

2015

Motherhood first: An interpretive description of the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at one regional university campus in Australia

Amanda Draper
Edith Cowan University

Recommended Citation

Draper, A. (2015). *Motherhood first: An interpretive description of the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at one regional university campus in Australia*. Retrieved from <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/1718>

This Thesis is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/1718>

2015

Motherhood first: An interpretive description of the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at one regional university campus in Australia

Amanda Draper
Edith Cowan University

Recommended Citation

Draper, A. (2015). *Motherhood first: An interpretive description of the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at one regional university campus in Australia*. Retrieved from <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/1718>

This Thesis is posted at Research Online.
<http://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/1718>

Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.
- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. Where the reproduction of such material is done without attribution of authorship, with false attribution of authorship or the authorship is treated in a derogatory manner, this may be a breach of the author's moral rights contained in Part IX of the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth).
- Courts have the power to impose a wide range of civil and criminal sanctions for infringement of copyright, infringement of moral rights and other offences under the Copyright Act 1968 (Cth). Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

**Motherhood first: An interpretive description of the experience of mature
age female students with dependent children at one regional university
campus in Australia**

Amanda Draper

2015

Doctor of Philosophy

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Regional Professional Studies (FRPS)

Principal Supervisor – Doctor Jennifer Sharp

Associate Supervisor –Associate Professor Wendy Giles

This page has been left intentionally blank

The declaration page
is not included in this version of the thesis

This page has been left intentionally blank

ABSTRACT

This study explored the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at one regional university campus in Western Australia, Edith Cowan University South West (ECUSW). These students are one of many student groups whose experience differs to that of more traditional students such as young, unmarried, and well-supported school-leaver students. Although all students enter university with experiences that make them valuable to the university institution, mature age female students with dependent children enter university with unique knowledge, experiences and attitudes making them potentially valuable contributors to their own and others' learning (Martins & Anthony, 2007). Whilst at university, these students often face unique challenges in balancing their time and energy between their multiple roles (White, 2008).

The timing of this study was important in response to the Bradley Report (Bradley, 2008) which was released in 2008, which stemmed from a review of Higher Education in Australia. This report recommended national targets of at least 40% of 25 to 34 year olds are to have a bachelor level qualification or higher by 2020 (Bradley, 2008). The Bradley report also recommended an increase in enrolments of non-traditional students, including those with a low socio-economic status (SES) and those residing in regional areas. Research focusing on these students is essential as the actual experience of these non-traditional students, mature age female students with dependent children, and their specific needs is significantly under-researched. Thus, the purpose of this study was to add to the existing and emerging body of knowledge related to the population of interest to inform, guide and improve decisions relating to future Australian mature age female university students with dependent children.

The methodology guiding this study was Interpretive Description, a second-generation qualitative methodology whose ancestry lies in phenomenology, ethnography and grounded theory. The purpose of this

methodology, which was developed by Thorne, Reimer-Kirkham and MacDonald-Emes (1997), is to guide the researcher in the exploration of the experiences of multiple participants in a particular social setting, such as attending university. The methodology facilitates the creation of a conceptual description capturing the themes and patterns conveyed by the participants (Thorne, 2008).

Data were collected from 32 participants who were involved in this study, with 21 participating in individual interviews and 11 participating in one of three mini-focus groups. Each of these 32 participants also completed the same 20-question demographic questionnaire. These methods supported the analysis of the participants' experience, resulting in a multi-layered conceptual description. The foundational layer of the conceptual description illustrates two complex and interrelated themes of expectations and management. The expectations theme included three aspects; students' academic expectations, expectations of the overall university experience and their expectations of time. The management theme included five aspects; students' management of time, family, well-being, money and other significant external factors. The interpretive analysis of these themes identified three protective coping concepts and one central concept forming the conceptual layers. The three protective coping concepts included having access to, and receiving appropriate support from others; sacrifices which were required or made by the student and others; and students' individual perception of their own university experience. Central to these protective coping concepts was the concept of "motherhood first" that was identified by the students as their primary social role, and that this role took precedence over other social roles, and influenced all aspects of their experience. This conceptual description synthesised the experience of mature age female students with dependent children who were studying at ECUSW, aligning with similar concepts highlighted for students with dependent children in existing literature (Estes, 2011; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; White, 2008).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although there are so many people who have travelled through this PhD journey with me, I would like to specifically thank those who I consider to be my support-team.

I would sincerely like to acknowledge my principal supervisor, Doctor Jennifer Sharp, for all her supervisory help and support. You were the encouraging supervisor when you needed to be and the most understanding at all times. Jennie, without your consistent efforts I would not have been able to finish this thesis, you made this overwhelming task achievable and I sincerely thank you. I would also like to thank you for being my friend, both my fun “have-a-laugh with” friend and my critical friend. This friendship is one that I cherish and shall carry with me. I would also like to acknowledge my supervisor Wendy Giles for all your assistance with the completion of this thesis.

I am incredibly thankful to all the women who have taken time out of their own lives to participate in my study. I felt privileged to have conducted this research with such an inspirational group of women. It was their willingness to share their experiences that has enabled me to examine the rich experiences of being a student and a mother at university. You have made my time conducting this research truly worthwhile.

I would like to acknowledge my children for being understanding when mum had to work “all the time” to complete this thesis. Andrew, Matthew, Nikita, James, Kandice and Noah, although having a large family has, at times, made completing this PhD difficult, being your mother was what motivated me in the first place. I strive to be your everything; your provider, your carer, your cook, your cleaner, your nurse, your educator, your role-model and I only hope that one day I may be your inspiration. It has not been easy doing a PhD, especially whilst being a single mother, and needing to work to support you all, but my hope is that when you are all a little older, you might look upon my efforts with pride to respect and understand the work that I have done.

Finally, I have had amazing friends and family along this journey who have listened, even when they did not understand, and have provided me with emotional support when I felt that this was all too much. To my family Mum, Dad, Jeff and Mike, and my friends Miro, Jody, Bobbie, Kerry and especially to Carol, for the life-time of friendship you have given me.

Together you form my support team and I sincerely thank you all.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	i
Acknowledgements	iii
LIST OF FIGURES.....	ix
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
Chapter 1 - Introduction	11
1.1 Chapter Overview	11
1.1.1 Background and justification	12
1.1.2 Aim of the study	15
1.2 Organisation of the thesis.....	16
1.3 Autobiographical statement	20
Chapter 2 – Background and Literature Review.....	25
2.1 Chapter overview	25
2.2 Existing literature	30
2.2.1 Higher education in Australia	30
2.2.2 Regional university students in Australia	33
2.2.3 Female students	36
2.2.4 Mature age students	37
2.2.5 Mature age female students with dependent children	39
2.3 Positive factors.....	42
2.3.1 Benefits of higher education	43
2.3.2 Motivators	44
2.4 Negative factors	45
2.4.1 Quality of the student experience.....	46
2.4.2 Personal reasons.....	48
2.4.3 Financial reasons	48
2.4.4 Competing commitments	49
2.4.5 Part-time and external enrolment.....	51
2.5 Background and literature review chapter review	51
Chapter 3 - Methodology	53
3.1 Chapter overview	53
3.2 Qualitative research.....	55

3.3	Interpretive Description methodology.....	56
3.4	Research process overview	58
3.5	Participant selection and recruitment	62
3.5.1	Sampling.....	62
3.5.2	Participant recruitment.....	67
3.6	Data collection instruments	70
3.6.1	Questionnaire.....	70
3.6.2	Individual interviews	71
3.6.3	Mini-focus groups	74
3.7	Data management.....	84
3.8	Data analysis.....	85
3.9	Credibility	88
3.10	Ethical considerations	92
3.11	Methodology chapter review.....	94
Chapter 4 –Profile of Participants.....		97
4.1	Chapter overview	97
4.2	Participant demographic information.....	99
4.2.1	Personal information	100
4.2.2	Academic information.....	108
4.2.3	Time commitment information	113
4.2.4	Financial information	118
4.3	Participants’ background from interviews and mini-focus groups.....	121
4.3.1	Previous academic and employment experience	122
4.3.2	Reasons for entering university	124
4.3.3	Reasons for continuing	126
4.3.4	Commitments and circumstances	127
4.4	Participants’ stories	132
4.4.1	Karen’s story	133
4.4.2	Barbara’s story	135
4.4.3	Meredith’s story.....	139
4.5	Profile of participants chapter review.....	141
Chapter 5 – Description of findings		144

5.1	Chapter overview	144
5.2	Quotable quote analysis	147
5.2.2	Quotable quote review	155
5.3	Conceptual description	155
5.3.1	Conceptual description outline	155
5.4	Expectations	159
5.4.1	Expectations overview	159
5.4.2	Expectations of time	160
5.4.3	Expectations of the university experience	168
5.4.4	Academic Expectations	182
5.4.5	Expectations theme review	194
5.5	Management	195
5.5.1	Management overview	196
5.5.2	Managing time	197
5.5.3	Managing family	206
5.5.4	Managing wellbeing	217
5.5.5	Managing money	224
5.5.6	Managing significant live events	234
5.5.7	Management theme review	240
5.7	Coping concepts	241
5.7.1	Support	242
5.7.2	Sacrifice	249
5.7.3	Perception	256
5.6	Central concept: Motherhood first	266
5.8	Description of findings chapter review	273
	Chapter 6 - Conclusion	276
6.1	Study overview	276
6.2	Discussion	280
6.2.1	Key themes	280
6.2.2	Central concept: Motherhood first	282
6.2.3	Coping concepts	288
6.3	Limitations of the study	303

6.4	Recommendations for future research	306
6.5	Concluding comments.....	309
	References.....	311
	Appendices.....	325
	Appendix A - Personal experience, expectation and biases	327
	Appendix B – Recruitment flyer	333
	Appendix C –Participant questionnaire	337
	Appendix D – Participant information sheet	343
	Appendix E – Statement and consent form	347
	Appendix F – Demographic information table.....	351

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1.1-1 Research into the Student Experience (Tight, 2012)	26
Figure 2.1.1-2 Structure of Chapter 2	29
Figure 3.1.1-1 Structure of Chapter 3	54
Figure 3.4.1-1 Research Process	61
Figure 3.5.1-1 ECUSW campus on the map of Australia	64
Figure 3.6.3-1 Mini-focus group structure	77
Figure 3.6.3-2 Mini-focus group discussion aid, example 1	79
Figure 3.6.3-3 Mini-focus group discussion aid, example 2	80
Figure 3.6.3-4 Mini-focus group discussion aid, example 3	80
Figure 3.6.3-5 Quotable quote in laminated speech bubble	82
Figure 3.6.3-6 Quotes in speech bubbles placed along bench.....	82
Figure 4.1.1-1 Structure of Chapter 4	99
Figure 4.2.1-1 Histogram of the ages of participants' children.....	105
Figure 4.2.3-1 Map of the South West of Western Australia.....	118
Figure 5.1.1-1 Structure of Chapter 5	146
Figure 5.3.1-1 Draper conceptual description....	157
Figure 5.3.1-2 Kember's causal network model	158

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.2-1 Participants' age	101
Table 4.2-2 Participants' entry into university	102
Table 4.2-3 Participants' marital status	103
Table 4.2-4 Selected participant information, married and single	104
Table 4.2-5 Number of dependent children	104
Table 4.2-6 Selected participant information, number of children	106
Table 4.2-7 Participation in paid employment, number of children.....	108
Table 4.2-8 Course enrolled.....	109
Table 4.2-9 Course load	110
Table 4.2-10 Attendance mode	110
Table 4.2-11 Attendance mode, course load	111
Table 4.2-12 Participation in paid employment, course load	1112
Table 4.2-13 Selected participant information, time on voluntary activities	114
Table 4.2-14 Selected participant information, time spent on own leisure activities.....	115
Table 4.2-15 Selected participant information, location of residence.....	117
Table 4.2-16 Selected participant information, income bracket	120
Table 5.2-1 Quotable quotes with mean ≥ 9	149
Table 5.2-2 Quotable quotes with a mean ≤ 3	151
Table 5.2-3 Quotable quotes with a standard deviation ≥ 2	154

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

Mature age female university students with dependent children are one of many student groups whose experience differs to that of other more traditional students, such as younger age, unmarried, well-supported school leaver university students without dependents. Mature age female students with dependent children are the focus of this study, which aims to add to the existing and emerging body of knowledge related to the population of interest to inform, guide and improve decisions relating to future Australian mature age female students with dependent children who will attend university. The timing of this study was important as in 2008 federal government policy directives, which stemmed from a review of Higher Education in Australia, recommended national targets of at least 40% of 25 to 34 year olds are to have a bachelor level qualification or higher by 2020 (Bradley, 2008). In addition, the Review of Australian Higher Education, known as the Bradley Report, also recommended that 20% of undergraduate enrolments be from low socio-economic status backgrounds by 2020 (2008). As many mature age female students with dependent children can be bracketed into one or both of these recommendation categories, this research is important as the actual experience of these non-traditional students, and their specific needs, is significantly under-researched. To understand the needs of these students and implement strategies to support and retain them in the tertiary education sector, it is essential that the experiences of mature age female students with dependent children are more comprehensively understood. These experiences include positive factors, barriers, challenges, and facilitators to university success. This study will contribute to the existing body of international knowledge in this field by providing a conceptual description of the experiences of mature age female students with dependent children at one regional university campus in Australia.

This chapter will initially provide a brief background into the existing body of knowledge, which will outline the justification for the study, rather than introduce a comprehensive literature review. A comprehensive literature review is provided in the second chapter of this thesis. Following this brief background and justification for the study, the aim and purpose of this study is outlined. This introductory chapter also provides a brief explanation of the structure of this thesis, providing a summary of the purpose and content of the remaining five chapters. Finally, an autobiographical statement about the researcher will conclude this chapter. This statement, which the researcher recognises as atypical in the introduction of a thesis, allows the researcher to provide the reader with initial insight into her own disciplinary heritage and her enthusiasm for the topic; both are consistent with the principles of the Interpretive Description methodology which has guided this study (Thorne, 2008).

1.1.1 Background and justification

It is important to understand the experience and needs of mature age female students with dependent children as assisting this student group to complete university contributes to meeting the participation and attainment targets of the Review of Australian Higher Education report which was led by Denise Bradley and is therefore known as the Bradley Report (2008). The participation and attainment targets outlined in the Bradley Report include recommendation two, proposing a national target that at least 40% of 25 to 34-year-olds have a bachelor level qualification or higher by 2020, and recommendation four, that 20% of undergraduate enrolments be from low socio-economic status backgrounds by 2020 (Bradley, 2008). As many mature age female students with dependent children can be bracketed into one or both of these recommendations, this research will add to the existing and emerging body of knowledge which aims to contribute to the attainment of these national targets.

Current researchers have identified that to help meet the government policy directives outlined in the Bradley Report (Bradley, 2008), research is required to explore the experiences of the contemporary mature age student (O'Shea, Stone, & May, 2014), including those students navigating the dual roles of student and mother (White, 2008). Despite a plethora of research into the difficulties regarding the access and success of female and mature age students at university (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2009; Cullity, 2006; Darab, 2004; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Plageman & Sabina, 2010; Ramsay, Jones, & Barker, 2007; Reay, Ball, & David, 2002; Steyn, 1994; Stone, 2008), there is a dearth of research detailing the experiences of mature age female students with dependent children, particularly in regional Australia. A body of knowledge focusing specifically on mature age female university students with dependent children has been developing internationally, and includes studies by White (2008) conducted in New Zealand and Griffiths (2002) conducted in the United Kingdom, both focusing on the experiences of pre-service teachers who are mothers. Similarly, Home (1998) conducted research in Canada focusing on the role strain of mature age female students with dependent children, adding to other Canadian studies into the lived experience of mature age female students with dependent children (Ajandi, 2011; Liversidge, 2004). These studies were complemented by studies in the United States of America focusing on psychological stress (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Swingle, 2013), the experience of mothering in college (Pare, 2009), the implications of the mothers' studies for the children's attitudes towards school (Ricco, Sabet, & Clough, 2009), and the experience of studying as a single mother at university (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Halem, 2004). In the United Kingdom, studies into student-parents have uncovered financial difficulties (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006), issues relating to support services available to students (Brooks, 2012), and the difficulties experienced by students, both male and female, with dependent children (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). In Australia, limited studies have been dedicated to mature age female students with dependent children, but include a study into postgraduate students who are mothers (Abbot-Chapman, Braithwaite, & Goodfrey, 2004), an eastern states study focusing on

attrition (Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1996), a doctoral study into the dual roles of post-graduate students (Bosch, 2013), a study into the decision making processes of mature age undergraduate students (Osborne, Marks, & Turner, 2004), and a small narrative analysis study focusing on the experience of three female students with pre-school age children in Western Australia (Welsh, 2003). As a result of the limited research available, detailed information on the experiences and difficulties of students who are mothers, particularly in Australia, has been extracted from the discussions of individual participants of other studies (Cullity, 2006; Darab, 2004; Osborne et al., 2004; Stone, 2008), rather than from entire study samples. This highlights a current gap in the literature which can be addressed by this study dedicated to mature female students with dependent children studying at one regional university campus in Western Australia.

This research also assists in addressing the recommendation by Western Australian researchers, Ayres and Guilfoyle, that further research be conducted which aims to validate the experiences of female mature age students to gain a broader understanding of how these students overcome problems that may otherwise lead to attrition. The findings from this research will add to the body of knowledge that can underpin decisions potentially improving the overall university experience for future students with children. These findings may also help inform the design of student support and counselling services to reduce future attrition rates (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2009; McInnis, 2001), and to assist universities to secure the financial benefits from the potentially improved completion of students' studies (Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003). In addition to these institutional benefits, more completions by mature age female students with dependent children, has potential personal, generational and national benefits (Murray, 2009; Osborne et al., 2004; Star & Hammer, 2008).

Finally, no similar studies using Interpretive Description methodology have been conducted into the experiences of students in the Australian university context, regardless of their parental status. Using Interpretive Description methodology, which is a second-generation non-prescriptive methodology, allows the researcher to create a detailed, coherent, conceptual description of the experiences of these students. The conceptual description that was created from this study was a multi-layer conceptual description containing a foundation layer – formed from the descriptive analysis of the two key themes that emerged in the study – in addition to the conceptual layers formed from the central concept and three protective coping concepts that emerged from the interpretive analysis of the data and the key themes. Therefore, this methodology in the discipline of tertiary education in Australia provides depth of description and understanding in the Australian context, addressing complex issues and experiences, some of which have been outlined previously using a phenomenological approach (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2009; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Ricco et al., 2009).

1.1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to produce a comprehensive, coherent, conceptual description of the experience of mature age female students with dependent children studying a coursework degree at one regional university campus, ECUSW in Western Australia. This aim directly related to the research question, which was to have students tell me, from their own perspective, about their experience as a university student. The key objective of this research was to find commonalities and differences between the experiences of female, mature age university students with dependent children. Further analysis of these commonalities and differences aimed to determine common themes and concepts that accurately reflect the experience of these students. A further objective of this study is to assist to address the gap in the existing body of literature relating to the experience of female mature age university students with dependent children studying in Australia.

The student group that this study aimed to explore were female, mature age students with dependent children. To be eligible to participate in this study participants needed to be aged between 25 and 44 upon entry to their course, a mother of a child or children under the age of 18 who still resided at home, living independently from their own parents, and currently enrolled at least partly on-campus in a coursework degree at the South West Campus of Edith Cowan University.

1.2 Organisation of the thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters. These chapters include this introductory chapter, four chapters constituting the body of the thesis, a concluding chapter, followed by references and appendices. This introductory chapter has provided a brief background into the study, outlining the justification for conducting the study in Australia at this point in time. The aim, research question and eligibility criteria of this study have been described, followed by this outline of the structure of the entire thesis. Finally, this chapter presents an autobiographical statement from the researcher, aimed at providing insight into her motivation and enthusiasm for conducting the study.

The second chapter, the literature review, provides a comprehensive review of the literature regarding female, mature age students studying at university. Existing gaps in the existing body of knowledge are identified in this literature review, including the limited studies relating directly to mature age female students with dependent children, and more specifically to students who are mothers studying at regional universities in Australia. As a result of this dearth of existing research focusing specifically on the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at regional university campuses in Australia, this literature review focuses on previous studies relating to female students, mature age students, the benefits of higher education, students' motivators for

entering university, and the difficulties and reasons for attrition from universities in Australia.

The third chapter of this thesis discusses the methodology underpinning this study. Initially, this chapter provides a background of both qualitative research and more specifically, Interpretive Description methodology, illustrating its purpose and use for guiding this particular study. Following this, a research design overview is provided showing the structure and flow of the study. At this point in the chapter, this chapter outlines the sampling criteria and recruitment of the 32 students into the study. Following this, the three data collection methods – the questionnaire, individual interviews and mini-focus groups – are detailed, with their purpose and use outlined. This chapter also outlines the considerations for data management, the process of data analysis, and the ethical considerations that were implemented to ensure the rigor, or credibility, of the study.

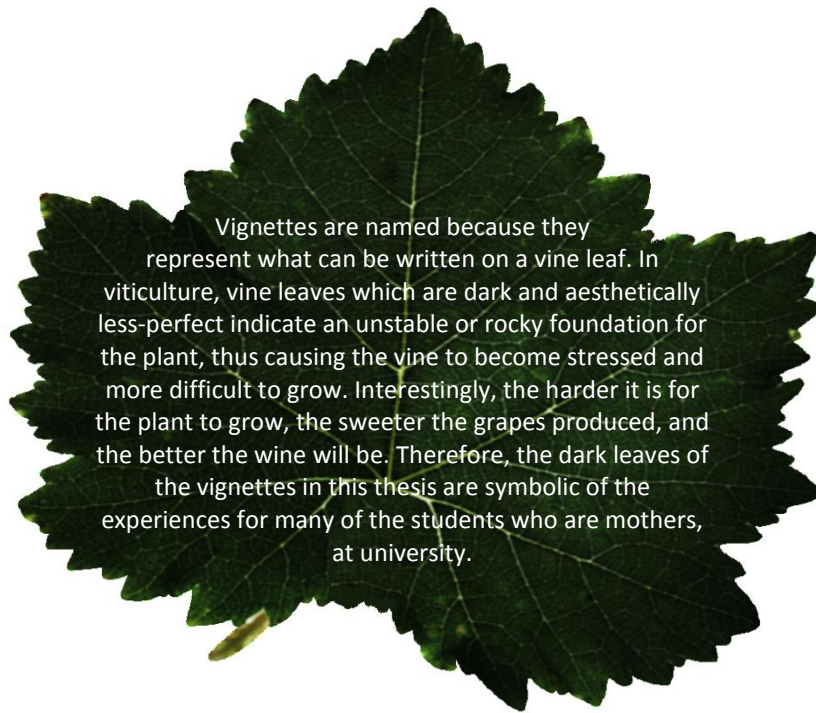
The fourth chapter of this thesis introduces the participants of this study. Initially, an overview of the participants' demographic information, received from the demographic questionnaire, is provided to give the reader some background into the demographic range of those students participating in this study. Although these data could be deemed findings in the design of many studies, these demographic data are used to describe and illustrate the participants in the study, with the demographic data not forming, or intending to form, part of the aims, objectives or findings of the study. Therefore, this demographic data is included in the participants chapter rather than in the findings chapter of this thesis. Following this, background is provided into participants' reasons for entering university, in addition to their reasons for continuing at university once enrolled. This background information was sourced from the rich data provided in the individual interviews. Similarly, this chapter

provides some background into participants' commitments and circumstances, which were also described during the interview process. Finally, this chapter gives a more detailed account of the stories of three of the 32 participants. These three stories aim to provide some depth of background and understanding into the broader experience of three different students participating in this study.

The fifth chapter of this study initially identifies the quotes extracted from the individual interviews, named in this methodology as quotable quotes (Thorne, 2008), and provides some confirmatory analysis of these quotes which was conducted through the mini-focus groups. Following this, the multi-layer conceptual description is introduced. The foundational layer of the conceptual description illustrates two complex and interrelated themes of expectations and management. The expectations theme includes three aspects; students' academic expectations, expectations of the overall university experience and their expectations of time. The management theme includes five aspects; students' management of time, family, well-being, money and other significant life events. Many of these life events are inherently connected to the participants' commitments and circumstances, as outlined in the previous chapter. The chapter then describes the conceptual layers of the multi-layered conceptual description. The first conceptual layer of the multi-layered conceptual description includes three protective coping concepts. These coping concepts included having access to, and receiving appropriate support from others; sacrifices which were required or made by the student and others; and students' individual perception of their own university experience. This third layer of the conceptual description centralised the concept of "motherhood first" as the participants primary social role that took precedence over other social roles, and influenced all aspects of their experience. Each of these three layers of the multi-layer conceptual description is illustrated in this chapter with the use of direct quotes from the individual interviews and mini-focus groups. The use of these participant's voices further illustrate the concepts and enhance the trustworthiness or credibility of the findings.

The sixth and final chapter of this thesis initially provides an overview of the study whilst purposefully not reiterating the contents of the entire thesis. This overview is followed by the discussion section, where the multi-layer conceptual description is discussed in conjunction with existing literature. It is here that the conceptual layers of the conceptual description are situated and contextualised within the Australian and international literature. Following the contextualisation of these concepts is a concluding statement. To conclude this thesis, a comprehensive list of the references used in the thesis is provided using the current American Psychological Association referencing style, commonly known as APA 6. Each of the six appendices is included at the end of this thesis.

To add further depth of understanding of these students' experience, vignettes (C1800) have also been used throughout this thesis. Vignettes are short pieces of writing that were traditionally named as they could be written on a vine leaf. For this reason, and to clearly delineate which quotes are the vignettes in this thesis, each vignette has been superimposed over a picture of a vine leaf. Traditionally, the content of vignettes can include, but is not limited to, prose, poetry, scripts and quotations, and are designed to provide a snapshot of an element of the work such as the mood, a character, the setting or an object (Murray, 2015). In this thesis, vignettes have been included to introduce the mood and to provide a level of setting to the section to be discussed. According to Clarke and Braun (2013), vignettes, typically involving hypothetical scenarios or characters, and are used in the writing of qualitative research to complement the readers' understanding of the information given. Consistent with this hypothetical structure of vignettes, the vignettes in this thesis are not quotations from participants rather they are composed elements of numerous conversations the researcher has had with students, staff and others during the course of this study.



Vignettes are named because they represent what can be written on a vine leaf. In viticulture, vine leaves which are dark and aesthetically less-perfect indicate an unstable or rocky foundation for the plant, thus causing the vine to become stressed and more difficult to grow. Interestingly, the harder it is for the plant to grow, the sweeter the grapes produced, and the better the wine will be. Therefore, the dark leaves of the vignettes in this thesis are symbolic of the experiences for many of the students who are mothers, at university.

1.3 Autobiographical statement

When it comes to the interaction of the researcher and the topic, Interpretive Description is a methodology in which it is accepted that the researcher is positioned within the ideas and context of the study (Thorne, 2008). This principle differs from that of other methodologies, including phenomenology for example, which expects the researcher to strive towards epoché through bracketing (Miller & Crabtree, 1999). When using Interpretive Description, Thorne considers that:

Interpretive description would require [the researcher to have] sufficient grounding in the discipline to be able to discern its scope and boundaries, its angle of vision on problems of concern, and its philosophical underpinnings in relation to what constitutes knowledge. This stance requires not only that one “owns up” to one’s disciplinary heritage, but also explicitly positions a new research question within it (Thorne, 2008, p.43).

Thorne further states that “... recognising that one’s very enthusiasm for a topic derives directly from a disciplinary interest in it becomes an essential aspect of the research forestructure and grounding” (2008). Therefore, although it is not typical to place an autobiographical statement in the introduction of a thesis, in the context of the Interpretive Description methodology guiding this study, including this autobiographical statement in the introduction allows the researcher to explicitly provide the reader with initial insight into her own disciplinary heritage and her enthusiasm for the topic. This research is not, and does not, contain elements of an auto-ethnographic study; rather, this researcher’s background has served to provide grounding to locate the discipline, and to set the boundaries and the scope, during the forestructuring of the study.

At the commencement of my Bachelor of Education, I was married with four children. My children were four, three, one and 16 weeks old when I decided to attend university and change career from working as a taxation accountant to having a career that I felt would be more family friendly. At the time when I enrolled at ECUSW campus, I lived a 45-minute drive from the university and was required to attend campus three days each week. During my first year at university my youngest child was diagnosed with a global developmental delay and was entered into an extensive early intervention program. In addition to these hardships relating to my son, I also experienced significant financial strain and worked packing supermarket shelves at night in order to support my family. During the progression of my undergraduate degree I, as a long-term foster carer, continued to study whilst fostering children, and in the final year of my undergraduate degree I was raising six children aged from one to 14. I continued working part-time at night whilst completing my 10-week, full-time Assisted Teacher Program (ATP) placement. At the time I did not have other family living in Western Australia. I consistently worked hard at my undergraduate degree, and completed my ATP with a High Distinction grade (HD) and the entire degree with the same HD overall course average.

This HD grade was then, and remains now, the highest mark available in the grading system for undergraduate degrees at ECUSW campus.

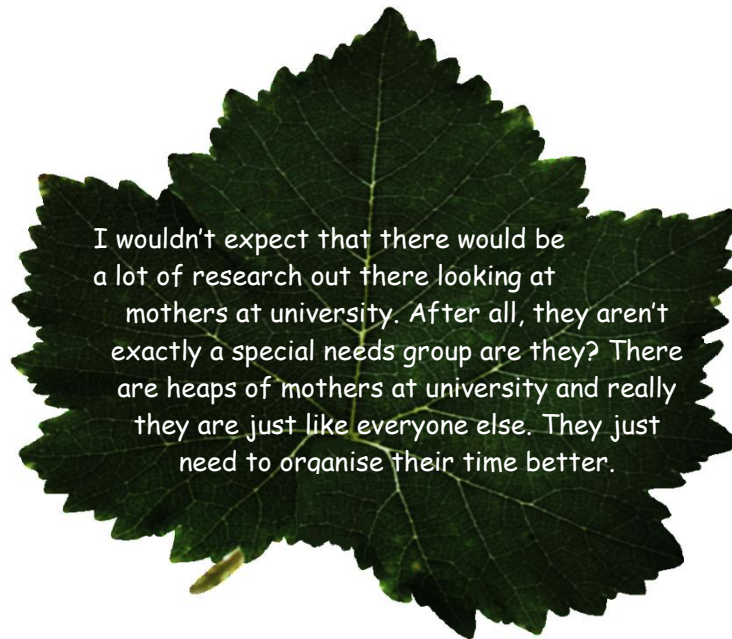
Following the completion of my undergraduate degree, I embarked on a post-graduate degree, a Master of Education. Whilst I was doing my Master's degree my youngest son was born, entering the world with a series of significant medical problems and in need of hospitalisation. He required extensive hands-on care, including the need for me to be awake for him hourly every night. It was also during this time that my then husband worked away, and we continued to have significant ongoing financial difficulties, which contributed to the irrevocable breakdown of our marriage. Despite varied and ongoing difficulties, I was proud to graduate from this postgraduate degree as a single mother with six children living at home and achieving a distinction average.

Throughout the completion of my undergraduate and postgraduate degrees many people, including fellow students and staff, would comment on how I was able to succeed at university given my multiple and significant life commitments. I am regularly asked for the magic formula by many mothers who wish to undertake an undergraduate degree, but feel that they may not be able to balance the requirements of being a university student with those of being a mother. To these questions I had only been able to speak of my own experience, and have never had a magic formula for success to share with others. This interest in my experience from others did, however, ignite my own interest in the experiences of mothers studying at university, thus motivating me to undertake this PhD.

Since beginning this PhD study the most common question I am asked is if this study is autobiographical; the short answer is “no”. I recognise that my experience has developed my interest and motivation to complete a study in this area, but also recognise that statistically I am an outlier. I recognise that few students are single parents with six children, especially with the added complications of having children with special needs or with foster children. Following the commencement of this PhD my life became even more complicated and difficult as my eldest son, who was then 10 years old, was diagnosed with cancer and was immediately hospitalised for the duration of his lengthy high-dose chemotherapy and recovery. This experience opened doors for me to speak of my experience and motivate others; and I became an ambassador for, and worked with, a number of cancer charities. From this I was nominated and won the Barnardo’s Mother of the Year award for Western Australia in 2011. These new experiences made me even more aware of how different my lived experience is from that of many mothers studying at university, and in many ways made it easier for me to define the role of my own experience in the research as one of motivation rather than one of knowledge.

At the conclusion of my PhD, I remain a single mother with sole custody of six school-aged children living at home. The children continue to have a significant amount of medical care but are all healthy and happy on a day-to-day basis. I continue to work to support my family and no longer have the significant financial pressures that I experienced during my previous degrees. My time conducting this study has opened my eyes to the amazing motivation and dedication that many students exhibit as they strive to complete their university degree. I feel privileged to add to the existing body of knowledge that may assist in the future success for mature age female students with dependent children.

Chapter 2 – Background and Literature Review



2.1 Chapter overview

Student experience in higher education is one area of interest that has been extensively researched world-wide. There are six sub-themes of student experience that are the most common focus of research, as illustrated in Tight's model, see *Figure 2.1-1 – Research into the Student Experience* (Tight, 2012). This study focuses on Tight's sub-theme of *the experience of different student groups* as shown in the same model. Research into different student groups often focuses on, but is not limited to, students with disabilities, and those who are mature age, part-time, off-campus, female, international, or from minority ethnic groups (Tight, 2012). The specific student group that was the focus of this study was female, mature age students with dependent children at one university campus, Edith Cowan University South West (ECUSW).

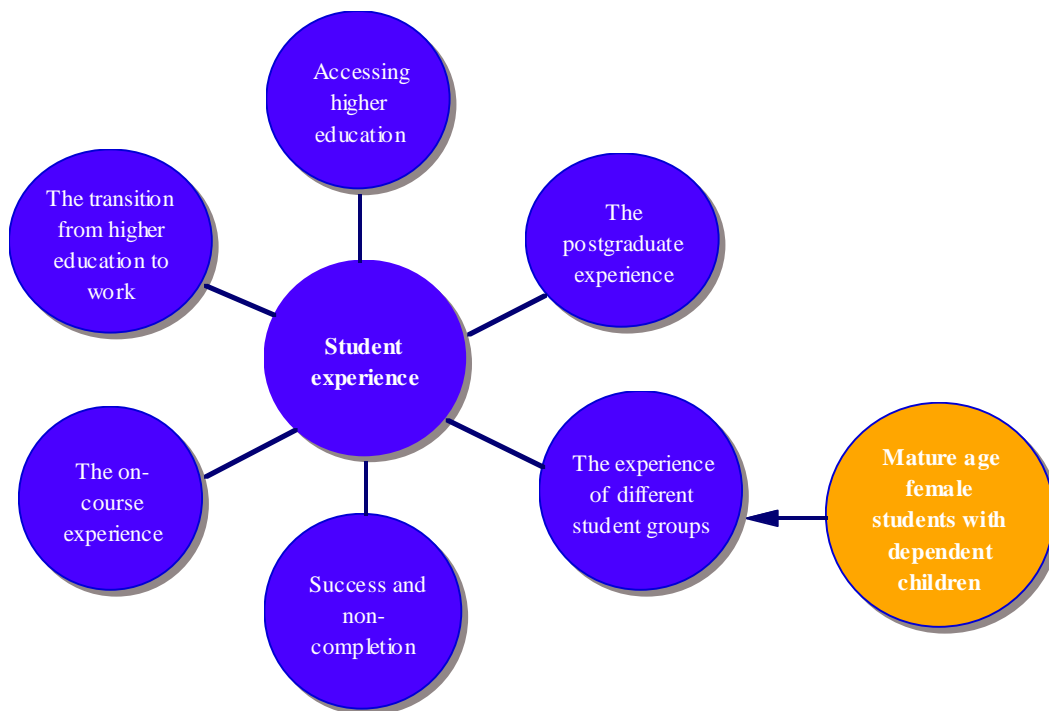


Figure 2.1.1-1 Research into the Student Experience (Tight, 2012)

Currently, there is a gap in the existing body of research in Australia relating to the experiences of mature age female university students with dependent children. Numerous Australian and international studies (see for example, Abbot-Chapman et al., 2004; Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Britton & Baxter, 1994; Candy, 2000; Cantwell, Archer, & Bourke, 2001; Cullity, 2006; Gallacher, Crossan, Field, & Merrill, 2002; Gonzales-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009; Johnson & Watson, 2004; Kahu, 2013; Kantanis, 2002; Kirby, Biever, Martinez, & Gomez, 2004; Leder & Forgasz, 2004; Lewis, 2009; McGivney, 2004; Montgomery, Tansey, & Roe, 2009; Ramsay et al., 2007; Stone, 2008; Trott, 2007; Young, 2000) relate directly to mature age students, but did not look specifically at female students or mature age female students with dependent children. Fewer Australian and international studies directly relate to female mature age students (for example Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Darab, 2004; Hennen, 2002; Kevern & Webb, 2004; O'Shea, 2007; Plageman & Sabina, 2010; Reay et al., 2002; Steyn, 1994), again not focusing specifically on mature age female students with dependent children. A number of studies have emerged internationally specifically focusing on mature age

female students with dependent children, including two studies conducted in the United Kingdom (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006; Griffiths, 2002); six studies conducted in the United States of America (Austin & McDermott, 2004; Halem, 2004; Pare, 2009; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Ricco et al., 2009; Swingle, 2013); two studies undertaken in Canada (Ajandi, 2011; Liversidge, 2004); one study from Europe (Engler, 2013); and one study conducted in New Zealand (White, 2008). In addition, two studies have been conducted in the United Kingdom and the United States of America focusing on students of either gender who are parents (Estes, 2011; Wainwright & Marand, 2010). However, considering the potentially significant international population of mature age female students with dependent children studying at universities, the body of international research detailing the experiences of female mature age university students with dependent children remains limited.

In Australia, four documented studies reflect the research into the experiences of mature age female students with dependent children studying at universities in Australia. In descending chronological order; first, one recent doctoral study by Bosch (2013) explored the experiences of post-graduate female mature age students with dependent children in the state of Western Australia. Second, was an honours study also conducted in the state of Western Australia that focused on three participants with pre-school aged children studying on campus at Edith Cowan University South West (ECUSW) located in regional Australia, (Welsh, 2003) incidentally conducted on the same campus as the current study. Third, was a well-documented study illustrating the motivations for attending, and reasons for student attrition, for female students with children, enrolled in a university in the state of New South Wales. Finally, a study by Kember (1999) was conducted into the integration of work, family and social commitments for part-time students, which was only partially conducted in Australia.

Considering the dearth of literature relating specifically to undergraduate mature age female students with dependent children, this literature review also relies on the examination of studies relating to female students and mature age students. With the exception of the aforementioned studies focusing on students who are mothers, the references to mature age female students with dependent children in this literature review have been extracted from participants' accounts from documented descriptions given in these qualitative studies, rather than from the findings of these studies. Study areas, which are examined in this literature review, include studies of female students, mature age students, the benefits of higher education, motivations for university entry and the difficulties experienced by different students. This need to extract information from the body of a variety of studies further outlines the need for studies specific to mature age female students with dependent children to be conducted in Australia.

In 2014, female students constituted 55.6% of the total higher education population in Australia, whilst mature age students constituted 41% of the same population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014b). This large population of higher education students who are both female and mature age are likely to be severely affected by attrition (Lukic, Broadbent, & MacLachlan, 2004). Highlighting the experiences of mature age female students is important as attrition rates for Australian mature age students have been shown to increase with age; 16.1% for students under 19, 25.3% for students aged between 20 and 24 years, and 36.3% for students aged over 25 (Department of Education, 2014). In addition to age, these attrition rates are affected by other factors such as attendance mode, basis of admission and paid employment (Department of Education, 2014), all of which are important factors for female mature age university students with dependent children.

This chapter begins by focusing on higher education in Australia, describing two important aspects which are referred to in this thesis; the Bradley Report and the Higher Education Contributions Scheme (HECS). It then looks at the existing literature focusing on regional university students in Australia, female students, mature age students, and the existing literature that specifically focuses on mature age female students with dependent children. Following this, as shown in *Figure 2.1-2- Structure of Chapter 2*, positive aspects of higher education for students are reviewed, including the current literature on the benefits of higher education, and the various motivations for female, mature age students entering university. Finally, this chapter focuses on the five major negative attrition factors for students in higher education in Australia (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000).

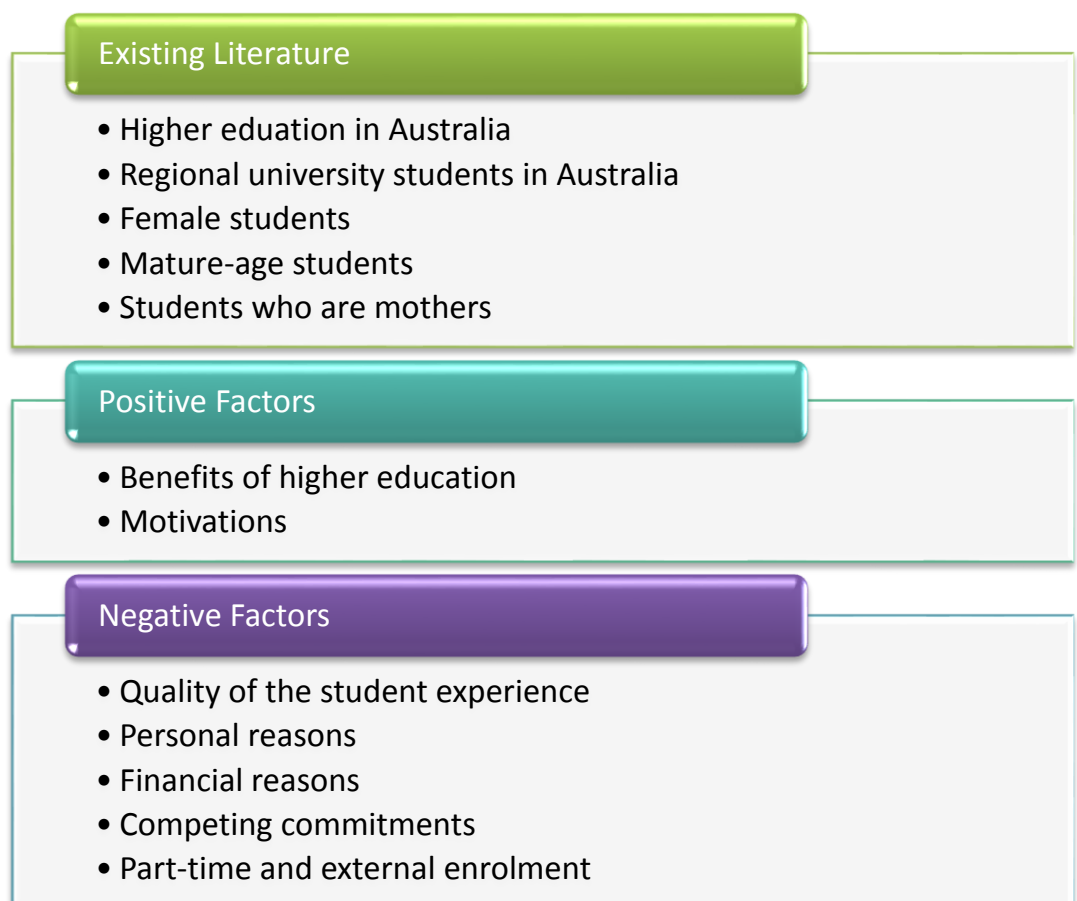


Figure 2.1.1-2 Structure of Chapter 2

2.2 Existing literature

This section focuses on the existing literature relating to mature age female students with dependent children at university. As previously discussed, there is a dearth of literature available specifically focusing on the experience of students who are mothers studying at university in Australia. This dearth of literature is possibly contributed by Australian universities not collecting demographic data on the parental status of students upon enrolment. This section begins with an overview on higher education in Australia, followed by regional university students in Australia. Following this, the available research relating to female students, and an overview of the current literature relating to the experiences of mature age students is provided. Then, a more detailed focus is placed on the existing literature relating specifically to the experiences of mothers studying at university. This focus on the literature relating to the experiences of mothers initially provides background relating to the limited studies conducted in Australia, followed by those conducted internationally.

The purpose of this section is two-fold. First, it provides an overview of the current literature on female, mature age students at university, including those who are known to have dependent children. Second, this section demonstrates the relevant gap existing in the current literature intended to be partially addressed by the findings of this study.

2.2.1 Higher education in Australia

The Final Report of the Review of Australian Higher Education chaired by Professor Denise Bradley has recommended a major expansion for access in higher education training in Australia (Birrell & Edwards, 2009). Known as the Bradley Report (2008), the Review of Australian Higher Education recommends an overall target increase in enrolment which will achieve an increase in the share of 25- to 34-year-olds holding a bachelor degree or above to 40 per cent by 2020. This achievement target, based on similar European higher education

targets in Sweden, the UK, Germany, Ireland and Finland, was also based on the projected needs of future job markets which are said to require "higher levels of skills, qualifications and experience" (Bradley, 2008, p.180).

In addition, the Bradley report (2008) recommends an increase in the participation rates of under-represented groups. Two of the most under-represented groups outlined in the Bradley report are those from low socio-economic backgrounds and those from regional locations. Bradley shows that the participation rates for students from regional locations in Australia have worsened from 18.7% in 2002 to 18.1% in 2007 (Bradley, 2008). This recommendation aims to encourage university participation from non-traditional students, including those with a low socio-economic status and those from regional areas. These non-traditional students differ from traditional university students in Australia who are typically full-time, recent high school graduates who have attained good grades. Furthermore, traditional students are often from high socio-economic backgrounds, who according to Munro (2011) are more likely to have a higher level of cultural capital to better equip them for their university education.

The method of entry for traditional students has been through the achievement of secondary school university entrance exams, assessed in Western Australia through the Tertiary Institutions Service Centre (TISC) and referred to as the Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR). Introduced during 2009 and 2010, students' ATAR is a ranking between "below 30" and 99.95, upon which universities, through the use of TISC, assess school-leaver tertiary admission. The widening of access to universities in Australia began in the 1960's with the introduction of the notion of life-long learners, aligning with the decision of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to encourage university access to non-traditional learners (Bagnall, 2006). To facilitate this widening of access to previously under-represented groups,

universities introduced alternative entry programs to provide mature learners with admission criteria allowing them to participate in higher education (Cullity, 2006). Alternative entry programs were required for universities to recognise and increase the acceptance of non-traditional qualifications as a method of university entry (Cantwell, 2001). In terms of mature age participation in higher education, Australia, along with New Zealand, Sweden, Finland and the UK, offer more opportunities for adults to enter higher education than other countries (Schuller, 2006). Furthermore, Australian mature age students are more likely to enter university through an alternative entry program (Cantwell et al., 2001). At the focus campus for this research, Edith Cowan University South West (ECUSW) alternative entry programs include the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT), the University Preparation Course (UPC), the Indigenous University Orientation Course (IUOC), the recognition of qualifications gained through Registered Training Organisations (RTO) such as Training and Further Education (TAFE) centres and portfolio entry which allows university entrance based upon a portfolio of evidence in conjunction with proof of English competency.

In Australia, most domestic students who attend Australian tertiary education institutions receive a Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP) (Birch & Miller, 2007) and as such are required to pay a part of the cost of higher education tuition fees, known as their "student contribution". To assist students to pay this student contribution, Government loans and subsidies are accessible for the majority of Australian citizens. Two such loans paid directly by the Commonwealth government to the universities are the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) and the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP). Both HECS and HELP loans are interest free government loans, indexed with the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and are available to Australian citizens to assist with the payment of their student contributions. HECS and HELP loans are both income contingent loans (ICL) (Chapman, Higgins, & Taylor, 2009) where students are required to commence the repayment loans to the Commonwealth government through the taxation system when the student earns in excess of

\$53,345 (2014-2015) (Birch & Miller, 2007). In addition to receiving this loan assistance with higher education student contributions, qualified students may also be entitled to Commonwealth income support payments through the federal government welfare system, Centrelink, with payments such as the Austudy Payment, for those students with children over eight years of age, or the Pensioner Education Supplement (PES) for those in receipt of a single parent pension or carer pension with at least one eligible child who is either under the age of eight years, or who meets another eligibility requirement. These Commonwealth support payments are both means and assets tested and do not require repayment. Further financial assistance is available to a limited number of eligible students in the form of scholarships, often available through the university. Chapman, Higgins and Taylor (2009) argue that the financial assistance available to mature age students in Australia is inadequate, thus restricting the choices for those with dependent children and other financial burdens. Financial considerations significantly affect students decisions surrounding university including attendance, choice of university, mode of study and choice of course (Ng, Shirley, Willis, Lewis & Lincoln, 2015; Long & Hayden, 2001).

2.2.2 Regional university students in Australia

Australia is a vast country with a land area of 7.7 million square kilometres (3.0 million square miles), making it the sixth largest country in the world. Western Australia is the largest state of Australia with a land area of 2.5 million square kilometres (1 million square miles), (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014a) which is approximately 33% of Australia's land mass. Despite this large area, Western Australia is home to only 2.6 million of Australia's 23.5 million residents, or 11% of the total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014a). This population distribution is comparable with the 10% of Australia's university students who are currently enrolled in Western Australian universities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014b).

Regional universities in Australia account for 19% of the higher education population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014b). Edith Cowan University South West (ECUSW) campus is both a small regional campus in Western Australia, and the focus campus for this study. ECUSW is located in the south-west region of Western Australia and had a total of 996 student enrolments in 2014 (ECU pocket statistics). These 996 students at ECUSW campus were predominately domestic students, with only 19 enrolled international students (Edith Cowan University, 2014).

Despite these low enrolment numbers at ECUSW, the inclusion of higher education students in regional university campuses is important, as higher education attainment is achieved by fewer people in rural and regional areas of Australia when compared to those in metropolitan regions (Alston & Kent, 2003). Therefore, the importance of access to higher education for people in regional and rural Australia was formalised as a recommendation of the Bradley Report (2008). According to Baxter, Gray and Hayes (2011) the lower numbers of higher education attainment in rural and regional areas in Australia may be somewhat expected considering rural parents have lower expectations for their children's future formal education than parents residing in major cities (Baxter, Gray, & Hayes, 2011; Vines, 2011). Students living in regional and rural areas of Australia also experience difficulties relating to campus access and campus inclusion, which can ultimately affect their university success after enrolment (Alston & Kent, 2003; Baxter et al., 2011). Furthermore, many regional university students experience difficulties with travel to and from campus (Alston & Kent, 2003), and financial difficulties and considerations, including living expenses, university expenses, travel expenses and loss of potential earnings (Alston & Kent, 2003; Fleming & Grace, 2014; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). Managing financial difficulties are identified as particularly important for regional university students who experience severe financial and accommodation difficulties when required to

travel for practicum placements, which is a requirement for the majority of courses offered on the ECUSW campus (Halsey, 2005; Lock et al., 2009). Furthermore, existing financial assistance schemes, such as Commonwealth welfare Centrelink payments, have been deemed inadequate for mature age students studying at university, in particular for mature age students with dependent children (Chapman et al., 2009).

Regional universities in Australia have a larger proportion of students studying partially, or fully, online (McInnis, 2003) than metropolitan campuses. Furthermore, regional universities have a higher proportion of mature age students when compared with metropolitan universities (Fleming & Grace, 2014). Both studying off campus and studying as a mature age student are two factors that can reduce the academic and social connection students have with their university campus (Benlanger & Madgett, 2008; Tones et al., 2009). Improving personal interactions between students and academics is essential to the learning process for regional students (Attwood, 2009) as effective, people-based, learning is the key to success for many otherwise isolated students in regional higher education (Evans, 2013).

Enabling students from regional and rural areas in Australia to succeed at university is essential as it assists Australia to meet the federal government's targets for higher education, which were set out in the Bradley report (2008). To further their higher education, many rural and regional students relocate to metropolitan areas; however, assisting students to study at regional university campuses can assist entry and be beneficial to these students. Regional university student populations are different to metropolitan student populations as they are more likely than their metropolitan counterparts to be female, older, and care for dependent children (Fleming & Grace, 2014). More so, there is a societal gain for regional communities when students complete their studies at

regional university campuses, as they are more likely to remain in these regional areas for future employment (Fleming & Grace, 2014).

2.2.3 Female students

Various government policies and fee changes have been introduced into Australia's federal and state government policies during the last century to increase Australia's participation in higher education, particularly for female students (Laming, 2001). Prior to 1987 there were fewer female than male students participating in higher education in Australia (Booth & Kee, 2010); however, partly as a result of policy changes, the female student population has risen from 19.7% in 1952 to 56.6% in 2014, with female students having consistently outnumbered male students in Australian universities since this gender shift occurred in 1987 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014b; Booth & Kee, 2010). This is consistent with the global trend towards female higher education, as 15 out of the 17 countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) now have higher female than male enrolment at tertiary level (OECD, 2008). Despite this, the number of students completing a bachelor degree or higher in 2010 was proportionately lower for females than males, with a 6.4% difference overall (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014b).

In 1911, female students accounted for 21.9% of the university population in Australia, a figure which had risen to 29.3% by 1921 (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000). Female participant rates remained around 30% until the 1940s when the Curtin government introduced measures to increase university participation in Australia, including the Commonwealth Financial Assistance Scheme (Booth & Kee, 2010). This scheme, introduced in 1943, aimed to increase participation in higher education and research, and was significant for women as they were able to access university scholarships for the first time (Laming, 2001). As a result, the female proportion of university enrolments

increased to 39% in 1944 (Booth & Kee, 2010). In this same year, in response to the demand to retrain returned war veterans, the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme (CRTS) was introduced. Prior to these schemes in 1943 and 1944, the government had played a negligible role in Australia's tertiary education, and the introduction of the CRTS resulted in university enrolments doubling between 1944 and 1947 (Laming, 2001). The implementation of the CRTS caused an influx of predominately male students, and as a result, the proportion of female students initially reduced sharply to 24.4% in 1946, further declining to 19.7% in 1952.

Although the proportion of female students increased gradually over the following two decades, this population remained under the 1920s and 1930s rate of 30% until 1971 (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s there was a significant increase in the percentage of female enrolments at university (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2000). In 2014, female students constituted 55.6% of the total higher education population in Australia, whilst mature age students constituted 41% of the same population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014b). According to Booth and Kee (2010), this increase could be attributed to a combination of three major factors: the inclusion of Colleges of Advanced Education (CAE) in universities, which traditionally trained pre-service nurses and teachers; the increase in unemployment from a 20-year average of around 2.0% to 9.98% in 1980; and the abolition of university fees in 1974 by the Whitlam government. As a result, there was an increase in female students in Australian higher education over the 1970s and 1980s, with gender parity achieved in 1987 (Laming, 2001).

2.2.4 Mature age students

Mature age students also represent a significant proportion of the Australian university population (Stone, 2008). Universities define mature age students as

students who are more than 21 years of age, and who are not immediately following full-time secondary schooling (Abbot-Chapman et al., 2004; Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Cantwell et al., 2001; Cullity, 2006; Gonzales-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009; White, 2008). Many studies refine this further by defining mature age students as those over 25 years of age (Steyn, 1994; Stone, 2008; Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009), whilst some studies define mature age students as those in a different stage of life than school-leavers (Darab, 2004). The mature age student population is diverse, encompassing a much wider age range, and experiencing a wider variety of motivations, needs, expectations, difficulties, and experiences than their school-leaver counterparts (Britton & Baxter, 1994; Stone, 2008). Thus, the mature age student population should not be treated as a single homogeneous group (Cullity, 2006; Osborne et al., 2004; Richardson & King, 1998).

The proportion of mature age students, defined in this thesis as those over 25 years of age upon enrolment, was 26% in 2014 for students enrolled in a bachelor degree, and 40% for all students including undergraduate, post-graduate and research students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014b). Mature age students, including those with children, enter university with a different array of personal circumstances than school-leavers. As 69.5% of Australian women give birth between the ages of 25 and 44 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008), the students within this age range are the most likely to be navigating the dual roles of student and mother. In 2014, this proportion of university students who were both female and aged between 25 and 44 was 18.9% of all Australian university student enrolments (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014b). This proportion of students is significant, as female students, who were aged between 25 and 44 upon enrolment, were two of the criteria for participant inclusion in this study. It must be noted, however, that universities in Australia do not currently collect demographic information on the parental status of students. Therefore, accurate statistics are unavailable for the numbers of students with dependent children, studying at universities in Australia.

2.2.5 Mature age female students with dependent children

Internationally there is limited research focusing specifically on the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at university, with even fewer studies conducted in Australia. One recently completed research project in Australia was a PhD study conducted by Bosch focusing on the experience of 14 Australian postgraduate students who are also mothers (Bosch, 2013). The participants of this study had both dependent children and non-dependent adult children with the ages of the children ranging between five months and 38 years. This mixed-methods study incorporated a qualitative narrative analysis and the quantitative Q-method, to examine the experience of these students at university. Three major findings arose from the qualitative narrative study. First was that the experience of studying at postgraduate level was essentially a positive one; second, that these postgraduate students were primarily motivated by a desire for personal achievement and self-satisfaction; and third, that students benefitted from their studies by increased self-esteem, an increased sense of professional identity, and positive influences on their children (Abbot-Chapman et al., 2004).

One small narrative analysis study by Welsh (2003) was conducted as the basis of an honours program at the same university, and on the same campus, as this study was conducted. Again focusing on the experience of postgraduate students, this study involved an auto-ethnography and a narrative analysis of two further participants. Each of the three participants in Welsh's study were mothers of younger pre-school children or babies. The themes outlined in this study included the need to bring children on campus, the attitudes of other students and staff towards the student, the students' need to balance their multiple roles, issues relating to breastfeeding on campus, and financial issues for the students (Welsh, 2003).

A New South Wales study was conducted researching the reasons for discontinuation of their studies by mature age female students with children (Scott et al., 1996). This quantitative study involved 118 students, with 73% of participants having dependent pre-school or school aged children. This study found that the six most frequently used reasons for discontinuing study for those students who were mothers were family responsibilities, work responsibilities, practical difficulties, financial difficulties, lack of support from family members, dissatisfaction with the course, and lack of academic feedback (Scott et al., 1996).

In addition to these three dedicated Australian studies, a body of knowledge is emerging internationally focusing specifically on university students who are mothers. One is a qualitative study by White, conducted in New Zealand focusing on the experiences of six pre-service teachers who were also mothers (Laming, 2001). This study found that mature age female students with dependent children typically experience difficulties sharing themselves between their studies and people such as their children, partners, extended families, university peers, and lecturers. Thus, similar to the Australian findings from Bosch (2013), this study highlighted the strong motivation students had to succeed, and the impact their studies had on their children and families (Bosch, 2013; Laming, 2001). The influence that university studies had on the dependent children of mothers at university was investigated in a USA quantitative study by Ricco, Sabet and Clough (2009), which found that the dependent children of mothers at university have increased motivation and self-regulation when it comes to their own primary and secondary education.

Home (1998) conducted a quantitative study in Canada focusing on the role strain of primarily postgraduate students who were either mothers or had other significant caring responsibilities. This role strain included the significant impact

of role overload, role conflict and role contagion that was experienced by the vast majority of participants in the study. This research has more recently been followed by a quantitative study in the US (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006) that focused on the factors influencing the wellbeing of undergraduate students who are mothers, including psychological distress, low self-esteem and low life satisfaction. Stress, role conflict and coping were also the focus of a further study in the US investigating the experiences of college students who were mothers (Swingle, 2013).

In the US, a qualitative doctoral study was conducted by Pare focusing on the experiences of 16 undergraduate and postgraduate students who were mothers (Pare, 2009). This study outlined the need for the prioritisation of the motherhood role, the importance of support for the student, and difficulties experienced by the student when balancing multiple roles. Haleman (2004) similarly conducted a qualitative study in the US into the experiences of 10 undergraduate students who were also single mothers and in receipt of welfare payments. The findings of this study were similar to the findings of a Canadian study into the experiences of single mothers at university (Ajandi, 2011), finding that these mothers' primary motivation for higher education was personal growth and role-modelling educational success for their children.

In the United Kingdom studies into mature age female students with dependent children have uncovered similar themes relating to role modelling, balancing multiple roles, and the difficulties experienced by students who are mothers (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006; Griffiths, 2002; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). The qualitative research conducted by Gerrard and Roberts (2006) involving 12 undergraduate students who were mothers, found that financial difficulties and the effect on the family unit of the mother studying were the most significant issues for mothers studying at university. Griffiths' qualitative research, including

19 participants, identified childcare, domestic difficulties, and changes in family life as major constraints for students who were mothers studying postgraduate degrees at university (Griffiths, 2002). Finally, the quantitative research conducted into the experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate students by Marandet and Wainwright (2010), also conducted in the UK, found that time, finance, childcare, confidence, skills and a sense of belonging were the most significant factors for parents studying at university.

Of the aforementioned studies focusing specifically on the experiences of mothers studying at university, only three were conducted in Australia, and only four focused specifically on undergraduate students who were mothers. Nearly half of these studies— six— used a primarily qualitative methodology, and eight required the participants to have dependent children residing at home to participate in the study. Furthermore, only one study was conducted entirely on a regional university campus. Therefore, despite the existence of these studies into the experiences of mothers studying at university, this brief analysis helps to demonstrate the gap in the existing literature, and hence the need for this Australian qualitative study focusing on the experience of undergraduate mature age female students with dependent children residing at home.

2.3 Positive factors

Gaining a university degree has been found to be beneficial to both the individual and to society (Johnson, 2004). Due to the dearth of research focusing on the benefits of higher education for mature age female students in Australia, including those with dependent children, this section provides an outline of the benefits of higher education for mature age students, followed by a brief insight into the motivations that these students have for entering university.

2.3.1 Benefits of higher education

Research into the experience of mature age students at university is important as the success of these students has potential individual, national, institutional and societal benefits (Johnson, 2004). First, individually, students who succeed at university have an increased ability to earn higher wages, have greater life satisfaction and are more likely to be healthier (O'Shea, 2007). Individuals who have succeeded at higher education also are less likely to be associated with crime and imprisonment (Murray, 2009). Furthermore, individuals who attain higher education benefit from a higher social standing, as many are considered to have a more prestigious standing within their community (Le, Miller, Slutske, & Martin, 2011; Murray, 2009).

Second, at a national level, mature age students who have succeeded in higher education are considered a key source of human capital (Jacobs & Stoner-Eby, 1998); significantly contributing to the national economy and Gross Domestic Profit (GDP) (Chapman & Withers, 2002; Murray, 2009). The success of these students also assists Australia in meeting the education targets and recommendations as outlined in the Bradley Report (Bradley, 2008). As previously noted, these national targets include improving the education of people from low socio-economic backgrounds, and aiming for at least 40% of people over the age of 25 having gained a bachelor degree.

Third, at an institutional level, mature age students are often motivated by personal development or an interest in the subject to be studied (Osborne et al., 2004). Therefore these mature age students help facilitate universities to reinforce their traditional purposes, such as developing reflective and critical thinkers, and furthering knowledge and excellence in a particular field (Star & Hammer, 2008). Thus, mature age students enhance the integrity and purpose of universities. This is considered significant for universities, as many of these traditional values have been eroded as the result of students enrolling primarily

for reasons of employability (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Candy, 2000; Star & Hammer, 2008) with graduating attributes increasingly driven by the current labour market (Masjuan & Troiano, 2009; Murray, 2009).

