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Running head: EXPERIENCES OF MATURE AGE FEMALE STUDENTS

Experiences of Mature Age Female Students studying Psychology:

A Phenomenological Account

Ruth Ayres

A report submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of
Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science,

Edith Cowan University

Submitted October 2008

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Thank you to all my participants. Each one of you gave a valuable insight into your lives; you were all honest and generous in both your time and your willingness to share your personal stories. I feel privileged that you shared your thoughts with me and I can only hope that my writing does justice to your stories.

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Running head: EXPERIENCES OF MATURE AGE FEMALE STUDENTS

Experiences of Mature Age Female Students studying Psychology: A Review of the

Literature

Ruth Ayres

Experiences of Mature Age Female Students studying Psychology: A Review of the Literature

Abstract

The trend towards increasing diversity in university student populations has not come without its problems and one area of concern has been the high attrition rate amongst mature age female students aged between 40 and 49 years. This literature review seeks to summarise and integrate findings on the adjustment of mature age female students into university; on the relationship between expectations and experience of university and how these might impact on attrition for this group. The review indicates a complex relationship around expectations driven by motivations and perceived benefits from return to study, expectations of academic support, ability to cope with the academic work load and to manage other significant roles such as spousal relationships, work and childcare (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998). These complexities between factors are highlighted particularly in literature based on research methodologies describing the lived experiences of mature age women students. A conclusion of this review is that a phenomenological research methodology would allow women to tell their own stories and enable researchers to investigate the complexities of the interrelationship between expectations of university study and actual experiences.

Ruth Ayres

Supervisor: Dr. Andrew Guilfoyle

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Experiences of Mature Age Female Students studying Psychology: A Review of the Literature

Recent Australian Federal Government policies have resulted in increased accessibility, and encouraged participation by under represented groups, into Australian universities (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). The student population has become increasingly diverse (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1998) and the view of the student as being full time and straight from high school, has been superseded by a student population consisting of more mature students with diverse entry pathways into university (McInnis, 2001). Similar trends have been noted in North America, Canada and the United Kingdom (Richardson & King, 1998). Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) stated that in North America, in 1999-2000, as many as 40% of enrolling university students were in their mid 20's or older. In Australia, in 2000, 36% of enrolling students were over the age of 20 (DEST, 2004).

Increasing diversity has not come without problems and one area of concern has been low completion rates of degrees by groups of non-traditional students (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). One student group, within the new diversity, are mature age females between the ages of 40 to 49 years, who have become an increasingly significant proportion of the student population. In 2002, 4,975 mature age female students between the ages of 40 to 49 years were enrolled in Australian Universities. This group have been severely affected by attrition and during their first academic year, approximately 27% withdrew from their course (Lukic, Broadbent, & Maclachlan, 2004). In Australia, during 2002, the attrition rate for 17-20 year old undergraduates was just under 18% (Lukic, Broadbent, & Maclachlan, 2004).

The experience of mature age female students tends to be complex and despite the high attrition rate many adult students perform to a higher standard than school

leavers, positively influence their course, and contribute more effectively in tutorials (Richardson & King, 1998). This finding was supported by Justice and Dornan (2001) who found that older students reported more use of high level study strategies. Hoskins, Newstead, and Dennis (1997), from their study of records at a university in England, also found that, on average, mature age students gained better grades than traditional students.

It is important to address attrition for mature age students, not only because students may suffer significant stress and anxiety in their lives when wrestling with the decision to, and consequences of, withdrawal from university; but also because Australian universities are funded on numbers of students who complete their study (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003a). In order to reduce attrition rates and improve university learning for these students, it is important to learn more about their experiences and how they have overcome problems that might lead to withdrawal. Knowledge of these experiences is applicable to the design of student support and counselling services and may reduce attrition rates and further increase accessibility to university (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003a; McInnis, 2001).

This literature review will analyse expectations of teaching, administration and social support. How these expectations affect adjustment into university and the role of transition programmes in managing the gap between expectations and reality. Literature relating internal expectations to academic self efficacy, and the students' ability to cope with other significant roles in their lives is also reviewed. Following this, the characteristics of mature age female students are investigated in an attempt to understand how they differ from other student groups and how support services offered by the university might support them and hence reduce their risk of attrition. In order to gain insight into the expectations a mature aged female student builds up

about returning to study, literature relating to developmental perspectives for mid life changes is considered. In conclusion, the relationship between theories of adult development; the formation of the desire to return to study and the resulting nature of mature age students' expectations of university are considered. Whether or not these expectations are realised, is central to developing an understanding of the risk of attrition for mature age females studying at university. The final section addresses the methodology of previous research.

Limitations of this Literature Review

The focus of this review is mature age women and in order to obtain an in depth understanding of the factors which influence the experiences of these students at university, psychological factors affecting the decision to return to study, development of expectations related to study and the complex relationship between life stage, motivation, expectations and experience were discussed.

Because of the breadth of literature relevant to these complex factors affecting mature age female students, this review was limited to those papers which directly related these factors to university study or to choices made by mature age women related to life corrections which could result in a return to study.

Transition, Expectations and Adjustment to University

Starting university, whether as a mature age student or directly from high school, involves a period of adjustment to new experiences, methods of studying, learning new jargon and finding the way, both academically and socially, around a new environment (Kantanis, 2002). The period of transition has been identified as a time of increased stress as students adjust to their new situation (Gall, Evans, & Bellerose, 2000). It is also a time when students may reassess whether they have made the correct decision to attend university and the possibility of withdrawal is

contemplated (Bennett, Kottasz, & Nocciolino, 2007; Hultberg, Plos, Hendry, & Kjellgren, 2008). This adjustment or transition period often involves the student in an assessment of whether the reality of university matches their pre-existing expectations. If this period is successfully negotiated and expectations and reality are reconciled, then the student has more likelihood of committing to university study and successfully completing their course (Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999).

In a study exploring the gap between expectations of university and reality for a general intake of first year students, Baker, McNeil, and Siryk (1985) researched the concept of the “freshman myth”. This suggested that prior to starting university, students generally had overly optimistic expectations for their academic performance, and for social and academic opportunities at university. Baker, McNeil, and Siryk (1985) found that students, who had a discrepancy between their anticipated and actual adjustment into university, were more likely to withdraw from college than those who had accurate expectations. Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) found in a longitudinal survey of emotional, social and academic adjustment into a North American university (n=387) that expectations relating to academic issues and social life were often overly optimistic, whereas expectations about social and personal adjustment were sometimes overly pessimistic.

Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, and Hunsberger (2000) undertook a longitudinal study of expectations and adjustment of students entering university directly from high school. The participants, from a university in Canada, completed a questionnaire of open ended questions about their expectations of university. They were surveyed at five time points, prior to starting university, at three other points and finally near the end of their fourth year (n=107). In addition, measures were made of their stress, depression, self-esteem, dispositional optimism, university adjustment, loneliness and

the frequency of problems in their life. The results showed that their expectations about university centred on academic adjustment, social life, coping and personal development. Jackson et al. (2000) did not find support for the 'freshman myth' but identified four groupings of expectation, these were: optimistic, prepared, fearful and complacent. Students who were fearful adjusted poorly to university and reported more stress and depression. The prepared group adjusted better than other groups and Jackson et al. considered that this might be because they recognised the challenges and developed strategies to overcome them.

This finding was supported in work undertaken by Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt and Alisat (2000) in a longitudinal study of a similar cohort of students. They found that students with more complex expectations adjusted better to stressful circumstances than those who had simpler expectations because they had thought about strategies of coping with problems. The participants in these studies were traditional undergraduate students and therefore we should reflect on how these findings might or might not be applicable to a mature student cohort and their life stage.

In a study of student expectations of higher education, Darlaston-Jones et al., (2003b) surveyed first year psychology students at Edith Cowan University (n=56). Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire in their first week of university requesting information on what they expected from teaching and administrative staff. The participants were asked to also complete the same questionnaire relating the reality of their experience at the end of the semester. Further to this semi-structured interviews were conducted with second to fourth year students relating to their experiences at university. The results indicated that there was a difference between expectations and reality of university and that some students have expectations which

are not met. Darlaston-Jones et al. (2003b) suggested that one of the problems might be that students have unrealistic views of university life and that this may be addressed by transition programmes. The participants in this study were aged between 17 and 47; hence the results may apply to all mature age female students. It is, likely, however, that this finding would also have applicability to mature age female returning students, as they too may have unrealistic views of university and may benefit from information about services available and how to access them.

In their paper on retention and persistence support for psychology students at Edith Cowan University, Darlaston-Jones et al., (2003a) reported on the complexity of the background characteristics of students involving differences in their goal commitment, their academic, social, cultural backgrounds, and the affects of age on entry to university. Allowing for these differences, they reported that student retention rates were higher when students were involved in retention and support programmes and that orientation programmes should be designed to meet the needs of the students. Expectations of university may be managed through transition, retention and support programmes and in order to do this effectively it is important to design such programmes specifically to support diverse groups.

Much of the research into student populations and design of induction and transition programmes has been based around cognitive, social, and moral development of late adolescents and ignores the needs of diverse student groups (McInnis, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). However, Kantanis (2002) conducted a study into issues affecting mature age students' transition to an Australian university. She collected data from two focus groups of mature age students at Monash University and found that although there was significant overlap between the needs of mature age students and school leavers, there were some issues that were

directly related to mature age student transition. These issues involved: orientation, which mature age students felt was geared around the needs of school leavers; computer literacy with a need for early assistance learning packages to be provided for mature students who had no recent experience of computing technology; part-time study assistance with additional services being provided for after hours access to resources; interaction with the university community including both younger students and staff; support networks to encourage interaction between the university and family, friends and work colleagues, and social support networks. The recommendations from this study were that mature age students require a transition programme geared more specifically to their needs and administrators should plan transition programmes that take into account the needs of different student populations. Hence the gap between expectations and reality could be managed more effectively through transition programmes.

