The Experience of Mature Age Students Transitioning to Higher Education

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Abstract

This thesis examines mature students' experiences of transitioning to university. An interpretive, hermeneutic framework is used to guide the interpretation of the experiences of the participants. Twelve mature students from health and education programmes took part in this study. Six were individually interviewed and six were part of a focus group that endeavoured to elicit their experiences as students in a new learning situation.

Mature students are a significant cohort within the university student population. Many have not partaken in formal education for a long period of time and face multiple challenges when entering the tertiary setting. Unknown expectations and not being academically prepared for the rigours of student requirements were some issues that could inhibit the transition of these students to the new learning environment.

Findings of this study provide insights into what aspects of the transition process assisted the participants' integration. Characteristics of the mature student such as their life experience and motivation appeared to aid their progress to be part of the university cohort. University structures and practices such as valuing diversity and timetabling played a role in how the non-traditional mature student engaged with their learning. Acknowledgement of the mature student's situation could perhaps lead to early university interventions that enable students to test their proficiency of their academic skills and become familiar with the requirements at this level.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material to which a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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Name

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Date

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Ethics Approval

Ethics approval was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 19/11/2013 from application 13/323.

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

Mature age students are not the typical cohort that engages in tertiary education. Many have had careers, raised families, have taken on the long term debt of a mortgage, or have had other significant life experience before deciding to pursue a qualification at university (Howard & Davies, 2013). The university environment has historically been the domain of the school leaver where the transition to the academic rigours and expectations of university is deemed a natural progression for the young learners (Munro, 2011).

For the mature age student who often has not partaken in formal education for many years, the university environment may be less accommodating. The structure of the learning environment may not take into account the different needs of the student who has multiple roles in their life. The exclusivity of being a student without other demands is not the reality for most mature age students. The need to work or care for dependents places competing demands on the time available to study (Porter, 2006). The experience of the mature age student may be advantageous in their educational pursuit as they apply their life skills to navigate the new environment and the challenges that come with learning at a tertiary level. Their academic ability is, however, a significant unknown especially with increased time away from education (Mallman & Lee, 2016).

In recent decades the student profile has become more diverse. Driven by policies to increase participation at the tertiary level, the New Zealand government views university education as a way for citizens to contribute economically to the national economy. It is also an avenue for individuals to attain a better quality of life for themselves and their families (Ministry of Education [MoE], n.d.b.). This has changed the ways in which universities approach teaching and learning. Strategies have been implemented to ensure different student cohorts feel included and to increase their chances of attaining successful outcomes. Non-traditional students, however, face challenges in a system that is still adapting to meet the divergent needs of its learners. The first undergraduate year is when students are most likely to discontinue studying, so much importance is placed on the successful transition of students in this initial year (Mallman & Lee, 2016; Trowler, 2010).

As mature age students are a significant cohort within the wider non-traditional student population, this thesis aims to explore the experiences of this particular group of students as they navigate their way as new university students. Much is made of the importance of widening the participation at university, but the experience of the students may give a good indication of the effectiveness of inclusion strategies. Therefore, the question addressed in this thesis is 'How do mature age students navigate their home responsibilities and the university environment?' The mature student's perspective should give insight into areas that enable transition and areas that make transition to tertiary study a problematic endeavour.

The purpose of this first chapter is to provide a broad context of the study and to establish my position as the role of the researcher. The following chapter synthesises the literature on mature age students and their transition to tertiary study. Multiple aspects were evident but due to the restrictions of this study only certain elements were chosen to focus on. The nature of transition and characteristics of mature students are first explored followed by an overview of Western educational policies and their impact on the tertiary setting. Student engagement was then chosen as a topic that enabled various elements of the mature student and the institutional environment to be examined. Successful transition is largely dependent on how well the student engages in the learning process and on what opportunities the institution provides to enable this. Other factors outside the academic sphere, such as family commitments, also determine engagement levels, so this topic allowed an extensive examination of the influences on engagement. Finally in this chapter Bourdieu's theory of habitus is explored. This provides a social and cultural perspective on the transition process for the mature students.

Chapter Three details the methodology that supports the research approach of this study. The philosophical perspective is discussed as is the influence of the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. The methods and justifications are provided to illustrate the transparency of the process and to give confidence to the validity of the research. Chapter Four presents the findings of this study through an interpretation of the participants' experiences. These are illustrated by themes that emerged from the data and from what I the researcher perceived as relevant to the participants and to the context of their transition to university. Chapter Five discusses the findings in relation to previous research discussed in the literature review. This puts the participants' experiences into a broader context and gives further insight into their unique situations. Chapter Six concludes the study with limitations

stated and areas of further research then noted. Furthermore, recommendations are given that could perhaps improve the transition process for future adult students. An overall conclusion on the mature age students' transition process closes this chapter.

1.2 Positioning the Researcher

As this study has employed a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, it is appropriate that I position myself within the context of the research. The purpose of this is to acknowledge my experiences and opinions in regard to the phenomena studied and to indicate possible influences on the interpretation of the participants experiences (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Mature age students entering the tertiary environment is a situation that resonates with my own personal experience. Having changed professions in my mid-30's to pursue a teaching career, I can empathise with the uncertainty that this change can bring. Leaving behind the security and comfort of the known is challenging, even intimidating, when taking the opportunity to seek advancement for either personal or for employment reasons. Apprehension and fear of failure are abiding thoughts and can inhibit personal progress, yet simultaneously, a new challenge can also be inspiring. Added pressure is related to the time and cost associated with attaining a qualification. While I did not personally have such experiences, nor did I have dependents to care for, nevertheless, I admire those who undertake such a commitment.

My teaching on a pre-degree course at university provided a further avenue where I have had closer experience with mature age students. The nature of the pre-degree course allowed more time with these students, and provided opportunities for their pastoral care. I particularly noted how some of the mature students thrived in the learning environment. Their new learning was transformative and very empowering for them, and witnessing this was inspiring for me. My interest in mature age students learning at university was initiated with those early encounters in my teaching career.

As a researcher, however, I need to be aware of these motivations for my study. I strive not to let my experiences compromise the integrity of the research. My writing reflects an admiration for some of the mature age students I have encountered, but I do realise that positive outcomes are not always the experience of students. I have played a part in some of those positive stories but equally I have played a part in the stories of the students who did not succeed. The insight I have as a teacher of mature age students is useful but as is the case

in qualitative research of this nature, the participants' voice is paramount and their experiences warrant authentic representation.

Chapter Two: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the experiences of mature age students as they transition to university. The transition to tertiary education can be challenging for any student as they enter a new environment where expectations may be uncertain. For mature age students, who have usually not had any formal education for a period of time, undertaking university study can be particularly daunting (Howard & Davies, 2013). With limited knowledge on the academic requirements and unsure of their ability to cope with the rigours of university study, the initial weeks of attendance can be an anxious time (Wingate, 2007). Widening participation has been a feature of tertiary study in recent years, which has supposedly led to changes in the delivery and structure of education to make it a more accommodating endeavour for an increasingly diverse student population (Moreau, 2016).

The review examines literature that explores the many facets of transition encountered by the mature student. Firstly, the context of transition is examined as well as what defines a mature age student. To provide a context for exploring the research question, a broad overview of influences that shape the current educational sphere nationally and with similar Western countries is explored in the next section. This is followed by a review of aspects of student engagement. This critical element of education can determine the success of students and is particularly interesting from the perspective of mature age students. Their time for study is not exclusive as they have other roles in life that compete with their student demands. The university environment has not evolved with adult students at the forefront, so establishing themselves into this new setting brings challenges. Lastly, Bourdieu's theory of habitus and cultural capital is applied to the educational context to further understand the complexities of transitioning to HE.

2.2 Transition and the Mature Age Student

The transition of students into higher education is a common topic of research. This initial step when students enter into the educational environment is crucial, as successful integration at this early stage increases future chances of academic success (McInnis, James, & Hartley, 2000). A student's transition is not linked to a definitive time period and is more accurately described as an ongoing process (Bowles, Fisher, McPhail, Rosenstreich, &

Dobson, 2014). But much of the literature focuses on the first year in higher education, and the challenges that students may encounter adapting to this new environment (Todd & Ballantyne, 2007). The first year learning experience is very important, as this is when students are most likely to fail. This is also when they are most at financial risk, and socially and emotionally vulnerable. It is also a time when patterns of engagement are set. Consequently this time period has been well investigated by many researchers (McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000). The outcome of a successful transition means that students will complete the   course they have enrolled in and gain a qualification. Institutions have a vested interest in a student's successful transition as funding is often dependent on student numbers and is compromised when students terminate their studies prematurely. Also the reputation of the university is influenced by success rates of the learners and is used as a marketing tool in the competitive tertiary education sector. Therefore institutions employ various strategies to enhance student completion rates (Christie, Tett, Cree, & McCune, 2016; Wilson et al., 2016). Institutional approaches to student transition are also dependent on the characteristics of learners and mature age students have particular characteristics that can require different consideration when compared to a traditional student (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012).

Mature age students, or adult students as they are often referred to in the literature, can be identified by certain features. Firstly, they are usually defined as over the age of 25. Secondly, they have a delayed enrolment in higher education (HE) or have had a significant time away from formal education. Thirdly, mature age students have life experience gained through work or family commitments. Lastly, they are financially independent (Saar, Taht, & Roosalu, 2014; Spellman, 2007). This is by no means a definitive list but are some common features that provide a context for the participants in this study.

The literature often includes mature age students as a smaller subset of non-traditional students. It is probably simplest to define a non-traditional student by defining what a traditional student is. Traditional students have entered tertiary education immediately after completion of their secondary school education, which is considered to be the conventional pathway (Keith, Byerly, Floerchinger, Pence, & Thornburg, 2006). Historically this cohort has been young and mainly male. Although the student population is now much more diverse, there are still some characteristics that may not be considered part of the traditional tertiary student profile (Moreau, 2016). A non-traditional student could be older, have a lower socio-economic status, a differing ethnic background, have dependents, or a disability of some

kind. None of these groups are homogenous. But often non-traditional students, including mature age students, share similar issues when entering an educational institution that has not been structured to accommodate students that do not traditionally attend HE (Munro, 2011).

Specific characteristics of mature age students may inhibit their success in comparison to traditional students. O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007) suggested a number of factors that make them vulnerable when engaging in transition to tertiary education. Being a minority, having limited experience in formal education, and responsibilities outside the educational environment, could impact on their successful transition. Mature age students can feel like imposters, or they may feel that they are not worthy of partaking in HE, and therefore need to prove their place (Kasworm, 2010; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). Negative Western social stereotyping to ageing can lead to low expectations of mature age students' attainment which impacts on how students perceive their abilities (Keith et al., 2006), while Todd and Ballantyne (2007) suggest that divides in the classroom can stem from the differences between school leavers and mature aged students. Differing behaviour, attitudes and expectations can sometimes cause tension between the two cohorts. Thus, there appear to be a myriad of potential issues for mature age students to contend with when transitioning to an educational setting that has potentially undergone significant changes since their last participation in formal educational.

2.3 Educational Landscape

Current mature age students are more than likely to enter a different educational landscape in the early 21st century than may have been the case in the past. In recent decades wider participation associated with lifelong learning has been a focus of educational policy throughout Western countries. This has resulted in an increase in non-traditional students, which includes mature age students, attending HE and gives the appearance of tertiary education being more accepting of a diverse student population (Forbus, Newbold & Mehta, 2011; Holdsworth, 2009; Mallman & Lee, 2016). Wider participation requires new modes of teaching and learning which aim to accommodate the varied learning styles of the diverse student population. Attaining HE qualifications is an important focus of Western governments as it is seen as giving opportunities for citizens to improve their lives and of their families by improving job prospects and therefore economic outcomes of the country as a whole (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009; Moreau, 2016). Educational reform policies that

drive lifelong learning and wider participation in the tertiary sector have, however, been subject to critique due to its focus on economic outcomes (Archer, 2007; Burke, 2013).

Between 1995 and 2011 participation rates at universities throughout Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries have increased from 39% to 60% (OECD, 2013). Driven by demand and structural changes in education systems, wider participation has changed student profiles. The average age of the first time student has increased to 22 years, when previously 19 was a typical age when many students would finish their secondary education and commence tertiary education (OECD, 2013). New Zealand has one of the highest rates of adult participation in formal or non-formal education within the OECD at 68% (OECD, 2016a). Completion rates for all full-time students at bachelor's level in New Zealand is also one of the highest at 81%, although it often takes longer than the normal three year period given to gain the qualification (OECD, 2016b). New Zealand appears to have relatively high success rates in HE achievement compared to other OECD countries particularly with adult students over the age of 25 years.

There is no specific mention of mature aged students in the New Zealand government's Tertiary Education Strategy, 2014-2019, but with an underlying theme of skilled workers contributing to the economy, it can be assumed mature age students are expected to play a part in this scenario (Ministry of Education [MoE], n.d.). Widening participation in tertiary education is an objective of the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) Strategic Plan, the university attended by the participants of this study, but again adult students are not mentioned specifically (AUT, n.d.). Mature age students made up 30% of the total students studying bachelor degrees in New Zealand in 2015. A total of 38,855 were studying with 67% being female and 33% male (MoE, 2015). Participation rates of mature age students have gradually decreased since 2008 down from 41,390 with small peaks in 2009/10 probably due to labour market conditions after the global financial crisis (MoE, 2015). Mature age students make up a significant portion of undergraduate students and although not specifically mentioned in policy they are an established cohort within the tertiary education sector in New Zealand.

Neoliberal ideologies have recently impacted on the educational environment in New Zealand and other western countries (Bowl, 2014; Burke, 2013; Zepke, 2009). This is reflected in the New Zealand government's strong focus on its tertiary students playing an integral role in boosting economic outcomes, to help the country become "more productive

and competitive" (MoE, n.d., p. 2) and in turn create better individuals, communities and society (MoE, n.d.). This is a common discourse amongst countries similar to New Zealand such as England and Australia. Lauder, Young, Daniels, Balarin and Lowe (2012) linked this discourse to the belief in knowledge as the vehicle to a better educated nation and therefore a better performer in the global economy. It is assumed that as a consequence a more socially just society will emerge. Naidoo (2008) identified the changing nature of the purpose of higher education, from more social and cultural purposes to a focus on economic outcomes. Education has become "commodified" (p. 45) with economics dictating the utilisation of achieved qualifications to contribute to a global market place. As a result, this may see a focus on knowledge learnt that reflects the values of the market place and not the social values that universities have traditionally embedded in the curriculum (Naidoo, 2008; Zepke, 2009). Aligning with the marketisation of university education is the notion of lifelong learning. Olssen (2006) viewed this concept as a form of government control that equips graduates with skills enabling job mobility within the global work place. It has allowed the individualisation of responsibility of education and to lessen the obligation of governments to financially assist students. In the workplace, worker adaptability and flexible work processes, have facilitated a reduction in the accountability of employment conditions as employees are regarded as economic units that can utilise their skills in a variety of employment opportunities available to them (Olssen, 2006).

Burke (2013) suggested that institutions have become stratified and focus on standards of excellence in order to increase their ranking, which is a market driven imperative. Within these divisions, long-established universities are deemed more prestigious and continue to attract traditional students. Newer universities, many that were formerly polytechnics, have lower international standings and tend to appeal to non-traditional students (Brooks, 2012). New Zealand's Tertiary Education Strategy describes how the vast amounts of money invested in tertiary education around the world have created an environment where institutions need to be "efficient" and "competitive" to be in the "race" for highly talented teaching and research staff needed for universities of high standing (MoE, n.d., p.4). These words reflect the dominance of the neoliberal discourse that influences western educational strategy.

The influence of neoliberalism on wider participation has been critiqued for the assumption that inequalities dissipate when the opportunity is given to attend university. With the change from an elitist to a mass education system more people have the choice to

participate in tertiary education. Once that choice is made it is up to the individual to make the most of the chance they have been given to reach their potential. Meritocracy underpins the idea of equality that presents people with the opportunity of choice. This is the belief that people who work hard and have ability will succeed within a fair and equal system. But this ignores the persistence of inequalities such as gender and ethnicity that may not appear explicitly in the environment. The discourse of neoliberalism and meritocracy that guides policy around access to HE appears to ignore issues of diversity and still entails non-traditional students such as mature age students to assimilate (Burke, 2013; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009).

The definition of student is continually changing due to the broadening HE population. But the student is still constructed within the parameters of the neoliberal discourse. That is students as learners who are consumers of education. They are independent, autonomous individuals that are based on masculine ideals that have historically defined the traditional student (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). Students' expectations may also be translated into a consumerist role, especially with reduced government spending on education and increasing student fees. Money is paid to gain qualifications with the expectation of a well-paid job and social upward mobility on completion (Naidoo, 2008; Saunders, 2007). Reduced spending also makes it more essential for an independent learner with reduced teaching resources available in institutions (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). The relationship between learners and teachers may change as a result of economic knowledge for the global market place not requiring a complex higher order set of skills (Naidoo, 2008; Zepke, 2009). This could result in students becoming more passive and taking less responsibility for their learning therefore impacting on their ability to be independent learners (Naidoo, 2008).

Global discourses about education have enabled greater access to HE. Consequently wider participation has changed the profile of the university student, but conjecture exists about the acceptance of the diverse student body into the tertiary environment. Neoliberal ideals place the onus on the individual student to succeed within a system that may not always facilitate the broadened cohort. Opportunities to attend do not eliminate systemic inequalities that may still exist. Mature age students face changes in education that they may or may not have anticipated but they will have some impact on their participation and success in HE.

2.4 Student Engagement

Student engagement is a fundamental concept within the discourse of higher education and is viewed as crucial to a student's transition. Being engaged can produce quality learning and therefore improve the chance of success in the tertiary environment (Trowler, 2010). With student success being so vital, educational policy makers also view engagement as a marker of an institution's success. Despite its importance and being widely researched in the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Australia, there is, however, no consensus on how to define student engagement and how it is best measured. This has left aspects of student engagement open to critique (Baron & Corbin, 2012; Gourlay, 2015; Zepke, 2015).

Kuh (2009) defines student engagement as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p. 683). Kuh has been influential in the creation of the National Survey of Student Engagement [NSSE] which is used to measure the engagement of American tertiary students. Academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences and supportive campus environment are the five criteria that are deemed necessary to facilitate student engagement (Baron & Corbin, 2012, Krause & Coates, 2008). Similarly, Australia and New Zealand have implemented the Australian Survey of Student Engagement [ASSE] which is modelled on the NSSE and uses the Student Engagement Questionnaire [SEQ] to record what students are actually doing to engage at university. This questionnaire uses similar criteria to the NSSE to define engagement behaviours with the addition of a sixth criterion; work integrated learning (Coates, 2010). These surveys supply empirical evidence but have been critiqued for focusing on involvement in particular learning procedures and utilising the survey to enable a quantitative, measurable analysis (Zepke, 2015). The transferability of the scales used to measure engagement from an American tertiary system to an Australian one is another aspect that may be limiting. The two systems have contextual differences that may not be accurately reflected when using a measuring scale established in America. Vital elements of engagement could therefore be overlooked (Hagel, Carr, & Devlin, 2012). Cultural, socio-economic and emotive factors have been identified by Zepke (2015) as potential areas not captured in the scales' measurements. He further comments that the surveys simplify conceptions about engagement and do not take into account the diversity that the student body brings or other pedagogical dimensions that institutions employ.

A broader definition by The Australian Council of Educational Research [ACER] defines student engagement as "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate higher quality learning" (ACER, 2008, p. vi). This definition enables numerous elements such as student background and circumstances, institutional structures and cultures, teaching practices and approaches to learning to be considered (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Trowler (2010) composed a definition of student engagement based on her comprehensive literature review although she acknowledged that a more holistic account was still wanting:

> Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimise the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution (p. 3).

The interpretations of student engagement outlined above vary, with some putting the onus on the student to engage and others highlighting the institutional influence in allowing conditions for engagement. Four aspects of student engagement are focused on in this section of the review. Firstly, the motivations of the learner and how that may affect their approach to learning at university is discussed. Secondly, personal factors are considered as mature age students can have particular circumstances that influence how well they engage at university. Thirdly, institutional policies and structures are explored as they can unintentionally impede a student's progress as a successful learner. Lastly, the interactions between the student and the teacher within the learning environment are reviewed. With student engagement being so multifaceted these aspects are considered some of the more prominent issues regarding mature students.

2.4.1 Motivation to enrol

The literature identifies a variety of reasons that motivate mature age students to pursue HE. To earn more money and to improve career prospects are a major motivation especially for younger mature age students. Some mature age students are required by their workplace to undertake HE in order to keep up with industry changes or to further their opportunities for advancement. Others are striving for a financially secure future for themselves and their families and view a qualification as an avenue to achieve that (Boeren, 2011; Kasworm, Polson & Fishback, 2002). Better employment and earning opportunities were found to be key motivators for undertaking tertiary education for the general student

population in Leathwood and O'Connell's (2003) study, although many non-traditional students were included in their cohort. Many re-enter study as a result of major life transitions that are often family related. Personal life transitions or critical incidents such as divorce, death, or children beginning school are often triggers for adults to change their self-perception and to contribute to the decision to enter tertiary education. They reflect on their lives and proactively pursue study to open up opportunities and to develop personally. The change in personal circumstances can create the chance to commit to long term study and to perhaps follow earlier desires to attend university when previously unattainable (Kasworm et al., 2002; McCune, Hounsell, Christie, Cree, & Tett, 2010). Social reasons for tertiary study is not normally a feature of mature age students (Scanlon et al., 2007). But for traditional younger students, the social aspect of meeting new people and participating in the student social life is an enticing component of studying at university. Mature age students are, however, deemed too busy balancing study, family, and other commitments to have available time for socialising within the university setting (McCune et al., 2010; Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). The motivations that inspire mature age students to enter HE are diverse and those reasons can influence the way that they approach their engagement at university which in turn contributes to how well students transition to the university environment.