Finally, at a societal level, higher levels of education have been linked to increased tax revenues, lower levels of unemployment and poverty, and less dependence on social security benefits (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Baum & Payea, 2004). Employers have reported the benefits of hiring mature age workers as they often possess qualities such as loyalty, empathy, adaptability and life experience (Department of Human Services, n.d.); which are qualities that have also been found to benefit fellow students in the university community (MacDonald & Stratta, 1998). Higher education is linked to wider societal benefits including a greater level of tolerance (Murray, 2009) amongst those who have obtained a degree or higher, with these people often more actively involved in voluntary and charitable work than those without a degree (Vila, 2005).

2.3.2 Motivators

Mature age students also enter university with different motivations than school-leavers (Stone, 2008) and are purportedly more motivated and committed than school-leavers, possibly because of the sacrifices necessary to enter higher education (Kevern & Webb, 2004; Montgomery et al., 2009). Researchers have reported that initially a catalyst most often drives the mature age students' decision to return to study, including illness, redundancy, bereavement, divorce or children entering school (McGivney, 2006; O'Shea, 2007; Stone, 2008). Furthermore, mature age students are often intrinsically motivated, describing a need to raise their self-esteem and to prove their ability. Many mature age students also discuss studying for intrinsic reasons, such as to fulfil a life-long dream, for the enjoyment of learning, to pursue an interest in a particular subject, or for self-satisfaction (Cullity, 2006; Osborne et al., 2004;

Steyn, 1994; Stone, 2008); in addition to be a positive role model for their family, which is a common goal for students who are mothers (Osborne et al., 2004). Extrinsic factors providing motivation include enhancing their future employment opportunities and gaining security, and having a means to provide a reasonable standard of living for their families (Osborne et al., 2004; Steyn, 1994; White, 2004). Thus, these motivators differ significantly from those of school-leavers, who are described as primarily employability-focused for a specific career (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000).

2.4 Negative factors

Among the most likely negative outcomes facing all students attending university, and for mature students in particular, is attrition; that is, dropping out of university before completing the degree. Despite mature age students' high levels of motivation and potential widespread benefits, mature age students, including those with dependent children, are more likely to succumb to the negative factors of studying and discontinue their higher education than school-leavers (McInnis et al., 2000). This is often a result of the variety of difficulties that they experience, and for mature age female students with dependent children the attrition risks are greater due to the need to balance academic and non-academic demands (Osborne et al., 2004).

These negative student factors that cause students difficulties in succeeding at university are not confined to mature age students. Although less research has been conducted into the difficulties of younger students, perhaps because those students between 17 and 20 have much lower attrition rates than older students (DEST, 2004), they do experience difficulties which can impede their success (Grosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009). These difficulties include expectations of school, family and friends to attend university, poor decision-making and the lack of research into courses prior to entering university. Furthermore, negative student experiences of the program and institution, a lack of social integration,

the failure to cope with the demands of the program, and high school courses not adequately preparing students for university all contribute to university attrition for younger students (Grosling et al., 2009; Jones, 2008; Long, Ferrier, & Heagney, 2006; Yorke & Longden, 2007).

The greatest attrition risk factors for Australian university students include wrong career choice, age, the quality of the student experience, personal reasons, financial reasons, part-time employment, competing commitments, and part-time and external enrolments (McInnis et al., 2000). As mature age female students with dependent children potentially fit into a multiple of these risk categories, this student population, who are the focus of this study, are at a significantly greater risk of attrition than their school-leaver counterparts (White, 2008). Extracted from the available literature, with the exception of age, the five most common factors affecting mature age students, particularly those who are mothers, are the quality of the student experience, personal reasons, financial reasons, competing commitments, and part-time or external enrolments (Darab, 2004; McInnis et al., 2000; Osborne et al., 2004; Stone, 2008).

2.4.1 Quality of the student experience

The second negative factor for mature age students at university is that various elements reduce the quality of the student experience, including psychological difficulties, social disconnectedness, in addition to the suitability and demands of the learning environment (Long et al., 2006; McInnis et al., 2000; Osborne et al., 2004). The most common types of psychological difficulties experienced by mature age students relate to self-belief and self-perception (Martins & Anthony, 2007; Osborne et al., 2004). Many mature age students enter university with what has been termed the “impostor syndrome”, described as an entrenched personal belief that they are not meant to be at university (Martins & Anthony, 2007). Features of this syndrome include feeling that other students are better than them, and having difficulty accepting positive feedback as a reflection of

their ability (Martins & Anthony, 2007; Ramsay et al., 2007). Many mature age students experience a distorted self-perception which is similar to that of female students, who are often less confident academically, distrusting their intellectual capacity more often than men (Acker, 1994; Martins & Anthony, 2007; Shands, 1998; Stone, 2008). Despite lowered self-belief and self-perception, studies have found that mature age students tend to be more academically orientated, diligent, certain of their academic roles, and achieve higher academic grades than their school-leaver counterparts (Cantwell et al., 2001; McInnis et al., 2000; McKenzie & Gow, 2004; Ramsay et al., 2007). Furthermore, this superior academic performance was attributed to life experiences and the deep learning approach which is adopted by many mature age students (Richardson & King, 1998).

Over the last three decades, numerous studies have concluded that academic and social integration are vital elements for student retention at university (Benlanger & Madgett, 2008; McInnis et al., 2000; Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 1987, 1998). Although this social integration is important for all students (Tones et al., 2009), mature age students have been found to experience more factors inhibiting their university connections, particularly for students who are mothers (White, 2008). These studies cited limited on-campus time outside compulsory contact hours due to family, paid work, domestic and social commitments (Cullity, 2006; Stone, 2008; Tinto, 1987, 1998), in addition to a lack of empathy or understanding of their situation from academic university staff (Cullity, 2006). As a result of this lack of understanding from staff, students can feel disconnected from their academic environment. This disconnectedness decreases the quality of the overall student experience, thus placing them at greater risk of attrition (McInnis et al., 2000).

2.4.2 Personal reasons

Family responsibilities were found to be the most likely personal reason to affect the success of 35 to 44-year-old mature age students in Australia (Tones et al., 2009). Studies from the last two decades show that many female students experience family and relationship strain as a result of their engagement in higher education (Cullity, 2006; Edwards, 1993; Leonard, 1994; Merrill & Aldershot, 1999; Stone, 2008; White, 2008). This relationship strain often results in a lack of domestic and emotional support (Edwards, 1993), with one study finding that one third of female mature age students described considerable resistance from their male partners (Leonard, 1994). Furthermore, in some studies students have described some partners as feeling “threatened and excluded” by their partner’s return to study (Kantanis, 2002; Wilson, 1997, p.358). Similarly, both the student and the partner have described the return to study to be stressful, with partners of students reporting issues such as less availability to assist with parenting, less quality time for family or marital activities, less social life, less time and energy available for domestic chores, and a general preoccupation with their studies (Kirby et al., 2004). Perhaps as a result, many female students reported the importance of their studies as secondary to their other responsibilities, or indeed, perceived their studies as a kind of leisure activity (Stone, 2008).

2.4.3 Financial reasons

Economic barriers often lead to attrition, regardless of the student’s academic potential. This risk of attrition is likely to be intensified for those students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Tones et al., 2009), many of whom are mature age students. Economic concerns are also greater for mature age students, as they have been described to have higher financial stress due to family and work commitments than their school-leaver counterparts (Hennen, 2002; Kantanis, 2002; Kevern & Webb, 2004). Many mature age female students with dependent children, including single mothers, also reported that they were unable to afford quality childcare (Kevern & Webb, 2004; Osborne et al., 2004). Students' inability

to source or afford appropriate child care is significant for students as it causes both financial stress and social stress, as students depend on family members and friends for childcare (Wainwright & Maradant, 2010). Leder and Forgasz (2004) found that financial difficulties for mature age students were more pronounced in Australia than among mature age students in the eight eastern-Asian countries included in their study.

2.4.4 Competing commitments

Mature age female students with dependent children need to meet the social, practical and emotional demands of various life roles concurrently to succeed in higher education (Darab, 2004; White, 2009). Furthermore, they divide their time between a variety of people and social commitments, including children, partners, extended families, fellow students and lecturers (Kirby et al., 2004; Stone, 2008). Studies found that participants who were both students and mothers need to balance practical commitments such as attending classes, studying, practicum placements in some courses, attending paid work, volunteer activities which are often related to their children, family commitments and domestic duties (Darab, 2004; Kirby et al., 2004; McMillan, 2005; Montgomery et al., 2009; White, 2009). Similarly, they balance a variety of emotional commitments, such as making themselves available to their partners and children on demand, acting as a role model, and ensuring their family's needs are met, all whilst managing their own feelings of guilt, worry, fear, and the self-belief concepts of self-worth and self-efficacy (Kirby et al., 2004; Osborne et al., 2004; Stone, 2008).

The most significant difficulty for students with multiple competing commitments comes from experiencing role strain (Stone, 2008; White, 2008), which was first articulated by Goode (1960). Goode outlines that role strain is typically comprised of three types of problems: role conflict, role overload and role contagion. Role conflict occurs when there are simultaneous, yet

incompatible demands which, for mature age university students, may include needing to attend lectures and work at the same time, or caring for children when they become ill and cannot attend school or childcare (Darab, 2004). A typical resolution for role conflict is to relinquish one or more of the incompatible roles. Role overload can be described as where inadequate time is available to meet the roles' demands. As insufficient time for study is cited as the most frequent reason for student initiated withdrawal from university (Kember, 1999); students with insufficient time for study due to domestic and family commitments are particularly at risk (Robotham, 2008; Stone, 2008). Role contagion occurs when the students' attention is focused on one role whilst performing another. This tendency to make every minute count ultimately reduces the students' overall efficiency and performance (Kantanis, 2002). Conversely, students may also experience the positive effects of role multiplicity. First outlined by Seiber in 1974, these may include role privileges, overall status security, resources for status enhancement and role performance, personality enrichment, and ego gratification, therefore assisting to balance some of the negative effects of role strain (1974).

Mature age female students with dependent children must also balance the commitment of caring for their own children, compared to relying on the assistance of others or a childcare facility (Darab, 2004; White, 2008). It has been suggested that issues relating to childcare are perhaps the most difficult for students who are mothers (White, 2008). These difficulties included access to appropriate quality childcare (Griffiths, 2002; White, 2008) which is documented as particularly difficult for single parents (Montgomery et al., 2009), and finding places for children outside of working hours, for example, to attend evening classes. Further childcare difficulties include finding short-term full-time places during practicum placement periods, and managing when children become ill and are unable to attend childcare facilities (White, 2008).

2.4.5 Part-time and external enrolment

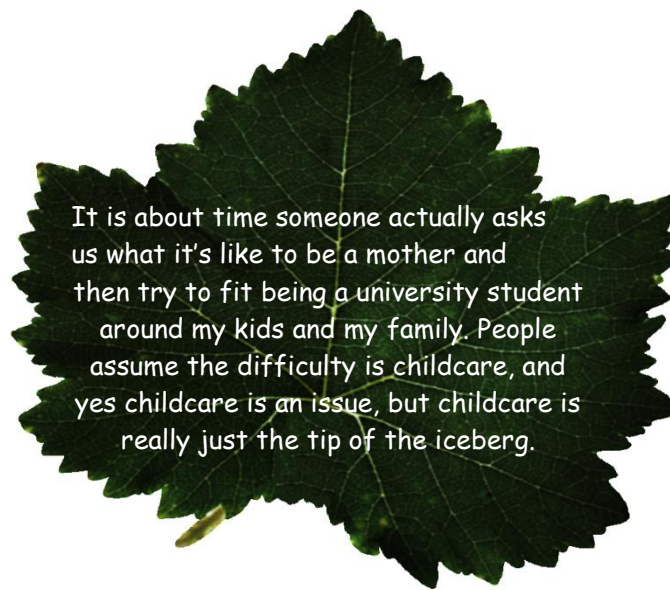
To help overcome the difficulties of role multiplicity and role strain, mature age students often reduce their campus commitment by transferring their enrolment to part-time, on-line or external studies (Trott, 2007). Trott (2007) further outlines that although reducing campus commitment can reduce role strain, mature age students are ultimately disadvantaged by this reduced time on campus because, as indicated previously, it reduces the quality of the student experience, therefore increasing their attrition risk (Frydenburg, 2007; Lui, Gomez, Khan, & Yen, 2007). With online and external studies, the quality of the student experience can be reduced by the absence of an appropriate learning atmosphere, low contact with lecturers and peers, and the need for traditional pedagogy (Kop & Hill, 2008; Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). Furthermore, these modes of study are considered “too autonomous” for many mature age undergraduate students who do not receive the required level of guidance, validation or critical engagement with the lecturer (Kop & Hill, 2008). This increased risk of changing study mode is supported by a large body of research outlining that despite developments in e-learning, the withdrawal rate for e-learning courses remains higher than for face-to-face delivery (Freedenberg, 2007; Kop & Hill, 2008; Levy, 2007; Lui et al., 2007; Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2002).

2.5 Background and literature review chapter review

This chapter initially provided an overview of higher education in Australia, giving the regional context for the campus which was the focus for the study. A brief history of female students in Australian universities was also provided. Following this, the population of female, mature age students in Australia was introduced. As described, both female and mature age students enter university with unique life experiences. Female mature age students often experience different motivations and difficulties relating to their pursuit of higher education than their school-leaver counterparts (Osborne et al., 2004). This chapter gave a background to, and highlighted, the body of research conducted into the

difficulties of female students and mature age students in Australia and internationally, many with similar findings (Cullity, 2006; Osborne et al., 2004; Stone, 2008). Although many of these studies include participants who are mothers with dependent children, few studies, especially in Australia, focus specifically on mature age female students with dependent children (Bosch, 2013; White, 2008). This literature review did, however, discuss the few dedicated studies that have been conducted in Australia focusing on female mature age university students with dependent children. From the review of the literature it became apparent that there was a need to explore the experience of mature age female students with dependent children and it was determined to situate that study on a regional university campus in Western Australia. The positive factors for higher education were discussed including the individual, national, institutional and societal benefits for higher education in Australia. In addition, the motivators for female mature age students were also discussed. Finally, the five most significant negative factors that have been found to affect mature age student attrition were described.

Chapter 3 - Methodology



3.1 Chapter overview

A qualitative methodology was required for this study as it aimed to gain insight into the actual experience of mature age female students with dependent children studying at one regional university campus in Western Australia. The qualitative methodology selected to guide this research was Interpretive Description, a methodology designed to explore participants' experiences from within their naturalistic environment (Thorne, 2008). Interpretive Description was selected to guide this study as it best aligned with the purpose of exploring students' experiences and the objective, which was to add to the existing and emerging body of knowledge to inform decision-makers to assist future university mature age female students with dependent children. As shown in Figure 3.1.1-1 – Structure of Chapter 3, this chapter outlines the methodology guiding the study, including a rationale for the use of a qualitative methodology. It also provides a description and specific discussion of this methodology, followed by an outline of the overall research design. The second part of this chapter introduces the three data collection instruments which were adopted for this study and are described in detail. These instruments include a demographic questionnaire, in-depth individual interviews, and mini-focus groups. Last, this chapter describes how the data was managed and analysed during the course of

the study, which allowed the researcher to reach the findings and the multi-layered conceptual description presented in Chapter 5 of this thesis. This methodology and methods chapter also provides a specific discussion regarding the rigor, or credibility, and ethical considerations underpinning the integrity of the study. Consistent with Interpretive Description, four evaluative criteria are essential for the researcher to claim credibility. Each of these four criteria – namely epistemological integrity, representative credibility, analytic logic, and authority is outlined further in this chapter. The following diagrammatic representation depicts the structure of this chapter.



Figure 3.1.1-1- Structure of Chapter 3

3.2 Qualitative research

Qualitative research has long been preferred for explaining human experiences (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013) as it is able to provide detailed information and give insight into people's individual experiences (Grbich, 2013). Therefore, using a qualitative research design in this research was essential as the study aimed to explore the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at one regional university campus in Western Australia. Grounded in the social sciences, qualitative research allows the researcher to explore participants' life experiences from within their social context, aiming to understand complex relationships while recognising the uniqueness of each individual case and context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Inherent in qualitative research are findings that include a determination of patterns and themes, accepting that the researcher uses subjective judgement for constant comparative analysis (CCA) and interpretation during the study, rather than summative interpretation at the completion of the study (Stakes, 1995). Constant comparative analysis is used in various qualitative research studies, including those based upon grounded theory, and involves comparing each datum with all other data whilst identifying and developing key themes and meaning from the research (Fram, 2013). Clearly, a qualitative research approach was required when designing this study in order for the researcher to achieve the aim of gaining insight and understanding into the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at university, demonstrated through the construction of a conceptual description.

Within the field of qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln explain that three dominant theoretical paradigms guide different lines of enquiry (2013), conventional inquiry, critical inquiry, and interpretive inquiry. Conventional inquiry is guided by positivism, critical inquiry is guided by critical theory, and interpretive or naturalistic inquiry is guided by interpretivism or constructivism (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As this study was designed as an interpretive study guided by interpretive descriptive methodology, it subscribes to this third line of

inquiry, namely interpretive inquiry. Importantly, interpretive inquiry exists in the constructivist paradigm, thus primarily concerned with understanding people's experiences in a humanistic and interpretive way (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007). This constructivist paradigm is also referred to in existing literature as interpretivist, or constructivist-interpretivist (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Schwandt, 1994). Consistent with the purpose and objectives of this study, this interpretivist paradigm, outlined by Guba and Lincoln (1994), considers the existence of multiple realities, where knowledge is created during the interaction between investigator and respondents. Furthermore, the purpose of this study was to further the existing and emerging body of knowledge in this field, through creating new knowledge relating to the experience of mature age female students with dependent children on a regional university campus. Wolcott delineates knowledge creation as occurring when qualitative data is transformed through the process of description, analysis and interpretation (Wolcott, 1994), thus, knowledge creation predominately occurred during the data collection and data analysis phases of this study.

3.3 Interpretive Description methodology

The specific type of qualitative methodology selected for guiding this study was Interpretive Description. Interpretive Description is a second-generation qualitative methodology termed by Thorne, Reimer-Kirkham and MacDonald-Emes (2004). The emergence of Interpretive Description reflected variations to, and the blurring of, traditional methodologies (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992); having an ethnographic, grounded theory, and phenomenological ancestry (Thorne, 2008). Rather than being a new and unique methodology, Interpretive Description articulates the evolution of qualitative research that was occurring in the healthcare context (Thorne et al., 2004). As a non-prescriptive, yet rigorous methodology, Interpretive Description retained elements of its methodological ancestry, enhancing its rigor, whilst discarding many limiting elements of its ancestry (Thorne, 2008). Interpretive Description is a methodology which has been used almost exclusively within its roots of the health sciences (Oliver,

2012), however, some emerging international studies have been conducted in other applied disciplines, including education, art therapy and tourism (Buissink-Smith & McIntosh, 2001; Burns, 2009).

Although Interpretive Description studies have mainly been in healthcare, this study was conducted within the discipline of education, with the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at one regional university campus forming the area of interest for the study. Despite its healthcare ancestry, Interpretive Description was selected as the most appropriate methodology for this study as its foundational underpinnings, which were to explore people's experience from within their natural context, aligned with the study's purpose, objectives, and context. These foundational underpinnings included conducting the study in as naturalistic a context as possible, and the data collection was therefore conducted primarily on the university campus. Congruent with Interpretive Description, this study explicitly attended to the value of the subjective and experiential knowledge of each participant as a fundamental source of insight. Furthermore, using Interpretive Description methodology capitalised on human commonalities within a shared interest whilst expecting variations (Thorne, 2008). As previously noted, Interpretive Description acknowledges the social constructivism element to human experience, it recognises multiple– and sometimes conflicting– realities, and acknowledges the inseparable and interactive relationship between the inquirer and the object of the inquiry (Thorne, 2008).

Using Interpretive Description to guide the research, the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at university is demonstrated by a coherent conceptual description illustrating thematic patterns and commonalities of phenomena (Thorne, 2008). The ultimate purpose of the resultant conceptual description is to guide future decisions that apply to the

lives of real people (Thorne, 2008), predominately future university students who are also mothers. Rather than having been designed as a study for theory development as with grounded theory, the findings of this Interpretive Description-guided study aims to guide future decisions to improve the experience of university mature age female students with dependent children (Mayan, 2010; Oliver, 2012; Thorne, 2008).

3.4 Research process overview

The implementation of Interpretive Description methodology was divided into five phases as illustrated in the left-hand column of *Figure 3.4.1-1 - Research Process*. These include preparation, data collection, Good Hard Thinking (GHT) (Morse, 2001), data analysis and data synthesis. The first phase of the research design, as shown in the research process, was the preparation phase, which commenced after the researcher had gained Ethics approval from the Edith Cowan University Ethics Committee, and involved the researcher reflecting upon on her own experiences, ideas and biases prior to the commencement of the study. These were typed into a Microsoft Word document titled “Personal experience, expectation and biases”, Appendix A - Personal experience, expectation and biases. This appendix includes the original reflection made by the researcher prior to the commencement of this study. At the time that this reflection was written it was not planned to be included in the thesis and it has not been edited or changed in any way. Rather, the purpose of this personal reflection was for the researcher to recognise her own existing disciplinary heritage in the area to be studied which may then be built upon (Thorne, 2008). This process was unique to the process of bracketing, which involves the act of suspending judgement of the natural world and is required in other qualitative methodological studies, including some forms of phenomenology (Creswell, 2014; Tufford, 2012). During this preparation phase, participant recruitment was also planned and undertaken. This included determining the selection criteria and methods for participant recruitment. As demonstrated in *Figure 3.4.1-1 –*

Research Process, this preparation phase was revisited after the completion of each interview or mini-focus group to recruit the next participant into the study.

Following the first preparation phase, the second phase of the research process as shown in the left-hand column in *Figure 3.4.1-1- Research Process*, was data collection. Following informed consent, this phase involved collecting data from one-on-one sessions with participants after they completed their questionnaire and participated in an in-depth, individual interview. These interviews involved conducting a series of 24 individual interviews, involving a total of 21 participants. Eighteen participants were interviewed once, and three participants were interviewed twice. These three re-interviewed participants approached the researcher and requested a second interview as they felt their circumstances had changed considerably following their first interview. Each interview was conducted, transcribed, coded and analysed prior to the recruitment of the next participant. At the completion of all of the 24 individual interviews, data collection commenced through mini-focus groups. Three mini-focus groups were conducted including a total of 11 participants. As with the individual interviews, after gaining informed consent all participants of the mini-focus groups also completed the questionnaire. During this phase of the research process each of the interviews and mini-focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher, which were then saved in a Microsoft Word document.

The third phase of the research process, as shown in the left-hand column in *Figure 3.4.1-1 - Research Process*, involved good hard thinking (GHT), which is a cognitive concept involving high-level thought processes termed by Morse (2001). After each interview or mini-focus group was conducted, recorded and transcribed, the researcher allowed time to react to the data and recorded any quotable quotes. Developing a series of these quotable quotes is an important strategy to ensure that the richness of these quotes is not lost in the analysis of

the data, whilst reducing the risk of the quotes dominating the evolving analytic structure of the study (Thorne, 2008). By allowing time for GHT, the researcher did not need to prematurely code the data, so as to not lose these insights into the participants' experiences.

The fourth phase, as shown in the left-hand column in *Figure 3.4.1-1 - Research Process*, was data analysis. Each transcript, which was saved into Microsoft Word documents, was imported into NVivo10 software prior to coding. The three levels of coding conducted were open coding, refining codes and thematic coding. As demonstrated in *Figure 3.4.1-1 – Research Process*, these types of coding were undertaken both sequentially and concurrently. This process of coding allowed the researcher the opportunity to fracture the data into smaller sections, before refining and grouping them into codes that could be used to develop the thematic tables and conceptual description.

The fifth phase, as shown again in the left-hand column in *Figure 3.4.1-1 - Research Process*, involved data synthesis, whereby thematic tables were constructed and a conceptual description was developed. This synthesis began to occur during the data analysis of the first interview, continuing to evolve with each subsequent interview or mini-focus group until the completion of all questionnaires, interviews and mini-focus groups. As also shown in *Figure 3.4.1-1 - Research Process*, the development of these thematic tables and conceptual description occurred concurrently with the data analysis of each interview or mini-focus group. Thus, the phases of data collection, data analysis and data synthesis occurred concurrently and interactively.

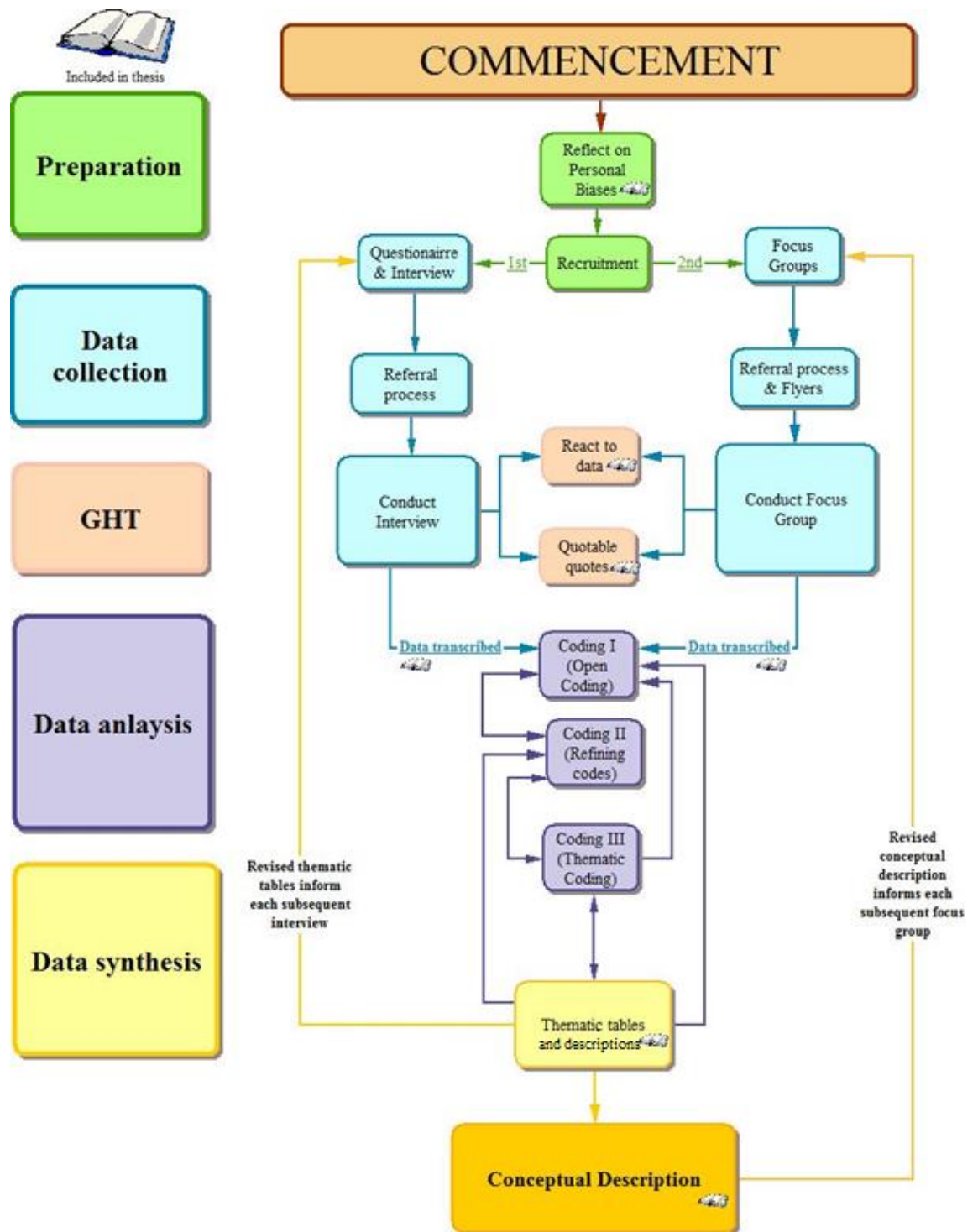


Figure 3.4.1-1 Research Process

3.5 Participant selection and recruitment

As this study focused on the experience of mature age female students with dependent children, participants were selected, and then recruited, using a number of sampling criteria and recruitment methods. Correct sampling was essential to achieve representative credibility, one of the four evaluative criteria that must be met when using Interpretive Description (Thorne, 2008). For the study to claim to be credible, the researcher needed to ensure that the participants selected were in fact representative of those intended in the design of the study (Thorne, 2008). Therefore, all participants were selected on the basis that they were students, mothers, and studying at ECUSW campus. Purposive recruitment was essential for an appropriate number of participants to be included in the study. This required a number of recruitment methods including advertising, the referral method, and snowballing. Both the sampling methods and recruitment methods of participants are detailed in the following discussion.

3.5.1 Sampling

When selecting the participants for recruitment into this study, three types of sampling were employed. These were convenience sampling, criterion sampling and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling was primarily used to select the university campus on which this study was based, whilst criterion sampling was used in conjunction with purposive sampling to select the participants for inclusion in the study.

Convenience sampling was employed by the researcher to help inform her choice of the regional university campus to be used for this study. The campus selected, Edith Cowan University South West (ECUSW), was selected partially for convenience as it is the home campus for both the researcher and principal supervisor. This also meant that the researcher had a detailed understanding, established over a considerable period of time, of the university and campus.

Convenience sampling is used extensively in research, and refers to sampling a population based upon its convenience and proximity to the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It is recommended, however, that convenience sampling be used in conjunction with other sampling methods (Gravetter & Forzano, 2015). Consideration must be given to the unintentional use of outliers and possible lack of representative credibility when employing convenience sampling, especially if claiming transferability (Fuarrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012). Therefore, in addition to its convenience, ECUSW campus was selected purposively due to its disproportionately high number of mature age, female students (Edith Cowan University, 2014), many of whom self-identify as mothers. Self-identification as mothers was important as this demographic information is not formally collected by the university.

ECUSW campus is located in the City of Bunbury, approximately 180 kilometres (112 miles) south of Perth, Western Australia as shown on *Figure 3.5.1-1 - ECUSW campus on the map of Australia*. The city of Bunbury has a population of approximately 33,000 people. Other similarly suitable Australian university campuses with high numbers of mature age students and female students are located in the eastern states of Australia. These campuses are a significant distance from the researcher, which would have made these campuses logistically difficult for the research to have conducted this study at. These similar university campuses are located in the Australian states of South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland, all of which are in excess of 3,500 km, 2,175 miles, away from ECUSW.



Figure 3.5.1-1 ECUSW campus on the map of Australia

Following the selection of campus on which to base this study, criterion sampling was used in conjunction with purposive sampling to select suitable participants based on specific selection criteria (Patton, 2002). As with all criterion-based purposive sampling, the selection criteria were designed to maximise the study's representative credibility, therefore best meeting the research objectives (Battaglia, 2008; Guest et al., 2013; Sarantakos, 1998). The eight inclusion criteria for the participants of this study were based on both their student status and their personal situation. These criteria required that all participants:

1. Were aged between 25 and 44 years on admission to the current course.
2. Were mothers.
3. Had children aged between birth and 18 years of age.

4. Resided with their child or children prior to and during their enrolment in their current course of study.
5. Lived independently from their parents or other supportive adults, not including partners, during their current university studies.
6. Were enrolled on-campus at the South West campus of Edith Cowan University.
7. Had completed either one year full-time or the part-time equivalent of their current course.
8. Were enrolled in any one of the coursework degrees available at the South West campus of Edith Cowan University. That is, inclusion was not limited to particular courses of study.

Interested students who failed to meet each of the eight inclusion criteria were excluded from participation in this study as they were considered to be outside the study's scope (Patton, 2002). During the recruitment phase of this study, many interested students were excluded based on these criteria. The majority of these students were mothers to adult children and mothers who no longer had children residing at home. These students were excluded as they did not address the third and fourth selection criteria. Additionally, two fathers contacted the researcher for inclusion in the study but were excluded as they did not meet the second selection criteria. Although these students were out of the scope of this current study, the study of fathers at university and students who are the parents of adult children will form part of the recommendations for further research in the discussion chapter of this thesis.

In conjunction with criterion sampling, purposive sampling was also employed. Purposive sampling is a non-probability method whereby participants are included based on the purpose of their involvement in the study (Guest et al., 2013). With purposive sampling, the participants selected should be logically

considered to be representative of the population (Battaglia, 2008). Purposive sampling occurred as some participants were recommended by lecturers or other students because they were considered to be representative of mothers at university, based on the recommenders' perception of their particular circumstances. These circumstances included, but were not limited to, distance from home to the university, number of children, becoming pregnant whilst studying at university, working whilst studying, and realising their life-long ambition. With the assistance of purposive sampling, the range of participants involved in this study enabled the researcher to gain insight into students' unique experience studying at this regional university campus whilst being a mother. This involvement aligned with the overarching purpose of the study, to gain insight into the actual experiences of mature age students with dependent children, studying at a regional university campus.

A second, but somewhat unintentional, focus for this study was the undergraduate student experience, as all of the 32 participants were undergraduate students. Although enrolment in an undergraduate degree was not part of the selection criteria only undergraduate students volunteered to participate in this study. Research into the experience of undergraduate students is aligned with much of the existing research, presumably because the undergraduate student population forms the majority of the student body for most universities (Kantanis, 2002). Notwithstanding these similarities, the undergraduate participant cohort of this study differed to studies into the experience of mature age female students with dependent children in Australia and abroad, which have primarily focused on the experiences of postgraduate students (Abbot-Chapman et al., 2004; Bosch, 2013; Griffiths, 2002; Home, 1998).

3.5.2 Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited first for in-depth individual interviews that were conducted and partially analysed one at a time. This process involved having one participant recruited, their interview conducted, digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. This transcript was transferred into NVivo 10 where it was open coded. Each of these steps in the process occurred prior to the recruitment of the next participant. This one-participant-at-a-time process assisted the researcher to comply with the process of constant comparative analysis as intended in the design of the study. At the conclusion of this process for each of the 24 individual interviews, focused coding and thematic coding were undertaken with the assistance of NVivo 10 to further develop the key themes and conceptual description. Following the individual interviews, recruitment for each of the three mini-focus groups commenced. Similarly, the data from each mini-focus group was managed and partially analysed prior to the recruitment and commencement of the next mini-focus group. Consequently, recruitment occurred periodically throughout the study's data collection phase, as opposed to, for example, one larger recruitment drive at the study's commencement.

Flyers, such as the example attached in *Appendix B – Recruitment flyer*, were displayed around the campus to encourage students who met the selection criteria to enquire about participating in the study. This flyer advertising campaign, which involved similar flyers for the individual interviews and the mini-focus groups, gave interested eligible students the opportunity to volunteer as study participants. A number of students contacted the researcher for an individual interview after seeing these flyers, possibly accounting for the recruitment of students from each of the five undergraduate degree disciplines.

The main recruitment of participants for individual interviews was achieved using more personal methods, including the referral method and snowballing. The referral method involved encouraging students to contact the researcher for

inclusion in the study through personal communication, mainly with university staff. Thus, the referral method is similar to snowballing, which involves encouraging students to contact the researcher for inclusion in the study through personal communication from students who had previously participated (Goodman, 1961). The use of the referral method allowed staff to refer specific students to the researcher for inclusion in the study as they felt those particular students' experience would be valuable to the research project, thus enabling purposive sampling. Through this purposive sampling, thus remaining consistent to the principles of Interpretive Description, the researcher was able to purposefully include "key informants", described by Thorne (2008, p.91) as participants who are considered better equipped to engage and contribute rich experiential data to the study.

Following the initial interviews, snowball sampling, otherwise known as chain sampling (Goodman, 1961; Guest et al., 2013; Krueger & Casey, 2009), occurred, as participants encouraged their peers to also participate in the study. This method of sampling assisted the researcher to access participants who may have otherwise been difficult to recruit (Guest et al., 2013; Morgan, 2008). Snowball sampling, however, does not, nor did it intend to, create a representative or random sample (Goodman, 1961; Guest et al., 2013; Morgan, 2008), and is also the most likely reason for the disproportionate number of nursing students ($n=18$) participating in this study.

Using these three recruitment methods— flyers, referral method and snowballing—21 participants who met the selection criteria were recruited for individual interviews. This number of participants aligned with the anticipated sample size of 15 to 20 participants, during the planning stage of this research. Establishing this type of premeditated arbitrary sample size, which occurs in many qualitative studies (Mason, 2010), is justified when using Interpretive

Description, as opposed to continuing to recruit and analyse data until saturation, as Thorne (2008) cautions against the overreliance on this notion of saturation. To claim saturation, the researcher must express confidence that no new variations in the data would emerge (Thorne, 2008); however, as this study explored the personal experience of individuals, theoretically, an infinite variation of experiences could occur. Congruent with Interpretive Description, a comprehensive range of experiences was explored during this study, as opposed to claiming saturation which was neither sought, nor presumed to have been achieved (Thorne, 2008). The actual sample size for the individual interviews was 21 participants, which was partially informed by the diversity of experiences discussed during each interview and partially informed by the arbitrary sample size anticipated during the planning stage. This arbitrary sample size was derived from the actual sample size of previous Interpretive Description studies (Burns, 2009; Maheu & Thorne, 2008; Plach, Stevens, & Moss, 2004; Rostam & Haverkamp, 2009; Thorne, Con, McGuinness, McPherson, & Harris, 2004; Van Wiltenburg, 2007).

At the completion of the individual interviews, recruitment for inclusion into the mini-focus groups occurred in a similar fashion to that of the individual interviews. Recruitment for the mini-focus groups, however, seemed to have occurred more evenly between the flyers advertising campaign and the snowballing method. Flyers, similar to that shown in *Appendix B*, were again displayed on campus to attract participants. As with the individual interviews, these gave eligible students the opportunity to volunteer as study participants. Participants were also recruited through the snowballing method after previous participants of either the individual interviews or previous mini-focus groups invited peers to contact the researcher for participation in the study (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Significantly more students were interested in participating in the mini-focus groups than were able to attend. The main reasons cited for their non-attendance included being off campus as a result of not having a class scheduled on the days of the mini-focus group sessions, having classes clash with

the mini-focus group session times, being away from campus on practicum placements, participating in paid employment, and being unable to find suitable childcare to allow them to attend. These difficulties were both expected and understandable considering the nature of the participants sought for recruitment. Participation in the individual interviews and mini-focus groups was entirely voluntary, with no remunerative or financial incentive offered to the participants. Notwithstanding this, morning or afternoon tea was provided during each mini-focus group as this custom is considered useful to promote conversation and communication within the group (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

3.6 Data collection instruments

Three data collection instruments were used to collect data from the 32 participants involved in this study. Initially, a demographic questionnaire was completed by each participant. Following the completion of the questionnaire, participants were involved in one of the two qualitative data collection methods, either individual interviews or mini-focus groups. Although every participant completed the same demographic questionnaire, participants were only eligible for inclusion in either an individual interview or a mini-focus group, but not both. Each of these three data collection instruments were congruent with Interpretive Description methodology as described.

3.6.1 Questionnaire

The questionnaire, included in *Appendix C- Participant questionnaire*, was completed by each participant to determine consistent demographic and individual information. Initially this questionnaire asked personal and family information such as age, marital status, and number, gender and ages of their children. Then academic information was sought regarding current course of study, course load, and mode of study. Other questions considered relevant to the experience of students at university which were included in the questionnaire related to income, travel time and participation in additional

activities, all factors potentially affecting available resources, including time and money. The selection of questions included in this questionnaire was important as they related directly to attrition risk categories (McInnis et al., 2000; White, 2008). Without the use of this demographic questionnaire, this information may not have been disclosed during the interviews or mini-focus groups as the participants would not have been asked directly. Furthermore, including this questionnaire as a data collection instrument for all participants of the study ensured consistency of the demographic information collected, this demographic information then assisting the researcher in examining, comparing and categorising data during the analysis phase of the study (Grbich, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

3.6.2 Individual interviews

Individual interviewing, considered one of the most important qualitative data collection methods (Qu & Dumay, 2011), constituted the primary source of data collection for this study. Individual interviewing as a data collection method is considered particularly appropriate when exploring participants' lived experience (Edwards & Holland, 2014), making it most valuable for this study exploring the experience of mature age female students with dependent children on one regional university campus. It is recognised that individual interviews provide subjective data (Thorne, 2008) that may not be transferable to other students in a similar position, however the analysis of interviews from multiple participants helped provide rich experiential data facilitating theme construction. A total of 24 interviews were conducted including 21 participants. Of these 21 participants interviewed, 18 participants had a single interview and three participants requested, and returned for, a second interview. All interviews were purposefully conducted during semester weeks four to 12 of each 15-week semester, to ensure participants were actively involved in their studies at the time of their interview. The semester timing of these interviews enabled participants to discuss their current experience as a student without need for recollection or

reflection, as ideally participants experience should be examined through interviewing when it is not only extensive but current (Olson, 2011).

The 24 individual interviews were conducted at a scheduled time and place that was convenient for both the participant and the researcher. Twenty interviews took place in the researcher's office on campus, three interviews were conducted in a separate dedicated interview room on campus, and one interview was conducted in the participant's home. Providing participants with flexibility and choice for the scheduling of these individual interviews assisted participants to feel comfortable and valued within the research process; essential qualities in individual interviewing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Kvale, 1996; Lukic et al., 2004).

At the commencement of each individual interview the study was explained to the participant by the researcher with a participant information sheet, *Appendix D – Participant information sheet*, which was given to each participant to read and discuss. Following this, informed consent was obtained from each participant using the statement and consent form, shown in *Appendix E – Statement and consent form*, prior to the commencement of the data collection phase of the interview. Participants were then asked to complete the questionnaire and were encouraged to ask any questions that they felt necessary during the completion of this questionnaire. Participants were informed, both verbally and in writing, that their interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder. These digital recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher within three days of each interview. A transcriptionist was not used for transcription as the process of transcribing these interviews assisted the researcher to develop a more intimate understanding of each of the interviews (Stuckey, 2014); consistent with the principles of Interpretive Description methodology (Thorne, 2008).

No pre-determined time limit was specified for these interviews; however, participants were advised upon recruitment to expect their interview to take between one and a half to two hours. The actual mean time for these interviews was 56 minutes, with the two shortest interview participants later contacting the researcher for a secondary, follow-up, interview. The interview durations in this study were similar to other interpretative description studies which reported interview durations of between 45 minutes and two hours (Maheu & Thorne, 2008; Rostam & Haverkamp, 2009; Thorne et al., 2004; Wiley, 2010), were considered appropriate interview durations to gain depth, whilst still maintaining participant interest (Richards & Morse, 2012).

One open ended “grand tour” question was used to initiate each interview (Richards & Morse, 2012), which was: “Tell me about your experience at university.” Thus, it was the participants who lead the interview rather than the interviewer which would be the case with a structured or semi-structured interview. Notes were taken by the researcher during each interview which enabled her to return to topics for further clarification without interrupting the participants’ flow or train of thought. To improve the validity of the data collected, the use of value-laden prompts such as, “that’s good”, “I agree” or, “I understand” (Thorne, 2008, p.115), were avoided during the interviews as Interpretive Description methodology discourages the researcher from directing the participants’ interaction. Similarly, the researcher also avoided leading the interviews other than to seek further clarification or elaboration. To prompt for more clarification or elaboration, questions were used such as, “you mentioned earlier can you tell me more about that?” or, “can you give me more detail into how that happened?” As Interpretive Description methodology requires the researcher to concurrently collect and analyse data, with themes continuing to be developed during the analysis of each interview, and as such it was necessary, at times, to seek clarification or elaboration about issues raised by previous interviewees. Questions were asked such as, “I’ve heard from other students that [this problem] seemed most challenging. What are your thoughts on that?”

These types of clarification questions were asked late in each interview to ensure participants had maximum opportunity to raise all issues independently first.

At the conclusion of each interview, the participants were invited to contact the researcher if they felt that they had overlooked anything that they felt was relevant, or if they wanted to add further information or discussion to their interview. As a result of this invitation, three participants requested a second interview. These second interviews were requested mainly because the participants felt their personal circumstances had changed significantly since their first interview, and they wanted to discuss more, or different, experiences that were not in existence at the time of their first interview. These changes included, but were not limited to, the breakdown of marriage, the diagnosis of a dependent child with special needs, and entering into full-time employment. In addition to these three subsequent interviews, one participant sent both a text message and an e-mail to the researcher to add further information that they did not feel they expressed clearly enough during their initial interview.

3.6.3 Mini-focus groups

Mini-focus groups are focus groups containing between two and six participants, which were included in the design of this study as this type of secondary qualitative data source is considered essential for maintaining rigor, enhancing credibility, and preventing placing an overemphasis on individual interview data (Sandelowski, 2002). Consistent with the social constructivist epistemology of Interpretive Description methodology, focus groups can capitalise on the group process to generate social knowledge (Thorne, 2008). In this study, the three mini-focus groups were used to confirm, expand, and to give depth to the theoretical constructs developed from the individual interviews. A total of 11 participants were included in these three mini-focus groups, which were conducted over two academic semesters.

The inclusion of mini-focus groups in the design of this study was essential for enhancing the quality of the conceptual description. The researcher used mini-focus groups as a tool to gain information, seek clarification and prevent researcher misinterpretation, thus enhancing credibility as these mini-focus groups allowed open discussions relating to new and existing concepts raised within the study. The group process of uncovering or creating a shared perspective from a shared environment, which occurs during focus groups, was also capitalised on, resulting in the mini-focus groups generating partially analysed data from which themes were interpreted (Thorne, 2008).

For the effective use of focus groups in qualitative studies, Steward and Shamdasani (1990) concur with Morgan (1988), that multiple focus groups are required to ensure that findings are not just the social dynamic of one particular group that is being observed. Consequently, three mini-focus groups were included in the design of this study. As recommended by Thorne (2008), the researcher may actively facilitate these groups to maintain control, protect the confidentiality and respectfulness of each participant, and use prompts from the themes developed during the interviews, to maximise the benefits of the use of focus groups. After gaining informed consent from each participant, these mini-focus groups were audio-recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim, with the resultant themes from the analysis being woven into the already emerging conceptual description.

When designing a focus group, an optimal number of participants is aimed for to ensure maximum interaction between participants within a reasonable period of time (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). Mini-focus groups contain fewer participants than traditional focus groups, with Morgan recommending an optimum three participants (Morgan, 1997) and Krueger

recommending an optimum four participants (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Although the primary reason for using mini-focus groups was driven by the limited availability of participants at appropriate times, the study ultimately benefited from these smaller groups. The advantages of using mini-focus groups included making the focus group experience more comfortable for the participants, and making it easier for the researcher to both recruit and manage participants (Morgan, 1996). Additionally, using mini-focus groups was advantageous as most participants had a great deal of experience to share, and many felt strongly about actively studying for their undergraduate degrees whilst being a mother. With fewer people, the participants in each focus group had more opportunity to interact, allowing more discussion between participants, being another benefit of mini-focus groups (Carey, 1994; Morgan, 1996). Whilst using mini-focus groups was beneficial for the depth of each participant's input, the researcher recognises that mini-focus groups potentially limit the breadth of experiences that may be gained from using a larger number of participants in a more traditional focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

The three mini-focus groups conducted during this study all followed the same procedure, which was essential for group comparability (Morrison, 1998). The procedure of these mini-focus groups, as shown in *Figure 3.6.3-1 – Mini-focus group structure*, included four distinct sections: an introduction, an exploration of participants' experiences, discussions regarding previous participants' experiences, and the conclusion.



Figure 3.6.3-1 Mini-focus group structure

During the introduction, as illustrated in *Figure 3.6.3-1 – Mini-focus group structure*, the researcher introduced herself as the research moderator and outlined the background of the project. The participants were also introduced to the research supervisor, who acted in the capacity of an assistant moderator during these focus groups. Having both a moderator and assistant moderator present during the mini-focus groups improved the quality of the mini-focus group, as the assistant moderator was able to fulfil the assistant role by facilitating discussion, prompting members to speak, balancing the input of overly talkative members, and encouraging all members to participate (Krueger & Casey, 2009). This introduction allowed the participants to gain insight into both the researcher and the project, ensured participants understood what was expected from their involvement, and afforded them an initial opportunity to ask questions. During this section of each mini-focus group, participants were given time to read and discuss the same participant information sheet as in the individual interviews, before informed consent was obtained using the same statement and consent form, *Appendix E – Statement and consent form*.

Following this, each participant was asked to complete the same questionnaire as completed for the individual interviews. Using copies of the same information sheets, consent forms and questionnaire forms to those used in the individual interviews helped the researcher to maintain consistency through the data collection phase of the study. The design of this introductory section of the mini-focus groups also assisted participants to get to know both the moderators and the other participants within their group, allowing them to feel comfortable and included in an environment which is both permissive and non-judgemental, which are environmental conditions deemed necessary for self-disclosure in a focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

The second section of the mini-focus groups, as illustrated in *Figure 3.6.3-1 – Mini-focus group structure*, involved an exploration of each participant's own experiences as a student and mother at university. A modified "think-pair-share" strategy (Lyman, 1981), was used to aid discussion and to initiate interaction between participants, which was required for the mini-focus groups to be successful (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). This strategy involved the moderator presenting participants with the same grand tour question as in the individual interviews: "Tell me about your experience at university." After individually considering their own experience, constituting the "think" part of the think-pair-share, participants were divided into pairs and given both an A3 size piece of paper and a variety of drawing implements. In these pairs participants were encouraged to write, draw and discuss aloud their own perceptions of their experiences at university, before eventually sharing and discussing these experiences in an open conversation with the entire group. Each of these A3 creations was used as discussion aids. Three examples of these A3 discussion aids created by participants during this section of the mini-focus groups are included as *Figure 3.6.3-2 – Mini-focus group discussion aid, example 1*, *Figure 3.6.3-3 - Mini-focus group discussion aid, example 2*, and *Figure 3.6.3-4 - Mini-focus group discussion aid, example 3*. This think-pair-share strategy assisted the facilitator to ensure each participant was actively involved in this

section of the focus group discussion. The inclusion of this strategy also helped to ensure that participants with strong or domineering personalities, or those who considered themselves an expert, neither monopolised nor directed the mini-focus group discussion. Managing these two types of participants is important when conducting any focus group as both domineering participants, and those who are self-appointed experts, can potentially direct and influence the entire focus group if they are not managed correctly (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Wells, 1974).

Examples of A3 discussion aids



Figure 3.6.3-2 Mini-focus group discussion aid, example 1

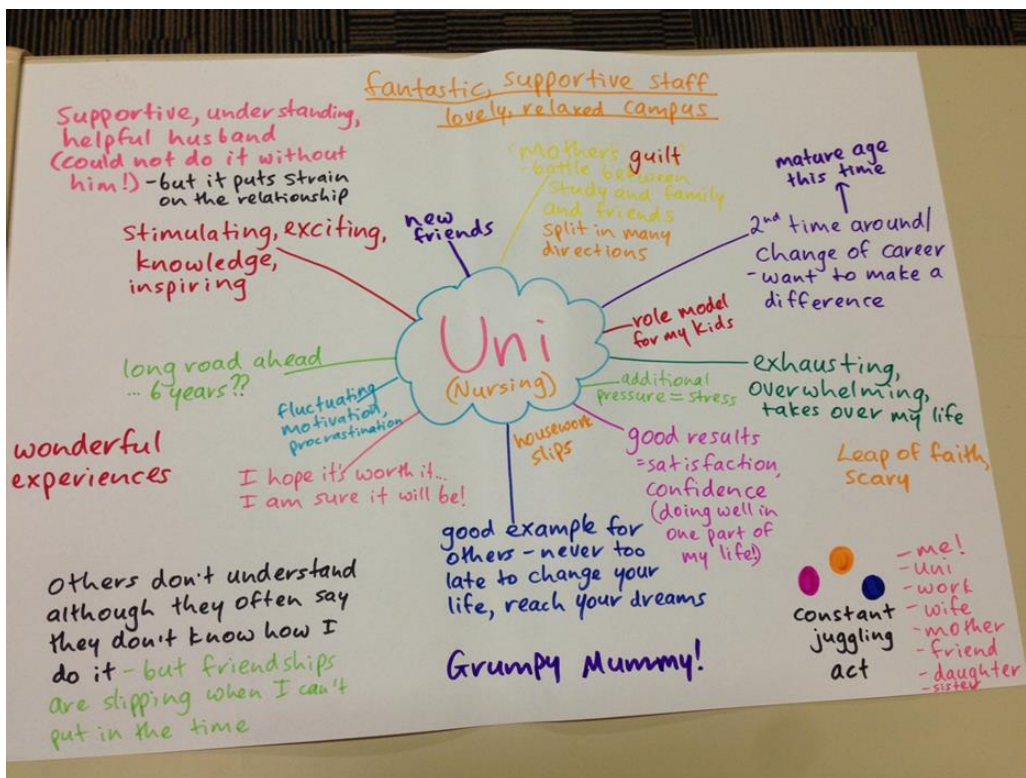


Figure 3.6.3-3 Mini-focus group discussion aid, example 2

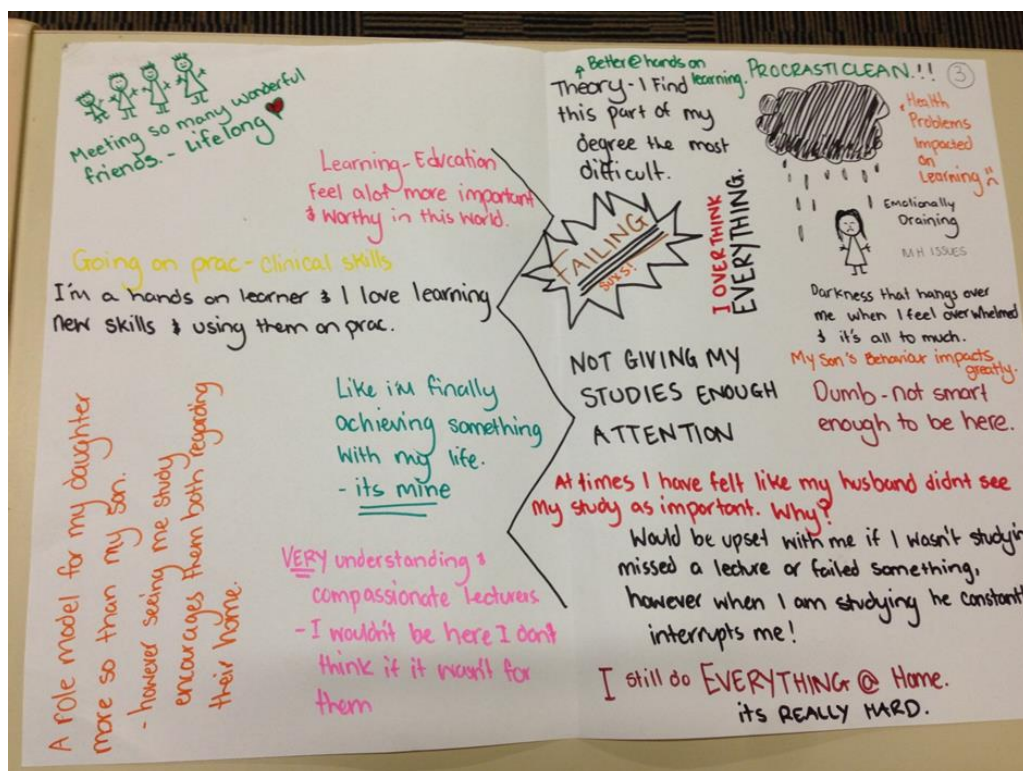


Figure 3.6.3-4 Mini-focus group discussion aid, example 3

At the conclusion of this second section of each of the mini-focus groups, the participants moved into the adjoining room for the third section, which involved a structured evaluation and discussion about previous participants' experiences. This adjoining room is furnished similarly to a sitting room, with lounges and a coffee table, allowing participants to feel involved in a more informal, social and comfortable activity for this section of each mini-focus group. Hot beverages and either morning tea or afternoon tea were provided during this section of the mini-focus groups, including gluten-free food options to increase the feeling of inclusivity for those who may have been gluten-intolerant. This was significant as catering for participants with food and beverages can be important for promoting conversation and communication within the group, as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2009). In this room, there was a series of 38 quotes that were extracted from the individual interviews as "quotable quotes" during the analysis of individual interviews. These quotes were laminated onto speech bubbles, excluding the participants' names or pseudonyms, with one example shown in *Figure 3.6.3-5 -Quotable quote in laminated speech bubble*, and arranged unsystematically along a bench in this same room as illustrated in *Figure 3.6.3-6 – Quotes in speech bubbles placed along bench*. The participants were then asked as a group to discuss and attach each of these onto a continuum with the respective ends named "agree" and "disagree". The participants were also informed by the moderator how much time was allocated for this activity, which assisted with participants' overall time management.

Example of speech bubbles and arrangement

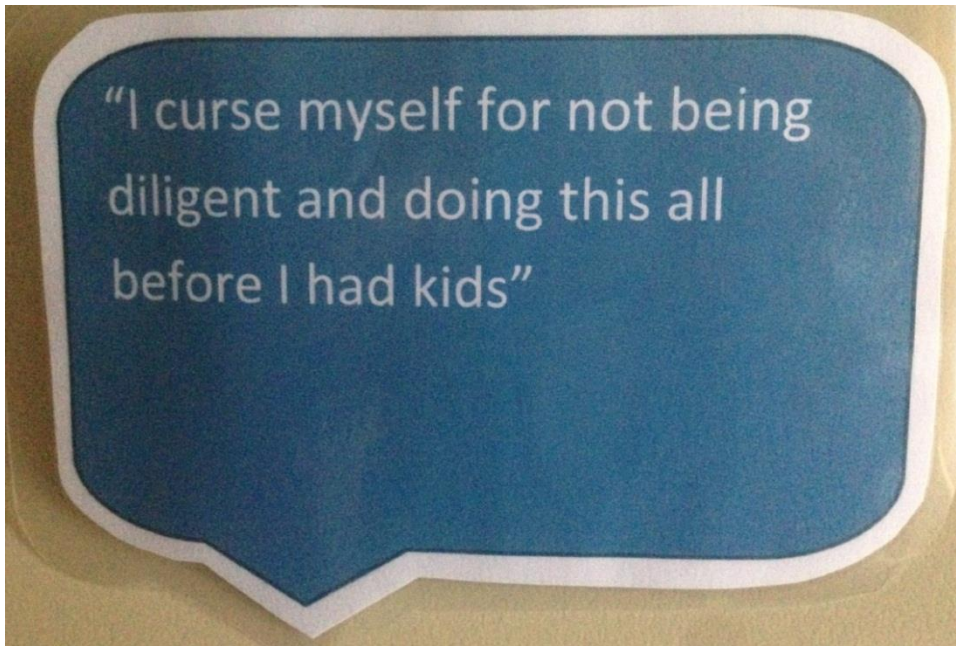


Figure 3.6.3-5 Quotable quote in laminated speech bubble



Figure 3.6.3-6 Quotes in speech bubbles placed along bench

To further improve the conversation and communication between the participants during this third section of the mini-focus groups, the moderators retreated back into the first room for the duration of this activity. Prior to the commencement of this activity, the participants were again made aware that they were recorded by the two voice recorders present in the room and were shown the location of these voice recorders. Excluding the moderators from the room during this activity helped ensure that they were not unintentional disruptors to the naturally-occurring conversations of the participants, recognised as a limitation to the genuine interaction and conversations occurring in many focus groups (Kirby et al., 2004; Morrison, 1998). The participants of all three focus groups completed the activity within the time allocated, and each of the 37 speech bubbles were placed on a final continuum for each mini-focus group. These final continua were photographed and, along with the voice recordings, were analysed by the researcher at the conclusion of each mini-focus group.

The final section of each mini-focus group was the conclusion. During the conclusion the moderator collated the information gained from the second section of the mini-focus groups, where participants described their university experience by creating an A3-sized discussion aid. This information had been collated and written on the room's whiteboard by the moderators whilst the participants were engaged in the speech bubble activity in the adjoining room. The purpose of this final section of the mini-focus groups was to present back to the participants their collective input in the context of the developing conceptual description. Following a short explanatory presentation by the moderator, the participants were given an opportunity to discuss and give feedback to the moderators about the understanding that the moderators had gained from their collective input. This conclusion assisted the researcher to increase the credibility

of the data and avoid misinterpretation, recognised as essential aspects of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

3.7 Data management

Each individual interview and mini-focus group was recorded in its entirety using a digital voice recorder. These recordings were then transcribed verbatim by the researcher, typically within three days of each interview. Participants were informed at the commencement of each interview and mini-focus group that these digital audio recordings were to occur and participants were shown the placement of the voice recorder. Consistent with the principles of Interpretive Description methodology (Thorne, 2008), a transcriptionist was not used for transcribing these voice recordings, as the transcription process assisted the researcher to develop a more intimate understanding of the content, thus allowing her to be more comprehensively connected to the data (Stuckey, 2014).

NVivo 10 software was employed to store and manage the data collected during this study. This data included the transcribed interviews, data from each questionnaire, and the researcher's reflections. The transcriptions from both the individual interviews and the mini-focus groups were completed in Microsoft Word before they were imported into NVivo 10 for further data management. NVivo 10 was considered the most appropriate software for the management of the data in this study as it has the capability to store, explore and code data, in addition to recording and attaching ideas, annotations and memos to stored data. Coding the data using the nodes function in NVivo 10 allowed the researcher to fragment and manage the data in a way that enabled her to achieve the intended level of Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA). Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) requires that each piece of data is considered in the context of all other previously analysed pieces of data (Fram, 2013). Thus, NVivo 10 software assisted the researcher by allowing her to find and compare each

fragment of data, amongst all other data, enabling her to build the conceptual description from the emergent meanings, themes and concepts.

In addition to the management of the interview data, statistical data from the questionnaires was entered into NVivo 10, before the researcher developed a two-way table combining composite participant demographics. This two-way table was developed further using a Microsoft Excel spread sheet for the purpose of outlining relationships between the collective demographics of participants. This table allowed the researcher to cross-reference important demographic information such as age, number of children, marital status and course load. The development of this table allowed the researcher to provide a more detailed profile of the study participants in the participant chapter of this thesis.

3.8 Data analysis

As previously discussed, this study was guided by Interpretive Description methodology, which included concurrent data collection and analysis. Thus, each of the elements of the research process including data collection, coding, data analysis, key theme construction and conceptual description development, occurred somewhat concurrently throughout the course of this study. The aforementioned Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) was essential to the development of the key themes and resultant conceptual description, as the researcher worked to compare each datum with all other data whilst identifying and developing key themes and meaning (Fram, 2013; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Traditionally, the use of Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) is central to grounded theory methodology, which is one of the ancestry methodologies for Interpretive Description (Thorne, 2008), however, studies involving other qualitative methodologies have also been found to benefit from its use (Fram, 2013; Ridolfo & Schoua-Glusberg, 2011). As such, the data analysis of this study successfully incorporated a Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) of the data from the questionnaires, interview transcripts, and focus group data; building on

and integrating each new piece of these into the emerging key themes and developing conceptual description.

The process of data analysis in this Interpretive Description guided study also acknowledges that meaning is constructed through an interactive and iterative process between the researcher and the researched (Thorne, 2008). For meaning to be constructed effectively in this type of interpretive study, the researcher actively made herself aware of her own disciplinary preconceptions in an attempt to maintain an optimum level of objective interpretation (Thorne, 2008). To acknowledge these preconceptions effectively, the researcher's existing understanding and experience was self-recorded prior to participant recruitment or data collection, and her initial reaction to each interview and mini-focus group was recognised and recorded prior to the transcription and analysis of the data. Researcher's preconceptions, and issues involving the researcher's interpretation levels, are important aspects to recognise and consider reflexively when conducting qualitative research, as both preconceptions and interpretation are highlighted as two of the major analytical challenges for researchers using Interpretive Description methodology (Hunt, 2009; Priest, Roberts, & Woods, 2002; Thorne, 2008).