In an examination of the transition experience of Australian students to university, Urquhart and Pooley (2007) conducted a study with first year university students (n=12) studying psychology at Edith Cowan University. The participants in the study ranged from 17 to 45 years, were interviewed and asked to describe their experience of starting university; the academic and social adjustments they had had to make; their expectations of university and to describe any positive or negative experiences or emotions they had undergone. Emerging from the qualitative interviews were five themes: social support, expectation, time management, transition issues, and emotion. Although the themes identified were important to all student groups, the study indicated that there was a difference in how these themes were experienced between school leaver and mature age students. Recommendations for

further research included investigation of the differing transition needs between school leaver and mature age students.

As Urquhart and Pooley (2007) found, all student cohorts recognise the need for social, emotional, and practical information support to help them through their university career. Thus it is important that universities understand the needs of diverse student groups, together with their motivations for attending university in order to plan their transition and assistance programmes accordingly (McInnis, 2001). If these external expectations related to social, academic, informational, and transitional support are not met by the university, it is then that the student may be at risk of withdrawing from study.

The literature reviewed illustrated that university transition programmes must focus on addressing the gap between students' expectations of university and helping them to develop appropriate strategies to cope with the reality of university study. In order to manage this gap more effectively for mature age female students it is important to learn more about their expectations of university. Expectations are not only related to academic and social support services provided to the student by the university they also include internal expectations formed by the student of their own ability to cope with the academic and social pressures that study will entail. The review now considers literature on internal expectations and how they influence adjustment and transition into university for mature age female students.

Internal Expectations and Adjustment into University

Central to the decision to embark on academic study are internal expectations of ability to cope with academic challenges, to manage roles and responsibilities both at university and at home or work, together with expectations for career development and changes to identity (James, 2001; Michie, Glachan, & Bray, 2001). Students have

expectations of their ability to cope with the challenges of academic study which may or may not be realistic and this affects their integration into university.

Overcoming challenges, feeling positive about doing so and realising the potential for personal growth and development creates a feeling of efficacy and personal strength; and on the other hand facing situations which are impossible to manage and non successful negotiation of them has the potential for harm or loss (Ramsay, Jones & Barker, 2007). In a university context, it is likely that harm or loss could cause reduced feelings of self-efficacy and ultimately lead to feelings of inadequacy and hence withdrawal from the course of study. For example, Bandura and Cervone (1983) proposed that people plan what they will do, make estimates of how much of their time and effort will be involved and how long they will persevere in an activity, based on self perceptions of efficacy. If performance falls short of standards, this may be motivating for some people and discouraging for others. If a person has a low sense of self-efficacy they may be easily discouraged by failure, whereas people who have high self efficacy, in the event of failure, may be motivated to intensify their efforts to ensure future success (Bandura & Cervone, 1983).

Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001) investigated academic self-efficacy and level of optimism on ability to cope with transition into university. The participants (n=373) were first year students at the University of California and were required to complete a questionnaire in their first week of study, followed by another questionnaire in the final week of their academic year. The first questionnaire focussed on perceived academic self-efficacy, social self-efficacy and general optimism, together with ratings of their expected academic performance, social adjustment ratings and their ability to cope with social and academic stress. The second questionnaire required similar ratings apart from self efficacy and optimism.

The results showed that academic self efficacy was directly related to academic expectations and performance and confident students were likely to find adjusting to university challenging rather than threatening. This study was based on first year students and did not differentiate between mature students and traditional younger students. It is vital, therefore, for future research to identify the factors shaping the self efficacy of mature age students, in particular mature age women.

Murphy and Roopchand (2003) did focus on the complexity of mature age women's completion of university courses in a study of their intrinsic motivation and self esteem. In this study, participants from the north east of England (n=160) were involved in an independent groups design using two questionnaires, measuring their motivation and self esteem. The results showed that mature age students had higher levels of self esteem and motivation towards learning. Murphy and Roopchand related mature students' higher self esteem to being older, having clearer motivations and making more informed decisions, and due to their high levels of self esteem and motivation they tended to do well in the university setting, they gained in self confidence as they gathered more positive feedback.

In their conclusion to this study the authors acknowledged that although mature age students developed higher self esteem and confidence, there was confounding evidence as many mature age students saw themselves as being more anxious and less confident when they compared themselves with traditional students (King, 1998 as cited in Murphy & Roopchand, 2003). They suggested that entering university formed a transition in mature students' lives and if these students achieved good academic results during their initial period of study, they gained positive feedback, grew in self confidence and self esteem and became increasingly motivated to study. These participants were established at university and therefore we might

expect that the mature students surveyed had successfully negotiated a transition stage and had developed self confidence, there is no account made of mature age students who may not have received positive feedback and had therefore withdrawn from study in the early stages of their course. We must question how mature age students cope with university if they find study difficult, whether support and transition programmes can be put into place and how self esteem affects the experience of mature age female students.

In a study investigating the adjustment behaviours of mature aged women returning to formal study via a university enabling programme, Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) undertook a study of 10 mature age women undertaking part-time study at the University of Newcastle, Open Foundation Course. The women completed questionnaires on approaches to learning and on attributional beliefs and then took part in two focus groups, one at the beginning of the semester and one at the end. The women reported developing maladaptive learning processes moving away from deep processing to surface learning approaches mainly due to difficulties in time management as they negotiated their competing roles.

However, Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) found evidence that this change enabled them to carry on with their courses and retain their motivation for self-improvement. For most women surveyed, motivation to study was about identity regeneration and the researchers suggest that some women entered university with the expectation that university study would aid their self growth and their identity development, but otherwise had little knowledge of the processes of university learning and the impact that study would have on their life outside of university. Hence, their expectations of what university would offer, in terms of self development, were realistic but their expectations of how they would manage and

cope were unrealistic. This finding is strongly related to attrition because if the gap between expectations and ability to cope was large, the mature age student would not have planned for resources to enable them to negotiate through university and hence may be forced to consider withdrawing.

It is clear from this review of literature that research into the expectations of school leavers and mature age students show that there is a difference between expectations of university, and the experiences encountered at university, and the nature of this gap may affect how student adapt to the university environment (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985; Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, & Hunsberger, 2000; Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000). Research on expectations, focussing on mixed age group students, general cohorts of mature age students and mature age women, show a complex relationship between expectations, motivation for study, perceived self efficacy and roles other than that of a student. In order to understand this dynamic more fully in relation to mature age female students the characteristics of this group are now considered in more depth.

The Characteristics of Mature Age Female Students

Richardson and King (1998) argued that the problems that the adult student had to overcome related to the roles that they had outside of education rather than their role as a student. Wilson (1997) in a survey of 70 mature age students at a Scottish University found several factors relating to the characteristics of mature age students which affected their adjustment into university. For some students the factors created positive attributions, but paradoxically, for others, the same factors created negative attributions. The factors identified by Wilson were: age difference, which could be positive in terms of older students having a deeper rather than surface approach to learning (Justice & Dornan, 2001; Richardson & King, 1998), or negative

in terms of the gap between younger and mature students. For older students the differences were isolation from university life through part-time enrolment and living distant from the campus. However, motivation was also a key factor. This factor included identity regeneration as a reason behind why some mature age female students returned to education, for these students, studying was identified as a means of developing their identity and this goal enabled them to keep strong motivation (Caffarella & Olson, 1993). Furthermore, relationships with spouses, family and friends, for some mature age students resulted in friction, whilst others reported that they gained support from partners and children. Another factor identified by Wilson was finance – the focus of which was financial burdens, which differed significantly from the financial burdens of the younger student. Older students reported greater financial pressures related to providing a secure home for their families, making mortgage repayments and maintaining a comfortable lifestyle. This responsibility, often necessitated paid work, which in turn placed increasing role pressure on the mature age student; for some, their work experiences complemented their study, but for others the pressure and time constraints of paid work contributed to increased stress. Institutional support and relations with lecturers, including the need for greater flexibility in delivery mode, assessment schedules and attendance requirements were also factors relevant to the older students. Wilson acknowledged that these issues were important to mature age students, but cautioned that evidence was complex and that each mature age student faced a unique combination of factors that could enhance their experience of university or alternatively, could become the catalyst for withdrawal.

Cantwell, Archer, and Bourke (2001) conducted a study of students entering the University of Newcastle (n=8503) via differing entry methods. Data were

collected on their age, achievement level, gender, entry qualifications, and discipline of study. Results showed that older students outperformed younger students.

However, mature students entering university via non-traditional entry programmes, tended to favour part-time, rather than full-time study and those who withdrew from university prior to degree completion, had higher achievement levels than other students in this category. This study indicated that higher attrition rates amongst mature age students were related to factors external to university such as the role demands placed on them by family responsibilities, the need to combine study with paid employment and financial pressures.

Indeed, research does show that mature students often have more competing demands for their attention than younger students. These demands centred on work, parental, spousal or relationship roles together with the possibility of demands for caring for aging parents (Jacobs & Berkowitz-King, 2002; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999). In their study of North American female students, Jacobs and Berkowitz-King (2002) found that women over the age of 25 years were disadvantaged in completing their degrees due to the fact that they had competing demands on their time and were, therefore, more likely to be enrolled part-time. The issue of being part-time also affected social interaction and deterred the formation of social support networks (Kantanis, 2002).

In an analysis of degree completion among non-traditional students Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) found that being part time had negative effects on degree completion because it was socially isolating and gave less time for interaction with lecturers. Interestingly, they found contradictory evidence relating to marital status. Married students had a better chance of gaining a degree than single mature age students because of the financial and motivational support they received from their

spouses. However, for some having young children decreased the likelihood of completing a degree and they concluded that this was possibly because of the time constraints on spending time studying versus spending time with young children. For others, having young children was a motivating factor in degree completion because they felt that they were providing an example to their children and also investing in the future financial and psychological security of the family.

Reay (2003) in a qualitative study of 12 mature age female students from the United Kingdom, ranging between 29 to 49 years, supported the idea that women considered that studying at university provided a good role model to their children. They also reported that women often cited a desire to 'give something back' as one of their motivating reasons for returning to study.

