrous light. My mother's legacy has been passed on to my own children and at least an undergraduate degree was a basic minimum expectation.* (Maria)

Other participants felt that while factor three described some aspects of their experience, they could identify with the other factors too. Mary, who loaded onto factor three, said that while this category most closely explained her experience, it didn’t quite articulate it. She said she would prefer to put it in the context of:

*Mum's return to study teaches her children that several goals (motherhood and academic achievement) can be pursued with great efforts. Mums' study routine and discipline force children to be autonomous and inspires*
them to follow their own dreams. Mum does not feel she is “just doing this for me” and sees being a mother as a stimulus to complete further studies so her children can benefit further (from work promotions or mum's job satisfaction).

Discussion

In general, the participants agreed that the three factors were valid reflections of the experience of combining postgraduate education and motherhood. The women were committed to their education and believed that the challenges of combining their studies and motherhood were balanced out by their benefits.

The major finding to emerge from this study was that the researcher’s labelling of factor one as “struggling” was not an adequate, or accurate, description of that factor. While the women confirmed that the experience was difficult at time, they agreed that it was better described as a “juggle” rather than a “struggle.” Hence, the participants considered their experience to have positive, rather than negative, connotations.

This study proved to be an effective use of member-checking because the researcher was corrected by participants. The feedback received from this study resulted in a different interpretation of factor one from one based on a deficit model to one based on growth and thriving. This point is expanded upon in the following chapter, where the researcher’s journey of understanding and interpreting the findings will be presented.

As previously stated, this stage of the research adds an element of rigour that was missing from the previous literature on the topic of student mothers. Rather than relying solely on the researcher’s interpretation, an effort was made to validate her interpretation with those women who conducted the Q-sort. It would have been beneficial to obtain
feedback from more participants but despite two follow-ups, it was only possible to member check 34% of the original Q-study participants. Furthermore, the women who provided feedback were not spread evenly across the three factors. Eight loaded onto factor one, four onto factor two, and nine loaded onto factor three. Further feedback from those women who identified with the second perspective that studying provided individual benefits would have provided for more rigour.

The findings did not fit with three out of the four theoretical perspectives outlined in Chapter 4 of this thesis. Firstly, the social construction of motherhood and specifically the “good mother syndrome” were explored as a potential theoretical framework upon which to base this research. According to the researchers’ interpretations, there was evidence of the “good mother” as in Estes’ (2011), Pare’s (2009) and Lynch’s (2008) research. The current findings do not fit with the “good mother theory” that, to consider herself a good mother, a woman should spend all her time with her children and forsake any other personally rewarding activities outside motherhood.

Secondly, gender role theory (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999) was considered as a possible explanation for why student mothers were struggling to meet the demands of their student and mother roles. According to gender role theory, tension and difficulties would be experienced by mothers if they were taking on the bulk of domestic and childcare responsibilities, coupled with the demands of postgraduate education. The present findings, however, did not fit with gender role theory, since the participants challenged gender stereotypes: many were single mothers who were the family’s sole provider, and others had male partners who undertook supposedly female-assigned tasks in the home such as cleaning, cooking and childcare. The women in this study viewed themselves as equal to men in all respects and that their decision to study was a valid and worthwhile choice, which in no way diminished their ability to be good mothers to their
children. Gender roles were not regarded as fixed and rigid, rather, the parent (in those families with two parents) who was able and available to undertake the required activity did so. In the case of single mothers, they had no other option but to take on both the provider and caretaking roles in the family.

Thirdly, the findings of the current study did not fit well with role conflict theory (Sieber, 1974) as several participants reported that having additional roles, such as worker or student, actually enhanced their performance in other roles. For example, the role of motherhood had taught some women many useful skills that they applied to their role as a student such as time-management or multi-tasking.

Fourthly, the current research found no evidence that the student mothers faced an identity dilemma (Charmaz, 1994), and therefore the possibility of identity theory as a theoretical framework upon which to base the research, was limited.

Based on the findings of the present member-checking study, positive psychology provided the most fitting theoretical explanation for the way in which these women thrive under often difficult circumstances. The findings showed that postgraduate education offered mothers growth opportunities.

It is possible that the findings of previous research on this topic were to some extent determined by the theoretical approach of the researcher. If the researcher’s lens were focused on the difficulties, it is likely that their research was impacted by that view. Pare (2009) for example, asked participants to give her an example of a hard day and discuss what they would change. The wording of this question provides for a potentially negative interpretation. This author has argued that her approach has been to allow the women to speak and share their experience, and the findings show growth, expansion and evolution. The findings from the research program reflected an experience that is quite different from those presented in the previous research.
The following chapter summarises the findings of the research program and argues that it has brought a more balanced perspective to the topic of student mothers by showing that, at least for postgraduate student mothers, the experience was not as grim and negative as that portrayed in the previous literature.
Chapter Nine

“It’s a personal drive so no matter how hard the juggling act is with my kids that personal drive will keep me plugging away at it.”

(Jodie, speaking about her PhD candidacy)

This thesis has shown that postgraduate student mothers were getting on with their lives, balancing their various responsibilities, and crafting a life for themselves outside of their domestic spheres. Postgraduate education provides women with an opportunity to grow and develop their own abilities while raising their children. This positive message, emergent from the findings of this research, offers an alternative snapshot of a student mother’s life than that portrayed in the previous research literature. This final chapter summarises, interprets and concludes the research program detailed in this thesis. It provides an overview of the major findings, demonstrates the ways in which the current research has contributed to the body of knowledge on student mothers, and challenges previously held beliefs about this group of students.

Based on the initial assumption derived from the existing literature that combining motherhood with higher education resulted in conflict and ultimately led to tension in a woman’s life, this research program was designed to determine how postgraduate student mothers resolved the tension of combining postgraduate education and motherhood. Based on the results of this research program, it appears that this assumption is unwarranted. Moreover, the research question is itself negatively phrased, in that it was how do Australian postgraduate student mothers resolve the tension of combining motherhood with education? The language of the research question used in this thesis reinforced the predominantly negative information that was available in previous literature.
Despite the negative phrasing of the research question, what emerged from the findings was that studying at postgraduate level was a positive and rewarding experience for mothers, and this became clear over the course of this research program. The women managed with resolve, optimism and tenacity, although the experience was challenging and at times difficult. This occurred because of the methodological focus on member checking and rigour which was demonstrated in the four research studies reported in this thesis.

The purpose of this chapter is to temper the seeming negativity that permeates the previous literature on the topic of student mothers in higher education. The postgraduate student mothers’ experiences will be highlighted using their own words while relating these reports to the existing research. In doing so, the author aims to honour and acknowledge the strength and power of the women who combine motherhood and postgraduate education.

Overview

Research investigating the experience of Australian student mothers is scarce, and to the author’s knowledge, there is no research that specifically examines the experiences of Australian postgraduate student mothers. The review of this literature examining the subgroup of students who combine higher education and motherhood was presented in Chapter 3. The author adopted a social constructionist approach (Chapter 4) to investigate this cohort of students, where an individual’s reality is constructed through social interaction. Language is at the core of social constructionism because it creates meaning and consequently reality (De Mol & Buysse, 2008). Gergen (1994, p. 264) claimed “it is human interchange that gives language its capacity to mean, and it must stand as the critical locus of concern.”
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To understand their experiences in the words and stories of the women themselves, narrative method was selected and employed for the first study (Chapter 5), which represented the qualitative phase of the research program. The second phase described in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 employed Q-methodology as the methodological tool to provide a bridge between the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research (Cross, 2005).

Major Findings of the Narrative Study

Three major findings emerged from the study described in Chapter 5. First, the assumption that combining motherhood and postgraduate education created tension or conflict was corrected, and in general, the experience of studying at postgraduate level was a positive one. Second, the results demonstrated that women studying at postgraduate level were primarily motivated by a desire for personal achievement and self satisfaction, and over the course of their studies they employed positive coping strategies to deal with the challenges that arose. Third, the results of the narrative study showed that postgraduate study rewarded student mothers in the form of individual benefits and benefits to their children. Individual benefits included increased self-esteem and a sense of professional identity. Children benefitted from their mother’s postgraduate education because she provided a positive educational role model, developed skills to assist her children with their own education, and positioned herself to improve the financial future of her family.

Positive Nature of the Experience

The experience of being a postgraduate student mother was found to be very positive. While previous research, such as Reay’s (2003) reported that student mothers considered the experience to be worthwhile and interesting, this study found that the
women delighted in their studies. For example, Diana explained that for her, one of the best parts of postgraduate study was the “joy of graduation and achievement.” Rachel said that the five years she spent as a postgraduate student mother had “been a really good period of time in our lives to look back on”. Eve said “it was a fabulous three years. I just loved it” and explained that “the empowerment of going to uni at thirty…the education and the knowledge, was uplifting and motivating and I loved every day. It was worth the sacrifice of being exhausted.”

These descriptions bring a new perspective to the research literature on student mothers and speak to the positive nature of their experiences. The previous research had reported that student mothers have difficulty combining motherhood with higher education, and that the experience is one to be endured rather than celebrated. For example, Reay (2003) epitomised the theme using terms such as “time poverty,” “problematise widening participation” and “failure of social and educational policy.” A second example may be found in White (2008), who determined what problems the student mothers encountered and what their training providers could have done to make their lives easier. A further example is Vryonides and Visilakis (2008) who highlighted the social conditions that obstructed student mother’s participation in higher education. In contrast, the findings from this research program overwhelmingly pointed to the experience as positive and enriching despite the challenges of combining motherhood and postgraduate education.