A significant element that can add complexity to a mature age students' decision to attend HE, is if they have dependent children (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Limited research has been done on this particular cohort, to the extent that Moreau and Kerner (2015) used the term "invisible" (p. 218) to describe their absence. Marandet and Wainwright (2010) found that training for a career and gaining a qualification were the first and third most common reasons in their survey on university students with children to care for with no significant difference between genders. The participants were not exclusively mature age students, but over 86% were aged over 25. Within these reasons were different drivers such as being sponsored by the student's former employer or making an independent decision to retrain for a different career. Intrinsic motivation to learn for its own sake was not a feature in their study. This differs to Reay, Ball, & David's (2002) study on mature age students that found interest in the subject was very dominant. Achieving the qualification was superseded by the desire to learn. This was similar across genders, although the number of participants who had dependent children was not specified in the study. Marandet and Wainwright (2010) identified children starting school or partner separations as examples of changes in personal circumstances which influenced female student-parents in particular to enter HE. This

perhaps illustrates the influence of family life in the motivation to study for those with children.

Being a role model for their children is an important factor when student-parents decide to engage in tertiary study. As well as a desire to have financial security and a better quality of life, children would hopefully be inspired by the parent's example and be encouraged to study and viewuniversity as an option for themselves in later life (Brooks, 2012; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). Being a role model was the second most common reason for attending university for student-parents in Marandet and Wainwright's (2010) study. Having children made parents reflect on their own capabilities and how equipped they may be to help their children with their own schooling. Attending HE could be perceived as trying to improve one's standing in the family and to have an education that the children would respect. The practical aspect of having the ability to help children with their own study was valued by the student-parent. It was also an avenue for children to observe that studying was a life enhancing endeavour (Reay, et al., (2002). The scenario of integrating study with the student's dependents is viewed as empowering and potentially transformative for both the children and parents (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010).

2.4.2 Approaches to learning

Successful engagement as a university student requires quality learning. A factor that contributes to attaining quality learning is the motivation of the student as this influences how they will approach the material to be studied (Ronning, 2009). Mature students tend to be intrinsically motivated as they normally have chosen to attend HE as opposed to being required to by some external influence. The substantial considerations and changes in life made to accommodate study can add to the incentive to achieve success (Howard & Davies, 2013). Intrinsically motivated learners are interested in learning as they can see the value in the task itself. Their motivation comes from within to engage with the learning for reasons of curiosity and mastery. Self-initiated strategies may be employed by the intrinsically motivated learner and can lead to more autonomy as a student which is a desired feature of the successful student (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). These patterns of learning by the intrinsically motivated learner are also known as a deep approach to learning. A deep approach will see the student make multiple connections to the content such as relating it to their own experiences or to other subjects or contexts. This manipulation and understanding of information promotes positive study habits and a much stronger connection to the learning

environment and is often a feature of mature-aged students approach to study (Fazey & Fazey, 2001; Howard & Davies, 2013).

Conversely, a student who is extrinsically motivated may have difficulty engaging in quality learning. The extrinsically motivated student is partaking in HE due to instrumental reasons such as a work requirement (McCune et al., 2010). They may be motivated by external signs of value such as gaining the qualification and not actually be interested in the subject. This is viewed as a temporary engagement to serve a short term purpose which may not be a sustainable strategy for undergraduate study (Bye et al., 2007). Learning in these circumstances can be based on a surface approach. Unlike a deep approach, learning would be based on memorising facts and recalling material. The content may seem fragmented as connections between subjects and others spheres of life may not be made (Kasworm, 2003). Externally motivated students are often more anxious about failing and are less stable in their commitment to the learning tasks. Hence they may be more at risk of not persisting with their studies. Younger students may be more prone to this style of learning as they tend to be at a stage of their lives where their identity is forming and they may not be as self-assured as the mature student (Bye et al., 2007; Fazey & Fazey, 2001).

2.4.3 Emotions and being a student

Transition to university is an emotional experience for students (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008). The emotions that a student experiences during the transition process can assist either positively or negatively with their learning. Motivation is particularly affected by the student's emotions and can impact the level of engagement (Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2015; Scanlon et al., 2007). Positive emotions such as interest and enjoyment are important aspects of emotional engagement. Interest is a connection between the student and the content or task. The emotion of interest is seen as a crucial factor underlying motivation as it drives focus, openness to new material, learning in different forums and inspires to learn throughout the life span (Dougherty, Abe, & Izard, 1996). Enjoyment is related to the combination of interest and the belief in one's capability to complete or engage in a task (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). Often students will have these positive emotions because they can relate to the content. If students are studying for a new career or for further career advancement, application of the material learnt can be very relevant to them. General life experience can also promote interest in a topic. This aspect can be particularly pertinent to mature age students with their greater experience

compared to the younger school leaver. If the course of study was chosen by the student and aligned with their interests then there is a greater chance of engagement. If a student is applying these combined emotions to their learning they are more willing to persevere with their study and to engage cognitively. When a student is cognitively engaged the learning is more satisfying and increases intrinsic motivation. This can create a positive upward spiral that enhances the learning for the student (Bye et al., 2007; Consedine, Magai, & King, 2004; Kahu et al., 2015).

Negative emotions such as anxiety, boredom and frustration have been more commonly studied. Course content and design can influence how students relate to the learning and whether negative emotions are experienced. If students are bored they are more likely to procrastinate and not engage cognitively. Feelings of frustration, often through high workloads, can compromise feelings of interest. Anxiety is a very common negative emotion experienced by students. Mature students in particular are prone to feelings of anxiety or being overwhelmed. After being absent from formal education for long periods of time, older students are often unsure about academic expectations. They doubt their ability to be competent in this area (Kahu et al., 2015; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). Times when first assessments are due can cause more intense feelings of anxiety. At this stage, students have yet to receive formal feedback on their academic competency, so may still have difficulty gauging their ability (Bye et al., 2007). Interaction with other students can create negative emotional feelings. Mature age students can be anxious as they are uncertain if they have the knowledge to engage with other capable students. Appearing less able than others can distress some students and inhibit them from participating (Kahu et al., 2015). The effect of negative emotions can vary though. They can lead to a decline in intrinsic motivation or conversely, they can inspire more intense effort as a strategy to not fail (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

Student parents often experience feelings of guilt while studying (Brooks, 2015; Lynch, 2008; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). While positive emotions, such as pride, are commonly experienced, especially when perceiving their student identity as a role model for their children, guilt remains as a dominant emotion for those with dependent children (Reay et al., 2002). Time spent on study can be perceived as compromising the time that could be spent with the children, who may be negatively impacted in some way. Conversely, guilt can be felt by spending time with the children and not enough time on studying, although this does not appear as prominent. This may be tempered depending on the age of the children

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and whether they are at school or in childcare (Lovell, 2014). Male student parents are less inclined to feel guilt over child responsibilities compared to female students. Men may feel more guilt around issues of not providing financially for the family, or losing their status as the main income provider. Female students tend to feel emotions of guilt more than male student parents in respect of the caregiver role (Brooks, 2015). Lynch (2008) suggested that this is due to cultural expectations of mothers as the natural primary caregiver. Patriarchal dominance lays the expectation of caring for children with mothers and the needs of the children deemed more important than the mothers. The experience of lone mothers as students appears to instil particular feelings of guilt. Societal norms can stigmatise single parents as burdens on society and as not being able to look after the welfare of the children as well as two parent families. Feelings of guilt from prioritising study over children can re-emphasise these stereotypical features of negligence (Kahu et al, 2015; Longhurst, Hodgetts, & Stolte, 2012). It appears from the literature that the student parent's role of caregiver in the family often falls to the female. Aside from any personal perceptions that they may have about balancing time between children and study, societal expectations may also influence the feelings of guilt that the female student parent experiences. .

Linked with motivation is a student's self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's own ability to engage in action that results in a positive outcome of a particular task (Bandura, 1993). How much effort and persistence is put in to tasks will depend on the student's belief in their abilities. To continually persist and to not be distracted illustrates an attitude that the task is achievable and illustrates the student's self-belief in what they are doing (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). Those with strong self-belief will engage in help-seeking behaviours that will enhance their learning strategies (Linnenbrink & Pintric, 2003). High self-efficacy is generally viewed as fundamental to positive emotions such as interest and enjoyment (Kahu et al., 2015). Low self-efficacy can produce negative emotions towards learning. Those with lower self-efficacy tend to give up more easily if a task becomes difficult even if they have the ability to complete it. They may not even have the confidence to engage in help-seeking as they are worried they may be perceived as deficient (Linnenbrink & Pintric, 2003). Leathwood and O'Connell (2003) noted in their study that some students, particularly women, were cautious about speaking up in lectures for fear of not contributing anything intellectual. Being intimidated by the males' dominance of the class discussions also made women less inclined to contribute. Some evidence suggests that mature students display high levels of self-efficacy and that this attribute informs the self-selection

process to enter HE. Those who are unsure of their capacity to deal with the rigours of academic study will not take the initial steps to enrol at university. These low self-efficacy beliefs act as a barrier to their participation in tertiary study (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Howard & Davies, 2013). Overall, student's self-efficacy is closely linked to their motivation and affects how they engage in the classroom. Positive emotions like interest and enjoyment will keep them striving to improve their learning while negative emotions like anxiety and frustration will inhibit their efforts to engage.

2.4.4 Personal circumstances and university choice

Research has identified mixed patterns of institutional choice that reflect the circumstances of student parents and the influence of gender on childcare responsibilities. Low status universities, typically those that were recently polytechnics, usually attracted non-traditional students such as student-parents and in particular women (Moreau, 2016). Brooks (2012) found that in her United Kingdom study male student-parents were more likely to attend high status universities that were typically older and more established. Brooks (2012) suggested that attending a prominent university may mitigate any perceived loss of status by males as they were no longer the main income provider. In contrast, Marandet and Wainwright (2010) found that proximity to home was a significant factor for student-parents when choosing which university to attend. Academic reputation was also an important consideration but appeared to be less relevant due to the time restrictions imposed by childcare responsibilities and the need to be located near their dependents activities. Interestingly, a breakdown of gender was absent so it cannot be assumed that the female participants bore most of the childcare duties, although 70% of the participants were female. Female student-parents in Brooks' (2012) study who attended high status institutions had more responsibility for childcare duties compared to their male counterparts. Mostly, the male student-parent had a partner taking care of childcare leaving study commitments to be treated like a full time job. It appears that the commitment to caring for dependents influences the choice of university and that care has a tendency to be undertaken by female student-parents. Brooks (2012) suggested that family negotiation to attend university for some female student-parents was less prominent as childcare was deemed to still be their responsibility.

Mature age students' circumstances normally lead them to attend a local university as opposed to living on campus in a location away from their home. The commitment to childcare duties plays a prominent role when deciding to enrol in a local institution (Marandet

& Wainwright, 2010) but there are other reasons that keep mature students within their local area. The emotional attachment to existing family networks when deciding which tertiary institution to attend is an important consideration (Christie, 2007). Evidence from Bye et al., (2007) proposed that the family home gave a sense of comfort and familiarity in contrast to the new and uncertain tertiary setting. Their participants indicated a greater sense of belonging at home and that family support was a tangible asset. Some literature, however, suggests that living away from the university campus can weaken the connection students have with their institutions (Wilcox, Winn, & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). This could have the effect of marginalising them from fellow students and to be less likely to be part of supportive social networks. The chance of discontinuing studies is stronger in this scenario (Holdsworth, 2009; Thomas, 2002). Many school leavers attending university live on campus and have the opportunity to be totally immersed in the academic and social environment. This can be viewed as advantageous as they can build strong connections to the university enhancing their ability to succeed in their studies (Wilcox et al., 2005). Mature age students, however, are unlikely to follow this path, as they typically have commitments, such as mortgages, employment, and family, which restrict their university choice (Thomas, 2002).

For those mature age students who are parents of dependent children, engaging in the tertiary environment can sometimes be problematic. If family concerns eventuate provision for student-parents are limited as it is not a prominent feature of the student profile (Moreau, 2016). Parental status often becomes apparent only when there are caring issues that interfere with study. In these circumstances student parents can potentially be viewed as 'problem' students and marginalised (Moreau & Kerner, 2012). This situation can cross boundaries by bringing the privates spheres of one's life into a public sphere which contradicts the traditional binary of how time is organised and what may be acceptable in a public institution (Moreau, 2016; Moss, 2004). Student-parents often feel that their private lives need to be separated from university life and are reluctant to seek help if family issues arise. By taking responsibility for their own issues student-parents can be perceived as internalising the neo-liberal model of a student as they viewed family problems outside the sphere of the university. This can diminish the importance of any institutional structures that inhibit the progress of non-traditional students and turn them into personal issues (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). Care work in Western neoliberal societies tends to be invisible and trivialised and therefore contributes to marginalising those students with caring responsibilities in the tertiary sector (Lynch, Baker, & Lyons, 2009).

Students' personal financial situations can impede the progression of their studies. This is particularly so for older students and those from lower socio-economic groups (Jones, 2008). Mature age students are more likely to be under financial pressure compared to younger students. They often have long-term financial commitments such as servicing mortgages and supporting dependents. Student loans and grants are normally not enough to cover these costs. (Howard & Davies, 2013; Steele, Lauder, Caperchione, & Anastasi, 2005). Quite often adult students are unaware of the financial assistance available to them or of the costs of the courses that they are enrolled in. This places them in a precarious position, and there is a clear link between discontinuing study and financial hardship (McGivney, 2004). The financial burden is more relevant now with the increasing cost of tertiary education being passed from governments onto the students (Naidoo, 2008). Mature age students have more to consider from a financial point of view before deciding to attend HE. If they were employed they would miss out on progressing to a better position in the time they are studying. The economic benefit from gaining a qualification and a potentially well paid job will not be as advantageous for mature students due to their age and having less time to capitalise on the situation. From the outset mature age students may already feel some tension with a change in their financial position (Howard & Davies, 2013). Financial debt is a reality for many students and although the burden can affect focus on studying it appears the future earning potential once a qualification has been gained makes the immediate financial hardship tolerable (Thomas, 2002).

With financial pressures being typical for many students the need to work while studying is more common especially for mature age students. Often the mature age student will be working part-time to facilitate attending tertiary study and generally works more hours than the traditional student (Forbus, et al., 2011; Kasworm, 2003), but this means less time available for study (Bozick, 2007). Working long hours in employment also interferes with the student's connection to the university and can lead to declining commitment to study (O'Keeffe, 2013). Often work is found to interfere with academic performance and is a contributing factor for students withdrawing from their course (McGivney, 2004). The need to work for many students means negotiation between the competing demands of study and employment is required. This puts an onus on institutions to adjust its expectations to facilitate its diverse student population (Zepke & Leach, 2010).

2.4.5 Integrating into the class

There are a range of factors that will influence how the mature age student engages at the tertiary level. Taking the perspective that students have a responsibility to engage as identified by Krause and Coates (2008) and Kuh (2009) their behaviour will impact engagement levels. Mature age students have characteristics that can differentiate them from younger traditional students (Scanlon et al., 2007). This difference can be manifested in the enthusiasm that is sometimes displayed in class. Eagerness to participate and to have one's opinions shared with the class and lecturer were a common classroom practice in Mallman and Lee's (2016) study. The gravity of the decision to attend university can provide motivation to make the most of the opportunity to learn and participate (Reay, 2002). The overt eagerness displayed by mature age students is, however, not always welcomed by other students. Younger school leavers in Scanlon et al. (2007) and Ballantyne's (2012) studies did not always appreciate the mature age students' contributions. Their keenness to participate was viewed as dominating and inhibited other students from participating in classroom discussions. Sometimes in the classroom situation mature age students may receive signs of disapproval from the other students causing them to modify their behaviour and lessen their participation. Mature age students could find themselves in the precarious position of being stigmatised by their behaviour which has the danger of making their transition to university challenging (Mallman & Lee, 2016). By being perceived as outside of the normal student behaviour, their sense of belonging may be challenged, leading to self-doubt about their suitability as a university student (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2016).

Mature age students in Scanlon et al.'s (2007) study made comments about the age divide between themselves and the younger students. They identified the younger school students' behaviour as contrary to what they perceived as appropriate student practice. Talking during lectures, lack of preparation, and off-topic conversations were some of the behaviours deemed not suited to the academic environment. There was often a focus on social topics of conversation rather than on the academic task at hand. Ballantyne's (2012) participants identified a notable segregation within the classroom between the mature and younger students. The behaviour of students was interpreted as reflecting their commitment to study. Younger students' disruptive or inattentive behaviour was viewed as being disinterested and lacking commitment. Mallman and Lee (2016) suggested that mature age students had their own interpretation of the learning process and felt confident that the behaviour they envisaged as appropriate was what the university also deemed appropriate.

Younger students' disruptive practice was also viewed as an affront to what they are trying to achieve. With major considerations taken to enable study to occur, mature students were very focused on achieving their academic goals and did not appreciate classroom distractions that may inhibit this. Characteristics of the mature student bring complexities to the classroom that require negotiation in order to find their place in the academic arena.

Lack of academic preparedness can inhibit students from engaging in their studies and is a particular feature of mature age students. It is not uncommon for students to feel that they are not prepared to undertake academic tasks (Pittaway & Moss, 2006). Traditional students entering directly from secondary schools can also lack the skills for learning in the tertiary environment (Wingate, 2007). Often, students have no clear expectations of the standard of work expected of them. Academic writing in particular can cause anxiety, especially for mature students who have not partaken in formal education for some of time. This often intensifies when the first exam or assessment is due (Mallman & Lee, 2016; O'Brien, Keogh, & Neenan, 2009). An aspect of mature age students' coping strategies that is advantageous when dealing with the rigours of academic work is their time management. Lundberg (2004) postulated that due to their experience with work and dealing with multiple life roles they cope better with the time pressures involved with academia and with achieving learning goals. The assumption that students would be confident computer users can also cause mature age students to feel disadvantaged. Some have not had experience of regular computers use, and this can be disheartening if there is an expectation that these skills are already learned and not sufficiently supported in the early weeks of university (Leese, 2010). A lack of familiarity with academic expectations can isolate new students and cause them to question their abilities. This can impact how well they integrate into the classroom and can make them feel overwhelmed and could lead to decisions to discontinue studying (Christie et al., 2008; Mallman & Lee, 2016).

2.4.5 The influence of the university on engagement

In the initial weeks of attending university a number of enablers have been noted that enable students to engage. Orientation or induction courses are deemed an important first contact for transitioning students. Both academic and social integration opportunities are beneficial during this early time. Additional support to alleviate anxiety, to disseminate information, and to prepare students for their first week are some key aims. This has been identified as a good time to introduce students to the learning expectations of the university

(Jones, 2008; Pittaway & Moss, 2006; Tinto, 2012). Wingate (2007) suggested that orientation courses can be overwhelming as the amount of information is vast and can leave students disorientated, especially if delivered in a lecture type format. Interactive and student centred activities were recommended. This should help students initiate a sense of belonging as they get to bond with fellow students and staff (Kift, 2004; Wingate, 2007). One on one conversations with current students were deemed advantageous especially for mature age students. This gave them the opportunity to enquire about the practicalities of studying and managing their other responsibilities. Childcare, financial support, and time management, were some issues that could be discussed so the student can gauge how the transition process can be handled (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012).

To help engage students who may not be academically prepared, opportunities could be given so they can determine what their level of proficiency is for particular required skills. Fazey and Fazey (2001) identified the need for students to have some indication of their competency early in the start of the first semester of university. Informal and implicit signals from staff and peers are important, but formal evaluation of an individual's work is what is really required in order to develop a sense of competence. Having a strong perception of their own competency influences positive achievement behaviours. If the skills of a student are deemed inadequate, support could be implemented to improve the skills and to keep the student from being discouraged about their perceived lack of ability (Pittaway & Moss, 2006). Rather than generic study skills assistance a discipline specific context is often more successful. This allows the student the chance to engage in the academic discourse of the discipline (Wingate, 2007). Academic support programmes are sometimes critiqued for treating the student as deficient (Henderson, Noble, & de George-Walker, 2009). Students are identified as lacking the necessary skills that will help them be successful students and therefore require some form of academic remediation to improve their scholarly competence. Often the courses are aimed at vulnerable students who are considered at risk, such as mature age students and other sub-groups of the generic non-traditional student. There is a danger that the students' capacities brought with them through their previous experience and learning are lost in a deficit discourse that undermines the student. It may also limit the focus of possible factors that impede the successful transition of the student (Henderson, et al., 2009; Trowler, 2010).

A student centred approach to learning is more likely to facilitate an engaging learning experience. This scenario acknowledges that students bring their unique knowledge

and experiences with them and that they will be applied to construct meaning. This is especially relevant to mature age students who bring more life experience with them than younger students. This is a dynamic process where students are not restricted to a controlled approach focussed only on the dissemination of information. The student is the focal point of the learning and their interests and needs are considered when facilitating the learning process. As students connect to the material presented the learning is interactive and inclusive and is more likely to be engaging for the student (Jones, 2008; Thomas, 2002).

Time considerations have been identified as an area where tertiary institutions do not always suit the demands of mature age students. Commitments outside of study, such as childcare, do not always fit with rigid institutional structures (Penketh & Goddard, 2008). Tutorials, lectures and placements are not always within the standard hours of childcare and evenings are often scheduled as times for student attendance. Some students require practical work placements which can be sporadic as they may be scheduled on different days on different weeks. An irregular schedule can be problematic for student parents using childcare facilities as they often require set hours and days for organisational and financial reasons (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). For mature age students, who often have to work to finance their studies, an irregular schedule can interfere with work obligations (Reay et al., 2002). Moss (2004) observed that maximising the learning spaces at university has led to inflexible timetabling with classes often scheduled very early or very late in the day. Moreau (2016) noted that assessment times can cause problems for student parents if they are set at short notice or if they are due during university breaks. University breaks often coincide with school holidays when younger children especially require constant care and attention. This limits time available to spend on study despite the assumption that for most students university breaks are a time that enables more focus on assessments with the absence of regular timetabled classes. Moss (2004) suggested that the time available for learning at HE has reduced over recent years especially for women. Women are increasingly engaged in paid employment while HE is a competitive environment that advantages students who are independent free agents (Moreau, 2016). There thus appears to be a discord between the policies of wider participation in university study and the reality facing student parents who have to study within a rigid, time-framed system.

