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Crossing the threshold: What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into higher education from an enabling course?

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Doctor of Education

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Abstract

When mature-age students return to study within higher education, they are presented with opportunities for life changing experiences. Many more students who are mature-age and from diverse backgrounds are now commencing university studies as part of the widening participation phenomenon. While quantitative data are readily available concerning these students, less well known are the lived experiences of the learners who undertake this journey. The focus of this study is an exploration of the experiences of one such group of learners, namely mature-age males entering university through an enabling pathway. Older males often return to education in order to improve their job prospects. This was the case for a group of 10 mature-age males who lived in what was once a traditional blue-collar city, “Westbeach”, undergoing economic transformation. Using qualitative methodology in the form of a narrative case study allowed for the in-depth exploration of the experiences of these participants.

The thesis focussed on the impact of the participants’ social and cultural capitals and identity formation as part of their transition into higher education from an enabling course. Also examined were the educational and personal outcomes of this interaction. Underpinning the research was the theoretical framing of Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory, Mezirow’s transformational learning theory and the concept of possible selves as applied to higher education. The findings show that learners’ habituses and capitals that had developed from their communities and families underwent changes and adaptations, to varying degrees, in order to adjust to their new environment. The participants also experienced changes to their identities in moving from manual work in traditionally male held roles to positioning themselves as university students. Despite the difficulties encountered and the barriers that needed to be overcome, the educational and personal outcomes for these students were predominantly positive. This research has implications for the ways universities adapt to the inclusion of male mature-age students and makes recommendations regarding more flexible approaches. This thesis sheds light onto an under-researched group of learners. Further exploration is now required into the experiences of male students from diverse backgrounds who form part of the rich tapestry that is higher education in Australia.

Acknowledgements

Undertaking this doctorate has been a momentous experience for me in which I have learned a great deal from the participants in the project as well as reading through the work of learned colleagues in the field. My heartfelt thanks and appreciation go to my supervisors, Professor Sarah O'Shea and Associate-Professor Pauline Lysaght. Their patience, perseverance and endurance are beyond question. I owe them a huge debt of gratitude for seeing me through to finalising this thesis. I also wish to acknowledge the services of my editor, Dr Sharon Lierse, who assisted me with copyediting and proofreading the final document.

In particular I extend my enduring thanks to those in my family who have supported and encouraged me throughout my studies, especially my devoted husband, Dr Peter McNamara, and my three children, Clare, Eamonn and Daniel who have all undertaken their own journeys as tertiary students. Sadly, no longer with us are my parents, Tom and Shirley O'Donnell, whose love and encouragement of education has endured. As well as family, numerous friends and colleagues have offered thoughtful advice and encouragement throughout this time, and I really do value and appreciate their ongoing support.

Seeing the transformation in the lives of so many students across the years has assured me that education and the ongoing work of teachers across all institutions remains paramount to the well-being of society.

Scully believed in the endless possibilities of life. His parents saw their lives the way their whole generation did; to them existence was a single shot at things, you were a farmer, a fisherman, a butcher for the duration. But Scully found that simply wasn't so. It only took a bit of imagination and some guts to make yourself over, time and time again.

Tim Winton, The Riders (1994)

Certification

I, Jacinta Margaret McNamara declare that this thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Doctor of Education from the University of Wollongong is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

____

Jacinta Margaret McNamara

20 November 2021

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
ADD	Attention Deficit Disorder
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
CAQDAS	Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software
DOCS	Department of Community Services
ELICOS	English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
FACS	Family and Community Services
FiF	First-in-Family
HD	High Distinction
HE	Higher Education
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
HEPPP	Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program
HSC	Higher School Certificate
IT	Information Technology
km	kilometre
NCSEHE	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research
NSW	New South Wales
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PASS	Peer Assisted Study Sessions
PE	Physical Education
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy

SEIFA	Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas
SES	Socio-Economic Status
STEPS	Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies
TAFE	Technical and Further Education
TEQSA	Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Authority
UAC	University Admissions Centre
UAI	University Admissions Index
UAP	University Access Program
UK	United Kingdom
UKOU	United Kingdom Open University
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WP	Widening Participation

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The university student of today may be quite different to the university student of a generation ago (Devlin, 2017). Previously, universities could be regarded as enclaves of the middle-classes looking to further advantage their children by gaining access to professional qualifications (Kemmis & Mahon, 2017). However, increasingly in Australia and internationally, higher education (HE) is being accessed by diverse groups of students through a multitude of pathways. Widening participation (WP) in HE has been instigated by the dual factors of economic and social inclusion imperatives. While a more educated workforce leads to increased national productivity, arguably more important is that all citizens should have the right to access tertiary studies for the benefits that it brings to the individuals concerned (Burke, 2012).

This chapter provides an introduction to a group of contemporary Australian university students, and to the phenomenon of WP at university and its influence on tertiary studies across the world. WP seeks to uplift aspirations and increase the number of students enrolled from across the social spectrum, particularly focussing on students from less advantaged families (Raciti & Dale, 2019). Included in this chapter are background details of the local area, including economic and social conditions as well as de-identified institutional details. Furthermore, the aims and research questions of this study are described, and an outline of the theoretical underpinning is provided. The chapter concludes with a framework for the entire thesis.

WP pathways into HE include vocational qualifications, alternative entry schemes and, peculiar to Australia programs known as enabling courses which are provided by universities for students unable to gain direct entry to undergraduate degrees (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020b; Hodges et al., 2013; Pitman et al., 2016). While relatively small in student enrolment numbers (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020b), these pathways nevertheless provide an important avenue for access to HE for a range of students from diverse economic, geographic and cultural backgrounds (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020a; Pitman et al., 2016).

Having worked in the enabling sector for over 10 years, I became very interested in this group of learners as I witnessed their myriad journeys though enabling education and onto

university. Participants in this study were enrolled in the University Access Program (UAP) at a regional Australian university college. The UAP is one example of an enabling course. Enabling courses are tailored by each institution to reflect the needs of its own domestic students therefore courses range in both length and scope (The National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (NAEEA), 2019). In this case the UAP was specifically tailored to Australian domestic students who were aged 21 years and older (however younger students could enrol on a case-by-case basis). The participants who volunteered to be involved in this study could be classified within three main subgroups of the current Australia contemporary student population:

1. Those entering university through an enabling program who comprise around 1.9% of enrolments (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020b);
2. Those who are older or "mature-age" (over 21 years) who comprise around 53% of enrolments (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020b); and
3. Those who are male who are around 43% of enrolments (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020b).

The decision was made to focus only on male students due to limited research on men returning to study through enabling courses (Irwin et al., 2019). Typically, students who are mature-age and enter through enabling courses face multiple barriers when participating in university (Hodges et al., 2013; Pitman et al., 2016; Willans & Seary, 2011), however, there is limited qualitative research on the experiences of older males who undertake this study pathway.

1.2 Background

This thesis examines students entering HE from backgrounds not usually associated with universities. In Australia this includes a wide variety of learners. For example, the Australian Government has prioritised support to students with equity backgrounds including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, those from regional and remote locations and those with low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds (Australian Government, 2021a). In Australia the term "low-SES" refers to students who reside in areas of disadvantage as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) based on the Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). These indexes summarise a range of information about the economic and social conditions of people and households within an area, however, these indexes only include measures of relative disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). In Britain

and other countries low-SES students are more likely to be described as “working-class” or from “blue-collar” backgrounds (Lehmann, 2014; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016; Reay et al., 2010). Working-class is classically defined as the class that must sell its labour-power in order to survive as distinct from the middle and upper classes (Scott, 2014). Similarly, blue-collar workers are those involved in some sort of manual labour as distinct from clerical or professional workers who are sometimes referred to as “white-collar” and who usually possess tertiary level credentials (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 2003).