The impact of role demands on mature age female students has been shown to be a complex issue. Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) surveyed motivation amongst Australian mature age female students with children (n=235). Two groups of participants were identified, one of current students and the other mature age women who had interrupted their study. Both groups completed a questionnaire designed to gain information about women continuing in education. The results showed little difference in motivation between mature age women with children who graduated and those who did not. However when personal circumstances were controlled for, the researchers found personal history and life circumstances underpinned the reasons for return to study and contributed to the decision to leave study. For some women, return to study was a mechanism to escape from low self esteem, disappointment with marriage or life in general and unsupportive families. Such women reported high levels of motivation for study in an effort to discover new roles for themselves but may have underestimated their ability to cope with study and difficult personal

circumstances. Other students reported development of new identity beyond that of 'wife' or 'mother' was their major motivator to return to study. When they achieved this from their study experiences, they found university fulfilling. For others social support from other students and academic staff at university enabled them to cope effectively with the demands of university (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998).

Quimby and O'Brien (2006) also investigated factors which affected non-traditional female students with children's psychological well-being. The participants in this study were 209 non-traditional students, defined as being at least 25 years of age and living off campus, each woman surveyed was the primary caregiver for at least one child. The women completed surveys and questionnaires relating to demographic variables, attachment style, perceived social support, role management self efficacy and well being. The results indicated that for some students the difficulties involved in managing their multiple roles and their lack of perceived social support caused significant psychological distress; other women benefited from managing multiple roles.

Due to the complexity of issues which affect mature age female students (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998; Wilson, 1997; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005), it is important to gain further understanding of the factors which influence the experience of mature age female students. Their experience involves a complex interplay of psychological states including life stage, motivations for return to study, expectations and self efficacy. This literature leads us to a viewpoint that while research implicates psychological life stage as an important factor, explicit arguments about the role of such psychological theory are not being made. Therefore this review turns to a discussion of life stage in order to identify whether this concept has utility in the understanding the issues which affect mature age female students. It

is anticipated that this knowledge may be beneficial to the development of support services which can aid mature age women in their journey through university and in so doing help reduce attrition for a significant proportion of this student cohort.

Does Life Stage explain Mature Age Women's Reasons for Return to Study?

Adult educators often subscribe to the view that the decision to participate in adult learning is related to developmental changes which take place throughout the lifespan (Tennant, 2006). A life span developmental model was defined by Erikson (1968) who proposed that people progress through eight developmental stages. Within each stage individuals must experience a psychosocial transition crisis which must be resolved prior to successful development and successful advancement to the next stage.

Erikson (1968) maintained that middle aged people start to be concerned with producing something that can be left for future generations (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moscovitz, 2000) and that their psychosocial development involved a resolution of the conflict between generativity and stagnation. According to Erikson (1968) generativity became most salient around the age of forty and revolved around establishing and guiding the next generation and contributing to the future. He viewed generativity as a motivating need or drive, which may result in a redirection of attention with a motivation to produce, create or make change (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moscovitz, 2000). A major characteristic of this stage was that the individual became concerned with the future of society as a whole and fostering development of others as well as making a valid contribution to society (Peterson & Stewart, 1993).

According to Erikson (1968) the ability to become a generative adult is dependent upon successful resolution of earlier developmental stages, most significantly the development of identity (Vandewater, Ostrove, & Stewart, 1997).

Research indicates that few people establish identity achievement by the end of adolescence (Waterman, 1982) and this may be particularly so for women who traditionally have based their identities on children and partners (Vandewater, Ostrove, & Stewart, 1997). Vandewater, Ostrove, and Stewart (1997) proposed that there was a relationship between the development of identity and well being for mid-life women and that generativity could not be attained until successful resolution of earlier personality development. Hence the resolution of the generativity stage involved women in an assessment of their identity status, whether they have a traditional role regret relating to career choice over home, an analysis of their roles and a re-evaluation of how they could contribute to future generations (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999; Vandewater, Ostrove & Stewart, 1997). Levinson (1986) also proposed a life stage theory of adult development in which he identified a mid life transition stage to take place between the ages of 40 and 45 years. He suggested transitional phases which served to terminate existing life structures and allowed the creation of new ones enabling the person to move forward and explore new possibilities for life.

However, the rigidity of boundaries for developmental stages has been refuted by McAdams (2001) who proposed that identity takes the form of a personal story and that identity construction is an ongoing process which takes place throughout the lifespan. Reconstructions of the past, perceptions of the present and goals for the future are integrated by the individual to form a narrative life story. The life story takes into account cultural values and norms and is constantly updated and re-evaluated as the cultural and social context changes. McAdams suggested that the midlife years required considerable work on identity as it is at this time that the realisation occurs that one's life is perhaps half over, hence the individual is

stimulated to realise ambitions that may have been suppressed. McAdams agreed that generativity was an important issue in the life story during middle years and this translated into revision of one's life story and consequent adjustment to formulated plans (McAdams, de St Aubin, & Logan, 1993). McAdams (2001) and Caffarella and Olson (1993) proposed that rigid developmental stages for life changes are not identifiable, however, life stories and the importance of identity must be taken into account in understanding women's psychosocial development.

Tennant (2006) also criticised the applicability of developmental theories to understanding women's motives for undertaking adult education due to the problems related to the influence of historical events on different age groups and suggested that life stage models were prone to social and historical bias. Hence we could not assume that women will undergo life transitions based on chronological age because the influences that have shaped their development are too varied and are, therefore, not comparable.

Nevertheless, the idea of a mid life transition stage at age 40 to 45 years, has been posited as a reflective stage in life, which may lead to the decision to re-evaluate life plans and career choices and return to study (Munley, 1975). In order to resolve this stage crisis an individual may decide to make a vocational or career change in order to meet generative demands and avoid stagnation (Munley, 1975). Erikson (1968) and McAdams (2001) both suggest that the need to make changes to identity in mid life might be related to issues of generativity and some researchers propose that for some women this develops as the urge to contribute to society. Rather than stages per se there is the possibility of mid-course corrections to identity, which may be necessary for the achievement of reformulated goals or ambitions and hence important to changes in career direction. Evidence for generativity in the form of

making a contribution to society and hence becoming a motive for women to undertake higher education is present in current literature.

In a review of literature relating to the psychosocial development of women, Caffarella and Olson (1993) suggested that Erikson and Levinson's theories were too prescriptive for many women and that these theories had largely been developed from the perspective and life course of men. They proposed that developmental theories relating to women must be based on women's experiences, and their individual differences must be taken into account. They suggested that issues that have more prominence in women's lives must be incorporated into theories of development; Sales (as cited in Caffarella & Olson, 1993) related that women adapt to their changing roles related to children being born, developing, leaving home and having their own children. Targ (as cited in Caffarella & Olson, 1993) also suggested that unanticipated events in women's lives had major significance in identity generation, such as divorce and widowhood and that factors such as these needed to be understood in developmental theories relating to women. Caffarella and Olson concluded by recommending that any attempt to understand the psychosocial development of women must be tempered with knowledge of the diverse patterns of development, the importance of identity and intimacy and the centrality of relationships to women.

The need to also take into account women's varying histories and individual differences in development when making any analysis of adult development was highlighted by a study of women's personality during their middle years undertaken by Stewart and Ostrove (1998). This study was based on a summary of findings from five previous longitudinal studies of middle aged women undertaken in North America. The women were college educated and mostly middle or upper class. The

results of the study showed that about two thirds of the women in the sample had made changes to their education or careers between the ages of 37 and 43 years. The findings supported the proposal of Levinson (1986) that a mid life transition or mid course correction period occurs, however, the timing of the transition was more variable and dependant upon other factors influencing women's lives such as varying histories and individual differences (Stewart & Ostrove, 1998). Again because the women studied were from a middle class background, the relevance of these findings to all groups of women needs to be questioned, however, the evidence for a mid life correction in which identity issues were considered and changes to career structure acknowledged were identified throughout the sample.

The literature reviewed indicated that although life stage theories might be too prescriptive for many women, life course and life story may play a part in a woman's decision to return to study and these models should be considered in the complex interaction between life stage, expectation development, and experiences in a woman's journey through university.

Research Methodology

In order to explore factors which lead to academic success or withdrawal from university for mature age female students, consideration must be given to appropriate research methodology. To develop full knowledge of the complexity of interrelationships involved in understanding a phenomenon, Polkinghorne (2005) advocated data collection methods which had vertical depth, that is, allowed for explanation, understanding and reflection and would enable participants to explore meaning of their experiences and relevance of interrelationships. He suggested that quantitative methods were inappropriate for collecting information about experiences because techniques such as short answer questions and Likert scales were only

suitable for gathering surface information. He proposed that qualitative interviews would allow researchers to redirect or rephrase questions enabling collection of information which would be multilayered and complex in nature reflecting the true nature of issues under examination.

Literature reviewed revealed a complex relationship between motivation, life stage, expectations and roles; all of which influence the study experience of mature age women. Caffarella and Olson (1993) in their analysis of psychosocial development of women concluded by recommending that any attempt to understand this area must be based around diverse patterns of development, identity, intimacy and the importance of relationships to women. If we are to adopt a life stage approach to them women's experiences and individual differences must be taken into account. For this, a consideration of a phenomenological research methodology, which was described by Schwandt, (2001) as an exploration of a person's 'lifeworld', is suggested. This methodology specifically involves detailed description of how a person experiences events in their life. Phenomenological research analyses lived experiences and attempts to make sense of them and to describe and understand them (Polkinghorne, 2005). Holstein and Gubrium (1994) suggested that one of the basic tenets of phenomenological research involved interpretation of the particulars of lived experiences in order to render meaning to the experience. This involved collection of data from people who had experience of the subject being investigated, and from what they communicate to the researcher, to develop a description of the 'essence' of the experience (Moustakas, 1994; Racher & Robinson, 2002). The essence comprises forming deep understanding of lived experiences (le Vasseur, 2003). Essentially to unpack the complexity of motivation, life stage, expectations and roles, it is necessary to know about what the lived experience of mature aged women students holds.