The institution and its guiding policies influence how comfortable the mature age student with children feels at the university, which consequently influences their transition (Lynch, 2008). Parental status is not usually visible in the different spheres of university life,

and the appearance of children is rare. Indeed, children are sometimes identified as incompatible with the academic space as it is deemed an adult space (Moreau, 2016). In some universities children are not allowed on campus unless written permission is given. This lack of acknowledgement of children in the student-parent role can lead to feelings of alienation from the university culture (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009).

Affordable childcare is a prominent concern for many student parents (Lynch, 2008; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). The enrolment of women in HE in America has increased in recent years but with the rising attrition rates of student mothers it appears that issues around childcare impede their academic progress (Lynch, 2008). With 70% of Lynch's (2008) participants requiring private childcare and only 20% relying on spouses to look after dependents, childcare was a significant issue to be resolved to accommodate study time. Institutional on-site facilities, although often available, can be too expensive for students (Lynch, 2008; Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). The portion of income allocated to childcare means other costs such as car maintenance, Internet access and social outings are deferred or ruled out completely (McGivney, 2004). Therefore, the needs of this relatively new cohort of students do not appear to be adequately considered, with institutions lagging behind in offering realistic childcare options or financial support for arranging care. This added pressure contributes to student mothers being one of the groups most likely to terminate their studies before completion (Lynch, 2008).

2.4.6 Student teacher relationships

Student teacher interactions are important platforms from which students can feel engaged. Different elements of the relationship and the communication can indicate a sense of belonging to students (Jones, 2008). If students feel that their teachers believe in them and are genuinely concerned about how they are doing then often students will reciprocate by gaining self-confidence and are motivated to do better (Thomas, 2002). Being respectful to mature age students is particularly important for those with previous negative learning experiences. They are aware of the possible stigma attached to failure and perhaps are more vulnerable in establishing their place. Acknowledging mature age students' situation as different to the younger students is another way to help establish themselves at university. They do not want to be viewed the same as school leavers and view themselves to some extent as peers to the staff (Scanlon, 2009; Vella, 2000). Creating a stimulating and challenging environment where the learning is linked to the mature age student's life

experiences is a strong way to engage students. This requires diverse student contributions to be valued with opportunities provided for them to voice their thoughts (Trowler, 2010). Approachable staff are an important feature that helps mature students feel more at ease with learning (Thomas, 2002). Student teacher interactions are complex, but it seems clear that to facilitate engaging students requires engaging teachers with an awareness of the needs of the student.

Staff attitudes towards students caring for dependent children can impact on their engagement. When staff do not empathise with student parents' situations when childcare issues arise a disconnection between the student and their study may result (Moss, 2004). Acknowledging the responsibilities of student parents and implementing strategies to assist with learning when needed can enhance their feelings of belonging. Making allowances for lateness, providing extra feedback when assessments are returned, or showing empathy towards student parents' situations are strategies recognised by students as providing a more inclusive environment (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). Some student parents advocate being treated with leniency in some areas as their circumstances are very different from younger, independent students who have less responsibilities outside of study. Female staff tend to be more understanding of the student parent predicament than male staff. This is probably because they can identify with the conflicting roles of work, study, and family (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009; 2010).

Staff sometimes illustrate their awareness of the rigidity of the university system and its impact on students. Less pastoral care, increased staff-student ratios, and more focus on research limit their ability to support students (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003). These features of neoliberal ideas and educational reform tend to frame the students as responsible for their own success. This can influence the way staff interact with students with issues outside of the university sphere interfering with study in a negative way. But those staff aware of the restrictions imposed by the educational system often exhibit empathy towards students and issues they may have (Marandet & Wainwright, 2009). Students are, however, often reluctant to approach staff with their issues as they are also aware of the limitations of the environment they are in. By embodying aspects of the neoliberal model, they personalise problems and may not perceive them as a consequence of functions of the wider educational sector. It is a complex interplay that has varying impact depending on the individual staff member or student (Marandet & Wainwright, 2010).

2.5 Habitus

Bourdieu's theory of habitus is often used to help understand the experience of students transitioning to HE (Leese, 2010, Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010; Thomas 2002). Habitus are the norms and practises of particular groups within society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Habitus also refers to dispositions (tendencies, capacities) constructed from a persons' life experiences and the objective structures they are exposed to (Thomas, 2002). They are also embodied in the actions of a person, such as the way they speak or walk and can operate below the level of consciousness (Bufton, 2003; Mills, 2008). These dispositions reflect past socialisation processes that have been undertaken and will influence future actions. Family are usually a fundamental influence on the habitus that an individual acquires (Mills, 2008). Two important aspects of habitus are that groups have an interest in reproducing themselves and that some groups are more dominant than others (Thomas, 2002). The cultural capital that an individual or a group brings into a habitus will determine how successful they are at assimilating into that environment. Cultural capital is acquired through the family. It is a form of knowledge that may be valued differently depending on where it is utilised (Scanlon, et al., 2007). It is suggested by Thomas (2002) that tertiary education facilities have their own 'institutional habitus' (p.41) that values certain forms of cultural capital. The education system can be viewed as a method of maintaining class order and typically perpetuates the habitus of the dominant culture. Those who are not members of the dominant group may be at a disadvantage when accessing educational institutions, as their norms and values may not be valued. Hence mature-age students, who are not part of the traditional HE cohort, may possess an alternative cultural capital from the institution and could be susceptible to failure (Thomas, 2002; Zepke & Leach, 2005).

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) suggested that there is flexibility in habitus. Institutional habitus is generally established over time so it is a continuing process. Those entering a habitus affect its structures in their turn as they bring their own capital that will either reinforce or challenge those existing structures. Therefore, while habitus can be viewed as permeable, the collective nature of the institution's habitus make it less likely to be influenced by the individual's cultural capital. It is to be expected that the onus is on the mature student, and other non-traditional students, to adapt to the ways of the institution (Reay, 2004). Aspects of institutional cultural capital are expressed through the organisational practices, the curriculum offered, and through the student body. Students' attitudes to learning and how they conduct themselves give tacit cues to acceptable modes of

behaviour. For those who do not share these common practices, the ability to transition to the learning environment may be more difficult (Leese, 2010; Reay et al., 2010).

Reed-Danahay (2005) identified a primary habitus developed from the family interactions and a secondary habitus that evolves from the interactions in the educational sphere. This suggests there could be competing interests between the two habituses especially with non-traditional students. This does depend on the circumstances of the students. Much of the literature on habitus is done in the United Kingdom with a focus on working class students attending tertiary institutions that normally accommodate middle class students (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012; Reay et al., 2010). There can be resistance from the primary family habitus to study at university if there is no history of the family engaging in tertiary education. Working class attitudes may perceive university as a middle class endeavour where educational success is a common part of their cultural values (Bufton, 2003). Non-traditional students often choose local, less prestigious universities to attend, so the family habitus can be very dominant if they are not living on the campus. This can cause issues if the family is unsupportive of the student. Conversely, the family habitus can give a sense of security and comfort while students negotiate their place in HE. Unfamiliar practices can be intimidating and leave the new student in a state of flux. The reassurance of familiar interactions can offer stability to the student. The tension between the primary family habitus and the secondary educational habitus is a feature that the non-traditional student has to navigate as they settle into their new role (Bufton, 2003; Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012).

2.6 Conclusion

Adult students undertaking tertiary education enter a setting that is influenced by a myriad of factors. Western and national educational policies play a role in creating expectations of the university student. A trend towards economic imperatives has created a need for students to be independent learners who must be resourceful and self-directed. The universities' environment reflect these policies and it can result in how they choose to engage with the new students as they transition to the learning setting. Timetabling, approaches to learning, and staff attitudes are areas that appear to be important for the new mature student. The institutions have an obligation to meet the needs of the mature student who are part of an increasingly diverse cohort. The literature suggests that the complexities of meeting this challenge make this a difficult task as it is reliant on many different aspects of the teaching environment, from the resources of the university to the individual teachers in the classroom.

Adding to the intricacies of the transition process is that historically tertiary institutions have been a domain for young school leavers and have practices, both explicit and implicit, that can favour this traditional student body, and therefore not fully embrace the non-traditional mature student.

The mature student brings with them their own experiences that impact on how they will interact with the university environment. They are embedded in their own life world that often includes caring for dependents or having the responsibility of a mortgage. Their time constraints do not allow them to be exclusively a student as other demands compete for their attention. They do, however, appear to be highly motivated to engage with the learning process and to meet the requirements of being an independent learner. What appears to hinder some is their lack of academic ability mainly due to long periods of time away from formal education. This can cause considerable angst for mature students. Their life experience, however, can be a positive attribute to their learning as being able to relate experiences to the learning context can be empowering. Equally, their life experience can set them apart from their younger student colleagues and cause tension between the two cohorts. Their commitment to learning can at times conflict with the more socially orientated younger student in the class environment. Mature aged students are not a homogenous group and their obligations and experience will help determine how they transition to tertiary study in the important early stages of their learning.

Chapter Three: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology used to interpret the experience of adult students transitioning to tertiary education. Firstly the philosophical perspectives are discussed in relation to epistemological and ontological beliefs. The interpretive, hermeneutic framework that guides this research methodology is explained within the wider context of the main research paradigms that inform quantitative and qualitative research. Following this, ethical considerations, participant recruitment and selection, data collection and analysis will be discussed. Issues of validity and reliability are the final aspects to be explained.

3.2 Philosophical Perspective

Qualitative research paradigms have developed as an alternative approach with which to investigate social phenomena. Traditionally, Western scientific methods have dominated approaches to explaining natural or physical phenomena, developing initially during the eighteenth century Age of Reason in England where the logic of science became an alternative to ambiguous religious reasoning (Crotty, 1998). A perspective underpinning this scientific approach is that there is a reality in the world that can be explained by observation and measurement. A term associated with this perspective is positivism. Positivism is closely linked with the concept of quantitative research which has often been seen as opposite to, but more recently as complimentary to qualitative research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The French philosopher Auguste Comte was a key proponent of positivism in the middle of the 19th century. He was aware of the impact of science on society and how its developments were creating opportunities for people through its translation into technology. His belief that truth was realised through facts, was imperative to man understanding the world. But this view was challenging to many widely held, ingrained beliefs relating to the religious justification of how society functioned. Positivism has since manifested into many ways of thinking about the world, and it is useful to have some understanding of this as it has helped form how research is perceived (Newby, 2010).

Post-positivism was a particularly important development that challenged the absoluteness of positivism. Weiner Heisenberg (1901-76), a German scientist, established the 'uncertainty principle' through his work in quantum mechanics. He identified that the position and momentum of subatomic particles could not be determined and therefore called into question the scientific notion of causality. By theorising that the observed particle is modified through the act of being observed, he challenged the independence of the observer and the observed. In Heisenberg's field it turned laws of physics to relative statements and gave room for subjective perspectives to be considered as part of the scientific process. Bohr, a Danish physicist, shared Heisenberg's notion on uncertainty, but was concerned with the nature of particles and the suitability of applying classical concepts such as position and momentum. Uncertainty highlighted an ambiguity present in scientific knowledge that was previously not considered. The facts that supported scientific theory were not always deemed as having been directly observed, but actively constructed which changes the nature of scientific knowledge and its integrity (Crotty, 1998).

Sir Karl Popper (1902-94) was a leading Austrian-British philosopher of the 20th century who also viewed the positivistic outlook of science as imperfect. The Nazi annexation of his homeland, Austria, in 1938 spurred Popper to focus his writings on political philosophy and its influence on scientific work. He demarcated a line between science and 'non-science' using the concept of falsifiability as his criterion. Falsifiability is the fundamental possibility of a scientific hypothesis to be proven false. The emphasis is on scientists being unable to prove that their assumption is wrong, as opposed to using experimentation and observation to identify a universal law and proving their assumption correct. This process of confirming a hypothesis with evidence is deductive and pivotal to positivist scientific method. Popper's concept confronted this process and postulated that scientific method ascribe instead to an inductive process whereby the evidence collected will generate the theory at the end. He believed that all scientific discoveries should be continually open to rebuttal, or considered non-scientific, and should remain tentative (Crotty, 1998, Newby, 2010).

Empiricism, related to positivism is the belief that knowledge comes principally from sensory experience. Relating to the scientific world, evidence must be empirically based on the senses through observation or experiment. John Locke (1632-1704) was a prominent British philosopher who believed at birth a person's mind was a blank slate and only through their experiences could they gain knowledge. He perceived that people are not born with

innate ideas otherwise they would be universal to all. But he did also concede that there were no universally held ideas (Bryman, 2008; Jones, Torres & Arminio, 2006). There are many nuances to the positivistic approach to producing knowledge that have developed over time. This illustrates that it is not a static discipline but has evolved and will continue to evolve to address the ever changing landscape of how humans try to understanding the world. The positivist and related positivist approaches are generally suitable for natural science but when studying social phenomena it can lack applicability.

At the beginning of the 20th century anthropologists and sociologists in particular found themselves in social situations as observers trying to make sense of other people's worlds (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2009). This required a research approach that enabled them to interpret what they observed around them. A way was needed to understand the meaning of the data obtained through interviews, artefacts and documents that could not be achieved using a quantitative approach driven by a focus on measurement and objectivity (Merriam, 2009) and the depiction of those being studied as abnormal (Bryman, 2008). A qualitative approach enabled researchers to understand the meanings that individuals bring to social phenomena within a natural setting (Cresswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). It allowed the view that human behaviour is not directed by universal laws and that the uniqueness of the individual's view on a situation has value (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011). The change from quantitative to qualitative approaches has, however, been gradual, with the initial use of a qualitative approach being heavily influenced by a positivistic mind-set. The nature of qualitative research continues to evolve with the contribution of many differing views by those who use it and write about it (Bryman, 2008).

Underlying any research approach, whether it be qualitative or quantitative, will be some philosophical assumptions that are also known as worldviews or paradigms. These philosophical assumptions are the use of hypothetical ideas and beliefs that the researchers will bring to guide the research (Cresswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Jones, et al., 2006). These ideas and beliefs will be characterised by an underlying epistemology and ontology. Epistemology relates to the attributes of knowledge and the rationalisation of how the researcher relates to knowledge formation (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Jones et al., 2006). Objectivism is the epistemology that informs quantitative research and the associated theories of positivism, post-positivism and empiricism. It views objects as having meaning independent of consciousness and experience. Through scientific research, truth and meaning within the objects can be discovered. The research process is value free and subject

to standard scientific procedures. The researcher is to contain their own personal beliefs, values, and prejudices and is considered external to the research topic (Crotty, 1998; Jones et al., 2006). A general qualitative perspective, in contrast, views knowledge as created by the individual through their own subjective experience with the researcher playing a critical role in knowledge creation. Ontology refers to the nature of reality and being. In a social context it is about the meaning of social phenomena and the role and influence of those who participate in it. From a positivistic view, social actors are independent from the meaning that is created from the experience. Whereas from a qualitative based view the social actors actively shape the meaning through their interaction. A qualitative perspective views knowledge as created by the individual through their own subjective experience (Bryman, 2008; Jones et al., 2006).

Any qualitative research needs to be put in a context that justifies the use of particular methods, ways of thinking and analysis. This is the challenge for novice researchers as qualitative research is a "complex, interconnected family of terms, concepts, and assumptions …. "(Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 3). Creswell (2013) identified many different qualitative approaches that have been written about by different authors over recent years to illustrate the variety of possible choices in choosing a qualitative design. An important step for researchers to develop an appropriate research approach is to consider their own views on knowledge creation and the nature of reality. Initially, either explicitly or implicitly, the researcher's philosophical assumptions, containing certain beliefs, will be brought to the study. This will inform to some extent how the research will be carried out. By delving deeper into the published work on philosophical frameworks within qualitative research and as a result formalising their position, researchers should eventually establish an aligned research process that will culminate in a logical, credible study (Creswell, 2013; Jones et al., 2006).

This study follows an interpretive based approach which is embedded in the qualitative research perspective. The approach is an alternative to the positivist stance and the use of the scientific process to gain knowledge. Interpretivism enables the researcher to explore the "subjective meaning of social action" (Bryman, 2008, p. 16). It allows the understanding of human behaviour as opposed to explaining it as per the positivist stance. Understanding acknowledges individuals' impact on phenomena being studied, and that they are not just passive recipients of what is going on around them (Bryman, 2008; Cohen et al., 2011). Max Weber's (1864–1920) idea of *Verstehen* (understanding), identified a more suitable avenue to make sense of social and human science and to move away from the traditional scientific focus on causality (Bryman, 2008; Crotty, 1998).

There are numerous ways of conducting studies that fall under the interpretivist umbrella. A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was chosen for this research. Phenomenology follows varying interpretations led by scholars such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merlot-Ponty. Husserl focused on transcendental psychology, Merlot-Ponty on existential phenomenology and Heidegger, the interpretation chosen to guide this study, on hermeneutic phenomenology.

One theme however that links the different phenomenological thinking is intentionality. That is the connection that people endeavour to have with the life-world. Humans are always present in the world and cannot be separated from it (Crotty, 1998; Jones et al., 2006). Consciousness, in the phenomenological context, is the awareness of involvement in a particular event. Human consciousness will always make sense of objects that it engages with in various ways, be it through memory, perception, emotion or social activity amongst others (Smith, 2013). Husserl regarded phenomenology as the conscious experience of phenomena using the structures of consciousness as listed above which give meaning to the experience but is separate from the things themselves (Laverty, 2003). The nature of intention in phenomenology is therefore not the same as in the ordinary practical sense where we act with a purpose towards something but it is cognitive in the sense of a conscious relationship one has with an object (Sokolowski, 2000). Vagle (2010) further defines intentionality from a post-structural perspective (which he terms 'post-intentionality'). His approach therefore encapsulates elements of post structural approaches to phenomenological research as opposed to moving beyond intentionality. Post-intentional phenomenology requires researchers to critique their positioning within the research field – Vagle views this self-awareness of positioning as only possible through intentionality. Moreover, the findings of research seek only to find the tentative manifestations of the phenomenon being studied (2010).

The phenomenological relationship between consciousness and objects in the world was a marked change to the mind-body dualism of Descartes (1596–1650) who related the mind to thinking only and the body to physical properties. This extrapolates to the individual being isolated from the world in general with reality existing outside of the mind in a different realm. This demonstrates a distinctiveness between the mind (the subject) and the objective world. The phenomenological idea challenges this by bringing together the mind's consciousness and its understanding of objects it encounters. There is an interdependence of the two elements that is pivotal to creating any sort of understanding of experiences. It is a

collaboration as opposed to a division that will give meaning to a person's engagement with their world (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 1998; Laverty, 2003; Smith, 2013).

It is necessary to explore the development of the philosophy of phenomenology in order to help put hermeneutic phenomenology into a context that highlights its suitability for this research. With this purpose in mind it would be remiss not to focus on Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), the founder and most prominent figure in phenomenology and in particular descriptive phenomenology (Cohen et al., 2011). Husserl's student, Heidegger (1889–1976), developed interpretive phenomenology, a form of which is hermeneutic phenomenology, which provides a centre of focus in this study. While each had their own interpretation of phenomenology it is nevertheless useful to reflect on the similarities and differences as Husserl was instrumental in the development of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology.

Husserl's philosophical ideas recognised that natural scientific methods were not suitable for researching human issues. The premise that an individual's perception of external stimuli could be an important part of understanding and had value motivated Husserl to seek a more appropriate way to capture people's lived experience. By not seeking an alternative method, he believed that scientists had an untrue view of human experience as it left out important subjective insight (Laverty, 2003; Lopez & Willis, 2004). Husserl also believed that experiences of people are experienced pre-reflectively. Often in the moment of an event we do not have the capability to reflect (Smith, 2013). To help facilitate this Husserl created a new way of exploring consciousness. To express the principle of this idea he coined the phrase 'to the things', which meant the researcher reflects on a communicated experience without presuppositions. This enables the researcher to look beyond the details of everyday life or by what appears to have happened on the surface and to focus on what the objects are in themselves. Husserl saw this as getting to the essence of experience (Cohen et al., 2011). To strip ones presuppositions is known in the literature as 'bracketing', 'phenomenological reduction' or '*epoche*' (An ancient Greek word meaning abstaining from belief) (Smith, 2013). Bracketing requires researchers to suspend their previous knowledge on the phenomena in order to facilitate getting 'to the things' or to the true meaning or essence of the experience (Dowling, 2005). By reducing participants' experiences to an identifiable essence or essences to give wider representation of a phenomena, Husserl revealed however, his leaning to positivism when applying his philosophy. Bracketing the researcher's previous knowledge and experience, favours a traditional scientific view that objectifies and does not

consider context, such as the social or historical background of the participants. This underlies Husserl's attempt to give phenomenology a more rigorous scientific basis.