However, economic measures alone do not fully encompass the range of students who are now more involved in HE. Broader terms to describe those from diverse backgrounds are “non-traditional” (Munro, 2011; West et al., 2013), which emphasises the differences between this newer cohort of undergraduates and “traditional” middle-class students from affluent families. The term “disadvantaged students” (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Pitman et al., 2016) is also applied which could be seen as a deficit term to describe students’ backgrounds. Another term used is “under-represented” (Riddell & Weedon, 2014) which perhaps more accurately describes students from diverse and minority backgrounds. More recently, “First-in-Family” (FiF) has been used to encompass those students who are the first in their immediate family, including siblings, to attend university (Luzeckyj et al., 2011; O'Shea et al., 2017). These various groupings often include people returning to study as older or mature-age students, sometimes referred to as “second chance” learners (Fenge, 2011; Rose, 2012).

As can be seen it is difficult to use a singular term to fully encompass the backgrounds of WP students. For the purposes of this study, as enabling students do not fit neatly into one category, I have predominantly used the term blue-collar to describe the economic backgrounds of the College’s students. While this is a contested term which could be seen as pejorative, it does serve to convey the backgrounds of the majority of these students, particularly males returning to study.

Unlike most comparable members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Australia has a particularly high rate of participation in HE for mature-aged learners including up to 10% of the population of 30- to 39-year-olds (Coelli et al., 2012; OECD, 2020), a substantial proportion of whom use enabling and vocational courses as a means of transitioning to university. While enabling courses are generally offered through universities, vocational courses are run through State Government Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions or private providers. Many of these older learners are from low

socio-economic (SES) backgrounds and are first in their families to attend university (Chesters & Watson, 2014).

The transition experience for enabling students varies widely, however, there is much to learn from their interactions within the HE sector. Moving into the world of academia can be challenging for enabling students, particularly those from families with limited exposure to universities (Burton et al., 2011; Pitman et al., 2016). This research project explored the 12-month experiences of one group (n=10) of male mature-age students from the first week of their enabling course through to the conclusion of their first session at university. Engaging directly with these students and their teachers has given valuable insights into their transition into HE and offers a unique perspective on this specific cohort of adult learners.

1.3 Enabling education

Based on principles of access and equity, enabling education offers avenues for second chance (Fenge, 2011) or non-traditional learners (Munro, 2011) who may not have had access to other opportunities to further their education. Enabling education consists of courses of instruction "provided to a person for the purpose of enabling that person to undertake a course leading to a higher education award" (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020b). In Australia, enabling courses, also known as access programs, pathways or transition courses, are used by students without requisite academic backgrounds to gain admission to undergraduate studies (Hodges et al., 2013; Pitman et al., 2016). As these currently sit outside the Australian Quality Framework (AQF), enabling courses are often perceived to hold a peripheral position in HE (Baker, 2020).

Enabling education provides access to learning for a wide diversity of students from many groups. Students may be a mixture of FiF students, low-SES students, mature-age learners and those with an array of equity backgrounds (Harvey, 2017; Pitman et al., 2016). Many fall into a number of categories which may be described as intersectional disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1991). While the composition of this cohort of students is varied, it typically includes a large percentage of mature-age learners, such as those who took part in this research project (Harvey, 2017).

In 2019 there were over 30,000 students enrolled in enabling courses in Australian universities (Australian Government, 2019b). Of these enabling enrolments, the majority (53%) were aged over 21 (Australian Government, 2019b). Similar to undergraduate enrolment, males comprise around 42% of students (Department of Education Skills and

Employment, 2020b). Pitman et al. (2016) estimate that around half of those enrolled in enabling programs “comprise several equity groups such as Indigenous students, regional and remote students and low-SES status students, compared with 30% of all domestic undergraduate enrolments” (p. 11).