Motivations

The postgraduate student mothers in this study were motivated by a sense of personal ambition and desire for achievement and self-satisfaction. Amanda explained: “the whole reason I am doing it, was not for anything else, it’s just for my own interest
and my own self achievement really.” She went on to say “it’s not for prospects of employment because it won’t make a difference, what I am studying it really is just my own interests.” Valerie, who had the option of working in a position that suited her children’s timetables, opted to enrol in postgraduate study despite the fact that it would be more difficult to manage on a practical level compared to her previous job. She said “if I was just looking at my kids’ needs I would have stuck to that (swimming instruction) because that fits into kid’s hours. So it’s definitely about personal desire. Definitely.”

There was no evidence in previous research of student mothers being as confident and bold in pursuing their own interests and activities through their postgraduate education. In Walkup (2005), only 13% of participants identified with statements related to self development. In Pare (2009), only a few participants reported that they were studying for personal benefit. Although White (2008) reported that the women were motivated to improve themselves and enhance their self esteem, they chose teaching because it allowed them to fit it in around their commitments to their children and partners, rather than for themselves.

In this research program, the women were motivated by personal challenge and opportunity, as Rachel explained, “to prove to myself that I could do it.” They loved to learn and wanted to achieve their degrees. Jodie said “I’ve always been a learner for life…I have a hungry brain and I find those periods in my life when I’m not using it constructively I get really…disillusioned with things.” Valerie expanded on this by comparing studying to an expensive hobby. She said “studying is a burden in the sense that it costs you more than you get back immediately and I think that it is almost like a hobby in that aspect you’re doing it because you really want to do it.” Unlike the women in Pare’s (2009) research who were dogged by guilt and feelings of selfishness for studying, these comments confirm that women in this research embraced the liberal ideals
of individual achievement and ambition. In her research, Lynch (2008) urged individual
student mothers to challenge the ideals of intensive mothering and assert their rights to an
identity outside of motherhood. This present research program provided an opportunity to
give a voice to these women, who have demonstrated that they are challenging the ideals
of intensive mothering and asserting their rights to an identity outside of motherhood.

Positive Coping

Combining the demands of motherhood and postgraduate study is not without its
challenges and obstacles. The major issues for the women in this study were childcare
and financial concerns. Finding short-term on-campus childcare was difficult, as was
securing affordable day-long care and this was confirmed by the findings of previous
research. For example, every participant in Lynch’s (2008) study identified the issue of
affordable childcare as being a pressing concern, as did the women in White's (2008)
study. However, the women in this research managed their childcare issues with
creativity. For example, they used crèche facilities at the on-campus gymnasium, created
activity stations in their homes to occupy their children while they studied, and structured
their university work around their children’s sleep routines. The findings of this research
emphasised that, while a lack of childcare at times created extra difficulties for student
mothers, it did not deter them from their studies. Mothers contemplating postgraduate
education should take from the findings of this research, the knowledge that it can be
done despite challenges that occur along the journey.

Financial concerns had a major impact on the women. They worried about paying
their bills, feeding their children and buying the resources necessary for their studies. This
was borne out by previous research (Lynch, 2008), which showed that a lack of financial
aid was the most common complaint made by graduate mothers. In addition, all of the
participants in White’s (2008) research revealed that money was a major concern and that government assistance failed to cover their expenses. Nonetheless, the present participants persisted with their studies because they recognised that the situation was “short-term pain for a long-term gain” (Lucy). They reconciled the financial hardship of their student years with the belief that in the long term, their education would lead to improved career prospects and an improved financial outlook for their family. As Jodie said “you know I need to look at their little faces every day to remember why I am working so hard.”

These two issues, childcare and financial hardship, were entangled for some students such as Natalie who, as an international student, was not eligible for any government assistance with childcare fees. While access to on-campus childcare was problematic, she could have used private childcare centres if they were affordable. She explained that in her country she could get one whole month of childcare for the equivalent cost of one day at an Australian childcare centre. She said she was surprised by the cost of childcare and acknowledged that “you know you can’t really compare” it to her home country, but that the cost should be “more fair” especially as her husband paid Australian taxes.

The manner in which these women dealt with obstacles such as childcare and financial difficulties, showcases their strength and resourcefulness. As Jodie said “I’m quite ambitious, I’m also pretty organized and head strong. I took this on knowing that, yes, this is a challenge but this is what I have to do.” By meeting these challenges and succeeding despite them, postgraduate student mothers developed a sense of personal achievement and confidence. As Diana explained “I was proud of me...of what I have been able to do.” For Eve “education was more than the paper, it was self-esteem.”
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The student mothers were dedicated and demonstrated a sense of persistence and determination, which helped them through challenging times. Sara said “*persistence is the key I suppose*” about her ability to continue when things became difficult. Claire called it “*stick-ability. If you just stick with it, just one step at a time you will eventually complete the course. You will eventually get a degree.*” These student mothers were not easily deterred by life pressures and expressed a clear sense of commitment to their educational journey. Hannah said “*I’ve just got to keep pushing and keep picking myself up and dusting myself off and keep going*” and stated that “it’s easier in some ways to give it up.” She explained that what motivated a student mother was desire - “*you have to want it.*”

Despite the juggling act required to balance their commitments, studying was an enjoyable experience for mothers. As Valerie explained “*I just enjoy it and I always have. It’s sort of like that addictive thing... studying I find is quite addictive.*” Eve spoke of taking personal responsibility and remembering that studying was “*something I chose to do because I loved it.*” She said she “*never groaned about it because I loved what I was doing.*”

**Rewards and Benefits of Postgraduate Education**

Participation in postgraduate education rewarded mothers. Individual rewards included the development of a professional identity and increased self esteem. Student mothers were also indirectly rewarded with the knowledge that their education benefitted their children. The benefits of postgraduate education to a woman’s children included the role modelling of educational success, a mother with an enhanced skill set, and an improved financial future.

**Individual Rewards and Benefits.** This research found that postgraduate education offered individual student mothers a sense of professional identity and an
enhanced sense of self esteem and confidence. Personal identity is defined by Gecas and Burke (1995, p. 42) as “the various meanings attached to oneself by self and others”. Identity is important for placing an individual in society by virtue of their relationships to others, and is based on the meanings that individuals adopt for themselves (Gecas & Burke, 1995). Given that membership to a professional group influences self definition and shapes how the individual is thought of by others (Slay & Smith, 2011), professional identity is defined as the constellation of attributes, beliefs, and values people use to define themselves in specialised, skill- and education-based occupations or vocations (Benveniste, 1987; Ibarra, 1999). Postgraduate student mothers widened the definition of professional identity beyond simply identifying with their “profession” to one that incorporated the professional world more broadly. For the women in the narrative study, a sense of professional identity was not based on defining themselves in terms of belonging to specialised, skill- and education-based occupations (Benveniste, 1987; Ibarra, 1999). Rather it involved attaching meanings to themselves that extended beyond the domestic responsibilities and obligations of motherhood, and into a wider context of personal ability, competency, self-confidence and a sense of preparing for a role outside of motherhood. Interestingly, the women spoke of their education as being their “jobs.” Valerie said “I consider that when I am studying that I am going to work”. Natalie explained that she tried to “make it like a job. Like a nine to five job” so that she could “relax in the evening.”

Hannah said that she wished she was “a full-time PhD student and that’s your whole job”. These women regarded postgraduate education a profession. Grace described her perfect world as being one where she “could be a professional student and write a perfect thesis because I had the perfect time and only had that to focus on.” Participation in higher education provided the women with a sense of professional identity that was not
specifically related to a specialised occupation - postgraduate education was their occupation. This finding is not evident in previous research on the topic.

Studying produced outcomes of increased self confidence and self belief. As Diana explained:

*I had fairly low self-esteem when I came in, I found it difficult to open my mouth but I have got much better and have grown confident in myself and my abilities…I was proud of myself along the way. I felt a sense of strength that has just grown and developed over this period…*”

The mothers who studied at postgraduate level treated their education as a gift to themselves. Comments that demonstrate this include: “*the studying was about me and everything else was about everyone else*” (Grace), and “*it’s my time out like other people do whatever they do, this is my time. My time out.*” (Valerie). Amanda said that her family realised studying was “*something that is for me and they are very supportive,*” and “*when I first made my decision to go back to study it was, you know, well now it is time for me.*” Rachel said that “*coming to uni is a total escape,*” and Valerie said that even without a supportive partner “*I know I wouldn’t quit because I enjoy it too much.*”

Another reward of postgraduate education was that it offered the women a chance to engineer their own futures. Jodie said “*it was literally me waking up one day and thinking no I need a change of direction…*” and that she decided it was “*about being a change agent. Taking that on board and going with the new direction.*” Postgraduate study offered these mothers an opportunity for achievement outside of motherhood or employment. Valerie explained that she:
...was so keen to get back into study (after taking time out for newborn) because I found that I was bored. I was very bored for that year and found I was doing things that I didn’t normally do, like walking around a shopping centre for six hours with my daughter in a pram because I just did not know what else to do. I didn’t feel like I was achieving anything because I’m not a mother’s group type of person.