Among the key differences between Husserl's view of phenomenology and that of his student, Heidegger, was Husserl's epistemological stance and Heidegger's ontological stance, which dominated each of their respective views. Husserl was concerned with the link between the knower and the phenomena including an objective perspective and the process of bracketing (Laverty, 2003; Sharkey, 2001). Understanding of the phenomena required immediate, pre-reflective, consciousness thus enabling a description of the universal essence of the experience (Dowling, 2005). Followers of Husserl's philosophy therefore seek answers to questions about the world in order to build knowledge about particular phenomena. Heidegger was more concerned with the ontological aspect of phenomenology in order to understand an individual's experience and believed an interpretive process was required to make sense of lived experience. The nature of existence or being was paramount to understanding. The participatory nature of the individual, including their background and beliefs, and the phenomena will help construct a unique reality. Heidegger's rejection of Husserl's transcendental notion of suspending one's own previous experiences and beliefs is an important factor illustrating the difference in their philosophical outlooks (Sharkey, 2001; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

Dasein is central to Heidegger's ontological bearing. This German word is translated to Being-in-the-world (Mackey, 2005). It refers "to the way human beings exist, act, or are involved in the world" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 175). Heidegger proposed an intimate relationship between the individual and their world in which they are always present. They co-constitute each other and can only be defined relationally. Humans' ways of being impact on the things in the world and will uncover different meanings through an individual's experience. Heidegger considers this concept as essential as it enables awareness of one's being and to be able to question ones existence. (Todres & Wheeler, 2000). Through the living of everyday, ordinary routines Heidegger believed that *Dasein* can uncover essential meaning that underpins peoples' lives (Mackey, 2005; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

Fore-structures is another important element in Heidegger's view on being-in-the-world. Also known as pre-understanding, this describes what is understood prior to interpretation of phenomena. There is awareness that a cognisance may exist around a scenario being investigated before further meaning is explored, but from the participant's

point of view, often it is unexpressed and waiting to be developed especially within the structures of the more mundane aspects of life (Mackey, 2005). From the researcher's point of view, the fore-structures which include any knowledge relevant to the context of the phenomena through any capacity of experience, including opinion, need to be acknowledged and their possible influence on interpretation realised. Contrary to Husserl's view, however, pre-understanding may be able to be put aside, but Heidegger believed it cannot be fully transcended (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). This does not need to compromise the rigour of the research but Hasselkus (1997) suggests it can enhance the researcher's ability in the process. Heidegger deals with the issue of fore-structures by incorporating it within a circular process of interpretation where they are identified and considered within the whole of the phenomena and then reconsidered in other ways. This is known as the Hermeneutic Circle. It encompasses a back and forth movement between the parts and the whole, with the smaller experiences considered separately and also within the whole of the experience. By repeating this process, engagement with the phenomena is enhanced and can allow the influence of fore-structures to be understood and their place within interpretation reach a reasonable standpoint (Mackey, 2005; Sharkey, 2001).

Time and space are two other important aspects of Heidegger's notion of phenomenology. Time is essential to the understanding of being as it is what all human experience is grounded in. For Heidegger, time refers to temporality and is a basic structure of *Dasein's* being. The concept of temporality is not about linear time, but a connectedness between the future, past, and present and how this is expressed in the 'now'. People are situated in their world and time influences their experience. The awareness of time creates a common thread between the past, present and future and makes it current (McMullin, 2009). For the researcher and the participants, the research process is located in a time which contributes to making sense of the experience on an ontological basis. The researcher is obliged to be particularly aware of the participants' situatedness as this can be affected by their temporal horizon, which is the various ways, sometimes limiting, in which time descriptions can be communicated. Often an experience of time is evident through its deviation from the normal course of time, which Heidegger saw as a facet of temporality. The process of interpretation should carefully examine how participants view their experiences in regards to time in order to further enhance understanding of the role of time in their situation and the nature of being in their world (Mackey, 2005).

Similarly to time, a grounding in a space or location is an integral factor to peoples' experiences. Heidegger does not view this as a geographical location but one that encompasses what matters to the person. It is referred to as 'care' or 'concern' and considered an integral part of humans' way of being-in-the-world. Again, the situatedness of the person in the world will determine what is experienced as close to them or in the foreground, and there will be experiences which will be confined to the background or relegated to beyond the horizon of awareness. The researcher has the task of listening attentively to identify the experiences that may not make it to the spatial horizon but nonetheless be an important element of the phenomena experienced (Mackey, 2005).

Researchers need not adhere to just one methodological approach such as hermeneutic phenomenology. The concept of bricolage is the utilisation of different methodological practises as the researcher sees fit as he/she works through the process to create new meaning from the phenomena. Methods from various disciplines can be employed so the focus is not just on a single disciplinary approach, which could be limiting, but an interdisciplinary approach, where any suitable method can be appropriated as the research process unfolds. Researchers could base their study on a hermeneutic perspective but could also include an ethnographic approach if it complemented the study's purpose (Kincheloe, 2001; Steinberg, 2011). Lincoln (2001) has questioned the ability to work across disciplines with very few examples of interdisciplinary collaboration to call upon. Also the structures involved in academia are not akin to nurturing this new approach. But she does acknowledge that the concept may mark a turning point in methodological inquiry.

The term bricolage is often linked to Claude Levi-Strauss, a structural anthropologist, and his description of the bricoleur as someone who is a jack-of-all-trades that utilises whatever tools available to complete a task (Papson, 2013). In this context research may be seen as an interpretation that is fictional in parts and can allude to the subjectivity that is encompassed within the presentation of research, depending on the conventions of the particular discipline that one is involved with (Kincheloe, 2005). Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg (2011) view the bricoleur's role as applying critique to the disciplines that are encountered in order to ascertain how knowledge is constructed and how the process of conducting research can influence the research narrative. This requires the bricoleur to acknowledge their own history and social position to provide insight into how that may impact the research process. The bricolage can therefore be defined as an emancipatory practice as it seeks to understand the effects of power on human situations. Kincheloe (2005)

states that these characteristics of bricolage force the bricoleur to seek understanding of different epistemologies. This reflects an appreciation of complexity in the endeavour to understand phenomena and the influence that culture, language and historical settings has.

The concept of the researcher as a bricoleur is one that resonates with me and my research approach for this study, although the true complexities involved can only be superficially utilised within the limitations of this study. What is important is the acknowledgement of the researcher as locating his/her self within a landscape of different possible social locations that can influence the interpretation of phenomena and creation of knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This critical reflection ensures that researchers are aware of other perspectives that inform understanding and therefore can only enrich the interpretation of phenomena as they will not be completely bound by a single approach and will keep an open-mind as the process unravels.

3.3 Ethics

Ethics ensures that those participating in research do not come to harm and that the ethical imperative to 'do good' is foremost in the research plan. This requires researchers to comprehend ethical principles to guide procedure, but the challenge is actually implementing them into the research process (Jones et al., 2006). Identifying potential ethical issues is a crucial first step in developing ethical sensitivity. Knowledge, reflexivity and experience will assist this, but they are often lacking in the novice researcher (Jones et al., 2006). Academic research is often a requirement in partial fulfilment of a course, so genuine desire to research may not be present. This can be a challenge for the researcher during the research process especially when considering potential problem areas (Best & Kahn, 2006). Ethical decisions will ultimately underpin the integrity of the study so it is imperative that the researcher undertakes ethical considerations thoughtfully (Merriam, 2009).

Ethical approval to undertake this study was approved from Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 19 November 2013 (Appendix A). A slight topic adjustment was approved after it was realised that the parameters of the original topic would not produce enough participants. Unique to research in New Zealand is the obligation to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. The Treaty, an agreement between the Crown and Māori, is interpreted to recognise and preserve Māori culture. Three Treaty principles; partnership, participation and protection, have been identified and implemented throughout government departments and other institutions including the research community (Hudson &

Russell, 2009). While the research undertaken in this study did not overtly target Māori participation, there is a likelihood that Māori participation will happen due to the demographic at AUT. Furthermore, commitment to the principles of partnership, participation and protection enhanced my researcher awareness of ethical sensitivity.

Ethical considerations are planned before undertaking research and should include the different stakeholders and the myriad of possible situations where ethical dilemmas could arise. The stakeholders include the researchers, participants, academic communities, and the communities that the participants represent. To what extent the stake holders are involved, either through consideration or consultation, depends on the sensitivity of the research and to the extent of the involvement of any stakeholder group (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Ethical principles of confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent, privacy, respect, and do no harm are central to the participants involvement in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013) and are illustrated in the conduct of this research as explained in this methodology chapter. Personal costs to the participants that should be considered include lowered self-esteem, affronts to dignity, embarrassment, or loss of autonomy (Cohen et al., 2011). The power dynamic between the researcher and participants is another important element of the research process to be aware of. Reciprocity between researcher and participant are features of qualitative methodology but informed consent subsides the power from the participant and firmly in the researcher's realm. Acknowledging that they are not neutral when interpreting and representing data goes some way to researchers addressing the power imbalance (Jones et al., 2006). The ethics underpinning research is heavily reliant on the researcher's decisions and conduct based on their sensitivity to the participants and the process. From the initial stages of seeking approval from AUT, through to the publishing of the study, ethical conduct has been central to the research process in this study.

3.4 Participants

The participants are individuals who are the focus of the qualitative research. The term 'participants' is appropriate as it brings with it connotations that reflect ideas informing the qualitative paradigm. A participant plays an integral part in the research process alongside the researcher in generating understanding and knowledge. The term 'subject', often used in quantitative research for its participants, signifies perhaps an uninformed or objectified individual where the researcher is detached from the person. This is not an appropriate definition for the inclusive role of the participant in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009;

Tracy, 2013). The establishment of appropriate roles between the researcher and participant is a critical aspect of the research. Communication is essential to data collection in these circumstances and entails the researcher to ensure a role that permits access to certain information. This requires an ongoing process of negotiation and reflects the nature of the relationship between the two parties (Flick, 2014). The qualitative researcher can often be seen as interpreting the social world through the eyes of the participants. This is in line with interpretivism and the epistemological links with Weber's *Verstehen* and the empathetic stance towards those being studied. Researchers must be aware, however, of tempering their empathy so as not to lose focus of the research issues and perhaps only providing limited understanding at the expense of a more balanced perception of the issue (Bryman, 2008).

3.4.1 Selection criteria.

Purposive sampling was the strategy used to gain participants for this study. This means that individuals were selected because they fit the purposes of this research (Tracy, 2013). In interpretive studies it is imperative that all participants have experienced the phenomena being investigated (Creswell, 2013). Those recruited should provide rich information as they are judged to most likely manifest the characteristics that the researcher is interested in (Best & Kahn, 2006). Quantitative research does not utilise this approach as it provides greater breadth to the study where generalising results to the wider population is the aim. Purposive sampling is deliberately selective and skewed towards gaining detailed knowledge about a particular phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2011). As interpretive, qualitative studies do not intend to generalise findings, small numbers of participants are suitable for study (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, this study investigated the experience of six individuals and a group comprising of six different participants, which was deemed suitable for the purpose of this research.

Determining the selection criteria is paramount to recruiting the appropriate participants (Jones et al., 2006). Mature age students transitioning to tertiary education were the target group for this study. The participants were required to be 25 years old or older and in their first semester studying a level 5 paper at a tertiary institution without recent previous tertiary qualifications. Utilising purposive sampling, participants were sought from the Bachelor of Health Science and the Bachelor of Education programmes at AUT. My discussions with colleagues about potential participants were particularly useful as they understood the programmes where relevant student-participants would most likely be located.

The Health Science and Education programmes were chosen as they contained two separate cohorts containing pre-requisite papers required for students to continue their study which meant relatively higher student numbers compared to other papers. The first year Bachelor of Health Science paper is a generic paper taken by approximately 1400 students before progressing to discipline specific courses. The Bachelor of Education consists of several compulsory papers, though has less students. Although there were no other inclusion or exclusion criteria such as gender, age or ethnicity, there was adequate diversity amongst the potential participants.

3.4.2 Recruitment process.

The first step in the pursuit of participants was the placing of advertisements on noticeboards around the university campus that were frequented by Health Science and Education students. The advertisement was discussed with a colleague who was experienced in research and suggested some changes. Increasing the font size, bolding certain words, putting on coloured paper, and attaching contact stubs were alterations made before placing the advertisements (Appendix B). As there was no response to the advertisements, I took a more direct approach. Two lecturers, one Health and one Education, with whom I had an existing relationship were identified and emailed outlining the purpose of the study with a request to visit their classrooms at a convenient time to inform the students face-to-face about the study. They responded positively and times were arranged to visit classrooms.

I was conscious not to project myself as demanding when I visited the classrooms to inform the students about the study, especially as I was a member of academic staff and aware there could be issues with power dynamics (Jones et al., 2006). No material incentives were offered to those partaking in the research. It was felt that no other enticement was needed other than the value of the actual research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Information sheets (Appendix C), containing the purpose of the study and what was involved as a participant were left on a desk for students to take. Potential participants were invited to contact me if they were interested in taking part but the issue of willingness soon became apparent (Flick, 2014). There were limited responses compared to the verbal interest shown in class when the study was presented. I decided to follow up the classes again to remind them of the study. A few students commented how they intended to contact me but had been very busy getting used to their first few weeks of university and were now approaching assessment points.

After the second visit, a total of 20 students had registered their interest via email and telephone in participating in the study.

3.4.3 Selection of participants.

Of the total 20 students who made contact to take part in the research 12 were from the Bachelor of Health Science course and 8 were from the Bachelor of Education course. Two students from the Health Science paper were immediately not eligible due to having previous tertiary qualifications. Eighteen appeared to be an appropriate number to work with from the two courses and my intention was to get an even amount from each to be in the six individual interviews and in the focus group of six. Not all students responded at the same time so I was aware of balancing the time factor and securing them for the study, with waiting to see who would reply before allocating students to the data collection method. There was an overwhelming majority of females with only two males applying, one eventually not being able to participate. Eventually one male and five females were to make up the six individual interviews with an even split of three from the health science paper and three form the education paper. The focus group was more homogenous with six females participating, five from education and one from health science. This was mainly dictated by the difficulty in arranging a time where six students could meet at the same time for one hour during term time. The focus group also contained all of the younger mature aged students, five who were in their twenties. This was not intentional but realised after the practicalities of organising the groups were completed. Table 1 contains some relevant demographic data about the participants.

3.5 Data Collection

Verbal data was utilised to inform this research. The data was sourced from individual interviews and a focus group discussion. Data collection in these forms are the most common in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This was suitable for an interpretivist approach based on hermeneutics and the use of text to interpret how individuals experience life world phenomena (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Table 1

Participants Demographic Detail

Pseudonym	Age	Children	Degree
Individual Interviews			
Alicia	43	Two dependent children	Health
Blake	42	Two dependent children	Education
Dominique	44	Two dependent children	Education
Abby	47	One dependent child	Health
Sheryl	46	Two dependent children	Education
Salena	49	None	Health
Focus Group			
Emma	25	None	Education
Kacey	47	Two dependent children	Education
Natalie	28	Two dependent children	Education
Alana	29	None	Health
Kristy	27	None	Education
Jane	27	One dependent child	Education

3.5.1 Interviews

An interview is a conversation with a specific purpose. It is based on daily life but is a professional conversation where a participant talks about their experiences, with a focus on their language and concepts, on a pre-determined topic created by the interviewer (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The knowledge created is via the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee with the interdependence between the two being crucial (Kvale, 2009). There is a dual aspect to this process; the interpersonal relationship between the two parties and the knowledge that is constructed as a result of the interaction. The knowledge is sought through the use of normal language and the nuanced detail provided on whatever aspect of the participants experience the interviewer seeks (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The interviews were constructed using a semi-structured format with the intention of understanding the experience of the participants' transition to university. A semi-structured interview differs from a highly structured or unstructured interview in that questions can be open-ended and will act as a guide to how the conversation may proceed (Merriam, 2009). In some interviews of this nature there may be no questions but only bullet points on certain aspects of the research objectives to guide conversation, although this was not the case for this study. Less structure can encourage discussion instead of the interviewer controlling the flow of the dialogue and perhaps just receiving reactions to their preconceived ideas about the

topic (Merriam, 2009; Tracy, 2013). It is a strategy to give space to the participants to share their perceptions by not having a rigid format to adhere to (Cohen et al., 2011). The interviewer can respond by clarifying points, to re-iterate using different vocabulary and to generally react to the immediate situation in order to encourage the unique perspective of the participant to emerge (Merriam, 2009).

If interview questions are used it is imperative they are fit for purpose and worded carefully to elicit conversation, and build trust and rapport (Braun & Clarke, 2013). They are different from research questions which can often be theoretical and abstract. Interview questions should be free from specialised language and be appropriately aimed at the interviewees interest and knowledge. They should be concise and simple (Tracy, 2013). The opening question could be based on a concrete situation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) which was the case in this study ie "Why did you initially choose to study in higher education?" (Appendix D). The indicative question list from the interviews were drafted and redrafted with the help of colleagues in order to appropriately guide but not limit conversation and to be relevant to the students (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Various prompts and probes can be considered to engage participants further. Prompts enable the interviewer to clarify any understanding or confusion the participant may have and probes encourage them to elaborate or qualify responses. This can be done with a 'why' question, or a less intrusive 'mm' or expectant glance to illustrate that you are interested and would like the interviewee to continue (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2011, Merriam, 2009).

Interest and empathy are elements of successful interviewing. Interest can be shown through subtle non-verbal cues such as raised eyebrows or a reinforcing 'ah-ha'. It reflects the interviewer's active listening skills to encourage further conversation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It's important that interest shown is non-judgemental. The tone and words used should make the interviewee comfortable. The interviewer is responsible for establishing a good rapport by communicating clearly, being polite, respectful, and personable. This requires a high level of empathy for the researcher to put themselves in the place of the participant and to ensure that they leave the interview, at the minimum, feeling no worse than they did at the start (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2011; Newby, 2010). Balance must be shown with empathy. Comments agreeing with the interviewee, such as 'yeah, I know what you mean' could influence them to seek affirmation on their responses and could indicate interview bias (Cohen et al., 2011).

The interview between researcher and participant involves an uneven power dynamic. The relationship can be considered hierarchical as the interviewer is in control of the conversation. They will determine the topic, what elements to expand on, and when the interview will finish. Power issues need to be reflected on by the interviewer to mitigate how they might influence the interview (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). I was particularly aware that I was a middle aged male interviewing mainly women, not all sharing my age range, and a staff member at the university. This was why it was important to employ strategies such as disclosing my other life roles to make a connection outside of my work environment with the participants. Power may not necessarily be eliminated from interviews as they are implicit in human interaction, but its effect on the creation of knowledge from such events need to be considered (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The interviews for this study were located on the campus where the students were based or were convenient to get to. All bar one were on the North campus where the researcher was based so securing a room and setting it up in a manner conducive to holding interviews was easily achieved. A large room with windows was chosen over a smaller one with none to allow for a less intense atmosphere and a flow of fresh air. A table and padded chairs were selected and a jug of drinking water and tissues provided. These aspects were all carefully thought of to create a welcoming, comfortable environment (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Arranging the one interview on the South campus was slightly more difficult due to lack of familiarity with the campus. Participants were greeted and thanked for attending. The purpose of the interview was re-iterated to them, my motives as the researcher were expressed, the length of time the interview might possibly take, and it was conveyed that there are no right or wrong answers to any of the interview questions (Cohen et al., 2011).

It was decided to give some personal disclosure to the participants before the interview started. My circumstances as a member of university staff, a student, a husband and father of two were very briefly described with the aim of letting the student know that I have other roles outside of the university sphere. Hopefully this illustrated I had some empathy with the students and their many roles and perhaps was an opening for rapport to develop. The intention after this point was not to relate any of my own experiences to the participants during the interview as it was felt that this may be overstepping the interviewer boundary and possibly compromise the students responses due to seeking the interviewers approval for what was said (Jones et al., 2006; Tracy, 2013). A consent form (Appendix E) was given to the participants and time was allowed for reading and signing and for them to contemplate

any questions they had before the interview began. The interviews were recorded with a digital audio recorder to enable the data to be analysed after the event (Merriam, 2009). Two recorders were used in case there were any technical faults. The sound quality was pre-checked to see if there was any background noise or echoes and it was double-checked with the participant that they were aware they were being recorded in case they had missed that information in the previous communications (Tracy, 2013).

The interview questions were sequenced to cluster around certain sub-topics and to flow in a logical order. An example of sub-topics were questions about participants before attending the university, developing relationships at the university, and impact on life outside of the university. The initial questions were not to too sensitive or probing to allow for a comfortable introduction into the interview (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2011). When it was gauged that the interviews were reaching a finishing point, a statement was made about the interviewing closing. This gave the interviewees a clear indication at what stage the interview was at and also an opportunity to invite them to add anything else that they wanted to. It also avoids anything being said after the recorders have been turned off and potentially not being used. Copies of the transcript were offered to be sent to the interviewees (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Cohen et al., 2011; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Tracy, 2013).

3.5.2 Focus group interviews

A focus group interview is a method of collecting data from a small group of people who have experienced a particular situation. A group moderator guides the process with questions but the emphasis is on interaction within the group to allow different outlooks to emerge (Bryman, 2008). Focus groups have been used extensively in previous decades for market research purposes, but is now a common method for data collection in the social sciences (Merriam, 2009). Focus groups have the potential to access unexpected knowledge due to the dynamics of a group situation. When interacting with others who have shared a similar situation, participants may show less inhibition, and produce insightful self-disclosure about their experiences, in comparison with a one-on-one interview (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Tracy, 2013).

The moderator has the responsibility of creating a safe, non-threatening environment so the participants can share their views, ask questions or challenge what is being discussed. The situation is very social and the interaction is crucial to how meaning is negotiated among the group. The goal is, however, not to reach a consensus, but to allow the interchange to

bring forth an array of experiences and perspectives (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The nature of the focus group discussion was emphasised to the participants before starting and for this occasion some snack foods were provided to act as an icebreaker (Newby, 2010). A consent form (Appendix F) was given to the participants and time was allowed for reading and signing and for them to contemplate any questions they had before the interview began.