Enabling courses are designed to create a bridge or pathway for students and normally include significant academic and pastoral support (Hodges et al., 2013; Norton, 2013). Due to the variety of funding models and varying structures, it is difficult to precisely calculate the number of such courses in operation, however in 2015 there were approximately 48 Australian university-based enabling courses available to students, as well as many delivered by private providers (Pitman et al., 2017). Although these programs offer an alternative pathway, they still have relatively high attrition rates (O'Rourke et al., 2013; Whannell, 2013). This is often due to the personal factors of those enrolled, many of whom have come back to study at a later age and have to balance work and family commitments as well as their studies (Harvey et al., 2016; Lomax-Smith et al., 2011; Pitman et al., 2016).

1.4 Widening participation

As well as enabling courses, WP more broadly in the university sector has been an important development in recent times in Australia and internationally. Many more students from a range of backgrounds now cross the threshold into HE than have previously done so, due to opportunities as a result of the issues of social justice as well as economic imperatives. In Australia, the *Bradley Review into Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008) ushered in a new focus on issues of access and equity in HE by recommending a number of important reforms, the foremost of which was creating a target to increase the percentage of low-SES background students to 20% by 2020.[1] In 2007 only 16% of enrolments were students from low-SES families (Koshy, 2014, p. 5). Since the *Bradley Review* (Bradley et al., 2008) there has been a concerted effort on the part of Australian governments and universities to encourage the increased enrolment of students from more educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (Kemp & Norton, 2014). Similar efforts at WP have been taking place internationally with the aim of improving access and social mobility for these learners (Cahalan, 2013; Thomas, 2020a). While there is statistical evidence available on trends in WP, such as attrition and retention rates (Australian Government, 2017), less well known is the impact of these

[1] In 2019 17.6% of enrolments were from students with low-SES backgrounds (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020b). Although the targets have not yet been achieved there have been gradual improvements from 2007 (Koshy, 2019).

changes and the experiences of students undertaking study from non-professional backgrounds.

Nevertheless, WP experiences of students have begun to be studied more seriously over the past decade with emerging research in Australia (May et al., 2016; O'Shea, 2017; O'Shea et al., 2016; O'Shea et al., 2017; Willans, 2020), the United States of America (USA) (Cahalan, 2013; Ramsey & Brown, 2018) and the United Kingdom (UK) (Reay et al., 2010; Thomas, 2020a). While there is some literature that focusses specifically on WP male students in the UK (Reay et al., 2002), there is limited understanding of these students in the Australian context (Armstrong et al., 2018; Stahl et al., 2020). This study has identified a gap in knowledge in this area and seeks to improve our understanding of the lived experiences of one group of male students in enabling education.

1.5 University Access Program (UAP)

The participants in this study were enrolled in the 14-week University Access Program (UAP) which is used by many adult learners as a pathway from the workplace to university studies. Entry to the program is broad and does not require students to have an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR),[2] rather entry is based on vocational qualifications and/or a literacy and numeracy test. Students enrolled in UAP study three subjects, comprising three hours each, totalling nine hours of face-to-face classes per week. The participants in this study enrolled in UAP in June 2015, the beginning of the second academic session. UAP has one common subject, *Language and Literacy*, however the other two subjects studied are dependent on whether the student wishes to proceed with either a Humanities focussed degree (Stream 1) or one from the Engineering/Informatics disciplines (Steam 2) or Health/Behavioural Sciences (Stream 3), details of which can be seen below in Table 1:

[2] Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) is used by Australian universities to help them select completing high school students for their undergraduate courses and admission to most tertiary courses. The ATAR is a number between 0.00 and 99.95 that indicates a student’s position relative to all the students in their age group (UAC, 2020).