Conclusions

The literature reviewed indicated a complex relationship between the characteristics of mature age female students, theories of adult development, motivations for attending university and the relationship between development of expectations, and how they relate to the reality of the university environment. The literature suggested evidence that some students had unrealistic expectations of the complexity of university and how it would affect other areas of their lives and this might lead to problems in adjustment and coping. Some research leads to the assumption that high expectations of, and motivation for studying at university occur as some women focus on identity reformulation, and this focus might lead some women not to assess the difficulties and time needed in the pursuit of a university education. For some women this can lead to uncertainty, role conflict and put them at risk of failure (Cantwell & Mulhearn, 1997; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006).

Choosing to study a subject, which is not directly vocational in nature, such as psychology, may be subject to more complex decision making related to career, identity, and life stage development. Factors affecting the choice of course may have a bearing on the complex development of expectations for mature age female students.

Research into the lived experiences of mature age female students from a phenomenological study should yield rich description of their lives, motivations, thoughts, goals and expectations and findings from this analysis. The findings can ultimately be used by policy makers involved in student retention, learning, social support, teachers and counselling services.

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Adult Education Quarterly

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Running head: EXPERIENCES OF MATURE AGE FEMALE STUDENTS

Experiences of Mature Age Female Students studying Psychology:

A Phenomenological Account

Ruth Ayres

Experiences of Mature Age Female Students studying Psychology: A
Phenomenological Account

Abstract

Universities encourage diverse student populations, within this diversity high attrition rates amongst mature age female students has been noted. Research indicated that these students experienced a complex relationship around expectations driven by motivations, ability to cope with the academic work load and to manage family roles (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998). This study used a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) to seek to understand experiences of university for 10 women aged between 40-49 years studying Psychology. Participants took part in a semi-structured interview and topics included: reasons for commencing study, formation of expectations about support, if lived experiences differed from expectations; and did any discrepancy between expectations and reality affect adjustment to university. Life-stage, life-story and identity underpinned motivation to return to study and influenced social and academic expectations, together with expectations of their ability to cope with study and their other roles. Discrepancies between expectations and lived experience caused some problems in adjustment. Recommendations for design of student services and transitions programmes were made to assist this cohort of students adjust to university.

Ruth Ayres

Supervisor: Dr. Andrew Guilfoyle

27 October, 2008

Experiences of Mature Age Female Students studying at University: A

Phenomenological Account

Mature Age Female Students at University: An overview

Recent Australian Federal Government policies have resulted in increased accessibility, and encouraged participation by under represented groups into Australian universities (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005). The student population has become increasingly diverse (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1998) and the nature of the student as being full-time and straight from high school, has been superseded by a student population consisting of more mature students with diverse entry pathways into university (McInnis, 2001).

Increasing diversity has not come without problems and one area of concern has been low completion rates by groups of non-traditional students (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Within the new diversity, mature age females between the ages of 40 to 49 years, have become an increasingly significant proportion of the student population. In 2002, the population of mature age female students, between 40 and 49, enrolled in Australian universities was 4,975 (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004). This group has been severely affected by attrition and during their first academic year, approximately 27% withdrew from their course (Lukic, Broadbent, & Maclachlan, 2004).

It is important to address attrition for mature age students because it is both a moral issue, as students may suffer significant stress and anxiety when wrestling with the decision to withdraw from university; and a practical issue, because Australian universities are funded on the number of students who complete their study (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003). In order to reduce attrition rates and improve university learning for these students, it is important to learn more about their

experiences, how they have overcome problems that might lead to withdrawal and use this information in the design of student support and counselling services (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003; McInnis, 2001).

Transition, Expectations and Adjustment to University

The adjustment or transition period often involves an assessment of whether university matches with expectations. If these are reconciled, the student has more likelihood of committing to university study and successfully completing their course (Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999). In an examination of the transition experience of Australian students to university, Urquhart and Pooley (2007) conducted a study with first year university students studying psychology at Edith Cowan University and found that student cohorts recognise the need for social, emotional, and practical information support. Thus it is important that universities understand the needs and motivations of diverse student groups in order to plan their transition and assistance programmes accordingly (McInnis, 2001).

Internal Expectations and Adjustment into University

In order to manage the gap between expectations of university and reality of experience, it is important to note that expectations are not only related to academic and social support services. They include internal expectations of ability to cope with academic and social pressures (James, 2001; Michie, Glachan, & Bray, 2001).

Mature age students demonstrate higher levels of motivation towards studying; related to being older, having clearer motivations and making informed decisions (Murphy & Roopchand, 2003). Due to their high levels of self-esteem and motivation they tended to do well at university and gain in self-confidence as they received more positive feedback. Contrary to this, many mature age students report themselves as more anxious and less confident than traditional students (King, 1998

as cited in Murphy & Roopchand, 2003). However, if they achieved good academic results during initial study, positive feedback developed their self-confidence and self-esteem and increased their motivation to succeed (Murphy & Roopchand, 2003).

In an investigation of adjustment of mature aged women returning to study, Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) analysed experiences of 10 mature age women undertaking part-time study at the University of Newcastle. The women reported difficulties in time management as they negotiated their competing roles. For most women surveyed, motivation to study was about identity regeneration and the researchers suggest that some women entered university with the expectation that study would aid their self-growth and their identity development, but otherwise had little knowledge of the processes of university learning and the impact that study would have on their life outside of university. Hence, their expectations of university, in terms of self-development, were realistic but expectations of how they would manage the process of university learning and cope with other life roles were unrealistic. Research on expectations shows a complex relationship between expectations, motivation for study, perceived self-efficacy and roles other than that of a student. In order to understand this dynamic more fully in relation to mature age female students the characteristics of this group need to be considered in depth.

The Characteristics of Mature Age Female Students

Cantwell, Archer, and Bourke (2001) conducted a study of students entering the University of Newcastle and showed that older students tended to outperform younger students. They related the higher attrition rates amongst mature age students to factors external to university such as the role demands from family responsibilities, the need to combine study with paid employment and financial pressures. Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) surveyed motivation amongst mature age female students

with children. Some women reported high levels of motivation for study in an effort to discover new roles for themselves but underestimated their ability to cope with study and difficult personal circumstances. Other students reported development of new identity beyond that of 'wife' or 'mother' was their major motivator to return to study. For others, support from fellow students and academic staff enabled them to cope effectively with the demands of university (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998). Due to the complexity of issues which affect mature age female students (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Reay, 2003; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Wilson, 1997) it is important to gain further understanding of the factors which influence the experience of mature age female students. Their experience involves a complex interplay of psychological states including life stage, motivations for return to study, expectations and self-efficacy. While research implicates psychological life stage as an important factor, explicit arguments about the role of such psychological theory are not being made and this paper now turns to a discussion of life stage in order to identify whether this concept has utility in understanding the issues which affect mature age female students.

Life Stage and Mature Age Women's Reasons for Return to Study

A life-span developmental model defined by Erikson (1968) proposed middle aged people become concerned with resolution of the conflict between generativity and stagnation. Generativity became most salient around the age of forty and revolved around establishing and guiding the next generation and contributing to the future (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moscovitz, 2000; Peterson & Stewart, 1993).

Resolution of the generativity stage involved women in an assessment of their identity status, whether they have a traditional role regret relating to career choice over home, an analysis of their roles and a re-evaluation of how they could contribute to future

generations (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999; Vandewater, Ostrove, & Stewart, 1997).

Levinson (1986) also proposed a life stage theory of adult development in which he identified a mid life transition stage to take place between the ages of 40 and 45 years.

Rigid boundaries for developmental stages was refuted by McAdams (2001) who proposed identity construction was an ongoing process taking place throughout the lifespan. The life story took into account cultural values and norms and was constantly updated and re-evaluated as the cultural and social context changed (McAdams, de St. Aubin, & Logan, 1993).

Caffarella and Olson (1993) suggested that issues that had more prominence in women's lives must be incorporated into theories of development; Sales (as cited in Caffarella & Olson, 1993) proposed that women adapt to their changing roles related to children being born, developing, leaving home and having their own children. Targ (as cited in Caffarella & Olson, 1993) also suggested that unanticipated events in women's lives, such as divorce and widowhood, had major significance in identity generation, and that factors such as these needed to be understood in developmental theories relating to women.

The purpose of the study was to investigate how life stage and life story play a part in women's (between 40 to 49 years), decision to return to university. Within this rationale the following questions were examined: these were:

1. What are the factors underlying the decision to return to university?
2. Do these factors affect the development of the mature age women's expectations of university?
3. Is there a discrepancy between expectations and the reality of study at university for a mature age woman?

4. Does any discrepancy between expectations and experiences lead to problems in adjustment to university?

Methodology

Research Design

A phenomenological research design, described by Schwandt (2001) as an exploration of a person's 'lifeworld', was applied. Phenomenological research analyses lived experiences and attempts to make sense of them, to describe and understand them (Polkinghorne, 2005). Holstein and Gubrium (1995) suggested that one of the basic tenets of phenomenological research involved interpretation of the particulars of lived experiences in order to render meaning to the experience. This involved collection of data from people who had experience of the subject being investigated, and from what they communicate to the researcher, to develop a description of the 'essence' of the experience (Moustakas, 1994; Racher & Robinson, 2002). The essence comprises forming deep understanding of composite experiences (le Vasseur, 2003). Essentially to unpack the complexity of motivation, life stage, expectations and roles, it is necessary to know about what the lived experience of mature aged women students holds.

Paradigm and Assumptions

The rationale for this design choice was driven by Polkinghorne (2005), who advocated data collection methods which had vertical depth, that is, allowed for explanation, understanding and reflection and would enable participants to explore meaning of their experiences and relevance of interrelationships. Qualitative phenomenological based interviews would allow researchers to redirect or rephrase questions enabling collection of information which would be multilayered and complex in nature reflecting the true nature of issues under examination.