A further benefit of postgraduate education was that it provided women with an alternative to employment. For example, Grace said “it’s been nice while I’ve been having kids that I’ve used the time I wouldn’t be working for doing something that would help me when I do start working again.” She explained how she studied when her children were asleep “I could have spent the two hours while they were asleep napping or cleaning or something but I’ve got something out of this so I am glad I have done it this way.” Mary explained “I don’t think I could ever go and work full time with my children while they’re young,” and Diana said “it has allowed me to stay at home with my kids...its allowed me to go to sports days without having to get work leave. I’m hands on, I need to be there with my kids.” As a recipient of government parenting payments, she added: “if I wasn’t studying I would have had to go to work and I wouldn’t have been there for my kids. Being able to study while they were little, meant that I was able to be there.” This finding supports Kuperberg’s (2009) observation that having children whilst undertaking graduate studies can be an appealing strategy for educated women, as it offers more flexibility than the formal labour market during the childbearing time in a woman’s life.
This section has shown that postgraduate education offers mothers several rewards that had not been reported in previous research literature on the topic. The following section discusses the benefits of a mother’s education to her children.

Benefits to the Children. Children benefitted from their mother’s participation in postgraduate education in three ways. First, they had a successful educational role model. Second, their mother learned additional skills that enhanced her parenting abilities, and third, by improving her career prospects, her children could benefit from an improved financial future.

The first benefit of higher education for a woman’s children, that is, having a successful educational role model, is confirmed by previous research (for example, Haleman, 2004; Suitor et al., 2008). These women believed that their children benefitted from the role-modelling they provided for them. For example, Amanda explained how her son had been motivated by her success of balancing studying with her other commitments. She said:

> Within the first year he had failed nearly every subject and had been asked to leave basically. By me going back to uni as well as working and running a household has actually shown him that, oh well hang on, maybe this can be done.

The second benefit of a mother’s participation in higher education for her children was that she gained valuable parenting skills, for example, Jodie explained that her teaching degree “has been great because it’s given me tools with my own children...it’s made me much more patient to the learning process of my own children”. This concurs with White’s (2008) findings that mothers studying to be student teachers believed that
their learning about pedagogy and practical teaching assisted them to better aid their own children’s education. Lucy, also an education student, said:

*The skills I have learned as a teacher...literacy and numeracy skills, being able to implement that with my children has enabled me to teach Ben to read early...these skills I am learning, I am able to use them with my children.*

However, the results of this research suggest that the skills which mothers learned were not only related to the mechanics of learning and the content of the school curriculum. Women studying in disciplines other than education also applied the skills they learned at university to benefit their children. For example, Claire, a psychology student, spoke of teaching her young daughter relaxation and emotion-regulation techniques. Emily used the knowledge she gained from an Aboriginal Studies unit to assist her foster children.

Finally, children benefit from having a mother who studies because they are able to look forward to an improved financial future. The mothers believed that obtaining a postgraduate education would give them better career prospects and therefore, improve their earning capacity. For example, in the narrative study Valerie explained that her decision to study at postgraduate level was motivated by “*the money...having the opportunities to do things that I guess we didn’t get as much as kids. That aspect really comes down to earning power.*” Rachel, who came to postgraduate education following her divorce, said: “*it wasn’t a fluffing around thing anymore. There was a lot of real purpose in it. It was about putting myself in a position where I could properly care for my children.*”
Lucy explained how studying as a postgraduate student mother was different from being a childless, undergraduate student:

*As a young person you just do what you want to do, what the passion inside you is, what you want to be and whatever the wage is you just kind of accept it but... (as you get older) You have to put your family first.*

Her choice to obtain a postgraduate degree was motivated by the potential earning power, whereas her choice of undergraduate degree was motivated by a passion and desire for the subject area.

The narrative study showed that postgraduate education rewards student mothers in several ways, and illustrated that the experience, despite being challenging, is ultimately worthwhile and positive. Statements like “*in all it's been a great experience and I wouldn't swap it or change it*” and “*it's been a really good journey*” are missing from the previous research literature. The narrative study reported on their experiences, which together present a fresh perspective and a positive outlook for mothers considering postgraduate study.

**Contributions of the Narrative Study**

In addition to this fresh perspective, this research also demonstrated that postgraduate education provides mothers with an opportunity to develop a professional identity. They viewed their degree programs as similar to having a “job” and treated their studies in much the same way they would employment.

A further contribution of this research was the finding of the effect that higher education had on some of the women’s relationships. White’s (2008) study briefly mentioned that one student mother sought professional counselling to assist her and her
husband to navigate the changes in their relationship following her entry into higher education. However, none of the research literature on the topic of student mothers directly addressed the issue. The first study presented compelling evidence that participation in higher education can lead to the dissolution of unhappy partnerships as three of the women from the narrative study believed that their participation in higher education led to the breakdown of their relationships. Higher education allowed these women to leave unsatisfactory relationships, by empowering them with a sense of self confidence in their ability to obtain financial independence. Claire, whose first husband vehemently opposed her desire to enrol in university, explained how she reacted when her second partner displayed the same response:

I got as far as figuring out what I needed to enrol in but he (first husband) just had a meltdown...and I had to choose...I had to make a decision about whether I lose the marriage or do what I want to do. So when the second guy did it to me as well I was buggered if I was going to give up...it was just a strong will thing and I (thought) I’m buggered if I’m giving up everything for bloody men.

Eve explained how the potential earning power and sense of self confidence that came with her education meant she “just became so much stronger and wasn’t willing to put up with any rubbish.” She revealed how, as a result of her education, she was no longer “just John’s wife” and that other people started referring to John as “Eve’s husband.” Eve gained a lot of self confidence from this change in the dynamics of her marital relationship, to the point that she felt empowered to leave.
Claire’s husband tried to sabotage her studies by getting drunk on the afternoons she had to attend class, which meant that she had to leave her children with an intoxicated caregiver. Her reaction to his attempted sabotage was:

Nobody’s going to tell me that I can’t. I’m not going to be bullied, I’m not going to be prevented from doing this because he doesn’t want me to, because he wants to keep me at home and pregnant...he didn’t want me to go out and study, he wanted me to stay home and be under his thumb.

Claire’s strong determination to complete her studies resulted in the breakdown of the relationship with her husband.

This research shows that postgraduate education enabled women to achieve and demonstrate a sense of self. As a result the change in the dynamics of their relationship, and in those cases where the relationship was unsatisfactory, this change enabled the women to leave. These student mothers were married, so these findings apply to traditional heterosexual unions. Future research examining the impact of education on a woman’s relationships could also include student mothers in de-facto and same-sex partnerships.

**Differences from Previous Research.** The findings of the first study differed from those reported in previous research literature in three major ways. First, the mothers had redefined what they considered to be good mothering. Second, the mothers saw no need to hide their identity as a student, and third, they relied on their own resources to cope well with the challenges of being mother and student.

First, the mothers challenged the expectations of motherhood and redefined good mothering to include the ability to financially provide for her children, unlike previous research (e.g. Pare, 2009) that failed to challenge the definitions and ideals of a “good
mother” and the ideals of intensive mothering. For example, Claire said “I’ve got three kids and a mortgage and I have no income (other than) from what I provide...so I am just going to do this...I felt really quite determined.”

Guilt was not an inevitable outcome of combining higher education and child-raising for Australian postgraduate student mothers, unlike what has been reported in previous research (such as Pare, 2009; Reay, 2003; Walkup, 2005; White, 2008; Vryonides & Vitsilakis, 2009). For example, Valerie put her baby into care at four months old in order to continue with her studies. She says of that decision “I was actually ok with that. I think that might have been an issue with my sister because he was so young but I was actually ok I just didn’t have any problem with it.” Hence, unlike the women in Pare’s (2009) study who spoke of the guilt associated with pursuing activities outside of motherhood, it was less of an issue for the women in this study. While some women struggled at times with feelings of guilt, these were situation-specific, such as during exam time or when assignments were due and they were required to spend more time than usual on their studies. Others, such as Valerie, did not feel guilty and explained it as follows: “I think I am just selfish and I accept that. I don’t really take it on (guilt) I don’t really tend to pay a lot of attention to that...I feel very comfortable in what I do.”

It is possible that previous research failed to capture the positive aspects of the experience due to the way in which the researchers phrased their questions. For example, in Pare’s (2009, p. 204) interview schedule, two of the questions were worded in such a way as to prime a negative response. These were:

29. If you could, would you make any changes to the way you have experienced motherhood? (Give me an example of hard day of being a mom, and what you wish you could change.), and
30. If you could, would you make any changes to the way you have experienced being in school? (Give me an example of a hard day of being in school, and what you wish you could change.)

These women have challenged the notion of intensive mothering and the perception that mothers feel guilty when pursuing their own activities away from their children. Their positive and growth-oriented approach contrasts with what has been reported in the previous literature.

Second, previous research (Lynch, 2008) identified that a way of coping with the tension of combining motherhood and education was to hide the “mother” identity in an “academic” environment and conversely, to hide the “academic” identity in the “mother” environment. This first study found no evidence of postgraduate student mothers practicing identity invisibility. The women made no attempt to hide their academic identities and in fact, were proud to combine higher education and motherhood, and made an effort to let their children witness them undertaking their academic work. When talking about her ten year old daughter seeing her work on the computer at night, Mary said: “I think it’s good for them (children), I don’t want her thinking that’s all I do (mothering) I want her to see that you can still do things and do the things you want with your life even if you have a family.”