Table 1: Outline of the College's UAP Streams

Stream	Subjects	Degree Pathway
Stream 1 **Humanities**	Language and Literacy Australian Studies Mathematics and Statistics	Arts Business Humanities Social Science
Stream 2[3] **Engineering and Informatics**	Language and Literacy Chemistry Mathematics	Engineering Informatics Science
Stream 3 **Science and Health and Behavioural Science**	Language and Literacy Chemistry Mathematics	Health and Behavioural Science

1.6 Context of the study

The site of this study was Westbeach University, a pseudonym given to a regional institution located on the East Coast of Australia. Originally established as a provider of technical education for engineers and metallurgists required for the region's steel industry, the university now offers a wide range of courses across four faculties:

- Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities
- Business and Law
- Engineering and Information Sciences
- Science, Medicine and Health

Westbeach College, located on the university campus, hereafter referred to as the College, is categorised as a non-university HE provider which offers a variety of programs of study.[4] Established in 1988 as an English language centre for international students, the College's pathways programs commenced in 1990. The College continues to deliver enabling, vocational and English language programs to domestic and international students. After

[3] Subjects for Streams 2 and 3 are the same, however Stream 2 students wishing to enter university Engineering must pass MATH010 Enabling Mathematics as well as the UAP subjects.
[4] The College is part of Westbeach University's Enterprises Group which, although owned by the University operates under an independent corporate governance structure with an independent board.

successful completion of UAP at the College, students are guaranteed a place in undergraduate studies at Westbeach University.[5]

The reason that many mature-age students navigate pathways to HE is due to changes in their workplaces (Pitman et al., 2016). In particular, economic globalisation worldwide has led to shifts in workforce structure and the increased need for employees to have higher skill levels and university credentials in order to compete for work in the changing financial environment (Hinton-Smith, 2012). Globalisation has impacted Westbeach itself as it is an area that was traditionally home to blue-collar workers. However, in recent years there has been a downturn in manual jobs, particularly those traditionally associated with male workers such as mining and heavy industry, which now only provide a small percentage of employment in the area (manufacturing 8%, construction 9% and mining 0.9%) ("Westbeach" City Council, 2020). Rather than a demand for unskilled labour, there is now much more demand for technical and professional competencies, often requiring tertiary levels of education (Beissel et al., 2013; Blackmore, 2001). The participants in this study were in the midst of such change which led many to their enrolment in UAP (Woodin & Burke, 2007).

Further potentially fuelling the decision of the participants to enrol in UAP were the changes taking place at a regional level. For example, local unemployment figures were disturbing, as the adult unemployment rate when this project commenced in June of 2015 was 8.3% compared to the national average of 6%, moreover, youth unemployment had reached 14.6% compared to the national average of 13.6%, impacting widely across the region (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Burrows et al., 2015, p. 8; Denny & Churchill, 2016, p. 9).

This study has sought to illuminate the impact of these changes upon lives of actual people by the use of qualitative measures, predominantly narrative inquiry. Workers in Australia and internationally, particularly those from blue-collar backgrounds, have experienced increasing unemployment levels due to globalisation, economic uncertainty and digital disruption (King et al., 2013; Munro, 2011). This has led to widening social disparity (Cobb-Clark, 2019). Many students who enter enabling programs have been impacted by these changes, however, there is limited research on their backgrounds and experiences. While

[5] Unlike the majority of enabling courses, students at the College do incur course fees, however, they are also guaranteed a place in Westbeach University if they successfully complete the UAP.

quantitative data and statistical measures can explain the broad picture of these social and economic changes, this project has explored the lived experiences of one group of these learners as they transitioned to HE.

1.7 Aims and research questions

The intention of this study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of a group of learners who are under researched in the available literature.

The specific aims are included below and divided into one main question and three sub-questions.

The overarching question addressed in this study was:

What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into HE from an enabling course?

In order to explore this more deeply, a number of sub-questions were asked.