The research followed a phenomenological approach as defined by Moustakas (1994) and formed an in depth qualitative study describing the lived experiences of women aged between 40 and 49 years, why they decided to study at university, what their expectations were and whether experiences matched expectations. An important component of this approach involves bracketing, which serves to isolate the researcher's prior experience in respect of the research topic or purpose (Cresswell, 2007).

Participants

The participants were 10 female students, aged between 40 and 49 years, studying psychology at Edith Cowan University. The age range was selected based on Levinson (1986) mid life transition theories. The number of participants was in line with criteria set out by Moustakas (1994) and Wertz (2005) to provide quality of data and valuable findings. The participants were purposefully selected via advertisements on noticeboards in the School of Psychology and Social Science and through flyers presented in psychology lecturers. The information flyer is included as Appendix A. Potential participants contacted the researcher via email or telephone. The researcher then screened potential participants prior to selection to ensure that they met the age and course criteria of the study. An information letter (Appendix B) and an informed consent letter (Appendix C) were distributed to participants.

The experiences of the researcher as a mature age woman studying at university have provided a focus for the study, and through bracketing of these experiences, researcher interpretative biases are made explicit (Ahern, 1999; Cresswell, 2007). This bracketing included my idea that mature age women may have decided to study psychology because they felt that it addressed a need to contribute to society (Erikson, 1968). Within this I thought that their expectations of

study may not take account of their conflicting life roles and for some women significant stress may occur in the resolution of the conflict between expectations and reality (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998). Mature age females studying psychology became the focus of the study because they provided a unified but diverse student group and enabled the researcher to analyse reasons behind the decision to attend university, development of expectations and the relationship between experiences and expectations of university study.

Data Collection Procedures

The interviews took place at a mutually convenient location agreed between the researcher and participant. The interviews were conducted between August and October, 2008. Participants were interviewed in the order that they contacted the researcher. Each interview took approximately between 1 hour and 1 hour 30 minutes. The interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Five open-ended questions (Appendix D) were used in a semi-structured interview to gain information about the social and cultural contexts affecting the mature age women students. The questions were formulated around expectations and experiences of social, emotional, and practical information support; themes which were identified by Urquart and Pooley (2007) in their study of transition into university. The interview schedule is included as Appendix D and included questions such as "What were the factors determining your decision to come to university?" and "What did you do when your expectations did not match up to your experiences at university?" The questions were followed by verbal prompts such as "Can you give me more information about?" (Rice & Ezzy, 1999) which enabled the participant to elaborate on points she wanted to make, and non-verbal prompts which helped develop rapport and hence facilitated the collection of rich data.

Ethics

Approval to undertake this study was granted from the Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement of research. Confidentiality was ensured and all references to names or other identifying information was omitted from transcripts. Names of participants were not recorded. All research data will be stored in the School of Psychology and Social Science.

Analysis

Prior to analysis the researcher acknowledged her own biases and prejudgements in order to make an unbiased analysis of the data (Ahern, 1999; Cresswell, 2007) see Appendix E and these were then used as validation point throughout the analysis. All possible meanings and perspectives were considered to create frames of reference and describe how the phenomena were experienced by the participants in the study (Osborne, 1994). Verbatim transcripts were made. Significant statements relevant to expectations, discrepancies between expectations and reality, and information related to reasons for attending university were identified. Significant statements were grouped into units of meaning, and then described. Clusters of meaning were defined through cross-case analysis and common themes and issues grouped together (Cresswell, 2007).

To ensure rigour in the analysis records of the classification and categorisation of the data were kept and a full audit trail of notes (see Appendix E), coding strategies and any revision of coding was kept (Mays & Pope, 1995). Researcher bias and validity checks were conducted and notes kept in the audit trail and researcher's notes were reviewed by the project supervisor to confirm that the researcher's interpretations accurately reflected the themes developed in the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings and Interpretations

From the analysis three major themes emerged, these were: motivation for study; support; and role conflict. In each of these major themes, recurrent sub-themes and concepts were also identified; these are presented in Table 1. The findings and interpretations will be discussed in relation to these themes, sub-themes and concepts and how they bear on the research questions. The discussion will be illustrated with extracts from the interviews and interpreted with reference to previous research.

Table 1

Themes and Sub-Themes of Mature Age Women's Expectations and Experiences of University

Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Concepts
Motivation for study	Shift in identity	Role of wife and mother Role regrets
	Life stage	Age of children
	Life story	Re-evaluation
	Generativity	Long term decision process Sudden decision
Support	Academic	Self-doubt Self-efficacy Success
	Sense of community	Adjustment Acknowledgement Anonymity Peer support
	Social	Friendships
Role conflict	Family	Reduction of study Part time External Isolation

Motivation for Study

Central to development of expectations about university study are motivations that mature women had for returning to study. The women in this study suggested that their motivation to return to study revolved around changes to their identity (Erikson, 1968). Identity changes were interrelated with woman's life stage (Levinson, 1986). For others their motivations were triggered by their evolving life story (McAdams, 2001).

Shift in Identity

Vandewater, Ostrove, and Stewart (1997) proposed that many women traditionally based their identities on children and partners. Finding identity beyond that of "wife" or "mother" was central to the decision to return to university:

... it was time for me to do something a bit more for myself ... part of the reason I went back because I wanted to do something for myself for once and not just always for the family. I just needed to do something for myself and I suppose show that I was much more than just being a mother and a wife.

Analysis of transcripts revealed that the women were deeply involved in an assessment of their identity status and were trying to resolve any role regrets that they might have had by choosing home and family over career choice (Stewart & Vandewater, 1999). As Caffarella and Olson (1993) suggested, developmental theories relating to women must be based on women's experiences, and their individual differences must be taken into account together with issues that have prominence in the women's lives. The women reported struggling with traditional role regrets, and choosing family over career and their decision to return to university was precipitated by salient factors which affected their lives whether it was their children becoming less dependent or other triggering events:

I think my Mother's illness helped in a way because I knew that I didn't want to finish up having regrets. Being down the track and saying 'I wish I had done this, I wish I had done that'. So I don't have that now – I know that

I have done all these things that I really wanted to do – that I dreamed about doing and I don't have regrets.

Life-Stage

Mature age women started university because they felt they were at a time in their lives when they were looking for new direction, and because of their life circumstances, and the ages of their children, they were able to engage in fresh opportunities. Levinson (1986) in a life stage theory of adult development identified a mid life transition stage between the ages of 40 and 45 years. Women in the study identified that they were at a stage in their lives when their commitment to bringing up their children was coming to an end and they had the opportunity to explore new possibilities:

I was at a stage with my children. They were older ... I had never gone back to work after I had them and one was already at high school ...and I was beginning to think I don't need to be at home anymore. They couldn't have cared less that I was home or not.

The women conveyed that their decision to attend university was not so much controlled by the developmental timeline described by Levinson (1986), but was related to the ages of their children and they felt that they could only return to study when they felt that their children had attained some independence. There was variation in how the women measured this independence, for some it occurred when their children started school, for others it was much later. This concurs with Sales (as cited in Caffarella & Olson, 1993) who proposed that women adapt to their changing roles related to children being born, developing, leaving home and having their own children. One particular quote encapsulated this:

I had to continue working plus get the youngest child through high school, when he left school, he got work and he got a good apprenticeship – that was when I realised I can do whatever I want now.

Life-Story

McAdams (2001) suggested that the midlife years required considerable work on identity as it was at this time that the realisation occurred that one's life was perhaps half over, individuals were stimulated to realise ambitions that may have been suppressed. Women revealed that their reasons for returning to study took the form of a personal story which was constantly being updated and re-evaluated dependant upon the context of their lives. This theme supports the theory of life story proposed by McAdams, de St Aubin, and Logan (1993). An ongoing narrative that evolved throughout the lifespan was often referred to:

when I did my first degree I always wanted to do social work or something with people and helping people because that was where I thought I could contribute but due to circumstances I didn't do it as a seventeen year old; so I think I always had this yearning for wanting to give it a go.

These findings illustrate the theme that the women were involved in a process of reconstructing their past experiences and integrating these with their perceptions of what is currently happening to them and analysing their future goals in an effort to develop an integrated life story.

Generativity

According to Erikson (1968) middle aged people also develop a concern with becoming generative and contributing to the future of society or producing something that can be left for future generations (Ackerman, Zuroff, & Moscovitz, 2000; Peterson & Stewart, 1993). This theme emerged from the data as the women reported that they chose to return to education to study "*something where I could help people*" and:

I was interested in the way people think and when things go wrong, why things go wrong – mentally and emotionally; psychology helped...

McAdams also highlighted the importance of generativity during middle years and how this instigated revision of life story and adjustment to formulated plans (McAdams, de St Aubin, & Logan, 1993). This was encapsulated in the following quote:

Well that [psychology] was what I originally wanted to do back when I was at High School and I was talked out of it that's why I did [different career]. Well yea I enjoyed it while I was doing it but then it got to be a hollow sort of profession for me, it didn't hold any meaning anymore, you know, it was the sort of thing when you wake up and you think 'ugh'... and it was just dreadful you know I didn't want to go to work anymore so I thought I better get back there

The findings show that for mature age women, the decision to return to study was strongly linked to their identity and to defining their identity as generative adults. The women identified their interest in rejecting work that “*didn't hold any meaning anymore*” and finding a career structure that emphasised “*helping*” people. Previously the opportunity to work in these generative areas had been unavailable to them because of demands placed on them by family and other work responsibilities. However, their interest had remained part of their life stories and it is only in their middle years, when their children became less dependent upon them, that the women had an opportunity to revise and consequently adjust and reformulate their plans.

The data did show a split in how the women addressed their need to give something back to society and in the process find new identity outside of the home. One set of the women became motivated to return to study because they felt that they were not “*being challenged at all*” in their lives. For some of the women the realisation that they were at a stage in their lives when their children had become less dependent came very suddenly and they grasped the opportunity to explore their identity and generativity through studying psychology at university:

we walked past the psychology building which had a big advert out the front and I thought oh I've always been interested in that ... so took a few bits of information home ... so I rang up and found out the information.