These women believed that being a mother was an advantage to their studies. As well as being of personal benefit, Emily said she felt that being a mother also advantaged other students in her class. When explaining the benefits of being a mother in an academic environment she said: “I felt that was a huge advantage for myself, and also I think for the students who were in my class, because I raised issues and presented life realities and life experiences that they had no idea about.” The findings of this research
suggest that the participants were able to balance their maternal and student identities and illustrate a type of identity integration. They did not feel they had to choose either component of their identity.

Previous research suggested that individuals blended their parent and student identities to create a new identity: the good student-parent (Estes, 2011). There was no evidence in this study to suggest that student mothers blended their identities, but rather, that they managed the challenges while maintaining both their student and mother identities. As one woman said: “my children are little individuals who have a certain amount of independent will, and will grow up to be independent people. What then? I need to maintain the person that I am along the way.” The evidence from this study suggests that these women integrated the roles of student and mother and did so in a balanced way. They did not sacrifice aspects of their identities like the student parents in Estes (2011) in order to create a new, blended identity, nor did they actively hide their maternal or student identities depending on the environment they were in. On the contrary, they incorporated their student and maternal identities in a way that respected and valued both.

Third, previous research (White, 2008; Springer et al., 2009; Reay, 2003; Walkup, 2006) emphasised that the difficulties of combining motherhood with education could largely be attributed to institutional failures or inadequacies. The first study demonstrated that postgraduate student mothers, while appreciative of institutional support, are not reliant on it, and will cope and continue, despite at times feeling unsupported by their higher education institution. Claire said “I don’t think the uni does anything wrong…they are as supportive as they can be.” Postgraduate student mothers relied on their own resources to complete their degrees and manage their various responsibilities. Eve said all students, not just mothers, needed to take “personal responsibility” and seek help if it was
needed. Their attitude towards expecting help from their higher education provider was summarised by Sara who said:

You can’t go around whingeing at uni that you can’t get good marks because life’s too hard. Nobody cares, just suck it up. They (the university) can’t help with the realities of life so it’s just tough biscuits...and that’s how it should be. It’s not meant to be easy. It’s a prize so when I get to wear that silly floppy hat I will bloody deserve it.

It is possible that the participants in the first study consisted of a biased sample and that the women who participated in this research were skilled learners who had been selected by the higher education system: those who continue on to postgraduate education have demonstrated a degree of mastery, simply by their admission to postgraduate courses. However, the participants consisted of women from a variety of disciplines and course programs, and were not representative of a group of PhD or doctoral students who are required to be autonomous by the very nature of their programs.

Limitations of the Narrative Study and Triangulation

One limitation of this research is that, given the length of time it takes some of these women to complete their degrees, it is highly likely that their experiences may have changed considerably over time. For example, Diana started her degree with a baby and a toddler and by the time she had finished, nearly 11 years later, her experience would have been very different to when she first enrolled. Future research could focus on obtaining longitudinal information about the experiences of combining motherhood and postgraduate education with an emphasis on gaining a deeper understanding of her journey, as the woman becomes more established in her student role, and as her children get older.
The major criticisms of qualitative research are that it is subject to researcher bias, lacks reproducibility and generalisability (Mays & Pope, 1995). According to positivist researchers, the fluidity and flexibility of qualitative research renders qualitative data “soft” and lacking in reliability and validity. However, qualitative data is reliable because it “documents the world from the point of view of the people studied…rather than presenting it from the perspective of the researcher” (Hammersley, 1992a, p. 45). Furthermore, it is important to note that in qualitative research, terms such as internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity are not generally used. Rather the four terms credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are the equivalent terms used in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To strengthen the confirmability of the qualitative data, a second phase of the research, which was quantitative in nature and used Q-methodology, was conducted. Q-method, which emphasised the group’s shared viewpoint, was the ideal complement to qualitative approaches like narrative method, which focuses on the individual (Watts & Stenner, 2005). Q-methodology is well suited to explore variety, while other methodologies with large sample sizes are necessary to examine issues of representativeness (De Mol & Buysse, 2005). The process of combining qualitative and quantitative research and drawing on the strengths of each method, thereby counteracting their limitations, is called triangulation (Carr, 1994). Triangulation maximised the strengths and minimised the weaknesses of the qualitative approach, and strengthened the research results (Morse, 1991). The following section of this chapter presents the major findings of the Q-study, discusses the limitations of the methodology, and outlines the efforts the author made to minimise these limitations.
Major Findings from the Q-study

The purpose of selecting Q-methodology was to provide what Cross (2005) refers to as a bridge between the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research program. The overarching aim of the Q-method was to provide exploratory data about the experience of combining motherhood and postgraduate education. Since it was not the aim of this research to provide generalisable findings, the Q-study was intended to determine the perspectives or points of view that defined the experience of combining postgraduate education and motherhood for this group of participants.

Chapter 7 described the process and the findings of the Q-study. An analysis of the Q-data identified three factors relevant to the experience of combining motherhood and postgraduate study. These were: 1) struggling; 2) benefits of higher education to the individual; and 3) benefits of higher education to her children. Given the subjective nature of factor interpretation, and to improve the confirmability and credibility of the Q-findings, an additional confirmatory study (Study four) was undertaken to obtain feedback from the participants about the interpretations. Chapter 7 discusses the results of the Q-sort study using the feedback obtained from Study four (Chapter 8), to present a more comprehensive understanding of the factors. It also highlights the benefit of conducting the confirmatory study because, as a result of the feedback, the researcher was corrected by the participants. Specifically, based on her interpretations, factor one was labelled “struggling” but based upon the findings in Chapter 8, the label on this factor was changed to “juggling”, to accommodate the positive approach that the women demonstrated in their responses.

Juggling

While student mothers experienced challenges and difficulties, they accepted this as being part of the experience. During times of hardship, they were sustained by the
belief and trust that completion of their higher education degrees would ultimately reward their efforts. This factor was characterised by the juggling required to balance the roles of mother and postgraduate student. Studying while raising children required meticulous time management, organisation and dedication, and trying to balance their various demands and obligations caused difficulties at times. This factor most closely resembled the experiences outlined in previous literature, where participation in higher education was characterised by hardship and difficulty (such as Estes, 2011; Lynch, 2008; Reay, 2003; Walkup, 2005; White, 2005). This factor also concurred with the findings of the narrative study, where the women described times of struggle to balance their studies with child-rearing. For example, Jodie explained how “having a newborn baby and house and also the content of the degree just kind of stretched my brain to snapping point sometimes…” This feeling of juggling many obligations and responsibilities was reflected in the highly ranked statements for this factor: “I feel under too much pressure” and “I am spread really thin, I feel like margarine.”

However, without the additional information gained from the confirmatory study, identification of this factor would appear to confirm the status quo: that combining postgraduate education and motherhood was difficult, problematic and ultimately a negative experience. This is especially true when examining the distinguishing statements for this factor, which included “sometimes I feel complete despair like I must be crazy trying to juggle all of this.” However, a deeper understanding was gained by asking the women who loaded onto this factor, to provide feedback on the interpretation. What was clear from the data was that, while the women agreed that the experience was a struggle; it was predominantly seen as having been “worth it.” For example, Tammy explained that while she agreed that her experience fell under factor one, she believed “that the ‘struggle’ will be worth it in the end, with the benefits of the outcome far exceeding all the
trials along the way to get there.” Even Sarah, who had to withdraw from her degree because of her difficulties in trying to balance motherhood with education, still hoped that she would return to her studies when her children were older and she was in a more comfortable financial position. In light of these findings and upon reflection of the overall positive nature of the data, the researcher decided to change the label of the factor. The original term “struggling” had negative connotations, so the factor was renamed “juggling” to more accurately reflect the mastery with which these women balanced their various roles and responsibilities. Therefore, while the current research confirms previous literature which highlighted the difficulties of combining higher education and motherhood, it is now clear that women accepted this aspect of the experience and tolerated the difficulties, because they believed that the experience was ultimately worthwhile and beneficial.

**Benefits of Higher Education to the Individual**

The identification of the factor that higher education provides benefits to the individual, confirmed the findings of the narrative study, where the rewards of higher education were emphasised. For example, Jodie explained that studying:

> was challenging because while I was pregnant I had split from my husband, so why I did the degree is really multi-faceted. At that point in my life I just had to grab hold of something and stick with it until I had achieved it. What it gave me was direction, focus. When you get to a road block in your life and you’ve got decisions to make you need to be able to have direction so it was a really good thing for me to be doing.

As discussed in both this chapter and Chapter 5, postgraduate education offered women several benefits and rewards. However, an interesting perspective was gained from feedback in Study Four from the women who loaded onto this factor. Grace said she
agreed that studying offered her individual benefits, but added: “however my primary goal of benefits of education to individual comes from a place of “happy and fulfilled mum = happy children and family.” This point of view presents a brighter outlook to that presented in previous literature, which focussed on mothers’ feelings of guilt and selfishness for pursuing their own activities. The reframing of individual benefits to incorporate family benefits was not reported in previous research. Grace’s comments in Study Four reflect what she said in the narrative study: “it’s been my escape, my thing. So maybe it’s benefited them because I don’t go nuts at them (children) because I am frustrated because I need to talk to adults or anything like that.”

Benefits of Higher Education to her Children

Student mothers believed that their participation in higher education taught their children to be ambitious and to set their own goals. The most highly ranked statement for this factor was: “my studying teaches the kids to follow their dreams.” This factor confirmed the findings of the narrative study that one of the benefits to children is having a positive role model. The importance of this was expressed in Study Four when Maria, who loaded onto this factor, explained:

> I was raised by a mother who taught me that education was the way out of poverty for women, the only insurance against dependence on a man, and the way to see the world in a wondrous light. My mother's legacy has been passed on to my own children and at least an undergraduate degree was a basic minimum expectation.