1. *In what ways do learners' social and cultural capitals impact upon their experiences of transition?*
2. *How do existing identities influence the students' transition into university?*
3. *What are the educational and personal outcomes for male students during this process of transition?*

In order to answer these questions which address a gap in the understanding of this group of learners, I have undertaken a detailed study and analysis of the experiences of 10 enabling course students over 12-months. Narrowing the focus on male learners has given insight into gendered experiences of education, particularly at times of transition. The narratives of males undertaking further education through an enabling pathway, which form the basis of this study, provided a fuller understanding of lived experiences in the HE environment. It is anticipated that this study will contribute to understandings of enabling education and its effectiveness for male mature-age students.

The study examined the men's interactions with HE, their family backgrounds and identities, including masculinities, as they experienced the transition process, and includes an evaluation of the educational and personal outcomes of their involvement. While there has been some important research on women returning to study as mature-age learners (Evans, 2009; Mezirow, 1978a; Stone & O'Shea, 2012), the scholarship surrounding males undertaking this pathway is limited (Burke, 2009; Stahl & Loeser, 2018; Weaver-Hightower,

2010). This study focussed specifically on the journeys of male learners due to this gap in the literature and our understanding of their lived experiences.

Contrary to previous decades, females now outnumber males in both university and enabling enrolments (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020b). Studies have noted that males appear to have different motivations than females for returning to studies as mature-age learners (Booth & Kee, 2011; Coelli et al., 2012). Research suggests that many women return to study after a change in personal circumstances such as a divorce, often with a view to finding employment, however, for men it appears that low wages and low job satisfaction are their main motivations for returning to study (Booth & Kee, 2011; Coelli et al., 2012; Lehmann, 2009).

As many enabling students enter their studies after involvement in the workplace, it is critical that educators are aware of their experiences and how these impact on their transition into and through tertiary studies. Moving from the workplace and its expectations to university studies can be challenging for enabling students (Burton et al., 2011; Pitman et al., 2016). This study examined the transition experience of one cohort of these learners shining a light into this largely unexplored corner of student experience.

The research questions posed in this study were broad in nature, allowing for various findings and viewpoints to emerge from the data so that the individual and collective experiences of the participants could be represented within this narrative case study. In Chapter 3 the research questions and research design are outlined in further detail.

1.8 Methodological approach

In order to gain insight into both the journeys of the 10 individuals as well as the collective experiences of the group, a narrative case study approach was used. While quantitative research enables collection of numeric data from a large number of people and comparison of trends using statistical analysis (Creswell, 2014; Gall et al., 2007), there is much that such data are not able to communicate. In order to explore in-depth the personal stories and lived experiences of individuals involved in the transition to HE, a qualitative research design was adopted. This approach had the advantage of being able to develop thematic analysis over time, comparing and contrasting the various experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2014). This project has opened a window into the lives of one group of students offering an understanding which cannot be gained by using quantitative methodology alone.

Using narrative inquiry allowed for a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of some of the hurdles the participants needed to overcome as well as the positive outcomes of their engagement in further study. Combining narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2013) with a case study approach (Yin, 2009) allowed for both an understanding of complex details of the participants' lives as well as an exploration of the similar experiences of the group. The case study included the additional lens of teacher interviews, researcher and participant reflectivity, and analysis of university and government documents which combined to add rigour and depth to the analysis.

1.9 Theoretical underpinning

In order to gain some perspective of how this project builds upon other educational research, three theoretical frameworks were used. Primarily this study drew upon Bourdieu's (1973) theory of social reproduction by incorporating the concepts of social and cultural capital, "habitus" and field. Also included were the lenses of transformative learning theory espoused by Mezirow (1991) and Markus and Nurius' (1986) concept of possible selves both of which provided added dimensions to understanding the findings of the project.