For the women who made the decision to return to study suddenly, a common theme emerged in that they enrolled without investigating fully what they would be undertaking. Their expectations related to the course content and processes of university were not always based on detailed preparation or research, but their focus was on making a change in life:

I didn't really go into it with my eyes fully open about what it was really going to be like ... maybe I underestimated the degree of difficulty and the way ... The statistics – that was something that totally came out of left field, that was not something I was expecting to be part of a psychology degree. I was thinking psychology would be about depression and anxiety and mental illness – how to diagnose and recognise symptoms and counselling.

Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) found that some women entered university with the expectation that university study would aid their self-growth and their identity development, but otherwise had little knowledge of the processes of university learning. The stories of the women interviewed who made the decision to enrol very quickly, concur with this and it appeared that the women realised that they had an opportunity to develop their self-growth, they seized upon this opportunity and neglected to fully investigate the details of the content of their choices. These women had developed expectations of the study environment but had put little emphasis on researching exactly what they would study and how the processes of university learning were organised; hence there was a large gap between their expectations and the reality of their experience:

I got more than I was expecting. To be honest, I didn't know how they were going to take three years to teach counselling. It was a lot more involved...

For the other subset of women identified; their entry to university was carefully planned, well researched and involved detailed preparation before they were

ready to enrol. One woman demonstrated her commitment to returning to study when she explained her husband's thoughts about her need to return to study:

I had my own business - I was making a lot of money and working part-time. Not that we needed the money – that was a decision he couldn't comprehend 'why would you give up, you've got the perfect job, why in the world would you feel that way' but once he realised that I was absolutely miserable with it – and I would have gone ahead regardless of what he said ...

Despite their commitment to returning to study they could only make the commitment to university when they felt that their children were less dependent:

And this had been in my head for about ten years. But at that stage I knew that it was ... when I first started the seed was starting to grow; I knew that it was very hard because young children at that time and all the other things that were going on in our lives.

For these women their expectations were based on detailed planning and research and they showed more realistic expectations of the reality of university study. Hence there was less of a gap between their expectations and reality of the processes of university study. However, they tended to focus on their own ability to succeed within the university. Internal expectations formed by the student of their own ability to cope with the academic and social pressures that study will entail have been found to be central to how a student adjusts to university (James, 2001; Michie, Glachan, & Bray, 2001). For these students it may have represented another aspect of their preparation for university. The women's focus on their internal expectations was noted thus:

I wasn't really concerned about what the university was going to provide, it was more was I capable of going back and doing all that would be expected of me, that was more my obstacle than the university system itself.

Support

Academic support

The participants in this study generally considered themselves to be exceptionally well supported academically and well beyond their expectations:

When I came into the programme here I was just amazed about how professionally it was run, the amount of communication that was happening, the support that the students got in terms of resources and also the fact that your feedback came very quickly and timetables were there you could just log on and get your timetables.

The effect of the academic support enabled the students to develop self-confidence and this finding concurs with a study undertaken by Murphy and Roopchand (2003) who suggested that if mature students new to university achieved good academic results and gained positive feedback, they grew in self-confidence and self-esteem and became increasingly motivated to study. This was a strong theme and women mentioned that they had achieved higher grades than they expected and they had found their success motivating:

when I got my first result back and I had done quite well then I thought ... I can do this and I am good at it.

In the reflective journal, the researcher considered the importance of academic success to the development of self-efficacy and recollected that throughout her own journey through university she had met people who had had problems coping academically. For one woman in particular a poor mark for an assignment had resulted in her doubting her abilities and feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of university study and managing the demands of her family. Instead of seeking academic support the woman had withdrawn from study (Reflective Journal, 10 September).

The women who participated in the study had developed successful academic strategies. However, there was a split in approach identified about sourcing help; some women were self-confident and stated “*if I needed help I knew where I could get it*”. Whereas others felt:

I never could bring myself to go and see a lecturer personally but a lot of the young ... everyone did but I actually felt that I was a bit nervous, I was a bit scared of doing that you know.

Other women developed in self-confidence as they progressed through the course:

When I very first started I think I felt the lecturers were on a higher plane than we were ... but when I actually got more comfortable being here and more involved in other people's research and I got to know the lecturers that way and I just felt more comfortable with them.

The students found that support developed their feelings of self efficacy, however, for some women, if they did not gain good academic results, they developed negative feelings relating to their abilities and were inhibited about seeking further support.

Sense of community

One of the key themes to emerge regarding transition to university revolved around lack of personal interaction with the university or more specifically with the psychology school. For the women the decision to return to study had been a difficult and complex one, for some it had involved several years of research and anticipation, for others it had involved giving up jobs, selling businesses; others had dramatically changed their personal circumstances, in order to study at university. The women found the application process was straightforward but acceptance at university represented the prospect of major change in these women's lives and they felt that this was not acknowledged:

I just remember getting a letter saying right you are accepted ... that was it, there was no more contact, nothing personal, no names and contacts of people to give you help and advice.

As Urquhart and Pooley (2007) found, most student cohorts recognise the need for social, emotional, and practical information support to help them through their university career. The same is true for the women in this study who reported their first interaction with the university to be distant and unwelcoming:

this was a major thing for me ...but they didn't even have my name on a list ... I think they could have done a lot more for some of the mature age students.

Although the academic support was considered to be excellent, a theme underlying this was that they were expecting that there would be some connection with the academic establishment of the university, as one woman said *"I suppose I wanted to feel welcomed and feel a part of it"*. A feeling of *"isolation"* and not knowing *"who to turn to, who to ask"* was identified.

Peer support programmes were rarely mentioned by the women and they were not acknowledged as being a source of support:

I know they have introduced mentors and I have phoned them up a couple of times and even that, it seemed like support but then it wasn't. You still felt isolated; the mentors were always busy as well ...

This feeling of lack of acknowledgement and anonymity from the department became apparent as one woman reflected upon people withdrawing; she commented *"you just don't see them again"*. This point strongly concurred with experience reflected upon by the researcher who remembered discussions with students, who when they felt conflict between family and study, and when their study was not going well, they made the point that there would be no-one at the university who cared or noticed if you never turned up to another lecture again. Because of this anonymity the easiest option would be to go *"back to what I was doing in my other career and ... family"* and walk away from university (Reflective Journal, 3 September). This was an area where the reality of their experience did not meet their expectations. And as one woman concluded:

being a part-timer no-one really knows you so if you didn't turn up or come back no-one would really miss you.

Social support

The importance of social support from other students to help mature age women students cope effectively with the demands of university has been well documented (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998). The mature age female students interviewed in this study had very little expectation for social support. They did not expect that they would make friends or engage in social interaction. Their expectation tended to focus on attending university, getting the work done and not being distracted by social contact. A theme that developed was that they expected there to be very few other mature age students and that they would be socially isolated:

I expected that I was going to be old and I was going to be in a class of kids who hadn't long been out of school and I wasn't sure that I would fit in.

The women underestimated the value of social support networks prior to commencing university but as they progressed through their courses most participants reported that they used social networks to exchange information on assignments and find out information about tutorials and lecture schedules:

I have made some wonderful friends and who have been very supportive you know – when there's deadlines for assignments, you don't know where you are going, you haven't got the right resources or you don't think you are on the right track.

In reflection, one participant who had mentioned that she had not expected to gain social support at university stated that her adjustment to university would have been easier if there had been more “connection” and:

more in terms of friendship and connection... and I think this didn't happen because there was nowhere to go and if there had been then people would have got to know each other.

If the students had not had access to social support, possibly because they had been studying externally, they were much more likely to recognise the importance that social networks have at university:

I think it is something they don't realise for the external studies how important it is that students are able to contact other students just to get that reaffirmation that you are on the right track and to normalise your experiences and that sort of thing.

Role Conflict

Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) reported on the complexity of the interaction that women face when juggling the demands of family, work and study and a major theme identified by the current study was the importance of family support. The women in this study all had children and planned their study around the needs of the family, in the majority of cases this involved them in part-time study; most of the women were willing to take longer to complete their degree and felt the need to reduce the impact that their studying had on the family:

my husband encouraged me initially ... but because I have always been at home he has worked full-time he hasn't had to think "what are we going to have for dinner" ... he was finding it a bit hard to cope so I just slowed it back down again and just went back to the two units. It took longer to finish the degree than I would have liked but obviously I had to consider everyone else.

An overwhelming theme was that they recognised that university study was fulfilling their needs for self-growth and personal development; hence they were willing to juggle their lives in other areas in order to continue their degrees but they could only continue if they felt that the needs of their families were being met.

Although their partners were generally supportive, this was demonstrated as a passive support:

I do get support when my schedule interferes with picking up kids and that sort of thing.

Their partners offered initial encouragement and financial support but the women felt that they had responsibility for nurturing their families and ensuring that that it was their role to rearrange their study to ensure that "everyone else" was considered. This factor alone placed considerable stress on the women. Their degrees took longer to

complete and they sometimes had to complete units externally when they realised that this was not the best way for them to study:

external studies are great but also – not great. Great in that it meant I could manage the family and still study and manage home but for a course like psychology which is about people ... it's not the best way of doing it.

A common theme found in the data was that although the women placed high priority on their studies this was not understood by their families:

I would say that he is not crazy about me studying at all ... And the kids ... I know they wouldn't care if I studied either and they are lots of work, you know teenagers, helping them with their homework ... So I can't say anybody is encouraging me to do this other than myself.

Most of the women felt that they had to “consider everyone else” and “everything is my responsibility”. There was also an implication, for some, that studying was something of an indulgence, “quite a selfish thing”. This finding highlights the complexity of role demands and concurs with the findings of Scott, Burns, and Cooney (1998) who found that women’s roles outside of university exert a strong influence on their experience of studying.