Following the transcription and inclusion of transcripts into NVivo 10 software, the transcripts were read in their entirety, before they were fragmented into codes using open coding, otherwise known as initial coding (Charmaz, 2006). Open, or initial, coding is a fundamentally interpretative data analysis strategy used extensively in classic grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and grounded theory variations (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This type of inductive open coding involves breaking down data sources into smaller fragments that are stored together to enhance the researcher's understanding of themes in addition to the properties of these themes (Glaser, 1978). After breaking down the data

into discrete fragmented parts, further analysis involved examining, comparing, conceptualising and categorising these data fragments to further develop key themes and concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Using inductive open coding in this way allowed the data to be systematically condensed into a brief summary format of key findings, where clear links were established between findings and the research objectives. Following this coding and condensing data into themes, a framework of the underlying structure of experiences, shown through the central and coping concepts in the conceptual description, was subsequently developed.

Open coding was not used alone in the analysis of this data, as focused and thematic coding were used to re-examine the initial codes to refine the emergent key themes and aspects of these themes. This focused coding involved searching for “the most salient categories” of themes (Charmaz, 2006) in the data after the initial open coding was complete. Consistent with the principles of Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA), each previously focused code was then further analysed using thematic coding to develop more highly refined themes (Saldana, 2009), thus facilitating the theme development. The key themes, which are detailed in the findings chapter of this thesis, were initially derived from the aforementioned coding of the data collected during the individual interviews. Theme development was therefore the primary function of the data from the individual interviews in the data analysis phase of this study. The primary function of the data from the mini-focus groups, however, was to act or serve as confirmatory or elaboration data. The data from the mini-focus groups was analysed against each aspect of the emerging themes, continuing to use Constant Comparative Analysis, to confirm, elaborate on, or dispute the themes emerging from participants’ experiences expressed during the individual interviews. The distinct roles of the interview data and the mini-focus group data stems from the fact that they are essentially different in nature, and thus are unable to be used interchangeably (Lukic et al., 2004).

Following the emergence of the two key themes, which formed the descriptive findings of this study, another layer of interpretation was implemented in the analysis to determine underlying concepts. This further analysis enabled the emergence of the central and coping concepts. These concepts were refined by interpreting meaning from why these thematic commonalities had occurred between participants. It is important to emphasise that the key themes from the data analysis, as outlined in the findings chapter of this thesis, are not independent from the conceptual layers of resultant conceptual description. Rather, these key themes form the foundations on which the four interpreted concepts were based, hence, the key themes are deeply embedded as the foundation layer of the resultant conceptual description.

Finally, the concepts were analysed further, which is where it became apparent that one concept was elevated to form an overarching central concept, which was surrounded and protected by three coping concepts. Elevating the central concept more accurately demonstrated the significance of this concept to the participants in this study.

3.9 Credibility

The basic notion of credibility for any qualitative research project is that the readers and the participants can view the research design and process and have it make sense (Jensen, 2008). This requires a clear, logical link between the design and the aim of the study. Furthermore, to be considered to have established research credibility, people with an interest in the research findings must accept the research as sound, legitimate and authoritative (Yardley, 2008). With qualitative research, it is imperative that the research design, the participant selection and the data analysis are executed to establish and enhance research credibility. These aspects are particularly important in interpretive,

qualitative research projects because for the researcher to form trustworthy and credible research findings, objective data does not passively emerge. Rather, the researcher needs to be engaged and active, completing necessary tasks: comprehending, synthesising, theorising, and re-contextualising (Morse, 1994). The active interpretive engagement with the data that occurred in this study was most prominent during the data analysis to assist the researcher in identifying key themes and analysing the central and coping concepts.

With the design of an Interpretive Description guided study, Thorne describes four evaluative criteria which must be met for the researcher to establish research credibility (Thorne, 2008). These four evaluative criteria are considered essential to ensure the research is theoretically, epistemologically, and technically sound, thus allowing the researcher to claim the study as both rigorous and credible (Thorne, 2008).

First, epistemological integrity is achieved through ensuring the research is designed and conducted consistent with epistemology and principles of Interpretive Description methodology (Thorne, 2008). To ensure epistemological integrity, the design and implementation of this study factored in the principles of Interpretive Description. The experience and preconceptions of the researcher in the discipline were recognised, rather than the researcher claiming to start the study as an empty vessel (Thorne, 2008). “Quotable quotes” were set aside, and later partially analysed by mini-focus group participants, so as not to place an overemphasis on them by the researcher during the data analysis phase of the study. The research design also ensured that the three data collection methods—questionnaire, individual interviews and mini-focus groups – all aligned with the epistemology and principles of Interpretive Description methodology. All transcripts were transcribed personally by the researcher as outlined in the principles of Interpretive Description (Thorne, 2008). Finally, each interview and

mini-focus group was analysed, contributing to the emerging themes, prior to the commencement of the following interview or mini-focus group. Each of these factors was designed to improve the epistemological integrity of the study, thus enhancing credibility.

Second, representative credibility was achieved by ensuring the participants selected, in this case through the use of purposive sampling, were in fact representative of those intended in the design of the study (Thorne, 2008). This representative credibility was achieved through the careful consideration and construction of the eight selection criteria. These criteria included participants aged between 25 and 44 upon entry, a mother of a child or children under the age of 18 who still resided at home, living independently from their parents, and currently enrolled at least partly on-campus in a coursework degree at the South West Campus of Edith Cowan University. The design of the study also considered ensuring that a variety of participants were included in the study. For example, this study aimed to, and succeeded in, including students who were both married and single, those with small and large families, those studying different courses, those with varying employment commitments, those living within and outside the greater Bunbury region, and those studying part and full-time. By giving close consideration to the design of the study, the representative credibility of the participant sample was enriched, thus enhancing the overall credibility of the study.

Third, analytic logic was achieved through a consistent audit trail of analysis, therefore ensuring analytic consistency (Thorne, 2008). The same process occurred for each interview to achieve this same consistency. Each interview was digitally voice-recorded before it was transcribed personally by the researcher within three days of the date conducted. At this stage, any quotable quotes were highlighted by the researcher. Then, each transcript was read in its entirety by

the researcher, open coded through NVivo 10 software, and analysed further using focused and thematic coding. This process, incorporating Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA), was consistent for each of the 24 individual interviews, thus enhancing analytic consistency and improving the study's credibility. Similarly, each mini-focus group was conducted using the same structure as outlined in *Figure 3.6.3-1 - Mini-focus group structure* shown previously. Again, these mini-focus groups were analysed using open coding and the same process of Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA). The consistency of the structure of both these interviews and mini-focus groups, and the consistency of the data management and analysis following the completion of these interviews and mini-focus groups, helped ensure analytic consistency and overall credibility of the study.

Last, interpretative authority was required to ensure trustworthy descriptions that illustrate truth external to the researcher's own bias or experiences (Thorne, 2008). Initially, the researcher recognised her own experiences by writing these down for future reflection. The analysis of the interviews and mini-focus groups was enhanced by raising aspects of the developing key themes with subsequent participants in the interviews and mini-focus groups. Clarifying questions were developed from the transcripts of previous participants, rather than from the curiosity of the researcher, to limit the researcher's own bias. All questions, other than the grand tour question, were presented as open, non-specific and as non-leading as possible, using questions for example: "Some previous participants have discussed domestic tasks in their interviews, could you please tell me your experience about that?"

As this study was designed consistently within the framework of the Interpretive Description methodology as outlined by Thorne (2008), the use of these four elements of this framework ensured the research was both methodologically and

interpretively rigorous. Methodological rigor and interpretive rigor are described as the two kinds of rigor required for qualitative research to be considered credible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

3.10 Ethical considerations

The design of this research was guided by both the *National statement on ethical conduct in research involving humans (Council, 2007)* and the Privacy Act, 1998 [Commonwealth]. In accordance with these legal requirements, the most significant ethical consideration in the design of this study was respecting the privacy and rights of each of the participants.

Prior to their involvement in the study an information sheet, as attached in *Appendix D - Participant information* sheet was provided to each participant informing them of the background to the study and informing them that their inclusion in this study was voluntary and completely independent of their course. Furthermore, this information sheet informed participants about the researcher and the purpose of the study; it outlined the process of participation, and made participants aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without academic penalty. Particularly relevant to those participating in the mini-focus groups, this information sheet outlined the importance for respecting the privacy and confidentiality of the other participants by not sharing their disclosed personal information with others. Finally, time was made available for the participants to ask questions of the researcher about the study or the information contained in the information sheet prior to the commencement of their data collection.

The anonymity of the participants was protected through the use of de-identified data. This was achieved by using pseudonyms for both the participant and any

other friends or family that the participant may have discussed during their participation in the study. To further enhance participant confidentiality, all questionnaires, transcripts and notes were titled with a participant number rather than with participant names, and were stored separately from the only document identifying each participant by name, which was the signed consent form. The process of using de-identified data was also included on the participant information sheet, headed “confidentiality”, to inform each participant of the steps taken to protect their privacy.

Special ethical consideration was required during the write-up of the participants’ chapter of this thesis, where a more detailed story of the background of three participants was provided. Although providing participants’ stories is not uncommon in qualitative research involving in-depth individual interviews (McCormack, 2004), the researcher was aware that providing these types of detailed stories can open the possibility of deductive disclosure (Wiles, Crow, Heath, & Charles, 2008). As recommended by Kaiser (2009), in addition to gaining informed consent and de-identifying the data, in the case of these three stories, a dialogue was opened between the researcher and the three participants. This dialogue allowed each participant the opportunity to view their story prior to its inclusion in the thesis and having the opportunity to remove any statements that they felt may cause them adverse effects from deductive disclosure. This dialogue between the researcher and the participants formed part of a nuanced view of consent which considers that some participants desire their own voice to be heard in the data rather than desiring complete confidentiality (Giordano, O'Reilly, Taylor, & Dogra, 2007).

Informed written consent was obtained from each participant after reading the information sheet and having the opportunity to ask questions. This written consent was obtained using the form attached in *Appendix E - Statement and*

consent form, prior to each participants' inclusion in the study. The researcher was also aware that there was potential for participants to become distressed or anxious during the interviews or mini-focus groups as personal issues were discussed, potentially including, but not limited to, issues of children, money, relationships, and participants' ability to cope. Considering this potential, the researcher was prepared to discontinue interviews or change the mini-focus group arrangements at any time if required. Additionally, the researcher was prepared to refer participants to the university's counselling service if necessary.

To ensure the safe management of data, all paper copies of consent forms, questionnaires, transcripts, notes and other data were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the office of the researcher on the South West Campus of Edith Cowan University. As previously mentioned, consent forms and other data were stored separately to maximise the privacy of the de-identified data. All electronic documents were stored on a computer, accessible only by password. To maximise the privacy of the participants, these records were only accessible by the researcher and the research supervisors. At the completion of the study, and in accordance with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (Council, 2007), these records will be stored for a further five years using the recommended Institute Data Storage (IDS) system at the Edith Cowan Institute for Education Research (Edith Cowan Institute for Education Research, 2011). After this time these records will be destroyed, again in accordance with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (Council, 2007).

3.11 Methodology chapter review

The methodology selected to guide this research, and the overall design of this study, aimed to provide insight in an ethical and credible manner into the experiences of mature age female students with dependent children at one regional university campus. Prior to metaphorically painting this picture of the participants, this chapter outlined how the university campus and participants

had been selected for inclusion in this study based upon sampling and selection criteria. The three main sampling criteria used for this study were convenience, criterion and purposive sampling. Each participant was required to meet each of the eight selection criteria for inclusion in the study. These criteria included being a mother, having dependent children residing at home, being currently enrolled in a course work degree at ECUSW, and having completed at least one year full-time, or the part-time equivalent, at the time of their inclusion in the study. Once sampling was established, participants were recruited using three recruitment methods, an on-campus flyer advertising campaign, the referral method, and snowballing. As this study required a qualitative methodology structured to explore experiences of people within a naturalistic environment, Interpretive Description was selected to guide this research. Consistent with the principles of Interpretive Description methodology, three data collection methods were used to gain rich, qualitative data. These included the completion of an initial demographic questionnaire, which was given to all participants to ensure uniformity in the gathering of demographic information from each participant. Following this, 24 unstructured in-depth individual interviews were conducted involving a total of 21 participants, each having been asked the same grand tour question: "Tell me about your experience at university." Consistent with the principles of Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA), each of these individual interviews was analysed prior to the subsequent interview being conducted. Finally, three mini-focus groups were held including a total of 11 participants. Each of these mini-focus groups followed the same structure, and each one was again analysed prior to the subsequent mini-focus group being conducted.

The integrity and overall credibility of the study was maximised by ensuring the study was designed and conducted congruent with the evaluative criteria required for Interpretive Description methodology as outlined by Thorne (2008), with epistemological integrity, representative credibility, analytic logic, and interpretive logic. These criteria are considered essential to ensure the research

is theoretically, epistemologically, and technically sound, thus allowing the researcher to claim the study as both rigorous and credible. Finally, the study design ensured ethical considerations were planned, particularly with respect to ensuring each participant's privacy.

Chapter 4 –Profile of Participants



4.1 Chapter overview

This study examined the experience of mature age female students with dependent children, who were studying at one regional university campus in Western Australia, ECUSW. Thirty-two undergraduate students participated in this study to assist the researcher to gain insight into the experiences of students with the shared roles of mother and student at a regional university campus. This chapter is divided into three sections. First, as shown in *Figure 4.1.1-1 – Structure of Chapter 4*, a statistical overview is provided of participants' demographic information. This demographic information includes, but is not limited to: personal information such as age, marital status and number of children; academic information such as course of study, enrolment and load; time commitment information such as travel time, participation in paid employment and participation in volunteer and sporting activities; and financial information such as family income bracket and out-of-pocket childcare expenses. This demographic information helps to contextualise the background of the participants who were included in this study. To assist the reader in

contextualising quotations throughout the thesis, three of these pieces of demographic information, course load, marital status and number of children, have been referred to in parenthesis next to each direct quote alongside a pseudonym.

Second, as also shown in *Figure 4.1.1-1 – Structure of Chapter 4*, qualitative information is explored providing understanding into participants' backgrounds. This information was retrieved from the interviews and mini-focus groups, and includes participants' reasons for entering university, their reasons for continuing university, common commitments amongst participants and unique circumstances. The last section of this chapter, also shown in *Figure 4.1.1-1 – Structure of Chapter 4*, is where the stories of three participants are told. These three participants' stories, which do not aim to be representative of the 32 participants included in the study, assist the reader to connect with the experience of the participants in the study. These three stories, each from different disciplines (nursing, education, social work) aims to connect the reader to the participants, giving a deeper understanding of the holistic situation of three mothers who are completing their undergraduate degrees.

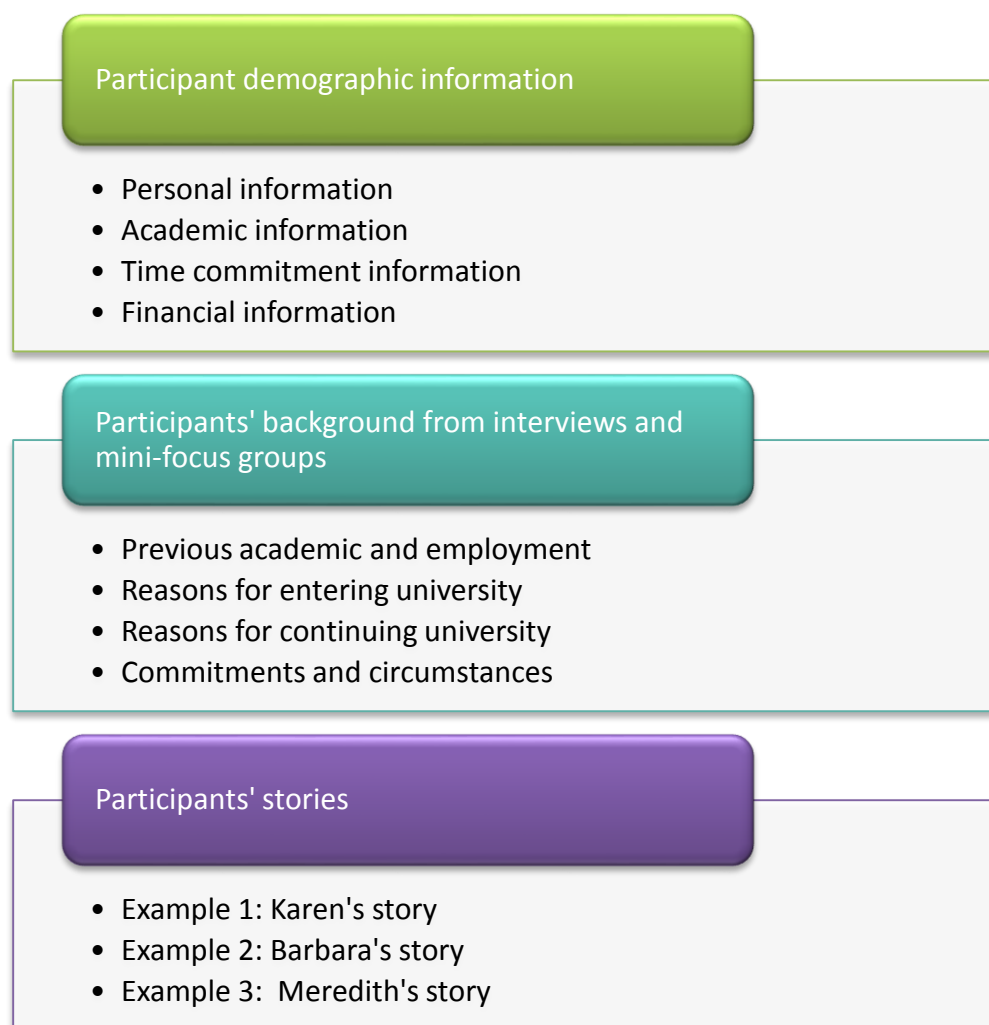


Figure 4.1.1-1 Structure of Chapter 4

4.2 Participant demographic information

As previously noted, a total of 32 participants were included in this study. Prior to each interview or mini-focus group, each of these 32 participants completed a demographic questionnaire that enabled a range of demographic information to be collected. The use of this questionnaire, attached in *Appendix C - Participant questionnaire*, ensured that consistent demographic information was collected from all participants. This section of the participants' chapter provides an overview of the participants' information provided by the demographic questionnaire. Although this was a qualitative study, this quantitative data was collected in the demographic questionnaire and has been compiled statistically to provide a collective overview of some of the demographics of the participants

in this study. This statistical analysis of the demographic information serves solely to create a profile of the participants who were included in this study, therefore this demographic information is included in this participants chapter rather than in the findings chapter of this thesis. This section follows the design of the questionnaire, which was separated into four sections: personal information, academic information, time commitment information, and financial information. The information provided in these questionnaires, as with the qualitative information collected in this study, was self-identified and assumed to be accurate. No attempt was made, nor was it intended to be made, by the researcher to triangulate or check the accuracy of the information provided by the participants.

4.2.1 Personal information

This first section of the demographic questionnaire collected personal information such as age, method of entry into university, marital status, and details of dependent children. Method of entry into university was included under personal information rather than academic information as it related to the past experience or education of participants rather than relating to their current academic pursuits.

Age

The first selection criterion of this study was that participants were aged between 25 and 44 years upon admission into the current course. As illustrated in *Table 4.2-1 – Participants' age*, the smallest participant group by age was those aged between 25 and 29 years of age inclusive at the time of their participation in the study, with only two of the participants, 6.3%. Seven participants, 21.9%, were aged between 30 and 34 years inclusive. The largest participant age group, 13 in total, were aged between 35 and 39 years inclusive, which accounted for 40.6% of participants. Ten participants, 31.2%, were aged between 40 and 45 years inclusive at the time of their participation in the study.

It was a requirement that students were aged between 25 and 44 years on admission to the current course, and as such three participants who met the upper end of this criterion were aged 45 years at the time of their participation in this study.

Table 4.2-1 Participants' age

Age Group	n (%)
25 – 29	2 (6.3%)
30 – 34	7 (21.9%)
35 – 39	13 (40.6%)
40 – 45	10 (31.2%)

Method of entry into university

The participants in this study self-identified their method of entry selecting one of five entry methods in the questionnaire. These figures are shown in *Table 4.2-2 – Participants' entry into university*. The questionnaire also had a sixth additional category for “other” as shown in *Appendix C – Participant questionnaire*, however, no participants selected this category. Nine participants, 28.1%, entered using a previously completed Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualification and eight participants, 25.0%, entered on the basis of their previous undergraduate studies. At interview it was disclosed that of these eight students who had previously studied at university, two had completed their previous undergraduate degree and six students had discontinued their previous undergraduate degree.

Table 4.2-2 Participants' entry into university

Entry into University	n (%)
TAFE qualification	9 (28.1%)
Previous undergraduate studies	8 (25.0%)
Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT)	9 (28.1%)
University Preparation Course (UPC)	3 (9.4%)
Portfolio entry	3 (9.4%)

Nine participants, 28.1%, entered their current course of study after completing the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT). Rather than a single test, the STAT is a series of tests assessing a range of competencies needed for success in tertiary study. These competencies include the student's ability to think critically and analyse information, as opposed to testing specific curriculum knowledge. A further three students, 9.4%, entered their current course after completing the University Preparation Course (UPC). This six-month full-time course is offered on campus at ECUSW and is designed to develop the students' learning skills with subjects including academic writing, learning skills, mathematics, humanities and science. The remaining three participants, 9.4%, entered through a portfolio entry. The portfolio entry pathway, available to mature age students, assesses potential students' ability to succeed in higher education based on a life experience portfolio with evidence including their previous employment, voluntary involvements and educational backgrounds.

Marital status

The majority of participants in this study, 65.6%, self-identified as either married or in a de-facto relationship as shown in the detailed table in *Table 4.2-3 – Participants' marital status*. At no stage during the questionnaire or interview

was it asked or delineated if the married or de-facto relationship was heterosexual or homosexual. Students who self-identified as married or de-facto are referred to collectively throughout this thesis as “married”. Eleven participants, 34.4%, self-identified as single, separated, divorced or widowed and are referred to collectively throughout this thesis as “single”.

Table 4.2-3 Participants' marital status

Marital Status	n (%)
Married/de-facto	21 (65.6%)
Single/divorced/separated/widowed	11 (34.4%)

Cross-examining different aspects of the demographic questionnaire highlighted a number of important differences between married and single participants. This is displayed in *Table 4.2-4 – Selected participant information, married and single*. A larger proportion of single participants self-identified as participating in paid employment, with eight of the 11 single participants, 72.7 %, compared with 10 of the 21, 47.6%, of married participants. A larger proportion of single participants were studying a full-time course load at the time of their participation in the study, eight of the 11 single participants, 72.7%, compared with 11 of the 21 married participants, 52.4%. A similar proportion of single participants were studying on campus units only, six of the 11 single participants, 54.5%, compared with 12 of the 21 married participants 57.1%.

Table 4.2-4 Selected participant information, married and single

Marital Status	In paid employment (n = 18)	Not in paid employment (n = 14)	Full-time Student (n = 19)	Part-time Student (n = 13)	On campus (n = 18)	On and off campus (n = 14)
Married (n = 21)	10	11	11	10	12	9
Single (n = 11)	8	3	8	3	6	5

Dependent children

Details of participant's dependent children were sought in the demographic questionnaire. These details included the number of dependent children, gender, age, and if each child resided with them. As illustrated in *Table 4.2-5 – Number of dependent children*, the majority of participants, 20 of the 32 participants, 62.5%, identified as having two dependent children. Two participants, 6.3%, identified as having one dependent child, whilst five participants identified as having three dependent children, 15.6%. Similarly, five participants identified as having four or more dependent children, 15.6%.

Table 4.2-5 Number of dependent children

Number of Dependent Children	n (%)
1	2 (6.3%)
2	20 (62.5%)
3	5 (15.6%)
4 or more	5 (15.6%)

The demographic questionnaire obtained information about the age of each of the participants' dependent children under the age of 18. The age range of participant's dependent children was between zero and 17 years of age, illustrated in *Figure 4.2.1-1 – Histogram of the ages of participants' children*. Both the mean and mode of these ages of participants' children were eight years of age. The median of this data was similar at seven years of age. These measures of central tendency are statistically reflective of participants' comments during the individual interviews that they choose to enrol at university when a child had started primary school. The compulsory schooling age for children in Western Australia is six years and six months, and their children's entry into schooling may also be the reason why no participants had children who were five years of age. In addition to the data provided on children's ages, five participants, 15.6%, declared having at least one child not living with them, and two participants, 6.2%, wrote on the questionnaire that their children live with them part-time.

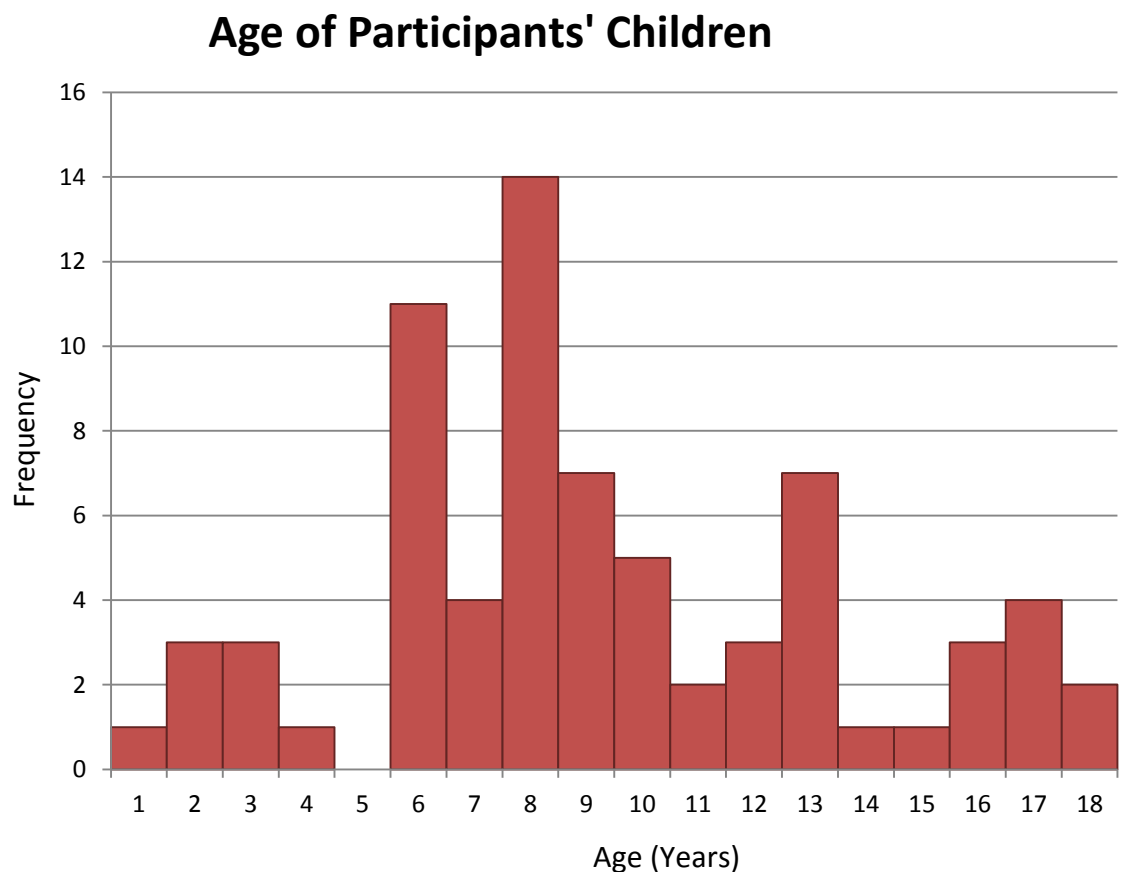


Figure 4.2.1-1 Histogram of the ages of participants' children

Further data examination compared the number of participant's dependent children with other demographic information, as shown in *Table 4.2-6 – Selected participant information, number of children*. Basic analysis of the number of children compared with participants' marital status shows that of those with one child, one identified as married and one identified as single, 50.0% each. A significantly larger proportion of participants with two children identified as married, 14 of the 20 participants, 70.0%, compared with six who identified as single, 30.0%. Similarly, a larger proportion of participants with both three and four or more children identified as married, with three of the five for each who were married, 60.0%, and two of the five for each who were single, 40.0%.

Table 4.2-6 Selected participant information, number of children

N° Children	Married (n = 21)	Single (n = 11)	Full-time (n = 19)	Part-time (n = 13)	On Campus Units Only (n = 18)	On and off Campus units (n = 14)
1 (n = 2)	1	1	1	1	1	1
2 (n = 20)	14	6	13	7	11	9
3 (n = 5)	3	2	2	3	5	0
4 + (n = 5)	3	2	3	2	1	4

The data focusing on the number of children with the course load of students is also displayed in *Table 4.2-6 – Selected participant information, number of children*. Of the participants with one child, one was full-time and one was part-time. A significantly larger proportion of those with two children were studying full-time, 13 of the 20, 65.0%, compared with seven of the 20 who identified as studying part-time, 35.0%. Fewer students with three children studied full-time, with two of the five, 40.0%, compared with three of the five, 60.0%, studying part-time. A larger proportion, three of the five, 60.0%, of those with four or

more children, were studying full-time, compared with two of the five, who were enrolled part-time.

The data focusing on the number of children with the attendance mode of students is also displayed in *Table 4.2-6 – Selected participant information, number of children*. It was a criterion of participation in this study that participants were studying at least partly on-campus; therefore there is no category for those enrolled in only studying off-campus units. Of the participants with one child, one was studying on-campus units only, whilst one was studying both on and off-campus units, 50.0% each. A larger proportion of those with two children were studying on-campus units only, 11 of the 20, 55.0%, compared with nine of the 20 who were enrolled in both on and off campus units, 45.0%. All five participants with three children studied on campus units only. Finally, a significantly larger proportion, four of the five, 80.0%, of those with four or more children were studying both on and off-campus units, compared with just one of the five, 20%, enrolled in on-campus units only.

An analysis was undertaken comparing the number of children participants had, with their participation in paid employment, as shown in *Table 4.2-7 – Participation in paid employment, number of children*. Of those with one child, one of the two participants participated in paid employment, 50%. Similarly, half of the participants with two dependent children participated in paid employment, three declared working less than 10 hours per fortnight, 15.0%, four who declared working between 10 and 30 hours per fortnight, 20.0%, two who declared working between 30 and 50 hours per fortnight, 10.0%, and one who was working in excess of 50 hours per fortnight, 5%. Of those with three dependent children, two of the five participants did not participate in paid employment, 40.0%, one of the five participants declared working less than 10 hours per fortnight, 20.0%, and two of the five participants declared working

between 30 and 50 hours per fortnight, 40.0%. Of those with four or more children, one of the five participants, 20.0%, reported not being in paid employment, two of the five, 40.0%, reported working less than 10 hours per fortnight and a further two participants, 40.0%, reported working in excess of 30 hours per fortnight.

Table 4.2-7 Participation in paid employment, number of children

N° Children	No Paid Employment (n = 14)	Less than 10 hours per fortnight (n = 6)	Between 10 and 30 hours per fortnight (n = 4)	Between 30 and 50 hours per fortnight (n = 7)	Greater than 50 hours per fortnight (n = 1)
1 (n = 2)	1	0	0	1	0
2 (n = 20)	10	3	4	2	1
3 (n = 5)	2	1	0	2	0
4 + (n = 5)	1	2	0	2	0

4.2.2 Academic information

The second section of the demographic questionnaire collected academic information relating to the student's current course. This information included their current course of study, date enrolled, expected date of completion, current enrolment load, attendance mode, number of units withdrawn from in the previous 12 months and the number of summer or winter school units completed in the previous 12 months.

Course enrolled

Each of the five undergraduate courses offered at ECUSW campus in which mothers are currently enrolled at the time of this study was represented by the

32 participants included in this study. The sixth degree available at ECUSW campus at the time of this study, the Bachelor of Science (Surf Science), did not have any students who met the selection criteria, that is, no mature age female students with dependent children were enrolled. As shown in *Table 4.2-8 - Course enrolled*, 18 of the 32 participants, 56.2%, were enrolled in the Bachelor of Science (Nursing) degree, six participants, 8.7%, were enrolled in the Bachelor of Education degree, four participants, 12.5%, were enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work degree, two participants, 6.3%, were enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts, (formerly the Bachelor of Creative Industries) degree, and a further two participants, 6.3%, were enrolled in the Bachelor of Business degree. These proportions did not, nor was it intended they do, form a representative sample of the number of enrolments at each course at this campus. As previously discussed, the disproportionate number of nursing students was most likely due to the referral and snowballing methods of participant recruitment.

Table 4.2-8 Course enrolled

Course enrolled	n (%)
Bachelor of Science (Nursing)	18 (56.2%)
Bachelor of Education (Primary)	6 (18.7%)
Bachelor of Social Work	4 (12.5%)
Bachelor of Arts (Creative Industries)	2 (6.3%)
Bachelor of Business	2 (6.3%)
Bachelor of Science (Surf Science)	0 (0.0%)

Course load and attendance mode

Course load was identified as either full-time with either three or four units of study each semester or part-time where one or two units were studied each semester. As shown in *Table 4.2-9 - Course load*, 19 of the 32 participants, 59.4%,

identified themselves as studying full-time, whilst 13 of the 32 participants, 40.6%, identified themselves as studying part-time.

Table 4.2-9 Course load

Course enrolled	n (%)
Full-time	19 (59.4%)
Part-time	13 (40.6%)

The same proportion of participants, but not the same participants, identified themselves as studying on-campus units only. As shown in *Table 4.2-10 – Attendance mode*, with 19 of the 32 participants, 59.4%, identified as studying on-campus units only, compared with 13 participants, 40.6%, declaring they studied a mixture of both on and off-campus units. As one criterion for inclusion in the study was that students be enrolled on campus, a category for studying all off-campus units was not included.

Table 4.2-10 Attendance mode

Attendance Mode	n (%)
On campus	19 (59.4%)
Mixed on and off campus	13 (40.6%)

As illustrated in *Table 4.2-11 – Attendance mode, course load*, of the 18 full-time students, the majority, 12, 63.1%, studied on-campus units only. Thus, seven of the 18 full-time participants, 36.9%, studied a mixture of both on and off-campus units. Of the part-time students, a smaller proportion, six of the 13, 46.1%, whilst seven of the 13 part-time student participants, 53.9%, studied a mixture of both on and off campus units.

Table 4.2-11 Attendance mode, course load

Course load	On Campus Units Only (n = 18)	On and off Campus units (n = 14)
Full-time (n = 19)	12	7
Part-time (n = 13)	6	7

In addition to cross referencing attendance mode and course load in *Table 4.2-12 – Participation in paid employment, course load*, illustrates the number of participants enrolled full-time and part-time in paid employment. A smaller proportion of full-time students were not employed, seven of the 18, 36.8%, compared to seven of the 13, 53.8%, part-time students. According to this data, full-time participants were also more heavily employed than part-time participants, with six of the 18, 31.6%, full-time participants working in excess of 30 hours per fortnight, compared with two, 15.4%, of the 13 part-time participants. This compared to a greater proportion of part-time participants in paid employment for less than 10 hours per fortnight, and between 10 and 30 hours per fortnight, with two of the 13, 15.4%, participants in each category. These proportions were higher than the same categories for full-time participants, having four, 21.5%, of the 18 participants employed less than 10 hours per fortnight, and two, 10.5%, of the 18 participants employed between 10 and 30 hours per fortnight.

Table 4.2-12 Participation in paid employment, course load

Course load	No Paid Employment (n = 14)	Less than 10 hours per fortnight (n = 6)	Between 10 and 30 hours per fortnight (n = 4)	Between 30 and 50 hours per fortnight (n = 7)	Greater than 50 hours per fortnight (n = 1)
Full-time (n = 19)	7	4	2	6	0
Part-time (n = 13)	7	2	2	1	1

Units withdrawn and summer or winter units completed

On the demographic questionnaire, participants were asked about the number of units from which they had withdrawn within the previous 12 months. No delineation was made between units that were withdrawn from before or after the financial and academic penalty deadlines for withdrawal. Seven of the 32 participants, 21.9%, declared withdrawing from one or more units in the previous 12 months. Of these seven participants, three, 42.9%, declared that they had withdrawn from one unit, a further three participants, 42.9%, declared that they had withdrawn from two units, and one participant, 14.2%, declared that she had withdrawn from a total of three units of study in the previous 12 months.

Participants were also asked if they had participated in summer or winter school units in the previous 12 months. These units are compressed units held mostly on-campus, either in Perth or in Bunbury during the university's break time. Unlike traditional university units, summer and winter school units require student attendance typically from 9:00am until 5:00pm, Monday to Friday, for either one or two weeks at a time. Summer and winter school units are not available for all courses, and were not available at ECUSW campus for either the Bachelor of Social Work or the Bachelor of Science (Nursing) at the time of this

study. Of the 32 participants in the study, three, 9.4%, indicated they had completed summer or winter school units in the previous 12 months. Two of these students were enrolled in a Bachelor of Education, and one was enrolled in a Bachelor of Business.

4.2.3 Time commitment information

The third section of the demographic questionnaire collected information about the time commitment of participants. This information included time spent on voluntary activities, time spent on own activities, time caring for persons other than their children, time travelling to and from university, participation in paid employment and the number of hours of domestic or child-rearing assistance received.

Time spent on volunteer activities

The demographic questionnaire required participants to estimate their time spent on other activities such as voluntary activities. This was intended to gain an understanding of the participants' time syphons in addition to their university and family commitments. Voluntary activities included, but were not limited to, participation on school committees, coaching junior sports, sitting on community committees, and participating in volunteer emergency services. As illustrated in *Table 4.2-13 – Selected participant information, time on voluntary activities*, the largest proportion of participants, 13 of the 32, 40.6%, reported participating in more than six hours of voluntary activities per fortnight. This compared to six participants, 18.7%, who participated in between three and six hours of voluntary activities per fortnight, five, 15.6%, who participated in between one and three hours per fortnight, and eight participants, 25.0%, who reported participating in less than one hour per fortnight on voluntary activities.

Table 4.2-13 Selected participant information, time on voluntary activities

Time on voluntary activities	Married (n = 21)	Single (n = 11)	Full-time (n = 19)	Part-time (n = 13)
Less than 1 hour per fortnight (n = 8)	7	1	8	0
Between 1 & 3 hours per fortnight (n = 5)	5	0	1	4
Between 3 & 6 hours per fortnight (n = 6)	4	2	1	5
Over 6 hours per fortnight (n = 13)	5	8	9	4

As illustrated in *Table 4.2-13 – Selected participant information, time spent on voluntary activities*, of the 13 participants who participated in more than six hours of voluntary activities per fortnight, five were married, 38.5%, and nine were enrolled full-time, 69.2%. Of the six participants who participated in between three and six hours per fortnight, four, 66.7%, were married, and one was enrolled full-time, 16.7%. Of the five participants who participated in between one and three hours of voluntary activities each fortnight, all were married, and one was enrolled full-time (20.0%). Last, of the eight participants who participated in less than one hour of voluntary activities each fortnight, seven were married (87.5%), and all were studying full-time, 100%. This data indicates that a greater proportion of single, and full-time participants, spent more time involved in voluntary activities per fortnight than married or part-time participants.

Time spent on own sporting or leisure activities

Participants were also asked about participation in their own sporting or leisure activities. These activities included, but were not limited to, participating in

group fitness classes, team sports, attending a gymnasium, running, and taking art classes. The highest proportion, as shown in *Table 4.2-14 - Selected participant information, time spent on own leisure activities*, 12 of the 32 participants, 37.5%, reported spending less than one hour per fortnight on their own sporting or leisure activities. Ten, 31.2%, reported spending between one and three hours per fortnight on their own sporting or leisure activities. Six, 18.7%, reported spending between three and six hours per fortnight on their own sporting or leisure activities. A smaller proportion, four of the 32 participants, 12.5%, reported spending more than six hours per fortnight on their own sporting or leisure activities.

Table 4.2-14 Selected participant information, time spent on own leisure activities

Time on own leisure activities	Married (n = 21)	Single (n = 11)	Full-time (n = 19)	Part-time (n = 13)
Less than 1 hour per fortnight (n = 12)	8	4	9	3
Between 1 and 3 hours per fortnight (n = 10)	7	3	8	2
Between 3 and 6 hours per fortnight (n = 6)	4	2	2	4
Over 6 hours per fortnight (n = 4)	2	2	0	4

An analysis of the time that the participants spent on their own sporting or leisure activities is included in *Table 4.2-13 -Selected participant information, time spent on own leisure activities*. The participants' demographic data showed that of the 12 participants who declared spending less than one hour on their own sporting or leisure activities, eight, 66.7%, were married, and nine were enrolled full-time. Of the 10 participants who reported spending between one

and three hours per fortnight on their own sporting or leisure activities, seven, 70%, were married and eight were enrolled full-time, 80%. Of the six participants who reported spending between three and six hours per fortnight on their own sporting or leisure activities, four were married, 66.7%, and two were enrolled full-time, 33.3%. Finally, of the four students who reported spending more than six hours per fortnight on their own sporting or leisure activities, two were married, 50.0%, and none were enrolled full-time. This data indicates that a greater proportion of part-time and single participants spent more time on their own sporting or leisure activities than full-time or married participants.

Travel to and from university

The majority of participants, 19 of the 32, 59.4%, lived in the greater Bunbury region and reported travelling less than four hours in total per fortnight to attend university, as shown in *Table 4.2-15 – Selected participant information, location of residence*. For the purpose of this study the greater Bunbury region included residences in, but not limited to, the suburbs and localities of Bunbury, Australind, Eaton, Dalyellup, Dardanup and Capel. Of these 19 participants living in the greater Bunbury region, nine, 47.4%, reported being enrolled full-time, whilst 10 participants, 52.6%, reported studying on-campus units only. These proportions were marginally lower than those for participants living outside the greater Bunbury region, as 10 of the 13, 76.9%, participants living outside the greater Bunbury region were studying full-time, and eight of the 13, 61.5%, participants were enrolled in on-campus units only.

Table 4.2-15 Selected participant information, location of residence

Residence location	Full-time (n = 19)	Part-time (n = 13)	On Campus Units Only (n = 18)	On and off Campus units (n = 14)
Within the greater Bunbury region (n = 19)	9	10	10	9
Outside the greater Bunbury region (n = 13)	10	3	8	5

As illustrated, 13 participants lived outside the greater Bunbury region. Nine of these participants reported travelling between four and eight hours per fortnight to attend university. These students lived in Busselton, Dunsborough, Donnybrook and Collie. Four participants reported travelling more than eight hours per fortnight to attend university. These students lived in the South-West region of Western Australia in Bridgetown, Manjimup, and Margaret River. The location of these towns in the South-West region of Western Australia and the distance of these towns from ECUSW campus are illustrated by the red stars on *Figure 4.2.3-1 – Map of the South West of Western Australia*. Furthermore, of the four students who reported travelling more than eight hours per fortnight, all were enrolled full-time, and all studied on campus units only at the time of their participation in the study.

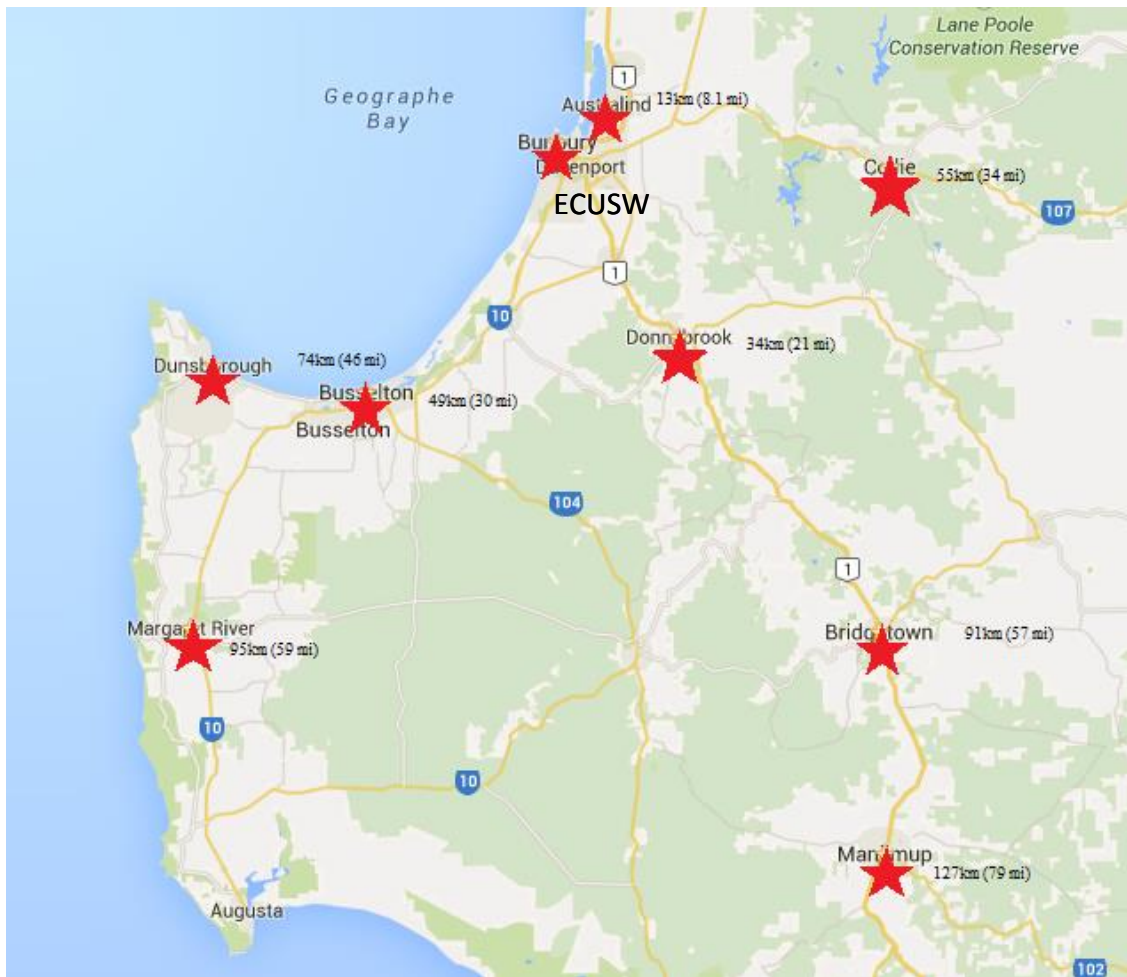


Figure 4.2.3-1 Map of the South West of Western Australia

4.2.4 Financial information

The fourth and final section of the questionnaire collected three key pieces of financial information. These were the participant's total accommodation expenditure, total out-of-pocket childcare expenses, and total income received.

Accommodation expenditure

Accommodation expenditure was significant for this study as it constituted a large expense for most participants. Accommodation expenditure ranged from AUD\$1100 per fortnight (AUD\$28,600 pa), to AUD\$0 as some participants owned their place of residence and did not incur accommodation expenses. The mean accommodation expenditure was AUD\$732 per fortnight, and for the majority of

participants, their accommodation expenditure was directly proportional to their income.

Childcare expenditure

Ten of the 32 participants, 31.2%, declared paying out-of-pocket expenses for childcare. This out-of-pocket amount was after each participant had received both the childcare benefit and the 50% childcare rebate from the Commonwealth government. Both the childcare benefit and the 50% childcare rebate are Commonwealth government incentives for parents who have children who are under 13 years of age, providing the parents are paying childcare costs in Australia to assist them with childcare expenses whilst they are actively involved in paid employment, approved study or job-seeking activities (Department of Human Services, 2015). The mean out of pocket expenditure for these 10 participants was AUD\$123 per fortnight, with a median expenditure of AUD\$92 per fortnight. Nine of these 10 participants, 90%, had children of seven years or under. Four, 40%, were married, six were single, 60%, and five were enrolled full-time, 50%. Three were not participating in paid employment, 30%, two were in paid employment between 10 and 30 hours per fortnight, 20%, and five were in paid employment between 30 and 50 hours per fortnight, 50%.

Income

Participants were asked about the total income received into their household. This total income included wages, salaries, government benefits, pensions, allowances, child support and other income declared by participants. Furthermore, participants were asked to declare their entire household nett income after tax, including their partner's income if applicable, to provide an understanding of the total nett income of the household. These incomes, as shown in *Table 4.2-16 - Selected participant information, income bracket*, were categorised into four income brackets. The first was those receiving under AUD\$1500 per fortnight, equating to receiving under AUD\$39,000 per annum,

which is an income below Australia's poverty line, namely the minimum level of income deemed adequate for each individual country (Chen & Ravallion, 2007). The second income bracket included those earning between AUD\$1500 and AUD\$2999 per fortnight, equating to receiving between AUD\$39,000 and AUD\$78,000 per annum. The third income bracket was those receiving between AUD\$3000 and AUD\$4499 per fortnight, equating to receiving between AUD\$78,000 and AUD\$117,000 per annum. The final income bracket was those receiving in excess of AUD\$4500 per fortnight, equating to receiving more than AUD\$117,000 per annum.

Table 4.2-16 Selected participant information, income bracket

Income bracket	Married (n = 21)	Single (n = 11)	Full-time Student (n = 19)	Part-time Student (n = 13)	Mean accommodation expenditure
< AUD\$1500 per fortnight (n = 10)	6	4	8	2	\$600
AUD\$1500 < AUD\$2999 per fortnight (n = 17)	10	7	11	6	\$800
AUD\$3000 < AUD\$4499 per fortnight (n = 4)	4	0	0	4	\$1100
> AUD \$4500 per fortnight (n = 1)	1	0	0	1	\$400

As also shown in *Table 4.2-16 –Selected participant information, income bracket*, ten of the 32 participants reported a household income less than AUD\$1500 per fortnight. Of these participants six, 60%, were married, and four were single, 40%; eight were enrolled full-time, 80%, and two were enrolled part-time, 20%; and the mean accommodation expenditure was approximately AUD\$600 per fortnight. The largest percentage of participants, 17 of the 32, 53.1%, reported

their nett fortnightly household income to be between AUD\$1500 and AUD\$2999. Of these 17 participants, 10, 58.8%, were married, and seven were single, 41.2%; 11 were enrolled full-time, 64.7%, whilst six were enrolled part-time, 35.3%; with mean accommodation expenditure of AUD\$800 per fortnight. A significantly smaller proportion, four of the 32 participants, 12.5%, reported receiving a nett household income of between AUD\$3000 and AUD\$4499 per fortnight. Each of these four participants were both married and enrolled part-time, with a higher mean accommodation expenditure of AUD\$1100 per fortnight. Only one participant, 3.1%, reported a household income in excess of AUD\$4500. This participant was married, studying part-time, and reported accommodation expenditure of AUD\$400 per fortnight, significantly lower than other participants.

4.3 Participants' background from interviews and mini-focus groups

In addition to the statistical information provided in the demographic questionnaire, descriptive information was also gained about participants through their participation in either the individual interviews, or their involvement in the mini-focus groups. This information had a broader scope, than that of the demographic questionnaire, and was not undertaken to gain consistent information about all participants. In addition to the intended information about the students' experience as student and mother, the 24 individual interviews and three mini-focus groups provided qualitative information and insight into various aspects of participants' backgrounds. This insight, as discussed by the participants, is further analysed with the purpose of providing additional relevant information about the participants. It has been collated into four aspects: previous academic and employment experience, reasons for entering university, reasons for continuing with university after entry, and commitments and circumstances.

4.3.1 Previous academic and employment experience

During interview, most participants discussed their previous academic experiences. The range of experience was diverse, from participants who had not finished secondary school to students who had previously completed an undergraduate degree. Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) said: “I’m a drop-out, a high school dropout.” Similarly, Karis (full-time, married, one child) said: “I didn’t finish high school and didn’t pass year 10.” Some participants had previously started university degrees but discontinued for reasons including having to travel from a country town, needing to work to earn an income, not feeling connected with their previous university, and wanting to have fun and/or party instead of studying. “When I finished high school I started my nursing degree, many, many years ago. I ended up dropping out because I thought it was more fun to go to the pub and that sort of stuff” (Lisa, full-time, single, four children). Some participants expressed regret about not finishing their previous degree, including Katrina (full-time, married, two children) who stated: “I was 24 or 25, no kids but I still had to work because I had a car and I had to pay rent, so I was working quite a bit, so I stopped. I always regretted not finishing.”

One participant, Vanessa (part-time, married, two children), had previously completed a university degree in another discipline, elaborating, “I went to uni when I was 18 and did chemistry, and then I worked as a chemist for a while”. A number of participants had previously studied at the South West Institute of Technology (SWIT), where they had completed related Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses including the Diploma of Nursing (Enrolled) and the Certificate IV in Education Support. The primary benefit that participants reported from completing those TAFE courses was receiving advanced standing for university units when they enrolled in their current degree. Danielle (full-time, single, two children), for example, discussed experiencing academic relief in the beginning of her Bachelor of Science (Nursing) from advanced standing for having completed the Diploma of Nursing (Enrolled) at SWIT, saying: “The first 18 months is when my exemptions came in, there were five exemptions, so from

second semester, second year onwards I had to do all the units.” In addition to the benefit of receiving advanced standing at university, participants who had previously studied at SWIT also expressed how their previous studies had given them experience in the formal education process. Janice (part-time, married, four children), for example, expressed this experience saying:

I did a certificate three and four at TAFE, teachers’ assistant, so I’ve had a bit of a mature student experience by having [had] a bit of homework and things like that, I’ve also had a bit of experience in a lecture or class.

In addition to discussing their prior education, all of the 32 participants either mentioned or discussed having been in the workforce prior to entering university. Many participants similarly discussed being employed while undertaking their current course of study. The participants’ descriptions of their previous and current work history varied considerably. For example, one participant had owned and operated her own hospitality business. Some participants described having previously had highly-paid or highly-responsible positions such as working in the mining industry, employed as a supermarket manager, or working as a chemist. Some participants also discussed a high level of success or satisfaction in their previous employment, such as Ruby (part-time, married, two children), who said: “I entered a pharmacy assistant of the year award and I got like a finalist for that, I always try to do everything to the best of my ability, and I did that for a long time.”

Conversely, a number of participants discussed working in jobs that they felt were intellectually beneath them, such as working as a cleaner or as a fruit picker in an orchard. Danielle (full-time, single, two children) stated: “I tried to get another job, but I couldn’t get a job, and I was like ‘I don’t want to be a cleaner’.” Similarly, some participants were employed in the same industry but in a lower position than that of which they felt capable. This included employment as a teacher’s assistant or enrolled nurse where the participants needed to complete

their current degree to be employed in the more responsible positions of a teacher or a registered nurse. This desire to up-skill was expressed by Katrina (full-time, married, two children) who said: “Working as a teacher assistant, [I was] just feeling like I want to do more, and knowing I can do more.”

In addition to paid employment, many participants also described voluntary work as beneficial to their overall university experience. These voluntary experiences included one teaching degree participant’s involvement in the army cadets as an instructor, which gave her valuable prior experience and exposure to teaching. Another participant discussed volunteering as an ambulance officer prior to, and throughout, her nursing degree, providing her with valuable nursing insight. Furthermore, one social work student discussed the value of her voluntary role as a breast-feeding association phone counsellor prior to, and during, the completion of her degree.

4.3.2 Reasons for entering university

Interestingly, most participants described similar reasons for entering university. First, most participants regarded themselves as needing to be a positive role model for their own children. This desire to be a positive role model was the most common reason discussed by participants in this study, echoing the findings of past studies detailing female and mature age student motivation for entering university (Edwards, 1993; Leathwood & O’Connell, 2003; Reay et al., 2002; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). Furthermore, a number of participants expressed this desire to be a positive role model as a desire to initiate a generational change, as they declared themselves as first-in-family university students.

Second, many participants discussed their need for future financial security. For some participants this was a result of being a single parent and needing a secure

income, which was the case for Karen (full-time, single, two children) who stated: "I put my life on hold to come to uni, which is important for my financial future and security for the children." Other married participants discussed feeling that they would be required to be the future primary income earner if either their relationship was to breakdown or if their partner was unable to earn an income due to age or health reasons. This was expressed by Jadine (part-time, married, two children) who said: "In the long run it's going to be so much better, I'm going to be able to provide and if my kids want to go to university I'm going to be able to say 'just go, you do that'." This desire for future financial security was significant for many of the participants, including one whose husband had a chronic illness that threatened their family's future income earning capacity. Future financial security was also significant for another participant who doubted the longevity of her current relationship: "I want to make sure that whatever happens I can financially support myself and my children" (Vanessa, part-time, married, two children).

Third, a significant reason for entering university discussed by participants was to fulfil a long-held personal ambition. These students described always wanting to complete a degree, and feeling as though they were both capable and worthy of a tertiary education. For some participants, fulfilling this ambition included finishing a previous degree that they had started but discontinued. Others stated that studying at university was an unfulfilled ambition primarily due to family, geographical or financial reasons.

Finally, some students discussed their reason for entering university as a result of a subject interest, or a strong desire to be involved in a particular course of study. This was the case for Kelly (full-time, single, two children), who stated that she had "always wanted to be a nurse". Similarly, another participant discussed her desire to learn more about nursing after caring for a sick relative. In the

discipline of arts, Rosie (part-time, married, three children) discussed a strong interest in developing her creative writing skills further, stating this as her primary reason for wanting to enter a Bachelor of Creative Industries.

4.3.3 Reasons for continuing

Participants discussed their reasons for continuing with their studies once enrolled, as different, and additional to, their original reasons for entering university. First, the most common reason discussed for continuing university was as a result of feelings of sacrifice and guilt. Participants discussed a desire to complete their degree, especially during times of difficulty, because the sacrifices made by themselves and their families were too great for them to not complete their studies. This family sacrifice was expressed by Linda (full-time, married, two children):

We've made so many sacrifices, both of us, and our kids, that I just, I can't give up, I couldn't chuck uni in and just say 'okay, I can't do this anymore'. It's not just about me, it's about the whole family.

These feelings of sacrifice extended to the sacrifices others had made for them as they described feeling appreciative and indebted to other people who had helped them, particularly with child-minding. Participants also discussed feeling that their children had sacrificed or missed out on time with their mother as a result of their enrolment at university. Furthermore, participants discussed how they felt guilt that they had sacrificed so much time, effort, and money, that they felt they would be doing themselves and their families a disservice if they did not complete.

Second, participants discussed matters of their perceived deservedness and diligence compared to other seemingly less committed students. Some of the participants believed themselves to be more deserving of completing their degrees than some peers with whom they attended university. This was

articulated by Barbara (full-time, married, four children) stating: “The kids who have just come out of high school, and I swear they just woke up one day and went ‘oh, I might go to uni today’, it’s like they [other students] have no drive, no reason to be here.” These participants felt that they would be doing themselves a disservice if they were to withdraw from their course when other, in their opinion, less motivated or less diligent students were likely to graduate.

Finally, some students were concerned about poor role modelling for their own children if they were to discontinue their studies. In a similar manner to feeling that they are a positive role model for their children by pursuing higher education, some participants also felt that discontinuing university studies would be modelling an undesirable attitude of giving up when studying becomes difficult.

4.3.4 Commitments and circumstances

During the individual interviews and mini-focus groups, academic studies only formed part of the participants’ discussions about their experience as student and mother. The majority of discussions were related to a range of life events which participants expressed impacted on their experience. These factors, which are also incorporated into the findings of this study, provided further information about the participants that was not detailed in the demographic questionnaire. This additional information is included in this section in two categories, common commitments, and unique circumstances. The first category, common commitments, included those commitments and situations that were discussed by, and common to, the majority of participants. The second category, unique circumstances, involved individual circumstances that each participant felt was unique to them. What was common about these unique circumstances was that all participants discussed having what they considered to be circumstances that made their experience different to other students. They also expressed that these circumstances significantly impacted on their overall experience. These

commitments and circumstances are elaborated further to help provide a deeper understanding of the participants involved in this study.

Common commitments

During the individual interviews participants discussed a range of factors that they considered significantly impacted on their experience as a university student and mother. All participants discussed how these commitments impacted on their time, energy, money, and emotional capacity. In addition to discussing the impact of these common commitments, many participants also indicated that they had either made changes, or needed to make changes, to reduce these external commitments to enable them to better balance the demands of their roles as student and mother. These commitments included being a mother, domestic commitments, and working commitments, both paid and unpaid.

All participants in the study were mature age female students with dependent children, which were criteria required for inclusion in the study. Every participant discussed, in detail, child-caring or child-rearing commitments as a significant factor that affected their overall university experience. There was a consensus amongst participants that despite being parent students at university, their children were their first priority. Prioritising motherhood was articulated by Vanessa (part-time, married, two children), saying, “I’m sort of like a mum mainly, and then I just fit uni around that.” Discussions about these parenting commitments included the physical transportation of their children to and from school and friend’s houses, appointments and extracurricular activities, as articulated by Rosie (part-time, married, three children) who stated, “I’m always busy running the kids around for sport”. Participants also discussed their requirement to attend meetings and activities related to their children, as they felt these were required to consider themselves good parents. These meetings and activities included medical appointments, school assemblies, sporting

games, and social occasions. Many participants also expressed a need to assist with parental help, committees or canteen duties as part of their parenting. Furthermore, participants discussed needing to be available to support their children both physically and emotionally, to assist with homework, social problems, emotional issues, and to be present when children were unwell.

In addition to these parenting factors, the majority of participants were responsible for running their household, including a wide range of domestic duties. This feeling of domestic responsibility, in addition to parental and university commitments, was shared by the majority of participants as articulated by Lorraine (part-time, single, six children): “All I do is housework, run after the kids, and assignments”. These domestic and housework duties included, but were not limited to, cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping, gardening, pet care and maintenance. As Karen (full-time, single, two children) described herself, “you are the person that has to do it all”. Many participants admitted that their quality or completion of domestic duties had reduced during their university tenure, as Barbara (full-time, married, four children) indicated her house “... has certainly seen cleaner days”. A few participants, however, discussed being more domestically diligent than prior to their university entry as they explained using domestic duties as a form of procrastination.

Working outside the home was also mentioned as a significant commitment by the majority of participants. Most participants were involved in either paid or voluntary positions which they expressed impacted on their overall experience as student and mother. This commitment caused some difficulty for participants needing to balance their working hours around both their family and university studies. The difficulty of maintaining this balance was described by Katrina (full-time, married, two children) who said:

I've struggled this semester, I've had to work, I've come in here [ECUSW campus] two days a week, and I'm a relief teacher assistant, and I took on six weeks work with them on the three days that I wasn't here, so I was basically full-time, and that was really tough.

In addition to paid employment, many participants were involved in voluntary work activities. These activities added another commitment for participants who were already balancing university with their home lives. These voluntary work activities included coaching their children's sports, army cadets, sitting as committee members, phone counselling, and volunteering as an ambulance officer. This was a considerable commitment for some students, such as Karen (full-time, single, two children) who said, "It's not unusual for me to do up to 15 or more hours a week volunteer work."