As the participants in this study had similar backgrounds, cultural capital theory provided an important methodological tool for examining their interactions in tertiary studies. Capital theory was originally outlined by Bourdieu (1977) and has become widely used in educational research (Burke, 2012; O'Shea et al., 2016; Reay, 2015; Webb et al., 2017). This theory posits that students are agents in the field of play where there exist unwritten rules of engagement visible to those from more privileged backgrounds (Bathmaker, 2015). Those who enter this field from outside the "accepted" class find themselves in the position of being outsiders, unknowing and unaware of the expected behaviours and norms. While some have critiqued this theory as being deterministic (Jenkins, 1999), others maintain that students have their own agency and ability to respond to the new situations in which they find themselves (Faber, 2017). Nevertheless, students from blue-collar and low-SES backgrounds who enter HE often remain at a disadvantage to those who fit neatly into the middle-class fields of play. In particular, Reay (2002a, 2004b) in the UK and Stahl (2015b), Stahl et al. (2020), Burke (2009) and Burke et al. (2016) in the UK and Australia have used this theory to explain the complex interactions of working-class students in colleges and universities.

While cultural capital theory can explain many of the hurdles faced by diverse students, Mezirow's (2000) theory outlines the power of education to transform students' lives.

Instigated by his initial study with mature-age women returning to college, Mezirow (1978a) explored the transformative impact of education for many participants who had not previously enjoyed the educational opportunities afforded to others. As adults, mature-age learners' experiences of education go beyond the simple transmission of knowledge. Their frames of reference, including habits of mind and meaning perspectives, are often challenged by their new interactions with learning (Kitchenham, 2008; Millman, 2013). Critical reflection on their previously held assumptions can have a transformative impact on students' lives. Therefore, this study has included the lens of transformative learning theory to further explore the experiences of the male mature-age learners transitioning into HE.

Finally, looking into the future lives of the participants using the possible selves framework (Markus & Nurius, 1986) provided additional insight into the hopes and motivations of these male learners. Using the lens of possible selves asks students to visualise what their futures may be after their engagement in HE, both their idealised as well as the negative possible self. This framing gave additional insight into the lived experiences of the participants in this study.

Drawing on the voices of the 10 participants in this project brought to life the issues and concerns the students experienced as they transitioned into HE from an enabling course. Added to these voices were the accounts of five teacher participants who shared their experiences of teaching mature-age males in UAP which enhanced the trustworthiness of the research design (Hesse-Biber, 2017).

1.10 Outline of thesis

Chapter 1 has presented the background context to WP in tertiary education which has led to more students from diverse backgrounds entering universities. Contemporary economic and workplace changes are discussed particularly with their impact upon males in the community. This chapter explains the rationale and significance of this study and briefly outlines the methodological approach and theoretical underpinning to the study.

Chapter 2 reviews and critiques the existing literature in this area, both in Australia and internationally. The main areas of focus are: WP, social reproduction theory, gender and identity within education and the transformative impact of educational engagement upon the future lives of students. It identifies where this study is able to fill a gap in the current literature.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology employed by this study, narrative case study, and the research design including details of the interviews conducted and the data analysis. The rationale is given for using qualitative methods.

Chapters 4 and 5 contain the findings from the study. Chapter 4 provides cameos of each participant and then introduces the first two themes of the findings which are *Changing Learner Identity* and *Contrasting experiences of employment and student life,* which examine contrasts experienced by the participants during their transition into HE.

Chapter 5 continues with the further two themes, namely, *Motivations and motivators* followed by the participants' *Shifts in thinking* during the course of this project. These themes allow an understanding of why the participants made the decision to re-engage with learning and the impact of this decision on their personal perspectives.