One important aspect of conflicting role demands placed on the students by family and work commitments, was that they often necessitated the mature age woman to reduce her study load to part time, this appeared to have the effect of increasing the student’s sense of isolation and reducing her opportunity to make social connections and feel a sense of connection with the university:

because I am only part-time, you know when you come with an intake and if you were doing full time you would go through those three years with the same people and you would feel a unity there and support knowing what each of us is going through.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate how life-stage and life-story related to mature age women's (between 40 to 49 years) decisions to return to university. Consideration was given to whether motivation affected development of expectations of university; whether the reality of university study met with these expectations, and did any discrepancy between expectations and reality lead to problems in adjustment? Motivation to return to university was linked to identity development and finding identity away from that defined by a woman's role as wife and mother. Life-stage also underpinned these women's decision to return to university, not so much by their developmental timeline based on Levinson (1986), but related to the ages of their children.

Choosing to return to university to study psychology was part of an evolving theme in the women's lives. This theme linked with the importance of achieving generativity, and became part of their life-story (McAdams, 2001).

For some women the decision to return to university occurred suddenly, based on the realisation that their children were less dependent, and they had an opportunity to define their identity away from the role of wife or mother. For these women, expectations of university were not based on detailed research and they tended to lack information of the processes of university learning. Reality of study differed from their expectations and this discrepancy had the potential to cause adjustment problems. For another subset of women their decision to return to study had been thoroughly researched. Expectations and reality were more evenly matched, and preparation involved analysis of their abilities to cope with university and their other roles.

The women in the study identified that university provided a higher level of academic support than they expected. This enabled academic success and increased their self-efficacy which assisted their transition into university. These findings were consistent with those found by Murphy and Roopchand (2003) stressing the importance of academic support in the development of self-confidence.

In contrast to academic support, more was expected from the university in terms of providing a sense of community. Some of the women interviewed had planned and prepared their return to university over a long period; even if it had been a sudden decision, return to study represented a major change in their lives and they expected more acknowledgement and welcome into the university community. This led to the women reporting a lack of connection with the university and they could envisage that if problems arose they would not know who to turn to for support, they could possibly withdraw and they felt that no-one would notice.

Most of the women had a low expectation for social support, however, as they progressed through the course they realised that they relied on friendships to help them gain information, normalise their experiences and support each other through difficulties.

The final theme identified was role conflict. The women reported that they felt that it was their role within the family to ensure that the family's needs were being met. In practical terms this meant that they could only justify studying at university if they reduced their study load to part-time or undertook external studies. This choice further reduced their opportunity to develop a sense of community and to form contact with social groups. At the onset of their study the women expected that they would be able to cope with study and the demands of their families, but for some women this expectation did not match the reality of studying and providing support to

their family. This concurs with the findings of Scott, Burns and Cooney (1998) who found that for women, their roles outside of university exerted a strong influence on their progress through university.

Limitations

There were some limitations for this study. For example the women who participated in this study all had children. It would be unrealistic to assume that all women in this age group, who attend university have children. However, it might be that women in the 40 to 49 year old range, who have children, are highly represented at university since their return to university may be related to their children's age and development. Consequently, the findings give a comprehensive insight into the motivations behind mature age women with children's decision to return to university and the consequent development of expectations. Further studies might be necessary to gather information across the full range of women in this age group.

A further limitation was noted by the researcher in the reflective journal (Reflective Journal, 10 June) when it was discovered that her own reasons for attending university only became clear to her as she reflected on the literature relating to mature age women at university. Due to the complexity of reasons for making the decision to attend university, the participants may not have had the opportunity to fully reflect on their answers to questions relating to this subject; the participants may have needed more time to consider their answers. Collecting data over two separate interview sessions was considered; unfortunately time constraints did not allow for this, however, future research might adopt this procedure.

Implications

The results of this study provide some practical implications for university administrators to address in their provision for mature age female students between

the ages of 40 to 49 years. Universities are funded on student numbers and it is therefore important for them to understand the motivations for target groups to attend university in order to produce effective marketing information. It is also important to retain students once they have enrolled at university, both in terms of reducing the individual's distress that withdrawal from university may produce; and in relation to the funding issues surrounding student retention.

It is suggested that careers counselling and course marketing material might be designed to give more specific information related to course content in order to help women make the correct choices when they recognise that they have a life opportunity to develop their identity away from home and children. This might entail a more specific individual careers counselling interview. Universities might also investigate providing a contact person from the academic staff to perform a pastoral tutor role and most specifically an entry to university interview. This would serve the dual function of providing personal acknowledgement to the mature age students that they have joined the university environment and hence they are welcomed and feel part of the university community and it would give the students a contact point if they felt that they needed to adjust their study load to facilitate their family commitments. The pastoral tutor might be connected to the peer mentoring system, with the peer mentors forming an intermediate link between the student and the lecturer, hence the new student has different levels of support open to them. This might further help in connecting networks or cohorts of mature aged women such that women know who else is within their cohort and can more easily develop social networks. A further recommendation involves practical support such as planning programmes that can be flexible to meet the needs of women as they juggle with their other roles and support they give to their families. This may involve flexible timetabling and delivery options.

Future Research

Future research would be useful to examine the experiences of mature age women who started university but withdrew from study. This would enable the researcher to investigate the reasons behind their decision to study and what factors influenced their expectations and what led them to withdraw from study. The findings from this research would assist in determining more specifically what universities could provide to address the problems of this group of students and further reduce attrition rates.

In conclusion the findings show that mature age women's motivations for attending university are related to the life-stage and life-story, and in studying psychology they place particular emphasis on defining their identity through generativity. The reasons behind their decision to return to study involve the women in formulation of expectations about university and their own ability to succeed academically and to manage other roles in their lives. If a serious discrepancy between their expectations and reality is found, this may put them at risk of withdrawing from study. The findings from this study are important for university administrators to develop an understanding of the expectations and needs of this group of students and this knowledge might be used in the implementation of strategies to improve retention.

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Appendix A

Research Participants Needed

I am investigating the experiences of mature age female students who are studying psychology at Edith Cowan University

I need your help if you are female, between 40 and 49 years of age, can spare an hour of your time and would like to participate in research – please contact me to arrange a time and place.

My name is Ruth Ayres and I am a student at ECU and my research is for my Honours Thesis.

Please contact me if you would like to be a part of this study.

**You can reach me by email:
rayres@student.ecu.edu.au**

**Alternatively contact me by telephone on
0413620084**

Appendix B

August, 2008

Information Letter

Experiences of Mature Age Female Students studying Psychology

My name is Ruth Ayres and I am an undergraduate student at Edith Cowan University. This project is being undertaken as part of the requirements of a Psychology Honours Degree.

Contact details:

Ruth Ayres Mobile Telephone Number: 0413620084
Email: rayres@student.ecu.edu.au

Supervisor: Dr. Andrew Guilfoyle
Telephone: 6304 5543
Email: aguilfoyle@ecu.edu.au

The aim of this project is to examine why mature age women decide to attend university, what their expectations of university are and whether these expectations are met. Understanding the issues that mature age women students face may help adjustment to university and assist in the design of student support programmes.

To take part in the research you must be studying psychology at Edith Cowan University, be female and aged between 40 and 49.

You will be requested to take part in one interview and will be asked a series of questions relating to your reasons for attending university and your experience of university. The interview should take between 1 hour and 1 hour 30 minutes and will be recorded on audio tape. The interview will be arranged to take place at a mutually convenient location between the researcher and yourself. Your identity will be protected and not published in any reports and measures will be taken to ensure that information will not be traceable back to you. The tapes and transcripts will be stored securely at the University site and after a 5 year period the tapes will be wiped and the transcripts destroyed by shredding.

Participation in the research is voluntary and there is no payment for involvement.

The research will involve discussion of motivations for, and expectations of studying at university. Some people will find this discussion positive and the results of the research may help identify better support services for students. However, it is possible that some people may find the discussion could cause some distress. Counselling of further support can be obtained from the Student Counselling Services, telephone: 9370 6706.

The results of the study may be published in reports, conference papers and journal articles. The results will not include any information which could identify any of the participants.

If you would like to take part in this research, please complete the informed consent document and return it to: Ruth Ayres, Building 30, School of Psychology, Edith Cowan University, WA 6027.

If you have any questions about the research or would like further information about the project please contact me, Ruth Ayres, telephone: 0413620084. Alternatively you could contact my Supervisor, Dr. Andrew Guilfoyle, telephone: 6304 5543 or the Fourth Year Co-ordinator: Dr. Justine Dandy, telephone 6304 5105. If you choose not to participate in the project no explanation or justification is necessary.

You are free to withdraw consent to be involved in the research project at anytime and with no explanation or justification. If you do withdraw from the research, you also have the right to withdraw information that has already been collected.

This project has been approved by the Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns or complaints about the research project and wish to talk to an independent person you may contact:

Dr Justine Dandy
Faculty of Computing, Health and Science
Edith Cowan University
100 Joondalup Drive
Joondalup WA 6027
Telephone (08) 6304 5105
Email: j.dandy@ecu.edu.au

Thank you for taking the time to consider helping with this research.

Ruth Ayres
Undergraduate
Edith Cowan University

Appendix C

August, 2008

Informed Consent Document

Experiences of Mature Age Female Students studying Psychology

Contact details:

Ruth Ayres Mobile Telephone Number: 0413620084
Email: rayres@student.ecu.edu.au

Supervisor: Dr. Andrew Guilfoyle
Telephone: 6304 5543
Email: aguilfoyle@ecu.edu.au

I have been provided with a copy of the Information Letter explaining the research study been undertaken in University Experiences of Mature Age Females and have read and understood the information provided. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have had all the questions answered to my satisfaction. I understand that if I have any additional questions that I can contact the research team at any time.