Unique circumstances

In addition to the common commitments that participant discussed, all participants described one or more circumstance impacting on their overall experience that they felt was unique to them. The descriptions of these unique circumstances were common in that they consumed time, energy or money, often drawing heavily on both the mental and emotional capacity of the participants. Some of these circumstances were discrete and were resolved in a short period of time, whilst others were enduring. These unique circumstances are categorised into four sections; housing, children, former partner, and current partner.

First, seven participants described significant housing circumstances which they felt affected their overall university experience. These circumstances included two participants who moved countries during their university tenure, with one needing to improve her English language proficiency, as English was her second language. Another participant experienced considerable stress when needing to

find, and move into, a different rental property with her family at short notice. After separating from her husband, a further participant was uncomfortably living as a separated couple in the family home whilst their joint property was in dispute. A further two participants described living on farms that require considerable maintenance and animal husbandry. Finally, another participant described the ongoing financial and physical discomfort of renovating her current family home.

Second, seven participants discussed significant changes involving their children that they felt were unique circumstances affecting their overall experience. These included four participants who fell pregnant during their current degree, two choosing not to take time off studying after the birth of their babies. The youngest child of another participant was diagnosed with a disability, requiring her frequent attendance at the hospital and medical clinic for diagnostic purposes. Furthermore, two participants had children who developed significant physical illness, with a further participant's child developing an acute mental illness. These pregnancies and health problems were described by participants as demanding considerable time, energy and emotional capacity, affecting their overall experience as a student and mother.

Third, a number of participants described what they felt were unique circumstances relating to their former partner that affected their overall experience. For two participants this included experiencing a marital separation whilst at university. Other previously separated participants were forced to negotiate changes to the care percentage of their children, which typically involved court appearances, counselling, mediation, and for one participant, the involvement of the Department for Child Protection (DCP). Another participant objected to her care percentage increasing, as this made less time for her university studies, and less flexibility in relation to periods of practicum

placements. This contrasted with the unique circumstances of another participant, who objected to her former partner's application to increase time with their children, as this caused her considerable emotional stress and disruption to her home routines.

Finally, three participants experienced circumstances with their current partner that they felt made their situation unique. One participant's partner was diagnosed with cancer, requiring significant changes within their family structure. Similarly, another participant's partner suffered a serious chronic health condition requiring her to care for him and the children. The husband of another participant became a fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) worker who, as a result, was described by the participant as being unavailable to assist his wife and family for sustained periods. Another participant viewed her circumstance as unique in a positive way, as her husband discontinued work to devote himself solely and fully to child-rearing and household tasks, assisting his wife in the commencement and continuance of her degree.

4.4 Participants' stories

This section provides a background of three participants, each studying a different undergraduate degree at ECUSW and were involved in individual interviews in this study. Written in narrative form, these stories were constructed by the researcher and were interpreted from information and quotes given during the individual interviews. Each of these participants was consulted regarding the accuracy of these stories to ensure their truth prior to their inclusion in this section. The purpose of these stories is to provide the reader with a more overarching picture of how participants described their situation and experience of being a student who was a mother studying at ECUSW campus. Rather than being selected at random, these three participants were selected as many parts of their stories are typical for the majority of participants in this study. Notwithstanding, parts of their stories are also unique

and differ from the experience of others. What is common for these, and all participants, was that they entered university with the view that they were a mother first. They described expectations which were not necessarily consistent with their actual experience, and they had to organise and manage their multi-faceted lives to ensure their continuing success. Here are their stories.

4.4.1 Karen's story

Karen was a 36-year-old divorced, part-time student with two children aged 10 and eight. Karen had been a single parent since her second child was five months old, and was not currently in a relationship. Karen had always wanted to work with people and hoped that the completion of her degree would improve her financial security as a sole parent for her children. Karen completed Year 11 at a local high school, however, she did not complete Year 12 as she became employed with a bank full-time and moved away from home. Karen had no intention of entering university during her secondary schooling, nor did she until she was 30-years-old after the suggestion and encouragement was made by a friend.

Karen enrolled in a Bachelor of Social Work after completing a Certificate IV in counselling. Karen initially enrolled in four units, but reduced to two units per semester as a result of underestimating the off-campus requirements of the course, and how this commitment would fit with the requirements of her young children.

I initially thought I would do my degree full-time to get through the degree in four years, however, a lot of factors came into play and once you get here you start to realise the impacts of life including things like childcare, the fact that uni runs on public holidays and school holidays with kids.

During her degree Karen had to balance everyday commitments such as the children's needs, transportation to and from school and childcare, and keeping

up with the extracurricular activities of her children. Karen also experienced considerable difficulties finding an appropriate childcare for her youngest child, made more difficult as she was breastfeeding upon enrolment into the course.

Karen was a first-in-family university student who was not encouraged to further her education as either a teenager or as an adult. Karen felt a level of resistance from her family, including from her parents who did not believe a university education would be valuable to her. Karen received comments, which she perceived to be negative, regarding her university pursuits, for example: “Why are you doing this? Why can’t you just go out and get a job?” Despite these perceived negative comments, Karen received regular practical support from her parents such as assistance with meal preparation and childcare.

I have family who support me as far as picking them up from school and so forth, so that I can complete university. However, there is a kind of double-edged sword because at times there is a feeling that they resent that obligation.

At times, Karen was dependent on this support from her family, but it has been recently withdrawn as her parents have been away for extended holidays, and recently experienced their own difficulties prohibiting them from continuing to support Karen.

Karen also experienced extra difficulties including balancing her university and child commitments with a dynamic, and often difficult, shared parenting arrangement with her former spouse. These difficulties were compounded by her child’s diagnosis of a registered behavioural disability that caused her child to have considerable disruptions to his schooling. This diagnosis, in conjunction with the behavioural difficulties exhibited by her son, prevented Karen from being able to use traditional after-school care facilities.

In addition to her family commitments, Karen gained part-time employment during the third year of her degree in a career-related position. This was described as a positive change for Karen as she said she is “extremely happy being employed in the human services field.” Karen described a sense of purpose with this employment and was truly happy in this field of work. Karen was also involved in voluntary commitments, both prior and during her university tenure: “I do a lot of volunteer work, it is not unusual for me to do up to 15 hours or more hours a week.” The two areas where Karen experienced the most difficulty were with her housework and with childcare when her children were not at school. Karen also described intermittent financial difficulties and problems sourcing the resources needed to complete her degree.

Upon entry, Karen intended to gain pass marks but doubted her academic ability to complete her university degree. After receiving a series of excellent marks and appearing on the Dean’s list, Karen’s view of her own academic ability improved substantially. Karen said she now aims to get the richest learning experience she can from her degree, saying: “I want to learn as much as I can for when I’m out there in the community.” Karen was also accepted into an Honours program which she intends to pursue.

4.4.2 Barbara’s story

Barbara was a 28-year-old married, full-time student with four children aged 10, eight, six and three. Barbara completed Year 12 at a local high school, but did not sit her university entrance exams as she became pregnant during her final year at school. Prior to becoming pregnant Barbara intended to enter university to study a nursing degree. Barbara had been married for nine years. Her husband was a manager in a hospitality restaurant where he worked shiftwork. Barbara had spent the majority of her adult life in the home raising children, and had not

done any post-secondary education or had significant employment during her adult life.

Barbara decided to reignite her dream of becoming a nurse after a traumatic life event with the death of her unborn child. She initially thought she would enrol in the Diploma of Nursing (enrolled) at SWIT, a TAFE course that was recommended to her by family members. Barbara had decided to do the aforementioned Diploma qualification rather than the university bachelor qualification as she had doubted her academic ability at the time.

I had always wanted to do this [university] but I didn't think that I could do it, and someone told me that I should try, and I figured that I may as well try, there was no harm in trying, and I was going to go to TAFE to do EN but it's not really what I wanted to do.

After discussions with a university-qualified friend about the possibility of entering university to pursue a Bachelor of Science (Nursing), Barbara sat a Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT) in the hope of entering the University Preparation Course (UPC). Her excellent results in the STAT test afforded her direct access into the Bachelor of Science (Nursing) course, rather than entering the UPC.

Barbara was a first-in-family university student who articulated that "people like me don't go to university". Barbara's family expressed to her that they were happy with her acceptance into university, but doubted her ability to complete the degree. As a result of her low confidence in her academic ability, Barbara initially enrolled in two units per semester, however she increased this to a full-time load to expedite her completion date, saying: "I couldn't imagine doing this for another five years, so I stepped it up a bit so that I could get it finished quicker." Barbara initially thought she would "scrape through and hopefully

pass” university, although this low confidence in her ability changed dramatically after her first assignments were marked and she received high distinction scores. Throughout her university tenure, Barbara had appeared on the Dean’s list every semester and had achieved an outstanding high distinction average. Barbara was now considering entering a Master’s degree after the completion of her current degree, to specialise as a midwife.

In addition to her university studies, Barbara considered herself a devoted wife and mother, raising her four young children. These roles included a significant time and energy commitment to domestic duties and transportation for her children. In addition to being actively involved in her children’s sports, Barbara regularly volunteered at her children’s primary school. Since beginning university, Barbara had also engaged in part-time employment in a nursing-related position.

I have four kids, they all have after school commitments. We have sport, dancing, they all have homework that I have to help them do, and just the normal mum stuff, cleaning the house, cooking dinner, the grocery shopping, like it just seems to never end and also I’m working and my husband works, so we are both very busy, and then to add uni on top of that, it is very busy.

Barbara further described how this can be difficult balancing her life with her university commitments:

All the assignments are due all at the same time, you can guarantee that if there is an assignment due someone [child] is going to be sick or someone is going to have an assembly at school or a certificate or something, so you have to try to prioritise what is more important.

Barbara described struggling with her domestic commitments and was regularly disappointed with the cleanliness of her house since starting university.

Furthermore, she said that both family and friends had commented to her saying that they believe she should be prioritising her housework over her university studies. Barbara described how these family and friends verbalise that they were proud of her for achieving excellent marks at university, but were unwilling to offer any, or appropriate, practical support to assist her. Rather, Barbara described how her family and friends often offered her advice on prioritising her time away from university tasks, or suggested she withdraw from units, rather than practically assisting her when required. Barbara also described feelings of guilt, and being judged by family and friends when she asked for assistance, especially with child-minding during practicum placements.

In addition, Barbara consistently struggled with money as she described how they manage on a modest income. This has caused her difficulties with accessing appropriate resources for her course, such as purchasing books, “because they are very expensive, and we can’t afford to buy new textbooks every semester, so I have picked out the ones that are more important.” Barbara had unreliable computer and internet access at home, and as a result was currently borrowing an out-dated laptop from a friend to complete her assignments. Barbara had unsuccessfully applied for a variety of scholarships to assist with her financial difficulties during her university degree. As both Barbara and her husband were in paid employment, she received limited assistance from the federal government’s Family Tax Benefit (FTB), and was not eligible for either the Health Care Card (HCC) – which provides concessional rates for a variety of service – or the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) assistance for childcare expenses that is offered to government welfare recipients who are retraining.

Despite these financial and domestic difficulties, Barbara described feeling that her entry into university made her a positive role model for her children, and hoped that her children may aspire for university in the future. She said: “I have

these kids that have gone from not even knowing what university was to these kids talking about when they grow up and go to university.” In addition, Barbara felt that in the future her family would be more financially secure and have better opportunities as a result of her gaining a university degree.

4.4.3 Meredith’s story

Meredith was a 33-year-old married, full-time student with two children, a girl aged nine years, and a boy aged four months. Although Meredith successfully completed Year 12 at a metropolitan secondary school, she had only studied non-university entrance subjects as she felt university was neither an option nor a priority for her at that time. Following her graduation, Meredith gained employment with a large company where her priority was career advancement. Meredith described her passion for working and chasing promotional opportunities, and described herself as having been employed in high responsibility positions prior to entering university. In addition to working, Meredith had also completed a TAFE qualification, enhancing her employment possibilities with previous employers.

Meredith’s decision to enrol at university was precipitated by negative experiences with staff at her previous place of employment. She had enjoyed working with children previously, and this helped her make the decision to enter the Bachelor of Education degree at ECUSW campus. Meredith explained:

I’d always sort of come back to thinking teaching would be a good thing for me, I like working with children and I think I would be a good teacher, and it seemed like the next big step career advancement-wise.

This decision was also influenced by the family-friendly appearance of the teaching profession. “It would give me more family time with Payton and holidays, because at work I worked lots [in previous employment], I missed out on a lot with her”.

Meredith was a first-in-family university student, whose family she described as being supportive of her decision to further her education. To demonstrate this support, Meredith's mother purchased a laptop computer for her to assist her with her studies. Her husband had been supportive as he largely discontinued paid employment to become the primary carer for their children during Meredith's studies. To assist her university pursuits, Meredith described how her husband became solely responsible for the domestic and transportation duties, making Meredith feel "lucky I have him". Meredith further described how:

Without David I don't think I would have coped, with the house and picking up Payton from school. I don't have to do those things, like I do them sometimes, but it's a choice, I don't have to do them.

Meredith also expressed how she felt it would have been substantially more difficult to do practicum placements or travel to Perth for summer school units if she didn't have this intense support from her husband and family to assist her in finishing her degree.

Meredith, and her family, experienced significant change whilst being at university. These include financial changes as they were now receiving substantially less income, as previously both partners were working. Meredith's family also moved into a smaller, more affordable house, with her daughter moving from a private to a public primary school. Furthermore, Meredith had a planned pregnancy, completing five units and a practicum whilst heavily pregnant with her second child. Meredith continued to study throughout her pregnancy, returning to university after the summer break when her son was only 10 weeks old.

Meredith's priority with her degree was to fast-track her subjects and complete in less time than the four-year full-time allocation for the course. This decision was employment motivated as she was keen to re-enter the workforce as a qualified teacher. To achieve this goal, Meredith had completed compacted summer and winter school units, in addition to overloading units in a semester, studying five units rather than the recommended four unit full-time load. At times Meredith has had to travel to, and stay in, Perth for one or two weeks at a time to complete these compacted units.

Meredith described herself as being "lucky" both because of the support she received from her husband and family, and also for the support she has received from being at a small campus. Meredith described having an excellent rapport with not only her lecturers, but with other associated support staff on campus. Meredith discussed feeling valued on campus, and how this has made her university experience significantly more positive than she felt that it would otherwise have been.

Although Meredith discussed her desire to achieve high grades in her subjects, she said she has remained realistic of her own academic expectations. She had received a credit average of which, although thinking she was capable of achieving higher marks, she felt proud considering her other commitments and her heavy course load. Meredith discussed receiving some disappointing marks which did not affect her drive to continue, and discontinued one summer school unit after having difficulties with being away in Perth for two weeks to study.

4.5 Profile of participants chapter review

As a qualitative study exploring the experiences of mature age female students with dependent children, it is important to create a picture of who these

participants were, rather than merely hearing what they had to say. This chapter has provided an overall profile of the 32 participants who formed the basis of the study.

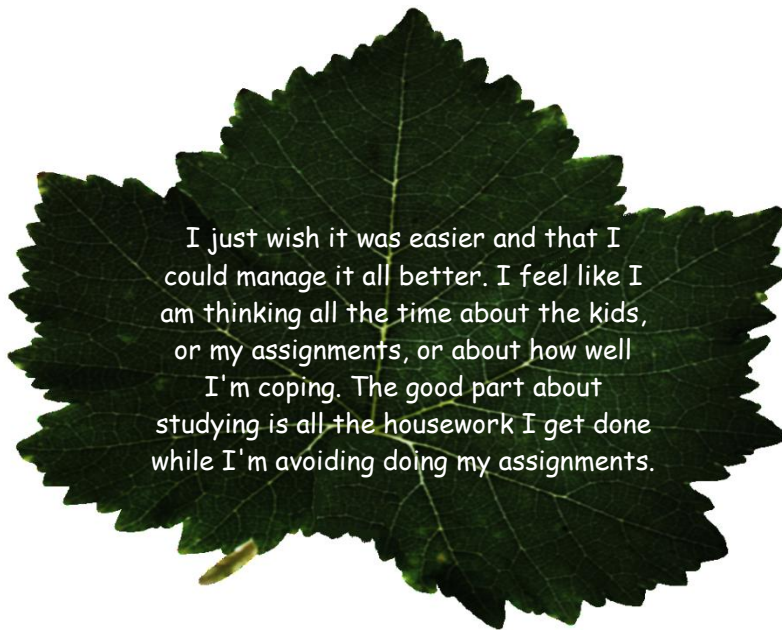
Initially this chapter outlined background information about the participants. This information had been obtained through participants' completion of the demographic questionnaire, in addition to information from the 24 individual interviews and three mini-focus groups. The demographic information from the questionnaire was used to provide an overview of the participants based on their personal, academic, time commitment, and financial information. This demographic information was discussed by the researcher quantitatively, through information provided by the demographic questionnaire completed by all participants.

Qualitative information regarding the participants' backgrounds was also discussed in this chapter. This qualitative information included the previous academic and employment experiences of participants, reasons for entering university and for continuing university after entry, and commitments that were both common and unique to participants. Although the profile of participants' information in part forms the basis of the findings for this study, it does not constitute findings as creating a profile of, or collating the information about, participants was not an explicit aim of this study. Rather, both this qualitative information, and the demographic information, aimed to give a comprehensive overview of the personal situations and commitments of the participants involved in this study.

Following this overview of the participant group, the individual stories of three of the participants were included. These stories were written by the researcher and

were interpreted from information and transcripts derived from the individual interviews. The participants were chosen as they were studying different degrees, were both married and single, and had different numbers of children. The aim of including these stories was to give the reader an overarching picture of three participants' situations and experiences as student and mother.

Chapter 5 – Description of findings



5.1 Chapter overview

Participants shared their rich, and often similar, experience as student and mother through their participation in this study, and as expected, key themes emerged during the analysis of these experiences. This chapter illustrates participants' experiences and is divided into sections that together form the conceptual description. The first section of this chapter focuses on the quotable quotes that were selected from the individual interviews. This section also provides a summary of the responses that participants gave when presented with these quotes during each of the three mini-focus groups. These quotable quotes do not constitute findings alone; rather, these quotes were identified by the researcher as containing potential "seeds of important insight" (Thorne, 2008) which have been explored further during the mini-focus groups. By exploring these insights further through the use of mini-focus groups, these quotes have been considered by mini-focus group participants, hence, the transferability of these quotes has not solely relied on the interpretation of the researcher. Although this was a qualitative study, the analysis of the placement of these quotable quotes on the continuum between 'agree' and 'disagree' was conducted quantitatively. This quantitative analysis was selected and conducted as it was the most suitable method for determining the mini-focus groups' collective opinion of each of the selected quotes. After this use and analysis of

these quotable quotes during the mini-focus groups, they were coded and considered with the remainder of the data during the data analysis and theme conceptualisation of this study.

The second section of this chapter outlines the key themes of expectations and management that were conceptualised during the analysis phase. The expectations with which students entered university impact their overall higher education experience. According to Appleton-Knapp and Krentler (2006) the extent to which student expectations influence student satisfaction is still largely unknown, requiring further research. The expectations discussed by the participants during the individual interviews and mini-focus groups, as shown in *Figure 5.1-1, Structure of Chapter 5*, are divided into three aspects, expectations of time, expectations of the university experience, and academic expectations.

When discussing the expectations of students, this research did not, nor did it intend to, analyse whether the expectations of participants were met by the university experience. Rather, the analysis explored how closely each participant felt that their university experience aligned with their expectations. Comments made by participants were then analysed to explore how this alignment impacted their overall university experience.

This chapter then discusses the second key theme, management. This management theme includes participants experience with managing time, family, well-being, money and significant life events. These themes are discussed in detail in this chapter as together, these two key themes of expectations and management form the foundational layer of the multi-layered conceptual description which forms the basis of the findings for this study.

It is at this part of the chapter that the conceptual description, which culminates the findings of the study, is introduced. Upon the foundational layer, are four concepts that emerged from further analysis of the data. The central concept, motherhood first, situates participants' social role of mother as their primary social role. Thus, motherhood first forms the central layer of the conceptual description being discussed in this chapter.

Finally this chapter discusses the middle layer of the conceptual description. This middle layer contains three coping concepts; support, sacrifice, and perception. This layer serves to protect the participants' social roles, particularly their primary social role of motherhood first.

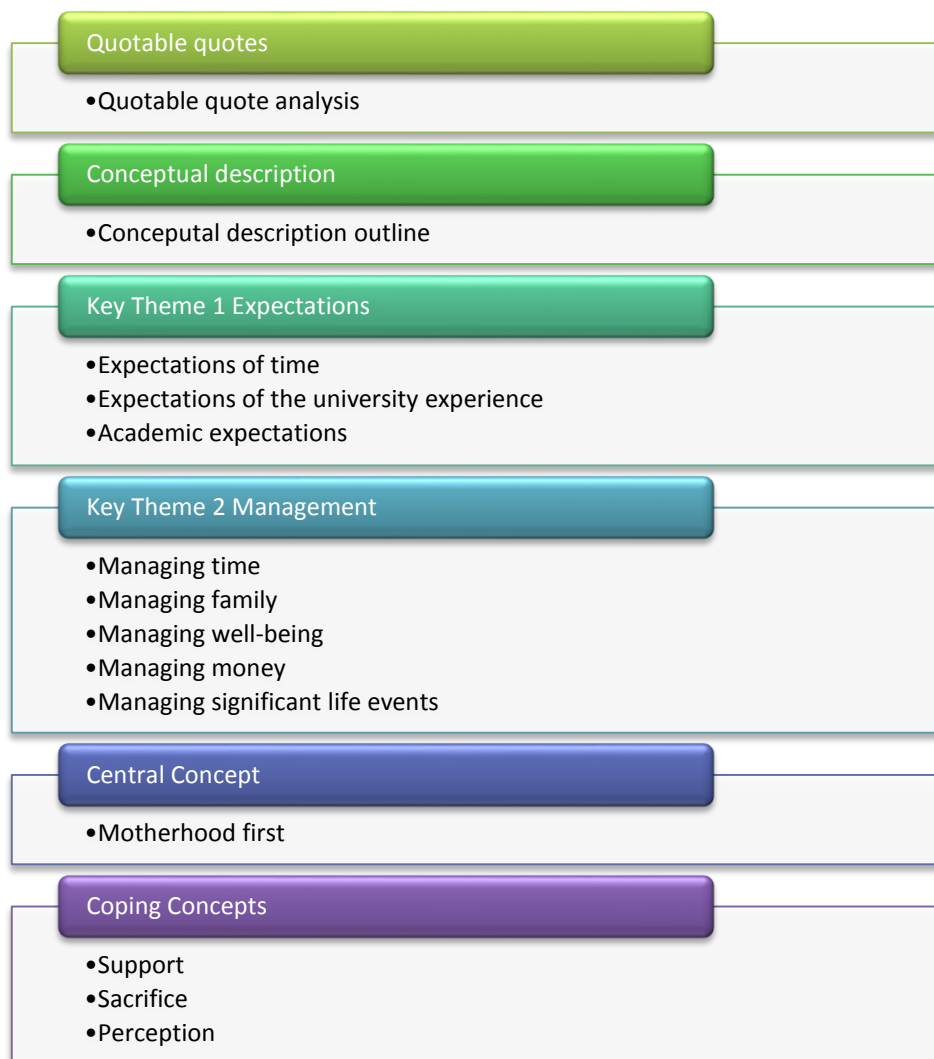


Figure 5.1.1-1 Structure of Chapter 5

5.2 Quotable quote analysis

The first section of this chapter provides findings from the mini-focus group analysis of the quotable quotes, which were taken from the individual interviews. Following each interview, and consistent with Interpretive Description, the researcher allowed time to react to the data and recorded any quotable quotes. These quotable quotes, as termed by Thorne (2008), are individual datum that “contains the seeds of an important insight that we [as researchers] feel compelled to ensure will be included in the final rendering” (Thorne, 2008, p.148). Setting these quotable quotes aside was an important strategy to ensure that the richness of these quotes were not lost in the researcher’s analysis, whilst reducing the risk of them dominating the evolving analytic structure of the study (Thorne, 2008). To ensure these datum are neither lost, nor given too much credibility, each one was presented back to each mini-focus group to discuss and therefore partially analyse. For this discussion and analysis to take place, 37 identified quotable quotes were laminated onto speech bubbles and arranged unsystematically along the bench. The participants of each mini-focus group were then asked to discuss and place each of these quotes onto a continuum with the respective ends labelled “agree” and “disagree”. The final continuum was photographed and the participants’ discussions while completing this activity were voice recorded.

The analysis of this activity was two-fold. First, a statistical analysis of the participants’ placement of the quotable quotes on the continuum was performed. To achieve this statistical analysis the continuum was rated on a scale of 1 to 10, with a rating of one meaning the mini-focus group participants collectively did not agree with the quote, and 10 meaning the participants collectively agreed with the quote. For each quote there were three sets of ratings, one for each of the three mini-focus groups, and the mean of these ratings was determined. The standard deviation of the three means for each quote was then calculated to determine if the three mini-focus groups were in agreement. Following this, the second part of this analysis involved the

researcher listening to the audio record of the participants' discussions regarding the placement of the quotes on the continuum. This provided a rich, qualitative insight into why participants agreed with, or did not agree with, the quotable quotes and, at times, with each other.

Many of the quotable quotes gained agreement from the majority of the participants in the mini-focus groups. This agreement was demonstrated in the data analysis with 11 of the 37 quotes scoring a mean score of 9 or more from the mini-focus groups. These quotes are shown in *Table 5.2-1 – Quotable quotes with mean ≥ 9* . All focus group participants agreed with the quote "By going to university you are forced to expand, to consider, to think, to analyse" (Lorraine, part-time, single, six children), which was rated a 10 by all three groups. The next two most consistently agreed quotes were "... generally speaking, all I do at the moment is housework, run after the kids and the assignments" (Lorraine, part-time, single, six children) and "I can actually have a conversation that does not involve children, breastfeeding or babies" (Lorraine, part-time, single, six children). These quotes were all agreed upon easily by the participants of each mini-focus group, and without detailed discussion.

Table 5.2-1 Quotable quotes with mean ≥ 9

<u>Quotable Quote</u>	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Mean	Standard Deviation
"... by going to university you are forced to expand, to consider, to think, to analyse ..." (Lorraine, part-time, single, six children)	10	10	10	10.0	0
"... generally speaking, all I do at the moment is housework, run after the kids and the assignments ..." (Lorraine, part-time, single, six children)	10	9	10	9.7	0.57735
"I can actually have a conversation that does not involve children, breastfeeding or babies" (Lorraine, part-time, single, six children)	10	10	9	9.7	0.57735
"... if there was a crèche on campus ..." (Vanessa, part-time, married, two children)	10	8	10	9.3	1.154701
"I hope I can get through this" (Jadine, part-time, married, two children)	8	10	10	9.3	1.154701
"... it is really difficult!" (Karen, full-time, single, two children)	7	10	10	9.0	1.732051
"I enjoy coming to uni because it is detached from being a mum" (Barbara, full-time, married, four children)	7	10	10	9.0	1.732051
"I hate group assignments ..." (Jadine, part-time, married, two children)	7	10	10	9.0	1.732051
"... I'm trying to write an essay and they come in wanting a drink or other stuff ..." (Rosie, part-time, married, three children)	9	10	8	9.0	1
"Even if I won lotto I would still be here!" (Linda, full-time, married, two children)	10	9	8	9.0	1
"... it's been really hard to juggle everything, and in all of it I talked about head space earlier, you just don't have room to think about anything else ..." (Karis, full-time, married, two children)	8	9	10	9.0	1
"... mothering doesn't stop because you're physically not there ..." (Lauren, part-time, married, two children)	9	9	9	9.0	0

Other quotes initiated discussion but ended up agreed upon consistently included “If there was a crèche on campus” (Vanessa, part-time, married, two children) and “I hope I can get through this” (Jadine, part-time, married, two children), both with a mean of 9.3 and a standard deviation of 1.15, as shown in *Table 5.2-1 – Quotable quotes with a mean ≥ 9* . These discussions included a detailed discussion of the crèche facilities that are offered on other metropolitan university campuses, and the difference between hoping they can complete their degree, as opposed to knowing they are capable of completing their degree. Participants also discussed enjoying coming to university because they felt it was easier to work on campus without their children present. This was initiated by two quotes, “I enjoy coming to uni because it is detached from being a mum” (Barbara, full-time, married, four children) and “... I'm trying to write an essay and they come in wanting a drink or other stuff ...” (Rosie, part-time, married, three children).

Two quotable quotes were not agreed upon by the three mini-focus groups. These two quotes, as shown in *Table 5.2-2- Quotable quotes with a mean ≤ 3* , had a mean of two and were “... if I wasn’t going to graduate next year I’d pull out” (Kelly, full-time, single, two children) and “I’ve always got plenty of time ... because I plan ahead, it’s something that I have to do” (Lorraine, part-time, single, six children). Upon hearing the audio discussions regarding these two quotes, it was apparent that the students did not feel like they wanted to now, or would ever, pull out of their studies. The reasons given during these discussions for not wanting to pull out were mainly because of the sacrifices that they, and their families, had made for them to have studied. Participants described feelings of guilt about the time they considered that university had taken away from their family, commenting that they would not have wanted this time to have been for nothing. The participants also disagreed with a second quote that, “I've always got plenty of time ... because I plan ahead, it's something that I have to do” (Lorraine, part-time, single, six children). The dominant discussions between the participants regarding these quotes included

participants saying that despite regularly planning ahead, unforeseen circumstances would often disrupt their overall time management. These circumstances were described as, for example, children becoming sick or having appointments pop up. A number of these mini-focus group participants also commented that they did not have time to plan ahead.

Table 5.2-2 Quotable quotes with a mean ≤ 3

Quotable Quote	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Mean	Standard Deviation
"... if I wasn't going to graduate next year I'd pull out!" (Kelly, full-time, single, two children)	2	3	1	2.0	1
"I've always got plenty of time ... because I plan ahead, it's something that I have to do" (Lorraine, part-time, single, six children)	2	3	1	2.0	1

The quotes most inconsistently placed on the continuum between the three mini-focus groups were identified as having a standard deviation over two. These quotes as shown in *Table 5.2-3 - Quotable quotes with standard deviation ≥ 2* , initiated significant discussion between the participants. Some of the disagreement between participants was a result of their different marital status or financial security. For example, the quote, "Two days a week as an assistant isn't great money, I could make that in one day eventually, so that's the carrot that I am dangling in front of my husband" (Katrina, full-time, married, two children), and "... every day I'm here I'm not out earning money ..." (Jadine, part-time, married, two children). These two quotes, along with "I'm able to purchase books, I've got the internet at home, I've got stationery, bits and pieces, I can provide all those sort of things, but the main resource that I struggle with is appropriate day care ..." (Kelly, full-time, single, two children) initiated discussions about differences in money between participants and how this affected their view on university studies. Similarly, these quotes also illustrated the differences between being a single or married mother. The quote that initiated the most discussion from both single and married participants was:

... basically I feel that because I chose to come to uni it should be up to me to organise everything still, so my husband is not put out for me going to uni, so I still make sure the kids are all where they are supposed to be and I make sure that everyone has lunch and dinner and I do all the cleaning (Barbara, full-time, married, four children).

This quotable quote precipitated significant discussion, without resolution, about the role partners should take regarding domestic duties and child rearing in a household.

A wide variety of discussions were also initiated with the quotes relating to how successful students felt they were being balancing their multiple commitments. These quotes, *Table 5.2-3, Quotable quotes with standard deviation ≥ 2* , included "Not doing anything properly; not being a mother properly, not being able to study like I need to, not being able to work to support my kids because I've got uni, but if I don't do uni then I can never support my kids..." (Kelly, full-time, single, two children); "... that whole guilt about, and doubting where my priorities are, am I meant to be a mother? Am I meant to be a student?" (Kelly, full-time, single, two children); "... my assignments are never good enough, it's like an unfinished piece of pottery that you're creating, it's never finished and I don't feel right giving it to the lecturer when it's not finished ..." (Sherie, full-time, single, two children); and "You're just constantly judged if you're 'that day care mum', or if you're doing it full-time because you want to have your own career or life ..." (Lauren, part-time, married, two children). Some participants, and mini-focus group participants, agreed entirely with these statements, whereas others disagreed. The audio recordings of the discussions about these quotes indicated that participants who had high expectations about fitting their university studies around their existing commitments, felt that they were not doing a good enough job as a parent, housekeeper or student. This differed to participants who stated that they were capable of achieving more in all areas, but said they were not capable of achieving a high standard in all aspects of their

life at the same time. Similarly, some participants discussed attending university for a short number of years and this making it “okay” to make sacrifices in other areas of their lives.

There was also significant discussion around one quote, again shown in quotes in *Table 5.2-3 - Quotable quotes with standard deviation ≥ 2* , "I've got to sort of slap myself and remind myself that I am a mother, and that is my first job, not being a student" (Jadine, part-time, married, two children). The majority of participants verbalised agreement that they were mothers first. However, the ensuing discussion was that pursuing tertiary studies was, in their opinion, congruent with prioritising motherhood. Therefore, these participants disagreed with this statement on the continuum on the basis that they felt that their roles as a student and a mother were complementary roles, rather than competing with each other. The reasons participants verbalised for their roles of student and mother complementing one another included providing an income to support their children, and role modelling the importance of education to their children.

Table 5.2-3 Quotable quotes with a standard deviation ≥ 2

Quotable Quotes	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Mean	Standard Deviation
"... two days a week as an assistant isn't great money, I could make that in one day eventually, so, that's the carrot that I am dangling in front of my husband" (Katrina, full-time, married, two children)	1	6	9	5.3	4.0
"... every day I'm here I'm not out earning money ..." (Jadine, part-time, married, two children)	8	2	2	4.0	3.5
"I'm able to purchase books, I've got internet at home, I've got stationery, bits and pieces, I can provide all of those sort of things, but the main resource that I struggle with is appropriate day care ..." (Kelly, full-time, single, two children)	10	2	1	4.3	4.9
"... basically I feel that because I chose to come to uni it should be up to me to organise everything still, so my husband is not put out for me going to uni, so I still make sure the kids are all where they are supposed to be and I make sure that everyone has lunch and dinner and I do all the cleaning ..." (Barbara, full-time, married, four children)	2	7	5	4.7	2.5
"Not doing anything properly, not being a mother properly, not being able to study like I need to, not being able to work to support my kids because I've got uni, but if I don't do uni then I can never support my kids ..." (Kelly, full-time, single, two children)	10	4	8	7.3	3.1
"... that whole guilt about, and doubting where my priorities are, am I meant to be a mother? Am I meant to be a student?" (Kelly, full-time, single, two children)	9	8	2	6.3	3.8
"... my assignments are never good enough, it's like an unfinished piece of pottery that you're creating, it's never finished and I don't feel right giving it to the lecturer when it's not finished ..." (Sherie, full-time, single, two children)	9	2	8	6.3	3.8
"... you're just constantly judged if you're that day care mum, or if you're doing it full-time because you want to have your own career or life ..." (Lauren, part-time, married, two children)	9	1	3	4.3	4.2
"I've got to sort of slap myself and remind myself that I am a mother, and that is my first job, not being a student." (Jadine, part-time, married, two children)	1	7	5	4.3	3.1

5.2.2 Quotable quote review

This first section of this chapter provided an overview of the analysis of the quotable quotes and was undertaken to ensure that undue emphasis was not placed upon them by the researcher. These quotable quotes were derived from the individual interviews, and congruent with Interpretive Description, they were identified by the researcher for further analysis to ensure they were neither lost nor given too much credence in the analysis of the study. Although this was a qualitative study, these quotable quotes were partially analysed by the participants in the mini-focus groups by their placement of these quotations on the continuum. The analysis of this continuum activity was best performed quantitatively. As previously outlined, this included numbering the placement of the quote on a scale of 1 to 10 for each of the three mini-focus groups, before determining the mean and the standard deviation for the same. This analysis identified 12 quotes that were agreed upon by the majority of the mini-focus group participants. This agreement solidified the researcher's opinion that these quotes contained "seeds of important insight" (Thorne, 2008). This process was most valuable, because it highlighted two quotes that caused disagreement in the three mini-focus groups. Nine further quotes could not be agreed upon by the participants of the three mini-focus groups and initiated discussion about participant's individual experiences. As a result, the analysis of these 37 quotable quotes succeeded in ensuring that these quotes were neither overlooked, nor overemphasised, in the analysis of the data, hence enhancing the credibility of the findings.

5.3 Conceptual description

5.3.1 Conceptual description outline

This study, using Interpretive Description as its guiding methodology, was designed to provide depth of insight and understanding into the experiences of mature age female students with dependent children, studying at one regional university campus, ECUSW. The insight and interpreted understanding that emerged from the data is displayed in a multi-layer conceptual description as

shown in *Figure 5.3-1 – Draper conceptual description*. This conceptual description contains three layers; the foundational layer, the middle layer and the central, or core, layer. The foundational layer for this conceptual description was created as a result of the emergence of two key themes from the data analysis, expectations and management. The middle layer of the conceptual description contains three concepts, termed coping concepts, which emerged from further analysis of the data collected in this study. The central, or core, layer of the conceptual description contains one concept that was central to all participants and all other concepts and themes; motherhood first.

The two key themes that formed the foundational layer of the conceptual description consistently influenced and integrated with the coping concepts and central concept shown in the conceptual description. These key themes formed the basis of the experiences for mature age female university students with dependent children studying at ECUSW. Similarly, the three coping concepts contained elements that were influenced by, and integrated with, both the key concepts in the foundational layer and the central concept of the core layer of the conceptual description. Thus, as illustrated in *Figure 5.3-1 – Draper conceptual description*, the key themes are illustratively different from, yet continuously surrounding the three coping concepts in the middle layer of the conceptual description. The central, or core, concept motherhood first, is also consistently influenced by, and integrated with, both the coping concepts in the middle layer, and the key themes in the foundational layer. As such, it forms the core of the conceptual description. This central concept, motherhood first, emerged as the most important concept for all participants in the study, integrating with all aspects of their experience as students and mothers. Thus, this central concept is illustratively and conceptually the central, or core layer of the conceptual description.



Figure 2.3.1-1 Draper conceptual description

This aforementioned central, or core concept is illustratively and conceptually surrounded by the three coping concepts that form the middle layer of the conceptual description; support, sacrifice and perception. These three concepts are termed *coping concepts* consistent with Kember's (1999) coping mechanisms of support, sacrifice and negotiation of arrangements, shown in *Figure 5.3.1-2 - Kember's causal network model* of mature age student experience balancing part-time study with family, work and social commitments. Upon further analysis of the data, these three coping concepts attempt to surround and protect the students' social roles, most importantly their primary social role of motherhood. When these concepts are unable to protect the students' primary social role of motherhood, these coping concepts then support and protect their secondary social roles as a student, wife, employee or volunteer. Moreover, if these coping

concepts were unable to protect the students' primary social role of motherhood, participants cited attributed this to external factors, similarly consistent with Kember's causal network model (1999).

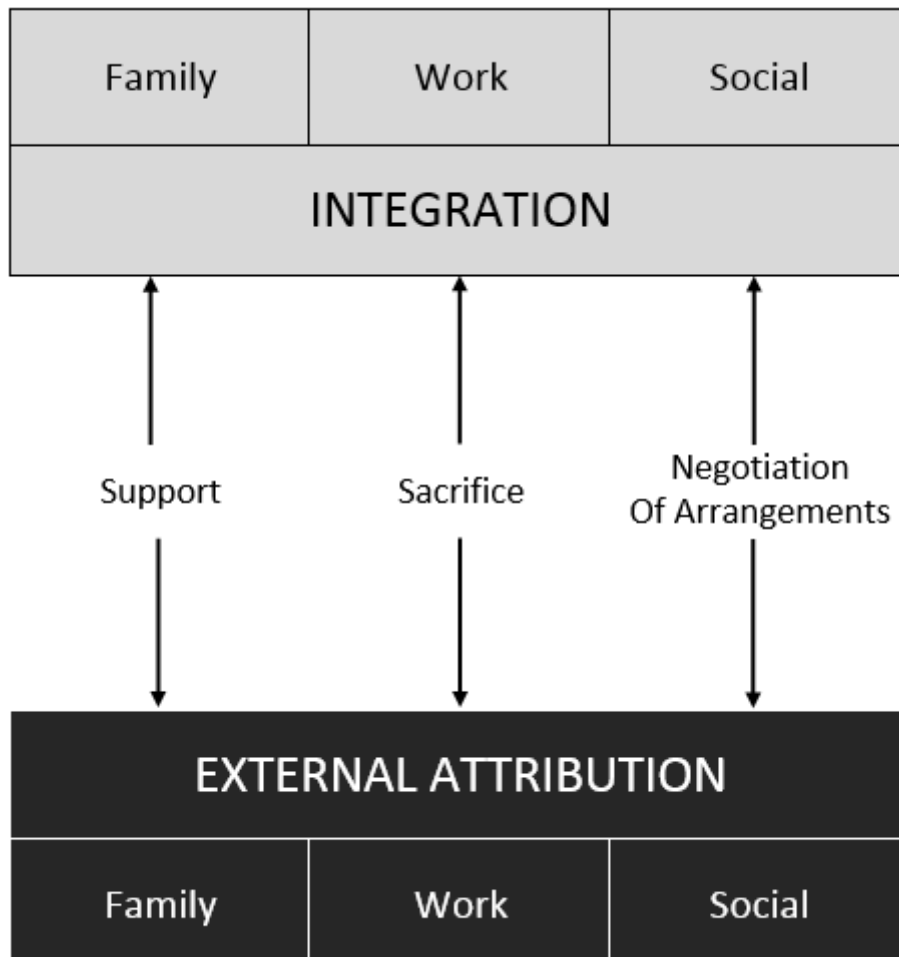
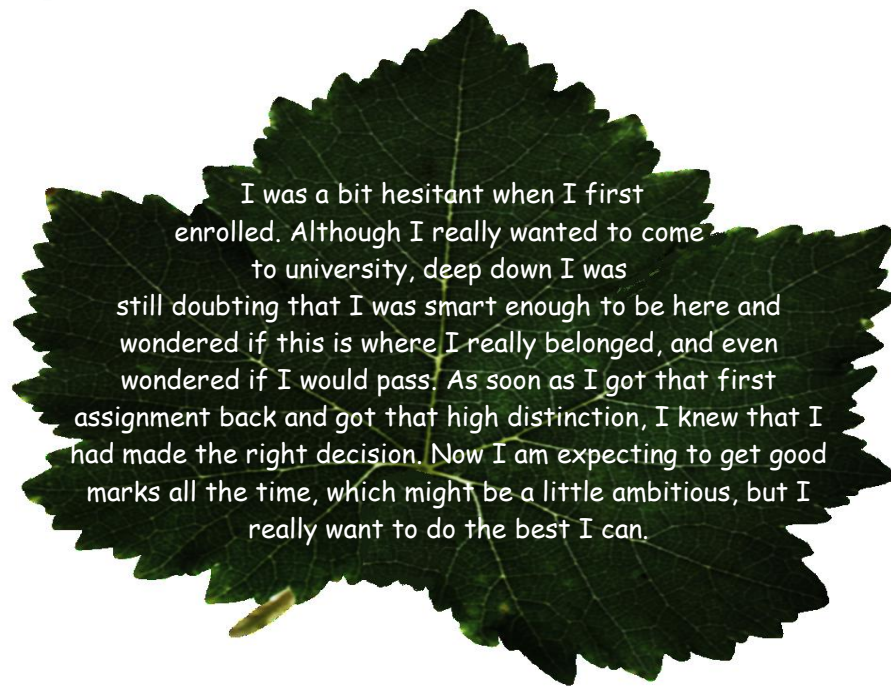


Figure 5.3.1-2 Kember's causal network model

5.4 Expectations



The next section of this chapter details the two key themes which emerged during the analysis of the individual interviews and mini-focus groups. After the fragmentation and coding of transcript data, it was apparent that aspects of participants' experience could be categorised into one of the two emergent key themes, expectations, and management. The first part of this section details the first theme, expectations, including participants' expectations of time, expectations of the university experience, and academic expectations. The second part of this section details the second theme, management, including participants' management of time, family, money, wellbeing, and other life events.

5.4.1 Expectations overview

All participants in the individual interviews and mini-focus groups discussed their expectations as student and mother. These discussions involving expectations were often related to participants' perceived satisfaction of their overall experience. Narelle (part-time, single, two children), for example, described how:

It just really annoys me when I think that all the young students get those in-school-hours classes and it makes it heaps harder for me. Maybe I expected it to be different or for them [the university] to understand that I can't stay back until late.

The variety of expectations discussed by participants ranged from those that participants said reconciled closely with their actual university experience, to those where the participant's actual experience resulted in stress and conflict when compared to their prior expectations. During the data analysis phase of this study, three aspects of the expectations theme emerged from the data. These themes were expectations of time, expectations of the university experience, and academic expectations. Participants described a range of experiences within these themes. Many participants discussed what they considered to be realistic expectations upon entry, at times comparing these initial expectations with their experience as student and mother. Furthermore, participants described feeling what they considered to be lower levels of stress and better management of their roles as student and mother when their experience more closely aligned with their initial expectations.

5.4.2 Expectations of time

The first aspect in this expectations theme was participants' expectations of time. For many participants, this ongoing and multi-faceted expectation impacted their perception of success in their current unit or course. As with all the findings in this qualitative research, expectations of time were not asked about specifically by the researcher. Rather, participants typically commented on their expectations of time during the interviews and mini-focus groups whilst they were in the process of discussing other topics. This expectation of time aspect is detailed further in three sub-themes: first, time to complete the degree, second, time to complete assessments, and third, time to study, read and complete work outside university contact hours.

Time to complete the degree

According to participants' discussions, the number of years participants expected that it would take to complete their degree had a significant impact on each participants' experience as student and mother. The impact of this expectation of the time needed to complete their degree depended on the congruency between the actual time needed, compared with the initial expectations of the student. Participants in this study indicated that they were less affected by the actual time it was likely to take to complete a degree, rather they were affected by their ability to complete the degree within their own expected completion time.

Numerous participants discussed entering university with a desire to finish their degree in the minimum number of years allocated. Some participants who entered with this expectation expressed doubt about completing their degree if they felt completion would take too long. Participants who took longer than they initially expected expressed feelings of frustration, disengagement and concern about their ability to continue. These emotions, which echo the sentiments of multiple participants, were described by Karen (full-time, single, two children) when her projected course completion time exceeded her personal expectations.

I just had to drop that unit so that just adds time to the course. My concern would be that the longer it takes, you kind of go through different levels of enthusiasm, so I think there's a chance that I may not complete my degree.

Conversely, there were a small number of participants whose projected completion time ended up earlier than their expectations. These participants discussed feelings of achievement and pride, for example, Rosie (part-time, married, three children), who spoke with a sense of achievement when talking about taking five years to complete her degree. Rosie happily explained how she finished earlier than expected "because I took on the extra, doing three units a

semester. I've done it a year faster than I thought I would". Rosie commented further with pride saying, "I still managed to get a distinction over all", despite studying a greater course load than she had originally thought that she could manage. Interestingly, there were a couple of participants who entered university without a confident expectation regarding the duration of their university degree. Vanessa (part-time, married, two children), for example, stated: "I must admit I probably didn't think about the number of years it's going to be when I started." These participants expressed neither achievement nor frustration about their projected course completion time.

Although most participants entered university with a confident expectation of the time needed for completion, several participants reassessed their expected completion time part-way through their degree. These included a number of participants who initially intended to study part-time, making their expected completion duration between six and eight years. These participants discussed their decision to enrol in more units, thus shortening their expected completion time. Raeleen (full-time, single, three children) described her need to finish her degree quickly to enable her to "work, earn money and [have] no stress". Similarly, Danielle (full-time, single, two children), stated that "I really need to get back to work soon" for income-earning purposes. In addition, Danielle also explained needing to finish her degree in the year of her interview as she was at the maximum time allowed by the university policy to complete her nursing degree, "I'm at my sixth year so I have to finish it this year, and that is another stress too, knowing that I can't afford to fail any units".

In addition to future income and university policies, participants discussed expediting their course completion expectation due to their desire to continue studying in classes with their current university peers. Many participants had not initially expected the received level of collegiality and support from their peers, nor did they expect to feel part of a cohort. Linda (full-time, married, two

children) articulated this saying: "I was contemplating dropping back some of my units next year, but I don't want to fall behind in my group of peers." For a number of participants this desire to continue with their peers was linked to their desire to complete future group assessments with people they know, as articulated by Linda (full-time, married, two children): "If I end up in a class with people I don't know, then I might have to do a group assessment with people who won't work around my kids."

To expedite their course completion, a significant number of participants also discussed a desire to complete summer or winter units. Despite this desire, the majority of these participants commented that summer or winter school units were not available at ECUSW in their course of study. Kelly (full-time, single, two children), for example, echoed the disappointment of multiple participants stating that: "I could have been a few units further along and had the pressure taken off if I had been able to do summer school." Furthermore, a number of participants discussed that when summer and winter school units were made available at ECUSW campus, the limited number of available units failed to fit into their current course structure. Karen (full-time, single, two children) explained this further, identifying difficulties with not knowing which units were to be available in upcoming summer and winter school sessions prior to commencing the previous semester, saying that "... I enrolled in units and then we don't know what's going to go in summer school [and] the ones you tend to withdraw from [during the semester] they don't run in summer school".

Time to complete assignments

During the individual interviews and mini-focus groups, participants discussed mixed expectations regarding the amount of time expected for the completion of assignments. Many of the participants described how this time expectation had a significant impact on students' ability to manage their study, family and life balance. The distinguishing aspect for participants between overall time taken to

complete assignments compared to the time spent studying, was that assignments had due dates, which were often problematic for participants. Times spent completing assignments were neither flexible nor negotiable because there were consequences for both non-completion and late completion. Additionally, the majority of participants discussed a reluctance to apply for extensions due to their external life commitments, as articulated by Janice (part-time, married, four children): "I had children before I came to uni so I don't think problems with them are a good enough reason for asking for an extension." Participants also discussed regularly underestimating the number of hours it would take to complete set assessments. As a result, participants described feeling stressed and rushed to complete assessments when they had underestimated this time. For example, Kelly (full-time, single, two children) stated: "I'm just not going to get that assignment done before I need it next Wednesday".

During the interviews and mini-focus groups it was revealed that underestimating the time required to complete assessments was not limited to the participants. Participants described how other parties such as their partners, children, family and friends would comment that they felt that it was taking the participants an excessive amount of time to complete their assessments. Many of the participants who discussed these comments by family and friends described how significant people in their lives expected each assessment to take a finite amount of time, rather than the actual time that it would take. This lack of understanding, especially from support persons, made it particularly difficult for participants when they were asked to, or expected to, estimate how long they would need to complete an assessment before being expected to return to their other familial duties. This expectation from others, therefore, increased pressure on the student. Karis (full-time, married, one child) commented how her husband tried to limit the time she would spend doing assignments in an attempt to support her in maintaining her study life balance by saying: "Okay, you can have two more hours to do that assignment, then hand it in the way it

is!” Similarly, Katrina (full-time, married, two children) discussed her husband’s reaction to the time it would take her to complete assessments, saying:

If they’ve never studied [they] can’t understand how it could take so much time, even my husband. I’d be working and it takes a long time to write an essay, well it takes me a long time, and he’ll be like, ‘I think you’ve worked enough on that now’ and I’ll be like ‘well, I’ll tell you when I have [finished]’.

Katrina also described a similar lack of understanding from her non-student friend because of the time it was taking to complete an essay, saying:

I was just finishing an essay recently and my friend was ringing, [she] was like bullying me to come over and that was really, that was horrible. I would never do that to someone, but yeah, she just kept calling on the phone, and on my mobile, and on the home phone.

Partially as a result of this lack of understanding, some participants explained how they made new friendships and associated with fellow students during their university tenure, as they expected other students to be more understanding of their university commitments.

The time it would take participants to complete assignments was also described as being affected by unexpected distractions. Some participants described feeling frustrated that their personal expectation to use time allocated for assessments was not always used effectively. Often assessment completion time was syphoned off by a range of child and family distractions. Katrina (full-time, married, two children) was one of many participants who described this situation, saying:

I do get quite frustrated and I’m trying to be calmer about the interruptions and, because what she [her daughter] is doing is very sweet, but it is difficult if you are writing an essay and you’ve got really good

flow happening and then you are interrupted, then it is difficult, so frustrating.

This frustration was echoed by Kelly (full-time, single, two children) with humour, as she said:

I'll say [to the children] I need an hour of no interruptions, yep, it doesn't work does it? 'Oh mum, I just forgot', 'oh mum', and you know, you end up looking at them and you're thinking that I just want to snap your neck actually (laughing).

Time required to complete assessments was not the only time expectation of participants. Participants also discussed the time required for readings, studying and other study-related activities.

Time for readings, study and other study-related activities

Many participants discussed the time commitment required for their university studies outside contact hours. The majority of participants said that they felt that they were doing considerably more hours of work than they had expected prior to enrolling at university. Karen (full-time, single, two children) stated that this misalignment of expectations compared to reality was despite having been informed differently during the orientation process: "When we first started and went to the orientation, they said for every hour on campus you spend three off campus, I possibly didn't factor that in as much as I should have."

Many participants commented that although they did expect to spend time outside of university hours working towards their degree, most said that they expected this time to be spent completing assignments or preparing for exams. Thus, many participants described feeling unprepared, or under-prepared, for the time allocation expected for academic preparation, required pre-readings, and the reinforcing of each week's new learning. Vanessa (part-time, married, two children) articulated underestimating her study time commitment saying, "I

don't think I realised quite how much work I would have to put in". Meredith (full-time, married, two children) also expressed how: "I started to get worried when I first started with the amount of reading that there was, because I don't like reading." Similarly, Lisa (full-time, single, four children) stated: "I didn't think it would take up so much time, and I didn't think there would be so much time involved outside of lectures and tutorials." In addition, many participants also said their partners, children, family and friends had made negative comments to them regarding how much time they were devoting to university-related activities that were not for assessment purposes. Linda, (full-time, married, two children) commented: "I was doing some pre-readings the day after I handed in a major assignment and my husband looked at me surprised and said that he thought I had already finished my assignments."

In addition to underestimating the amount of time needed for academic preparation, a number of participants also commented that they had significantly underestimated the time, and at times emotional capacity, needed for non-academic tasks. These non-academic tasks were described by participants as tasks such as organising their materials and study space, enrolling and making changes to enrolments, sourcing suitable resources, using online learning materials through the university's Blackboard© webpage, chasing up other students during group assessments, and meeting with lecturers to resolve queries. Each of these tasks took time from participants which the majority of said that they had not expected. Kelly (full-time, single, two children), for example, articulated: "I've been trying to get advanced standing on one of the units, and again that is quite a stressful process."

This first aspect of the expectations theme that emerged from the data in the analysis was participants' expectations of time. Participants' perceived experience depended on how closely their expectations of time aligned with their actual experience. The misalignment between participant's expectations

and their actual experience was not limited to their expectation of the time it would take to complete assessments. Rather, this theme included the unrealistic expectations of family and friends; expectations of how long other associated academic tasks would take; and participants' expectations of the time commitment needed for a variety of other non-academic tasks.

5.4.3 Expectations of the university experience

The majority of participants commented on their expectations of the overall university experience. Numerous students recalled their expectations prior to entry, whilst others discussed their expectations after the commencement of their degree. During the interviews and mini-focus groups, a significant proportion of participants self-identified as first-in-family university students. Many of these first-in-family students discussed having limited prior experience with the university system, and possibly as a result, many participants' expectations of their overall university experience were misaligned with their actual experience. Some participants commented that when there was a close alignment of their expectations and actual experience, this alignment actually assisted them to feel satisfied with, and fulfil, their dual roles of student and mother. In addition, this close alignment of expectations and experiences, according to some participants, assisted them to feel less anxious about entering university, more capable of coping with the overall university experience, more emotionally secure whilst at university, and more valued and supported within the university context.

The majority of participants entered university with high expectations of their overall university experience. One commonly-held expectation of the participants in this study was that universities are highly-professional and highly-organised places of learning. Participants also expressed thinking that universities are designed for the education of highly intelligent people. These high expectations caused some participants to feel initially apprehensive of their

entry into university. These initial expectations were articulated by Janice (part-time, married, four children) stating: “It’s a big thing, university, it’s huge, you’ve got to be very clever, it’s professional, you think the expectations are extremely high and you’ve got to know it all the first week.” More specific expectations the majority of participants discussed were the family friendliness of the ECUSW campus, the rapport participants expected with their lecturers, and the relationships participants expected with their peers.

Family friendliness

Participants’ expectations regarding the family friendliness expected from ECUSW campus was either discussed or commented on by all the participants in this study. Discussing the family friendliness of the campus was predictable considering the study focused on the experiences of mature age female students with dependent children. An overwhelming expectation was expressed by participants that ECUSW campus was a family-friendly campus. The expected family-friendliness of ECUSW campus was important because although most participants initially expected their greatest challenges at university to be academic, many stated that their greatest challenge was that their high expectations of this family-friendly campus were not met. These high expectations of the family-friendliness of this campus included, but was not limited to, how accommodating they expected the staff to be when dealing with students who have children, the flexibility of both the timetable and courses of study for students with children, and the available facilities or support services participants expected to assist students with children.

Most participants entered university with an expectation that their university timetable would accommodate their children’s schooling. The majority of participants expected to attend all lectures and tutorials whilst their children attended school. Similarly, the majority of participants expected university holidays to align with their children’s school holidays and expected to not be

required to attend university on state public holidays. Most participants described feeling disappointed and frustrated when these expectations were not met. In addition, unpredicted difficulties arose for many participants when lectures or tutorials were timetabled outside school times. Barbara (full-time, married, four children), for example, described not being able to take a course because:

I would have had to have missed classes, or I would have had to have left early from every class to go and get my kids from school, and there's nothing else that I could have done about it. I did speak to Student Central before enrolments opened to see if there was anything they could do, but they said that there was nothing that they could do about it.

This was particularly frustrating for some participants when multiple tutorials were scheduled, some during and some outside of school-hours. During the interviews, these participants believed that more appropriate school-hours classes had already been filled by students without children. Narelle (part-time, single, two children) discussed her frustration at having to take a course at an unsuitable time, saying: "It's been really hard because I always seem to get the classes [that finish late], all the young 'no kids' students get all the in-school-hours classes, last semester I got the ones that finish at 6:30pm." Similarly, Janice (part-time, married, four children) commented that finishing late was difficult for her university-life balance as she would finish university directly before it was time for her children to be fed, bathed and prepared for bed: "It was a bit tricky first semester because I had the late [classes]. I was getting home at 5pm, so, I was walking straight into witching hour."

In addition to having to enrol in classes at unsuitable times, some participants also discussed their frustration when participants' timetables were unexpectedly changed by the university. Many participants were required to reorganise plans or withdraw from subjects as they had enrolled and made arrangements for their children around their original timetable. Participants also discussed expecting

that the university would be accommodating to their difficulties considering it was the university who initiated these disruptive changes. Raeleen (full-time, single, three children) recalled:

I enrolled into my units and they turned around and changed it on me, I wasn't the only one, [they] sent us an e-mail and said 'sorry about the inconvenience, however, we have had to put you into the 3:30 to 5:30pm class due to ...' [pause: shrug shoulders] you know, 'over our limits' or something, so I basically rang ... [and explained] my kids come home at 3:20 pm, they're getting off the bus, I said I can't do this, so I have, and [as advised] I sent out a bulk e-mail to everybody, like everybody else did, tried to change with other girls, but no-one wants to change, who wants to come at that time of the day?

Similar frustrations were expressed by Linda (full-time, married, two children) stating:

I was a little bit annoyed because there [were] many single people who don't have kids or responsibilities, or they might not even have work, but it just, it was not a kid-friendly couple of classes I got, the only kid-friendly class I got this semester was a morning lecture for Tuesday.

Narelle (part-time, single, two children) went further to reflect on this difference between her expectations and her experience when she was told that she would need to try to swap her unsuitable classes with another student. Narelle said:

The lecturers, their hands are tied really, so yeah, it's not so family friendly, it says on the website family-friendly but it's not, I mean, you might get a really great lecturer and they will do what they can ... but they're all bound by red tape.

In these situations, the participants discussed feeling disappointed and frustrated that their expectations of how accommodating the university would be did not align with their actual experience.

Many participants also discussed entering university with high expectations that the ECUSW campus was more family-friendly than they perceived other university campuses to be. Some of these participants discussed feeling disappointed with ECUSW campus when the comparative family-friendliness of the campus did not meet their high expectations, particularly when it came to childcare on campus. The absence of a crèche or childcare facility was discussed by many participants, feeling that it was unfair that the metropolitan campuses of Edith Cowan University had childcare facilities whilst Bunbury did not. Kelly (full-time, single, two children), for example, articulated these feelings:

[I study] on a campus that has no crèche, I believe that Joondalup and Mount Lawley [campuses] have some sort of day care facilities, that makes it quite difficult, often a lot of the parents are away on days like that [school holidays], or they have to bring their kids to uni.

Similarly, Raeleen (full-time, single, three children) shared her frustration stating: “They [the university] need to have a day care centre at university, they should have one at every single university.” Karen (full-time, single, two children) also discussed how this lack of childcare had affected her studies saying: “The fact that I’ve had to drop units, because of a lack of childcare and [available childcare] not being compatible with my family requirements, then it just makes it harder.” Considering their high expectations of the comparative family friendliness of the ECUSW campus, these participants articulated the feelings of many other participants who felt that an on campus childcare facility was necessary at ECUSW.

In addition to childcare facilities, some participants also commented on or compared facilities that they believed other campuses provided, which assist students with dependent children. A number of participants commented that the

university library should be open for longer hours on the weekend. As Vanessa (part-time, married, two children) stated:

The library is only open between one and four, I can't do anything at home, it would be handier if the library was open a bit longer at the weekend. I sort of find that I get all my books and get here, set myself all up and get in the head space and it's time to go home.

The comparative absence of other facilities was also commented on, for example, by Meredith (full-time, married, two children) who stated: "... look at Curtin university, they have a tavern, we have nothing here." In addition, a number of students commented positively that the availability of parking on campus had exceeded their expectations. Jadine (part-time, married, two children) was one of the few participants who discussed how this ease of parking was beneficial for her considering she had to drop off children before coming to university in the morning, and was often short of time. "Parking is great, somehow I always get a good park [laughing] that's fabulous because I am here with one minute to spare" (Jadine, part-time, married, two children); thus assisting to make the campus more family friendly.

Rapport with lecturers

Parking was not the only aspect of the university discussed by participants where ECUSW campus exceeded their expectations. Most participants expressed having their expectations exceeded regarding their rapport with the majority of lecturers on the ECUSW campus. Participants described their lecturers as professionals who treated them as independent learners needing to maintain their study-life balance. For many participants, this experience contrasted their initial expectation that academic staff, particularly lecturers, would be less approachable or caring than they actually experienced. Danielle (full-time, single, two children) described her lecturers: "They are all brilliant, I think that being in a small campus they know you personally, they know your situation." This small campus experience was echoed by Ruby (part-time, married, two children) who

stated: "I love Bunbury [ECUSW campus] for the fact that there are small class sizes, you've got that personal experience with your lecturers." Danika (full-time, single, one child) described her relationship with lecturers in a similar way, stating: "I've found that they [the lecturers] are approachable and you can talk to them and, you know, they have helped both my professional and personal development." Ruby (part-time, married, two children) stated: "I prefer to build that rapport with my lecturers, because they are more willing to give you the help if you're showing the interest in learning and you want to succeed." Not all participants, however, had excellent experiences with every lecturer. Linda (full-time, married, two children) stated when discussing her issues with childcare as she had only a single lecture to attend on one day, and was needing to bring her child to university, "I find that the lecturers don't always [help], they're not very flexible in helping mothers".