Feedback from Study Four suggested that women considered themselves to be role models not just for their own children, but for other children in their family. For example Ivy said that “I still see my education as a benefit to my child as I am a role
model for her and other children in my family.” This sentiment echoes comments from the narrative study where Hannah said:

> For my kids I think just having somebody who’s done it and the fact that they’ve come to the university and they’ve been there makes it less mysterious. I think, especially in regional areas, kids scale back their expectations to (match) what they see around them. I’ve seen that in my friends’ kids. Like, they don’t even think about going to university, because until they met me they’d never known anyone who had.

In conclusion, the identification of this factor confirmed the findings of the narrative study, and as a result of conducting the Q-study and the additional interpretation feedback study, the overall conclusions of this research have been strengthened.

**Financial**

Another finding to emerge from the Q-data was that all individuals represented by the three factors agreed that financial concerns had impacted on their study decisions. This finding confirmed the results of the narrative study which revealed a substantial financial impact from participation in higher education. It also confirmed previous research (such as Lynch, 2008; White, 2008) which showed that financial matters are of great concern to student mothers. However, the fact that these women accepted the “negative” aspects of the experience, such as financial constraints, as a valuable component of the whole experience, was confirmed by Hannah, who described her years as a student:

> I don’t know, not poverty stricken, but not having a lot (of money) but my girls often talk about that time as being very rich because we went on
camping trips and we did all kinds of other stuff because we couldn’t afford all the deluxe items that some of their friends had.

Limitations of Q-method

While acknowledging the limitations of Q-methodology, there are some common misunderstandings (Watts & Stenner, 2012). It is often incorrectly associated with the more familiar R-methodology. Concerns about R-methodology, or by-variable factor analysis, centre around the comparison of different individuals in relation to specific psychological traits or characteristics (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Stephenson (1936b, p. 202) took issue with this analytical dissection of a person into specific variables and traits, with no effective solution for putting “the person together again.”

An example of how Q-method is misunderstood in psychology comes from a text on psychological research methods, in which Haslam and McGarty (2003, p. 387) report that Q-method is a data reduction method “that identifies and combines sets of dependent variables that are measuring similar things.” As Watts and Stenner (2005) point out, Q-method in fact makes no such claims. Rather the method uses a by-person factor analysis to identify groups of participants who make sense of (and therefore Q-sort) a set of statements in a comparable way. Watts and Stenner suggest that to properly appreciate Q-methodology it should be recognized as a gestalt procedure, meaning the subject matter cannot be broken down into a set of constituent themes, but rather Q-method shows the primary way these themes are interconnected and related by a group of participants. They go on to suggest that Q-methodology is most closely related to narrative analysis by virtue of its openly holistic approach but that it differs because it does not deal with participants’ own discourses. It only focuses on a “snapshot” of viewpoints and, unlike narrative analysis that focuses on the narratives of individuals, Q-method focuses on the
range of viewpoints that are shared by specific groups (Watts & Stenner, 2005). It must be noted that Brown in much of his research emphasises that Q samples are best composed of the natural language of the participants themselves.

One limitation of Q-methodology is that the concourse from which the Q-statements is derived, can never be totally complete. It is impossible to include every item of information on a subject matter in the statement set. In this research, an additional study (Chapter 6) was conducted to ensure the Q-set contained a representative selection of statements. Brown (1980) said that Q-set development and design is more art than science - this should not be understood to mean that it lacks rigour, because artistic work still requires persistence and high levels of skills (Watts & Stenner, 2012). While the Q-set used in this study can never be totally complete, Chapter 6 described a study that included a variety of statements with which participants agreed and disagreed.

Watts and Stenner (2005) further addressed this limitation by highlighting that the Q-set need only to contain a representative condensation of information, because in Q-methodology it is not the Q-set itself which is of interest, but rather the participant’s engagement with the Q-set, such as their relative likes, dislikes, interpretations and overall understanding of the statements. They further point out that in a Q-method study, the Q-set can actually be added to as the study proceeds and participants engage with the subject matter. This means that the process of Q-methodology itself can add knowledge to the subject matter and reflects a conceptual shift in thinking which is required to engage with Q-methodology. Rather than viewing the findings of a Q-method study as an “answer” to a research question or hypothesis, it should be seen as exploratory, thereby rendering any comparisons with traditional R-methodological studies unnecessary.
Another major criticism of Q-method is similar to that levelled at qualitative research: the process of factor interpretation is subjective and vulnerable to researcher bias. Brown (1980, p. 247) explained that “there is no set strategy for interpreting a factor structure,” so the strategy chosen by the researcher “depends foremost on what the researcher is trying to accomplish.” To reduce the potential for researcher bias in the interpretation of factors in this research, an additional study was conducted. Chapter 8 described the process the researcher undertook to clarify and seek feedback on her interpretations from the Q-sort participants. The interpretation of the factors was generally well received by the participants, but some believed that their experience encompassed aspects of all factors as opposed to just the factor onto which they loaded. This in itself highlights that the technique achieved the goal of identifying those factors that characterised the experience of combining motherhood and postgraduate study.

Finally, Q-methodology does not claim to identify viewpoints that are consistent in individuals across time (Watts & Stenner, 2005). Despite the findings of Q-studies only allowing researchers to conclude that participants expressed those viewpoints at a particular point in time, and that individuals may change their minds over time, the researcher can expect that multiple shared viewpoints will show a degree of consistency over time (Watts & Stenner, 2005). In summary, like all methodologies, Q-methodology has its strengths and its weaknesses. In this research it provided an innovative way to validate the experiences of postgraduate student mothers, and is the first example of how Q-method has been used to examine this group of the student population.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Given the limited amount of information available on students who combine postgraduate education and motherhood, there are numerous opportunities for future
research. Of particular interest would be an examination of women’s experiences over a longer period of time to determine what, if any, changes occur as they become more established students and their children develop. Research examining the specific coping strategies that these students use would be useful to create resources for other students in similar situations. Other areas worthy of further research are the educational experiences of single mothers, women in same-sex partnerships, mothers with disabilities and mothers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Future research could also examine if the experiences of student mothers enrolled in postgraduate research degrees differs from those enrolled in postgraduate coursework degrees. It is possible that the uncertainty related to postgraduate research degrees may be an additional source of stress.

Broadly speaking, the whole area of higher education and parenthood merits further research attention. Knowledge about the experiences of fathers who undertake higher education would provide insight into the role, if any, that gender plays in how positive or negative the experience is for the student. As this thesis has demonstrated, the benefits of education extend beyond the individual and into their families and society.

While this research has shown that postgraduate student mothers are committed, focused and goal-directed, with balanced identities and a positive view of the world, the reasons for this have not been examined in this research. Furthermore, this research has only considered those students who were successful, so future research could include the experiences of those women who have withdrawn from their courses, and the reasons behind their decisions.

Conclusion

This thesis has shown that the experiences of postgraduate student mothers in Australia are positive. Postgraduate education provides women with opportunities for
growth and development, and rewards them with benefits for themselves as well as their children. The author has argued that the previous literature painted a predominantly grim picture of the student-mother experience, and whether this emanated from the women themselves or from the way in which the research was constructed and/or the findings interpreted, cannot be accurately determined. This thesis has reported that women who are postgraduate students experience their lives as being positive. The participants, a diverse group of women at different stages of their education, were studying a variety of different disciplines. It has been argued that the combination of the methodology used and the attention to rigour and member-checking, has brought a fresh, yet robust, perspective to the literature. It is fitting to conclude with the following quote from Claire that encapsulates the experience of being a mother who studies:

*I don’t think what I am doing is heroic…sometimes people say “oh my god you are so amazing how do you do all that?” and I think “I choose this.” It’s not heroic, it’s crazy and in some ways a little bit stupid but it’s just that I want to do something really important to me and I think it will benefit my family.*
References


BALANCING THE DUAL ROLES OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENT AND MOTHER


BALANCING THE DUAL ROLES OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENT AND MOTHER


Balancing the Dual Roles of Postgraduate Student and Mother


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Walkup, V. (2005b). *I’m not stopping until I’ve done it and I’m taking the children with me: A report upon research into the needs and experiences of students who are mothers (SWAMs) returning to higher education*. Paper presented at the British
Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Warwick.