Initially the interaction was stilted as group members navigated their way through the tone of the gathering and the appropriate behaviour. Luckily an opportunity arose to inject some humour when they were asked to state their names before speaking for the first few interactions for transcribing purposes. The silliness of doing this in a discussion raised some giggles. It was subtle, but a noted tension dissipated after this and the discussion started to become less faltered and more natural (Tracy, 2013). A pencil and notepad were of more use in this situation compared to the individual interviews. The dynamics of the group meant many ideas were being talked about and I found keeping track of them was challenging. Noting them down gave me time to refer to them and to consider if and when it was suitable to follow any of them up in the discussion. This had to be kept in balance with judging the tone of the group and guiding the interaction where necessary (Tracy, 2013). Ensuring all group members had space to share their comments was foremost in my mind, and there turned out to be some slightly more dominant speakers, which Newby (2010) warns about. After the discussion was closed the point was re-iterated that the discussion was confidential and that pseudonyms would be used instead of the participant's real names (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

3.5.3 Transcribing the interviews

Transcription transforms the recorded conversation into a textual document to be used for analysis. The aim is to represent as accurately as possible what was said by the participants, including non-linguistic behaviour such as laughing (Flick, 2014). The transcription should not be changed in any way, for example, changing slang into formal words, as this would change how the person has expressed themselves. The accuracy of transcription is debateable, however, and Braun and Clarke (2013) advise that transcriptions be thought of as a representation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). When an interview is recorded, it is abstracted from the physical interaction that takes place and non-verbal cues are lost. A second abstraction happens when the audio recording is transcribed. Further details, such as tone and intonation are lost and add to the decontextualization of the original conversation

(Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). There is no universal transcription symbol system for transcribing interviews, which makes it more difficult to get totally accurate translations (Tracy, 2013).

The interviews and focus group discussion for this study were transcribed by a professional company. Despite the advantages of getting very familiar with the data if researchers transcribe the interviews themselves (Bryman, 2008), time constraints led to this decision. The transcriber signed a confidentiality form (Appendix G) before starting the process. The transcriber password protected the data and sent it back via email. Once received it was stored in a password protected folder with the other research material from this study.

3.6 Data Analysis

There are numerous choices to how one analyses qualitative data. Its non-numerical nature gives rise to a complex, diverse field that requires deep topic understanding and intimate familiarity of the data in order to analyse competently (Newby, 2010). Whatever method is chosen it needs to be fit for purpose, which is driven by what the researcher wants the data analysis to do (Cohen et al., 2011). Primarily, the analysis process is finding answers to the research questions (Merriam, 2009). Flicke (2014) defines qualitative data analysis as "the interpretation and classification of linguistic (or visual) material with the following aims: to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning making in the material and what is represented in it" (p. 370). Merriam (2009) views the analysis as a complex iterative process taking into consideration the abstract concepts, the descriptive and interpretive elements and the inductive and deductive reasoning that is applied. Tracy (2013) also views it as an iterative process with the data often revisited, and the researcher constantly reflecting on their own knowledge, theories, and insight gained from the data to continually inform their understanding.

This study followed a thematic analysis approach to make sense of the data. It is an inductive process that enables researchers to use an interpretive approach informed by hermeneutics to be the framework for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Themes are an attempt to describe an element of the lived experience that is to be understood. It is a way of identifying what was significant in the participants' experiences of a phenomena. It was not an avenue to capture all the meanings that could encapsulate the notion of transition for the mature age students in this study, but it helped identify some of the important ones that were

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evident (van Manen, 1997). Understanding grafted from the data in the form of text, was based on a blend of the participants' and researcher's perceptions. Each brought their own background of experience and ideas that formulated an interpretation of the participants' account (Lopez & Willis, 2004). The hermeneutic circle was a process utilised to immerse myself in the data as a whole to form overall ideas about the nature of the experiences. Then opportunities to examine smaller elements of the text gave insight that further informed the overall understanding of the phenomena. This process was repeated and the data revisited to possibly uncover meaning that may have been overlooked in previous instances (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005). Thus, analysing experience was a multi-dimensional exercise where I endeavoured to extract meaning from the participants' accounts to capture some of the notions that underpinned their experiences.

3.6.1 Coding the data

Coding is the process of labelling a segment of text that eventually incorporates a concept or piece of information (Cohen et al., 2011). A code is a word or concise phrase that represents a feature of the data that is considered useful for the purpose of the research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). There are different levels of specificity for coding (Cohen et al., 2011) but this study initially applied a complete coding level where everything relevant to the research question was identified (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This allowed me to immerse myself in the data and get an overall impression of the participants' experiences. Several readings of the texts were completed in this phase of the coding. Codes can be data-derived or researcher derived. Data-derived codes represent the explicit content of the data based on the participants' language and concepts. They are also known as semantic codes. Researcher-derived codes identify implicit meanings in the data by using theoretical insight to interpret the text. These codes are known as latent codes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Data can often be coded in more than one way and in the beginning stages of coding there is no limit to how many codes are created. It is important to be as creative as possible and codes can be narrowed down later in the process (Bryman, 2008). Coding was initially data-derived to gain an overall feeling for text. Familiarisation with the data led to further insight which enabled me to engage more deeply with the material and to apply researcher derived codes. At this point implicit meanings started to become more apparent. The hermeneutic circle was applied more earnestly in this phase with movement between units of the text and the whole to build a multi-layered perspective of the participants' experiences. The final stage for complete

coding was to assemble instances of individual codes. Excerpts of data were labelled to enable them to be traced back to where they came from in the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.6.2 Constructing themes

After the data has been coded the next step entails sorting the codes into various themes (Flick, 2014). Themes or categories are generally conceptual elements that span many units of coded data that relate to the research question (Merriam, 2009). A theme has a central organising concept that is made up of codes representing an idea. One must be careful to distinguish between themes and a feature. Both represent recurring elements in the data but a theme tells us something more meaningful in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). From a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective creating themes is not a mechanical process based on frequency counts but a method of understanding the structures of an individual's experience. Themes are generated by trying to extract meaning from the text of participants' experiential accounts. It is identifying features that embody the lived experience that was described by the participants (van Manen, 1997). By continually moving within the body of the texts, themes or focal points from descriptions of the phenomena became apparent. Four main themes were chosen from the text that appeared to represent meaningful understanding of the participants' experiences: Firstly, 'Now is the right time', secondly, 'I'm a mature student', and thirdly, 'You cannot do it alone'. There is no set number to how many themes should be identified in the final analysis, but potentially, the greater the number of themes, the less coherent the analysis may be. Depth and focus are needed to illustrate the richness and intricacies of the themes, and too many may compromise this (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

3.7 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are considered paramount to the integrity of research. There is debate about how these legitimating categories apply to qualitative research. Validity and reliability are often seen as belonging to a positivist paradigm compatible with quantitative research but not suitable for qualitative research which can be innovative and emancipatory (Bryman, 2008; Newby, 2010). Some qualitative researchers have replaced validity – does the data collected accurately reflect the concept being investigated – with credibility, and reliability – repeatability of the results – with dependability. These are deemed more appropriate criteria to be judged by (Bryman, 2008). Dependability can be tested by how well the researcher clarifies the context of the research and how plausible it appears to the reader

(Newby, 2010). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) view validity as dependent on the quality of the craftsmanship of the researcher. If it is done competently, the research procedures will be transparent throughout the process and will validate the finding and results convincingly. I have endeavoured to approach this research with integrity. My attempts to be transparent with the research process and to articulate the theory informing my research choices may go some way to instil confidence in the readers of this study. My engagement with the text was mindful of the participants who entrusted me to interpret their experiences in a meaningful, and caring way. By conscientiously communicating and justifying the procedures of this research, credibility and dependability are issues that have hopefully been convincingly addressed.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the research methodology I employed to guide this study. The epistemological and ontological beliefs that informed my interpretive approach have been expressed in order to illustrate their alignment with the methodology utilised. Hermeneutics has informed this interpretive approach, with thematic analysis used to analyse the data. The intention of this chapter was to demonstrate transparency and to comprehensively justify how this research was executed. The next chapter will discuss the research findings.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the findings that give insight into the experiences of mature age students transitioning to university. Data was collected via six individual interviews and one focus group. There were twelve participants in total with six comprising the focus group. The twelve participants were recruited from two bachelor degrees at AUT, one being Health Science and the other Education. The participants communicated various details about their experience transitioning to a tertiary environment. Being older than most university students their issues were perhaps more complex than younger students, especially for those students with children. Their time was divided between the many roles they already had, such as a parent or a partner, as well as dealing with the new situation of being a student. This gave the task of obtaining a university qualification a sense of urgency as time was a limited resource. These circumstances set the mature age student apart from the traditional student that entered straight from high school. This is reflected in the themes that developed from the interviews and from the focus group. The first theme 'Now is the right time' illustrates how circumstances in their lives and their financial situation made studying a realistic option for the participants. The second theme 'I'm a *mature* student' illustrates the sense in which mature age students see themselves as distinct from younger students. The third and final theme is 'You cannot do it alone' and emphasises the support of immediate and extended family as crucial to coping with being a student, especially for those with children. The role of the institution in empowering the mature student to participate in higher education is also highlighted.

4.2 Now is the Right Time

The concept of time was an important aspect when choosing to undertake tertiary study. Many felt that it was a convenient point in their lives to initiate further educational study. After many years of raising families, working in other careers, and an awareness of getting older, life's circumstances had culminated to a point where the opportunity to attend university was realistic. This made studying at university a very purposeful, carefully considered endeavour for the mature age students.

4.2.1 A purposeful endeavour

Mature age students had a clear focus on their goal at university and that it would be attained within a specific time-frame. They had made many changes to their families' lives in order to study full time. Sheryl had many career changes and had been inspired by working at a play centre to study. Sheryl explained:

> It's just, it's taken me kind of all this time to realise that this is where
> you want to be, need to be. Where I have needed to be. It's been a
> long road but we have got there. I think it kind of, I feel, I don't think
> I was ready up until now.

Blake's working circumstances had changed after being employed for the same company for twenty two years. He had considered full time study some years previously, but now with the work changes he was motivated to make a decision. "Six years later with the changes in my work and that, everything just sort of came into one and right." He added, "But it got to the stage where if I don't do it now, it won't get done, so I've taken the chance.

Abby had come to a stage in her life after both her and her husband had worked and she had spent time at home with their daughter. She explained, "which I didn't mind but it's about me now, now that I am getting older." She further explained:

> Yeah, I always wanted to do it and now it's time because I am not
> getting any younger and our daughter's going to grow up soon, so I
> want to get a degree. I don't want to be studying with her.

Kacey viewed the opportunity to study as unique:

> See, I feel like this is, might sound bad, this is my last chance so I am
> doing this once and I am doing it right. So this is it for the rest of my
> working life, to support my kids.

Some mature age students' timing was influenced by ill health of close family members. Dominique had nursed her sick mother for a number of years and now had time for herself, even though she still had the responsibility of dependent children. When considering options after nursing her mother, she chose university study: "Yeah, I think I am doing it for myself now." She indicated that the time needed to nurse someone isolated her from other aspects of society as her world was very focused on the one task. She got great satisfaction

and stimulation once classes began: "But I feel kind of privileged to be sitting in the class and having so much information given to me. I just love it." Alicia also had an ill mother and this motivated her to study: "but I realised that I need to do what I need to do now because later on I might need to help her. So if I didn't do my study now it might be too late later on." She too enjoyed the stimulation the learning provided. "I have got to be honest, being a stay home mum was good but I was a bit bored, I need more brain activity." Alicia added, "So yeah, I'm loving it."

The timing appeared to have influenced the sense of urgency mature age students had to complete their degrees. They were utilising the time which they saw as a unique opportunity to initiate themselves into tertiary education. Being conscious of being mature adults it was often viewed as a final chance to gain a qualification that would enable them to have a fulfilling career.

Abby supported this with her comment, "I am there to study and to get my degree and then I am out." Salena emphasised her age as a contributing factor to not wasting time getting her degree as she stated that she was "Too old to just be doing things for the sake of it now." This sense of purpose is contrasted with the notion that younger students are less determined and not particularly ambitious regarding their time at university. Natalie suggested that, "we are not here because we are out of school then something to do and it's just an easy choice. We are actually here because we want to be here."

4.2.2 Have a financial plan

Having a financial plan was imperative to entering tertiary education for mature age students. This enabled them to be a student and to carry on in their other roles as mothers, fathers, partners, and friends without too much compromise. Finances were organised to enable them to study, often without needing to have part time employment, but they did rely on the income of partners to support them. Dominique's husband earned a higher than average income plus they sold an investment property they had. This provided extra money to make studying more feasible and was a crucial factor. Dominique stated that "I don't know if I would have really done it if I didn't have financial support." Alicia's husband earned "good money" and they sat down and worked out a three year plan that enabled them to survive financially during the study period. Similarly, Blake and his wife assessed their finances and worked out what time period they could sustain him not working. He stated, "So I am financially secure for the next 3-4 years." The stability of being employed by the same

organisation for 22 years, has resulted in him being mortgage free, which had eased financial pressure while being a student and did not require him to work. Salena's situation was not so favourable. She had to rely on her partner's income and work part time to meet their financial obligations. Her partner was on a zero hours contract where there is no guaranteed work or hence wages. This put extra pressure on them both, "Yeah, we are just winging it at the moment, we are seeing how it goes at the moment, to see if we are ok." Both Salena and her partner have professional backgrounds so appear to have the resources to seek other employment options and they do not have dependent children. The uncertainty of their situation may be less difficult to redress than those in a similar situation with dependent children.

The expectation of having a student loan at the end of the degree was not a deterrent to studying. This was seen as something that would be dealt with once qualified and in employment. The importance of gaining the qualification far outweighed the potential debt needed to be paid off. Sheryl's attitude to having a loan was that "we are going to cross that bridge when we come to it." She added that they would not be put off studying, "definitely for me, is it's for something that I have wanted to do. It's worthwhile." Alicia and her husband decided to add her student loan to their mortgage. She acknowledged that "Financially, yeah, I think any year is going to be difficult." But they viewed studying as a pathway to a more fulfilling career. Blake similarly accepted the extra financial burden while studying by focussing on the outcome. "But I need to get out there and work again. The whole point of this is three years down the track, hopefully get a job as a teacher."

4.2.3 Life experience

The life experience of mature age students seemed to highlight differences between mature and younger students. The mature age students identified that they had more knowledge to draw upon when participating in class discussions. They felt that their own experiences enabled them to relate better to some topics in class and to express their opinion more readily. It gave a sense of value to their contribution when they could discuss topics that they had familiarity with and that many others in the class had little knowledge of. A particular New Zealand event was discussed during one class and Sheryl was the only student who had any previous knowledge of it. "I'm stunned that only one person in a class of 18 knew about, so and it's quite flattering, well I don't know, but if we have debates or anything like that, [classmates say], 'I wanna be on your side'." When talking about a sociology class,

Dominique found that she easily understood the content due to her personal experience. "That has really shocked me. I've really, really enjoyed the classes and the context of the classes. That has been really easy but I'm thinking that's because of my age and what I have already been through."

As some of the mature age students found the class and lecture content extremely meaningful, it caused them to reflect quite profoundly on their own lives and contemplate their position in society. Sheryl described her passion for one of her classes and how it helped positively identify factors that contributed to where she is placed in society:

> It's really spinning my wheels. I just love the formatting and the
> whole sort of learning sociology. It's made a lot of things sort of just
> slot into place, which is, you kind of know your place in the world.
> Now it's like 'oh, ok.'

Salena spoke positively about the learning in her first semester. "I enjoyed the lectures. They are very good. I am enjoying those. First semester is all about self-discovery really. It's sort of psychological." Dominique recalled how one of her classes approached a past event that her extended family had been involved in. This brought back specific memories about safety issues for her family and made her get quite emotional during the class:

> I had to get up and walk out of there because I just remember the
> times of my uncles and stuff and they did not feel safe, out on the
> roads. And yeah, I mean lots of times to reflect. I mean all my classes
> I have really reflected on, 'is that why?'

This made Dominique contemplate what had happened in the past and contextualise it with the new knowledge she was receiving. This potentially could have been very negative for her due to the distress it caused her, but she viewed the episode as positive. She believed it confronted sensitive issues from New Zealand's past that younger students may have no knowledge about but should be aware of. Alicia explained that some of her classes required anecdotes about her life and caused her to reflect on her situation. "When you have got your own kids too, you know, it does help you think about where they are and also where you have been in your life."

4.3 I'm a *Mature* Student

The participants viewed themselves as legitimate students who belonged at the institution, but as mature age students transitioning to tertiary education, they regarded themselves differently from those entering directly from high school. Some of the attitudes and behaviours of the younger students were regarded as unfavourable and not conducive to the university environment but there were also perceived advantages that the younger cohort enjoyed. The theme 'I'm a *mature* student' is considered under four sub themes. Each sub theme represents characteristics of the mature age students' transition into tertiary education in regards to them being an older cohort of students.

4.3.1 Learning from difference

The mature age students identified differences between themselves and the younger school leavers in their classes, but these differences resulted in benefits for both groups. The two cohorts appeared to learn from each other's perspectives. The interaction between them in the class offered alternative viewpoints and broadened each other's understanding on topics. Due to their perceived experience, some younger students gravitated to their mature counterparts as it was evident that they could learn from them. Jane described her experience: "I think a lot of the younger students might tag on to you a little bit. Because they are like 'ok, you have been there, you have done some stuff, we can sort of learn from you." Alicia enjoyed the interaction of younger students when they asked her about her experiences relating to class topics and saw the benefits as reciprocal:

> And some of the younger students that I talk to in the paper, you
> know they ask me questions, so I find that a really positive thing, you
> know, 'Oh, what are your kids doing? Do they do that drawing?' Or
> 'do they hold pens?' Yeah, 'what do they do?' And I find that I like
> that. I like um, it's not mentoring, it's yeah. No, I like that they ask
> questions, it's interesting.

Jane similarly saw a mutual benefit to some of her interaction with younger students:

> And at the same time you get quite a bit of energy from them and
> sharing your experiences with them. Because we have got two in our
> class … They are straight from high school and it's quite interesting

looking at how they are perceiving things versus how we are
perceiving things.

Working in groups both formally and informally could result in advantageous interaction for both groups. Group work is a feature of learning at the university that allows collaboration between students that may not otherwise interact. Alicia saw the advantages of this: "It's been good I have been able to share my experiences with them and also find out from them what life is like, you know, being younger." Dominique was part of a study group that consisted of some younger students. She viewed this positively as it helped her familiarise herself with her new environment. "And that includes the younger students because they have been so helpful. They just know the system. So that's been awesome." Dominique appreciated the resource of her younger peers, as opposed to approaching the university resources herself, and saw the benefit for both parties. "it made us go and ask and then it probably gave some value to the students that we did ask. And that's really good."

4.3.2 The relative advantage of youth

Students entering university straight from high school were viewed as having an advantage compared to the mature age students when transitioning into the new environment. Younger students were perceived to have a better grasp of the technology used at university, and that they were already accustomed to the rigours of academic work and the sheer volume of information that had to be retained as part of the learning process. Alana was initially struggling with the technology used in classes but realised others were not. "Yeah, sometimes I think they are a bit lucky and they've come from school and they're used to the technology and the way everything is run. Where they don't know life before Google." Natalie similarly struggled at times and compared herself to her mother with her technological encounters. "I feel like my mum sometimes, it's like 'oh crap, how do you do that?' Because you know how mum is always asking me 'how do you do this online?'"

Overall mature age students found academic work challenging and difficult. Many had not studied for a long period of time and were anxious about their ability to write academically. They eagerly waited for their first feedback on any of their first written assessments so they could gauge their competency. Salena commented:

I think it's just that getting into that student mode and just, because I
haven't written an essay for so long, I have no way of knowing. I am

hoping I am going to pass. I have got no way of judging that until I

get some feedback.

Mature age students often struggled with the amount of learning that was taking place and their capacity to comprehend it all. They complained of fatigue as they attempted to absorb information at a rate they were not used to. Blake struggled with the amount of content in his first few weeks of university:

But it's trying to remember everything and you have got so much

getting shoved into your brain at the moment. I am finding that I am

tired. Like a lot more tired than what I used to be during the middle of

the day.

Kacey also felt overwhelmed by her workload. It was:

pretty stressful, but I am just learning. I'm like, because it's been so

long since I've been to school, it feels like, just getting my brain, it

sort of felt like it was dormant for quite a while and it's just starting to

wake up.

Sheryl found absorbing the lecture and classroom content challenging: "It's just sort of being in the moment 100% to basically take it all in. I find myself having to re-look at notes and constantly to refresh. The memory isn't as good as it used to be."

Although friends were not always seen as a priority among the mature age students, it was noticed that some younger students had come to university with established friendships. Sheryl explained that:

I just think it's a natural thing, I think some of the young ones have

come from school as well so they have all sort of joined the whole

'they know each other' sort of following each other through, whether

it be schools or friends, you know. But they seem to know each other

a bit more.

Often with responsibilities like dependent children, mature age students did not appear to have the spare time for socialising like the younger students. With their much focused attitude to obtaining a degree, there did not appear to be time for distractions outside of study and family life. Alicia stated that, "I feel like I'm not really here to make close

friends." She further added, "I feel like I am here to do my work and go." However she did note that, "A challenge has been some people know each other from high school it seems and I don't have that connection. I know absolutely no one here." Similarly, Abby perceived friends as advantageous but not absolutely necessary:

> Don't rely on friends. Because what I noticed in some of the groups is
> I am able to, if I don't have a friend in my class, I don't care. I have
> just got to stick with what I am there to study and to get my degree
> and then I am out. I don't care if I've got anyone on my side. It's just
> a bonus that I did.

It appears that friendship is seen as a factor that can positively influence transition despite it being noted that it is not always an aim of the mature age student.