Most participants discussed developing what they perceived to be a positive and supportive rapport with the majority of their lecturers. Additionally, most participants described this rapport as exceeding their expectations. As nursing student Kelly (full-time, single, two children) stated: "My lecturers are all good, coming from that helping profession." Similarly, fellow nursing student Vanessa (part-time, married, two children) said: "They have all been really nice, really nice and really supportive. I've really liked most of my lecturers so far, all of them actually." Similar sentiments were expressed by education student, Meredith (full-time, married, two children): "I like all the lecturers, I think they are all fair." Nursing student Barbara also elaborated on her rapport with lecturers, saying:

The lecturers have all been great. I go to them when I have problems and I feel that I can talk to them anytime. They have really helped me with everything even when I just feel like everything is on top of me.

Despite these positive comments, a number of participants also discussed expecting a higher level of professionalism and organisation than they felt they received from a number of individual lecturers on-campus at ECUSW. One participant, Rosie (part-time, married, three children), described a lack of rapport and a perceived negative attitude from one sessional lecturer, saying the lecturer was: "... quite condescending and belittling. She's got a PhD and I don't know whether she thought that was, you know, we are still all [undergraduate] degree students so we're all still learning, and she could be quite rude and abrupt." A small number of participants also discussed a problem with lecturers having unclear assignment expectations, for example, Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) said: "I just don't get what she wants ... [she is a] very nice lady, absolutely awesome, but what she says and what I understand it to be, not happening."

Similarly, Sherie (full-time, single, two children) articulated feeling frustrated with one ECUSW lecturer, stating:

There's always been one [lecturer] that I have crossed swords with but apparently a lot of other students have as well ... it seems that they have had the same thoughts that the particular lecturer often changed her mind about decisions regarding assignments.

Linda's (full-time, married, two children) expectations had not been met by another sessional on-campus lecturer, as she described the lecturer's verbal delivery of information as both "unclear" and "monotone". Linda stated: "... I was really interested in her content but she was so boring and difficult to understand." These negative comments from participants about lecturers at the ECUSW campus collectively demonstrate that although the majority of on campus lecturers were reported to be friendly, accommodating and approachable, not all on campus lecturers met or exceeded participants' expectations.

In addition to these lecturers who are situated on-campus at ECUSW, various off-campus lecturers, who were mainly situated on the Joondalup campus in Perth, Western Australia, also did not meet the participants' expectations. A significantly higher proportion of participants studying off-campus units described at least one negative experience with relation to off-campus lecturers. A number of these participants discussed expecting lecturers of off-campus units to be more understanding of participants' need to be organised and flexible, as the reason why participants were unable to attend all on-campus units was because they were balancing dual roles of student and mother. Danika (full-time, single, one child) expressed concerns about an online lecturer stating: "...sometimes she is late with the lectures, which just sets me behind in my time management, which I find annoying, and her lectures, she doesn't do a good job of." For a small number of participants, difficulties with off-campus lecturers also affected their relationship with on-campus lecturers, for example, Jamie (part-time, married, one child) who stated that her experience with an on-line unit was:

Horrible, because it was a Joondalup course, so even when I go to talk to some of the lecturers [on-campus at ECUSW] they were just like 'oh, nup, we can't help you cause that's an off-campus thing, we're not paid to help you'.

As a result of this bad experience with lecturers regarding this off-campus unit, Jamie went further to say: "I've re-mapped my [course] pathway out and I've added it [time] further on and I've made sure it [studying units] will be as an on-campus thing only." This negative experience described by Jamie consequently affected her expected completion time and overall satisfaction with her university experience. Similarly, for all the participants who expressed that their experience with some lectures did not meet their high expectations of them as professionals, these negative experiences ultimately affected participants' overall university experience.

Relationships with peers

In addition to discussing the rapport participants had with lecturers, the majority of participants also discussed their interactions and relationships with their university peers. For many participants these relationships with their peers exceed their expectations, with many developing respectful and supportive relationships that were described as both academically and socially beneficial. Furthermore, a number of participants described a strong, and unanticipated, desire to remain with, and ultimately graduate with their peers as a cohort. Although many participants described a professional and mutually-respectful relationship with their peers, a number of participants also described feeling frustrated, and at times disappointed, when their expectations of the conduct of their university peers had not been met. Many participants discussed the unprofessional or disruptive behaviour of other students and, as a result, some of these participants commented that they preferred to associate with students in life situations similar to their own.

Many participants additionally indicated that the relationships they formed with their university peers exceeded their expectations. These supportive relationships were established with a range of peers including traditional, younger school leaver students. This relationship was described by a number of participants as motivational, giving them a strong desire to remain with, and ultimately graduate with, their peers in their cohort. Karen (full-time, single, two children) reflected on the importance of this collegiality to her within the cohort.

The ones that have all gone through together, they have the stronger bond or a stronger relationship. Particularly when it comes to things like group-work and things like that, you know, they have that tighter bond, and understanding of each other's' strengths and weaknesses.

Similarly, Lisa (full-time, single, four children) commented on the academic support she received from her university peers.

I've carried through with the same people now, and I've got a couple of people that I study with and we can bounce ideas off, and that's made a big difference, having peers that I'm comfortable with that you can ask questions with and stuff like that.

For some participants, this collegiality and social interaction increased motivation to continue with their current study load, as Linda (full-time, married, two children) said:

I actually love the social interaction, and I've made some really good friends, and yeah, I don't [feel] that I could leave it now simply because of that group that I have, you know, like we all seem to be moving along together in, like a wave.

Linda further described feeling both included in, and connected to, the nursing faculty on campus at ECUSW. She attributed this connection to the high number of mature age female students with dependent children currently enrolled in her degree, commenting:

With nursing there are so many mums in that group and around that age, I'm probably in the middle age bracket of students, so I don't feel like I'm a duck out of water or anything like that, I feel very incorporated into the nursing fraternity.

A small number of participants also described feeling inspired and motivated by other mature age students, who are mothers with dependent children, within their cohort. Jadine (part-time, married, two children), for example, expressed her admiration:

I definitely look at them [students who are mothers] and think wow, they are so much more applied and dedicated than the school-leavers, and

they have got more maturity, and they have got that real drive. They know what their purpose is because they've had a bit of life experience and now they're ready to go.

Barbara (full-time, married, four children) extended these sentiments to include sacrifice, commenting: "You have got the mothers who are trying hard and you know how much they are sacrificing to be here." Karen (full-time, single, two children) articulated receiving support from other students who were mothers in her cohort, stating: "I think sometimes it's really [important] you can get support from other students who are going through the same, particularly mums who understand." Jamie (part-time, married, one child) reflected on the understanding that she, too, received from her peers when her child was unwell, saying: "The other students were good, most of them had children and they had ones that had had asthma or bronchiolitis or had been in the same or similar situations".

For some participants, this collegiality experienced with their peers also extended to what they described as somewhat unexpected relationships they developed with younger, school-leaver students. A number of participants indicated that the positive relationships they developed with their school-leaver peers exceeded their expectations. For example, Janice (part-time, married, four children) reflected: "It's nice to see how lovely and mature these kids try to be just to include me, you know, because I could have been their mum, and they do their best and they actually succeed." Ruby (part-time, married, two children) also articulated similar positive feelings relating to her relationships with younger students: "I get along with all of them, and they include me in their stuff. Sometimes I don't feel like I'm nearly 40." Similarly, Rosie (part-time, married, three children) reported:

I'm probably one of the oldest in the group, so [there are] a lot of young ones, but everyone is really friendly and I think, because the campus is really small we all tend to know each other in the Arts, it's really good.

Having these positive experiences with younger students that exceeded the participants' expectations of these students helped them to experience a more positive university experience overall.

Although many of the younger, school-leaver students exceeded participants' expectation of them, these positive experiences were not indicative of the feelings of all participants. Despite describing that they were maintaining professional and respectful relationships with younger students, some participants revealed what they described to be private feelings of jealousy and envy when considering the different situation these younger students were in compared to their own. Danielle (full-time, single, two children), for example, said:

I suppose when you look at these young [students who are], single, still living at home, and [you] just think 'you guys have no idea how good you've got it not having to work'. You feel a little bit jealous that that's all they have to do, is to come to uni, they don't have to work, they don't have to worry about kids, you know, all the rest of it, so I don't relate well to the young single ones or to the school-leaver kinds.

Similar sentiments were also described by Raeleen (full-time, single, three children):

They're just more carefree, they don't seem to [be worried], they seem happier, it's different. You listen to the conversations, and they're chatting about Facebook, and they're chatting about what they're doing on the weekend and this and that, whereas the older students will be going 'oh my god', you know, 'I've got to do this, or got to do this', you know it's [conversations for the older students are] more family-orientated, [and] uni-orientated.

For a small number of participants, these feelings of jealousy or envy actually inhibited their desire to form friendships with younger, school-leaver students. These few participants described their feelings as affecting their ability to change their expectations of, or form positive peer relationships with, younger school-leaver students.

In addition to feeling jealous or envious of other students, some participants also described feeling frustrated or disappointed when their expectations of other students' behaviour or level of professionalism had not been met. A couple of students described this as particularly frustrating when they felt other, often younger students, were unprofessional or disruptive during lectures and tutorials. One type of unprofessional behaviour discussed by participants was the perceived rudeness of other students. Meredith (full-time, married, two children) recalled, when discussing a particular group of younger students: "They talk in class, they are on their phones all the time, they are disrespectful, they are rude. One teacher, or lecturer we have got is Robert, and they call him 'Rozza' which I think is really inappropriate." Sherie (full-time, single, two children) also articulated feeling uncomfortable around some of the younger female students, explaining: "When I came here it seemed very competitive, very bitchy, because it's just about all women on the course. The guys are lovely, the guys are always nice to hang out with." During the second mini-focus group, Marissa (full-time, single, two children) described feeling particularly shocked by the unprofessional conduct of other students, describing witnessing a group of students viewing pornographic pictures on their laptop in the lecture theatre during a lecture. This was conduct that participants had not expected from their peers upon entry to university. A number of participants further articulated that unprofessional, or at times disruptive, behaviours of other students were the main reasons why mature age students chose to sit together. Kelly (full-time, single, two children) articulated this view of younger students, saying:

We [mature age mothers] understand each other, and we are not into looking at photos on our iPhones and giggling about how drunk we got last night, because we know how important [it is to pass university]. This isn't a way of life for us, this is our life.

Many participants in this study were reluctant to interact fully with younger, or school-leaver, students for reasons including inappropriate, unprofessional or disruptive behaviour. A small number were also unwilling to develop relationships with others as they experienced feelings of jealousy or envy. Of those who did establish positive relationships with younger students, many described these relationships as mutually respectful and valuable. Developing positive relationships with peers in similar circumstances to themselves was described as valuable to the participants, where many participants discussed feeling a high level of support and understanding from students who were in a similar situation to their own, encouraging them to continue to graduation as a university cohort. Most participants discussed forming positive and supportive relationships with their peers that exceeded their expectations; however a number of negative experiences with other students, particularly younger students, made some participants reluctant to fully assimilate with others. During the interviews and mini-focus groups, many participants described a mutually-respectful relationship with younger students; however, their expectations of other students were, at times, let down by the unprofessional or disruptive behaviour of individuals.

5.4.4 Academic Expectations

The academic achievement of most of the participants far exceeded their academic expectations upon entry. As a result, the majority of participants discussed their academic expectations and achievements in a positive light, expressing feelings of pride and a sense of achievement with regards to their studies. The majority of these participants discussed attaining high grades at

university, with many proudly discussing making the Dean's list within their first year. Many of the participants in this study outlined a realistic self-evaluation of their academic abilities, and a desire to achieve high grades in their course. Although they reported achieving these high grades, nearly all participants discussed expecting that the academic standard of work at university would be significantly higher than what they reported to have experienced. Participants' high academic expectations extended to valuing quality in both their work standard and work ethic, with many participants reluctant to ask for extensions or to submit work that was, in their opinion, substandard. Many participants also described anxiety at missing lectures, mainly because of sick children, as they reported feeling gaps in their understandings. Most participants described feeling proud of their academic achievements at university, with many feeling that they had exceeded their academic self-expectations.

As a result of the misalignment between participants' expectations upon entry and their actual experience, many participants changed their individual academic expectations part-way into their course. Following their first or second semester of study, many participants expressed experiencing a paradigm shift in their thinking about their academic expectations. These participants described becoming more concerned about gaining valuable and transferable learning experiences, rather than attending university to pass and attain their degree.

Academic self-evaluation and self-doubt

Most participants discussed their personal expectations of their own academic abilities during the individual interviews and mini-focus groups. The majority of participants discussed feeling, upon entry, significant academic self-doubt about their ability to complete the actual university assessments and succeed at university. Meredith (full-time, married, two children), for example, stated that when she first started university: "It was really daunting and really stressful for me because I felt like I wasn't smart enough". This similar sentiment was

described by Karis (full-time, married, one child), “when I started I didn’t think I would be doing honours because I thought I would be scraping through and not doing so well”. Similarly, Rosie (part-time, married, three children) said that she expected university to be “a lot harder than it was, so I was glad that I was able to do the work”. Academic self-doubt was discussed more particularly by participants who were either studying at university for the first time, were first-in-family students, or those had not been successful in previous studies in the past, including, at secondary school. Linda (full-time, married, two children) echoed these common feelings of academic self-doubt upon entry, saying: “I just didn’t think that I was actually smart enough to be at university, because I never did well at high school”.

A number of participants also discussed unexpected initial self-doubt relating to whether they deserved to be at university or belonged on campus. This self-evaluation related to their status as a mature age student, a first-in-family student, or a student with children, as distinct from the self-doubt experienced about their actual ability to succeed in the academic tasks at university. As Karen (full-time, single, two children) says: “people in my family don’t come to university, we are workers, we go out and work”. Many of these participants described feeling initially intimidated by school-leavers, as they expected universities were a learning place for younger students. This expectation was articulated by Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) who said: “I thought university is more for the kids who have just left school. Of course they are better at it, and used to homework and doing assignments”.

Despite having a low self-evaluation upon entry to university, nearly all participants described experiencing a significant and unexpected increase in their self-evaluation after their first or second semester at university. These feelings included a significant improvement in their sense of belonging at university, which according to Tinto (1998) is essential for reducing attrition. After initially

feeling that university was daunting and doubting if she was smart enough to succeed, Meredith (full-time, married, two children) changed her expectations of herself at university, stating, “it’s gotten a bit easier because I’m a bit more confident about my ability and also what the university wants from me”. After their first semester at university the majority of the participants who initially described self-doubt, went on to describe how they now felt that they were smart enough to complete and pass the academic work requirements. As Karen (full-time, single, two children) reflected, “after I got that first HD [high distinction] I just wanted to get high marks all the time, [because] I knew I was capable”.

Although many participants’ self-evaluation of their academic ability improved after the commencement of their degree, some participants felt that they were unable to meet their initial expectations of their ability to managing their multiple commitments; most importantly motherhood, with their university studies. This misalignment of their expectations with reality was a cause of stress and concern for a number of participants. Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) said:

I’ve been mentally stimulated above and beyond what I was hoping, I’ve had my horizons expanded, I’ve been forced to look at new perspectives, which is great at uni but at the same time it has been really hard at home, trying to do everything.

Narelle (part-time, single, two children) also discussed how, upon entry, she expected to cope better balancing her children, studies, and other commitments than she actually experiencing after entry. Narelle articulated experiencing greater feelings of self-doubt than she had expected,

I managed a lot better [before entering university], so I was kind of thinking that I would be able to manage like that now too, but no, life has just

thrown me a lemon, so no, I wasn't expecting this. I thought I would be able to cope better.

In contrast, a small number of participants discussed how they expected that being a mature age student, with previous life experiences including being a parent, improved their self-evaluation as a university student. Kelly (full-time, single, two children), for example, articulated, "university is easier because you have a bit of life skills behind you and a bit of volunteering knowledge".

High academic expectations

Although many participants experienced feelings of self-doubt prior to, or upon, university entry, many students described a paradigm shift in their thinking about their own academic abilities after one or two semesters at university. Many participants initially entered university with the expectation that they would simply pass their degree; however, they reassessed their academic expectations when they more accurately recognised their potential and capabilities. The turning point for many of these participants was after they had received feedback from assessments, including a high distinction mark for a number of participants. These higher marks caused many participants to change their expectations. Participants discussed a desire to reach their academic potential and to learn as much as possible from their time at university, rather than aim to achieve the pass mark that they had originally expected. This was best articulated by Katrina (full-time, married, 2 children) who said:

When I started I just wanted to pass and I thought that would be okay, but I just got a high distinction for one of the papers I did, it was a really good mark, it was really good, and I, so now I have put the bar up, but it can be done you just need to put in that little bit more effort.

Not every participant, however, felt that their university experience was less difficult than they had originally expected. A small number of participants felt that the difficulty level exceeded their expectations, an impression possibly given by others when they were encouraging enrolment. Lisa (full-time, single, 4

children), for example, was encouraged to enrol at university by her former husband who had completed a degree. Lisa described her experience of the work expected as “a lot harder than what I expected, a lot harder”.

Participants also described high expectations of their own personal study ethic as university students. This study ethic included an expectation that they will complete all assessments by the due dates, regardless of their external circumstances. Many participants discussed a reluctance to seek extensions despite having valid reasons for applying. As commented by Katrina (full-time, married, two children) when discussing extensions, “I don’t want to operate like that”. Participants discussed continuing to work through and complete assessments despite being unwell or caring for sick children. Rosie (part-time, married, three children) echoed the feeling of many participants when she proudly said, “I’ve never, ever had an extension”. Many participants were reluctant to apply for extensions because they held an expectation that the circumstances for which they are requiring an extension were normal in their lives, such as having unwell children, and therefore they were not considered an excuse to not complete their university requirements. In addition, participants described not wanting to get behind in their studies, thus, not delaying the completion of assessments or exams that they knew they would be required to complete in the future if they were postponed now. As Lauren (part-time, married, two children) said: “I actually don’t ask a lot around extensions and things like that because I want it [the assignment] done.” Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) described similar feelings saying: “If I can get it [the assignment] in I would rather get it in and over and done with, knuckle down and knock it off and get it in.” A number of participants expressed a similar reluctance when it came to applying for deferred examinations as these students expected that they should not be using deferred examinations for family-related reasons. Jadine (part-time, married, two children), for example, discussed considering a deferred exam when she was caring for a severely unwell child: “I actually contacted another student and she said that I could go and apply for a,

you know [deferred exam] to sit it another day, but I couldn't do that, I went in and I sat it."

Participants also expressed a high study ethic discussing the level of assistance they expected to receive from others over the duration of their degree. Some participants discussed feeling a high sense of personal achievement when they completed their assessments with minimal assistance from others, including, but not limited to, lecturers, learning advisors, and peers. Narelle (part-time, single, two children) articulated her opinion, saying: "I know some students go to Janet [the learning advisor] and she helps them to do their assignments, but I think I should do them all myself, that [the learning advisor's help] should just be for people who can't do it themselves." In addition to their expectation to submit high quality individual work, participants also discussed a genuine desire for an equal distribution of work allocation and completion during the completion of group assignments. As Raeleen (full-time, single, three children) said:

Everybody is different, and everybody's work ethic is different, I think with that I'm very organised, and driven, and I like to get my work done and get it done promptly and I'm not lazy. I've found in the past, working in groups I get very annoyed when they [other group members] don't pull their weight.

A number of participants shared Raeleen's expectation that all students should be completing work to the best of their ability whilst completing group assessments so as not to let their peers down. Many of the participants also discussed feeling compelled to take control of the group assignments to ensure that it could be started in a timely fashion so it wasn't left to the last minute. As Narelle (part-time, single, two children) recalled:

Right in the beginning I had one group-work assignment and it was horrific. We had one girl who came up with every excuse under the sun not to get

together and I ended up doing her work and staying up all night and that was because I didn't want to fail.

The majority of participants described unexpected feelings of frustration and disappointment with regards to compulsory group-work assessments. Furthermore, a number of these participants elaborated that compulsory group-work assessments partially inhibited their ability to manage their time and commitments, as a student and mother, over the semester. As Meredith (full-time, married, two children) said: "I really needed to get that [group] assignment finished because I had another two assignments due that fortnight. I wasted time when the others didn't show up and it just isn't good enough."

Although most participants expressed an expectation that all the work they handed in was their own, and completed individually to the best of their ability, there was a difference in the way many of these students viewed the use of academic services available to them on campus. These views included those who expected to withhold from using these services, as previously discussed, as they considered these services as only provided for students struggling to pass, rather than those looking to improve an already satisfactory mark. In contrast, a few participants expressed that they were happy to use these academic services to their full potential, seeing them as a service offered by the university to ensure students receive the best mark possible. This expectation to take advantage of services offered was expressed by Ruby (full-time, married, two children): "I've been using Janet [learning advisor] to review all my assignments, I'm not real happy that they are changing their policy on that, and they only read the first two pages now."

Desire for a genuine learning experience

Nearly all the participants discussed holding an expectation to gain genuine learning experiences from their university studies, rather than attending university with the prime objective of passing their subjects. Even those

participants who entered university with the initial expectation to pass their degree expressed that they had changed their thinking to expect, and desire, the most valuable and genuine learning experience possible from their time at university. This desire for genuine learning experiences was articulated by Kelly (full-time, single, two children), saying “I’m not just there to tick a box”. Similar comments were made by Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) who said “I’m not here just for the piece of paper”, and Narelle (part-time, single, two children) who said “I want to be the best nurse that I can”. There were three main aspects that the participants discussed regarding expecting to gain the most genuine learning experience from their time at university. First, participants expected the most realistic and valuable practicum placements available to them. Second, participants expressed concern about missing lectures and tutorials because they felt they would miss genuine learning opportunities. And third, participants expected to develop transferable skills and knowledge that they will be able to put into practice, whether it be in their professional life, with their own family, or in an external voluntary role.

The first expectation participants expressed was their desire to gain the most realistic and valuable practicum placements possible. This desire for a realistic experience was despite, and in some cases because, many of these practicum placements posed significant difficulties for participants. These difficulties included expected practicum hours, location, difficulties negotiating time off with existing work places, and difficulties balancing existing commitments. Interestingly, participants were willing to accept and even volunteer for placements that amplified these difficulties when they expected to gain a richer and more valuable practicum experience. Karis (full-time, married, one child) described this saying: “Prac in itself as a learning experience was fabulous, but it has been really hard.” For many participants, accepting these desired practicum placements meant travelling and staying in locations away from Bunbury, including Narrogin, which is 193 kilometres (120 miles) away, and Perth, which is 172 kilometres (107 miles) away. Vanessa (part-time, married, two children)

discussed this travelling difficulty saying: “Next semester I will probably be alright if it is in Bunbury, but if it is in Perth then I don’t know what I will do.”

Participants also described extending their practicum hours by voluntarily staying back, outside their allocated hours, to ensure they completed all tasks asked of them with the express desire to gain the richest learning experience possible. In addition, participants talked of practicum placements as an opportunity to up-skill and gain valuable experience to assist with their future career. Although practicum placements were discussed as difficult and as inconvenient for the majority of participants, participants recognised their value, as Kelly (full-time, single, two children) stated: “I don’t think there is enough prac actually, especially for us who are part-time.”

Second, and in addition to expecting to gain genuine practicum learning experiences, most participants discussed also expecting to gain valuable learning experiences from their time on-campus. Whilst articulating this, participants described feeling frustrated with other students when they would waste time during lectures or tutorials. This feeling was articulated by Barbara (full-time, married, four children) who described what she perceived to be younger students wasting time and asking inappropriate questions in the lectures, saying: “They don’t do anything for themselves, and we often wonder what they are even doing here because they just [don’t think for themselves], it doesn’t seem like they want to do anything.” Participants also described feeling frustrated when they had to miss lectures or tutorials, usually for family-related reasons such as to care for unwell children. These participants expressed feeling concerned about missing valuable learning experiences that were occurring in the lectures or tutorials during the time of their absence. Karen (full-time, single, two children), for example, described feeling disappointed about being late for lectures, anguishing about “that feeling of not getting all the information”. Narelle (part-time, single, two children) stated: “I just feel that the more you know the better you are going to be”, as she described her desire for the most genuine learning experience from university. This desire for a genuine learning

experience meant that the majority of participants viewed lectures more as a genuine and valuable learning opportunity rather than as a university requirement.

In addition to attending scheduled lectures and tutorials, many participants also expected to attend, and gain value from, extramural learning opportunities offered by the university. These extramural opportunities included attending pre-exam study sessions, participating in primary school tutoring programs for education students, and participating in the seniors' expo for nursing students. Participants expressed that they did not expect themselves to be involved in these opportunities simply to pass an assessment, rather, they had a genuine desire to learn and develop into the best professional possible. Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) echoed the sentiments of many of the participants saying: "there is so much more out there that I need to know about, so much more I need to learn" when discussing developing into the best future professional that she can be. A small number of participants also delineated between their perceived difficulty of a unit and the advancement of their learning. This was articulated by Kelly (full-time, single, two children) who reflected: "It's interesting the ones [units] that I've found the hardest, like the science one and two, the patho and the pharmo, are the ones [units] that I really get the most out of."

Third, participants discussed expecting to gain transferable knowledge and skills that could be used in both career-related and other aspects of their lives. These other aspects commonly included the health or education of their children or other family members. As education student, Meredith (full-time, married, two children) said: "I know more about her [daughter's] schooling now, what she does at school, what she needs." This was similar to the sentiments of Lorraine (part-time, single, six children), who said: "I've learnt through the units of study how better to deal with my kids." A number of participants discussed expecting

to develop learning that would assist them with future voluntary activities. These voluntary activities included a nursing student volunteering for the ambulance service, a social work student volunteering for community advocacy groups, and an education student wanting to travel to a third world country to share her professional knowledge in a developing community, after graduating from their university degree. Kelly (full-time, single, two children) described a similar desire to volunteer in the future, saying:

I will be an RN [registered nurse] next year [with all] the possibilities it offers me. I want to travel with it, I want to volunteer, I want to go to India or the Kalahari Desert and help with cataract removals because that is quality of life.

Some participants articulated a high level of satisfaction when their expectation to gain valuable and transferable learning was perceived to have been realised. This sense of satisfaction was best articulated by Linda (full-time, married, two children), who said:

It's sort of a bit like a runner's high, you know like when you exercise and you get that adrenalin kick, and I think I get that from studying and I got that very much last year, and that's what I probably was focusing on, every little bit of new information that I learned and retained and understood, it just really, I suppose, inspired me further.

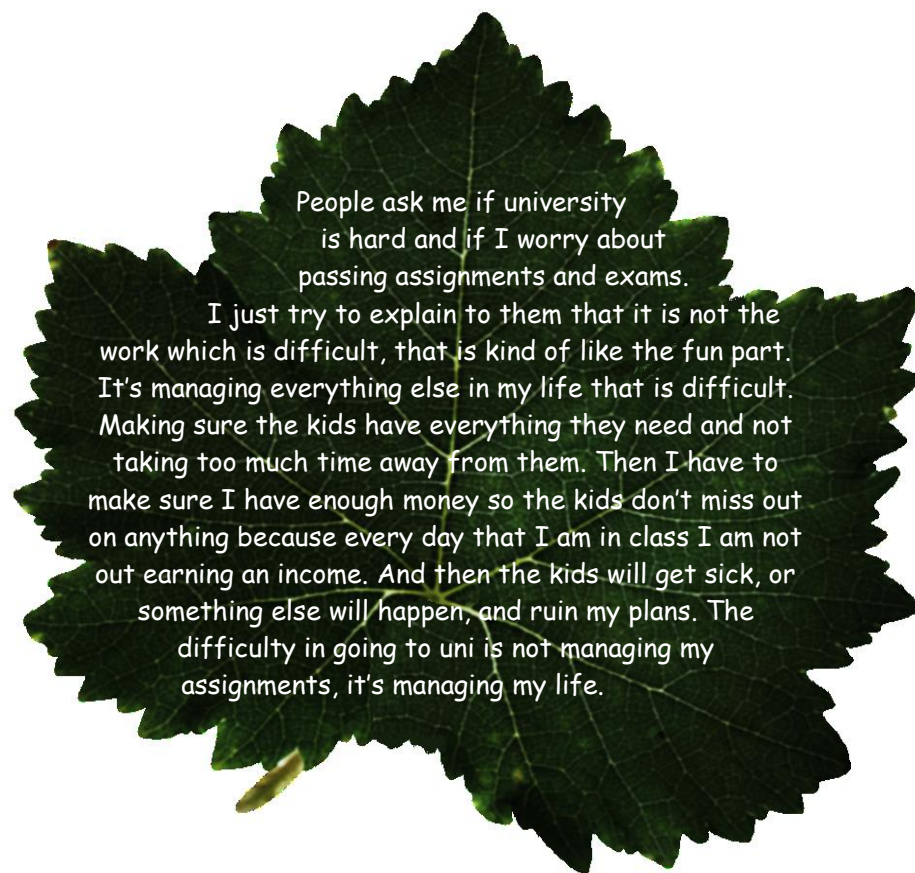
All the participants of this study expected to, and aimed to, gain the most genuine learning experience possible from their university experience. These experiences included gaining valuable learning from practicum placements, despite facing challenges as a result of these placements. Participants expected to both attend, and gain the most genuine learning experience from their lectures and tutorials. In addition, participants expected to gain transferable learning that they could use in their future, both in their chosen professional career and in other aspects of their lives. Despite many participants' original

expectation to attend university to pass their degree, the majority of participants expressed a strong desire to enhance and maximise their overall learning experience.

5.4.5 Expectations theme review

The expectations of participants, both upon entry and during their university tenure, constituted the first of two key findings from this study, which together formed the foundational layer of the conceptual description. During the individual interviews and mini-focus groups, participants commented on and discussed their expectations, including those of student and mother. During the data analysis three aspects of these expectations were identified; expectations of time, expectations of the overall university experience, and academic expectations. Participants' expectations of time included the time they expected it would take to complete their degree, the time expected to complete assignments and the time expected for readings, study and other university related activities. Participants also expressed expectations of the overall university experience, including the family-friendliness expected from the ECUSW campus, the rapport with lecturers, and the relationships developed with their university peers. Finally, participants expressed a variety of academic expectations. These expectations included participants' self-evaluation as university students both upon admission and during their time at university, high academic expectations, and a desire for a genuine learning experience from the university. The delineating factor of this expectations theme was that when participants' expectations closely aligned with their actual experience, participants expressed satisfaction with their experience. On the other hand, when there was a misalignment between participants' expectations and their actual experience, participants discussed these aspects negatively and were, at times, disappointed and frustrated with elements of their university experience.

5.5 Management



People ask me if university
is hard and if I worry about
passing assignments and exams.

I just try to explain to them that it is not the
work which is difficult, that is kind of like the fun part.
It's managing everything else in my life that is difficult.
Making sure the kids have everything they need and not
taking too much time away from them. Then I have to
make sure I have enough money so the kids don't miss out
on anything because every day that I am in class I am not
out earning an income. And then the kids will get sick, or
something else will happen, and ruin my plans. The
difficulty in going to uni is not managing my
assignments, it's managing my life.

The second key theme that emerged during the data analysis phase of this study, and co-forming the foundational layer of the conceptual description, was the theme of management. The theme of management, as with the expectations theme, emerged from the data collected during the 24 individual interviews and the three mini-focus groups. All the participants involved in this study discussed various areas in their lives that they described as needing to be managed for them to perceive success in their dual role of student and mother. Although these two key themes of expectations and management relate to the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at the ECUSW campus, many of the elements of these themes may be transferable to the experiences of other students, or students studying on other campuses, both of which were outside the scope of this current study.

5.5.1 Management overview

All participants in this study discussed their management, or requirement to manage, various aspects of their lives. These discussions that included management were then fragmented, coded, and grouped into five common aspects of management: managing time, managing family, managing wellbeing, managing money, and managing significant life events. These aspects have not been ordered by deemed importance, therefore, they are not discussed in order of importance, nor are they discussed in order of occurrence. As outlined in the methodology of this study, and consistent with Interpretive Description, participants were not directly asked about any of these aspects of management either during their interviews or during their participation in the mini-focus groups. Rather, the key theme of management and its aspects emerged in the context of participants talking about their university experience, which was prompted using the grand tour question “Tell me about your experience at university.”

The importance of this management theme was that participants’ overall experience of being both students and mothers were significantly impacted by their perception of how well they were managing each of these five aspects. The inconsistencies participants experienced in managing each of these aspects was complex and dynamic. Although these five aspects were interconnected, participants' management abilities were neither linear nor uniform within and between these five aspects of management. For example, a number of participants described feeling as though they were managing well in one aspect, such as family, whilst feeling that they were not managing in another aspect, such as wellbeing. Similarly, multiple participants described inconsistencies in the management of each aspect. For example, in the aspect of managing money, some participants described successfully managing their money relating to their household bills, whilst currently finding it difficult to manage their university-related expenses. Furthermore, participants' perception of their own ability to manage was highly dependent on personal expectations of self, thus outlining

the interconnectedness of the two key themes that form the foundational layer of the conceptual description, expectations and management. Each of the five aspects of management is outlined further.

5.5.2 Managing time

The first aspect of the management theme discussed in this section is participants' time management. Time management was discussed by all participants involved in this study, as the analysis of the data identified that time management affected participants' ability to balance the competing commitments required to perceive success as student and mother. The majority of participants stressed that their time needed to be effectively managed to maintain what they felt was a balance between their university studies and their other competing commitments. Three elements were identified within the aspect of time management. The first was formal time management, including the use of lists, schedules and timetables. The second was informal time management, which involved developing and maintaining study and family routines. The third and final element of time management was the commonly described practice of stealing time from one activity to complete another. Participants who identified themselves as having well-developed time-management techniques discussed feeling more capable of managing their multiple commitments, thus perceiving success. Many of these participants also discussed how implementing time-management techniques made them feel in control of their overall experience, hence experiencing less anxiety and stress than anticipated.

Formal time management

The first of the three aspects of time management was formal time management. Formal time management was discussed by the majority of participants and involved the using of formal time-management techniques such as term planners, weekly planners, and lists. Most of the participants who

discussed the use of formal time-management techniques also stated that they did not use these techniques prior to their university entry. On the contrary, most commented that although they were aware of the existence of these techniques, they only commenced using them following either their first or second semester, after identifying a need to become more organised. Kelly (full-time, single, two children), for example, articulated this need saying: "I finally, last year, figured out how useful a study timetable is". A small number of participants discussed developing formal time-structuring techniques during the completion of the University Preparation Course (UPC). In the UPC these time-management techniques are explicitly taught, making students aware of how to implement strategies to manage their time effectively directly prior to entering their undergraduate degree. A number of other participants also discussed adopting formal time-structuring techniques after conversations and advice from their university peers, stemming from their expressed need to manage time more effectively.

The types of formal time-structuring techniques used by participants included term planners, weekly planners and to-do lists. First, term planners were used and discussed by a number of participants in this study. This use of term planners assisted students with planning for their upcoming assessments, in addition to forward planning for difficult weeks in the semester. The use of these term planners was not limited to organising university commitments, rather, term planners were identified by multiple participants as useful tools for time-managing both university and family commitments during the semester. Narelle (part-time, single, two children) for example, described her essential use of a term planner, saying she had a "massively big desk calendar, you know one of those big ones, with the kids and I, and everything gets written on it, I have to, absolutely have to." Jadine (part-time, married, two children) also described an extension of her use of a term planner to include her family, saying:

When we want to plan a camping trip, or to go to peoples' houses for dinner, or anything like that, my husband checks my planner first. That way he knows if I am going to say that I am too busy or if I have time.

All the participants who discussed using term planners stated that they felt planners were essential for time managing their semester, especially at times when they had multiple assessments due.

Weekly planners were the second type of formal time management technique discussed by multiple participants in this study. These weekly planners were described as useful for participants balancing multiple family commitments around their studies. Similar to term planners, the use of weekly planners extend beyond academic commitments to include participants' children's extracurricular commitments, domestic tasks, and fitness and social commitments. These weekly planners were described by a number of participants as written in a timetable format. Weekly planning also assisted students to set realistic targets and optimise the use of their time, as articulated by Karen (full-time, single, two children), who said: "You don't know until you've planned out your week that you just can't fit it all in." Students using weekly planners also identified these as an essential tool for their success. Reasons given for this success included that weekly planners allowed participants' families to plan around them; they assisted participants to utilise more hours in each day, and helped participants to both see, and attempt to maintain, a balance of their university studies with their other competing commitments.

The third type of formal time-management technique discussed by participants was the use of to-do lists. Unlike the aforementioned term and weekly planners, participants using to-do lists discussed having previously used these prior to entering university. The majority of participants who discussed using to-do lists described reviewing these lists on a weekly basis to assist them with keeping

abreast of their multiple commitments. Danika (full-time, single, one child), for example, described using a to-do list, saying:

I write down what I intend to do and I find that I work pretty good when I keep to the list. And then I get to the end of the list and I can highlight anything that hasn't been done. I'm not going to pressure myself if I don't finish that, because at the end of the semester or at the mid-semester break I will take all of those pieces of paper and I will knock off what I have not yet done.

The items participants discussed, including on these to-do-lists, included assessments, readings, informal social commitments such as ringing people or planning visits to see friends and family, paying outstanding bills, and supplementary tasks such as returning library books. Participants described the most useful aspect of to-do lists was helping them to know what tasks had not been achieved over the week. These to-do lists therefore ensured that tasks were neither forgotten about permanently, nor were they neglected for extended periods of time. A number of participants using to-do lists reported feeling more in control of keeping track of smaller tasks as a result of using these lists.

A number of participants who stated that they did not use formal time-management techniques revealed both knowing about these techniques and expressed a currently unrealised intention to use them. Katrina (full-time, married, two children), for example, stated: "I don't have a semester plan, but I probably will for next semester based on knowing a little bit more about the workload and how it can catch up with you." Participants discussed believing they would be better able to keep track of both their studies and their other competing commitments if they were to use formal time-management strategies, however, the overwhelming reason identified for not using these techniques was not having the time or motivation to prepare planners early in the semester. For example, Lisa (full-time, single, four children), commented: "I

could definitely work on my time-management skills, [but] I'm just too tired to do it at the moment." Formal time-management techniques were described by many participants as essential for success. In addition, the implementation of formal time-management techniques enhanced the participants' ability to balance multiple competing commitments, and complemented the dual roles of student and mother.

Informal time management

Informal time management was the second of the three time-management aspects discussed by participants. Informal time-management techniques were predominantly described, but not specifically articulated as, the consistent implementation of routines. That is, unlike formal time-management techniques, participants were largely unaware that implementing informal time-management techniques were assisting them with their studies. Rather, they typically identified routines as a pre-existing and normal part of their families' lives. For example, Raeleen (full-time, single, three children), described her normal routine, saying:

Usually the kids are in bed at 8 pm, so by the time I've made school lunches and everything that you have to do, it is usually 8:30 pm or 9 pm. Then, if I'm lucky, I'll get in a couple of hours [study], sometimes I'm up studying until 11 pm sometimes 12, if I need to.

Most of the family routines discussed by participants were developed primarily for what they perceived to be the smooth running of the household to ensure all daily tasks were completed. These daily routines, including study routines, were described as particularly useful helping participants to meet their weekly academic expectations. This use of a study routine was described by Barbara (full-time, married, four children), who said:

After the children go to bed, I spend about two or three hours every night studying. First doing my pre-readings, then reading through the lecture notes, writing my own notes from my lecture notes, and doing my own pre-reading, and yeah, lots and lots of hours of assignments.

These types of daily routines, particularly when their children were in bed, were indicated by participants as the key factor responsible for the timing and regularity of study in each participant's day.

As alluded to with the aforementioned routine of studying when children were in bed, most participants discussed the need to study without children present. This was identified as required for many participants who discussed their children, of all ages, actively attention-seeking while they were attempting to study. As articulated by Vanessa (part-time, married, two children): "They [the children] can sort of tell if I'm working, then that's usually the time when they're going to be most disruptive." Consequently, participants predominantly studied at night after their children were asleep, or alternatively, participants routinely studied either during school hours when their children were at school, or early in the morning before their children arose for their morning routine. Linda (full-time, married, two children), described avoiding studying around her children:

It means that it's either really late nights or early mornings for me, so I'll make sure, if I have something due, that I'm getting up at 4 am and I'll put three hours in. [Then I'll] do the kids, carry on, you know, or I'll go to prac or whatever, so it just makes my day longer.

Although maintaining study routines assisted students to complete regular readings and prepare for lectures, many students reported needing to spend additional hours preparing for assessments, or attending practicum placements, which significantly disrupted their family's household routines. As a result, both assessments and practicum placements were identified by participants as a

major disruption to their established routines, including their meal preparation, domestic tasks, regular socialising and television routines. To manage these significant disruptions to established routines, a number of participants identified the temporary implementation of modified routines. These new temporary routines were typically expressed as sub-standard but necessary by participants in this study. These temporary modifications made to participants' routines included, but were not limited to, reducing the quantity or quality of completed housework, purchasing fast food rather than preparing meals for the family, allowing children to use more electronic media than usual (including watching television for lengthy periods of time), either commencing or increasing the use of childcare facilities, and having children stay either overnight or weekends at the houses of friends and family. For example, Katrina (full-time, married, two children), explained: "I'm certainly not cooking food for the family like I used to, some days you just don't have the mental energy." Furthermore, these temporary routines, often used to manage assessment periods or practicum placements, were described as often being criticised by friends and family members, particularly by the participants' mothers or mothers-in-law. Barbara (full-time, married, four children), for example, discussed receiving what she perceived to be negative comments from her mother and close friends, relating to these new routines. Barbara's comments were representative of the experience of numerous participants, saying:

I get told all the time I should quit uni because I don't have time for everything now, and that I should stop stressing myself for nothing, by lots of people. Or I get told that maybe I should just quit uni and work for a year, and then come back to uni when the kids are older, but I get lots of comments.

Linda (full-time, married, two children), who commenced using childcare for her children during a practicum placement, described feeling judged by others about her new routine. Linda's feelings in this regard were indicative of many other participants, as she bemoaned: "You are just constantly judged if your house isn't clean, or if you are 'that day care mum', or you know, if you're doing it

[studying] full-time because you want to have your own career or life.” Using routines, including modified routines during busy periods, were effective in assisting participants to time-manage efficiently. The majority of participants also discussed routines as normal in their families, and not disruptive to the overall management of their family and home lives.

Stealing time

The final aspect of time management was the informal practice of stealing time from one activity to complete another. Differing from modified family routines, this practice was unplanned, at times sub-conscious, and often occurred without notice. The practice of stealing time from one activity to complete another was discussed by most participants, with sleeping-time described as the most common time stolen. Students discussed staying up much later than intended, often into the early hours of the morning, when assessments are due, as articulated by Lisa (full-time, single, four children), who commented:

I had a bit of a plan to get to so far on an assignment, which took me to 1:30 am this morning, and life still just goes on really doesn't it, and you still have to get up at 5 am. It is not the first time.

Similarly, students reported stealing sleeping-time by rising as early as 3 am or 4 am. As Simone (part-time, married, two children), explained: “I'll get up really early, you know four in the morning, I'll just get up and do what I need to do, homework or whatever I've got due.” As a result of stealing this sleeping-time, many students also discussed feeling excessively tired, feeling grumpy, or falling asleep during other activities.

In addition to stealing sleeping-time, many participants recounted stealing time from domestic activities such as cooking and cleaning. Unlike with a temporary change in routine, participants described this as occurring at short notice and without prior-planning or intention. Many participants commented on forgoing

tasks such as cooking or cleaning to complete other tasks, both academic and household, often precipitating stress and anxiety. Participants also stole time from their children's extracurricular activities, or their own wellbeing activities, to use this time for the completion of other tasks. Participants discussed feelings of stress and guilt associated when needing to get other parents to take their children to extracurricular activities at short notice, to allow participants time to finish assessments. These feelings were evident with Kelly (full-time, single, two children), who stole time that would have been used taking her son to an appointment, as she expressed: "I am disappointed I can't get him there, I feel guilty." As a result of the direct impact stealing time had on participants' families and emotions, stealing time was identified as the most disruptive time-management technique.

Managing time was identified in the data analysis as the first management aspect included in the key theme; management. Formal time management was the first aspect of the key theme of management that emerged from this study. There were three elements of time management identified from the participants' experience. These were formal time management, informal time management, and the stealing of time from one activity to complete another. The quality of participants' time-management techniques determined students' perception towards their experience as student and mother. The first element, formal time management, was the most effective time-management technique, often allowing participants to feel organised and abreast of their multiple commitments. The second element, informal time management, was considered essential for participants to manage their dual roles of student and mother. However, when modified routines needed to be implemented, friends and family members often made negative comments. The third element, stealing time, was identified as the most disruptive of the three time-management techniques. The feelings participants experienced regarding their time management overall were not static, rather they were dynamic, moving between inadequacy and guilt, to organisation and control.

5.5.3 Managing family

The second element of the management theme was managing family.

Participants' discussions regarding managing their family were prevalent in all the 24 interviews and three mini-focus groups. There were six complex and interconnected elements identified in this study relating to managing family. The first four aspects related directly to managing children, which, not surprisingly, was most prominent within the element of managing family. These elements were managing childcare, managing their role as mother, spousal changes, and meeting the needs of the children. The final two complex and interconnected elements were managing the needs of the larger family unit, and managing the study space within, and outside, the family environment. Participants' ability to manage their family was considered the largest obstacle to success by the majority of participants involved in this study. Furthermore, successfully managing family was considered essential by all participants as they stressed that motherhood was their highest priority.

Childcare

The first of five elements of managing family was managing childcare. Childcare was an important issues for most parents, regardless of the ages of their children. Childcare options changed depending on the ages of the children. Newborn babies included either bringing babies on campus or relying on either the participant's mother, or their mother-in-law. Childcare of toddlers was predominantly provided by family members, friends or formal childcare centres. Primary school students were cared for by grandparents, school friends' families, after-school care facilities or were left in the home either unattended, or in the care of older siblings. Finally, secondary school student children were predominantly left unattended in the home, or cared for by school friends' families.

The cost, availability and flexibility of childcare facilities were major issues for most participants, found to be particularly troublesome for participants during practicum placements. The largest costs were incurred when using a childcare or after-school facilities, despite many participants having these costs subsidised by Commonwealth childcare benefit rebates through the federal welfare agency, Centrelink. Rather than incurring these costs, Linda (full-time, married, two children) discussed bringing her child to university:

I actually have been taking Keatley to lectures with me this year because on a Monday morning this semester I've only had a one hour lecture on a Monday morning, and there's no way I'm going to stick her in to the day care for \$73 for one hour.

In addition to the cost, the availability of suitable childcare was difficult at times as students often needed to change their days to accommodate a new timetable each semester. Separated parents with week-about care faced difficulties with childcare as articulated by Karen (full-time, single, two children) who said: "Being a separated person, I have a need for childcare three days a fortnight and you can't physically have that if day care will only take kids on a weekly roster." Availability also posed an issue during practicum placements due to limited opening hours of the facilities. Using these types of childcare providers was also problematic at other times, for example, children could not be cared for if their children were unwell or had head lice, in addition to the children needing to remain enrolled during university breaks to maintain their childcare place.

An alternative to these childcare providers was the more financially beneficial option of relying on family or friends. For example, Kelly (full-time, single, two children) said "without my parents donating childcare I would not cope financially". Despite considering family assistance a financially viable option, relying on family and friends could be problematic at times. Although family and friends were more flexible than childcare centres when dealing with issues such as the children's health, head-lice, and available hours – especially during

practicum periods – participants expressed experiencing other problems with relying on friends and family as a childcare alternative. These problems included friends and family members going away during the semester, becoming unwell, having alternative plans, or otherwise cancelling at short notice. Raeleen (full-time, single, three children) discussed one example: “My mum has been extremely unwell, and they’ve pretty much said mum is not going to be up to looking after the kids probably for the year, and I’ve gone, ‘what am I going to do?’” Participants discussed feelings of guilt regarding relying on senior family members, especially their children's grandparents or great-grandparents. Furthermore, reliance on friends, and school friends' families, brought guilt and the responsibility of reciprocation, often at unsuitable times. At times, having family members staying to help would be disruptive, for example, Linda (full-time, married, two children) said: “My mum will actually come and stay, unfortunately that sometimes tends to be a negative thing, because she tends to put the household out.” Thus, complex childcare arrangements with friends and family, to solve childcare difficulties, brings its own complications.

Many participants discussed either bringing children on campus, or leaving them unattended at home, as the least-desired childcare alternative. The majority of participants stated that these options were only considered by participants when childcare facilities and family or friends were unavailable. Although participants said that most lecturers did not mind children's presence on campus, this was problematic at times due to problems with other students, or the content of the lecture, as described by social work student, Kelly (full-time, single, two children): “Unfortunately some of the topics that we talk about in social work aren't child-appropriate, especially if you are talking about sexual abuse or domestic violence.” It was also inappropriate for students to bring their children to university because of the location of a tutorial, for example, nursing tutorials conducted in a laboratory. Furthermore, students discussed feeling less attentive when either their own, or other students', children were present during lectures

and tutorials. Many participants were reluctant to bring children to university, such as Jadine (part-time, married, two children):

I did enquire if I could bring [my son] Dyon to one lecture last term, and the lecturer that I did have was very stern in letting me know that it would be okay for one instance, because there are a lot of mothers that were abusing that and bringing their kids in each week.

Participants discussed feeling torn between not wanting to bring their children to university, and not wanting to leave their children at home unattended. This was a common problem for participants during school holidays, student-free days at school, and state public holidays. Many participants expressed feeling that, if given the choice between these two options, they would prefer to bring their children to university to avoid feeling worried and neglectful about their children staying home unattended. In addition, when children were left unattended in the home whilst participants attended university, participants describe feelings of guilt and concern about the opinions of others.

Role of mother

The second of the five management elements discussed by participants was managing their role of mother. Overwhelmingly, students discussed complex feelings of guilt specifically related to their role as a mother as described by Sherie (full-time, single, two children): “Anytime that I spend at uni is time away from her, and I’ve always been aware that as a child it is such a limited time that we have as mums.” There was a greater range of discussion about this key management issue, possibly depending on participants’ upbringing and perception of their role as a mother. These deep-rooted values were exposed as participants described their return to study in terms such as selfish, a luxury, a social outlet, something that is done just for themselves, and as a leisure activity. These complex feelings of guilt were expressed by Barbara (full-time, married, four children):

I feel guilty for being here because I should be with my children, and then I feel like this [university] is what I am supposed to be doing, and I feel happy when I'm here, and then I feel guilty because I am happy without my children, so um, it makes it very stressful to try and figure out what you're actually really feeling.

The majority of participants described feelings of guilt relating to their lack of time, energy or availability to meet their own personal expectations as a mother. These feelings of mothering guilt were emphasised when participants were away on practicum, and needed to rely on childcare facilities, or missed attending school events such as assemblies or canteen duty. Furthermore, participants discussed having feelings of guilt imposed on them by close family or friends, and discussed receiving what they perceive to be unsupportive or negative comments about their decision to pursue a higher education.

In addition to these negative feelings in their role as mother, the majority of students also discussed positives. Most participants discussed positive role modelling to their children, particularly their daughters. Many felt they were role-modelling dedication and a good work ethic towards their studies, which they felt may help their children develop a positive work ethic at school. Some participants identified that they perceived that their studies would ultimately help their children to be more independent, as their children were required to take on additional domestic responsibilities than previously. This was articulated by Barbara (full-time, married, four children), who stated: "They are also learning to be a bit more self-sufficient, like my children can make their own beds now, so it has been positive." Many students were delighted to report that their children's ambitions now included future university ambitions, and ambitions that were not discussed in the family prior to their own university entry. Participants identified that they were therefore better able to cope with their feelings of guilt by recognising these positive elements, including hope for

generational change, positive role-modelling, and teaching their children to be independent.

Spousal changes

The third element of managing family, identified by participants, was spousal changes as a result of the participants' university studies. There was a range of changes in spousal relationships as a result of participants' university studies. These changes included the partner needing to take on more domestic duties, more of a caring role towards the children, accepting 'couple time' was often reduced in favour of study time, and at times taking sole responsibility for the children during practicum periods. Although the minority of students described feeling justified and comfortable with a more balanced division of household tasks, many students discussed deep levels of guilt as their spouse had to undertake more domestic and parental responsibilities. For example, Katrina (full-time, married, two children) outlined this change in the division of household tasks:

I've demanded more help from my husband, so, because our roles are sort of changing, you know, it was always me being at home and now I'm doing this to try and bring in some income into the house eventually, um, so, we've had to even the playing field a bit.

Alternatively, other participants chose to work harder to maintain their previous standards as a housewife, feeling that their spouse and the family unit should not be required to work more as a result of their decision to study. The impact of this element of choice was articulated by Barbara (full-time, married, four children):

Because I chose to come to uni now it should be up to me to organise everything still, so Lance is not put out for me going to uni, so I still make sure the kids are all where they are supposed to be, and I make sure that everyone has lunch and dinner and I do all the cleaning.

Participants' perception of spousal assistance was dynamic and relative. For example, one participant described her husband as highly supportive as he had left his employment to perform domestic and child-rearing duties full-time. This is contrasted with another participant, who similarly described her husband as highly supportive because he didn't mind if she mopped the floor only once a week. Interestingly, a few students indicated not feeling the same guilt when their husbands were supporting their participation in paid employment, as the benefits of paid work were perceived as more short-term and tangible.

Meeting the needs of the children

The fourth element of managing family, expressed by participants, was meeting the needs of their children. This included meeting the physical needs of their children. In addition to the supervision and childcare needs previously discussed, participants also needed to provide, including food preparation, washing, cleaning and transportation to and from extracurricular activities. A number of participants verbalised that they did not think their children should miss out as a result of their mother's entry into university. Narelle (part-time, single, two children), for example, said: "My little one does taekwondo twice a week as well, so I refuse to give that up, what worries me is because I have to miss out I don't want them to miss out." Many participants discussed needing to be physically available, often at short notice, for additional needs that could be either positive or negative. These needs included, for example, providing comfort when their children were unwell, making class cupcakes on children's birthdays, attending friends' parties, making costumes for book week at school, attending assemblies for awards or class concerts, and delousing their children when required. Furthermore, participants discussed the disappointment associated with not personally meeting these needs, as Danielle (full-time, single, two children) articulated: "Both my kids got merit certificates within the first couple weeks of this term, and I wasn't able to make either of them because of work or uni." Participants described experiencing greater difficulty adequately meeting these physical needs of their children during times where they were feeling mentally

exhausted, preoccupied with their studies, during intense assessment periods, or during practicum placements.

Participants also discussed experiencing difficulties adequately meeting the emotional needs of their children, often leaving the participants feeling torn and inadequate. Karis (full-time, married, one child) explained: "There is little time to spend helping kids with homework, and sometimes little time to actually listen to their problems that they have at school. My daughter has had some friendship issues." This was particularly difficult for participants who felt that their children were seeking attention as a result of their studies. This was best articulated by Karen (full-time, single, two children), who said: "I can see that Jayde's needs for attention are increasing as my studies have increased, because she's been put to the back burner." The emotional needs discussed by the participants in this study included listening to and providing emotional support for teenagers on a regular basis, providing emotional support for children during difficult family times such as during a marriage breakdown, assisting their children to overcome social difficulties at school such as bullying, and supporting children who would actively make their mother feel bad about their university studies by using comments such as, "you're always on the computer, Mum" (Lauren, part-time, married, two children) or "you're always away, you're never here" (Sherie, full-time, single, two children). Participants identified that although meeting these emotional needs was essential for successfully managing their dual role as student and mother, they were often time-consuming, repetitive, poorly-timed, and guilt-provoking.

Meeting the needs of the larger family unit

The fifth element of managing family moved away from meeting the needs of the children and involved meeting the needs of the larger family unit.

Participants discussed difficulties with, and reactions to, their ability to meet the needs of their spouse and other significant family members whilst at university.

Most of the 21 married participants discussed managing their university studies around their partner. Many of these partnered participants avoided studying while their spouse was home, saying that they preferred to study while spouses were at work. Alternatively, some participants chose to leave the house to study in the university library, thus physically removing themselves from their spouse for the purpose of getting work done. Barbara (full-time, married, four children), for example, articulated this saying: “I think that [my husband] Lance thinks that he doesn’t have a wife for half the year.” Attempting to study away from their spouse posed significant difficulties for some participants, especially those whose spouse worked fly-in-fly-out (FIFO). FIFO workers are common in Western Australia and typically involve workers flying to mine-sites to work for 14 consecutive days before returning home for 7 days. Participants with FIFO partners reported finding it easy to work whilst their partner was away, but some reported that they felt like they needed to take a week off studying when their partner returned home. In contrast, a small number of participants described choosing to study on a laptop in front of the television with their spouse to feel physically closer whilst continuing to study. Jamie (part-time, married, one child) said: “I take my laptop in there and do my work while we watch TV, it’s not great, but that way at least he does get to see me.” Some partnered participants also identified feelings of guilt because their spouse was required to increase their participation in the home to compensate for the incompletion of tasks by the participants whilst busy with study or on practicum placements. Although most partnered participants said their partners were supportive of their studies, the majority of partnered participants also said they felt their studies should have the minimum possible impact on their partners' lives.

A number of participants also discussed needing to manage the needs of their extended family, and friends whom they considered to be family. This included making themselves available to either attend or host celebratory occasions and activities with extended family members, which were explained by some

participants as necessary but inconvenient. Barbara (full-time, married, four children) bemoaned: “It’s like every time there is a birthday that we have to go to I seem to have an assignment due.” Many participants stated that although they considered their family to be understanding of their university commitments during the university semester, they also felt that they needed to compensate during university breaks for their social exclusion during the semester by scheduling more social activities with extended family members. As Ruby (full-time, married, two children) said: “I do all this catching up during the breaks and then it’s like ‘uni is starting, I will see you all in six months’.” A number of participants discussed that they felt managing these relationships was essential, especially for participants who depended on these family members for childcare and other support whilst at university.

Study space

The final element regarding managing family that was discussed by participants was managing their study space within the home. For many participants, managing their study space had a significant impact on their family management. Most students who discussed study space within the home discussed using more space in the home than originally intended. The majority of participants described their study space as either external to their family living space or within their family living space, with many participants describing changing their study space from within their family living space to separate to their family living space, or vice versa.

Many participants described their study space as external to their family living space. These external areas included dedicating a room, often a study, for completing university work. Lisa (full-time, single, four children) described her study space, saying: “It’s the most organised area of the house, it’s in my bedroom, I have a desk and it’s bloody organised.” Arts student Katrina (full-time, married, 2 children) also described her organised separate study, saying:

I have the study which is quite a large study, which has the computer desk. I've allocated the other half of the study with an easel and a little cupboard, so basically I paint in the same room as the computer.

Four participants, who did not previously have a dedicated study, converted family-living rooms in their houses, such as a toy or games room, into a study, ultimately reducing the living space for their family. Simone (part-time, married, 2 children) described this change in her house, saying: "we have partitioned off half the playroom so it is now half-playroom and half-study. I'm a pretty strict mum and they know not to go into my space so I can leave my things out".

Other participants discussed studying within their family living space, ultimately impacting on their ability to manage their family with their university studies. Many participants discussed using the dining room table to study, often at the cost of family sit-down meals, such as Karis (full-time, married, 1 child) who described her study space saying: "it's really chaotic, and then we just don't use the dining table to eat because it's covered in all my stuff and it's noisy". Studying in the living areas of the house was problematic for the majority of participants who did not have a dedicated study, such as Meredith (full-time, married, 2 children) who said: "It's just not the right environment for me, I need to be away from distractions". A variety of places were described for studying in the home including in the bedroom or on the bed, at the dining table, on the kitchen bench, on the lounge-room floor and, for two participants, outside on the veranda.

Many students also described having articles and books spread out, encroaching on space previously enjoyed by a spouse or children. Rosie (part-time, married, three children) described her study space within the living area of the home as: "A mess, I spread out everywhere, I'm not tidy, I'm either up here at the kitchen bench or I'm over on the sofa, I don't have one designated area." One participant

discussed the difficulties she encountered when a family member moved into her study:

It has been a little more complicated because my nephew lives with us now, so he has taken up what was my study. So now I study on the dining room table, or I move to somewhere quieter, but I don't have a designated study space as such (Karis, full-time, married, one child).

Nearly all the participants commented that the optimum study space would be quiet, external from the family living area, and one that did not need to be packed up at the end of each studying period, as articulated by Barbara (full-time, married, four children): "I would love a quiet study space, one where I didn't have to pack my stuff up before I went to bed, so that I could leave my stuff out. I would like a study."

5.5.4 Managing wellbeing

The third aspect of the management theme was participants' management of their wellbeing. Managing wellbeing included participants managing their physical health, including diet, exercise and tiredness. It also included participants managing their emotional health, including feelings of anxiety, stress, feeling in an unhealthy headspace, and guilt. Finally, participants needed to manage their social wellbeing, including maintaining healthy relationships with spouses, children and friends.

Physical wellbeing

Maintaining physical wellbeing whilst at university included managing diet, exercise and tiredness. Most participants identified poor management skills in some, or all, of these areas. Although a number of participants reported knowing how to maintain a healthy lifestyle through a healthy diet, regular exercise and good sleep patterns, many of the same participants also reported putting on weight and lowering their physical activity since beginning university. Danielle

(full-time, single, two children) described experiencing difficulties maintaining her physical health: “I always put on a couple of kilos around exam time, because I’m just sitting there, you know, studying with a handful of M&Ms [chocolates].” Fast and convenience foods were identified as the main changes to the participants' diet, in addition to snacking on high-fat and high-carbohydrate foods whilst studying. Katrina (full-time, married, two children) said: “I feel bad that I am not cooking meals like I used to, I used to make sure everything was balanced and healthy.” Time, lowered energy levels, and preoccupation with studies were identified as the main contributing factors inhibiting multiple participants' ability to maintain a healthy diet and exercise regularly, as Barbara (full-time, married, four children) said:

I don’t get time to eat, I don’t get time to do anything remotely enjoyable, there’s not a lot of exercise time, there’s no time for me, and I have been so sick sometimes and still had to get up and take everyone to school and come to uni.

Despite this, a limited number of students reported improving their diet and exercise regimes since beginning university. Two participants discussed choosing to improve their nutritional intake and exercise to enhance their cognitive ability during each semester. Danika (full-time, single, one child) best articulated this experience, saying: “I started looking into ways to concentrate better and I started to look into what I was eating, and started eating healthy, like clean eating and exercising, and taking the time to do the things that I enjoy.” A small number of participants described becoming better organised with food to avoid a poor diet for their family, such as Katrina (full-time, married, two children), who said, “I am starting to prepare meals now on a Sunday night for the week, so we just pull out whatever I have to heat up”.