*OECD Observer*, (287), 14-16.
## Appendix A

**Participant Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Children’s age at time of study</th>
<th>Program of study</th>
<th>Stage of degree</th>
<th>Additional notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Between 28-38 years</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Nearly finished</td>
<td>Emigrated from Europe with no family in Perth. Had two birth children and adopted a further 8. Husband was very supportive. She worked in the family business whilst studying and raising children. Took her 9 years to complete her undergraduate studies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diana</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11, 15</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>One year to go Has studied for 11 years</td>
<td>Enrolled in university following the break-up of her marriage. Would not have been able to study had she stayed in the marriage. Has studied for the past 11 years as a sole parent. Has struggled financially.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8,12,14</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Has been studying part-time for one year</td>
<td>Her return to study resulted in the breakdown of her marriage. She works full-time and studies part-time and thinks studying has had a negative effect on her children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14,16,28</td>
<td>Masters/PhD</td>
<td>Has 2 years full-time to complete</td>
<td>Her return to study resulted in domestic violence and the break-down of her relationship. She has suffered financially as a result of studying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,2</td>
<td>Prof Doc</td>
<td>Near completion</td>
<td>Returned to study so that she could provide for her children should the need arise. She is concerned her husband may not be able to provide for them in the future due to mental illness. She suffers from fatigue and lack of time as her children are both under 3.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6,10</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Has been studying for one year.</td>
<td>Waited until her children were school-aged before pursuing postgraduate education. Has a strong support network and is enjoying her experience as a student-mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14,16</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>One semester left to complete</td>
<td>Left school due to teenage pregnancy. As a single mother she was motivated to get a better job so she could provide for her two children. Despite financial struggles and childcare issues she loves what she is studying.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11,17,19</td>
<td>Grad Dip</td>
<td>One semester complete</td>
<td>Following the break-up of her marriage she needed to support her 3 children. Found that studying helped her heal from the relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14,17,22</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Has completed one year</td>
<td>Studies purely for the enjoyment of gaining new knowledge. Does not have any financial concerns and comes from a high socio-economic background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16,17,20</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Has just commenced</td>
<td>Is caring for her children and elderly relatives. Is the first in her extended family to undertake higher education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eve</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14,16,18</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Has completed one year of two-year course</td>
<td>Worked night shifts and studied during the day while caring for 3 young children to support her studies. As a result of her further education her marriage broke-up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3,5</td>
<td>Grad Dip</td>
<td>Has completed one semester</td>
<td>Struggles to balance her studies with being a ‘traditional housewife’. Tries to minimize the impact of her studies on her husband and children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
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<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2,6</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>One year to complete</td>
<td>Is an international student who hopes to gain permanent residency by furthering her education. She struggles with childcare as she is not eligible for government assistance to pay for care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4 and 5 months old</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>One year completed part time</td>
<td>Is career focused and has a long term goal which requires further qualifications. She believes that studying makes her a better mother and says her friends and family don’t understand her motivations.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B

Information Sheet

Dear Potential Participant

Thank you for your interest in this study. My name is Bailey Bosch and I am currently completing my Doctor of Philosophy (PHD) degree at Edith Cowan University, Joondalup Campus. As part of my degree I am required to undertake a research project. The Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this research. I am interested in talking to postgraduate female students who have children. The aim of this study is to learn more about how these women balance the dual roles of postgraduate student and mother. It is anticipated that the results of this research will inform institutional policy and will provide researchers with a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to the success of women who juggle studying with raising a family.

There are four stages to this research. You are invited to participate in each stage or only in part of this research. First, I am interested in hearing about your experience; second, I will conduct a feedback exercise to verify my interpretations; third, a card sort study where you will be asked to sort a series of statements into piles depending on their importance to you; fourth, a feedback exercise.

Participation in the study is voluntary and students will be free to withdraw their consent at any time. You can be assured of anonymity and other than the principle researcher no one else will know the identity of any participant and all information given will remain strictly confidential. All identifying information will be removed from all data collected across the four stages of the research. All tapes and transcripts will be kept in a secure location and no one other than myself will have access to this information. All information collected during the four phases of the research will be used to create my PhD thesis but will be presented in a general way and will not in any way identify any individual participant.
If you would like further information or are interested in participating in any stage of the research, please feel free to contact me on 0415 177 607 or one of my supervisors: Associate Professor Lynne Cohen on 6304 5575 or Dr. Ken Robinson on 6304 5526. My email address is bbosch@our.ecu.edu.au.

If you wish to talk to anyone independent of this research, please contact the Research Ethics Officer Kim Gifkins on 6304 2170 or research.ethics@ecu.edu.au.

Thank you for your time.

Bailey Bosch
Appendix C

Advertisement for Participants

Post-graduate Mum?

Can you spare me an hour of your time?

My name is Bailey Bosch and I am currently completing my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree at Edith Cowan University, Joondalup Campus.

As a mother, and as part of my research, I am interested in talking to other postgraduate female students who have children. The aim of this study is to learn more about how you balance the dual roles of postgraduate student and mother and understand what factors contribute to your success in juggling study with children.

If you are willing to spare an hour and are interested in sharing your experience with me – please get in touch!

Participation in the study is voluntary and you will be free to withdraw your consent at any time. You can be assured of anonymity and all information given will remain strictly confidential. The Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this research.

If you would like further information or are interested in participating, please feel free to contact me on 0415 177 607. My email address is bbosch@student.ecu.edu.au.

Thank you!
Study One Information Sheet

Dear Potential Participant

Thank you for your interest in this study. My name is Bailey Bosch and I am currently completing my Doctor of Philosophy (PHD) degree at Edith Cowan University, Joondalup Campus. As part of my degree I am required to undertake a research project. The Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this research. I am interested in talking to postgraduate female students who have children. The aim of this study is to learn more about how these women balance the dual roles of postgraduate student and mother. It is anticipated that the results of this research will inform institutional policy and will provide researchers with a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to the success of women who juggle studying with raising a family.

There are four stages to this research. You are invited to participate in each stage or only in part of this research. First, I am interested in hearing your experience; second, a Q statement selection study will be undertaken; third, a card sort study where you will be asked to sort a series of statements into piles depending on their importance to you; fourth, a feedback opportunity.

STUDY ONE:

In this stage of the study you will be invited to share your experience of combining postgraduate study with motherhood during an interview session with the researcher. The session will last approximately an hour and a half and will be audio recorded. There are no set questions to ask, you will simply be invited to talk about your life as a mother and as a student. This information will be used to create the statement cards used in Study Three. The statements will be of a general nature and will in no way identify any individual participant.

Participation in the study is voluntary and students will be free to withdraw their consent at any time. You can be assured of anonymity and other than the principle researcher no one else will know the identity of any participant and all information given will remain strictly confidential. All identifying information will be removed from all data collected across the four stages of the research. All tapes and transcripts will be kept in a secure location and no one other than myself.
will have access to this information. All information collected during the four phases of the research will be used to create my PhD thesis but will be presented in a general way and will not in any way identify any individual participant.

If you would like further information or are interested in participating in any stage of the research, please feel free to contact me on 0415 177 607 or one of my supervisors: Associate Professor Lynne Cohen on 6304 5575 or Dr. Ken Robinson on 6304 5526. My email address is bbosch@student.ecu.edu.au.

If you wish to talk to anyone independent of this research, please contact the Research Ethics Officer Kim Gifkins on 6304 2170 or research.ethics@ecu.edu.au.

Thank you for your time.

Bailey Bosch
Appendix E

Consent Form

Notice of Informed Consent

I, ______________________ (name), on _____________ (date), state that I have read and understood the letter of introduction for the research thesis entitled: “Women who study: Balancing the Dual Roles of Postgraduate Student and Mother”. In addition, these details have been verbally explained to me by the researcher __________________________ (name), along with the requirements of participation. Any questions that I have had have been answered fully.

I further understand that I am under no obligation to participate in the study. As a participant, I have the right to refrain from answering any questions, and am free to withdraw from the study at any stage without adverse consequences. All of my information will be treated as confidential, with interview tapes and transcripts kept in locked storage, and computerised documents adequately secured and password protected. I agree to the interview being audio taped and transcribed.

I hereby consent to participate in the following stages of this research project.

Stage 1

Stage 2

Stage 3

Stage 4

I am happy to be contacted by the researcher. My contact details are:____________________

_____________________________________________________________________________

_________________________ (participant signature)

_________________________ (researcher signature)
Appendix F

Additional Statements from Narrative Study

Motivation

“...joy of graduation and achievement.” (Diana)

“...been a really good period of time in our lives to look back on”. (Rachel)

“It was a fabulous three years I just loved it” and “The empowerment of going to Uni at thirty...the education and the knowledge, was uplifting and motivating and I loved every day. It was worth the sacrifice of being exhausted.” (Eve)

“The whole reason I am doing it, was not for anything else, it’s just for my own interest and my own self achievement really.” And “It’s not for prospects of employment because it won’t make a difference, what I am studying it really is just my own interests.” (Amanda)

“If I was just looking at my kids needs I would have stuck to that (swimming instruction) because that fits into kid’s hours. So it’s definitely about personal desire. Definitely.” (Valerie)

“To prove to myself that I could do it.” (Rachel)

“I’ve always been a learner for life...I have a hungry brain and I find those periods in my life when I’m not using it constructively I get really...disillusioned with things.” (Jodie)

Financial Impacts

“Is a burden in the sense that it costs you more than you get back immediately and I think that it is almost like a hobby in that aspect you’re doing it because you really want to do it.” (Valerie)

“short-term pain for a long-term gain.” (Lucy)

“You know I need to look at their little faces every day to remember why I am working so hard.” (Jodie)
“You know you can’t really compare” to her home country but that the cost should be “more fair” especially as her husband paid Australian taxes. (Natalie)

**Persistence**

“I’m quite ambitious, I’m also pretty organized and headstrong. I took this on knowing that, yes, this is a challenge but this is what I have to do.” (Jodie)

“I was proud of me...of what I have been able to do.” (Diana)

“Education was more than the paper, it was self-esteem.” (Eve)

“Persistence is the key I suppose” (Sara)

“Stick-ability. If you just stick with it, just one step at a time you will eventually complete the course. You will eventually get a degree.” (Claire)

“I’ve just got to keep pushing and keep picking myself up and dusting myself off and keep going.” Stating that “It’s easier in some ways to give it up” she explained that what motivated a student mother was desire: “you have to want it.” (Hannah)