4.3.3 Mutual interests

The participants reported that mature age students tend to gravitate towards each other when establishing peer groups. Alicia explained her situation, "I have met mothers who have more children than me, being first time students. So that's been, yeah we tend to navigate towards each other and communicate about our kids and that's been good." Sheryl explained, "It's really nice that there are two mature adults in my class …. And we, as natural as it sounds sort of gravitate towards each other." She further commented how they communicate outside of class via text and email about assessments and added, "So that's quite nice we've got a little bit of common ground. But I so can't relate to the young ones."

The nature of the conversations tended to set mature age students apart from some of their younger counterparts. Mature student participants may discuss their children or focus on course work, whereas some of the younger students' conversations are based on social activities. Jane commented, "Like they come to class and talk about last night's party instead of last night's study." Blake noted "yeah they like to say that they play sports and they got out that night with their mates and do all that." Sheryl explained the difference that is perceived between the two groups of students:

> I think there's another 46 year old and a 35 year old and myself …
> And we have also sort of got family life and things similarities. You
> know there is a lot of common ground for us. So it's only natural that

we are not likely to be going out to pubs every Saturday night you

know and on Facebook 'whose party are we going to this weekend?'

The conversations between younger students had caused some tension at times when these impinged on learning in the classroom. The mature age students implemented certain strategies to lessen the impact of the distracting talk. Sitting near the front of the class seemed to be a common approach to negate the effect of the conversations. Abby previously explained how she looked over to those talking to indicate they were disruptive. Emma described one strategy used, "We have already had one outburst on my part on Facebook telling everyone if you are coming to lectures to shut up." Kacey, however, felt that it was not her place to admonish those responsible and was concerned about the consequences:

Oh, I wish we could do that now. I wouldn't want to speak up and tell

the particular group that talks because I don't want, I have got three

years with them. I am just hoping that the teacher will tell them. A

few do but not all the teachers do.

Seating choice within the classroom was viewed as a reflection of student's ambition at the institution. Emma proposed that as she was there to learn she sat near the front of the class and that sitting at the back reflected a lack of motivation to learn: "But you will probably find a lot more of the younger students are at the back of the class." Sheryl supported this with her comment about mature age students in her class: "We sort of sit in the same place every week, usually at the front." Abby also chose her seating at times to distance herself from some of the younger students who were disruptive. "They talk and I have got to constantly look over at them or throw a piece of paper or you know. So that's why I move away from them so I am close to the front." Alana echoed Abby's experience:

Some of our tutes are terrible, everyone is talking and you are sitting

up the front and you can't even hear what they are saying right in

front of you. And you are not wanting to be a killjoy or anything, but

they are talking about totally irrelevant stuff.

4.3.4 Empathy towards younger students

Although the social content of conversation was a feature noted by the participants, there was empathy expressed towards the younger students' different context. Blake explained, "Oh just I am more family orientated. They like to go out boozing, stuff that I used

to do when I was that age." He adds, "so I just don't go out. But otherwise they are pretty much just like I was when I was younger." Abby recalled her first time at university as a school leaver many years ago when she lived next door to the institution, "It was full of parties you know. Of course you can get drunk and stagger home." The social events that dominated some students' conversation were not always exclusive to the younger students. Mature age students were invited to social gatherings organised by younger students but were often declined mainly due to other priorities. Sheryl described how a student set up an event which she was invited to but did not go to:

> I think the other two, you know from my peers were away. It's just
> Saturday and I had intended on going, but my babysitter's son got
> chickenpox, so it was like 'you are not coming over.' It's ok, I said
> next time for sure if you give me a bit of notice for a babysitter.

Tension between younger students was sometimes noted in classes as a result of previous social events. It was noticed that groups of students would change who would sit with them. Jane commented, "Or something happens out of uni that makes them not want to hang with those lot, I have noticed in my class." Jane added, "But as someone looking in you can see the awkwardness. Glad I'm not part of that."

4.4 You Cannot do it Alone

The participants recognised that they required support from various groups to enable them to undertake tertiary education. First and foremost the immediate family, parents and children, were considered. Partners were primary considerations when contemplating further education as responsibilities and support would mainly be given by them. As a result of different parent roles at home, children would often need to adapt to changes in their routines and the changing role of their student/parent. This could affect them in various ways, some advantageously and some not. Beyond the immediate family, extended family also played an important role in some participants' lives. The support they offered to the time restricted mature age student could help immensely. Outside of family relations, the university was a prime facilitator of the mature age student. An environment that made the students feel that they belonged and a curriculum that gave them flexibility to fit in their other life roles was crucial once they had entered the tertiary setting.

4.4.1 Partner support

Partners appeared to be the most pivotal influence when deciding to initiate tertiary education as the repercussions on family life impacted significantly on them. Without their support, especially for those students with children, considering study would not be an option. Often they empathised with their partner's desire to obtain a degree in order to enter a new career pathway. Alicia's partner reflected on his own position to appreciate what she was trying to achieve. "He understands that he is not happy in his job and he doesn't want to study, but he would jump out and go out and do a different job if he could." Sheryl's husband had been made redundant a number of times and he jokingly referred to the scenario once she is qualified, "he kind of laughed and is like 'well when you get your degree you can go and teach and I'll stay at home with the kids.'" One aspect of practical support that appeared to affect husbands in particular was to change their routine to help out more with their children. Natalie and Sheryl's husbands had assumed responsibility for taking their children to school when their mothers had early starts at university. Sheryl explained "I'm kind of up in the morning, out at 7am in the mornings so my poor husband has to drop (son) off at school." Natalie's husband was also more involved with the children's learning, "he reads my son's marks and does all that." For Abby's husband, the change in routine was more profound. She lived outside of Auckland and commuted home on weekends. Her husband had assumed more responsibility for their teenage daughter which caused tension at times. Abby described how she received phone calls from them sometimes: "The arguments between the two has lifted, it's like children arguing on the phone with me. Oh my goodness. So there was a big change."

Salena's partner was not enthusiastic about her attending university. Both had recently recovered from major illness so their time together was particularly valued. To ensure they had quality time as a couple they negotiated "that we would absolutely dedicate one day, a Sunday, that would be our day. There would be no study." Similarly Alicia made a concerted effort to have quality family time together in the weekends as she acknowledged that her partner perhaps did not realise the impact of her study on them as a couple. She commented, "then there's you're relationship and that's definitely changed as well because we just have less time for each other."

4.4.2 Impact on children

The impact on children of having a parent studying was reported by the participants to be both positive and negative. Often the children had to deal with there being less time available with their student parent. Although the flexibility of university attendance enabled some routines to remain stable, students constantly tried to balance their study time with responsibilities of their children. Natalie explained that "my nights are for me to study, when they are awake, that's the time with my children." She added further "I'm not going to ditch them." Similarly, Alicia studied at night to ensure some daytime was spent with her children. She felt the pressure of these very full days: "Basically it feels like every moment is either kids or study." Mature age students often identified the pressures on themselves as influencing their behaviour towards their children in a negative way. Jay described herself as grumpy and felt her daughter was constantly misbehaving: "Everything she does is naughty. And it's just because I am tired and it's not actually naughty." Natalie felt she was being selfish by focusing so much time on her study, "I just sit there and just study and read and not spend the time that I should be focusing on the family." Kacey had feelings of guilt with spending less time with her children, "First of all I felt like I had deserted my kids ... I still feel a bit bad leaving the kids on early mornings." Alicia found that her 4 year old son's behaviour had changed negatively since she had started studying. She had to monitor him, finding this "a bit stressful. At first I thought it wasn't about me coming here but I think the extra stress on me has impacted him." Sheryl's son was very familiar with having his mum at home for the first seven years of his life and found the change displeasing, "I don't want you to be a teacher. I just want you to be at home."

Generally, those mature age students who had children found them to be supportive of their parent's new endeavour. There were also new conversations and expectations taking place in the home environment influenced by the parent's study. Children observed the changes in the parent's routine and behaviour and reacted to them in their own ways. Dominique often found herself praising the university and commenting on her enjoyment of studying while at home with her family. She was spending less time with her daughter now that she was a student but her daughter articulated a desire to enter the same profession that her mother was studying for. Kacey reported that her "13 year old is adamant that she is going to uni too…[yet]…before this we never really talked about this kind of thing." Kacey also observed that all her children were studying more since they saw her studying at home. She could see one of the attributes of her being a student was being a role model to her

family. Dominique's daughter also spent time at the table while her mother was also studying. Alicia's older son had been taking a particular interest in his mother's study and was intrigued that his mother was now at 'school'. He often asked questions about what she did and she could see that they were communicating on a different level, having "conversations about things that we never had before which I think you know, that's neat." Sheryl's 7 year old son was very proud of the fact his mother was attending tertiary education. Sheryl explained "he's quite chuffed because he comes and says, 'my mum's at university'. You know which is neat." Blake had implemented changes to a card game he normally played with his children. The changes were based on the learning he had in a primary education maths paper, and he used it to enhance the game and increase his children's learning. The advantages to the children of their parent's learning at university were varied and perhaps unexpected at times.

4.4.3 Get everyone involved

Support outside of the immediate family was identified as essential to the participants, especially those with children. Extended family gave practical support as well as emotional support to those endeavouring to get a degree. Kacey was fortunate to have had parents living next door to her to give much appreciated assistance with looking after her children. Sheryl also received effective support from the children's grandparents and extended family. The support given by extended family was particularly valuable to those mature students who lived away from their hometown. Natalie had shifted up from another city in the North Island and had no practical support from family at her new location. For her the emotional support she received from her mother over the telephone was very important. She made daily calls to her in her home town to give her updates on her day. Her mother appeared to give her reassurance in her ability to be successful in her studies. Natalie described an obviously important comment her mother made, "It's not about what you know or how you study, because you are more passionate about it, you are going to pass."

Kristy's parents lived overseas and she sometimes felt the lack the emotional support from her distanced family. There was a sense that sometimes the support she did receive from them was superficial. It was encouraging but they were not involved in her day to day life and did not appreciate the enormity of the task she had undertaken. Kristy commented, "They don't really see the extent of what I am doing and how hard I am working and the hours I am putting in and the craziness that has now just turned into my life."

Abby also lived outside of Auckland and relied heavily on extended family to support her immediate family back in her home city. Her teenage daughter had many cousins to go to school with and aunties and grandparents living locally to share in the responsibility of looking after her and supporting her father while her mother was in Auckland studying. Her daughter had a school issue in which Abby could not go and resolve so "my cousin had to go and deal with it because I was emailing [the school] but the message wasn't getting through, so she went in to go and find out what the story was."

Jay's advice for other mature students was to seek the support of the wider family, even if they are not closely attached. She viewed their participation as crucial and that students should organise themselves a support network to call upon when necessary, "get everyone involved on board. Like regardless of if it's the aunty you never see but will help you eventually in your degree, get her involved."

4.4.4 University as an enabler

The university provided an environment for mature age students that encouraged and valued their participation and allowed them time for their other roles in life not related to being a student. The teaching staff were particularly important in creating a non-judgemental environment that encouraged discussion and valued opinion. This was useful for the mature participant students who were unsure of what to expect in the class and who had life experience to share. Teaching staff were mainly viewed as being approachable and were open to students expressing their views in the class. There was no perception that the mature age students were treated any differently to other students. This was viewed positively as they had a desire to fit in with other students in this unfamiliar environment. Alicia believed that, "it's all the same, it's all quite fair. The lecturers are really good." Sheryl noted, "I mean even being in a classroom environment you definitely feel like a student and that you belong." She also commented that the staff were "one of the big draw cards" when explaining her relationship with her teachers.

Class size seemed to influence the approachability of the academic staff and the ability to interact with them. Larger classes could overwhelm the student and make them reluctant to interact with the lecturers. Whereas smaller classes made questions or discussions with staff more conducive. Alana noted:

Because health science is such a huge first year, first semester, you feel like you are a bit of a number ... I do find it quite hard to even speak to the lecturers if you are wanting to ask questions.

A feature of the smaller education classes was the interaction between students and lecturers. The mature age students felt comfortable to raise points and take part in discussions to voice their opinions. Natalie identified the smaller student numbers in the lecture as promoting interaction: "We can approach our lecturers, we can yell out in class too." Blake appreciated the freedom to question in the smaller classes: "Yeah, you listen, but you can interrupt now and again. Or you can sit there and say, 'isn't this a better way?'" Sheryl noted that "at the end of just about every class we hang back and ask questions" and her lecturers were always patient and helpful with accommodating their requests.

The flexible timetable allowed the mature students to fit in other obligations outside of their role as a student. This was helped by the use of technology that gave some of them the choice to view lectures off campus in their own time or to review material at their leisure. On site lectures and tutorial classes were scattered over the week but study time could be completed at home. Not being required on campus lessened the disruption of routines they had before being a student, especially for those with children. Alicia explained that "I am only really here for like three days" and added "as soon as the kids are fed, I just try and sit down in front of my laptop and watch a lecture." Blake still had time to attend his children's school events and was able at times to take them to and from school. He observed that "I have probably got more time to do it than working fulltime." Not having to adhere to a strict full time schedule appeared to be an important feature that ensured a less complicated transition for mature age students to the tertiary environment.

4.5 Conclusion

Transitioning to tertiary study takes time as mature age students navigate their way to becoming a student, while still maintaining the roles that were already established outside of the university. Mature age students normally have multiple responsibilities that can complicate their role as a student. Not being able to devote time exclusively to study puts pressure on completing academic tasks and on fulfilling other family responsibilities. The students were challenged in class by the intense periods of learning that tested their mental capabilities, but were encouraged by the validation of their contributions. They did not regard themselves as normal students due to their age and experience, but the classroom

environment was such that they were made to feel a sense of belonging as students. Relationships with children and partners were found to change due to the demands placed on each family member in order to facilitate the extra student role undertaken by their parent/partner. Children expressed their own desire to one day attend university or to become a teacher as they emulated their parents. It was important that adequate time be put aside to ensure relationships were maintained. The support of family was crucial if study was to be viable, and the commitment of all those involved was a vital ingredient to the successful transition of the participants to tertiary education.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss the findings of this study in consideration of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two. For the purpose of the discussion, the findings of this study are grouped into six themes. The first theme 'Motivation and approaches to learning' discusses the motivation of the participants to enter university and how that can influence their approach to learning. Emotions are also highlighted as a factor that impacts on their engagement. Second is the theme 'Living at home and less time at university'. This explores how the participants' living situation plays a role in their engagement at university as both academic and social connections are affected by the time spent at and away from university. Finally in this theme Bourdieu's habitus is used as a lens to explain the impact of the living situation. Thirdly, the theme 'Economic risk' explores the impact of financial considerations on mature age students while studying. The fourth theme 'Classroom interaction' focuses on the interaction between the mature age students and the younger cohort they shared their learning with. The fifth theme 'Habitus and cultural capital' gives a broader perspective on the transition process of the participants. The final theme is 'The neoliberal student'. This section reflects on the impact of the neoliberal discourse on the mature age students and identifies if they illustrate elements of this dominant concept as they have proceeded through their educational experience.

5.2 Motivation and Approaches to Learning

The motivation of the participants to study represented the range of reasons for choosing to attend HE identified in the literature review. The younger mature students were more focused on career incentives which seems quite obvious with so much of their working life ahead of them. Some of the older participants were motivated by career aspirations. The financial security that this would bring them and their families in the future was an added incentive. According to Boeren (2011) a financially secure future was a prominent reason for undertaking study for those with families. Some participants had experienced what Kasworm (2003) described as major life transitions that caused them to rethink their future and come to a decision to enrol in HE. A desire to learn appeared to be significant feature for this group of

mature age students. It was evident it was a time for them to consider what they would like to do for themselves. The varied circumstances of the students led to an opportunity where it was a feasible option to study, but the choice to study was driven by a desire to make it happen. These were mainly decisions that impacted on other family members so were not considered lightly. For those with dependent children there were many considerations and plans put into place to adjust to the additional role of being a student. Abby was an extreme example, as she was relocating from her home city during the week and returning at weekends. The care of her teenage daughter had to be arranged between her partner and other relatives while she was physically absent. As most students had children the daily routines of the family had to be re-arranged. Only one of the study participants had circumstances similar to the traditional student. She was living at home and did not have pressure to work after accumulating savings from previous employment. Most of the students had significant negotiations with partners, children or other family members to arrange alternative household duties and routines to accommodate university study.

The mature age students' decision to study full time could be perceived as selfish considering the significant change within the family unit that results from this decision. There appears to be some truth to this as illustrated by Abby's comment "it's about me now" and Dominique's remark "I am doing it for myself now" illustrate. But these comments need to be put into a wider context. Most of these students are mothers and in Dominique's case she had also undergone a personal life transition after caring for her ill mother. It would not be unreasonable to suggest that these students embody the cultural expectation of mothers to be the main care givers in the family as proposed by Lynch (2008). To oppose such conventions and follow a different path may take selfishness and determination in order to make changes. But great consideration appears to have been made to enable the time and space to study. Once university study had begun however, it would be illogical to suggest that the responsibility and duty of the students to dependents diminished. It seems that study was an added factor in the mature student's congested life and that ample amounts of exclusive time did not become available to allow for the tasks that studying demands. The participants were very aware of the compromise that their family, in particular partners made, and acknowledged the impact of their studying on them. Sheryl left the house at 7am and her "poor husband" had to deal with the children's school routine. Natalie was not "not going to ditch them" when explaining how she did not study until the children were in bed. These comments indicate feelings of guilt. Guilt was a common emotion identified in the literature,

especially for mothers who spent less time with their children (Brooks, 2015). The societal expectations for mothers to assume the caregiving role (Lynch, 2008) seems evident with some of their comments about the change in roles due to study demands. The participants did not seem to be under the illusion that studying would be a pleasant self-indulgent journey but one that encompassed stress and anxiety as they navigated their way through the unknown expectations of academic study and still had their family roles to contend with. Any perceptions of selfish reasoning for attending HE appear to be countered by the realities of home life for the student that continued regardless of the additional responsibilities of tertiary education and the feelings of guilt that were illustrated due to the reshuffled schedule of home-life and the impact on family.

Although the students in this study exhibited both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for studying, there appeared to be an overall engagement that illustrated a deep approach to learning and therefore greater chances of success. Extrinsic motivations such as gaining a qualification for future employment can be associated with surface learning (Bye et al., 2007). In this type of scenario the topic may not hold the student's interest and they may just be interested in the extrinsic value of gaining the qualification. Learning can be fragmented and relating it to other aspects of life may not eventuate (Kasworm, 2003). Intrinsic motivation encourages multiple connections to life experience and the learning becomes much more meaningful. Students will learn as they appreciate the value of learning in itself (Bye et al., 2007). Although learning to do with job opportunities can be extrinsically motivated, intrinsic motivation can be a feature of the engagement taking place if the learner values the learning associated with their employment (Kasworm, 2003). This highlights the difficulty in trying to define something as complex as motivation into binary categories such as intrinsic and extrinsic. The intrinsic motivation also reflects the notion that mature age students make careful considerations that can significantly impact their life circumstances before committing to long term study and therefore have an entrenched interest in succeeding (McCune et al., 2010).

Intrinsic motivation was clearly evident from the students' comments about the connections they made with their learning and their life experience. Sheryl described a sociology class and how "things sort of just slot into place, which is, you kind of know your place in the world now it's like, oh ok." Dominique told how she "just so enjoyed the context of everything". Salena used the term "self-discovery" to describe how she was interpreted the learning taking place. These illustrate how the learning itself was a highly valued and

stimulating process. This learning for the sake of learning potentially sets these participants up to persist with their studies and apply learning strategies that should positively influence their educational performance more than others who do not display similar interest (Severrino, Aiello, Cascio, Ficarra, & Messina, 2011).

5.2.1 Emotions

The emotion of interest in learning demonstrated by the participants in this study reinforced the motivation that should help them continue with their study successfully. These features are desirable for the participant mature age student to help them engage with the educational tasks they faced. The above comments demonstrate the level of engagement that the students clearly enjoyed. They connected with the content of the classroom material and applied newly acquired knowledge to their own context. This was an empowering experience when students such as Sheryl could place their own situation within a wider context that explains why things were the way they were. Such examples of meaningful learning encourage good learning habits and further increase intrinsic motivation (Kahu et al., 2015).

Negative emotions were evident amongst the participants as was to be expected. Mature age students entering tertiary education after lengthy periods away from any formal education are bound to have negative emotions such as anxiety (Pekrun& Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2004). Being unsure of the expectation of academic writing was a major cause of anxiety for the students. Salena commented that "I have no way of knowing" when describing if her academic writing would be competent or not. Being overwhelmed with the amount of content was another common feature that caused the students to experience anxiety. They acknowledged associated fatigue, or that they found it difficult trying to process all the material. Blake remarked that "you have got so much shoved into your brain" when reflecting on the challenges of studying. Kahu et al. (2015) suggested that high workloads can compromise interest in study which can lead to surface level learning. No evidence was given that suggested the students were losing interest or that motivation levels were declining. This could be linked to their high engagement levels with the material presented in class and also their perceived self-efficacy. They illustrated a belief that they could succeed with the academic demands of the course. There seemed to be a persistence to continue even though they displayed negative emotions which can often be the result of low self-efficacy. These students did not engage in the corresponding behaviours such as giving up on tasks or not employing help-seeking strategies (Linnenbrink & Pintric, 2003). By

actually enrolling in HE, the students had already exhibited high levels of self-efficacy which Carney-Crompton & Tan, (2002) suggested acts as a way of self-selection to attend tertiary education.

As this research study was conducted during the participants' first undergraduate year, no judgement can be made whether their intrinsic motivation which they displayed, would endure and enable them to persist successfully with their studies. The participants did acknowledge that they were uncertain about the challenge of academic rigours but there appeared to be an underlying determination and belief that they would be able to learn the required skills to be successful. The favourable emotions of interest and enjoyment that they experienced to that point would also hopefully have sustained their motivation further. Their enthusiasm in the classroom situation was clearly demonstrated with examples of knowledge sharing with peers and staff that validated the student's contributions. These scenarios appeared to be very empowering to the participants as they tried to navigate their way and find their place in the new tertiary setting.