I have been informed that the research project will involve participation in an interview which will last approximately 45 minutes and will be audio taped. I understand that the information I give will be kept confidential and my identity will be protected. I am aware that the results of the research project may be published in reports, conference papers and journals but that confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

I have been made aware that I can withdraw from further participation in the project at any time and that I do not need to give any explanation or justification. There will be no penalty if I choose to withdraw consent for any previous information that I have given to be used in the project.

I freely agree to participate in the project.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Researcher:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix D

Interview Schedule

1. What were the factors determining your decision to come to University?
2. What were your expectations of University?
3. When you started University how did your experiences differ from your expectations?

Prompts

- Work load -
Degree of difficulty
 - Academic Support –
Practical
Informational
Emotional
 - Social
Friendships
Group Tasks
 - Family Support
Partner
Children
Parents
 - Career Prospects
4. What did you do when your expectations did not match up to your experiences at university?

 5. What could the University have provided which would have helped you to make the adjustment to university?

Appendix E
Reflective Journal

Date	Activity or Theme	Reflective Journal
10 May	Getting ideas for proposal	Purpose of research – Honours thesis – keep it real and do-able
15 May	Bracketing	<p>Just reading about phenomenological research – bracketing. My experiences need to be acknowledged:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I am a MA student 2. Female with children – my children older teenagers – do I relate to people with younger children. Am I assuming that all people my age have children – can't be so, but most MA people in age range do have children? 3. Previous degree – do I understand issues for people without prior knowledge of uni system – previous work in teaching – confident about my abilities – have I been accepting of people with less academic background and less confidence 4. Financial – well supported financially must reflect that for many people finance more a limiting factor 5. Work to support study but I can be very flexible as work for family business – this probably not experience of most people 6. Support from family - Husband generally supportive in theory understands study needs but would like study to fit in with work hours. Can't always be done. I still take on role of household organiser. Children – always expect their needs addressed before mine –?
3 June	Reflections during Reading Journals	<p>Erikson - generativity is this related to why women choose to study psychology – must be a link between feeling need to help people, do something for society etc.</p> <p>Think back to some people I have known – strong passion for trying to do something but sometimes not able to carry on because their family needed them more.</p>
10 June	Literature Review	<p>In researching for lit rev. discovered that my reasons for starting uni are different to those that I had always told people. Think that for me it was probably about finding my identity in Australia – I didn't go back to career that I had in UK and had focussed on settling everyone else. I think I needed to find identity here. Also about ages of children etc BUT will people know what their reasons are, it took me a long time and this research to really acknowledge this.</p>

11 June	MAStudent Meeting	Attended ECU meeting about MA students – realised that this is quite an important issue for uni and may generate quite a lot of interest. This affects my thoughts about writing it. In some ways it is good because I feel to do some research that is relevant is good, but I have to focus on how to present the information in best light. I have to consider psychology dept, ECU and perhaps wider readers. I suppose everyone should write for audience so I think this helps me to focus ideas. In general thought the meeting focussed on issues around flexibility of delivery and childcare etc – extreme issues for some people but did not encapsulate all MA students – more of a stereotype than I am thinking about.
9 July	Lit Rev	There is a real complexity in this issue – so many different themes and interactions that affect people's motivations. Planning how to write up review is very complex. I keep changing my mind. If it is so complicated I wonder how I am going to get the information from people.
10 Aug	Interview 1	I felt ridiculously nervous and probably didn't focus enough on building up rapport with the interviewee but was amazed when I read the transcript back and so much of what she said reflected the literature. Clear lead in to identity (role of wife and mother), role conflict. Issue of not knowing a lot about psychology came through – almost implication that idea to go to university came into head, thought oh yes always wanted to help people – I will do psychology – people feel they know what it entails but do they really? Strong ideas about academic support – better than expected.
17 Aug	Interview 2	Must concentrate more on putting interviewee at ease – made the mistake of carrying on talking after interview and this participant then relaxed and talked in depth about what she really felt – so I missed most of it in the transcript.
		Lots of conflict in motivation reported – do we have clear ideas about why we do things? Refer back to 10 June. Difficult to unravel as various contradictory themes came through and support from family and partner. Interesting not telling many people about uni. Again academic support better than expected.
3 Sept	Interview 3	Recurring theme of lack of knowledge of what studying psychology entails – ready to leap in to study but no great depth of knowledge of what was included in degree programme. Mentioned isolation and loneliness of study. Made me think about discussions we had had about if things were tough and you thought you couldn't go on would anyone notice. You could just disappear and would anyone at uni acknowledge that you had been part of the system. Very tempting to think sometimes

		well I could give up and go back to my old life – who would care? Does this link back to 17 Aug and not telling people about uni?
5 Sept	Reflection	Looking at transcripts – feel a great sense of awe and responsibility in writing up correctly to do justice to what people tell me. People very open but details are very complex and interpretation and analysis not straightforward but requires thought and care
10 Sept	Interview 4	Need to develop skills as interviewer as this woman really opened up towards end of interview but some of what she said was contradictory and I should have asked her to expand on her thoughts more. Am getting better at this but only when listen back to you sometimes realised that they have said something important and you picked up on something else and didn't revisit the other subject. A strong theme of seeing the opportunity to do something for herself when children were old enough, great growth in confidence as progressed through course. But again not a lot of knowledge of process of uni – jump in and find out. Academic support helped and encouraged her – developed her confidence as she went through. (Important theme). What would have happened if she hadn't got academic support? Real strength developed in this participant. Shows importance of support if she hadn't had it she would have been in real danger of finding uni not what she thought it would be. Memories of someone I knew early at uni she found work very hard and after getting poor marks she found herself overwhelmed by family and never saw her again. Would she had been able to carry on if had got better marks, better feedback about her work etc.
15 Sep	Interview 5	Strong difference to previous interviews – this woman had strong objectives and researched exactly what she wanted to do, had been waiting for 10 years to put her plan into practice and had clear direction about what she wanted to achieve and where she was heading. How does her story link into the essence of what others have been saying? Not sure – need more people to make things clearer.
19 Sept	Interview 6	Another story – very humbling – difficult journey through life taken by some people and still come to uni and want to succeed. Themes of lack of acknowledgement of uni – people want to be part of community and don't like loneliness.
23 Sept	Reflection	Difference between MA and students from school. Some seem to find Uni for young people and they don't feel part of it, others suggest that they are different and have different demands than younger students. Theme identified is that they want to be part of community of uni and are not finding this. How to reconcile differences

		between young students and MA? Can they be treated differently – must know that some young people have difficult circumstances but is there an argument for acknowledging the difference and treating them differently?
25 Sept	Interview 7	Another person with strong goal and motivation and clear ideas about why Psych (still surprised at Statistics content). Loneliness and support mentioned – external studies were described in detail and definite need for much more support.
27 Sept	Interview 8	Very self contained – willing to come to uni without any expectation for contact with others. Just want to do what was necessary for her personal journey. Reflect – find this hard to understand but must acknowledge that other people are like this – am I in danger of putting too much of my own interpretation on what is important. Read through findings and check.
3 Oct	Interview 9	A real strong motivation for return to study – involving career change and upheaval to life. Reflect – difference in this person's expectations to previous interviewee. Wants and expects strong interaction, clear expectations about what she expects from uni –if they are not met willing to fight for them. Reflect on the differences in participants. Difficult for uni system to address all needs – how can this be done?
12 Oct	Interview 10	Highlighted needs for sense of community to be established. Need for people to feel part of uni. Clear need for assistance from time to time to help MA students through.
15 Oct	Reflection	Some clear differences in student's reasons for attending uni – cannot be reduced to one essence. Individual differences play an important part – write up difficult. Check whether have been unduly influenced by people like myself – have ideas that reflect my own experience jumped out at me because I understand them or once I have identified a theme am I looking for evidence to support it and missing other interpretations. Re-read transcripts for this.
16 Oct	Reflection	Difficult if ideas expressed do not get recognition in the literature – does this mean that I have not acknowledged strong themes because I have not referred them back to literature. In thesis difficult to address issues that not included in literature review and this may have influenced development of my themes?? Have I ignored themes because they are not relevant to me? Difficult to assess.

Guidelines for Contributions by Authors

Adult Education Quarterly

Adult Education Quarterly (AEQ) is a scholarly refereed journal committed to advancing the understanding and practice of adult and continuing education. The journal strives to be inclusive in scope, addressing topics and issues of significance to scholars and practitioners concerned with diverse aspects of adult and continuing education. AEQ publishes research employing a variety of methods and approaches, including (but not limited to) survey research, experimental designs, case studies, ethnographic observations and interviews, grounded theory, phenomenology, historical investigations, and narrative inquiry as well as articles that address theoretical and philosophical issues pertinent to adult and continuing education. Innovative and provocative scholarship informed by diverse orientations is encouraged, including (but not limited to) positivism, postpositivism, constructivism, critical theory, feminism, race-based/Afrocentric, gay/lesbian, and poststructural/postmodern theories.

AEQ aims to stimulate a problem-oriented, critical approach to research and practice, with an increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary and international perspectives. The audience includes researchers, students, and adult and continuing education practitioners of many orientations including teachers, trainers, facilitators, resource persons, organizational developers, community organizers, and policy designers. Manuscript Submission: Maximum length for most manuscripts is 7,500 words. Title page should contain (a) title of manuscript; (b) full names, institutional affiliations, and positions of authors; (c) complete contact information for all authors including phone, fax, e-mail, and mailing address; (d) acknowledgments of formal contributions to the work by others, if any; and (e) statement of place and date of previous oral presentation of the paper, if any, and date of submission. The first page of the text should repeat the title and include an abstract of no more than 150 words. The name(s) of the author(s) should not appear on this or any other page of the text. For rules governing references and style, consult the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA; 5th edition) guidelines. Manuscripts should be submitted electronically to <http://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/naeq>. Authors will be required to set up an online account on the SageTrack system powered by ScholatOne. Essay reviews are commissioned by the AEQ editors, who welcome suggestions for topics and authors. Readers are invited to submit "To the Editor" responses to published articles or ideas reflected in AEQ.