“I just enjoy it and I always have. It’s sort of like that addictive thing... studying I find is quite addictive.” (Valerie)

“something I chose to do because I loved it.” She said she “never groaned about it because I loved what I was doing.” (Eve)

“having a new born baby and house and also the content of the degree just kind of stretched my brain to snapping point sometimes...” (Jodie)

“...was challenging because while I was pregnant I had split from my husband so why I did the degree is really multifaceted. At that point in my life I just had to grab hold of something and stick with it until I had achieved it. What it gave me was direction, focus. When you get to a road block in your life and you’ve got decisions to make you need to be able to have direction so it was a really good thing for me to be doing. (Jodie)

**Professional Identity**

“I consider that when I am studying that I am going to work”. (Valerie)
“...make it like a job. Like a nine-to-five job” so that she could “relax in the evening.” (Natalie)

“...a full-time PhD student and that’s your whole job”. (Hannah)

“...could be a professional student and write a perfect thesis because I had the perfect time and only had that to focus on.” (Grace)

Individual Benefits

“I had fairly low self-esteem when I come in, I found it difficult to open my mouth but I have got much better and have grown confident in myself and my abilities…I was proud of myself along the way. I felt a sense of strength that has just grown and developed over this period...” (Diana)

“The studying was about me and everything else was about everyone else” and “It’s my time out like other people do whatever they do, this is my time. My time out.” (Amanda) explained that her family realized that studying was “something that is for me and they are very supportive” and that “When I first made my decision to go back to study it was you know well now it is time for me.”

“I don’t think what I am doing is heroic...sometimes people say ‘oh my god you are so amazing how do you do all that?’ and I think ‘I choose this.’ It’s not heroic, it’s crazy and in some ways a little bit stupid but it’s just that I want to do something really important to me and I think it will benefit my family.” (Claire)

“...coming to uni is a total escape” (Rachel)

“I know I wouldn’t quit because I enjoy it too much.” (Valerie)

“It was literally me waking up one day and thinking no I need a change of direction...” and that she decided it was “about being a change agent. Taking that on board and going with the new direction.” (Jodie)

“...was so keen to get back into study (after taking time out for newborn) because I found that I was bored. I was very bored for that year and found I was doing things that I didn’t normally do like walking around a shopping centre for six hours with my daughter in a pram because I just did not know what else to do. I didn’t feel like I was achieving anything because I’m not a mother’s group type of person” (Valerie)
“It’s been nice while I’ve been having kids that I’ve used the time I wouldn’t be working for doing something that would help me when I do start working again.” She explained how she studied when her children were asleep “I could have spent the two hours while they were asleep napping or cleaning or something but I’ve got something out of this so I am glad I have done it this way.” (Grace)

“I don’t think I could ever go and work full time with my children while they’re young.” (Mary)

“It has allowed me to stay at home with my kids…its allowed me to go to sports days without having to get work leave. I’m hands on, I need to be there with my kids.” (Diana)

“If I wasn’t studying I would have had to go to work and I wouldn’t have been there for my kids. Being able to study while they were little meant that I was able to be there.” (Diana)

Benefits to Children

“Within the first year he (son) had failed nearly every subject and had been asked to leave basically. By me going back to uni as well as working and running a household has actually shown him that, oh well hang on maybe this can be done.” (Amanda)

“...has been great because it’s given me tools with my own children...it’s made me much more patient to the learning process of my own children”. (Jodie)

“The skills I have learnt as a teacher...literary and numeracy skills, being able to implement that with my children has enabled me to teach Ben to read early...these skills I am learning I am able to use them with my children.” (Lucy)

“The money...having the opportunities to do things that I guess we didn’t get as much as kids. That aspect really comes down to earning power.” (Valerie)

“It wasn’t a fluffing around thing anymore there was a lot of real purpose in it. It was about putting myself in a position where I could properly care for my children.” (Rachel)

“As a young person you just do what you want to do, what the passion inside you is, what you want to be and whatever the wage is you just kind of accept it but...(as you get older) You have to put your family first.” (Lucy)
“It’s been my escape, my thing. So maybe it’s benefited them because I don’t go nuts at them (children) because I am frustrated because I need to talk to adults or anything like that.” (Grace)

“For my kids I think just having somebody who’s done it and the fact that they’ve come to the university and they’ve been there makes it less mysterious. I think, especially in regional areas, kids scale back their expectations to (match) what they see around them. I’ve seen that in my friends’ kids. Like, they don’t even think about going to University because until they met me they’d never known anyone who had.” (Hannah)

“I don’t know, not poverty stricken, but not having a lot (of money) but my girls often talk about that time as being very rich because we went on camping trips and we did all kinds of other stuff because we couldn’t afford all the deluxe items that some of their friends had.” (Hannah)

Impact on Relationship

“I got as far as figuring out what I needed to enrol in but he (first husband) just had a meltdown…and I had to choose…I had to make a decision about whether I lose the marriage or do what I want to do. So when the second guy did it to me as well I was buggered if I was going to give up…it was just a strong will thing and I (thought) I’m buggered if I’m giving up everything for bloody men.” (Sara)

“Nobody’s going to tell me that I can’t. I’m not going to be bullied, I’m not going to be prevented from doing this because he doesn’t want me to, because he wants to keep me at home and pregnant…he didn’t want me to go out and study, he wanted me to stay home and be under his thumb.” (Claire)

“I’ve got three kids and a mortgage and I have no income (other than) from what I provide…so I am just going to do this…I felt really quite determined.” (Claire)

Combining Motherhood and Postgraduate Study

“I was actually ok with that. I think that might have been an issue with my sister because he was so young but I was actually ok I just didn’t have any problem with it.” (Valerie)

“I think I am just selfish and I accept that. I don’t really take it on (guilt) I don’t really tend to pay a lot of attention to that…I feel very comfortable in what I do.” (Valerie)
“I think it’s good for them (children), I don’t want her thinking that’s all I do (mothering). I want her to see that you can still do things and do the things you want with your life even if you have a family.” (Mary)

“I felt that was a huge advantage for myself, and also I think for the students who were in my class because I raised issues and presented life realities and life experiences that they had no idea about.” (Emily)

“My children are little individuals who have a certain amount of independent will and will grow up to be independent people. What then? I need to maintain the person that I am along the way.” (Jodie)

**University Support**

“I don’t think the uni does anything wrong...they are as supportive as they can be.”

(Claire)

“You can’t go around whingeing at uni that you can’t get good marks because life’s too hard. Nobody cares, just suck it up. They (the university) can’t help with the realities of life so it’s just tough biscuits…and that’s how it should be. It’s not meant to be easy. It’s a prize so when I get to wear that silly floppy hat I will bloody deserve it.” (Sara)
Appendix G

Blank Distribution Grid

Please complete and return with the attached consent form in the reply paid envelope provided.

Less like my experience  More like my experience

Just a reminder – some of the statements will not be relevant to you.
Please put them somewhere on the grid anyway.

Thank you!
Appendix H

Q-study Instruction Sheet

Women who study: Balancing the Dual Roles of Postgraduate Student and Mother

Dear Participant,

As you complete this task as outlined below, please consider your own experience as a mother who studies at postgraduate level. You have been provided with 49 statement cards. Please would you rank these 49 statement cards according to how relevant each is to your experience (more like your experience through to less like your experience). Each card must be placed in the grid as indicated below. It doesn’t matter if you feel that all the statements are like your experience (or unlike your experience for that matter) I am interested in how you would prioritise the statements.

How to do the task

- Read through all the cards
- Place them into three piles

1) Most like my experience

2) Sort of like my experience

3) Less like my experience

Photo source: www.seri-us.org
• Next take the *Most like my Experience* pile and sort that into three piles from most extreme to least extreme.
• Using the grid template take the cards and start ranking them according to the shape of the grid. For example place the card you consider to be the *most like your experience* out of every card at the far right of the table, then the next two *most like your experience* cards next to that – following the shape of the grid.
• Repeat this procedure with the other piles of cards.
• At any stage feel free to move cards around until you are happy with their position.
• If you find a different way of placing the cards (such as starting with the middle *Sort of like my Experience*) suits you better, please feel free to use that method.
• All cards must be placed into the grid.