5.3 Living at Home with Less Time Spent at University

Living at home and local to the university that they attended could have impacted on the experience of the mature age students in this study. Most lived locally, either sharing their homes with family members or having recently settled in the area due to other circumstances. They were not living on campus although one student had shifted from a nearby city and commuted at weekends to home but lived off campus. With studies proposing that students living off campus can be alienated from the university and fellow students, there may be increased difficulty transitioning to the tertiary environment (Thomas, 2002; Trowler, 2010). Furthermore, students who live locally are normally non-traditional students, such as the participants in this study, who are generally more at risk of unsuccessful transition to HE. Responsibilities outside of learning influence the time available to focus on study and for those living at home can create pressure on integrating at university (Holdsworth, 2009).

Most of the participants chose to attend their local university due to geographical constraints and the emotional attachment to existing family networks. This is not surprising and in line with the findings of Brooks (2015) and Bye, et al. (2007). Studying had to fit in with other commitments, mainly the responsibilities of the participants, many of whom had firmly established family connections to the local area especially with regards to childcare arrangements and schooling. Reliance on partners and other family members was critical to

maintaining the children's routines, whether it be for taking them to school or for supervision while the student parent is absent. Childcare at the university was not an option as most carried on with their usual arrangement outside of the institution. Lynch (2008) reported that childcare facilities at tertiary institutions were often too expensive for student parents to consider. Issues around childcare often interfered with the academic progress of mothers in particular (Moreau & Kerner, 2012) so stability in this area for the participants in this study appeared to be a significant factor that will impact on their transition. Choosing an institution to attend away from home would be impractical for most, mainly because of dependents. For school leavers, the advantage of the HE experience and gaining independence by attending a distant university as proposed by Wilcox et al. (2005) would not have the same allure for the mature age students in this study. They were already independent with considerable life experience, had dependents of their own or significant financial responsibility and had different needs compared to school leavers.

Overseas studies have highlighted that university choice for non-traditional students can be influenced by the status of the university. Patterns have emerged that show non-traditional students will tend to study at universities that are local and newer. Established universities with higher prestige are still inclined to attract traditional students (Brooks, 2012; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010). The participants in this study attended what would be considered a low status university due to having recently changed its legal status from a polytechnic to a university. Location appears to be an important factor in their choice of institution due to their ties to home life, but there were two other universities, that would be considered high status, in the city that they could have attended. A more detailed exploration into why they chose their particular university may have given insight into if the status of the university played a role in their decision. Policies encouraging wider participation of tertiary education in OECD countries have not resulted in a preference of non-traditional students to attend higher status universities (Archer, 2007). It would be interesting to gauge the perceptions of the participants in this study as it may reflect to what extent institutions embrace the participation of a diverse student cohort and whether it had influenced their decision not to attend a more prestigious institution be it locally or not.

Having the comfort of home as opposed to living on campus may have positively assisted the participants' early transition to HE. Although this was not explicitly stated by the participants in this study, they often talked of the uncertainty and anxiety that was felt as they undertook the challenge of academic study. This suggests that there was a situation of

normality outside of the university environment. Family was an important consideration for the participants with specific time often being set aside for then to interact and connect with family members away from the distractions of study. The physical and emotional support from family is a palpable asset (Bye et al., 2007) and this was expressed numerous times by the participants. Partners and children were often generous with their understanding and consideration of the new demands on their student partner/parent. Wilcox et al. (2005) reported that family relations can compete with integrating at the institution and can be a distraction for mature age students. Although the responsibilities of family and partners often stretched the resources and time of the mature student in this study, the intimacy of home life may have been very reassuring in a sometimes chaotic and testing tertiary setting that offered new challenges.

Another aspect that lessened the importance of time spent on campus is the overwhelming majority of the student population live off-campus. AUT is based in a major city with a significant residential population, and the majority of its students do not reside on the campus. On campus accommodation is only available to less than 10% of students (AUT, n.d.). The possibility of the participants' isolation due to living locally and not being part of a more inclusive experience when based at the university (Bye et al., 2007) seems less likely (in the AUT case) as the vast majority of its students are in a similar situation. This highlights the difference in many of the overseas studies where living on-campus is a more common occurrence and deemed advantageous as students are immersed in the environment (Christie, 2007; Thomas, 2002). With the majority of students living off-campus at AUT, the learning and teaching strategies, and structure of the institution should accommodate this cohort. Therefore, the participants in this study are probably not disadvantaged by living off-campus and not having a totally immersive university experience that some of the literature highlights as beneficial. The family obligations at home, however, may put pressure on the time available to engage with their university studies.

5.3.1 Habitus

From a Bourdieuian perspective, habitus can be used to illustrate the competing pressures of university study and the home life of the mature age student. The norms and practises, or habitus, of the institution and the family unit may not be congruent (Thomas, 2002). The primary habitus of the family and the secondary habitus of the university as defined by Reed-Danahay (2005) require different demands which mature age students must

navigate. The prominence of the family identifies it as the primary habitus (Reay, 2004) and the universities' requirements need to fit in with the student and their other family roles. The family may be reluctant to support the student with their educational aspirations if they do not value what the student is trying to achieve. The consequences of studying, such as rearranged childcare routines and adjusted roles of family members take negotiation and the willingness of others to implement. Most of the participants were mothers so the traditional gender roles of women as responsible for childcare are challenged (Brooks, 2012). The potential for the family to be unsupportive due to the impact on their own lives would not be surprising. The time and space needed to study is crucial for the student and these demands challenged the participants in this study. Possible conflicts between the habitus of the family and the institution could eventuate but this does not appear to have been the case in this study.

Families were always a priority for the participants with partner support particularly crucial to them successfully undertaking tertiary education. The family habitus was prominent in their lives, while learning the educational habitus seemed to be an additional structure to adapt to as opposed to a structure that challenged the established habitus of family. At times the habitus of family and education integrated with the children joining the student parent at the family table to study and in Kacey's case her 13 year old daughter expressing a desire to attend university. The constancy of family life can provide welcome reassurance during an otherwise turbulent time of transition. For those participants who did experience family resistance to their attending university, the passage of time may either have intensified or reduced the challenge to the primary family habitus. At their initial stage of transition when the research was conducted, however, the educational habitus appeared to be an acceptable encounter that did not deter these mature students or their families.

5.4 University Interactions

Class discussions were a time when the participants could gauge their competency for university study, by contributing ideas and opinions and receiving informal feedback and reaction from others in the class. For most, the participants had a very positive experience when these situations arose. They were quite surprised at the extent to which lecturers and other students valued their knowledge. This had an empowering effect and was an important step for increased belief in their ability to cope with the academic requirements. Dominique's contributions on topics related to her life experiences "shocked" her. She "really, really enjoyed the classes and the context". Lecturers appeared mostly to provide a platform for

students to share their knowledge in a safe environment. Student-centred approaches to learning enabled the mature students to utilise their life experiences in the context of the classroom learning. Valuing the students' unique views is a strategy that promotes inclusiveness and engagement of the student (Moss, 2004). There appeared to be some surprise that "we can approach our lecturers, we can yell out in class too" (Natalie). This is probably due to the change in teaching approaches since the participants last attended formal education. Staff were deemed to be accessible, creating room for much appreciated interaction (Thomas, 2002). Sheryl expressed her appreciation of how her teachers created a stimulating and inclusive learning environment with her comment that staff were "one of the big draw cards".

At the stage of the semester when the participants were interviewed (five weeks), none of them had completed any summative assessments. Therefore without any formal feedback on their work, the class interactions were important engagements where the students could ascertain whether the knowledge they brought to the classroom was appropriate. This in turn could encourage or discourage them to participate further. Older adult students are novices in this situation and not able to judge what is relevant knowledge in the undergraduate classroom (Kasworm, 2003). The guidance of staff is needed for mature-aged students to ascertain the congruence of the expectations of the institution and their expectations ((Trowler, 2010). Some participants had taken part in library workshops and academic skills workshops, but they did not express the need for extra support, relying instead on classroom processes to develop their skills. They may also have been reluctant to voice their desire for support programmes due to the perceived deficit view of those needing to attend them (Henderson et al., 2009). They had also previously noted that they did not want to be seen as different to the other students.

The ability of the participants to affirm their knowledge and place at university via classroom discussion was not available to all. Some participants attended classes where discussions were not always feasible. This appeared to be primarily based on the number of students and the size of the classroom or lecture theatre. In particular, Alana commented on how her lectures had large numbers of students attending. This overwhelmed her and inhibited her from communicating with the staff. It was an environment that discouraged dialogue between staff and students. Those opportunities for students' to voice their perspectives and to create an engaging environment are important elements of a successful transition (Trowler, 2010). Others who commented on their positive classroom and lecture

experiences had pointed out the smaller numbers in their classes and lecturers and the approachability of the staff. Spontaneous comments and questions from students were also highlighted as acceptable behaviour. Bigger class sizes may impact on the participants' sense of competency because of delayed opportunities for important feedback from staff before formal summative assessments were due. It thus appears that a strategy enabling early assessment and feedback would be useful for these participants. These could be brief, focused, formative or summative assessments, whose key purpose would be to get timely comments allowing students to gauge if they are meeting the study requirements. This is particularly important for mature-aged students who are generally seen as needing more reassurance in their abilities than their younger colleagues (Fazey & Fazey, 2001).

The participants in this study were very focused on engaging academically with the university. They were conscious of the uncertainty and potential challenges of the academic tasks ahead and that much effort was needed in order to achieve success in obtaining their degree. These challenges can often demotivate mature age students and make academic study seem an insurmountable undertaking (Brooman & Darwent, 2014). Guidance was sought and strategies implemented by the participants to assist in learning what was required in particular for the assessments. Classes, especially for the education students, were good opportunities to engage with lecturers to clarify issues. Students would often stay behind after class to ask questions as described by Sheryl. The participants would sit in front of the class as this was viewed as an advantageous place to be to learn. Communication with the lecturer was not impeded by distracting conversations that were going in on, normally at the back of the classroom by the younger students. These mature age students modelled what they thought was appropriate student behaviour as a way of maximising their learning. Mallman and Lee (2016) identified that mature age students often enacted student behaviour that they thought was required for tertiary study. Their skills may be untried but they took control of other aspects of being a student that would maximise their opportunities to engage and learn. The participants illustrated confidence and persistence which is a feature of successful students (Linnenbrink & Pintric, 2003). Not engaging academically can lead to possible disconnection from the learning environment (Jones, 2008). But the eagerness that the students displayed at this early stage of their study and the proactive way in which they engaged with the learning seemed to assist with their transition thus far.

It appears that confidence gained through class interaction was a defining point for the participants in this study. Affirmation that their contribution was worthwhile gave them a

sense of self-belief. This is particularly needed for mature age students who are often unsure of their suitability academic study (Thomas, 2002). It was certainly noticeable that overall the study participants had a very positive attitude towards the tasks ahead of them. They were very aware of the enormity of the academic demands, despite their limited experience but seemed to be ready for the challenge. This perhaps aligns with the comment of Howard and Davies (2013) that high academic self-efficacy beliefs will encourage mature students to initiate study at HE. So it could be assumed, and was illustrated by the students in this study, that those entering HE appear to have strong self-belief in their ability to cope with the initial doubt and anxiety over the academic rigours they will encounter. Opportunities from classroom interactions were valued and when participated in tended to boost their confidence further and counter feelings of uncertainty.

Although the importance of face to face interaction was highlighted by the participants and was evident in the literature, the provision of online services for learning was a useful tool for them to utilise. The participants were able to watch lectures online and engage with study without having to be on campus. Teaching staff were also reported to be available remotely. Sheryl commented on how her lecturer often responded to emails outside of what would be considered normal university hours. This situation allowed greater flexibility for students to choose their times to learn. Staff being easily accessible promotes an inclusive environment (Moss, 2004) and it appeared that online elements broadened the learning opportunities available. For staff to reply to emails outside of working hours illustrated a positive attitude towards the needs of the students. Marandet & Wainwright (2009) highlighted how their student parent participants often felt excluded due to the unsympathetic attitudes of staff to their circumstances. Staff appeared to embrace the online component of the learning for the participants and utilised it as an additional avenue for students to connect and learn.

There may also be some tension with online services, as it was reported by the mature age students that computer use was frustrating at times due to their lack of familiarity. This is a widely reported difficulty with mature age students and can make them feel inadequate. With an expectation that students come with appropriate computer knowledge, not having these skills can contribute to feelings of being overwhelmed and disconnected (Christie et al., 2008; Leese, 2010). The advantages of online learning and communication appeared to outweigh the disadvantages for the participants. They reported being able to schedule their routines to attend tutorials and any other events requiring their physical attendance, but

outside of these events they were able to arrange their own learning schedule. Those with children found this flexibility extremely helpful as they could maintain daily routines, such as picking up children from school. For Blake who worked full time before he decided to study, time flexibility enabled him to spend more time being involved with his children's activities.

5.4.1 Interactions with other students

The empathy that the mature age students exhibited towards younger students and the positive aspects of learning in collaboration with them was not a feature of the literature reviewed for this study. The younger students were identified by the mature students in this study as already possessing particular academic skills having come straight from school. At times there were feelings of envy towards this as illustrated in Alana's comments about dealing with technology and how younger students "don't know life before Google". Learning from those students deemed to be university-ready was viewed as advantageous and engagement with them was gratefully acknowledged. It is, however, not unusual for those attending university straight from school to be equally unprepared and unsure of academic expectations (Christie et al., 2008) so this assumption by the participants may not always be correct. The participants were obviously glad to have the opportunity to interact with other students and the collaborative learning was valued. They appreciated the views of the younger students and acknowledged they were often different from their own but viewed them as opportunities to learn from. This was reciprocated by the younger students who sought the life experiences of the mature age students. Sometimes this was incidental but Jane also noted that at times some younger students "tag on to you". Seeking the mature age students' experience was particularly pertinent for those studying education conversing with those older students who had children. The participants gained confidence as a result of having their contribution valued. At times students can feel intimidated and unsure when exchanges take place in the classroom (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003) but these instances when the students' comments are respected helps affirm the students' place in the tertiary environment.

The literature reviewed tended to focus on the negative aspects of the differences between the two cohorts and not on the positive outcomes that can occur. Disruptive behaviour, such as talking in lectures and disapproving of mature age students' enthusiastic class contributions, sometimes led to segregation within the class (Ballantyne, 2012; Scanlon et al., 2007). Negative elements were also noted by the participants and this caused

considerable feelings of annoyance at what was perceived as wasted opportunities and inappropriate behaviour in such an important environment with potentially life enhancing outcomes. But the younger students were also viewed as a valuable resource. At times the negative aspects of some of the younger student's characteristics came to the fore but the mature age students were also sympathetic to the stage of life that the younger students were at and recognised the difference in priorities for them at university. Blake's comments about students drinking and acknowledging it was "stuff that I used to do when I was that age" typified the empathy felt. Group work was identified by the adult students in this study as a beneficial setting and it appears opportunities for the students to interact should be prioritised in the classroom. This enables interaction between different groups that otherwise may not take place when there are perceived differences that could inhibit voluntary communication. Various strategies enabling sharing of opinions and student centred learning that acknowledges the uniqueness of individuals are noted elements that enhance education (Jones, 2008; Trowler, 2010). This is perhaps more relevant now with such a diverse student population. The benefits of collaboration to enhance understanding of the many viewpoints that students possess and to affirm those varied perspectives would be a helpful strategy to accommodate student transition.

The participants de-emphasised the importance of making social connections while attending university. Their sense of urgency and other family commitments left little time for extraneous activity that could distract them from completing their study. Alicia's comment, "I feel like I'm not really here to make close friends" reflected a general attitude towards social engagement with others. This was reinforced by the disapproval expressed by some participants in relation to the younger students' conversations on the social aspects of life during class. Their observation was that this distracted them from learning and they viewed this as inappropriate student behaviour. The age divide between mature age students and school leavers is noted in the literature and differences in approaches to learning and class behaviour are often cited (Ballantyne, 2012; Scanlon et al., 2007). The overall negative attitude towards socialising, however, was surprising as it is counter to the much of the literature that stresses the importance of connecting socially to the learning environment. Socialising presents opportunities to share information, concerns, advice and are important in the initial transition period (Pittaway & Moss, 2006; Tinto, 2012). Institutions organise events with these purposes in mind (Jones, 2008) but for the participants engaging socially with university activities or clubs was also unimportant due to the demands of life outside of

the institution and their lack of relevance to the lives of mature students. Thus, they regarded orientation week (usually a major social event) as focused on younger students with such activities as sumo wrestling, tug o' war and pub crawls. This suggests that if universities want students to engage socially in the important initial weeks of the first year, a range of events need to be organised to accommodate non-traditional students as well as the young school leavers. Thoughtfulness is required into how to garner the interest of this cohort of students and to give them a sense of belonging (Kift, 2004). Although the mature students underemphasised making social connections they did comment, however, on the need for a place where mature students could connect and support each other. Remarks were also made about not wanting to be alienated from the rest of the students. This illustrates the complexity of trying to accommodate different student needs and perhaps also the uncertainty that these mature age students have about what they may need to help them transition to university.

5.5 Habitus and Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's concept of habitus can be used to provide a context for understanding the mature age student's transition to study at university. Mature age students bring life experience that informs how they act and think, and this influences what future directions will be taken (Mills, 2008). These dispositions will play a part in how mature age students will adapt to being a student in an environment that has its own set of rules or what Thomas (2002) refers to as 'institutional habitus'. These rules, as with individuals, are constructed throughout the history of the institution and guide the behaviour and expectations of those who belong to it. Belonging is dependent on the congruence of the practices and values individual students and the institution's practices and values. Practises, values and other aspects such as education and material wealth, create cultural capital that a person relies on to help navigate through situations throughout life (Scanlon, et al., 2007). The challenge for the mature age students in this study was whether their cultural capital would support them in gaining a qualification or whether it would not be valued by the university.

Mature age students have not traditionally been part of the university student cohort. That they are labelled as 'non-traditional students' indicates that they are outside the norms of the HE sector. In a system that was initially set up to provide further education for young, white, middle class males (Lynch,2008), it would be reasonable to speculate that there could be misalignment between the two cultural capitals. The participants' institution, AUT, has

existed since early in the twentieth century so the habitus has formed over generations making it potentially less flexible to change (Thomas, 2002).

The participants did not seem to be academically prepared for university. Apart from sorting out their domestic affairs, their preparation for university work appeared minimal. They lacked knowledge in relation to the expectations of academic life. Student expectations of the tertiary environment are a reflection of their cultural capital. If university study is not common within the family or within their experiences then knowledge about what is needed will be limited (Leese, 2010). Computer use was a particular area identified where the participants did not seem adequately prepared. They were also overwhelmed by the amount of content they have needed to learn. These were requirements that they were not used to, leading to comments about the difficulty of meeting this challenge at their age. Kacey remarked how her brain "felt like it was dormant for quite a while and it's just starting to wake up". In addition to their other responsibilities, having time to process new content was an extra challenge, one that perhaps younger students may not have felt as much. This is perhaps where mature age students are slightly disadvantaged when entering HE and illustrates that university expectations do not account for different cohorts (Thomas, 2002).

The mature age student's life experience appeared to contribute to their cultural capital that enabled them to participate actively in the class. The participants engaged in class interactions and made connections with what they learnt and applied this learning to their pre-existing knowledge which formed part of their own cultural capital. It gave them the ability to persist in the face of potential adversity and continue to implement strategies to succeed. But the need for the interactions to take place is paramount.

Based on their enthusiasm most of the participants expressed that their contributions were valued, reinforcing that they possessed some cultural capital befitting a tertiary student. This encouraged them to continue to engage and is an important aspect in giving students a sense of belonging (Reay, 2004). In some instances the mature age students seemed to embody the habitus of the institution more than the traditional students, as was illustrated with the clear disapproval of the disruptive behaviour of some of the younger students. Still, they recognised they had much adjustment to make in order to fit in with the expectations of the university, but at the time of the research, the participants were coping well, unpinned by their very determined will to succeed. The university also respected the participant's diversity by giving them opportunities to share their personal knowledge and stories. Until summative

assessments were completed so their academic competency could be judged, there appeared to be enough congruence between the respective cultural capitals to keep the participants engaged and progressing. What perhaps needs to be recognised, however, is that institutions must provide appropriate support for students and that they have some responsibility to adapt their habitus to the needs of the diverse student body (Leese, 2010).

5.6 Economic Risk

The mature age students in this study demonstrated a willingness to accept the economic risk associated with pursuing a late entry to tertiary education. The participants understood the financial pressures student fees would create, leaving them with a study debt to repay. Their main strategy was to plan for the costs over the three year study period relying on the financial support of the partner to cope. According to Steele et al., (2005) mature age students in a stable relationship with their partner working were less likely to be affected by financial stress. This is evident in this research. Steele et al. (2005) also found, however, that having dependent children increased the impact of financial stress on emotional well-being and course participation. This was not reflected, however, in what the participants communicated in this study. Those with children had a financial plan to carry them through the study time. Most did not need to seek paid work to enable their study. This is an unusual scenario for many tertiary students in the current climate where study costs are passed on to the users requiring many students to work part time as well as study. This is evident in the Australian research of Krause (2005), who found that the majority of their student participants identified part-time work as an inhibitor to their academic work. The positive prospect of employment at the end of the study period was seen as an adequate solution to deal with resulting financial arrears for the mature age students in this study. If the participants continued not having to work during their time at university it could be very advantageous. Finance and employment were found to be one of the two factors outside of institutional control that contributed to student disengagement and early departure from study in the United Kingdom (Yorke & Longden, 2008).