The majority of participants identified tiredness as another significant factor of wellbeing that needed to be managed. According to the participants in this study, tiredness was predominantly caused by participants staying up later in the

evenings or rising earlier in the mornings, usually to complete assessments or readings. Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) described study encroaching on her sleep-time, saying, "I go to sleep at like 9 pm, then get up at about 11 pm, and [I'll] be in study mode again". In addition to feeling tired around assignment time, some participants reported feeling exceptionally tired during practicum placements, as they were combining practicum placements with paid employment. Some participants described feeling mentally tired, in addition to feeling physically tired, from balancing university studies with their existing, and often competing commitments. Danika (full-time, single, one child) said: "I struggled for the first year and a half because I just couldn't concentrate. I just couldn't read, and if I did sit down to read I would fall straight to sleep." Barbara (full-time, married, four children) also described trying to study whilst mentally tired, saying: "I've also been doing afternoon shifts which means I don't get home until after 10:30 pm, and I don't want to start studying then because it just kind of goes in one ear and out the other".

In addition to feeling tired because study was encroaching on their sleep time, many participants also discussed feeling tired because they found it difficult to fall asleep. Danika (full-time, single, one child) described this difficulty, saying: "I normally get a spike of anxiety around this time of the semester when I start having, you know, sleep problems, I can't get to sleep." For some participants, this difficulty falling asleep was as a result of finding it difficult to mentally switch off, thus compounding their tiredness. As Barbara (full-time, married, four children) further explained: "I don't sleep very often anymore, ever, and I feel like because I'm tired and stressed I get really grumpy with the kids, so I'm not as tolerant and patient with them as I used to be." Excessive or ongoing tiredness was discussed by participants as a significant factor for participants becoming short-tempered with their children, less likable as a person, and less able to focus on readings and academic tasks. Lisa (full-time, single, four children) explained:

Being tired affects everything, it affects your mood, it affects the way you treat everybody around you, it affects the quality of your work, not only academically, but, you know, housework and that sort of stuff. You just can't be bothered, you lose motivation.

Managing physical health, including tiredness, diet and exercise, was identified by the majority of participants as an important factor for successfully negotiating their roles as student and mother. Although most participants articulated knowing the importance of maintaining physical health, the majority of participants discussed experiencing decreased physical health since enrolling at university.

Emotional wellbeing

These experiences of short-temperedness and reduced likability, which many participants attributed to feelings of tiredness, also affected the emotional wellbeing of participants. Maintaining healthy emotional wellbeing was a significant factor discussed by participants, which ultimately affected their experience of student and mother. Kelly (full-time, single, two children), for example, said: "I'm a much nicer person when I'm not studying", which was similar to the remarks made by Linda (full-time, married, two children), who said: "when I'm studying, my time is divided and obviously I get quite stressed, so I am probably not the best mummy in the world when that's happening".

Guilt was overwhelmingly the most significant emotional wellbeing concern for participants. Most participants identified feelings of guilt – whether rationally or irrationally – about their mothering, their domestic responsibilities, not adequately contributing to the family's income, not maintaining social relationships, and not balancing or prioritising their multiple commitments as well as they had anticipated. This guilt was identified by Karen (full-time, single, two children) who stated: "That whole guilt about, and doubting where my priorities are, am I meant to be a mother, am I meant to be a student." Many

participants felt the desire to work harder, spoil their family during university breaks, or otherwise compensate to relieve their underlying guilt. Some participants also articulated needing to balance this guilt with remembering their motivation for studying, as articulated by Jadine (part-time, married, two children), who said: “Of course I feel guilty about leaving a 1-year-old, but, I just know it’s ... in the long run it’s going to be so much better, I’m going to be able to provide.” Students also reported feeling the need to justify their university studies to family, friends, acquaintances and themselves, at times, as a result of these feelings of guilt.

In addition to feelings of guilt affecting participants’ emotional wellbeing, many participants discussed feeling unsure about their ability to cope, including feeling stressed, anxious and overwhelmed. Danielle (full-time, single, three children) described feeling overwhelmed, saying: “Last week, it was a mini-meltdown. It wasn’t as bad as they have been, but I just couldn’t physically get into the car and come to uni. It was just too much, it was almost like anxiety.” Another participant (pseudonym withheld) described feeling extreme anxiety whilst discussing balancing her relationship, children and university studies, saying, “I was driving home and I kind of almost lined up a tree. I was crying and crying.”

Many participants discussed using strategies such as procrastination, avoidance, drinking, and venting to cope with their feelings, strategies that may be perceived as unproductive. Rosie (part-time, married, three children) discussed using procrastination and avoidance when feeling stressed, saying: “I go on Facebook, check my e-mails a million times even though no-one has e-mailed me, I don’t really watch TV but maybe do some housework for a change.” Kelly (full-time, single, two children) alludes to using unproductive strategies when coping with negative emotions, saying: “I get drunk because I am trying to stop myself from crying while I’m studying”. Conversely, some students reported using more productive strategies, such as seeking support from their university

peers, writing to-do lists, setting short-term goals, or visualising the university break to help manage their negative emotions. Danielle (full-time, single, three children) described seeking the support of her peers, saying: “just talking to the other girls here as well, knowing that I’m not the only one that’s overwhelmed and is really struggling”. Despite their awareness of the existence of counselling services on campus, only one participant recalled using this service. Kelly (full-time, single, two children) commented on the on-campus counselling service, saying:

I know that if things get really bad I could probably go and see the counsellor, it would be on a day that I don’t come up so there’s another three hours plus then another \$45 [in fuel costs] so you end up just struggling along.

Social wellbeing

A number of participants also discussed neglecting their social wellbeing as a direct result of their university studies, potentially affecting relationships with others. The most important of these relationships was those that participants had with their children. The majority of participants discussed feeling worried about not spending enough time, or quality time, with their children. Many participants also worried about telling their children to wait when the children needed them with participants using statements such as, “not now” and “give me five minutes more”. As Kelly (full-time, single, two children) elaborated:

They are going to be sick of mum saying “look, I’m sorry I can’t do stuff with you”. I organise with other people to do stuff with them, because mum has to get this assignment done or I need to pass this exam, otherwise I’ve got another year of uni.

Some participants reported less quality time with their children, including not eating meals together, not being actively involved during playing times, and doing their university readings during sport practice rather than actively spectating. Lauren (part-time, married, two children) described trying to balance

the social demands of the children with her university commitments, saying: "Quite often I'll actually take my study to the park. I did last year particularly, and I'll sit on a blanket while they'll go on the swings or whatever and play, and I'll be in the corner." Multiple participants expressed concern about their relationships with their children, saying that they are not a good mother or showing the correct amount of patience towards their children. Karen (full-time, single, two children) expressed regret about not spending social time with her children, saying that if she was not at university "I would be able to make those memories with my kids, and not feel guilty about that, and not feel like I'm letting my family down". Sherie (full-time, single, two children) also expressed feeling that her social relationship with her children is affected by her dual roles of student and mother, saying: "Whatever time is taken away is regretted, if that makes sense, we need to know that it is not our intention to be away from them, we are doing it because we have to get through the course."

A number of participants also discussed what they perceived to be disintegrating relationships with other family members, including for some, their own mothers. According to these participants, this was a direct result of them persisting with their studies despite others expressing concern about their ability to cope, or actively encouraging them to withdraw. Jadine (part-time, married, two children) described pulling away from her social relationship with her mother, saying: "my mother is not very supportive, I'm the only family member that has entered a tertiary institution". Jadine went on to express her mother's opinion of her studies, retelling her mother's words: "University is always going to be there and really she has got a baby. She should be at home, full-time with her baby." In addition, some participants had made the difficult decision to sever commitments and social interactions with others, such as volunteer organisations, to reduce their overall commitments. Karen (full-time, single, two children) discussed withdrawing from her volunteer role, saying: "I feel disappointed because even though it is a volunteer role, it was part of my social outlet too. Getting together with other women, we often have meetings over

meals or dinner. It's also part of my social connection." Many students also reduced their use of social media, such as Facebook, to assist with their time management. The reduction of all these social interactions culminated, for some students, in making them feel isolated in their academic pursuits, with many participants identifying various individual and family sacrifices made for university success.

Managing wellbeing, including social, emotional and physical wellbeing, emerged from the data as the third of five key management elements. This multi-faceted element included participants looking after their physical health, including diet, exercise, and limiting tiredness, by keeping emotionally healthy through reducing or trying to reduce anxiety, stress, and guilt, and by maintaining healthy social relationships with others. Although some participants discussed successfully managing these aspects of their lives, the majority of participants described negative feelings of stress, anxiety, and feeling out of control at difficult times during the university semester.

5.5.5 Managing money

The fourth aspect of the management theme was managing money. The vast majority of the participants discussed both income and expenses as significant factors impacting on their experience as a university student and mother. The elements of income included earning income, or not earning income, scholarships, Commonwealth financial assistance, and child support. Following income, issues regarding expenses included university-related expenses, childcare expenses, ongoing household expenses, practicum expenses and, for some, travelling expenses. Consistent with the experience of many people in society, both income and expenses became problematic for participants when their total expenses exceeded their total income. Each of these elements of income and expenses are discussed further.

Income

Earning income was a significant consideration for most participants. Many participants felt obliged to earn income to support their family, thus meeting their ongoing financial commitments, despite some participants already feeling overworked and overwhelmed. As Barbara (full-time, married, four children) described:

When I went on prac they offered me a job, and so I have taken it to try and help with the extra costs which have been coming in since uni. I have been doing three shifts a week so averaging 30 to 40 hours a fortnight at work.

Interestingly, there was no significant difference in the proportion of married or single students who discussed working to earn an income to finance their existing commitments. Rather, according to the demographic questionnaire, participants with three or more children worked more hours in paid employment than those with one or two children. Many participants, particularly those studying a Bachelor of Science (Nursing), worked part-time in industry-related positions. For nursing students, these positions included patient care at local hospitals or nursing homes, with many of these participants choosing to work night shift for the shift loading. Raeleen (full-time, single, three children) articulated this saying: “I do night shifts and afternoon shifts, but only on the week that he [ex-husband] has the kids.” For reasons including income and the security of their employment, participants discussed accepting a busy roster or extra shifts at short notice, despite having assessments or exams due at the same time. Kelly (full-time, single, two children) expressed this concern, saying: “If I start saying no to shifts at the hospital, well then they employ someone else and I don’t have a job. Because I’m casual, I don’t have any permanency.” As a result, many participants discussed feeling conflicted between university, their family and their place of employment.

Block practicum placements were particularly difficult for income-earning participants. Many participants described working well above normal hours before and following their practicum placements to compensate for their loss of income during their placement. As Raeleen (part-time, single, two children) said, “I have to try to put as much money into the bank to cover for when I do the two week prac because I am not going to earn anything”. Others discussed continuing with paid employment whilst undertaking their practicum placement, thus working excessive hours whilst maintaining a family. Danielle (full-time, single, three children) described this situation:

Last prac I worked the weekend before prac, then I did my two weeks prac, then I worked [during those two weeks], and worked the weekend after. So my actual hours for that fortnight were 110 hours, even though I only got paid for 30 hours because there was 80 hours of prac, it was just insane.

A few participants discussed feelings of guilt resulting from taking paid annual leave to complete their practicum placement, as they felt holiday leave should be reserved for holidays and quality family time. It was a common opinion amongst participants that block practicum placements should be paid, as Kelly (full-time, single, two children) said: “Maybe it should be paid, not like I am asking for a wage, but maybe there should be some way in recouping the fact that you are not getting any wages in that time.”

In contrast with participants who were actively earning an income, a number of participants – both single and married – described deciding purposefully to not participate in paid employment whilst completing their university degree. Simone (part-time, married, two children) described leaving paid employment, saying: “I’ve only just stopped working. I had been working up until the middle of this semester, but [my husband] Paul would come home from work and I would walk out the door.” Kelly (full-time, single, two children) described her income dilemma as: “not being able to work to support my kids because I’ve got uni, but

if I don't go to uni then I can never support my kids". Most of the participants who were not participating in paid employment had either one or two children.

Many participants discussed receiving income support from the federal welfare agency, Centrelink. These income support payments included Family Tax Benefit (FTB), Commonwealth Childcare Benefit (CCB), Jobs, Education and Training (JET), Austudy, and Parenting Payment Single (PPS). Multiple participants reported experiencing a range of difficulties when dealing with Centrelink. These difficulties included excessively lengthy phone communications where the participant was kept on hold for up to two hours, in addition to Centrelink booking inappropriate appointment times for students to have compulsory meetings with employment and training agencies. Practicum placements were also difficult, with some participants reporting that Centrelink staff were inflexible and unsympathetic when appointments were scheduled during practicum placements. Narelle (part-time, single, two children) explained:

Every time I'm on prac they [Centrelink] cut me off, because I'm on prac I can't go in, but then I get back-pay after. But the thing is, until I finish my prac, I've got to go in because they keep giving me interviews.

The possible consequences of not attending these scheduled appointments included having their Centrelink payments reduced, cancelled or having to repay payments received. Participants receiving Austudy payments discussed needing to maintain a minimum study load, which was problematic if units were changed or withdrawn from during the semester. Maintaining this study load was also difficult during university breaks. Participants also experienced difficulties when their youngest child was turning eight, such as Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) who described this difficulty saying: "I'm a single parent, my son will be turning eight, I will be losing all benefits and I must find a way to support myself." A small number of participants also experienced difficulties after incorrectly reporting part-time income. Sherie (full-time, single, two children) described her difficulties with earning money, saying:

I did work in the apple orchard this summer, and for most of that the money was cut down [reduced] from Centrelink, so I am not sure if it was really worth all the effort. It is a hard job, a really hard job.

Finally, some students described feelings of guilt, or undeservedness, for depending on government funds to support their family as a direct result of their decision to study at university.

Nearly all participants discussed a desire to receive scholarship money to supplement their income, with most participants having applied for at least one scholarship since their enrolment. These scholarships were typically a one-off payment of between AUD\$1000 and AUD\$5000, with some scholarships making yearly, or semester payments, for the three or four years of the course. One participant, Danika (full-time, single, one child), who was in receipt of a lump-sum scholarship, reported that she was “paid out at the beginning of the year a AUD\$3000 scholarship”. A number of participants said they were ineligible for a scholarship because of family income, or they did not meet the requirements. Barbara (full-time, married, four children) said: “I did apply for three scholarships last year, but because they were all equity scholarships, so needs-based, and because I only had a financial reason to apply, I wasn’t successful.” Students who felt eligible and applied felt frustrated by the scholarship process when their applications were rejected without an explanation that was satisfactory to them. For example, Lisa (full-time, single, four children), who was unsuccessful in getting a scholarship but commented on a peer who was successful: “it’s just frustrating, she hasn’t got childcare to pay, she hasn’t got mouths to feed, I’m pretty sure she’s probably got all her books”. Approximately half the participants discussed having received a scholarship helping with either their ongoing expenses or providing a financial cushion enabling them to deal with unexpected expenses during the semester. Lisa (full-time, single, four children) best described the importance of receiving a scholarship, stating:

If I didn't have that equity scholarship last year, I wouldn't have passed all of my subjects, because it enabled me to pay for the childcare on the days that I had to come, I was actually able to buy all my books, and it just gave me that peace of mind.

The final aspect of income which was discussed by a number of participants was child support. Child support in Australia is assessed, and in many cases, collected and paid, by the Child Support Agency. Each child support assessment takes into account the income of both parents, other dependent children living in each home, the time the child spends with each parent, and any large expenses the child incurs. Most participants entitled to receive child support reported receiving regular payments. Two participants discussed difficulties including not receiving child support regularly, or not receiving their entire entitlement of child support. Danika discussed not receiving regular child support, saying, "when we haven't had the child support we have gone without quite a bit". Some participants also discussed needing to maintain continuous contact with the Child Support Agency to resolve child support-related issues, such as Raeleen (part-time, single, two children), for example: "I can't rely on child support, it's stressful chasing them, it's more of a stress than it's worth." As their education would ultimately benefit their children, most participants who were recipients of child support discussed feeling justified in using part of this money to help support their academic pursuits. Kelly (full-time, single, two children) stated: "I cope okay [financially] because my ex-husband does pay some maintenance [child support], without his maintenance I wouldn't be able to study." Notwithstanding, some participants reported feelings of guilt and defensiveness when their child support payer made negative comments to them regarding their decision to use child support money to partially support them to advance their formal education.

Expenses

In addition to discussing income, the majority of participants discussed their financial expenditure. This expenditure included expenses that were directly related to their university studies, childcare expenses, family expenses and travel expenses. The university-related expenses discussed by participants included textbooks, equipment, office supplies and internet services. Few participants discussed university tuition fees, presumably because the majority of participants were Commonwealth-supported students accessing a FEE-HELP loan. The FEE-HELP loan is a low-interest federal government assisted loan, deferring payment of university tuition fees until the participant earns an income in excess of AUD\$54,126 in 2015/16. Of the two participants not accessing FEE-HELP, the first was an international student who had recently moved to Australia and was not entitled to a FEE-HELP loan. The second student was in a comfortable financial position with her husband and had chosen to pay university fees upfront to receive the tuition-fee discount and avoid accruing a debt.

The majority of participants commented on the financial cost university was having on their family. Jamie (part-time, married, one child), for example, reported feeling constantly aware of the overall cost of her university experience, estimating: "... between day care and books, laptop, units and things like that, goodness knows what petrol money I have spent, but yeah, a good \$15,000-odd I've spent in the last two years at uni." Many participants discussed the expense of purchasing textbooks, with a number of participants commenting that required textbooks were expensive and often underutilised. Meredith (full-time, married, two children) commented that she "didn't do any readings out of the book that cost me \$300". Some participants discussed having paid for these books with lump-sum Centrelink payments, whilst others used savings. A number of participants reported that they received money to purchase textbooks as Christmas and birthday presents from family. Danielle (full-time, single, three children) explained: "Because my birthday is in April, sometimes my mum and

step-dad would say 'here's some money', and I would go and spend it on textbooks." About half the participants discussed delaying buying textbooks until a number of weeks into each semester to help prioritise their textbook purchases, such as Karis (full-time, married, one child) who questioned: "do I need this book or can I cope without it, or can I get it from the library?" Although most of the participants in this study purchased required textbooks new, some sourced second-hand books or borrowed books from the library. One participant relied upon photocopying chapters of books as required, despite feeling that she was breaking copyright laws by doing this.

The expense of required equipment, particularly computers, was also discussed by many participants. All participants who discussed computers expressed that having a personal computer was essential for university success. Most participants had a computer prior to their university entry. The few participants who did not own a computer prior to entering university initially felt capable of managing without a computer, but decided this was an essential piece of equipment within their first two semesters at university. Participants reported acquiring new computers using scholarship money, interest-free loans, and gifted money from family. Barbara (full-time, married, four children) discussed the acquisition of her laptop, saying:

I needed to get a computer, we could have all made do but I did get another one on interest-free [store loan] to make it easier. My biggest thing was having to buy all the Microsoft Office programs, it's very expensive and you can't do anything without Word, or Publisher, or PowerPoint.

Some students who did not have their own computer discussed the difficulties of sharing a computer with other family members, particularly children in upper secondary school. Lorraine (part-time, single, six children), for example, expressed that when sharing a computer with her children she "... would have to book the computer and say 'hey listen guys, you can't do homework on it

tonight, I don't care if you have Hotmaths®, or what maths, or what essay, it's mine tonight'." Some participants also discussed using the student guild's printer to limit either their home printing expenses or their need to purchase a home printer. Lisa articulated the difficulties she was having with printing, saying: "I can't print at home at the moment because I haven't got any cartridges left, and I probably won't get more for a while, but I can go into the guild where you can print stuff for free." A number of participants also discussed financial difficulties relating specifically to the affordability of sufficient internet access. As a result of this expense, a few participants reported relying solely on using the internet on campus. Sherie (full-time, single, two children), for example, said: "We don't have a home phone or internet link at home because of money." All students who discussed stationery and other consumables felt they were able to purchase required items without these contributing to their financial hardship.

A significant university-related expense for participants was childcare. As Kelly (full-time, single, two children) articulated: "The main resource that I struggle with is appropriate day care." Childcare, in the forms of day care or before and after school care, was highlighted as a significant ongoing expense for the majority of participants. Childcare requirements and expenses rose significantly during practicum placements, and participants also discussed needing to continue paying for childcare during university breaks to maintain their childcare place. To assist with childcare expenses, some students were eligible for Jobs, Education and Training (JET) funding from Centrelink. Others relied on leaving their children with friends and family to reduce their childcare expenses. Some students chose to do online units to minimise childcare expenses, such as Jamie (part-time, married, one child), who said she took an online unit because: "I just can't afford to put her in more than one and a half days a week at the day care." Similarly, some participants reduced their childcare expenses by choosing to enrol in units timetabled over one or two days per week.

Travelling expenses posed a significant expense for many of the participants in this study. Travelling to and from campus was particularly problematic for those participants residing outside the Bunbury region. To manage travel expenses, some participants relied on public transport services, whilst some car-pooled. Sherie (full-time, single, two children), who resides 127 km (79 miles) from the campus, described this financial saving: "Getting the bus up saves me about \$170 per fortnight." Similar to reducing childcare expenses, participants also chose to reduce their travel expenses by either enrolling in online units, or enrolling in units that enabled multiple units to be timetabled on the same day. Kelly (full-time, single, two children), for example, explained that: "\$45 it costs me to drive here and back for one day, it's a lot of money, hence why I'm doing two units online." Some students discussed missing multiple lectures during the semester to limit their travelling expenses, choosing to rely on lecture notes online. Furthermore, most participants reported that their lecturers understood their travel difficulties, with one lecturer orally recording lectures to assist students.

Practicum placements were also identified by participants as activities that increased expenditure. The expenses relating to practicum placements included increased childcare expenses and increased travel expenses. Bachelor of Science (Nursing) participants also encountered peripheral expenses relating to practicum placements such as uniforms and immunisations. As Vanessa (part-time, married, two children) explained:

My blood tests were \$137 and that was just to get the serology to see what I was immune to and everything. Vaccinations you have got to pay for, and police clearances, and all that sort of thing, and uniform shirts.

Non-practicum expenses were also discussed by participants, with many participants incurring costs for time-saving items such as buying fast food for their families during practicum placements. A number of participants also experienced significant expenses when they were required to travel away for a block practicum placement. These living-away-from-home expenses included

accommodation, as articulated by Danika (full-time, single, one child): “I had to pay my rent here in Bunbury, and \$1100 for accommodation in Perth up there, and my food as well.”

Managing money was the fourth aspect of the management theme which impacted on the participants in this study. All participants felt that money needed to be managed to support their university success. Danika (full-time, single, one child) articulated the view of many participants when she said: “We can afford to get what we need at the time, we don’t necessarily have the money to get what we want.” To meet their financial needs, participants discussed receiving income from a variety of sources including employment, federal welfare payments from Centrelink, scholarships and child support. Participants also described needing to prioritise and manage their university-related expenses such as textbooks, computers, childcare and travel. Practicum placements were also identified by many participants as a significantly difficult financial time, with many participants experiencing both reduced income and increased expenditure.

5.5.6 Managing significant life events

The final aspect of the management theme as described by participants was managing significant life events. Although the individual circumstances of the participants were different, one commonality of participants was they all had different complicating events going on in their lives that made their dual roles as student and mother more difficult. These complicating events were similar in that they had a significant impact on the participants and were not related to participants’ role as a university student. These events are termed in this thesis ‘significant life events’. Although the circumstances of these significant life events were unique to each participant, they collectively absorbed time, energy and mental capacity from the participants, impacting on their already limited resources.

A number of participants, however, identified intrinsic qualities within themselves to manage these significant life events. These included participants feeling like they were demonstrating resilience during difficult or uncertain times, remaining dedicated by maintaining study routines regardless of the life events, and maintaining motivation by having a strong desire to finish what they had started. Furthermore, a number of participants described improved motivation as a result of wanting to overcome these significant life events. To manage these life events, participants sought emotional support from lecturers, peers and friends, with practical assistance with children sought by other students with children or mothers from their children's school. Some participants were reluctant to seek this support from family members and, at times, spouses, as many encouraged the discontinuation of their studies to manage.

These significant life events were, however, not all negative, and are categorised in this section as positive, negative and accommodation events. These significant life events are described below. However, it must be said that this is not an exhaustive list of all the significant events affecting the 32 participants in this study. Nor are they representative of the myriad of possible life events that can affect mature age female students with dependent children at university.

Positive events

A number of positive life events were experienced by participants in this study. Although these events signified happy or positive experiences in the participants' lives, they still impacted on participants' dual roles of student and mother, and therefore, still needed to be managed. These positive significant life events included three participants who become pregnant whilst at university, subsequently giving birth to healthy babies. To manage this change, participants reported either deferring their studies, or reducing their workload. A number of participants began new relationships, with one becoming engaged during a

semester. According to participants, these new relationships required time to be invested and extra socialising to occur, as they needed to get to know the family and friends of their new partners. Another participant had an overseas visitor come to stay for an extended holiday during a semester, requiring more socialising than the participant had expected. This complicating factor left the participant with feelings of guilt as she often had to leave her guests alone in the house to complete her studies.

Negative events

A large number of negative life events were also experienced by participants in this study. Health-related events were particularly significant for a large number of participants during their studies. A range of health-related events were described, including having to be hospitalised due to acute illness. Some participants had dependent children acutely sick or diagnosed with specific disorders such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and a mental health disorder. A few participants had children diagnosed with chronic conditions such as asthma and bronchiolitis. During their university tenure a number of participants had parents or grandparents who become unwell or were diagnosed with serious illnesses, including cancer. Multiple participants had a parent, or grandparent, pass away during their studies. The impact on participants of each of these negative life events was complex and cannot be underemphasised. Karen (full-time, single, two children) explained losing her mother as a support person, saying: “My grandmother became unwell with cancer and as a result my mum basically moved away for six months to care for her.” Participants need to manage these health-related events effectively to be able to continue their studies. Some of the impacts these health-related events had on participants included an inability to attend lectures and tutorials, requiring significant time off for medical and therapeutic appointments, time and the mental capacity absorbed by researching specific health issues, and increased emotional anxiety.

A number of participants described a marriage breakdown and child custody-related issues as significant negative life events that took precedence over their studies. A number of participants underwent a marriage breakdown within their first year at university. Raeleen (part-time, single, two children) discussed the change in her family, saying: "I've separated from my partner so now I'm a single mum. I've got the kids now, then he has them for a week and then I've got them for a week. We are doing the shared custody thing." Recently separated participants also discussed mixed feelings of guilt and loss, in addition to relief and excitement with the breakdown of their marriage. Kelly (full-time, single, two children) recalled: "Our marriage had never been a really great one anyway, but me studying really had brought things to a head, it is no longer a marriage." Changes to established custody arrangements also caused additional stress and anxiety for a number of participants. This was particularly stressful for Danika (full-time, single, one child) who explained: "It was really stressful for me because he obviously wanted his son less, so I was trying to advocate for my little man, he didn't understand why his dad didn't want to spend every weekend with him anymore." Both recent and long-term separated participants reported significant time, mental and emotional capacity that was consumed by custody disputes requiring mediation, counselling, court appearances, and legal appointments.

Accommodation

Many participants outlined accommodation events as significant life events that impacted on their experience as university student and mother. Participants who were required to change house during their university tenure described significant stress, time commitments and financial difficulties as a result of this change. These changes included two participants who relocated countries, moving to Australia whilst enrolled at university. Similar challenges were expressed by participants who renovated, or lived on rural properties. At times these accommodation events were entwined with other life events, such as finding suitable rental accommodation as a result of their marriage breakdown.

Every participant who outlined an accommodation event described it as needing to be managed, with these events ultimately impacting on participants' experience as university student and mother.

Two participants described moving from other countries directly prior to or after the commencement of their university degree. Both of these participants were married and chose to locate a distance from Bunbury to live on a rural property. One participant, who originally enrolled and studied externally at Edith Cowan University from the United States of America as an international student, experienced severe difficulties as a result of this move as their furniture failed to arrive until four months after their own arrival. The other participant also experienced difficulties as a result of her international move, needing to learn English as a second language.

The most common accommodation life event that participants described was relocating home whilst at university. The main reason for this accommodation change was the expiry of an existing lease. Jamie (part-time, married, one child) best described this situation, saying: "The house that we originally were living in, as soon as we found out that it was being bought there was stress. So once that was being bought we had to go house-hunting for another house." Jamie further explained:

Then we had to move during the semester, and pay another bond too. We needed help because I just had bub and couldn't help much and everything was still in boxes. Then we needed to clean the other house and all that stuff. In the new house I didn't have a study anymore so I had to do my work in the lounge-room which was really hard when he [her husband] was around.

Another participant also described locating and moving into a rental property after the breakdown of her marriage, with Lisa (full-time, single, one child)

saying: “Just finding something [a rental property] was really hard, and then the money, and the moving. We had to settle in, now it’s fine, but it was really stressful.”

A number of participants described difficulties in their current accommodation that significantly affected their experience as student and mother. Raeleen (part-time, single, two children), for example, discussed difficulties living in the same house as her estranged husband in the months after their separation:

We have been separated for 10 months but I have only been in my place for six weeks. We lived together for that whole time because he was fly-in-fly-out and lost his job so I had to support him, so that was hard. He was angry because I initiated the separation. I wanted to be in my own place and have the kids all set up and starting, before they started school and before I started uni, it didn’t happen that way, I moved house the first or second week that I was back at uni.

A number of participants had undertaken significant renovations to their current homes affecting their quality of living and experience as student and mother. Janice (full-time, married, two children) described: “We bought a really old cottage in Boyanup to renovate, and it’s just one room area for the kitchen, dining room, sitting room and TV area. It’s hard, because everything is happening in there.” A number of participants also described challenges as they lived on large properties or on farms. Having animals on these properties were a significant concern for a small number of participants, especially during practicum placements, as they struggled to find suitable assistance to manage their horses and farm animals during university semesters and in their absence during practicum placements. Linda articulated living on a small farm, saying:

We live on 11 acres out of town, between Boyanup and Donnybrook, which is about 20 minutes drive [from campus]. We have four horses and have three dogs, and chooks, and a cat and a rabbit and [other animals], so I

have a lot of [responsibilities] before school, or before I come to uni and after uni, ...other than just my children.

All participants reported experiencing at least one, but typically multiple, significant life events during their university tenure. These events were considered in this section as, first, positive life events, such as a new baby or having family visit from overseas. Second were negative life events, such as a marriage breakdown or having a family member diagnosed with an illness or disability. Third, accommodation events occurred for many participants including changing countries, finding new accommodation, or living with difficulties within their current accommodation. Each of these was considered significant life events in the analysis of this data. Most participants described multiple life events that often fluctuated and needed to be continuously managed. Although the life events were different for each participant, the commonality for participants was that these significant life events absorbed the time, intellectual, emotional and often financial capacity of the participants, impacting on their experience as university student and mother.

5.5.7 Management theme review

This chapter explored the second of two key themes, management, which together with the key theme, expectations, formed the foundational layer of the conceptual description. From this management theme five aspects of management emerged as significant to participants' experiences as student and mother. These five aspects involved managing time, family, wellbeing, money and significant life events. All 32 participants discussed each of these aspects during the 24 individual interviews, or through involvement in the three mini-focus groups. Participants provided insight into elements of these aspects that needed to be managed, with many participants discussing the strategies they used to manage these aspects. Each participant's management of these aspects was unique and dynamic. Participants' perception of how they were managing

also changed depending on the time in the semester, their personal circumstances, and unexpected life events. Participants described a large variation in their management between, and within, each of the five aspects identified. Significant in this management theme was that management strategies, or the absence of such strategies, were interwoven throughout each participant's voice. This theme outlined the importance of managing the multiple aspects in a student's experience, thus, enabling participants to feel successful in their dual roles of university student and mother.

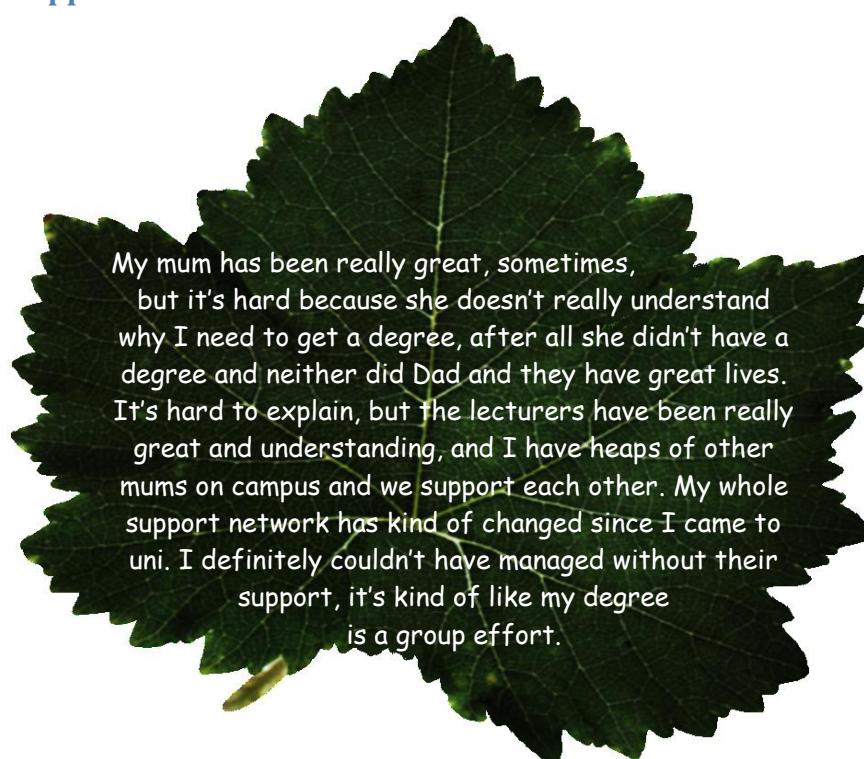
5.7 Coping concepts

The interpretive analysis of this study identified three layers as illustrated in *Figure 5.3-1 – Draper conceptual description*. The foundational layer encompassed the two key themes, expectations and management, which emerged from the data analysis and illustrated the foundations of the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at ECUSW. These key themes were discussed in the previous section of this chapter. The middle layer, of the conceptual description consists of three concepts that emerged after higher order data analysis. These three concepts, termed coping concepts, provided deeper insight into, and understanding of, participants' experiences as student and mother. Furthermore, they were termed coping concepts as they share characteristics with the coping mechanisms outlined in Kember's causal network model (1999). Importantly, these middle layer concepts, namely support, sacrifice and perception, are underpinned by, and interconnected with, the two key themes that formed the foundational layer of the conceptual description.

The three identified coping concepts in this conceptual description illustratively and conceptually surround, and attempt to protect, the central, or core layer of the conceptual description, motherhood first. Hence, motherhood was identified by participants as their primary social role, thus forming this core concept and

layer. Consistent with Kember's causal network model (1999), when these three coping concepts were unable to protect the participant's primary social role, this failure was externally attributed, mostly to the participants' secondary social roles. Therefore, these three coping concepts attempted to surround and protect each participant's role of motherhood, however when this was not possible, they reverted to protect the participants' secondary social roles including, but not limited to, their roles of student, wife, employee and volunteer.

5.7.1 Support



Support is the first of three coping concepts which were identified in the interpretive analysis of this study, located in the middle layer of the conceptual description. Support is required to protect the participants' primary social role of motherhood, and where this is not, or cannot be, achieved, it assists to help protect the participants' secondary social roles. The types of support that were both required and sought after by participants, as discussed by participants, consisted primarily of practical support, known as instrumental support (House,

1981), and, to a lesser extent, emotional support. Constantly interconnected with, and embedded in, the themes of the foundational layer of the conceptual description, these two types of support were required for participants to maintain realistic expectations, and to allow the participants to manage, the various aspects of their experience as student and mother.

Instrumental support

One of the most prevalent types of instrumental, or practical, support expressed by the participants in this study was the need for assistance with managing family, particularly managing children and childcare. Often this instrumental support included looking after children when they were unwell or unable to attend childcare, or involved the transportation of children. Lorraine (part-time, single, six children), for example, discussed receiving this type of instrumental childcare support, saying: “I have a mate who picks him [her son] up on Wednesday afternoons [from school].” Similar instrumental support from friends was discussed by Lisa (full-time, single, one child) who said:

I can’t afford to pay for childcare five days a week. I had been using a friend and shuffling around friends to babysit, I’ve only got one child that is not at school, but it is really tricky with pick-ups and drop-offs when I’ve got a really shitty timetable and it’s [tutorials are] not in between school hours.

Participants also identified the need for additional and flexible instrumental childcare support which had not been initially anticipated, especially at times of practicum placements. Jamie (part-time, married, one child) articulated this need for flexible instrumental childcare support, stating: “I was quite stressed in the fortnight leading up to it [practicum experience] because I needed to find people to look after bub, and I didn’t have my [practicum] hours until the day before I went to prac.” Danika (full-time, single, one child) further described the financial cost involved in securing instrumental childcare support, explaining:

I have had to fly my mother over from Adelaide to help me because childcare centres in this town don't open until 7 am. We are expected to start at 7 am and there just aren't the childcare facilities and I just outright do not have the support network.

Securing this type of instrumental childcare support enabled participants to more adequately manage their family, particularly during times of practicum placements.

Many participants described feeling that a significant amount of time was used transporting children to sport and other extracurricular activities; time which could be used on other activities if support transporting children was available to them. Lisa (full-time, single, one child) described how her limited time is often absorbed by children's extracurricular activities: "sport, sport, sport, sport, basketball, soccer, hip-hop dancing, hockey, rugby." To compensate for participants unattained instrumental support, many participants considered, but described feeling unwilling to, lower their expectations of their perceived mothering responsibilities by having their children forgo these activities on account of their studies. Karen (full-time, single, two children) articulated this sentiment:

I have to keep up with all their activities so they don't miss out on anything just because of my university studies. Between scouts and sports and other after school activities I am always busy keeping up with both of them.

A further instrumental support identified by the majority of participants was financial support. Financial support was required to enable participants to more effectively manage various aspects of money, identified as a key element within the management theme. This type of financial support included both receiving additional money to assist with university, and assisting students to manage their regular income. Some students discussed requiring instrumental financial support

as their financial expectation of university misaligned with their experience. This misalignment of expectations included underestimating associated costs with university, such as the purchasing of books, parking fees, fuel, childcare, and photocopying. Furthermore, these unexpected expenses facilitated a need for many participants to seek additional instrumental financial support, including the need for scholarships and government-assisted payments from the federal welfare agency, Centrelink. Lisa (full-time, single, one child) described the importance of receiving such financial support:

I think that if I didn't have that equity scholarship last year I wouldn't have passed all of my subjects, because it enabled me to pay for the childcare on the days that I had to come, and I was actually able to buy all my books.

Many participants also discussed optimising other instrumental supports offered including from the on-campus student guild, such as accessing available student facilities for printing and photocopying. These support services enabled participants to manage financially, as Karen (full-time, single, two children) said: "I can't afford the photocopying costs, if I didn't buy my own paper and print through the guild photocopier it would be an absolute fortune." As another gesture of instrumental financial support, a number of students were gifted money to purchase textbooks and resources, mainly from their parents. Sherie (full-time, single, two children), for example, described receiving this type of instrumental support from her mother, saying: "my mum bought me a laptop, which is handy, [because] before [I got it] I was just making do".

Another significant instrumental support identified from the further data analysis included participants perceived need for an appropriate study place. Accessing appropriate study space enabled participants to better manage their family, by ensuring their studies did not physically affect their place as mother in the home.

Furthermore, this support assisted participants to better manage their time, by ensuring they did not waste time unnecessarily, including having to set up and pack away their books and resources. This instrumental supports, discussed by participants, included the opening hours on the campus library to more appropriately facilitate the participants' study needs as described by Vanessa (part-time, married, two children):

Whenever I've gotten an assignment to do, sometimes I'll come here [to the university] on the weekend, but the library is only open between one and four, so you really only have got the three hours to do it, because I can't do anything at home.

To support their overall university experience, a number of participants described how their family members had converted a room in their house into a study to ensure an appropriate study place was available. This implementation of support enabled students to better manage their family and household, as they described that they no longer needed to clear their books away from the dinner table for every meal. For some students, having a designated study space supported them by keeping their children separate from their study space, and by allowing them to set up the study in a way to maximise their learning. This practice of separation assisted to protect their role of mother as participants reported feeling less frustrated with their children interfering with their study space. Danika (full-time, single, one child), for example, described her dedicated study space in the home:

He doesn't touch anything in there and there's normally flow diagrams all over my wall. I'll get all the information that I need, figure out what it is that I need to write in a really basic sort of flow or visual diagram, and have it stuck on my wall to keep me on track.

Not all required instrumental supports were realised by the participants as some were deemed either unaffordable or impractical to attain. The most common

unrealised instrumental support was domestic assistance, including tasks such as cooking, laundry, and house cleaning; as most participants indicated that this type of instrumental support was unaffordable or unjustifiable. A number of participants described feeling disappointed when their expectation of how much domestic support they would receive off their partner or other family members had also not been realised. Hence these participants needed to seek further support from other people or services external to their family to compensate for the instrumental support that did not meet their expectations. Kelly (full-time, single, two children) articulated feeling defeated, saying: “Sometimes it was easier to not look for the support because you know it’s not there in the first place.”

Emotional support

Although many participants of this study identified a need and expectation for emotional support, they indicated that their expected level of emotional support was often not available, nor was it realised. To compensate for this perceived lack of emotional support, participants felt an extra burden to continue to cope in order to protect the quality of their roles, including their role as mother.

Many participants commented on the lack of emotional support available to them, particularly from family members and friends. Contrasting with instrumental support, the majority of participants were reluctant to desire or seek emotional support, however when sought, university peers and friends were identified by participants as the primary source of this emotional support. As Karen (full-time, single, two children) stated: “I think I have an emotional meltdown every semester ... [but] you can really only get support from other students who are going through the same, particularly mums who understand.” Despite describing her husband as totally supportive, Lauren (part-time, married, two children) articulated her reluctance to seek emotional support from him, saying: “I think my hubby doesn’t understand the academic stress that comes

with study.” Many participants also expressed their belief that partners, family and non-university friends were ill-equipped to understand and, therefore, could not be sought out or relied upon for emotional support, which was particularly problematic for first-in-family students. Jamie (part-time, married, one child) explained: “My partner is kind of supportive, and my partner’s family stand in a lot [looking after the baby], but my university friend Carol has been more understanding with helping me to vent and just being able to talk to somebody, because she has been to uni.”

Although participants recognised knowing that emotional support was available from the counsellor on campus, most participants were either unwilling or unable to seek this professional emotional support. Many participants indicated that they viewed this support service as available only if their emotional issue made it absolutely necessary. Kelly (full-time, single, two children) discussed this hesitance, and her practical difficulties seeing the part-time counsellor at ECUSW, saying:

I know if things get really, really bad I could probably go and see the counsellor. But then again, it [her availability] would be on a day that I don’t come up, so there’s another three hours and another \$45 [for fuel].

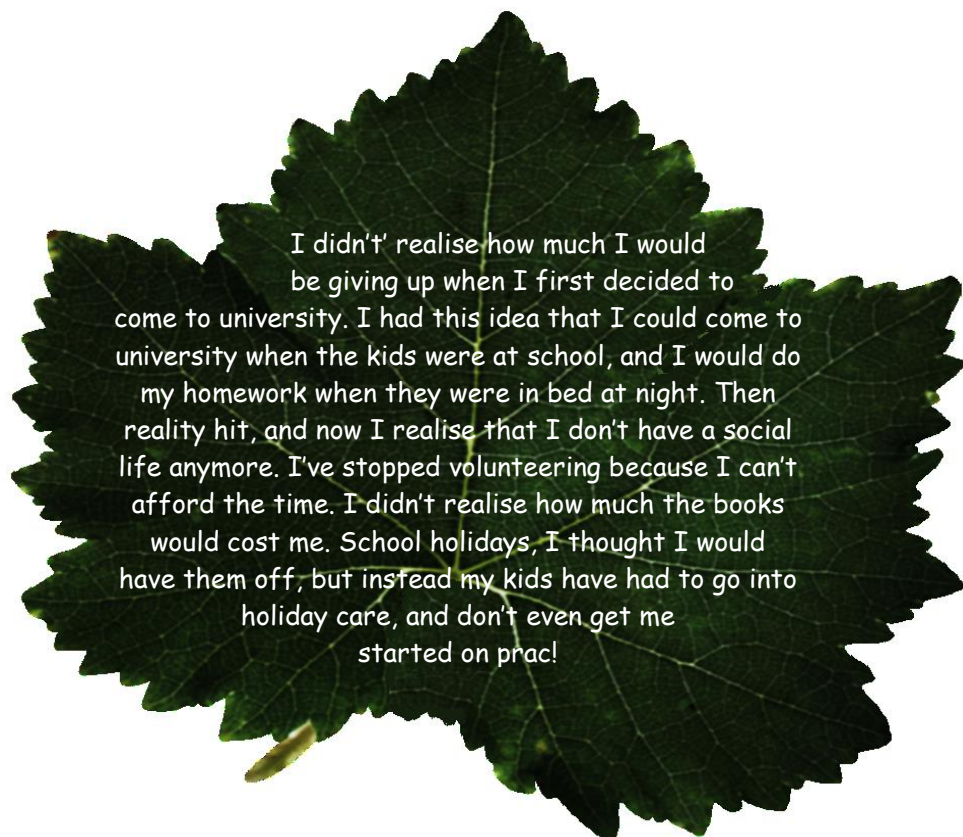
After having sought and accessed the counsellor for emotional support, Sherie (full-time, single, two children) reflected these sentiments, saying:

I have received counselling from [the counsellor] to help me through because it [university] is really tough. I found her to be a great help but it’s also tough seeing her because of the travel. I found that if I ask for help there is help, but at the end of the day this is a solo journey, so it is really up to me.

Despite the majority of participants describing themselves as having positive relationships with their lecturers, many of these participants also expressed a reluctance to rely on their lecturers for emotional support. Meredith (full-time,

married, two children) described what she perceived to be a better relationship with lecturers than her school-leaver peers, saying: “I don’t know if it’s because I’m older, [but] I have, I feel, there is a stronger and better relationship than what they have with some of the younger students.” Meredith later said: “I get on with them [the lecturers] really well, but I don’t go and tell them all my problems when I can’t get an assignment done, because I know that’s not their job.” Similar reluctance was also expressed by Lauren (part-time, married, two children), who discussed seeking emotional support from university staff: “I think that half of my battle is asking for help.” Overwhelmingly, participants expressed that they were significantly more likely to seek out and expect instrumental support, such as help with childcare, financial aid, resources and assignment extensions, rather than seeking emotional support, to assist them to navigate their dual roles as student and mother.

5.7.2 Sacrifice



The second coping concept, situated in the middle layer of the conceptual description is sacrifice. A variety of sacrifices were discussed by many participants; sacrifices that were deemed necessary for participants to navigate their dual roles as student and mother. Participants' perception of these sacrifices varied greatly, depending on whether they had expected to make them prior to their university entry. Although participants made sacrifices relating to their children, family, social commitments and finances, participants discussed how making sacrifices influenced their motivation to complete their degree.

Family

The most common sacrifice discussed by participants was the sacrifice of quality time with, and what they deemed to be quality parenting of, their children. This aligns with the core concept of the conceptual description, that female mature age students with dependent children prioritise motherhood. Despite their desire to prioritise motherhood, many participants felt that they had to reduce their expectations of themselves as a parent to succeed at university. By reducing their expectations, participants said that they felt less guilt about taking time away from their children. For many participants this was a difficult sacrifice as, although they felt it important to undertake their degree, they desired more quality time with their children. Katrina (full-time, married, two children) described spending less time with her children, stating: "I think it's really the kids. You feel it is a sacrifice because you are taking yourself away from them." Karen (full-time, single, two children) similarly stated:

My parents have organised to do movies and activities with them during the school holidays because I have to get my assignments done, but I really feel like I am missing out on time with them and that they are missing out on spending that time with me.

Danika (full-time, single, one child) detailed her feelings about sacrificing what she deemed to be the quality of her parenting to complete an assignment, saying:

You've got that ethical dilemma where you're weighing it up to yourself 'it's for our future and it's not going to be forever', but then at the same time I'm thinking to myself, 'he's watched television for more than four hours today', or 'he's been playing that game for two hours' ... , and then you start to think, it's a very fine line between good student and bad parent.

Similarly, Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) described sacrificing coaching her son's soccer team to help her manage her time and family commitments, saying:

I have said that I am not coaching this year because I can't do it, ... physically and mentally I have not got the time and I cannot be at all these different places, so I have actually said that I am not going to coach this year.

Barbara (full-time, married, four children) commented about how she had not expected the level of family sacrifice that was involved in going to university, saying: "I had thought when I started that I would do my studying when the kids are in bed and it wouldn't really affect them, but I soon found out it isn't like that". This comment contrasted with comments by Lauren (part-time, married, two children) saying: "When I first enrolled I expected that it would take time away from my kids, but it is good for them to see me studying, I think it teaches them."

In addition, participants described sacrifices made by their families, including their families' need to work harder in the household to assist the student to manage her multiple roles. Lauren (part-time, married, two children) described needing her husband to take on more responsibilities during a week-long summer school unit, saying: "Once again hubby's just had to step up, which he always does, you know, adjust his work life ..., because I'm working from 9 to 6 pm." Another participant, Danielle (full-time, single, three children), described

receiving assistance from her mother who had sacrificed four weeks of her own life to move in with Danielle during her practicum placement, precipitating friction between them:

While mum was there she cleaned up this and that and she did the dishes and she tidied, and I felt inadequate, it [the housework] was never good enough and she couldn't understand that it wasn't high on my list of priorities, but obviously to her it was.

Danielle continued further to explain how she had expected and accepted that domestic duties were sacrificed in her house for her to finish her degree, saying:

When I'm studying and what not, I don't care, the house gets vacuumed once a week, the dishes get done but I've got my washing basket full, all the clothes are folded but I just have to actually get them to put them away.

Social

There were also social sacrifices made by participants that affected their children and some partners. Karen (full-time, single, two children) described her children having to sacrifice having what she perceived to be a 'happy mother' because of university, stating: "they [the children] know that I'm a much nicer person when I'm not studying". Karen further questioned her decision to sacrifice going on a camping holiday with her parents and her children in lieu of using the time to complete an assignment, expressing her concerns about that sacrificed family time: "I'm not a mother and look[ing] after my children, am I going to lose relationships with my children and opportunities to create beautiful memories?" Similarly, Vanessa (part-time, married, two children) described her disappointment with sacrificing watching her son's soccer game in lieu of studying, saying:

The only goal he scored was the week before our exams last semester, so I didn't actually go and watch soccer that week and that was the only goal

he scored [all season] ... so that was a bit devastating.

Similarly, a number of participants discussed other social sacrifices that they deemed needed to be made for them to complete assessments or to spend time in their role as mother. Jadine (part-time, married, two children) stated: "I feel bad when I have to say no to going out with friends, but I know it is more important to get that assignment done." Raeleen (full-time, single, three children) also said:

I really want to catch up and hang out, but most of the semester I have something for uni that I just have to get done, and when I do have time I really have to spend it with my kids, so unless it is an important occasion it just doesn't happen.

Meredith (full-time, married, two children) also discussed making social sacrifices, saying: "I don't really see any of the mums up at Payton's school anymore. Where I used to have kids over I now just want to hang out with her, just us." Another participant, Katrina (full-time, married, two children), described how she had withdrawn from her social commitment playing in a ladies netball team since commencing her university degree, saying: "I really like playing but I just can't commit to it [netball] anymore, I have uni, and assignments, and the kids, so something has to give."

Financial

Financial sacrifice was discussed as significant for many of the participants in this study. The most common financial sacrifice related to the opportunity cost of foregone potential income as participants either did not engage in paid employment, or were no longer employed full-time as a result of their studies. Many participants underestimated the financial sacrifice, concurring with Osborne, Marks and Turner (2004) who also suggest that many mature age students enter university unaware of the financial cost and sacrifice required to

complete their degree. Meredith (full-time, married, two children) described the financial sacrifice for her family after leaving paid employment for full-time study, saying: "Financially life has changed, because now I'm poor all the time." Janice (full-time, married, two children) told of the financial sacrifice needed to assist her when she decided to take on a higher study load, stating: "I've decided if I do three units I'll hand over the church cleaning to somebody else, which is also a paid job, so I lose that income." Barbara (full-time, married, four children) further explains that family members remind her of the financial sacrifice she has made forgoing potential income, saying: "My mum reminds me that if I had done a TAFE course I would have been working by now and I would be bringing in an income so we wouldn't be broke all the time". Although many participants articulated expecting that there would be financial sacrifices upon entry, this became a precipitator of stress when the course took longer to complete than expected. As Narelle (part-time, single, two children) stated:

I knew that it was a three year degree so you expect not to work as much while you're doing your degree, but then it has taken me longer so that was more time without money so I have had to work as well which I have to do now. I didn't originally want to do that.

As a motivating factor

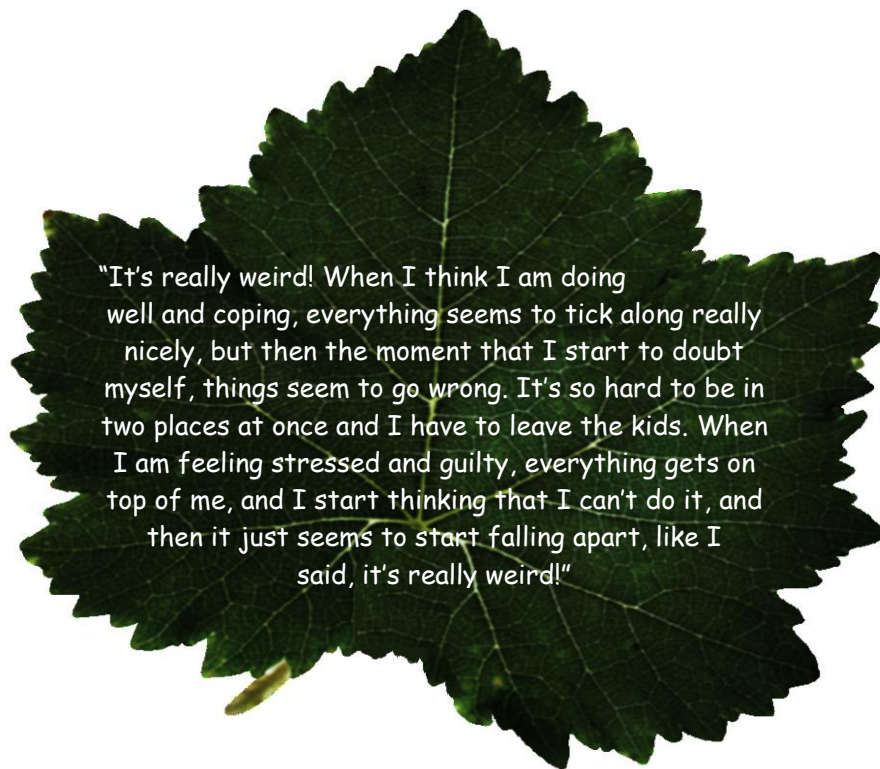
Sacrifices were also described as motivating factors for many of the participants. These students felt they had a responsibility to finish their degree as a direct result of the sacrifices that they, their spouses, and their families had made to enable them to succeed at university. Vanessa (part-time, married, two children) described her financial sacrifice as a motivation to achieve better grades, saying: "I feel like it's quite a sacrifice for my husband with me not working and things like that, so I want to do well, rather than just scrape through." Linda (full-time, married, two children) also articulated sacrifice as a motivational reason for not withdrawing when study became difficult, saying:

We've made so many sacrifices, both of us, and our kids, that I just can't give up, I couldn't chuck uni in and just say 'okay I can't do this anymore', it's not just about me, it's about the whole family.

Danielle (full-time, single, three children) similarly echoed the feelings of many participants as she described sacrifice as a motivating factor for receiving higher grades, stating: "I felt that I had to do well because my family was having to make sacrifices for me coming to uni".

A variety of sacrifices were discussed by the participants in the study, all of which were deemed necessary for participants to navigate their dual roles as student and mother. Participants discussed sacrificing time with their children and families, in addition to other social sacrifices. The majority of participants also discussed financial sacrifices, particularly loss of potential income. Sacrifices served to be a motivating factor for a number of participants, who felt obligated to complete their degree because of the sacrifices their children and family members have made on their behalf.

5.7.3 Perception



The third coping mechanism comprising the middle layer of the conceptual description is termed perception. This coping mechanism relates to participants' perception of their experience as student and mother, which emerged from the data analysis as having a significant overall effect on the participants' experience. Participants discussed their perception of their own experience by referring to their confidence, self-efficacy and self-regulation. Moreover, these perceptions influenced, and were influenced by, the previously discussed key themes in the foundational layer, expectations and management. Participants also described that when they perceived themselves to have high levels of confidence, self-efficacy and/or regulation, they also shared that they felt in control of their multiple roles and discussed having a more positive experience. Therefore, having a positive perception of their overall experience assisted them to navigate their dual roles of student and mother.

Having a positive overall experience not only assisted participants to cope with their multiple roles, but assisted in the protection of their social roles, particularly motherhood. When participants described having a positive experience they similarly described feeling happier, like a better parent, a positive role model and as advancing family security as a result of having a positive perception towards their studies. Conversely, those who described lower confidence, self-efficacy and/or self-regulation, described a less positive experience navigating their dual roles as student and mother. Thus they felt that they were not succeeding in each of these roles. It was therefore important for participants to perceive their experience as a positive one, protecting their social roles as mother and student. Furthermore, when participants' perceptions aligned with their expectations of self and of their overall experience, they described a more positive experience than those who perceived that their expectations misaligned with their experience. Participants' perceptions, however, were varied and dynamic, directly influenced by their ongoing experience, and encompassing their self-perceptions, their perception of learning, and their perception of their personal and family circumstances.

Confidence

Many participants discussed entering university with low academic-confidence and for many, low confidence in their sense of belonging in a university setting. The most common element of confidence discussed by participants was a change in their perception of their own confidence during their university tenure. This was particularly articulated by those who entered with low academic confidence; however, after receiving positive feedback they experienced a significant increase in their academic confidence. One participant, Simone (part-time, married, two children) described gaining confidence in her ability early in her university tenure after completing the university preparation course (UPC) prior to entering nursing: "I went and did the university preparation course, which I actually did pretty good in, and it gave me that confidence to enrol and try and get into university." After enrolling and completing a first year of her

undergraduate nursing degree, Simone expressed further growth in her academic confidence, saying: “It has gotten easier because I’m a bit more confident about my ability and in what the university wants.” Similarly, Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) described how social support helped her to change her self-perception and overcome her initial lack of confidence:

I kind of always wanted to go to university and do a degree but I didn’t think that I could do it because I didn’t finish high school. My friends told me that I should try [and] that is how I ended up here. I have great friends and they haven’t been to university, but they are really supportive and help me to realise that I am more capable than I thought.

Overcoming self-doubt and a lack of confidence was the first step towards growth and development, which ultimately had a positive impact on the experiences of these students at university.

With increased confidence, some participants indicated a sense of enjoyment and inspiration from their learning experience that they had previously not expected. Linda (full-time, married, two children) commented:

Last year I kind of got that whole academic addiction thing for me, I was like ‘oh, I like this study thing’ you know, it opened doors for me for things I never really understood before, things I didn’t even know I could learn, and I just realised so much so this year ... every little bit of new information I learned and retained and understood, it just really, I suppose, inspired me further.

Narelle (part-time, single, two children) discussed a genuine desire to get the most out of her learning at university, saying:

I get stressed out because I can’t know it all, I can’t take it all in and I like to know everything ... I just feel that the more you know the better you

are going to be, and I get frustrated when I don't have the time because I know I can learn it now.

This increase in perceived confidence was described by a number of participants as a motivator for significant change in their personal circumstances. These changes were initiated as a result of their changing self-perception and changes to the way they perceived their situation and circumstances after learning and personal growing at university. For five participants, this personal growth precipitated a separation from their husband or long-term partner. One such participant, Kelly (full-time, single, two children), described: "I guess one positive thing about coming to uni is I'm learning about myself and what I am not willing to put up with". After developing her perception of relationships and gender roles, social work student, Lauren (part-time, married, two children) described changing the dynamics of her relationship with her husband, saying:

It's actually that academic stress that's helped me to stand up for myself in a way. Actually it's changed my, our, relationship a lot, when you go around and explore these theories of gender equality and feminism and things like that.

Lauren outlined feeling confident making changes in her family's domestic responsibilities, stating: "Housework isn't my job, it's not my responsibility, it's everyone's ... and you don't realise how many of these roles you slip into because you assume that [those roles] are yours."

In addition, as participants' perceptions changed during their university tenure, a number of participants discussed feeling confident enough in non-academic aspects of their life to make significant changes to their personal situations. These included changes in employment to positions that more closely related to their new understandings or current course of study. Barbara (full-time, married, four children), for example, described starting to work in a nursing-related

position, saying: “I’m working in a nursing home as a patient care assistant, and I have only recently started since I have been on prac. When I went on prac they offered me a job.” Two education students, who described changing their perception of primary school education after completing practicum experiences, initiated a change in their children’s schooling. Meredith (full-time, married, two children) discussed this paradigm shift regarding her daughter’s education following her first practicum placement, saying:

I would go in and see how the other classrooms work, and it’s changed my perspective on the whole idea of having to send her to private school for education purposes. I don’t necessarily think that where she is, is the best place for her.

Another participant, Barbara (full-time, married, four children) described feeling confident to make what she perceived to be better decisions for her family, moving her children to a private school that she perceived to be better than her children’s previous school, as her perception of education changed:

I never really thought about it before, I just put them in the local school, but now I look at what they do and what they are not learning and think where is that going to lead them. I want them to go to uni too, and get good jobs.

Self-efficacy

With increased confidence some participants also described higher levels of self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) distinguishes confidence from self-efficacy:

Confidence is a non-descript term that refers to strength of belief but does not necessarily specify what the certainty is about. I can be supremely confident that I will fail at an endeavour. Perceived self-efficacy refers to belief in one's agentive capabilities, that one can produce given levels of attainment (p.382).

Therefore, it can be said that many participants in this study perceived an increased in both their confidence in the broad or overall ability to navigate their dual roles as student and mother, in addition to perceiving increased self-efficacy in, for example, their ability to complete their degree in a designated time-frame, achieve High Distinction grades or to be able to attend to specific family needs during the same weeks as their assessments were due.

Some participants described entering university with what they described as a 'hope' to complete their degree, however, they did not have the expectation that either their degree would be completed in full, or that their degree would be completed in a specified timeframe. These participants further described that, often after experiencing success, their self-efficacy had increased, and with this they had a more realistic expectation that they would complete their degree, often with high marks and often within a specific timeframe. A number of participants described an increase in their academic self-efficacy after receiving initial high marks. Katrina (full-time, married, two children) described how:

When I started I just wanted to pass, and I thought that that would be okay, but I got a HD for one of the papers I did, you know the report, and I was so chuffed, I just got the bug you know, and it was a really good mark, it was really good, and so now I have put the bar up and I know I can get them now. But it [receiving High Distinctions] can be done, you just have to put that little bit more effort in.

Barbara (full-time, married, four children) also expressed her perceived increase in self-efficacy, saying: "At the start I was just hoping I would finish, now I am disappointed if I get a credit". Narelle (part-time, single, two children) similarly stated: "I initially started thinking that I would see how I go, but then I got some good marks and worked out that I was smart enough to not only get a degree, but to do really well at it while I am here". This increase in self-efficacy motivated participants to implement management strategies, for example, more purposeful use of time schedules. Danika (full-time, single, one child) articulated this

relationship between her perceived self-efficacy and the improvement in their self-regulation, saying: “When I started to realise that I could do this I wanted to make sure I finish on time so I can start working, so I did up a semester plan and started setting aside study time each day”.