**How to record your grid results**

• On the distribution grid record the number on each card in each box where you placed it (see below for example)
• Should you require any assistance please phone the researcher, Bailey Bosch, on 0415 177 607 or email her at bbosch@our.ecu.edu.au
Thank you for your time in participating in this research project.
Appendix I

Statement List from Study Two

1. I don’t have any family I can fall back on
2. Family members don’t understand
3. I have friends that are supportive and helpful
4. I’ve pretty much done this on my own
5. I couldn’t have done this without the support of my partner
6. The support is there you just need to ask for help
7. People don’t volunteer their help so I have had to learn to ask for help
8. The main support I have had has been from my Supervisor/Lecturers
9. The university goes out of its way to assist students
10. The kids have been supportive of me
11. The kids are not that supportive
12. People see me as some sort of ‘super-mum’
13. My family and friends are really proud of me
14. My friends are concerned I push myself too hard
15. People think when you study you have loads of free time because you don’t work
16. Timetabling has caused many problems for me during my study
17. You have to learn self-care when you are a mother who studies
18. I am reasonably strong willed
19. There is no way I am giving up
20. You study because you have a purpose, a goal
21. I have had moments where I have thought ‘why am I doing this?’
22. I love learning
23. I need to support my kids
24. Study will give us some financial freedom
25. I am doing this so I can get a better job
26. I am just doing this for me
27. I try to take it one day at a time and stick in there
28. You have to keep the thirst and energy
29. You really do have to want to study and be interested in it
30. Money is very tight
31. Financial concerns have impacted on my study decisions
32. It has been a really liberating experience
33. Studying has been an amazing journey for me
34. I have grown confident in myself and my abilities as a result of my studies
35. I am proud of myself and what I have achieved
36. I have so many roles and I try to keep them separate
37. I studied despite my partner’s objections
38. My study always comes second to what my husband/partner wants
39. As a mum it is important to have something else in your life for when your children grow up
40. I have to negotiate the help I get from my husband/partner
41. Sometimes I feel complete despair and feel like I must be crazy trying to juggle all this
42. Persistence is the key
43. You just do the best you can
44. I am learning skills that I am able to use with my children
45. I try and do my studying at night time so it doesn’t impact on my children
46. Studying is not fair on you or the family
47. There were positive and negative impacts on my children as a result of my studies
48. My children have learnt to be quite autonomous
49. My studying teaches the kids to follow their dreams
50. I am hoping I have taught my kids that you can survive, that you can be resilient
51. I don’t particularly want to put my kids into childcare but I have to
52. I do feel guilty about studying especially when I have assignments or exams
53. I am not enjoying my life
54. The study has allowed me to heal from my marriage/relationship
55. I have got competing priorities
56. For a mother to study there is a lot of pressure
57. I do sometimes feel left out when my friends socialize and I can’t join them
58. I have lost fitness as a result of my study commitments
59. Getting time for yourself is difficult
60. I tend to burn the candle at both ends and sometimes in the middle as well
61. I feel very mentally drained
62. Physically I cannot stay awake to do the study I need to do
63. I think being a mother has been a great advantage for my studies
64. Having children stopped me from studying further
65. I feel under too much pressure*
66. It is hard when everyone wants a piece of you
67. I am always trying to make it work for everyone else but sometimes it doesn’t work for me
68. My family don’t drop their demands just because I am busy studying
69. Studying would have been much easier without kids
70. My memory is not as good as it used to be which makes studying harder
71. The order I have done things in my life has been totally appropriate for me
72. It has got a bit easier the older my children get
73. My partner does not approve of my studies and tries to make it difficult for me
74. Postgraduate study is a better choice for me because of the flexibility it offers over undergraduate study
75. Postgraduate courses are shorter and therefore more manageable
76. With undergraduate study you can completely focus on the needs of your family whereas postgraduate study is a 24 hour a day occupation of the mind
77. I don’t think I could have done postgraduate study with young children
78. There is no flexibility in undergraduate study
79. Postgraduate study is hard especially without government financial assistance
80. While I have interacted with fellow students I haven’t really made friends
81. I don’t have time to partake in the social side of university life
82. When you work/study from home you feel alone and isolated
83. I have made some really lovely friends during my study
84. The load is enormous
85. My life is pretty full on
86. I have had my meltdowns throughout it
87. In terms of juggling my family and studies I think I have done OK
88. You have to accept that sometimes you aren’t as robust or as strong as you think you are
89. I didn’t balance it well
90. You feel guilty all the time like you are not doing enough for your children
91. I am a sandwich generation because I am also caring for elderly relatives
92. I am spread really thin, I feel like margarine
93. I try to give a lot to a lot of different people
94. Managing procrastination is a difficult thing for me
95. My studies are my last priority
96. Other commitments seem more immediate and important than my studies do
97. I have trouble finding suitable childcare for my children
98. I love daycare it has enabled me to study
99. I dislike daycare
100. I can’t afford childcare
Thank you for your interest in this study. My name is Bailey Bosch and I am currently completing my Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree at Edith Cowan University, Joondalup Campus. As part of my degree I am required to undertake a research project. The Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this research. I am interested in talking to postgraduate female students who have children. The aim of this study is to learn more about how these women balance the dual roles of postgraduate student and mother. It is anticipated that the results of this research will inform institutional policy and will provide researchers with a greater understanding of the factors that contribute to the success of women who juggle studying with raising a family.

There are four stages to this research. You are invited to participate in each stage or only in part of this research. First, I am interested in hearing your experience; second, a Q statement selection study will be undertaken; third, a card sort study where you will be asked to sort a series of statements into piles depending on their importance to you; fourth, a feedback opportunity.

STUDY TWO:

In this stage of the study you will be presented with a list of 100 statements and asked to answer YES or NO to the question “Is this statement relevant to your experience of combining motherhood with postgraduate study?” This information will be used to create the statement cards used in Study Three. The statements will be of a general nature and will in no way identify any individual participant.

Participation in the study is voluntary and students will be free to withdraw their consent at any time. You can be assured of anonymity and other than the principle researcher no one else will know the identity of any participant and all information given will remain strictly confidential. All identifying information will be removed from all data collected across the four stages of the research. All tapes and transcripts will be kept in a secure location and no one other than myself will have access to this information. All information collected during the four phases of the
research will be used to create my PhD thesis but will be presented in a general way and will not in any way identify any individual participant.

If you would like further information or are interested in participating in any stage of the research, please feel free to contact me on 0415 177 607 or one of my supervisors: Associate Professor Lynne Cohen on 6304 5575 or Dr. Ken Robinson on 6304 5526. My email address is bbosch@student.ecu.edu.au.

If you wish to talk to anyone independent of this research, please contact the Research Ethics Officer Kim Gifkins on 6304 2170 or research.ethics@ecu.edu.au.

Thank you for your time.

Bailey Bosch
## Appendix K

**Demographic Information about Q-sort Participants**

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Appendix L

Example of a Completed Q-sort
Appendix M

Factor Interpretation Crib Sheet for Factor One

Items Ranked at +6
4) I couldn’t have done this without the support of my partner

Items Ranked Higher in Factor 1 Array than in Other Factor Arrays
10) The kids are not that supportive
14) Financial concerns have impacted on my study decisions
18) Sometimes I feel complete despair and feel like I must be crazy trying to juggle all this
20) There were positive and negative impacts on my children as a result of my studies
23) I don’t particularly want to put my kids into childcare but I have to
28) Physically I cannot stay awake to do the study I need to do
31) I feel under too much pressure
32) I am always trying to make it work for everyone else but sometimes it doesn’t work for me
34) My memory is not as good as it used to me which makes studying harder
44) You feel guilty all the time like you are not doing enough for your children
45) I am spread really thin, I feel like margarine
48) Other commitments seem more immediate and important than my studies do

Items Ranked Lower in Factor 1 Array than in Other Factor Arrays
1) Family members don’t understand
2) I have friends that are supportive and helpful
3) I’ve pretty much done this on my own
5) The support is there you just need to ask for it
6) People don’t volunteer their help so I have had to learn to ask for help
8) The university goes out of its way to assist students
9) The kids have been supportive of me
11) People think when you study you have loads of free time because you don’t work
15) It’s been a really liberating experience
16) Studying has been an amazing journey for me
17) As a mum it is important to have something else in your life for when your children grow up
21) My children have learnt to be quite autonomous
22) My studying teaches the kids to follow their dreams
25) The study has allowed me to heal from my marriage/relationship
29) I think being a mother has been a great advantage for my studies
35) The order I have done things in my life has been totally appropriate for me
37) Postgraduate courses are shorter and therefore more manageable
38) There is no flexibility in undergraduate study
39) Postgraduate study is hard especially without government financial assistance
42) I have made some really lovely friends during my study

Items Ranked at -6

25) The study has allowed me to heal from my marriage/relationship
**Appendix N**

**Factor Loadings**

Factor matrix with X indicating a defining sort for each of the three factors extracted.

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Appendix P

Autobiographical Statement

It has been an important element of my research to be aware of my own experiences and to ensure that I have viewed and interpreted the data I have collected from other mothers in an objective way. I commenced this research when my first child was around a year old and during the course of my degree I have been blessed with two more children. When I had completed my Masters degree and was contemplating a PhD I was told by the interviewing senior academic staff member at the university I was considering, not to bother with a PhD as I would be going off to have babies in a few years. As well as being a breach of anti-discrimination policies, this comment stuck with me as an example of the narrow way in which motherhood is defined by some people. I basically decided then and there that I wanted to understand what mothers in higher education really experienced.

Undertaking a PhD with three children has been a juggling act and some periods of time have been easier than others. In the four and a half years I have been enrolled in this course I have spent a large amount of time pregnant and caring for very young children. I have been most fortunate to have a strong support network that has enabled me to continue when times have been tricky. Logistically, this would have been impossible without the practical support my husband, parents and family have given me. I started this course with the clear ambition to complete it for my own personal satisfaction. As the years have gone by, I have become increasingly motivated by my three little children who I hope one day will look at me as an example of how a woman can pursue her own interests while raising children. I also hope my nieces see value in my efforts. In that sense, all the major findings of this research apply to my own experience in some way or another. I have done my best to view the contents of this thesis with an objective eye and to ensure that I have not put my own interpretations on the data I have collected. In addition to the member-checking studies I undertook, my supervisor and I have also spent many conversations dissecting the findings and examining all the different viewpoints to ensure rigour in the reporting. Finally, I hope that the positive messages contained in the contents of this thesis will find an audience with both mothers who are contemplating further education and those in the higher education system itself.