5.7 The Neoliberal Student

As neoliberal discourse dominates education, it is interesting to question whether the students in this study emulate the neoliberal student profile. It appears they do illustrate some characteristics of a neoliberal student. Their choice to enter tertiary education was underpinned by their belief that hard work leads to success. The opportunity had presented

itself and their ability, coupled with how they would conduct themselves, would determine their results. This position reflects the concept of meritocracy, which assumes people will succeed through hard work in a system where all are treated equally (Burke, 2013). The inequalities in university participation have been established for many years and only in recent decades has a more diverse student population attended HE. For the participants to assume that they would have the same opportunities to succeed as traditional students ignores the institutional structures that have disadvantaged non-traditional students for many years. Universities have not always catered for the needs of mature age students with dependents and other demanding life roles. University curricula, regulations, and expectations generally require non-traditional students to assimilate to the institution's ways of learning.

The commodification of education is a result of the neoliberal discourse (Archer, 2007). This changes the nature of the university student's relationship with the institution into that of a consumer of education. Students purchase the educational product in the form of a course of study leading to the award of a qualification with the hope of increasing their employment opportunities and economic stability (Saunders, 2007). There is evidence that the participants in this study were motivated by the financial and employment security that gaining a qualification would hopefully give them. These reasons for studying are sometimes perceived as extrinsically motivated and can compromise the quality of learning by students employing surface approach learning strategies (McCune et al., 2010). Naidoo (2008) suggested that the change from socially based knowledge to economic based knowledge decreases the intrinsic value of education and causes students to be passive consumers of education.

The participants in this study did not appear to be passive consumers of education despite being motivated to some extent by extrinsic values. The intrinsic motivation that appeared to drive many of them supersedes any superficial approaches they may have had to their learning. This is reflected in their determined attitude to do well in their study. The participants appeared as extremely conscientious and diligent in their efforts. The stimulation they derived from the content being learnt and application to their own experiences to make the learning meaningful triggered very proactive learning habits. They demonstrated help-seeking strategies such as approaching the lecturers for clarification after class and forming their own study groups. There did not appear to be any indication that the participants believed the university could be doing more to help them succeed. But at the early stage of their university life, when the data collection occurred, the participants were still navigating

their way, attempting to assess the academic standards required and the appropriate behaviour of a university student. They placed the onus on themselves to succeed and viewed their circumstances as barriers they had to overcome as opposed to barriers that the institution is responsible for. This fits neatly with the concept of the neoliberal student being a purchaser of education and what follows after the purchase is not the fault of the product provider as all students buy the same product. There is complexity involved with how neoliberal ideas affect the student and in this case the participants illustrated possible detrimental effects of the concept but their own motivation countered the severity of some.

5.8 Applying Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Researchers utilising hermeneutic phenomenology are required to be aware of the participants' situatedness. Heidegger's time and space are two concepts that frame the participants' situatedness in relation to the phenomena. The concept of time in the hermeneutic sense refers to the connection between the future, past and present. These elements culminate to contribute to the participants experiences (McMullin, 2009). Space refers to what matters to the person and relates to their way of being-in-the-world (Mackey, 2005). This is what I have endeavoured to interpret, the experiences that the participants had, with the realisation that it was not a one dimensional event, but one that has multiple influences that may or may not be realised by the participant (Mackey, 2005). Fore structures are another element of hermeneutics that should be acknowledged. They are my understandings of the phenomena before engaging with the participants. Heidegger believed that these cannot be transcended (Wilding & Whiteford, 2005) and I believe that my experience as a teacher, staff member at AUT and having a significant career change in adult life allowed me to have insight into the participants' experiences.

My pre understanding of the phenomena required careful consideration, especially with my role as a staff member of the participants' university. I considered scenarios such as my loyalties to my workplace influencing my interpretations of any unfavourable AUT encounters by the participants. Issues like Alana's anonymity in a large lecture made me reflect on her situation with empathy. From my teaching point of view the experience in front of a large student group is less engaging and rewarding. That is the situation that presents itself at the time, but there are other factors that influence these scenarios. Alana's expectations as a learner, based on her previous experience, may have predicted a more personal, interactive environment. The student to teacher ratios are influenced by the

institution's pedagogy and financial situation. Taking a broader perspective, the institution's capabilities are within a framework of national educational policies and funding which are embedded within a wider global neoliberal agenda that views education as an economic imperative and students as autonomous learners (Naidoo, 2008). This illustrates the complexity involved when interpreting the experience of individuals and the multiple viewpoints that could be considered. The hermeneutic circle accommodated these multiple viewpoints by requiring me to look at individual parts of the data and also how they fit into the whole (Mackey, 2005). The back and forth nature of interpreting the experiences of the participants meant I could view the text in different ways and be open to new meanings that become apparent. Hopefully, the meanings presented from the participants experiences contribute worthwhile understandings to the phenomena they encountered.

5.9 Conclusion

This study has illustrated the complexity involved when a mature age student undertakes tertiary study. The initial decision to study is supported by a strong motivation to succeed. The participants exhibited engagement behaviours that research has shown will help them to persist with their studies. The multiple roles that mature age students have can often act as barriers to learning but the advantages of a stable home environment and supportive family when entering an unknown educational environment seemed to be beneficial. With online resources as part of the learning curriculum, the ability of the participants to attend to other commitments outside of study was enhanced, and at the time data for this study was collected, academic and social disconnection had not yet appeared to be an issue for this cohort. The knowledge gained through their life experience empowered their belief in their ability to participate in the classroom. The opportunities to validate this knowledge needed to be provided in the learning environment as they were anxious about their academic proficiency. Early indications gave them confidence while they waited for summative assessments when they could gauge the appropriateness of their written academic ability. The participants viewed themselves as different to the younger cohort, but the differences were also opportunities to learn from those with other perceptions and knowledge. The social and cultural perspectives that Bourdieu's habitus focuses on indicated that this group of non-traditional students so far were able to navigate the new environment and to contribute meaningfully. Their motivation and understanding of what was required of a self-directed tertiary student appeared to have made their first five weeks a successful transition but still with some anxiety as the transition period continued.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

This study aims to provide insight into the experiences of mature age students transitioning to university. The decision to attend HE is a significant commitment for an adult with responsibilities such as dependent children or a mortgage. The widening participation of tertiary study is a continuing trend, driven by national and global educational policies (Bowl, 2014). Institutions have a responsibility to embrace a more diverse student body to ensure that gaining university qualifications are a realistic ambition for those that choose to undertake it. Mature age students face particular challenges when undertaking university study and are more at risk of discontinuing their studies compared to younger school leavers (Mallman & Lee, 2016). The research question 'How do mature age students navigate their home responsibilities and the university environment?' is the basis of this study. The findings from this study should provide further understanding on what aspects of the university facilitate them becoming a student and how the mature age students' home life and responsibilities impact on their ability to commit to their learning.

6.2 Limitations

Interviewing students after only five weeks of attending university only captures a short time frame in the transition process. This could be considered a limitation of this study. Their experiences, although rich in detail, suggest that there is much more to be added to their narrative as the participants continued their transition. No summative assessments were completed at this early stage. With any estimation of their academic ability so uncertain, the impact of the first formal results would be a significant event in their transition. Furthermore, the adjustment undertaken by family members was crucial for the participants to study. As they progressed the stresses of changing family dynamics may have intensified or reduced. The support offered by their families could therefore have been the difference to their continuing study or not. Of the twelve participants only one was male. To explore if the student transition was experienced differently due to gender was difficult to gauge with such an uneven balance of participants. Three of the mature students were 'younger' and perhaps had different priorities than the older mature students who had dependents and partners. As

the study progressed these limitations became apparent illustrating the difficulty in trying to treat a group as homogenous when there is so much complexity involved in human behaviour and relationships.

Another important limitation was my contribution as a novice researcher. The learning curve was very steep with many adjustments along the way. This was reflected by having to almost completely re-write the literature review after the findings were finished. The iterative process that I had read about as a part of the qualitative research approach had come to fruition. Constantly finding threads of enquiry that I thought warranted attention had me wishing that I had asked different questions during data collection. Trying to contain so many different aspects of the participants' experiences into a cohesive account was difficult. Their general experiences were melded into themes but it felt that elements of some individual's stories were left out if it did not fit in with the overall theme. I was constantly trying not to let my own judgements on what was important to interfere with creating themes generated from the text. Honouring what the participants were sharing was integral to the research and to me as a researcher. Hopefully I have interpreted their experiences with the integrity that warrants their contributions.

6.3 Further Research

Continuing to follow the progress of these mature age students over the course of their study would be a possible path of future research. The transition period is normally limited to the first year but has also been identified as post this first year period. There are multiple points where more research could be carried out to get further insight into the experience of the students. On completion of the first semester would be an important milestone but during the second year of study, when the expectations of a more experienced student may bring other challenges, could also provide valuable data. The participants reflecting on their experiences as they advanced through their programme and developed as students would have provided interesting perspectives. Identifying areas of stress and strategies to overcome these could be useful for future mature students. Any experiences that can inform students on the unknown and alleviate uncertainties would be beneficial.

Mature age students who had formally expressed an interest in university study but did not accept an offered place would offer an interesting aspect to explore. The participants in this study seemed to self-select themselves to undertake university study. The preparation and family negotiation that took place enabled them to make the choice to become a student.

To get to that stage perhaps already indicates that they have self-belief, skills, and strategies that will assist them in their educational endeavour. Engaging with mature age students who declined their student position could give insight into the circumstances that inhibited their enrollment. This could add to the knowledge on perceived or actual barriers that make becoming a tertiary student less viable for some.

6.4 Recommendations

Although the participants emphasised that they did not have the time to partake in social activities, their underlying need to converse with other mature age students was evident. A facility or club that allowed mature age students to gather together to share their experiences at university and to converse on common topics would be a useful beginning to the transition process. It would help the students feel more connected to the university. Comments about the nature of orientation activities, which are important for social bonding, being inappropriate for the mature-aged students raised the need for a wider approach to organising more inclusive activities. As uncertainty regarding their personal academic ability is a significant area of concern to these students, early assessment opportunities are critical. The earlier the students can get feedback on their skill levels the earlier they can implement strategies to improve them. In the first one or two weeks some form of formative assessment would help students assess their abilities and hopefully reduce their anxiety. Summative assessments at an early stage may cause unnecessary stress to students new to HE. Students can then identify areas that require development and can seek targeted help from the university support services. Opportunities for students to interact with each other and staff in class discussions is an important stage of assessing the adequacy of student knowledge, especially in the absence of assessments. Teaching and learning strategies need to create space for this interaction. It allows mature age students in particular, to relate their life experiences to the learning context and gives them a sense of belonging. Large student cohorts and the often accompanying didactic teaching style can inhibit this, however, so strategies for a more student centred approach should be created and implemented in the larger class scenario.

6.5 Conclusion

The mature age students in this study were resourceful and resilient when faced with the challenges of transitioning to tertiary education. Potentially they were at risk of leaving university before completing their degree as they are a group of non-traditional students that

have a history of non-completion when compared to traditional students. Their expectations were unclear and they felt academically challenged. The unknown requirements of academic writing caused anxiety and the volume of content taught was testing their capabilities, nevertheless, their determination to be successful was clearly evident. The life changes made to create the opportunity to study and for some the perception of it being a last chance to gain a degree and change careers due to their age, were important considerations that made this endeavour extremely significant. They engaged in the learning process and were proactive in employing strategies that clarified and enhanced their learning. The students acknowledged the academic challenges ahead of them but had belief in their ability to learn the skills needed once they were aware of what they were.

Different motivations underpinned the participant's reasons to enter university and this could influence their resilience when faced with adversity. The stimulation they received from the learning was empowering and appeared to encourage positive learning behaviour that negated any possible negative learning patterns linked with extrinsic motivation. A deep approach to learning was dominant with the participants. This was partly incited by the connections the students made with the content of the learning material. Their life experience enabled them to contextualise the material with events they remembered happening or in some cases had connections to. Emotions of interest instilled a desire to learn creating a positive cycle of learning and motivation.

The university mostly provided a setting that encouraged participation by allowing opportunities for participants to share their experiences and knowledge. Validation of their contributions through class discussion were pivotal points that gave them confidence in their ability to be a university student. It gave them a benchmark of comparison until formal assessments were given. It helped to illustrate that the cultural capital that they possessed was compatible enough with the values and practices of the university. Examples of inappropriate student behaviour by their younger peers further consolidated their expectations of how a successful student should act. This did seem to have overtones of a neoliberal discourse as that behaviour incorporated working hard and being diligent as a formula for success. The notion that the individual was responsible for their own success downplayed the impact of personal circumstances and institutional structures.

Balancing life as a parent or partner with multiple responsibilities and as a university student was especially challenging. Family played a crucial role in enabling the mature

student time and space to study. Negative feelings of guilt were present for those who were parents, as their time with children were sometimes decreased as others took on the caring roles. The flexibility offered through online content enabled the mature age students to negotiate time to study and to be with family. With a deep concern not to neglect family duties, strategies to create space for all demands were a priority and it appears the stability of the home environment could also help deal with the uncertainty of being a new student.

In summary, the mature-aged participants in this study exhibited a strong self-belief in their ability to cope with the demands of being a student. The support they received from their families and the determination to succeed in gaining a qualification will stand them in good stead. The literature often focuses on the limitations of being a non-traditional student but the participants in this study were not defaulting to a deficit model of expectations. They were setting their own standards and the factors that could inhibit them as non-traditional students were faced with a positive, unwavering attitude. Their life experience appeared to help them as they implemented strategies to assist with their transition. At the early stage of their journey when the data was collected, the students were inspirational with their positive approach to the new tertiary environment and this attitude should continue to play a significant role in their student experience.

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Appendices

Appendix A: AUTEC Committee Approval Letter

A U T E C
S E C R E T A R I A T

19 November 2013

Leon Benade
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Leon

Re Ethics Application: **13/323 The experience of mature age undergraduate students transitioning between campuses.**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the AUT University Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 18 November 2016.

As part of the ethics approval process, you are required to submit the following to AUTEC:

- A brief annual progress report using form EA2, which is available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics. When necessary this form may also be used to request an extension of the approval at least one month prior to its expiry on 18 November 2016;

- A brief report on the status of the project using form EA3, which is available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics. This report is to be submitted either when the approval expires on 18 November 2016 or on completion of the project.

It is a condition of approval that AUTEC is notified of any adverse events or if the research does not commence. AUTEC approval needs to be sought for any alteration to the research, including any alteration of or addition to any documents that are provided to participants. You are responsible for ensuring that research undertaken under this approval occurs within the parameters outlined in the approved application.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval from an institution or organisation for your research, then you will need to obtain this. If your research is undertaken within a jurisdiction outside New Zealand, you will need to make the arrangements necessary to meet the legal and ethical requirements that apply there.

To enable us to provide you with efficient service, please use the application number and study title in all correspondence with us. If you have any enquiries about this application, or anything else, please do contact us at ethics@aut.ac.nz.

All the very best with your research,

Kate O'Connor
Executive Secretary
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: Nick Boston nboston@aut.ac.nz

The experience of mature age students transitioning to higher education

My name is Nick Boston and I am currently a Masters student here at AUT. I would like to invite you to participate in my research related to mature age students transitioning to higher education. The study will focus on the experience of adult students entering higher education at AUT.

- Have you begun your first year of study in the first semester of 2015 at AUT University?

- Are you 25 years or older?

If you answer 'yes' to each of the above questions, and are interested in participating in a research project in 2013 please contact me at nboston@aut.ac.nz or phone: (09) 921 9999 ext 7201 for further information. An information pack will be sent on request.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 19 November 2013. AUTEC Reference number 13/323.

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

AUT
U N I V E R S I T Y
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TAMAKI MAKAU RAU

Date Information Sheet Produced:

12th March 2015

Project Title

The experience of mature age students transitioning to higher education.

An Invitation

My name is Nick Boston and I am currently a Masters student here at AUT. I would like to invite you to participate in my research related to mature age students transitioning to higher education. Your participation in this research is voluntary and you will be able to withdraw from the project at any time. In this event, any information that you have provided will not be used. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not affect, or advantage or disadvantage your study. This research is part of my Master of Education study, which if successful, will result in me being awarded the qualification.

What is the purpose of this research?

The aim of this research is to explore the experiences of mature age students when transitioning to higher education at AUT University. It is expected that these students will experience some adjustment during that process and that it may impact on their studies and in other spheres of their lives. The findings from this study should help inform teaching and curriculum planning staff when implementing programmes that include mature age students who experience this transition. The findings may also be shared with others through presentations, discussions, reports, and publications.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have been identified to participate in this research because you have indicated your interest in participating after reading the advertisement. You need to meet the criteria by being 25 years of age or older and have begun your study in semester one, 2015 at AUT university.

What will happen in this research?

If you agree, you will be asked to participate in two activities. The first is an individual interview that is expected to take approximately one hour. This interview will be conducted on AUT premises. Your responses to questions that relate to the research purpose will be audiotaped. The second activity is a focus group. This will involve you and five others in a group discussion of your experiences as students transitioning between campuses. I will facilitate this discussion, which will take approximately one hour. It will also be audiotaped. The audiotapes will be transcribed into text for later analysis. Throughout the research process your identity will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will be used (false names) to protect your privacy. Any data collected will be used solely for the purpose of this research.

What are the discomforts and risks?

It is unlikely you will experience any discomfort or risks as a participant.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

Interviews and the focus group discussion will be conducted in a friendly manner. If you do find any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, you can choose to not respond to them or you can stop your participation in the interview or discussion.

What are the benefits?

You may benefit through the process of sharing your experiences with the researcher and the other participants. Future students and teaching staff may also benefit from the findings of this study. As mentioned previously the successful completion of this research will result in me being awarded a Master of Education qualification.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your confidentiality will be protected throughout the research process. Pseudonyms will be used to identify your data. Physical forms of information will be stored in secure areas. Information held on computers will be secured via password access. Information relating to participants' identity and the data collected from those partcipants will be securely stored in separate locations. No information which could identify participants will be included in any presentations or publications. All data will be destroyed after six years.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The only cost associated with your participation is approximately two hours of your time spread over an individual interview and a focus group. These two events will be conducted at different times.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You will have seven days to consider whether you would like to participate in this research. After this time period you will be sent an email requesting your response. If you would like to participate, a consent form will be sent to you for you to sign. This will be collected from you when the first interview is conducted.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

By signing the consent form, you are agreeing to participate in the research.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

If you require feedback from the study a summary will be provided free of charge. Your interest can be indicated on the consent form. The summary will be uploaded onto a website after the completion of the research project. The url for the website is tbc.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Leon Benade, lbenade@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 7931.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, Kate O'Connor, *ethics@aut.ac.nz* , 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Researcher Contact Details:

Nick Boston, Room: AF409, Faculty of Health and Environmental Science, Auckland University of Technology.
Email: nboston@aut.ac.nz Telephone: 921 9999 ext 7201.

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Leon Benade, lbenade@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 7931.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 19 November 2013, AUTEC Reference number 13/323.

Appendix D: Indicative Questions

The experience of mature age undergraduate students transitioning to higher education

Indicative questions

- Why did you initially choose to study in higher education?

- What were you initial thoughts and feelings after you had decided to study at AUT?

- What have been your experiences at the AUT so far?

- What was the most challenging experience you have had AUT?

- What was the most satisfying experience you had at AUT?

- What has been your experience in developing relationships with staff at AUT?

- What has been your experience in developing relationships with students at AUT?

- Has studying at AUT impacted on your family in any way?

- Were there any difficulties in other areas of your life, outside of your study, because you chose to study at AUT?

- What advice would you give to someone entering higher education as an adult?

- What words would you use to describe yourself now, regarding being a student at AUT?

Appendix E: Consent Form for Individual Interviews

Consent Form

Project title: ***The experience of mature age students transitioning to higher education***

Project Supervisor: ***Dr Leon Benade***

Researcher: ***Nick Boston***

○   I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated _____.

○   I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

○   I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.

○   I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.

○   If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.

○   I agree to take part in this research.

○   I wish to view a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes○ No○

Participant's signature: ....…

Participant's name: ....…

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

……………………………………………………………………………………..

……………………………………………………………………………………..

……………………………………………………………………………………..

……………………………………………………………………………………..

Date:

*****Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 19 November 2013. AUTEC Reference number 13/323.*****

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix F: Consent Form for Focus Group

Consent Form

Project title: **The experience of mature age students transitioning to higher education**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Leon Benade**

Researcher: **Nick Boston**

○ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 12th March 2015.

○ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.

○ I understand that the identity of my fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group are confidential to the group and I agree to keep this information confidential.

○ I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that it will also be audio-taped and transcribed.

○ I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.

○ If I withdraw, I understand that while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the focus group discussion of which I was part, the relevant information about myself including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will not be used.

○ I agree to take part in this research.

○ I wish to view a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes○ No○

Participant's signature: ....……

Participant's name: ....…………………………………………

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

……………………………………………………………………………..

……………………………………………………………………………..

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 19 November 2013. AUTEC Reference number 13/323.

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix G: Confidentiality Agreement

Confidentiality Agreement

For Transcriber

Project title: **The experience of mature age students transitioning to higher education**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Leon Benade**

Researcher: **Nick Boston**

○   I understand that all the material I will be asked to transcribe is confidential.

○   I understand that the contents of the tapes or recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.

○   I will not keep any copies of the transcripts nor allow third parties access to them.

Transcriber's signature:

……………………………………………………………………………………………………

Transcriber's name: ……………………………………………………………………………………………………

Transcriber's Contact Details (if appropriate):

…………………………………………………………………………………………..

…………………………………………………………………………………………..

Date: ………………………………………..

Project Supervisor's Contact Details (if appropriate):

Dr Leon Benade

Email: lbenade@aut.ac.nz   Ph: (09) 9219999 ext 7931

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 19th November 2013 AUTEC Reference number AUTEC 13/323

Note: The Transcriber should retain a copy of this form.