Self-regulation

The data analysis of the study also determined that students’ perceived self-regulation had a significant effect on their overall experience as student and mother. Self-regulated learning is not related to either participants’ mental ability or their academic performance, rather it relates to their ability to take a proactive approach towards their learning, to implement strategies that enhance life-long learning and to monitor their performance for signs of progress and success (Zimmerman, 2000). Furthermore, participants who described an increase in self-regulatory strategies described themselves as feeling more in control of not only their academic performance, but of their overall experience. By perceiving that they were mastering their self-regulation processes, participants expressed feeling able to cope with their multiple roles more effectively, which assisted in the protection of their roles as mother and student. Participants who described developing self-regulatory strategies discussed their experiences as positive, allowing them to advance their knowledge in addition to being a better parent and role model for their children.

Many participants discussed entering university with the motivation to succeed, but limited understanding of the strategies required to be a self-regulated learner. A number of participants articulated feeling unsure of what was required of them upon their entry to university. A number of participants felt that they were starting university with a disadvantage as they had not completed secondary schooling. Karis (full-time, married, one child) said: “I didn’t really know what I was doing or how I would go. I didn’t finish high school and didn’t pass year 10.” Similarly, Sherie (full-time, single, two children) stated: “when I

first enrolled I knew I had assignments to do so I was fine with that, but I didn't know how to actually study, what I should have been doing." Another participant, Narelle (part-time, single, two children), went further to explain:

I expected to be taught better, like at high school, when I went to high school years ago, where they taught you everything, but then I had to do readings, and look stuff up and work out how to learn by myself. Now I feel like I can do it better, but that was really hard working out how to learn.

Some participants needed to make modifications to their expectations, further developing their management strategies, to better moderate their academic performance and become self-regulated learners. One modification many participants made in response to moderating their academic performance was to change their course load. Karen (full-time, single, two children) said: "I started off with a full-time load, but I didn't really know how much work I had to do or what I would need to do to pass. When I worked it out then I dropped some units". Another participant, Kelly (full-time, single, two children) commented how improving her organisation assisted her to monitor and improve her results, stating:

I soon worked out that I needed to start my assignments earlier because if not I would be up all night trying to get it in on time and I didn't have time to even read what I had written so some of it wasn't that good. But now I can get better marks by reading them again every time before I hand it in.

Participants' perception of themselves as learners was described by a number of participants as related to their ability to be self-regulated learners. Some participants discussed feeling less stressed when they felt in control of their own learning as a result of implementing self-regulatory strategies. These emotions associated with feeling in control were expressed by Barbara (full-time, married, four children) as she said:

The worst thing is when you feel like it is all on top of you and you have so much on and don't know how to do it all and then you get grumpy with the kids and feel bad because you are grumpy, but when it is all under control and you have things planned and it is going well then I am happy and everyone is happy.

A number of participants discussed learning how to use feedback from lecturers to enhance their learning as a form of self-regulating learning, as Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) said:

The first few times when I got assignments back with comments I didn't even read them because that assignment was over and then I worked out that if I looked at these when I do the next one I cannot do the same stuff again and I would get better marks, so that worked really well.

Danika (full-time, single, one child) similarly stated:

I read every bit of feedback I get now, it is so helpful and I know some students don't even read it at all. But why would they [the lecturer] spend all that time writing comments if they weren't going to be useful.

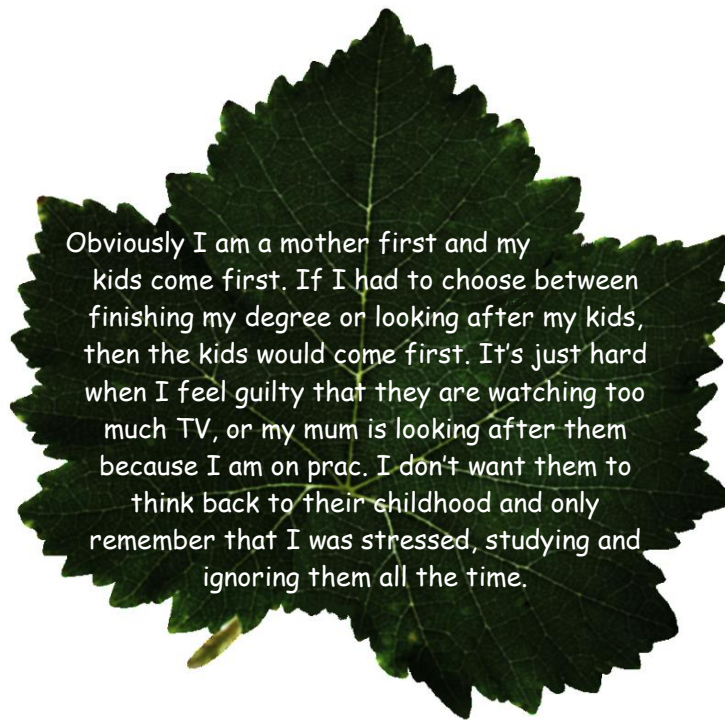
A number of participants also attributed their success managing their multiple roles to being a self-regulated learner. Two students also expressed that they considered themselves to be a better parent as a result of implementing strategies that made their learning easier. Narelle (part-time, single, two children) commented on her use of a term planner as a self-regulatory strategy, saying: "My term planner has been the most useful, I use one all the time and my kids know what it is and it has been the one thing that has made me get through this [university experience]". One reason stated for being a better parent is that these participants felt that their positive role modelling would assist their children to be successful students in the future. Sherie (full-time, single, two children) described this type of role modelling for her teenage children, saying:

I started off doing my assignments and studying at uni but then I was spending so much time away from home and now I think it is good for them seeing me doing my homework and then she [her daughter] will get her books out at the table and do hers too.

Danika (full-time, single, one child) commented on the value of having visual aids on the walls in her house, saying: "I [have] put mind-maps up and lists and whatever helps me up on the walls, so he [her son] has seen them and I think that is good for him at school later."

Many participants described changes in their perception since enrolling at university. These changes in their self-perception included their confidence, self-efficacy and self-regulation. Participants also discussed a significant change in the way they perceived themselves as students, indicating an increase in their confidence, belief in themselves and ability to implement strategies to enhance their learning. For many participants this improved perception improved their overall experience and, for some, inspired changes in their family circumstances. These family changes included ending or entering relationships, employment changes, and children's schooling choices. The majority of participants discussed a change in their perception, with those having a positive perception also indicating that they felt better equipped to navigate their dual roles as student and mother. They discussed being a better mother as they considered themselves to be a more positive role model, happier as they experienced success and more confident about their ability to provide financial security for their family in the future.

5.6 Central concept: Motherhood first



Overwhelmingly, the most central concept interpreted from the findings of this study was that mature age female students with dependent children at university see themselves, or expressed that they should see themselves, as a mother first. As such, motherhood was expressed as, and deemed to be, participants' primary social role. This central or core concept layer, motherhood first, was positioned centrally in the conceptual description both illustrative and conceptually, surrounded by and, where possible, protected by the coping concepts and key themes of the conceptual description. All participants described their motherhood role as their highest priority, and as such, participants prioritised their multiple roles and experiences around either protecting this motherhood role, or justifying decisions and actions that conflicted with it.

The interpretive analysis of the data found that it was the intention of all participants to ensure their motherhood role was fulfilled as a priority to their

secondary social roles. These secondary social roles included, but were not limited to, their social roles as a wife, student, paid employee or volunteer. Whilst motherhood took precedence over these secondary social roles, other roles still needed to be attended to and, as a consequence resulted in conflict. This conflict, which was discussed at least in part by all the participants in this study, typically resulting in participants describing experiences of role conflict and guilt.

Prioritising motherhood

All the participants in this study indicated that their role as a mother was paramount. Thus, their expectations were established and their experience was managed based on this premise that their motherhood role took precedence over their role as student. As Jadine (part-time, married, two children) articulated, whilst discussing her need to study part-time and not complete university as soon as her peers: “I’ve got to sort of slap myself and remind myself that I am a mother, and that is my first job, not being a student.” Similarly, Vanessa (part-time, married, two children) discusses mothering as her primary social role, saying: “I’m sort of like a mum mainly, and then I just fit uni in around that.” Although university studies were identified as extremely important to all the participants in this study, the identity of a university student was determined to be a secondary social role.

Role strain

Role strain was identified in the interpretive analysis of this study as a key indication of how students perceived their university experience. Participants described experiencing three levels of role strain. Termed by Goode (1960), role strain is typically comprised of three types of problems: role conflict, role overload and role contagion. Role strain had a significant impact on participants’ perception of their university experience, in addition to their perception of their motherhood role. Participants did, however, describe being able to relieve part

of their role strain by implementing coping concepts as illustrated in the conceptual description. As a result, the coping concepts, in addition to the key themes of this conceptual description attempted, and at times succeeded, to protect the participants' role of motherhood by assisting to combat the role strain they experienced.

Role conflict

The first aspect of role strain described by participants was role conflict. Role conflict occurs when two roles need to be completed at the same chronological time. Some level of role conflict was indicated by all the participants of this study requiring greater amounts of time than many of the participants had expected. Typically, these students described needing to make a choice between university and other events, including family related events. For example, Danielle (full-time, single, three children) said: "Both my kids got merit certificates within the first couple weeks of this term, and I wasn't able to make [attend] either of them". Similarly, Simone (part-time, married, two children) described: "I have to organise a friend to pick them up from school because I just can't be at uni and there to pick them up [from school] at the same time". According to the participants in this study, role conflict was the least complex type of role strain to overcome as it typically involved making a decision between two roles.

Role overload

The second aspect of role strain described by participants was role overload. Role overload occurs when there are too many roles that need to be completed within the allocated time. Role overload was indicated by most of the participants, requiring a higher standard of time management than participants had originally expected. Expectations of time and the university experience had a significant impact on some participants' perceived level of role overload. A number of participants found themselves feeling overwhelmed with the level of work their multiple roles placed on them, such as Raeleen (part-time, single, two children) who described:

I work a minimum of four days every fortnight and then my studies on top, so it is hard to, it is definitely a balancing act, a huge balancing act from transitioning from work, to mummy mode, to uni mode, to trying to get assignments done, and doing all my pre-readings.

The implementation of time management strategies was deemed essential by participants in managing role overload, as Karen (full-time, single, two children) stated: “Sometimes you don’t know until you’ve planned out the semester or the week that you can’t actually fit it in, and then I see all the things I have to do and realise that I just have too much to do.”

To assist participants to manage this role overload, a number of participants expressed feeling obliged to withdraw from other activities to ensure that their children received the optimum amount of mothering required at each time, therefore protecting their motherhood role. This was articulated by Raeleen (part-time, single, two children) who said: “My kids come first at the end of the day, and if the kids are failing in anything, I’ll pull back with what I’m doing and address that.” Another participant, Meredith (full-time, married, two children), described minimal role overload as significant adjustments were made prior to her university entrance, including leaving paid employment and ensuring higher levels of familial support were in place in anticipation of the greater role load. Role overload was indicated by the participants as more complex to resolve than role conflict, and often resulted in participants feelings of tiredness, inundation and guilt.

Role contagion

The third and final aspect of role strain discussed by participants was role contagion. Role contagion is described as actively thinking about one role while performing another. Participants commonly described thinking about their children or family commitments while attending, or studying for, university. This practice, which inhibited many participants' ability to manage their university-

allocated time effectively, was determined to be a form of role contagion during the interpretive analysis of the data in this study. Lauren (part-time, married, two children) described her experience of thinking about her children whilst at university, saying: "Mothering doesn't stop because you're physically not there. They [the children] never leave your head, your kids, its constant." Similarly, Vanessa (part-time, married, two children) described unintentionally thinking about her son whilst studying, saying, "sometimes my mind is sort of worrying about him". Conversely, Lorraine (part-time, single, six children) described thinking about her university studies whilst spending time with her children, saying, "I'm not totally and utterly focused on them". Role contagion was also identified by participants as difficult to avoid. Karis (full-time, married, two children) described trying to overcome role contagion by avoiding taking on her teenage daughter's problems at the same time as focusing on an assignment, saying: "Sometimes she has approached me and I'm in the middle of an assignment and I can't, I haven't got the head space to go to her and help her with that issue." Similarly, Simone (part-time, married, two children) described trying to concentrate on one type of thought at a time, saying she has:

[I have] a million things going around my brain, but I've learned to sort of filter it a bit better now. I kind of learned how to put it out of my mind, whatever I need to put out of my mind.

Guilt

In addition to experiencing each of the three layers of role strain, participants also discussed experiencing significant levels of guilt. The majority of participants described feelings of guilt relating to their belief that they are not performing their mothering role to the standard that they deem acceptable. Feelings of guilt were significant for participants who described feeling as though they were succeeding in prioritising their motherhood role. When establishing their initial expectations of the university experience, most participants expressed that they did not anticipate these feelings of guilt, or the subsequent effect of these feelings of guilt on the management of their own wellbeing. This was because

they expected less role conflict than they had initially anticipated as they believed their motherhood role would continue to take priority over their other competing commitments.

Guilt was experienced when these expected priorities were misaligned as, at times, students prioritised their studies first over other aspects in their family commitments. Karen (full-time, single, two children) for example, described feelings of guilt after postponing her son's non-essential therapy in lieu of using her available time to fulfil her university commitments, saying:

I also feel really guilty that every time I look at my diary it's got *make an appointment with the speech therapist* and every time I look at that I just feel disheartened and I can't do that right now because I just can't do that with uni.

Danielle (full-time, single, three children) also expressed feelings of guilt as a result of the sacrifices that she perceived her children have made for her to complete her university studies, saying:

You feel like you're neglecting them a bit and I've said to uni friends and work colleagues, that I'm going to do something really good for the kids at the end of this degree, like take them away on a holiday or do something because they've had to put up with this for six years, and it's just [that] you do feel bad.

Another participant communicated feelings of guilt about leaving her children unattended in the home while she attended lectures. She described these feelings of guilt as a reflection of her not meeting her expectations of her role as mother. Her feelings of guilt extended to feeling neglectful as she described having to leave her children in the home during the school holidays whilst she attended lectures, saying: "I had to leave them at home, they had access to a neighbour down the street, so they weren't home alone, but they were home alone" (pseudonym withheld).

When participants were unable to protect their motherhood role, thus resulting in feelings of guilt, they actively justified their decisions and actions that conflicted with prioritising motherhood. A number of participants discussed considered it a motherhood obligation to act as an educational, and for some female, role model for their children despite the feelings of guilt associated with their role as student. Thus, the interrelated nature of these roles, as student and mother, were discussed by a number of participants, including Lauren (part-time, married, two children) who was one of many participants that justified that studying at university was positive role modelling, and therefore, good mothering to her children, saying that: "The kids are seeing that I'm at big school [university], so [university is] in their vocabulary now, they're seeing me doing it so I think [it is a good thing] from that role-model perspective." Furthermore, some participants also discussed increasing their future earning capacity as a key element of sustaining their good mother role. Lauren (part-time, married, two children), for example, said: "Whatever happens, I can financially support myself and my children." Jadine (full-time, married, 2 children) also justified her feelings of guilt, saying:

Of course I feel guilty about leaving a one year old, like, today, today's a hard one because it's pass the parcel with him, but, I just know in the long run it's going to be so much better, I'm going to be able to provide.

Ruby (full-time, married, two children) also justified her feelings of guilt by discussing her future earning capacity after the completion of her degree, saying:

I might not be at home as much as I would like to, but you know, as a trade-off for doing this [university degree] and providing for them [in paid employment], I can't then also be properly the mum you know, the stay at home mum that people sort of think that you have to do, but then also for me as a person, I've also got to look at what I want to do with my future. That's the driving force, providing for my children and their future".

Simone was one of a few participants who described managing her feelings of guilt by justifying reducing the time she spent on individual assignments, saying:

When I've got an assignment due, I'll get to the point when I'll think I haven't got any more time to do this, so it's just going to have to be, this is as good as it is going to be, you know, and yeah, I could spend the rest of the Sunday doing it, but the kids want me and they want to spend time with me and I'll feel too guilty so I probably won't improve [the assignment] that much anyway.

5.8 Description of findings chapter review

This chapter provided a voice to what the participants had communicated during the 24 individual interviews and the three mini-focus groups undertaken in this study. First, this chapter explored the quotable quotes that were taken from the individual interviews and used during the mini-focus groups. This use, and subsequent analysis, of the quotable quotes ensured these quotes that were identified by the researcher as containing important seeds of insight (Thorne, 2008), were neither lost, nor given too much credibility. Following the quotable quotes, this chapter introduced the conceptual description that emerged from the interpretive analysis of the data. This multi-layered conceptual description conveyed illustratively and conceptually what the participants in this study had described their experience as both student and mother, to be.

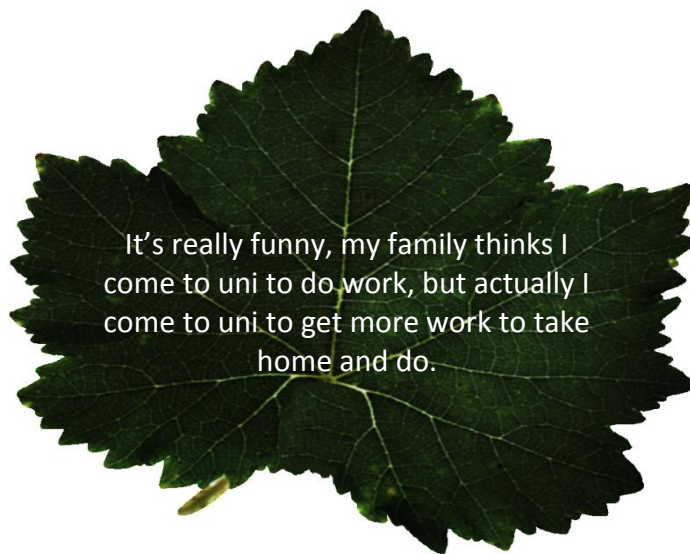
The first layer of this conceptual description discussed the two key themes that emerged from the data, expectations and management. Both complex and interconnected with the concepts of the other two layers, these themes reflected what the 32 participants in this study had communicated to the researcher. Participants' expectations were the first key theme, having a significant impact on participants' experience as student and mother. This impact was amplified when there was a misalignment between participants'

expectations and experience. The three aspects of expectations that emerged from this data were participants' expectation of time, their expectation of the overall university experience, and their academic expectations. The second key theme was management. Participants identified five aspects that needed to be managed for participants to navigate their dual roles of student and mother. These five aspects included managing time, family, wellbeing, money, and significant life events. Participants' management of these five aspects were neither uniform nor static. Rather, participants often reported managing one aspect well, whilst struggling with another aspect. Similarly, a number of participants' noted managing one element of an aspect well, whilst not achieving another element of the same aspect. Therefore, this description of findings chapter provided a structured overview of what the 32 participants said about their experience as university student and mother.

The middle layer of the conceptual description described three coping concepts that illustratively and conceptually attempted to protect the core concept. These three coping concepts were support, sacrifice and perception. Participants discussed the need for, and at times, acceptance of mostly instrumental supports to assist them navigating their dual roles as student and mother. Emotional support was also discussed by participants, albeit to a lesser extent. Furthermore, participants discussed sacrifices that were commonly described by participants, required to navigate their dual roles. These sacrifices, as discussed, included family, social and financial sacrifices made by participants to enable their studies. In addition, many participants described these sacrifices as motivation for completing their degree. The third coping concept in the middle layer of the conceptual description was perception. Participants' perception of their experience was identified as having a significant effect on their experience as student and mother. Participants' self-perception was dynamic, including their confidence, self-efficacy and self-regulation.

Finally, this chapter identified the central, or core, concept of the conceptual description; motherhood first. The majority of participants in this study expressed that they either saw themselves, or felt that they should see themselves, as a mother first. As such, motherhood was expressed as, and deemed to be, participants' primary social role. This central concept of motherhood first was positioned in the conceptual description both illustrative and conceptually as, surrounded and, where possible, protected by the coping concepts and key themes of the conceptual description. All participants described their motherhood role as their highest priority, and as such, participants prioritised their multiple roles and experiences around either protecting this motherhood role, or justifying decisions and actions that conflicted with it. When participants were unable to prioritise their motherhood role, they described experiencing role strain and guilt.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion



6.1 Study overview

Researchers who focus on the experience of university students have the ability to inform future decision-makers by conducting studies that report on the experience of students from discrete groups. One such student group, which was the focus of this research, is mature age female students with dependent children studying on one campus, ECUSW. This study explored beyond the educational disadvantage (Abbot-Chapman et al., 2004) of this mature age participant group, instead exploring participants' combined experience navigating their dual roles as student and mother. This therefore aligned with the aim of this study, which was to explore the experiences of mature age, female students with dependent children studying on one regional university campus in Western Australia, ECUSW. The purpose of this exploration was to provide an insight and understanding of the experience as student and mother, as expressed by the participants, which can be used to inform future policy makers to better cater for similar university students in the future.

The insight and understanding that emerged from the data has culminated in a multi-layered conceptual description. The three layers of this conceptual

description included the foundation layer, which is descriptive-based outlining the two key themes of expectations and management. The middle layer is made up of three coping concepts, support, sacrifice and perception. These three coping concepts assisted to protect the central, or core layer, of the conceptual description, motherhood first. This multi-layered conceptual description situates and advances the existing body of knowledge into mature age female students with dependent children studying at university, providing insight into the experience of these participants navigating their dual roles as student and mother studying at a regional university campus in Western Australia.

The regional university campus where this study was conducted was Edith Cowan University South West (ECUSW), located in the regional city of Bunbury in Western Australia. Bunbury is a small city with a population of approximately 33,000 people, located approximately 180 kilometres (122 miles) south of Perth on Australia's west coast. This Bunbury campus is a modest campus consisting of approximately 1000 students (Edith Cowan University, 2014) and offering six undergraduate courses. ECUSW campus was selected for this study partially because of the convenience to the researcher, and partially because it has a disproportionately large number of female and mature age students when compared with the Australian national statistics (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014b; Edith Cowan Institute for Education Research, 2011). A total of 32 students participated in this study, and consistent with the inclusion criteria, each of these participants was aged between 25 and 44 upon their university entrance, had at least one child residing with them under the age of 18, were studying at least partly on campus at ECUSW, and had completed the first year full-time, or part-time equivalent, of their degree.

The methodology for this research was Interpretive Description, which is a second-generation qualitative methodology aimed at exploring the experiences of people with the view to guiding future decisions that will also apply to the

lives of real people (Thorne, 2008). The data was collected through three data sources. First, a 20-question demographic questionnaire was completed by each of the 32 participants. Individual unstructured interviews were then conducted with 21 participants using the open-ended grand tour question “Tell me about your experience at university.” Then 11 people participated in one of the three semi-structured mini-focus groups that were conducted incorporating the same grand tour question. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, and the data were organised using NVivo 10 qualitative research software. This software assisted the researcher to fragment the data into nodes, before analysing it to ultimately determine the key themes of the study. These themes were further analysed, interpreted, and contextualised into a conceptual description, giving rise to concepts which further illustrated the experiences of mothers studying at ECUSW campus.

A multi-layered conceptual description emerged through the analytical process of this study. The foundation layer of this conceptual description outlined the two key themes that were articulated as having the most significant impact on participants’ experience as student and mother. The first key theme was expectations. Participants whose expectations aligned with their experience perceived themselves as having a more positive experience at university than those students who described a misalignment between their expectations and experience. These expectations related to their expectations of time, their expectations of the overall university experience, and their academic expectations. The second key theme was management. Participants who discussed implementing well-established management strategies more often discussed a positive experience navigating their dual roles as student and mother. Management strategies in one or more of the five aspects were discussed, managing time, managing family, managing wellbeing, managing money and managing significant life events. These two key themes emerged directly from what participants expressly said about their experience navigating their dual roles as student and mother.

The middle layer of this multi-layered conceptual description includes three coping concepts: support, sacrifice and perception. These three coping concepts emerged from further data analysis, and attempted to protect the primary social role of the student, motherhood. Participants discussed both the instrumental and emotional support required to navigate their dual roles of student and mother. Sacrifices, family, social and financial, were described by participants as required to navigate these dual roles. Finally, participants' self-perception as a student and mother was instrumental in their overall experience, including their confidence, self-efficacy and perception. Each of these coping concepts aligned with other research into the experience of mature age students at university, outlining the importance of these three concepts, support, sacrifice and perception, on their overall university experience (Bosch, 2013; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010).

The central, or core layer of this conceptual description was motherhood first. Overwhelmingly, all the participants in this study discussed their experience as student and mother in terms of ensuring that they fulfilled, or attempted to fulfil, their motherhood role first. For many participants, prioritising motherhood also served as a motivating factor, as they considered themselves a primary role model for their children, a concept consistent with the findings of previous research (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006; Griffiths, 2002; Liversidge, 2004; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). This prioritisation of motherhood, however, resulted in difficulties for many participants, including the three aspects of role strain; role conflict, role overload, and role contagion (Home, 1998; Goode, 1960), in addition to feelings of guilt. This central concept of motherhood first culminated what all participants had said throughout the study; that although they were trying hard to achieve a degree and fulfil their university requirements, their primary social role as mother took precedence over all other roles, concurring

with the findings of previous research (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Leary & Tangen, 2003).

6.2 Discussion

The key themes and concepts that emerged from the analysis of the data in this study, which are included in the conceptual description, were not unique to this study. Rather, these elements concur with the findings of previous studies into the experience of female, mature age university students, and more specifically, mature age female students with dependent children. First, the central concept, that participants prioritise their motherhood role, is addressed in the literature relating to role theory. The expectations and management of various aspects by participants influence their ability to maintain this central concept. Second, three coping concepts are discussed, each of which act to protect the motherhood role, and each influenced by and interrelated with the two key themes of expectations and management. These three protective coping concepts of support, sacrifice, and perception, in addition to the central concept of motherhood first, are contextualised in this section within the Australian and international literature.

6.2.1 Key themes

The key themes identified by the descriptive analysis in this study are the foundational layer of the conceptual description. This layer sits distinct from the conceptual layer, surrounding and underpinning the concepts rather than sitting within them. Two key themes emerged. The first was expectations, encompassing expectations of time, expectations of the overall university experience, and academic expectations. The second was management, encompassing managing time, managing family, managing wellbeing, managing money and managing significant external events.

The elements involved in these key themes aligned significantly with the findings of an Australian study on the reasons for student discontinuance (Scott et al., 1996). This study specified the main reasons identified as to why students with dependent children discontinue study, which include difficulties and pressure in managing family responsibilities, childcare difficulties, pressure managing work responsibilities, financial difficulties, difficulties with their own health and wellbeing, ill-health of a family member, and hostility or lack of support from their partner, family or friends. Many of these key aspects found in this study aligned with the findings outlined by Griffiths (2002), who found that university mature age female students with dependent children are most significantly affected by difficulties managing childcare, domestic commitments and changes in their family lives.

The difficulties managing money which were identified in this study aligned with the difficulties found in a United Kingdom study focusing on the experiences and needs of students who are parents (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). This study identified similar difficulties such as managing family responsibilities, finding time for personal study, managing finances to support their studies and pay for childcare, and finding appropriate childcare places. In another United Kingdom study (Gerrard & Roberts, 2006), managing money and wellbeing were also identified as a significant issue for mature age female students with dependent children. Similarly, problems managing children, including childcare and supervision, alongside financial pressures, are evidently international difficulties and not unique to this Australian study, as these were determined to be two of the most significant difficulties for students with small children in a Hungarian study (Engler, 2013), a Canadian study (Ajandi, 2011), an American study (Haleman, 2004), and a New Zealand study (White, 2008). In fact, every study focusing on the experience of mature age female students with dependent children at university, regardless of the specific aim or purpose of the study, found, or at least commented, that participants experienced difficulties managing their multiple roles as student, mother and, most often, worker

(Ajandi, 2011; Austin & McDermott, 2004; Bosch, 2013; Engler, 2013; Gerrard & Roberts, 2006; Griffiths, 2002; Haleman, 2004; Kember, 1999; Liversidge, 2004; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Osborne et al., 2004; Pare, 2009; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Ricco et al., 2009; Scott et al., 1996; Swingle, 2013; Welsh, 2003; White, 2008). Therefore, an exhaustive outline of the concurrence between the management and expectation themes with existing literature is not provided here. Rather, these are embedded in the context within the different elements of the central and coping concepts as outlined further.

6.2.2 Central concept: Motherhood first

Motherhood first was identified as the most significant, or central concept, interpreted from the data analysed from the participants in this study.

Motherhood is a culturally derived term for “the way we perform mothering” (Thurer, 1994). Although motherhood is defined by multiple discourses (Johnson & Swanson, 2003), the dominant discourse of motherhood in Western society positions the concept of motherhood as “good mother” (Johnson & Swanson, 2003; McMahon, 1995; Thurer, 1994). The traditional ideology of “good mother” incorporated white, middle-class mothers, who were full-time at-home carers, entirely satisfied fulfilling domestic aspirations (Boris, 1994). Hays (1996) defines a more contemporary motherhood ideologies of “good mother” as:

A child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, financially expensive ideology in which mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture and development of the sacred child and in which children’s needs take precedence over the individual needs of their mothers.

This contemporary ideology concurred with the participants in this study as all participants discussed motherhood as taking precedence over their individual needs. A role that takes precedence above all other roles, as described with motherhood, and termed a primary social role, is the role that each person believes is the most important in their lived experience (Leary & Tangen, 2003).

As the purpose of this study was to identify the shared experience of mature age female students with dependent children studying at university, it was found that this experience of identifying mothering as their primary social role was consistently shared and expressed by all participants in this study. Although university studies were identified as extremely important to all the participants in this study, the identity of university student was found to be a secondary social role. Secondary social role identities are considered to be important by the person, however, to a lesser degree than that of the primary role (Leary & Tangen, 2003). In this study, multiple secondary social roles were identified by the participants in addition to their secondary role as student. These other roles included, but are not limited to, wife, daughter, employee and volunteer.

This concept of prioritising motherhood as a woman's primary social role is not unique to this study; rather, it aligns with other theories regarding motherhood. According to familial and gender ideology, motherhood is an intensive role that should override other roles, activities, identities and relationships (Hays, 1996; O'Reilly, 1996). Similarly, Douglas and Michaels state that for mothers "all identities take a backseat to the identity of being a mother" (2004). More recently, motherhood ideology denotes that mothers are judged by many at a higher standard, and are expected to have less leisure time (Douglas & Michaels, 2004) today than in the past. Holmes (2006) concurs, saying, "the 21st Century mother is somehow expected to be all things to all people. She can have children, a career and still have time to make her family a healthy dinner". Previous studies indicate difficulties for university mature age female students with dependent children to both fulfil all of these multiple roles and to do each of them well (Darab, 2004; Estes, 2011; Lynch, 2008; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Reay, 2003).

Although the mothering identity is illustrated as a separate identity to that of student, aspects of these two identities are interrelated. The expectation for mothers to have a career as part of their mothering role (Douglas & Michaels, 2004) was expressed by a number of participants, who felt obliged as a mother to role-model educational engagement and career-goal orientation for their children. This parental role modelling for their children has been identified as a positive outcome of higher education for mature age female students with dependent children (Debenham & May, 2005; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Liversidge, 2004; Stone & O'Shea, 2013), with positive role modelling cited as a motivating factor for parents enrolling in higher education (Edwards, 1993; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Reay, 2003). Positive role modelling and working towards future financial security were cited as reasons why studying at university was, in itself, considered an example of good parenting (Estes, 2011; Reay, 2003; Reay et al., 2002).

The vast majority of participants in this study discussed experiencing difficulties balancing their primary social role of motherhood with their secondary social roles, specifically, their role as student. Experiencing difficulties managing the various aspects of their roles of mother and student is not unique to the participants of this study, rather, these difficulties have been identified in a number of international studies (Griffiths, 2002; Hays, 1996; Holmes, 2006; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Pare, 2009; Pierce & Herlihy, 2013; White, 2006; Williams, Manvel, & Bornstein, 2006). Difficulties are intensified when there is a misalignment of the students' experience once at university, compared to their expectations of the overall university experience upon entry (Stalker, 2001). When students experience difficulties managing their multiple roles at a level unmanageable for them, they withdraw their efforts in their secondary social roles, in this case their role as student, to protect the quality of their primary social role, their role of mother (Bosch, 2013). This compulsion to withdraw from their role as a student to focus on their role as a mother has been identified in previous studies (Pare, 2009; Scott et al., 1996; Smith, 1996), and documented as

a significant reason for mature age female students with dependent children to either defer or withdraw completely from their university studies (Abbot-Chapman et al., 2004).

The difficulties that mature age female students with dependent children experience managing their multiple roles have been attributed to role strain by numerous studies (Darab, 2004; Estes, 2011; Hays, 1996; Home, 1998; Johnson & Swanson, 2003; Lynch, 2008; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Role strain was described by the majority of participants in this study, and is a common consequence for many female, mature age students who are negotiating the responsibilities of their dependent children with their university studies (Darab, 2004; Home, 1998). Experiencing role strain is not unique to the student-mother role combination, rather, mothers often experience role strain whilst navigating other secondary social roles such as participating in paid employment (Estes, 2011; Hays, 1996; Johnson & Swanson, 2003).

Termed by Goode (1960), role strain is a three-level concept referring to students' perceived difficulty in meeting multiple role demands. The first level of role strain, role conflict, involves the difficulty students have meeting simultaneous but incompatible demands (Goode, 1960), thus, the participants in this study described struggling to be in two places at one time. The role conflicts that participants described aligned with the findings of previous research, including conflicts between on-campus contact time and child-rearing, especially when dependent children were unwell or were unable to attend school (White, 2008). Furthermore, role conflict was exacerbated for the participants in this study, and for those in previous studies, when lectures and tutorials times were inflexible and scheduled at times that were unsuitable for the student (Lynch, 2008), such as during school holidays or on school pupil-free days.

Role overload, the second level of role strain, describes having insufficient time available for students to meet their multiple demands (Goode, 1960). Goode further relates role overload directly to the management of, and expectations of, time. Time was significant in the key finding from this study, including participants' expectations of time and their management of their time available, concurring with the findings of previous studies (Stone, 2008; White, 2008). Role overload, considered in the framework involving scarcity theory (Goode, 1960), results in students feeling "time poor" (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Darab, 2004), as only a limited amount of time is available to the student to meet the expectations of their multiple roles (Aryee, Srinivas, & Tan, 2005), resulting in time poverty (Ajandi, 2011; Austin & McDermott, 2004). Time poverty, as illustrated in a doctoral study focusing on the experience of single mother-students (Ajandi, 2011), more significantly affected students who entered university with the expectation of fitting their university studies around their existing commitments. This concurred with another study outlining instances of students with dependent children entering university expecting to make learning invisible within their home by ensuring their home life remains undisturbed by their demanding study schedule (Stalker, 2001).

In addition to role conflict and role overload, most participants in this study also described experiencing the third level of role strain, role contagion. Role contagion, which is focused on less in the existing literature on mature age students (Rowlands, 2010), involves students' preoccupation with one role whilst actively performing another role (Goode, 1960). Participants in this study described not switching off from their primary social role as a mother whilst at university, whilst others commented that they were thinking of their children and family commitments constantly.

Participants' experience of role strain in this study most significantly impacted on their ability to negotiate multiple aspects of the management theme, particularly their management of family and other significant external events. The relationship between role strain, as a student and a mother, with the management of their time and significant external events, echoed the experience and difficulties of students who are mothers from previous studies (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Home, 1998; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Five coping strategies to overcome role strain, as articulated by Goode (1960), were discussed by participants, assisting them to manage their dual roles as student and mother. These strategies (Goode, 1960), identified as particularly important for mothers studying at university (Rowlands, 2010; Swingle, 2013) are: compartmentalisation, including studying away from the home, i.e. in the university e-lab, to ensure minimal disruptions by the family; delegation, including the use of childcare centres or family support for the delegation of child minding and domestic assistance; elimination, commonly involving the resignation from paid employment or a volunteer position to allow more time for university studies; extension or expansion, where the student expands their commitment in one role, i.e. paid employment, to excuse not completing their commitments in another role, i.e. university assignments; and barriers to intrusion, which was considered a necessity by a number of participants and included, for example, turning off their mobile phone, or removing themselves from Facebook during the academic semester.

In addition to experiencing role strain, students expressed feelings of guilt whilst prioritising their primary social role of mother. Predominant feelings of guilt were described by the majority of participants in this study, aligning with the findings from existing research (Britton & Baxter, 1999; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; White, 2008). Parents who undertook a university degree report feeling guilt regarding their unavailability to their children (Gonzales-Arnal & Kilkey, 2009). Participants' feelings echoed those of previous studies that mothers should be available for their children at all times "on demand" (Stalker, 2001). The concept of parental

guilt, as identified in this study, is a gendered concept as female students are more inclined to define their university studies in terms of guilt and selfishness than men (Britton & Baxter, 1999).

Participants in this study discussed guilt for two main reasons. First, for not fulfilling society's expectation of them as a good mother. The expectation of "good mother" that society has constructed is considered unattainable, especially for students managing dual roles of student and mother (Hays, 1996; Johnston & Swanson, 2003; Liss et al., 2013; Warner, 2006). When mature age female students with dependent children fail to meet these expectations, either sporadically or chronically, they felt guilt and were concerned about their university studies interfering with their primary social role as a mother (Blaxter & Tight, 1994; White, Davies, & Murphy, 2008). Second, participants in this study expressed guilt that they were neglecting their children by not supervising them adequately whilst completing their university studies, echoing the concerns of participants from previous studies (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Moss, 2004). Although the guilt related to supervisory neglect was a concern for a number of participants in this study, this guilt was largely unfounded, as both their lack of supervision and their actions did not actually meet the criteria of supervisory neglect as no extra potential to lead to harm for the children existed (Scott, Higgins, & Franklin, 2012).

6.2.3 Coping concepts

Despite emerging from the interpretive data analysis in this study, each of these three coping concepts is not individually unique to this study. Rather, each of these three coping concepts, that serve to protect the integrity of the motherhood first central concept, individually and collectively reflect elements from existing studies (Bosch, 2013; Home, 1998; Laming, 2001; Quimby & O'Brien, 2006; Scott et al., 1996; Stone, 2008; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010).

This section discusses the elements of each of these three coping concepts, contextualising each concept within the existing body of literature.

The coping concepts which form this conceptual description most closely align with the coping mechanisms in Kember's causal network model (1999). Kember's model, as shown in *Figure 6.2 – Kember's causal network model*, resulted from a study focusing on the experiences of part-time students from three universities, including one in Australia, looking at the integration of their family, work, and social commitments. Kember's qualitative research focused on the experiences of students from three universities located in Australia, Papua New Guinea and Hong Kong, each balancing multiple roles as part-time, employed university students with family commitments. As this current study included only continuing students who were successful in completing at least one year of their degree, the aspects of Kember's causal network model which attributed failure and withdrawal to external factors were outside the scope of this study. Kember's reasons, however, for student-initiated withdrawal were similar to the key themes that participants said needed to be managed, including time available for study because of occupational and other commitments, financial difficulties, illness of the student or family members, and housing and other accommodation difficulties. Although the participants of this study were continuing students, many described similar difficulties. As a result, participants discussed their need to implement coping strategies to manage their money, including employment, and a range of significant external events. The implementation of these coping strategies is not dissimilar to those described within negotiation of arrangements in Kember's causal network model (1999).

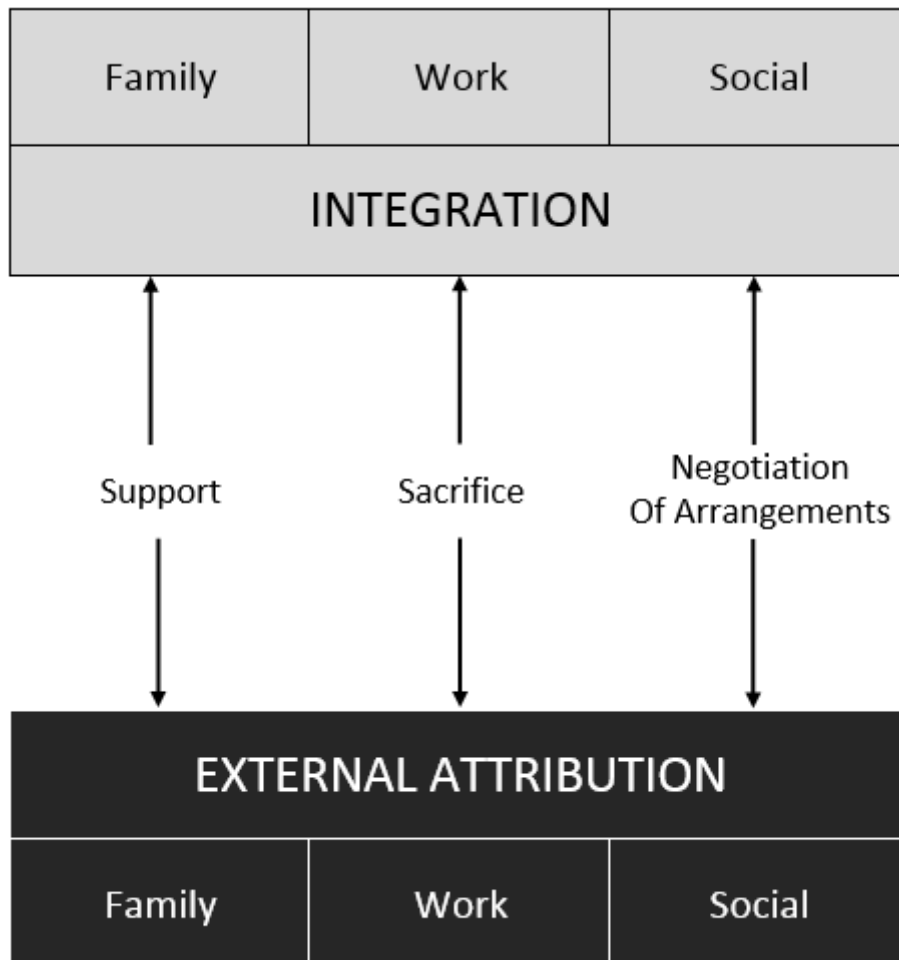


Figure 6.2-1 Kember's causal network model (1999, p.4)

Support

The levels of support participants wanted, needed, or sought directly impacted their experience as university student and mother. Support is a broad and complex concept, with students' need for support fluctuating largely depending on life events, rather than remaining continuous (Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2011). Identifying the concept of support in this study concurs with, and extends the existing literature, as support is identified within existing literature as a key factor influencing the experience of mature age women studying at university (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Darab, 2004; Engler, 2013; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Pare, 2009; Scott et al., 1996; White, 2008; Zepke et al., 2011).

The interpretive analysis of this study identified that two main types of social support were significant to participants' experiences. Specifically, instrumental and emotional support, being two of the four categories of social support outlined in House's support framework (1981). The majority of participants predominantly discussed their need for, and expectation to receive, instrumental support to assist with managing family, money and time. Participants also discussed, albeit to a lesser extent, their need for emotional support, which provides assistance to help students manage their emotional wellbeing. Emotional support commonly includes a combination of ongoing support, deemed important for ongoing psychological health and wellbeing, and buffer support, deemed necessary during stressful situations (Cohen & Willis, 1985; Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). Emotional support, on the other hand, involves the provision of empathy, nurturance, concern, and encouragement.

Instrumental support was identified as the most important support, aligning with White (2008) who also identified that mothers studying at university predominantly required practical support, particularly from their immediate and extended family, whilst managing family. The provision for instrumental support is essential for mature age female students with dependent children, particularly in relation to childcare (Darab, 2004; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Osborne et al., 2004; Pare, 2009). Childcare centres and extended family members were the most common sources for childcare support, allowing participants to manage the care and supervision of their children, aligning with previous studies (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). A number of participants were forced to seek more childcare support than they had originally expected due to a misalignment in their expectations of the university experience, as many participants expected, but were unable to, align their on-campus lecture and tutorial times with their children's schooling hours. Aligning with previous studies (Liversidge, 2004; Montgomery et al., 2009; White, 2008), many participants required additional

childcare and domestic support during practicum placements than initially expected. Students with families were described by Stone and O'Shea (2013) as feeling frustrated after altering their expectations of partners and children, thus expecting greater assistance with domestic tasks. In addition to relying on partners and children, students most often relied on extended family, neighbours and paid services, such as childcare centres, for instrumental support (Engler, 2013; Estes, 2011; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; White, 2008).

This familial support contrasted with the sources for emotional support, where participants relied almost predominantly on friends, particularly their university peers (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2009). Emotional support is important for students managing their wellbeing, particular their emotional wellbeing. Gaining emotional support from peers was more difficult for part-time students as their enrolment load affected their formation of peer support networks (Kantanis, 2002). Participants were reluctant to seek emotional support from professional sources such as the university counsellor, as they said this impacted on their management of time, family and money. This reluctance to use the university counselling service differed from previous studies that said female, mature age students were overrepresented using the counselling service (Stone, 2008). Participants described feeling reluctant to seek emotional support from familial sources as they perceived family as either unable to be genuinely understanding, or having a negative view of the students' entry into university studies, a common situation for many mature age, female students (Stone, 2008), particularly for first-in-family students (O'Shea, 2007). The need to improve the facilitation of emotional support for mature age female students with dependent children by educating partners and other family members of their needs was recommended by White (2008). Educating partners, family and friends is important as mature age university entry can often cause friction with these social supporters (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007). Furthermore, partners who felt excluded or intellectually threatened by the students' university enrolment resist providing emotional or instrumental support to assist their partners (Edwards,

1993; Leonard, 1994; Stone, 2008; Wilson, 1997). The absence of appropriate familial support is significant for students with dependent children (Engler, 2013) as the “lack of family support” was found to be one of the six significant contributing factors in an Australian study for mature age, female students with children discontinuing study (Scott et al., 1996).

Participants were less likely to seek ongoing emotional support from lecturing staff, concurring with previous literature (Greenbank, 2007). Compulsory group-work, including group assessments, designed in part by universities to increase social interaction and peer support amongst students (Coffman & Gilligan, 2003; Willcoxon, 2006), was viewed by participants as unsupportive, with many participants identifying a need for emotional support as a result of the group-work activity. This perception of group-work concurred with previous literature (Pritchard & Roberts, 2006; Smith & Rogers, 2014) suggesting that students held concerns about the time-consuming nature, equal participation of group members, and the fairness of marking with relation to group-work (Caple & Bogle, 2013; Willcoxon, 2006).

The two remaining types of support outlined by House (1981) were informational support which provides advice, guidance and suggestions, and companionship support, which develops a better sense of belonging. Informational and companionship support were identified as less important by the analysis of the data in this study, contrasting the findings of previous literature describing these types of support as more essential (Gallacher et al., 2002; Johnson & Watson, 2004; Pritchard & Roberts, 2006; Ramsay et al., 2007). It is suggested that this contrast may be due to the relatively small population of the ECUSW campus, in addition to the disproportionately large number of female, mature age students, including those with dependent children, studying on campus. Furthermore, as this qualitative study made no attempt to check the accuracy of the data collected, the support identified by participants refers to their perceived support,

defined as the support perceived to have been received through the participants' subjective judgement, as distinct from received support, defined as the actual support a person receives (Taylor, 2011).

For many participants, a mixture of instructional and emotional support is needed to ensure a suitable environment for studying and completing assessments. This environment was particularly important for participants studying partly online. It is important that mature age students, especially whilst studying online units, are supported with an appropriate study space, with adequate internet access, and minimal distractions (Kahu, Stephens, Zepke, & Leach, 2014). This supportive environment can be difficult for many students as study spaces, and spaces that have access to technology, are often shared spaces within the family home (Kirkwood, 2003).

The need for, and importance of, instrumental support concurred with the findings and recommendations of previous studies investigating the experience of female mature age students or mature age female students with dependent children, studying at university. White's (2008) New Zealand study recommended that universities invest in additional services to improve the support that students required, concurring with similar recommendations from the United Kingdom (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). When asked, participants with dependent children in the latter UK study identified a need for a variety of mostly instrumental support including childcare, finances, study space, study resources, flexible deadlines, and appropriate areas to relax and eat (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Investing in support services has been identified as one important action required to improve student engagement at university (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Similar support needs were identified in other studies including mature age students (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2009; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Zepke & Leach, 2010) and students with dependent children (Pare, 2009; Ricco et al., 2009; Swingle, 2013), recommending the

provision of adequate study spaces, childcare facilities, providing a quality orientation process, academic support, and the development of peer support networks.

Improving student support, including instrumental and emotional, from potential support for the student, was the focus of a study in South Australia that aimed to assist students' transition into university (Kooyman & Johnston, 2014). This involved distributing an information book, 'Guide for parents, partners and friends for UniSA students' (no date), and conducting information sessions to inform and guide partners, families and friends about the types of support needed by the student. Students in the Australian study by Ayres and Guilfoyle (2009) indicated the recommendation from mature age students to establish support programs that are geared more specifically to their needs. The provision for appropriate and effective support not only improves the students' university experience, it potentially improves motivation and student engagement, particularly for students who are navigating dual roles as student and mother (Edwards, 1993; Engler, 2013; Kantanis, 2002). Thus, adequately supporting students can assist with the essential student qualities of improved motivation and social engagement, each deemed as having a crucial role in student learning and achievement for mature age students (Kahu, 2013).

Sacrifice

The majority of participants in this study discussed a range of sacrifices that were made in order to manage their dual roles as student and mother, and to ensure their expectations were both realistic and aligned with their experience. Kember (2005) outlines that most sacrifices are made in the self or social domain, as "work and family have limited possibilities for sacrifice". Participants in this study outlined various sacrifices made within the family domain, resulting in difficulties for students managing their family, and in the work domain, resulting in difficulties managing money. Family sacrifices, as described by the participants in

this study, included, but were not limited to, sacrificing time spent with their children and spouse, their perceived quality of their mothering role, and the quantity and quality of domestic tasks undertaken within the home. These family sacrifices, particularly sacrificing time spent with children, was common to the findings of other studies (Estes, 2011; Pare, 2009; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; White, 2008), often precipitating feelings of guilt and a desire to compensate for this lack of attention at the completion of their degree. The need for students to renegotiate or sacrifice household domestic tasks positions this finding amongst similar findings of mature age female students with dependent children at university (Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010; White, 2008). Not all students sacrificed household chores in lieu of completing assignments, with some participants using domestic chores as a distraction from their work, concurring with findings of other studies focusing on experiences of mature age university students (Kahu et al., 2014; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010).

Work sacrifices were made by a significant number of the participants in this study, resulting in increased financial difficulties, aligning with other studies which cited difficulties arising after giving up full-time employment (Abbot-Chapman et al., 2004). The main reasons for reducing or giving up paid employment resulted from a lack of time to manage dual roles as a student and a mother (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010), in addition to 'discordant timing' (Moss, 2004) where role conflicts arose between employment and university. Work sacrifices, that were not expected upon entry, have been cited as necessary sacrifices (Cullity, 2006; Home, 1998; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Moss, 2004) to allow the student to better manage their time and family commitments. Students who are parents often need to make such sacrifices as they are "caught up in a constant balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money" (Reay et al., 2002). This work sacrifice, however, often resulted in subsequent financial sacrifice for the family (Abbot-Chapman et al., 2004); such financial sacrifices were expressed by many participants in this study.

Social sacrifice was similar to Kember et al.'s (2005) articulation of self-sacrifice, in that it involved "giving up things which would have been enjoyed, essentially elements of a social life". Mature age students who entered university expecting to accommodate their university studies around their other responsibilities were found to implement a "complex negotiation of time" (Edwards, Hanson, & Raggatt, 1996) to manage aspects such as paid employment, childcare, domestic tasks and their social life. This requirement to successfully negotiate, or manage their time, aligns with the findings from this study, that sacrifices were made by participants to allow them to better manage their time. Similar conclusions were made by Marandet and Wainwright (2010), who concurred with Moss (2004), that when female students with children enter university, their leisure and social time is usually the first area which is sacrificed. Making social sacrifices was common amongst the participants in this study, with many participants renegotiating their perception of social time, viewing their university studies as part of their "leisure time" (Stone, 2008).

Perception

The third coping concept emerging from the data in this study was participants' perception of themselves as students and perception of their university experience. This perception included their motivation and confidence, and self-efficacy and self-regulation. These factors, which emerged from the data analysis, were deemed significant in the existing literature, as student academic behaviour is most influenced by students' perceived self-efficacy, motivation and outcome expectancy (Bandura, 1997; Linnebrink & Pintrich, 2002; Nilsen, 2009). Described by Vroom's expectancy theory (1964), people, including university students (Geiger & Cooper, 1996), are motivated to exert effort to succeed based on their expectations and the level of confidence they have for achieving those expectations. Although a multitude of elements influence participants' perceptions of their university experience, the interpretive analysis of this study

illuminated four aspects that were most significant. These four aspects – motivation, confidence, self-efficacy and self-regulation – aligned with similar aspects identified and acknowledged in existing literature into mature age university students and university students who are mothers (Glogowska, Young, & Lockyer, 2007; McGivney, 2004; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Reay et al., 2002; Scott, Burns, & Cooney, 1998; Stallman, 2010).

Motivation is the first aspect of the perception concept, affecting participants' perception as students, and their expectations of the university experience. A variety of motivations were expressed by the participants in this study, most of which were associated with their expectations upon entry. Mature age students have been described by staff as more motivated than younger students (McGivney, 2004) because, congruent with literature (Reay et al., 2002), mature age students are motivated by a love of learning, illustrated by a number of participants who expressed entering university with the expectation to enjoy and intellectually gain from their university studies. Other reasons discussed by participants in this study that were also outlined in current literature (O'Shea & Stone, 2011), including realising a long-held ambition for a particular course or career path, wishing to prove to themselves and others that they were capable of achieving a degree, and completing studies for employment and financial stability. Where participants were motivated by future financial stability, they often had a clear, and at times misaligned, expectation of the time it would take to complete their degree. A significant number of participants became more motivated as a result of the significant sacrifices that were made for them to undertake a university degree (McGivney, 2004). Furthermore, congruent with O'Shea and Stone (2011), many participants in this study discussed different motivations for continuing with their university studies post-entry, compared with their initial reasons upon entry. This motivational change, for some participants, and aligning with previous literature (O'Shea & Stone, 2011), shifted from, for example, following a desired career path, to achieving a significant personal accomplishment or a sense of completeness. Post-entry motivational

change for mature age students has also been attributed in the literature to changes in students' academic confidence and academic self-efficacy (Hsieh, 2014; Williams, Kessler, & Williams, 2014).

Confidence, including academic confidence, was the second aspect of the perception concept that emerged from the participants in this study. Perceived confidence is particularly important for female, mature age students, and particularly those with dependent children, as they often enter university with a lack of confidence and considerable self-doubt (O'Shea & Stone, 2011), and often with low academic expectations (Home, 1998; Mercer, 2007; Osborne et al., 2004; Stone, 2008). Participants in this study were found to experience an increase in academic confidence after the initial teaching semester, supporting similar findings relating to female, mature age students (Ayres, 2008; Murphy & Roopchand, 2003). Thus, aligning with existing literature, (McGivney, 2004), as students gain academic experience, they also develop an enhanced level of academic confidence (Ayres & Guilfoyle, 2009), particularly evident after participants received initial high marks. Similarly evident in existing literatures (Abbot-Chapman et al., 2004; McGivney, 2006; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Scott et al., 1996) is this link for mature age university students, including those with children. Furthermore, confidence assisted participants to manage their wellbeing, supporting literature linking confidence to development in students' social skills and an increase in students' sense of belonging (McGivney, 2006), and considered essential for success for students with dependent children at university (Home, 1998). This development of confidence, and subsequent social skills, is not unique to female university students who are mature age students, or who have dependent children, rather, they are important for all students who have experienced a lengthy interval since last participating in formal education (McGivney, 2004).

The third aspect of the perception concept in this study was self-efficacy. Participants' perceived self-efficacy was also influential for participants to maintain realistic expectations and successfully manage their multiple roles. In addition to developing increased academic confidence, participants in this study increased their academic self-efficacy. Although students' confidence and self-efficacy are interrelated, confidence is task or situation-focused, whilst self-efficacy is result or goal-focused (Archer, Cantwell, & Bourke, 1999). Situated within social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1993), self-efficacy is a goal-orientated concept describing one's belief that one can undertake the required steps to achieve an anticipated goal (Bandura, 1977). Academic self-efficacy, therefore, is the belief that one can take the required steps, passing each of the required units and practicum placements, to successfully complete a degree (Linnebrink & Pintrich, 2002). A positive relationship has been established in the literature between self-efficacy, effort, and academic achievement (Hemmings & Kay, 2010; Li, 2012; Stewart, 2008). For university students this relationship is attributed to students persisting with, and exerting effort towards, academic tasks that they believe they can successfully achieve (Nilsen, 2009). Many participants in this study began university with low academic expectations and self-efficacy, stating that they had been convinced to enrol and try by friends, thus their academic self-efficacy was initially based on social persuasion (Bandura, 1977). Hence, developing academic self-efficacy post-entry for mature age students through mastery of experiences, known as performance attainment (Bandura, 1977; Chowdhury, Endres, & Lanis, 2002), is essential for student success, as self-efficacy theory suggests that people behave consistently with their self-beliefs (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, since higher self-efficacy promotes higher achievement, self-efficacy functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Gecas, 2004). Furthermore, academic self-efficacy is a perceived concept, intrinsically connected in the university context to student motivation (Williams et al., 2014). Participants describe entering university with low perceived academic self-efficacy, however, consistent with the experience of students in other studies (Young, 2000), academic self-efficacy developed for mature age students as they experienced academic success (Chowdhury et al., 2002).

In addition to academic self-efficacy, participants in this study were also influenced by their overall self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), that is their belief that they could successfully manage all the aspects involved in their dual roles as student and mother. Contrasting with participants' academic self-efficacy, they often entered university with an inflated overall self-efficacy, with many unrealistically expecting they would manage their multiple roles as student and mother during school hours, whilst leaving their families and households undisturbed by their university studies (Stalker, 2001). Initial overall self-efficacy for the participants in this study was often based upon vicarious experience (Bandura, 1977), having seen other students with multiple roles and responsibilities appear to successfully manage their multiple roles (Preez, 2010). Aligning with previous literature (Hsieh, 2014; Williams et al., 2014), participants' misaligned expectations of their ability to manage multiple roles resulted in a necessary change to their expectations, including extending their expectations of the time it would take to complete their degree, extending the time it took to complete assessments, increasing the amount of assistance they sought to managing their multiple roles, and renegotiating their self-expectation in their mothering role. Similar to previous studies (McGivney, 2004), overall self-efficacy affected student motivation, confidence and persistence, particularly in the face of adversity (Bosscher & Smit, 1998), essential for students managing significant external events. Previous literature outlines that the optimum level of self-efficacy should be slightly higher than the person's actual ability (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Thus, a high, but realistic, level of overall self-efficacy is required for students to successfully manage their roles as student and mother.

The final aspect of the perception concept was self-regulation. In the learning context, self-regulation is described as "an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behaviour, guided and constrained by

their goals and the contextual features of the environment” (Pintrich, 2000). Self-regulation is a motivational learner characteristic, that together with self-efficacy and motivation has a significant influence on student learning and achievement (Pajares, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000). Participants in this study outlined their perceived importance of being a self-regulated learner, aligning with previous literature that outlines self-regulation as a critical factor in academic achievement (Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003). Furthermore, participants discussed self-regulation as an expectation of all university students, and essential for managing their time.

Although most participants described themselves as self-regulated learners, the majority of participants discussed procrastination, considered to be caused by low levels of self-regulation (Klassen, Drawchuk, & Rajani, 2008; Steel, 2007). Consistent with literature on procrastination for university students (Alexander & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Klassen et al., 2008; Odaci, 2011; Steel, 2007), procrastination accentuated difficulties for participants’ management of time (Steel, 2007) and management of wellbeing (Odaci, 2011), as procrastination has been linked with psychological distress (Stallman, 2010). There is an absence of literature focusing specifically on the procrastination of mature age female university students, including university students who are mothers. Procrastination is the intentional delay of completing tasks, such as the completion of assignments in the case of academic procrastination (Alexander & Onwuegbuzie, 2007), despite an awareness of negative consequences (Steel, 2007). Unremarkable from other student populations, and aligning with current literature on problematic internet use for students (Odaci, 2011; Sahin, 2014; Thatcher, Wretschko, & Fridjhon, 2008), participants predominantly procrastinated on the internet using Facebook (Sahin, 2014) and ineffective internet researching (Thatcher et al., 2008).

The multi-layer conceptual description that emerged from the interpretive analysis of the data included two key themes, which were positioned in the foundation layer, and four concepts, which were positioned in the conceptual layers. The two key themes emerged from the descriptive analysis, thus they are predominantly accounted for in the description of findings chapter of this thesis. The four concepts, however, are interpretively analysed and informed by external concepts and previous literature. Therefore, this section predominantly focuses on the four concepts, including the central concept of motherhood first, and the three coping concepts that protect the central concept, being support, sacrifice and perception. Each of these concepts is not unique to this study. Rather, the elements within each of these concepts align with the findings of previous studies into the experience of female, mature age university students, and more specifically, mature age female students with dependent children. This section focused on the central concept, motherhood first, situating it within the existing literature relating to role theory, the ideology of “good mother”, and guilt. The three coping concepts were contextualised, including their role in protecting the motherhood role as the participants’ primary social role. Each of the four concepts in the conceptual layers is influenced by the two key themes of expectations and management.

6.3 Limitations of the study

As with all research, the contribution that this study makes to the existing body of literature needs to be considered in the context of its limitations (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). These limitations include, but are not limited to, the accuracy of the information conveyed, the generalisability of the conceptual description, the limited demographics of the participant group, and the absence of standardised answers due to the open-ended questioning technique adopted. These limitations do not constitute an exhaustive list of all the limitations of this qualitative study, nor are they unique to this study, rather, the limitations of this study are shared with those of many qualitative studies.

The scope of this study was limited to participants studying at a single regional university campus in Western Australia, ECUSW. All participants were continuing students who had successfully completed at least one year, or the part-time equivalent, of their undergraduate degree. The participants in this study were selected based upon criteria detailed in *Chapter 3: Methodology*. As 32 participants constitute a significant participant group for this type of qualitative study, it may be likely that the experience of these participants is reflective of other similar students studying at similar regional university campuses in Australia. Despite this, it is possible that the insight provided by these students may not be generalisable to the experience of all mature age female students with dependent children at university. Similarly, as the data collected for this study was conducted over a 26-month period, it is recognised that the insight gained by this study related to the experience of students who were both university students and mothers during a specific period of time. The conceptual description developed may not be generalisable to reflect the experience of mature age female students with dependent children during all periods of time, past or future.

The first limitation discussed in this section addresses the accuracy of the information conveyed. As a qualitative study, it is recognised that whilst every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the research by truthfully representing the experience of the study participants as shared with the researcher, each participants' discussion is through their own subjective lens (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The information provided by participants in this study was self-identified and assumed to be accurate according to the participants' recollection. No attempt was made by the researcher, nor was it intended to be made, to triangulate or check the accuracy of the information provided by the participants.

The second limitation discussed includes the generalisability of the conceptual description that emerged in the analysis of the data. While this conceptual description provides evidence that may inform decision-making, it cannot be claimed that this conceptual description has automatic relevance to, or can be generalised to include, all mothers studying at every university. Furthermore, considering the scope of this study was limited to only mothers studying at one university campus, it must not be assumed that findings can be extrapolated to other seemingly similar student groups, such as fathers or care-giving grandparents. Similarly, geographic generalisability cannot be assumed as this research was conducted on one campus of Edith Cowan University in the south-west region of Western Australia. Not only is this campus unique geographically – due to its location which is more isolated than many other regional university campuses – this campus has relatively few courses of study available and has a disproportionally large number of female mature age students. Furthermore, 56.2% of the participants in this study were enrolled in a Bachelor of Nursing program. Thus, it cannot be assumed that the conceptual description that emerged from the data in this study is automatically relevant to all courses undertaken on all regional university campuses.

The third limitation discussed in this section is the limited demographics of the participant group in this study. This participant group included 32 students, all of whom were mothers of dependent children under the age of 18, who were studying at least part-time, on campus at ECUSW. Although not intended in the design of this study, each of these 32 participants were Caucasian women, the majority of whom were Australian-born, and only one participant declared speaking English as a second language. No participant wore any type of headdress, religious or other; nor did participants discuss religious beliefs other than two participants who mentioned attending Christian churches during the course of their interviews. It may therefore be assumed that there was minimal cultural diversity amongst the participants in this study. Participant diversity may also have been limited by the sampling techniques adopted in this study. Each

participant had to actively contact the researcher to volunteer their participation in the study, which may have limited the range of students who participated. Although these factors may have limited the range of students in the participant group, it is important to note that this participant group did not intend to, nor did it purport to, be a representative sample of all the mothers studying on the selected regional university campus.

The final limitation of the study discussed in this section involves the absence of standardised answers given by participants. Standardised answers are expected when every participant is asked the same question in the same way, and were not intended in the design of this study. Rather, the data were based on largely unstructured open-ended interviews and mini-focus group discussions, with each participant self-directing the individual interviews and mini-focus groups after the same grand tour question was asked: “Tell me about your experience at university.” This open-ended, grand tour question had the intended benefit of allowing each participant to direct the course of their answers according to their individual university experience. As this grand tour question afforded participants maximum control over the interview process (Corbin & Morse, 2003) and the ability to feel free to tell their own story (Olson, 2011), standardised answers were neither sought, nor could they have been achieved through the method of questioning which was used in this study.

6.4 Recommendations for future research

This study provided preliminary research into the experiences of mature age female students with dependent children studying for a degree at one regional university campus, Edith Cowan University South West (ECUSW). This research identified two key themes, three protective coping concepts and one central concept, all of which were shown in the conceptual description. Further specialised research is recommended into each of these key themes, coping concepts, and central concept, to provide a more detailed understanding the

experiences of mature age female students with dependent children. By providing greater detail into each of these elements, universities may be better informed to incorporate flexible and appropriate strategies to support mature age female students with dependent children to maximise their university experience, ultimately assisting them to graduate. Thus, an initial recommendation for future research is to conduct studies that specifically explore each of the elements that emerged in the conceptual description.

The second recommendation originating from this study is for an Australian university to research the implementation of an entry package specifically designed for mature age female students with dependent children. The purpose of such a program, designed from the finding of this and previous studies (Engler, 2013; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; White et al., 2008), would be to inform partners, family and friends of the support requirements and ongoing sacrifices involved for mature age female students with dependent children to be successful at university. Similar to the program intended to assist the transition of all students entering higher education (Kooyman & Johnston, 2014) this package may include both booklets and group information sessions designed to enable partners, family and friends to enhance the students' experience navigating their dual roles as student and mother. This recommendation is supported by Wainwright and Marandet (2010), expressing that universities need to create a "culture of learning" that better embraces the motherhood role, furthering inclusion for both students and their children.

The third recommendation for future research is to conduct further qualitative research exploring the experience of other discrete university student groups, such as fathers or carers. It is recognised that many aspects of this conceptual description may be consistent with the experience of other groups of mature age students studying at university. Although the experiences of the 32 participants from this study cannot necessarily be generalised to these other mature age

student groups, it is possible to recognise possible implications for future research resulting from this study. Therefore, the conceptual description that emerged from this study may form the foundation of future research into these other seemingly similar student groups. These student groups, which were out of the scope of this current study, may include other discrete groups of university students including fathers, single parents, parents of adult children, or parents of non-dependent children. Similarly, further research may also be recommended to investigate this conceptual description with the experience of other non-parental care-givers studying at university, such as relative or kinship carers, foster carers, or residential step-parents.

The fourth recommendation for future research suggests further investigation into the feasibility, viability and benefits of implementing further on-campus supports with the intention of improving the overall experience for future mature age female students with dependent children. These supports, as were recommended for the ECUSW campus by the participants in this study, include, but are not limited to, extending the availability of summer and winter school classes, improving the purported family friendliness of university campuses, increasing the availability and flexibility of child care facilities on campus, providing additional library opening hours on the weekends, and making support services, including counselling services, more easily accessible to non-traditional students with significant external commitments.

The final recommendation for future research generated from this study is to increase the geographical reach of a similar future study. This research was conducted on one regional university campus in Bunbury, Western Australia, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Further research is required to determine if the key themes, coping concepts and central concept that emerged in this study would also emerge in similar studies into mature age female students with dependent children on other regional university campuses in

Australia or abroad. Similarly, it would be beneficial to delineate if these findings would be similar for mature age female students with dependent children studying predominately online, or at metropolitan university campuses.

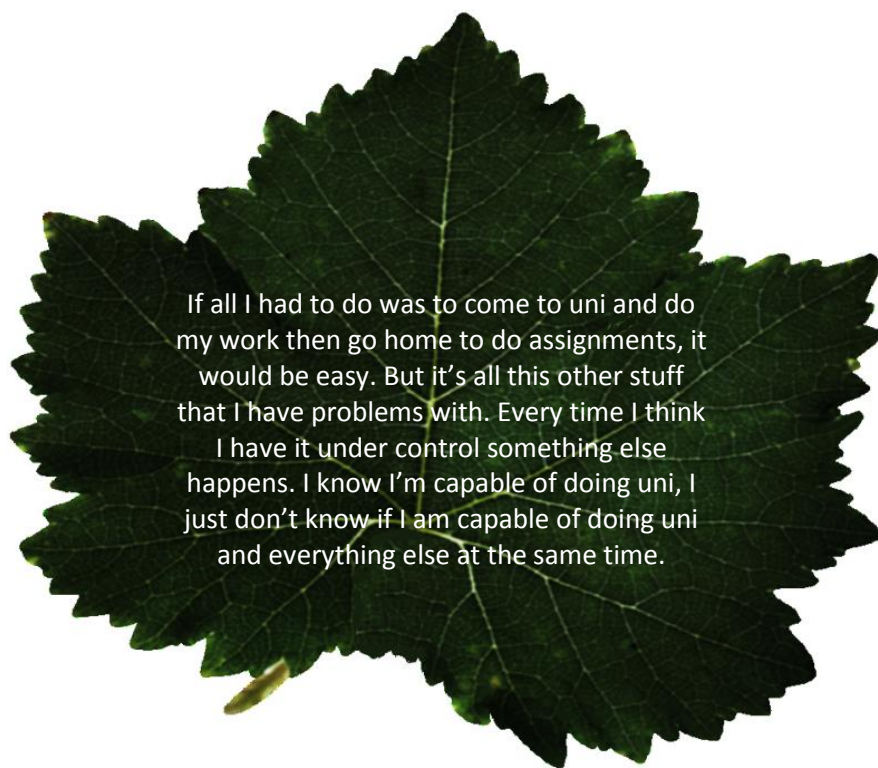
To assist with these recommendations for future research, it is also a recommendation of this study that more comprehensive data be collected by universities from students upon entry in Australia. Currently, information on parental status is not a demographic that is collected by universities in Australia, thus the actual numbers of students with dependent children are not known. It is anticipated that the collection of this demographic data would assist universities to identify the needs of disparate groups, such as those with dependent children, allowing them to form and adapt policies to more appropriately cater for their needs in the future.

6.5 Concluding comments

The completion of this study contributes new information to the existing body of research in Australia in three key ways. First, this was an Australian study that focused specifically on the experiences of mothers studying at university. This is important as most of the existing contemporary research in this area has targeted more broad groups, such as mature age students or female students, where many, but not all participants, have dependent children. Thus, this study is now one of a few international studies with a narrow field of participants who were mothers, aged between 25 and 44 upon entry, and with dependent children residing at home. Second, this study focused on the experiences of mothers at one regional university in Western Australia. As the majority of research is conducted in the eastern states of Australia, this regional Western Australian focus provided another element of separation, making this study unique in the existing body of literature. The third key way that this study uniquely contributes to the existing body of research is as a result of the guiding methodology used. The methodology underpinning this study was Interpretive Description, a second-generation qualitative methodology used mainly in North

America and originating in the health care discipline. Expanding this methodology into both the Australian and education contexts, provided a unique angle for viewing student experience, again separating this study from the existing body of literature.

Congruent with the Interpretive Description methodology that underpinned this study, a conceptual description emerged. This multi-layer conceptual description had a foundation level containing the two key themes of this study, expectations and management. The middle layer of this conceptual description illustrated the three coping concepts, support, sacrifice, and perception, which illustratively and conceptually assist to protect the central, or core, layer of the conceptual description, motherhood first. Each of these layers, the foundational layer, the middle layer, and the central layer, form the resultant conceptual description.



If all I had to do was to come to uni and do my work then go home to do assignments, it would be easy. But it's all this other stuff that I have problems with. Every time I think I have it under control something else happens. I know I'm capable of doing uni, I just don't know if I am capable of doing uni and everything else at the same time.

References

- Abbot-Chapman, J., Braithwaite, J., & Goodfrey, J. (2004). *Promoting access, increasing opportunities for university education: A study of mature-aged students from disadvantaged regions*. Canberra, Australia: Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Abbott-Chapman, J. (2006). Moving from technical and further education to university: An Australian study of mature students. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 58(1), 1-17.
- Acker, S. (1994). *Gendered education: Sociological reflections on women, teaching, and feminism*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Ajandi, J. (2011). *Overcoming barriers and finding strengths: The lives of single mother students in university*. (Doctor of Philosophy), University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada.
- Alexander, E., & Onwuegbuzie, A. (2007). Academic procrastination and the role of hope as a coping strategy. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 42(7), 1301-1310.
- Alston, M., & Kent, J. (2003). Educational access for Australia's rural young people: A case of social exclusion. *Australian Journal of Education*, 47(2), 5-17.
- Appleton-Knapp, S., & Krentler, K. (2006). Measuring student expectations and their effects on satisfaction: The importance of managing student expectations. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 28(3), 254-264.
- Archer, J., Cantwell, R., & Bourke, S. (1999). Coping at university: An examination of achievement, motivation, self-regulation, confidence and method of entry. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 18(1), 31-54.
- Aryee, S., Srinivas, S., & Tan, H. (2005). Rhythms of life: Antecedents and outcomes of work-family balance in employed parents. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 90(1), 132-146.
- Austin, S., & McDermott, K. (2004). College persistence among single mothers after welfare reform: An exploratory study. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 5(2), 93-102.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2002). ABS Household Expenditure Survey 1998-99. In R. Dean (Ed.), *Universities develop society and the economy*. Canberra, Australia: University of Canberra.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2008). How many children have women in Australia had? *Australian Social Trends*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2014a). *Australian Demographic Statistics, June 2014*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2014b). *Education and work, Australia, May 2014*. Canberra, Australia: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Ayres, L. (2008). Thematic coding and analysis. In L. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 868-869). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Ayres, R., & Guilfoyle, A. (2009). *Experiences of mature age female students studying psychology: Implications for the university learning environment*. Paper presented at the Preparing for the Graduate of 2015 Conference, Perth, Australia.
- Baker, C., Wuest, J., & Stern, P. (1992). Method slurring: The grounded theory/phenomenology example. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 17(11), 1355-1360.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

- Bandura, A. (1993). Perceived self-efficacy in cognitive development and functioning. *Educational Psychology, 28*(2), 117-148.
- Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York, NY: Freeman.
- Battaglia, M. (2008). Purposive sample. In P. Lavrakas (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Survey Research Methods* (p. 646). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Baum, S., & Payea, K. (2004). *The benefits of higher education for individuals and society*. Retrieved from http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/press/cost04/EducationPays2004.pdf
- Baxter, J., Gray, M., & Hayes, A. (2011). *Families in regional, rural and remote Australia*. Melbourne, Australia: Commonwealth of Australia.
- Benlanger, C., & Madgett, P. (2008). First university experience and student retention factors. *Journal of Higher Education, 38*(3), 77-96.
- Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (4th ed.). Berkshire, England: Open University Press.
- Birch, E., & Miller, P. (2007). HECS and HECS-HELP: Equity issues. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 28*(2), 97-119.
- Birrell, B., & Edwards, D. (2009). The Bradley review and access to higher education in Australia. *Australian Universities' Review, 51*(1), 4-13.
- Blaxter, L., & Tight, M. (1994). Juggling with time: How adults manage their time for lifelong education. *Studies in the Education of Adults, 26*(2), 160-182.
- Booth, A., & Kee, H. (2010). *A long-run view of the university gender gap in Australia*. Canberra, Australia: Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA). Retrieved from <http://ftp.iza.org/dp4916.pdf>.
- Boris, E. (1994). Mothers are not workers: Homework regulation and the construction of motherhood. In E. Glenn, N. Glenn, G. Chang & L. Forcey (Eds.), *Mothering: Ideology, experience, and agency* (pp. 161-180). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Bosch, B. (2013). *Women who study: Balancing the dual roles of postgraduate student and mother*. (Doctor of Philosophy), Edith Cowan University, Joondalup, Australia.
- Bosscher, R., & Smit, J. (1998). Confirmatory factor analysis of the general self-efficacy scale. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 36*(3), 339-343.
- Bradley, D. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education*. Canberra, Australia. Retrieved from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/HigherEducation/Review/Pages/ReviewofAustralianHigherEducationReport.aspx>.
- Britton, C., & Baxter, A. (1994). Mature students' routes into higher education. *Journal of Access Studies, 9*(1), 215-228.
- Britton, C., & Baxter, A. (1999). Becoming a mature student: Gendered narratives of the self. *Gender and Education, 11*(2), 179-193. doi: 10.1080/09540259920681
- Buissink-Smith, N., & McIntosh, A. (2001). Conceptualizing the 'spirit of service' in tourism education and training: A case study from New Zealand. *Journal of Teaching in Travel Tourism, 1*(1), 79-96. doi: 10.1300/J172v01n01_07
- Burns, A. (2009). *An interpretive description of patterns of practice of arts therapists working with older people who have dementia in the UK*. (Doctor of Philosophy), Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, Scotland.
- Candy, P. (2000). Knowledge navigators and lifelong learners: Producing graduates for the information society. *Higher Education Research and Development, 19*(3), 261-277.
- Cantwell, R., Archer, J., & Bourke, S. (2001). A comparison of the academic experiences and achievement of university students entering by traditional and non-

- traditional means. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 26(3), 221-234. doi: 10.1080/02602930120052387
- Caple, H., & Bogle, M. (2013). Making group assessment transparent: What wikis can contribute to collaborative projects. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 38(2), 198-210.
- Carey, M. (1994). The group effect in focus groups: Planning, implementing, and interpreting focus group research. In J. Morse (Ed.), *Critical Issues in Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 225-241). London, UKed: SAGE Publications.
- Carney-Crompton, S., & Tan, J. (2002). Support systems, psychological functioning, and academic performance of non-traditional female students. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 52(2), 140-154.
- Chapman, B., Higgins, T., & Taylor, D. (2009). Income contingent loans for mature aged training. *Australian Journal of Labour Economics*, 12(2), 167-179.
- Chapman, B., & Withers, G. (2002). *Human capital accumulation: Education and immigration*. Canberra, Australia: Australian National University, Centre for Economic Policy Research.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Chen, S., & Ravallion, M. (2007). Absolute poverty measures for the developing world, 1981-2004. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 104(43), 757-762.
- Chowdhury, S., Endres, M., & Lanis, T. (2002). Preparing students for success in team work environments: The importance of building confidence. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 14(3), 346-359.
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Coffman, D., & Gilligan, T. (2003). Social support, stress, and self-efficacy: Effects on student satisfaction. *College Student Retention*, 4(1), 3-66.
- Cohen, S., & Willis, T. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98(2), 310-357.
- Corbin, J., & Morse, J. (2003). The unstructured interactive interview: Issues of reciprocity and risk when dealing with sensitive topics. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 9(3), 335-354.
- Creswell, J. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Cullity, M. (2006). Challenges in understanding and assisting mature-age students who participate in alternative entry programs. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 46(2), 175-201.
- Darab, S. (2004). Time and study: Open foundation female students' integration of study with family, work and social obligations. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 44(3), 334-353.
- Darlaston-Jones, D., Cohen, L., Haunold, S., Pike, L., Young, A., & Drew, N. (2003). The retention and persistence support (RAPS) project: A transition initiative. *Issues in Educational Research*, 13(1), 1-12.
- Debenham, J., & May, J. (2005). Making connections: A dialogue about learning and teaching in a tertiary enabling program. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 45(1), 82-105.
- Denzin, N., & Lincoln, Y. (Eds.). (2011). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs. (2000). *Higher education students time series table: Selected higher education statistics*. Canberra, Australia: Commonwealth Government of Australia.

- Department of Human Services. (n.d.). *Age no barrier to success*. Retrieved 28th March 2011 from http://www.crsaustralia.gov.au/age_no_barrier_to_success.htm
- Department of Human Services (n.d). *Child care benefit*. Retrieved 24th July 2015 from <http://www.humanservices.gov.au/customer/services/centrelink/child-care-benefit>.
- DEST. (2004). *Performance indicators and statistics used in the institution assessment framework*. Canberra: Commonwealth Government of Australia.
- Douglas, S., & Michaels, M. (2004). *The mommy myth: The idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined women*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Edith Cowan Institute for Education Research. (2011). Storage of research data. Retrieved 30 May 2011, from <http://www.edithcowan.edu.au/research/institute/storageofdata.html>
- Edith Cowan University. (2014). *Edith Cowan University pocket stats 2014*. Edith Cowan University. Mount Lawley, Australia.
- Edwards, R. (1993). *Mature women students: Separating or connecting families*. London, UK: Taylor and Francis.
- Edwards, R., Hanson, A., & Raggatt, P. (1996). Boundaries of adult learning. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 44(4), 465-468.
- Edwards, R., & Holland, J. (2014). *What is qualitative interviewing?* London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Engler, A. (2013). Students with small children in higher education. *Journal of Social Research and Policy*, 4(1), 109-120.
- Estes, D. (2011). Managing the student-parent dilemma: Mothers and fathers in higher education. *Symbolic Interaction*, 34(2), 198-219.
- Fleming, M., & Grace, D. (2014). Increasing participation of rural and regional students in higher education. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 36(5), 483-495.
- Fram, S. (2013). The constant comparative analysis method outside of grounded theory. *The Qualitative Report*, 18(1), 1-25.
- Frydenburg, J. (2007). Persistence in university continuing education online classes. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 8(3), 1-15.
- Fuarrokhi, F., & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, A. (2012). Rethinking convenience sampling: Defining quality criteria. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(4), 784-792.
- Gallacher, J., Crossan, B., Field, J., & Merrill, B. (2002). Learning careers and the social space: Exploring the fragile identities of adult returners in the new further education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 21(6), 493-509. doi: 10.1080/0260137022000016172
- Gecas, V. (2004). Self-agency and the life course. In J. Mortimer & M. Shanahan (Eds.), *Handbook of the Life Course*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Geiger, M., & Cooper, E. (1996). Using expectancy theory to assess student motivation. *Issues in Accounting Education*, 11(1), 113-115.
- Gerrard, E., & Roberts, R. (2006). Student parents, hardship and debt: A qualitative study. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 30(4), 393-403. doi: 10.1080/03098770600965409
- Giordano, J., O'Reilly, M., Taylor, H., & Dogra, N. (2007). Confidentiality and autonomy: The challenge(s) of offering research participants a choice of disclosing their identity. *Qualitative health research*, 17(2), 264-275.
- Glaser, B. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.

- Glogowska, M., Young, P., & Lockyer, L. (2007). Should I go or should I stay? A study of factors influencing students' decisions on early leaving. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 8(1), 63-77.
- Gonzales-Arnal, S., & Kilkey, M. (2009). Contextualizing rationality: Mature student carers and higher education in England. *Feminist Economics*, 15(1), 85-111.
- Goode, W. (1960). The theory of role strain. *American Sociological Review*, 25(1), 483-496.
- Goodman, L. (1961). Snowball sampling. *Annals of Mathematical Statistics*, 32(1), 148-170. doi: 10.1214/aoms/1177705148
- Gravetter, F., & Forzano, L. (2015). *Research methods for the behavioral sciences* (5th ed.). Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning.
- Grbich, C. (2013). *Qualitative data analysis: An introduction* (2nd ed.). London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Greenbank, P. (2007). From foundation to honours degree: The student experience. *Education and Training*, 49(2), 91-102. doi: 10.1108/00400910710739450
- Griffiths, V. (2002). Crossing boundaries: The experiences of mature student mothers in initial teacher education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 6(3), 267-285. doi: 10.1080/13603110110091607
- Grosling, G., Heagney, M., & Thomas, L. (2009). Improving student retention in higher education. *Australian Universities Review*, 51(2), 9-18.
- Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1994). *Competing paradigms in qualitative research*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Guest, G., Namey, E., & Mitchell, M. (2013). *Collecting qualitative data: A field manual for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Haleman, D. (2004). Great expectations: Single mothers in higher education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 17(6), 769-784. doi: 10.1080/0951839042000256448
- Halsey, J. (2005). *Pre-service country teaching costings survey*. Paper presented at Rural Education Forum, Adelaide, Australia: Flinders University.
- Hays, S. (1996). *The cultural contradictions of motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Hemmings, B., & Kay, R. (2010). Prior achievement, effort, and mathematics attitude as predictors of current achievement. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 37(2), 41-58.
- Hennen, D. (2002). Women, access and progression: An examination of women's reasons for not continuing in higher education following the completion of the Certificate in Women's studies. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 24(1), 39-55.
- Holmes, C. (2006). *Born to do it? The social construction of motherhood*. (Master of Arts). Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, Canada.
- Home, A. (1998). Predicting role conflict, overload, and contagion in adult women university students with families and jobs. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(2), 85-98.
- House, J. (1981). *Work stress and social support*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Hsieh, T. (2014). Motivation matters? The relationship among different types of learning motivation, engagement behaviors and learning outcomes of undergraduate students in Taiwan. *Higher Education*, 68(3), 417-433.
- Hunt, M. (2009). Strengths and challenges of the use of interpretive description: Reflections arising from a study of the moral experience of health professionals in humanitarian work. *Qualitative Health Research*, 19(9), 1284-1292.
- Jackson, R., Drummond, D., & Camara, S. (2007). What is qualitative research? *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, 8(1), 21-28.

- Jacobs, J., & Stoner-Eby, S. (1998). Adult enrolment in higher education and cumulative educational attainment, 1970-1990. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 1(59), 91-108.
- Jensen, D. (2008). Credibility. In L. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopaedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 139-140). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Johnson, D., & Swanson, D. (2003). Invisible mothers: A content analysis of motherhood ideologies and myths in magazines. *Sex Roles*, 49(1), 21-33.
- Johnson, G. (2004). *Healthy, wealthy and wise? A review of the wider benefits of education*. Treasury working paper 04/04. New Zealand. Retrieved from <http://ideas.repec.org/p/nzt/nztwps/04-04.html>
- Johnson, G., & Watson, G. (2004). Oh gawd, how am I going to fit into this?: Producing [mature] first-year student identity. *Language and Education*, 18(6), 474-487.
- Jones, R. (2008). *Widening participation: Student retention and success*. Higher Education Academy, York, England. Retrieved from www.heacademy.ac.uk/observatory/themes/widening-participation/observatory/summary/detail/student_retention_and_success
- Kahu, E. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(5), 758-773.
- Kahu, E., Stephens, C., Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2014). Space and time to engage: Mature-aged distance students learn to fit study into their lives. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 33(4), 523-540.
- Kaiser, K. (2009). Protecting respondent confidentiality in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 19(11), 1632-1641.
- Kantanis, T. (2002). *Same or different: Issues that affect mature age undergraduate students' transition to university*. Paper presented at the Sixth Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, Christchurch, New Zealand. http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers02/KantanisPaper.doc
- Kember, D. (1999). Integrating part-time study with family, work and social obligations. *Studies in Higher Education*, 24(1), 109-124.
- Kember, D., Ying, C., Wan, C., Yung, C., Wai, C., Mui, C., . . . Jason, T. (2005). How students cope with part-time study: An analysis of coping mechanisms through an on-line forum. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 6(3), 230-242.
- Kevern, J., & Webb, C. (2004). Mature women's experiences of preregistration nurse education. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 45(3), 297-306.
- Kirby, P., Biever, J., Martinez, I., & Gomez, J. (2004). Adults returning to school: The impact on family and work. *Journal of Psychology*, 138(1), 65-76.
- Kirkwood, A. (2003). Understanding independent learners' use of media technologies. *Open Learning*, 18(2), 155-175.
- Klassen, R., Drawchuk, L., & Rajani, S. (2008). Academic procrastination of undergraduates: Low self-efficacy to self-regulate predicts higher levels of procrastination. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 33(4), 915-931.
- Kooyman, B., & Johnston, H. (2014). *Students, parents, partners, friends and the university: Collaborators in successful first year transition*. Paper presented at the First Year Higher Education, Darwin, Australia.
- Kop, R., & Hill, A. (2008). Connectivism: Learning theory of the future of vestige of the past? *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 9(3), 1-13.
- Krueger, R., & Casey, M. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

- Laming, M. (2001). Seven key turning points in Australian higher education policy 1943-1999. *Post-Script*, 2(2), 239-273.
- Le, A., Miller, P., Slutske, W., & Martin, N. (2011). Attitudes towards economic risk and the gender pay gap. *Labour Economics*, 18(4), 555-561.
- Leary, M., & Tangen, J. (2003). *Handbook of self and identity*. New York, NY: Gilford Press.
- Leathwood, C., & O'Connell, P. (2003). 'It's a struggle': The construction of the 'new student' in higher education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(6), 597-615.
- Leder, G., & Forgasz, H. (2004). Australian and international mature students: The daily challenges. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 32(2), 183-198. doi: 10.1080/0729436042000206654
- Leonard, M. (1994). Transforming the household: Mature women students and access to higher education. In S. Davies, C. Lubelska & J. Quinn (Eds.), *Changing the subject: Women in higher education* (pp. 163-177). London, UK: Taylor & Francis.
- Levy, Y. (2007). Comparing dropouts and persistence in e-learning courses. *Computers and Education*, 48(2), 185-204.
- Lewis, A. (2009). E-learning and mature-aged learners. *Training Development in Australia*, 36(1), 26-28.
- Li, K. (2012). A study of the attitude, self-efficacy, effort and academic achievement. *Discovery SS Student E-Journal*, 1(2), 154-183.
- Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (2013). *The Constructivist Credo*. Retrieved from <http://ECU.eblib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=1187038>
- Linnebrink, E., & Pintrich, P. (2002). Motivation as an enabler for academic success. *School Psychology Review*, 31(3), 313-327.
- Liversidge, S. (2004). It's no five o'clock world: The lived experience of re-entering mothers in nursing education. In L. Andres & F. Finlay (Eds.), *Student Affairs: Experiencing Higher Education* (p. 285). Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press.
- Lock, G., Reid, J., Green, B., Hastings, W., Cooper, M., & White, S. (2009). Researching rural-regional (teacher) education in Australia. *Education in Rural Australia*, 19(2), 31-44.
- Long, M., Ferrier, F., & Heagney, M. (2006). *Stay, play or give it away? Students continuing, changing or leaving university study in their first year*. Clayton, Australia: Monash University.
- Lui, S., Gomez, J., Khan, B., & Yen, C. (2007). Toward a learning oriented community college online course dropout framework. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 6(4), 519-542.
- Lukic, T., Broadbent, A., & MacLachlan, M. (2004). *Higher education attrition rates 1994-2002: A brief overview*. Canberra, Australia: Department of Education Science and Training.
- Lyman, F. (1981). The responsive classroom discussion. In A. Anderson (Ed.), *Mainstreaming Digest*. College Park, MD: University of Maryland College of Education.
- Lynch, K. (2008). Gender roles and the American academe: A case study of graduate student mothers. *Gender and Education*, 20(6), 585-605.
- MacDonald, C., & Stratta, E. (1998). Academic work, gender and subjectivity: Mature non-standard entrants in higher education. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 30(1), 67-79.
- Maheu, C., & Thorne, S. (2008). Receiving inconclusive genetic test results: An interpretive description of the BRAC1/2 experience. *Research in Nursing and Health*, 31(1), 553-562.

- Marandet, E., & Wainwright, E. (2010). Invisible experiences: Understanding the choices and needs of university students with dependent children. *British Educational Research Journal*, 36(5), 787-805.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (2006). *Designing qualitative research* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGEmcg Publications.
- Martins, R., & Anthony, L. (2007). The imposter syndrome: What if they find out I don't really belong here? In J. Scevak & R. Cantwell (Eds.), *Stepping stones: A guide for mature-aged students at university*. Camberwell, Australia: ACER Press.
- Masjuan, J., & Troiano, H. (2009). University students' success: A psycho-sociological approach. *Higher Education*, 58(1), 15-28.
- Mason, M. (2010). Sample size and saturation in PhD studies using qualitative interviews. *Qualitative Social Research*, 11(3). Retrieved from <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs100387>
- Mayan, M. (2010). Commentary three: The disciplinary divide. *Qualitative Health Research*, 20(11), 1467-1468.
- McCormack, C. (2004). Storying stories: A narrative approach to in-depth interview conversations. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 7(3), 219-236.
- McGivney, V. (2004). Understanding persistence in adult learning. *Open Learning*, 19(1), 33-46.
- McGivney, V. (2006). Attracting new groups into learning: Lessons from research in England. In J. Chapman, P. Cartwright & J. McGilp (Eds.), *Lifelong Learning, Participation and Emorquity*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer Verlag.
- McInnis, C. (2001). Researching the first year experience: Where to from here? *Higher Education Research and Development*, 20(2), 105-114.
- McInnis, C. (2003). From marginal to mainstream strategies: Responding to student diversity in Australian universities. *European Journal of Education*, 38(4), 387-400.
- McInnis, C., Hartley, R., Polesel, J., & Teese, R. (2000). *Non-completion in vocational education and training and higher education: A literature review commissioned by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs*. Canberra, Australia: Research and Evaluation Branch, Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.
- McKenzie, K., & Gow, K. (2004). Exploring the first year academic achievement of school leavers and mature-age students through structural equation modeling. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 23(1), 95-112.
- McMahon, M. (1995). *Endangering motherhood: Identity and self-transformation in women's lives*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
- McMillan, J. (2005). Course change and attrition from higher education. In Australian Centre for Educational Research (Ed.), *Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth*. Camberwell, Australia.
- Menchaca, M., & Bekele, T. (2008). Learner and instructor identified success factors in distance education. *Distance Education*, 29(3), 231-252.
- Mercer, J. (2007). Re-negotiating the self through educational development: Mature students' experiences. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 12(1), 19-32. doi: 10.1080/13596740601155314
- Merrill, B., & Aldershot, U. (1999). *Gender, change and identity: Mature women students in universities*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate.
- Montgomery, L., Tansey, E., & Roe, S. (2009). The characteristics and experiences of mature nursing students. *Nursing Standard*, 23(20), 35-40.
- Morgan, D. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.

- Morgan, D. (1996). Focus groups. *Annual Review Sociology*, 22(1), 129-152.
- Morgan, D. (1997). *Focus groups as qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Morgan, D. (2008). Snowball sampling. In L. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 816-817). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Morrison, D. (1998). *The search for a method: Focus groups and the development of mass communication research*. Bedfordshire, UK: University of Luton Press.
- Morse, J. (2001). The awfulness of simplification. *Qualitative Health Research*, 11(4), 435-441.
- Moss, D. (2004). Creating space for learning: Conceptualising women and higher education through space and time. *Gender and Education*, 16(3), 283-302. doi: 10.1080/09540250042000251452
- Munro, L. (2011). Go boldly, dream large! The challenges confronting non-traditional students at university. *Australian Journal of Education*, 55(2), 115-131.
- Murphy, H., & Roopchand, N. (2003). Intrinsic motivation and self-esteem in traditional and mature students at a post-1992 university in the north east of England. *Educational Studies*, 29(2), 243-259.
- Murray, J. (2009). The wider social benefits of higher education: What do we know about them? *Australian Journal of Education*, 53(3), 230-245.
- Murray, R. (2015). *Writing in social spaces: A social processes approach to academic writing*. London, UK: Routledge.
- National Health and Medical Research Council. (2007). *Australian code for the responsible conduct of research*. Canberra: Australian Government. Retrieved from http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/file/publications/synopses/r39.pdf.
- Ng, F., Shirley, D., Willis, K., Lewis, S., & Lincoln, M. (2015). The E12 experience: Students' perceptions of a widening participation scheme. *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 6(1), 35-47.
- Nilsen, H. (2009). Influence on student academic behaviour though motivation, self-efficacy and value-expectation: An action research project to improve learning. *Issues in Informing Science and Information Technology*, 6, 545-552.
- O'Reilly, A. (1996). Ain't that love? Antiracism and racial constructions of motherhood. In M. Reddy (Ed.), *Everyday acts against racism*. Seattle, WA: Seal Press.
- O'Shea, S. (2007). Well, I got here but what happens next? Exploring the narratives of first year female students who are the first in the family to attend university. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 29(2), 36-51.
- O'Shea, S., & Stone, C. (2011). Transformations and self-discovery: Mature-age women's reflections on returning to university study. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33(3), 273-288.
- O'Shea, S., Stone, C., & May, J. (2014). *Breaking the barriers: Supporting and engaging mature age first-in-family university learners and their families*. Paper presented at the First Year Higher Education Conference, Darwin, Australia.
- Odaci, H. (2011). Academic self-efficacy and academic procrastination as predictors of problematic internet use in university students. *Computers and Education*, 57(1), 1109-1113.
- OECD. (2008). Education at a glance: 2008 OECD Indicators. Retrieved from www.oecd.org/edu/eag2008
- Oliver, C. (2012). The relationship between symbolic interactionism and Interpretive Description. *Qualitative Health Research*, 22(3), 409-415.

- Olson, K. (2011). *Essentials of qualitative interviewing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Osborne, M., Marks, A., & Turner, E. (2004). Becoming a mature student: How adult applicants weigh the advantages and disadvantages of higher education. *Higher Education*, 48(1), 291-315.
- Pajares, F. (2002). Gender and perceived self-efficacy in self-regulated learning. *Theory Into Practice*, 41(2), 116-125.
- Pare, E. (2009). *Mother and student: The experience of mothering in college*. (Doctor of Philosophy), Wayne State University, Detroit, MI.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Pierce, L., & Herlihy, B. (2013). The experience of wellness for counselor education doctoral students who are mothers in the southeastern region of the United States. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 14(3), 108-120.
- Pintrich, P. (2000). The role of goal orientation in self-regulated learning. In M. Boekaerts, P. Pintrich & M. Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of self-regulation*. San Diego, CA: Academic.
- Pintrich, P., & Schunk, D. (1996). *Motivation in education: Theory, research and applications*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Plach, S., Stevens, P., & Moss, V. (2004). Corporeality: Women's experiences of a body with rheumatoid arthritis. *Clinical Nursing Research*, 13(2), 137-155.
- Plageman, P., & Sabina, C. (2010). Perceived family influence on undergraduate adult female students. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 58(3), 156-166.
- Preez, J. (2010). *Co-constructing self-efficacy narratives: A study of four mature age university students*. (Doctor of Philosophy), Queensland University of Technology.
- Priest, H., Roberts, P., & Woods, L. (2002). An overview of three different approaches to the interpretation of qualitative data. Part 1: Theoretical issues. *Nurse Researcher*, 10(1), 30-42.
- Pritchard, L., & Roberts, L. (2006). *Mature student's guide to higher education*. Berkshire, UK: McGraw-Hill.
- Qu, S., & Dumay, J. (2011). The qualitative research interview. *Qualitative Research in Accounting and Management*, 8(3), 238-264.
- Quimby, J., & O'Brien, K. (2006). Predictors of well-being among nontraditional female students with children. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 84(4), 451-460.
- Ramsay, S., Jones, E., & Barker, M. (2007). Relationship between adjustment and support types: Young and mature-aged local and international first year university students. *Higher Education*, 54(1), 247-265. doi: 10.1007/s10734.006.9001.0
- Reay, D. (2003). A risky business? Mature working-class women students and access to higher education. *Gender and Education*, 15(3), 301-317.
- Reay, D., Ball, S., & David, M. (2002). 'It's taking me a long time but I'll get there in the end': Mature students on access courses and higher education choice. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(1), 5-19.
- Ricco, R., Sabet, S., & Clough, C. (2009). College mothers in the dual roles of student and parent: Implications for their children's attitudes towards school. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 55(1), 79-110.
- Richards, L., & Morse, J. (2012). *Read me first for a user's guide to qualitative methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Richardson, J., & King, E. (1998). Adult students in higher education: Burden or boon? *Journal of Higher Education*, 69(1), 65-88.

- Ridolfo, H., & Schoua-Glusberg, A. (2011). Analyzing cognitive interview data using the constant comparative method of analysis to understand cross-cultural patterns in survey data. *Field Methods*, 23(4), 420-438.
- Robotham, D. (2008). Stress among higher education students: Towards a research agenda. *Higher Education*, 56(6), 735-746.
- Rostam, H., & Haverkamp, B. (2009). Iraqi expatriates' experience of North America media coverage of the Iraq war. *International Journal of Counselling*, 31(3), 100-117.
- Rowlands, S. (2010). *Non-traditional students: The impact of role strain on their identity*. (Master of Science in Education), Southern Illinois University
- Rubin, H., & Rubin, I. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Sahin, Y. (2014). Comparison of users' adoption and use cases of Facebook and their academic procrastination. *Digital Education Review*, 25, 127-138.
- Saldana, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Sandelowski, M. (2002). Re-embodying qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(1), 104-115.
- Sarantakos, S. (1998). *Social research*. South Yarra, Australia: MacMillan Publishers Australia.
- Schwandt, T. (1994). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 118-137). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Scott, C., Burns, A., & Cooney, G. (1996). Reasons for discontinuing study: The case of mature age female students with children. *Higher Education*, 31(2), 233-253.
- Scott, C., Burns, A., & Cooney, G. (1998). Motivation for return to study as a predictor of completion of degree amongst female mature students with children. *Higher Education*, 35(2), 221-239.
- Scott, D., Higgins, D., & Franklin, R. (2012). The role of supervisory neglect in childhood injury. *Australian Institute of Family Studies*, 8, 1-10.
- Seiber, S. (1974). Toward a theory of role accumulation. *American Sociological Review*, 39(4), 567-578.
- Shands, K. (1998). Doppler effects: Female frequencies in higher education. In A. Mackinnon, I. Elgqvist-Saltzman & A. Prentice (Eds.), *Education into the 21st century: Dangerous terrain for women?* London, UK: Falmer Press.
- Smith, G., Ferguson, D., & Caris, M. (2002). Teaching online versus face-to-face. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 30(4), 337-364.
- Smith, M., & Rogers, J. (2014). Understanding nursing students' perspectives on the grading of group work assessments. *Nurse Education in Practice*, 14(2), 112-119.
- Smith, S. (1996). Uncovering key aspects of experience: The use of in-depth interviews in a study of women returners to education. In E. Lyon & J. Busfield (Eds.), *Methodological imaginations*. London, UK: Macmillan Press.
- Stakes, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Stalker, J. (2001). Misogyny, women and obstacles to tertiary education: A vile situation. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 51(4), 4289-4305.
- Stallman, H. (2010). Psychological distress in university students: A comparison with general population data. *Australian Psychologist*, 45(4), 249-257.
- Star, C., & Hammer, S. (2008). Teaching generic skills: Eroding the higher purpose of universities, or an opportunity for renewal? *Oxford Review of Education*, 34(2), 237-251.

- Steel, P. (2007). The nature of procrastination: A meta-analytic and theoretical review of quintessential self-regulatory failure. *Psychological Bulletin*, 133(1), 65-94.
- Stewart, D., & Shamdasani, P. (1990). *Focus groups: Theory and practice*. London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Stewart, E. (2008). School structural characteristics, student effort, peer associations, and parental involvement. *Education and Urban Society*, 40(2), 179-204.
- Steyn, R. (1994). A study of mature age female students with particular reference to influences of their academic program on family relationships. *Journal of the Higher Economics Institute of Australia*, 1(3), 23-30.
- Stone, C. (2008). Listening to individual voices and stories: The mature-age experience. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 48(2), 263-290.
- Stone, C., & O'Shea, S. (2013). Time, money, leisure and guilt: The gendered challenges of higher education for mature-age students. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 53(1), 90-110.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Stuckey, H. (2014). The first step in data analysis: Transcribing and managing qualitative research data. *Journal of Social Health and Diabetes*, 2(1), 5-8.
- Swingle, A. (2013). *College student parents: Stress, role conflict, and coping*. (Doctor of Philosophy), Indiana University of Pennsylvania.
- Taylor, S. (2011). Social support: A review. In M. Friedman (Ed.), *The handbook of health psychology* (pp. 189-214). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Thatcher, A., Wretschko, G., & Fridjhon, P. (2008). Online flow experiences, problematic internet use and internet procrastination. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24(5), 2236-2254.
- Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy*, 17(4), 423-442.
- Thorne, S. (2008). *Interpretive description*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Thorne, S., Con, A., McGuinness, L., McPherson, G., & Harris, S. (2004). Health care communication issues in multiple sclerosis: An interpretive description. *Qualitative Health Research*, 14(1), 5-22.
- Thorne, S., Reimer-Kirkham, S., & MacDonald-Emes, J. (1997). Interpretive description: A non-categorical qualitative alternative for developing nursing knowledge. *Research in Nursing and Health*, 20(2), 169-177.
- Thorne, S., Reimer-Kirkham, S., & O'Flynn-Magee, K. (2004). The analytic challenge in interpretive description. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1). Article 1. Retrieved from http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/3_1/pdf/thorneetal.pdf
- Thurer, S. (1994). *The myths of motherhood: How culture reinvents the good mother*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Tight, M. (2012). *Researching higher education* (2nd ed.). Berkshire, England: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1998). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *Review of Higher Education*, 21(2), 167-177.
- Tones, M., Fraser, J., Elder, R., & White, K. (2009). Supporting mature-aged students from a low socioeconomic background. *Higher Education*, 58(4), 505-529.
- Trott, D. (2007). Recognising the expectations of mature age students, their value-adding and enhancing of retention rates: A case study. *Studies in Learning Evaluation Innovation and Development*, 4(2), 53-64.

- Tufford, L. (2012). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(1), 80-96.
- University of South Australia. (no date). *Guide for Parents, Partners and Friends of UniSA Students*. Adelaide, Australia: Author.
- Urquhart, B., & Pooley, J. (2007). The transition experience of Australian students to university: The importance of social support. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 19(2), 78-91.
- Van Wiltenburg, S. (2007). *Workplace violence against registered nurses: An interpretive description*. (Master of Science in Nursing), University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. Retrieved from https://circle.ubs.ca/bitstream/handle/2429/389/ubc_2008_spring_van_wiltenburg_shannon.pdf?sequence=1
- Vila, L. (2005). The outcomes of investment in education and people's well-being. *European Journal of Education*, 40(1), 48-78.
- Vines, R. (2011). Equity in health and wellbeing: Why does regional, rural and remote Australia matter? In *Psych*. Retrieved from <http://www.psychology.org.au/Content.aspx?ID=3960>
- Vroom, V. (1964). *Work and motivation*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Wainwright, E., & Marandet, E. (2010). Parents in higher education: Impacts of university learning on the self and the family. *Educational Review*, 62(4), 449-465.
- Wells, W. (1974). Group interviewing. In R. Ferber (Ed.), *Handbook of marketing research*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Welsh, A. (2003). *The experiences of mothers studying at university who have pre-school aged children*. (Bachelor of Education (Honours), Edith Cowan University, Bunbury, Australia.
- White, S. (2004). What motivates them? Some adult learners' perceptions of and reasons for engaging in lifelong learning. *New Zealand Journal of Adult Learning*, 32(2), 66-76.
- White, S. (2006). Who will look after the kids? The practicalities faced by a group of mothers participating in pre-service teacher education in New Zealand. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 8(3), 7-16.
- White, S. (2008). Mothers who are student teachers: Navigating their dual roles in pre-service teacher education. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 30(2), 159-172.
- White, S. (2009). Mothers becoming teachers. What motivates them? What doesn't? *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 13(1), 79-92.
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people: The role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), 707-722.
- Wiles, R., Crow, G., Heath, S., & Charles, V. (2008). The management of confidentiality and anonymity in social research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(1), 417-428.
- Wiley, J. (2010). *Sitting and practice: An interpretive description of the Buddhist-informed meditation practices of counselling psychologists and their clinical work*. (Master of Education), University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.
- Willcoxon, L. (2006). It's not fair: Assessing the dynamics and resourcing of team work. *Journal of Management Education*, 30(6), 798-808.
- Williams, B., Kessler, M., & Williams, M. (2014). Relationship among practice change, motivation, and self-efficacy. *Journal of Continuing Education in the Health Professions*, 34(1), 5-10.

- Williams, J., Manvel, J., & Bornstein, S. (2006). *Opt out or pushed out? How the press covers work/family conflict: The untold story of why women are leaving the workforce*. San Francisco, CA: Center for Worklife Law.
- Wilson, F. (1997). The construction of paradox? One case of mature students in higher education. *Higher Education*, 51(4), 347-366.
- Wolcott, H. (1994). *Transforming qualitative data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Yorke, M., & Longden, B. (2007). *Retention and student success in higher education* (Vol. 38). Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Young, P. (2000). I might as well give up: Self-esteem and mature students' feelings about feedback on assignments. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 24(3), 409-418.
- Yum, J., Kember, D., & Siaw, I. (2005). Coping mechanisms of part-time students. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 24(4), 303-317.
- Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2010). Improving student engagement: Ten proposals for action. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 11(3), 167-177.
- Zepke, N., Leach, L., & Butler, P. (2011). Non-institutional influences and student perceptions of success. *Studies in Higher Education*, 36(2), 227-242.
- Zimmerman, B. (2000). Self-efficacy: An essential motive to learn. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1), 82-91.
- Zimmerman, B., & Campillo, M. (2003). Motivating self-regulated problem solvers. In J. Davidson & R. Sternberg (Eds.), *The psychology of problem solving*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Appendices

Appendix A - Personal experience, expectation and biases

Personal experience, expectation and biases

Amanda Draper

As I'm approaching this research I am aware of my own biases that could affect the way I approach the data, and my interpretations of what experiences other students may have. As I have personal experience being a mother and a student at university, I realise that I am approaching this research with existing knowledge and experience. Furthermore, as a result of my literature review which was conducted and revised over a period of three years, a variety of journal articles have also contributed to my knowledge. Rather than changing my memories of my experience at university, this new information has helped me to solidify and articulate these experiences better.

The purpose of writing this section is to identify what I feel may be important before I start collecting or analysing data. This may help direct my interpretation of data and may help me be aware of any leading questions that I may ask. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list or explanation of my own knowledge or experience; it should be a recognition of the ideas that I have foremost in my mind when approaching the research, research participants and data.

Balance commitments. These include:

- The need to balance time. I didn't feel flexible anymore and started writing things on a calendar if anyone at home wanted to organise something.
- Fitting everything in, especially near exams. I felt stressed at times and this often put me in a bad mood which I felt guilty about.
- Be flexible for family commitments. I constantly felt like I needed to juggle things; everything.
- Letting my family go and do an activity while I finished an assignment at home. This was hard.

Dealing with other people. This includes:

- Being available for the kids when needed. Sometimes they need help with homework, not telling them to go away when they come and ask me things when I am studying, getting to the assembly when they get an award or are doing a class item, trying to do canteen duty and class help.

- People who don't understand why I want to study. They feel that a mother's place is in the home, that I should just get a job if I want money, thinking that university is just for people when they are young.
- Partner (when I had one) who wanted me to be watching TV with him in the evening rather than doing studying, and expressing all the time that he was having to do more work because of my studying (even though I still organised and did everything that I did before).
- Trying to please lecturers and "act" professional, so that it didn't look like I was not coping or too busy. I think I did this because I didn't want to be "kicked out" of university, or told that I should just go part-time.
- Wanting to be there for the social commitments of other students, sometimes just social ones that they would put on to get to know people better. I couldn't make these often and felt bad about that.
- My husband at the time would get upset with me for what he perceived to be "thinking I know more than him just because I was at university".
- Family, like my in-laws, would avoid asking me anything about my university studies as if it was a taboo subject.

Financially

- Sometimes I needed to work part-time in addition to studying, and felt a strain like this was "another" thing to be done.
- I felt guilty at times that I wasn't earning a "proper" income with the time that I was at university.
- I felt that I needed to justify that at the end of the studies I would be earning "significantly more", but in reality I wasn't sure if I actually would be.
- I felt bad when I had to buy expensive books knowing I could have been spending that money on my family's budget. This was a weird feeling because my family were well catered for and didn't actually "go without" for my university studies. I allowed myself to buy one book only per subject and did a lot of photocopying to manage not having all the books. At times I was disappointed with myself after I realised that I had purchased the "wrong book" (least used from the booklist).

Learning

- Lots of things I learned at university I could apply at home. I felt like, as a parent, I knew so much more about my children and their needs.
- I loved the role model that I was providing for my children and from early in my studies I would talk to them about "when" they go to university, rather than just hoping that they would continue with their studies when they got older.
- There were times that I would encourage my kids to do their homework with me as I did mine.

- I changed the way I would talk about university with my kids and used the same words as them. I would say I was “going to school”, “had an assignment due”, had “tests”, etc.
- I had a different appreciation of other people who had done degrees, especially my children’s primary school teachers who I had previously thought less of.
- I didn’t realise that having a higher education was more about learning in general, rather than the skills involved in that particular job. This helped me to feel “educated”.

Self

- I no longer regretted not going to university or feeling like there was something that was missing in my life, i.e., a higher education.
- I wanted to say to people that I was at university, as if that made me feel more successful than before I was there.
- I was really proud of myself for every assignment and success that I had.
- I had a massive desire to finish what I started, even though there were many times that I doubted that I could do it, or when finishing just seemed too far in the future.
- I felt smart, like my brain worked really well and I enjoyed learning.
- I felt like I was successful in balancing many things at the one time, although there were many times where I was scared that it all seemed like a “pack of cards” that could fall apart at any moment.

At home

- I found it difficult to get the children not to touch my things.
- I found it difficult to find pens, etc., because people would take them off my desk.
- My desk was in the middle of my house, which annoyed me when everyone would be around when I was trying to work.
- About half-way through my degree I decided to stop answering the phone when I was busy working.
- I would avoid answering the door (if I could help it) if I was in the middle of doing something.
- I would spend heaps of time on the phone talking to other students about assignments and class work. At times this would be a point of stress between my husband and myself.
- I would try really hard to get the kids to not use my computer because I couldn’t afford to replace it if anything happened to it. With a teenager that was really hard.

Appendix B – Recruitment flyer

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Students who are Mothers



Register now:

Tuesday 8th April, 10am

Do you:

- Have a child, or children, aged under 18

and

Are you:

- Aged 25 to 44
- Studying on campus
- Doing a degree by coursework
- Successfully passed your first year of studies

Participation involves:

- 90 minute focus group
- Completion of a short questionnaire
- Morning tea/ light lunch (allow 2 hours)

Researcher:

Amanda Draper, M.Ed,

Edith Cowan University
(Regional Professional Studies)

TO REGISTER CONTACT AMANDA DRAPER

PHONE: (08) 6304-7865

MOBILE: 0437-315-323

ECU (SW) OFFICE: 2.107

E-MAIL: A.DRAPER@ECU.EDU.AU

Appendix C –Participant questionnaire

Students who are mothers: An interpretive description

Thank you for agreeing to be part of this study.

Please read each question carefully and either tick the most appropriate box

☒ or write the appropriate response in the space provided.

This questionnaire asks you 20 questions to gain information about yourself, your family, your studies, your time commitments and your financial position.

All information will be kept strictly confidential.

Questionnaire

PERSONAL INFORMATION																																
1.	Age (as of last birthday):	_____ Years																														
2.	Method of entry into university:	Portfolio entry	<input type="checkbox"/>																													
		Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT)	<input type="checkbox"/>																													
		University preparation course	<input type="checkbox"/>																													
		TAFE qualification	<input type="checkbox"/>																													
		Previous undergraduate studies	<input type="checkbox"/>																													
		Other	<input type="checkbox"/>																													
3.	Marital status:	Single	<input type="checkbox"/>																													
		Married / de facto	<input type="checkbox"/>																													
		Separated / divorced / widowed	<input type="checkbox"/>																													
		Other	<input type="checkbox"/>																													
4.	Dependent children details:	<table border="1"><thead><tr><th>Child</th><th>Gender Male Female</th><th>Age (years)</th><th>Lives with you Yes No</th></tr></thead><tbody><tr><td>Child 1</td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td><td></td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr><tr><td>Child 2</td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td><td></td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr><tr><td>Child 3</td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td><td></td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr><tr><td>Child 4</td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td><td></td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr><tr><td>Child 5</td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td><td></td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr><tr><td>Child 6</td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td><td></td><td><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/></td></tr></tbody></table>	Child	Gender Male Female	Age (years)	Lives with you Yes No	Child 1	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Child 2	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Child 3	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Child 4	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Child 5	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	Child 6	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		
Child	Gender Male Female	Age (years)	Lives with you Yes No																													
Child 1	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>																													
Child 2	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>																													
Child 3	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>																													
Child 4	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>																													
Child 5	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>																													
Child 6	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>																													

ACADEMIC INFORMATION			
5.	Current course of study:	_____	
6.	Date enrolled in current course:	Year: 20____	Semester: _____
7.	Expected date of completion for current course:	Year: 20____	Semester: _____
8.	Current enrolment:	Full-time	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Part-time	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Current semester load	_____ units
9.	Attendance mode:	On-campus	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Mixed on-campus and off-campus	<input type="checkbox"/>
		Off-campus	<input type="checkbox"/>
10.	Number of units withdrawn from in the past 12 months:	_____ units	
11.	Number of summer or winter school units completed in the past 12 months:	_____ units	

TIME COMMITMENT INFORMATION			
12.	Time spent on voluntary activities separate from university, for example canteen duty, parent help, committee meetings, children's sports, volunteering, etc.:		
	Less than 1 hour per fortnight	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Between 1 and 3 hours per fortnight	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Between 3 and 6 hours per fortnight	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Greater than 6 hours per fortnight	<input type="checkbox"/>	
13.	Time spent on own sporting or other commitments, for example team sports, fitness classes, self-development activities, etc.:		
	Less than 1 hour per fortnight	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Between 1 and 3 hours per fortnight	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Between 3 and 6 hours per fortnight	<input type="checkbox"/>	
	Greater than 6 hours per fortnight	<input type="checkbox"/>	

TIME COMMITMENT INFORMATION (continued)

14. Time commitment for other caring roles you do, for example unwell or invalid spouse, parent or other family member: _____ hours per fortnight
15. Travel time between home and university: _____ hours per fortnight
16. Participation in paid employment:
- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|
| No paid employment | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Less than 10 hours per fortnight | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Between 10 and 30 hours per fortnight | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Between 30 and 50 hours per fortnight | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| More than 50 hours per fortnight | <input type="checkbox"/> |
17. Number of hours of domestic or child rearing assistance you receive from:
- | | |
|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Partner | _____ hours per fortnight |
| Family | _____ hours per fortnight |
| Friends | _____ hours per fortnight |
| Paid assistance | _____ hours per fortnight |
| Others | _____ hours per fortnight |

FINANCIAL INFORMATION

18. Residence:
- | | |
|-------------|--------------------------|
| Fully owned | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Buying | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Renting | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other | <input type="checkbox"/> |
19. Total out-of-pocket childcare expenses per fortnight (after childcare benefit and 50% childcare rebate if applicable): \$ _____
20. Total take home household income per fortnight (include all income sources, for example wages, Centrelink benefits, family tax benefits, child support received, etc.):
- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| Less than \$1,500 per fortnight | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Between \$1,500 and \$2,999 per fortnight | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Between \$3,000 and \$4,499 per fortnight | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| More than \$4,500 per fortnight | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Thank you for your participation in this questionnaire.

Appendix D – Participant information sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

STUDENTS WHO ARE MOTHERS: AN INTERPRETIVE DESCRIPTION

RESEARCHER: AMANDA DRAPER

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

My name is Amanda Draper and I am enrolled in Doctoral Studies at the South West Campus of Edith Cowan University. This study examines the experiences of university students who are also mothers, and my motivation to conduct research in this area comes from my own experience of being a mother while completing both a Bachelor of Education and a Master of Education at ECU South West.



INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in this study looking at the various experiences of students who are mothers at the South West campus of Edith Cowan University. This study aims to “paint a picture” of the experiences of students at university who are also mothers. This is important because students who are mothers often have different academic and non-academic experiences to other university students.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to help inform universities and policy makers of the academic and non-academic experiences of these students. Therefore, this can allow them to more appropriately cater for and support students who are mothers in the future. Ultimately, this study aims to improve both the university experience and the completion rate for future students who are mothers.

PARTICIPANTS

All the students participating in this study will be currently studying an approved course on-campus at ECU South West. They will also all be mothers, with children living at home with them, and be aged between 25 and 44. To be included in the study, the students need to have completed one year full-time of their course, or the equivalent part-time.

THE STUDY PROCESS

This study involves information being collected in three ways. Firstly, all the participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire. This questionnaire, consisting of 20 questions, aims to give the researcher an idea of each student’s commitments both on and off campus. After the completion of this questionnaire you participate in either an individual interview with the researcher or in a focus group with the researcher and about 5 other students. You are free to ask the researcher any questions relating to this study process, or the question being asked, at any time.

The individual interviews will be conducted first. During these interviews you will be asked to tell me about your experience at university. Although it is intended that each student have one interview, more than one may be required. These interviews are expected to go for around 90 minutes. They will take place at a place and during a time that is agreeable to both the researcher and student.

The focus groups will be conducted after all the individual interviews have been completed and analysed. These focus groups involve approximately 6 students discussing their experiences of university together. Both the interviews and focus groups will be recorded on a digital voice recorder for analysis by the researcher.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without any academic penalty or other disadvantage. There are no risks associated with your involvement in this research. You may choose not to answer some questions. You may ask for the digital voice recorder to be turned off at any time. If you withdraw from the study, any personal details and data collected will continue to be stored securely with the information from the other participants of the study. Alternatively, you may ask for your data to be destroyed.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Participation in this study is strictly confidential. Your personal information will be identified using a participant identification number and your information will not be given to anyone who is not part of this study. The research report may include parts of interviews; you will not be identified in any way. Any publications arising from this study will not identify any of your personal information. All documents and notes taken will be stored in a secure location at the university until the completion of the study. Following this, records will be stored securely for a further five years at the Edith Cowan Institute for Education Research, before being shredded. Any electronic documents relating to this study will be stored on a password protected computer. This research will be conducted in a way that is consistent with the National statement on ethical conduct in research involving humans (2007) and the Privacy Act (1998).

CONTACTS

If you wish to ask any questions or discuss any part of the research, I can be contacted at Edith Cowan University on 9780 7777. If you wish to speak to my supervisor, Doctor Jennie Sharp can be contacted at the South West Campus of Edith Cowan University on 9780 7704.

Appendix E – Statement and consent form

STATEMENT AND CONSENT FORM

STUDENTS WHO ARE MOTHERS: AN INTERPRETIVE DESCRIPTION

RESEARCHER: AMANDA DRAPER

I, _____ (*participant's full name*)
have read and understood the attached participant information sheet entitled:
"Students who are mothers: An interpretive description".

1. The contact details of the researcher have been given to me for me to direct any further questions that I may have about this study.
2. I understand that while information gained during this study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal details will not be given. I understand the research team will have access to the data and results. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any stage without academic or any other penalty.
3. I recognise that my participation in this study will assist with research into the experiences of students who are mothers at university, and that I may not benefit personally from the research.
4. I understand that this research will be conducted in a way consistent with the National statement on ethical conduct in research involving humans (2007) and the Privacy Act (1998).

Participant's signature

Date

I, _____ (*researcher's full name*) have
explained the study to the signatory who stated that she understood the purpose
and process of this study.

Researcher's signature

Date

Appendix F – Demographic information table

Participants' Demographic Information

Selected demographic category	Participation in study
Age Group	n (%)
25 – 29	2 (6.3%)
30 – 34	7 (21.9%)
35 – 39	13 (40.6%)
40 – 45	10 (31.2%)
Entry into University	n (%)
TAFE qualification	9 (28.1%)
Previous undergraduate studies	8 (25.0%)
Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT)	9 (28.1%)
University Preparation Course (UPC)	3 (9.4%)
Portfolio entry	3 (9.4%)
Marital Status	n (%)
Married/de-facto	20 (62.5%)
Single/divorced/separated/widowed	12 (37.5%)
Number of Dependent Children	n (%)
1	2 (6.3%)
2	20 (62.5%)
3	5 (15.6%)
4	4 (12.5%)
5	0 (0.0%)
6	1 (3.1%)
Course of Study	n (%)
Bachelor of Science (Nursing)	18 (56.2%)
Bachelor of Education (Primary)	6 (18.7%)
Bachelor of Social Work	4 (12.5%)
Bachelor of Arts (Creative Industries)	2 (6.3%)
Bachelor of Business	2 (6.3%)
Bachelor of Science (Surf Science)	0 (0.0%)

Course Load	n (%)
Full time	19 (59.4%)
Part time	13 (40.6%)
Attendance Mode	n (%)
On campus	19 (59.4%)
Mixed on and off campus	13 (40.6%)
Participation in Paid Employment	n (%)
No paid employment	14 (43.8%)
Less than 10 hours per fortnight	6 (18.7%)
Between 10 and 30 hours per fortnight	4 (12.5%)
Between 30 and 50 hours per fortnight	7 (21.9%)
More than 50 hours per fortnight	1 (3.1%)
Travel to and from University	n (%)
Less than 4 hours per fortnight	19 (59.4%)
4 hours per fortnight < 8 hours per fortnight	9 (28.1%)
More than 8 hours per fortnight	4 (12.5%)
Time spent on Voluntary Activities	n (%)
Less than 1 hour per fortnight	8 (25.0%)
Between 1 hour and 3 hours per fortnight	5 (15.6%)
Between 3 and 6 hours per fortnight	6 (18.8%)
More than 6 hours per fortnight	13 (40.6%)
Time spent on own sporting or leisure activities	n (%)
Less than 1 hour per fortnight	12 (37.5 %)
Between 1 hour and 3 hours per fortnight	10 (31.2 %)
Between 3 and 6 hours per fortnight	6 (18.8%)
More than 6 hours per fortnight	4 (12.5%)
Income Bracket	
Less than \$1500 per fortnight	10 (31.2%)
Between \$1500 and \$2999 per fortnight	17 (53.1%)
Between \$3000 and 4499 per fortnight	4 (12.5%)
More than \$4500 per fortnight	1 (3.2%)