Chapter 6 explores the findings and links them to the initial research questions and other research in the field. The primary question examines the experiences of male learners transitioning into HE from an enabling course. The three sub-questions include: the impact of social and cultural capitals; identity and university participation; and educational and personal outcomes of the participants involved.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis with an examination of the benefits to the participants of engaging in HE as mature-age students, including outcomes for their education and personal lives. These include views of themselves into the future and the transformational experiences that HE can generate. The value of enabling education is promoted along with recommendations for further research and improvements to the sector based on the findings from this study.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

Scholars across the world have been examining the impact that the globalisation of HE and WP has had on the changing nature of universities, and on the students who have become part of the phenomenon (Lehmann, 2014; Marginson, 2016; Naidoo et al., 2015). The participants involved in this study resided in a regional area of Australia that had been impacted by globalisation. These economic and structural changes have led many mature-age learners such as the participants to consider engaging in tertiary level education.

The chapter commences with background details of the impact of globalisation on the nature of work, the economy and HE. Following this there is a review of the available literature in the field of WP in HE, including the nature of social mobility and the development of transition or enabling courses in Australia and internationally. The chapter then delves into the theoretical framing of this research project, particularly cultural capital theory. This is followed by a review of education and its interaction with gender and identity. The chapter concludes with an examination of the long-term outcomes for students, including transformational learning theory and possible selves' literature, identifying where this study fills some gaps in the current area of research.

Table 2: Structure of Literature Review

Chapter 2: Literature Review Structure	Sub-elements
2.2 The Impact of globalisation on higher education	
2.3 Journeys of widening participation	
2.4 Enabling education	
2.5 Prior Findings	
2.6 Weighing the risks of higher education	
2.7 Cultural Capital theory	• Habitus and stratification • Social and cultural capitals • Fields
2.8 Education, work and gendered identities	• Males in education • Males in the workplace • Identities in transition

Chapter 2: Literature Review Structure	Sub-elements
2.9 Long-term outcomes, transformation, and future selves	• Outcomes for students • Transformational learning • Possible selves

2.2 The impact of globalisation on higher education

Many learners who now enrol into university courses would not have considered this as an option in previous decades (Burke, 2012; Norton et al., 2018). This phenomenon has been variously termed WP or even the "massification" of HE (Gumport et al., 1997; Norton & Cakitaki, 2016; Stuart, 2012). Widening access to university study has been partially driven by principles of social inclusion but is also based on notions of improving "human capital". Social inclusion emphasises the ways that education can level the playing field so that all people regardless of their backgrounds are able to access HE (Burke, 2012).

An important aspect of social inclusion is to promote social mobility across economic classes (Bennett et al., 2021). According to the *Bradley Review of Higher Education* (Bradley et al., 2008), WP "can enhance social inclusion and reduce social and economic disadvantage" (p. 55). Access to HE by diverse students aims to redress major social inequalities found across Australia, sometimes referred to as the "Great Gatsby curve" where "higher inequality is associated with lower social mobility" (Carmignani, 2014, p. 1). While there appears to be some increasing educational mobility within Australian society (Clark & Maas, 2016), there has not been a parallel increase in social mobility. This lag is evidenced by the OECD report (2018) which outlines that it can take four generations for those from low-income families to reach the average income in Australia. Unfortunately, wealth in Australia continues to be unequally distributed, leading to rising inequality which "pulls the rungs of the socioeconomic ladder further apart, reducing social mobility" (Cobb-Clark, 2019, p. 30). Burke (2012) also notes that in Britain while there is widening access to HE, there remain "widening, social and economic inequalities" (p. 11). Education alone cannot counter this trend of ongoing disadvantage; however, it can provide opportunities for many students from poorer families to gain access to improved education and career choices into the future.

An alternative view to social inclusion is economic rationalism which regards individuals in terms of human capital (Marginson, 2019). Proponents of economic rationalism argue that increasing the rates of HE should lead to improvements in the productivity of the workforce which would benefit the overall economy (Marginson, 2019). The forces of both economic

rationalism and social inclusion have led to WP in Australia (Bradley et al., 2008), the UK (Dearing, 1997; Marginson, 2016; Younger et al., 2019), the USA (Cahalan, 2013; Grubbs, 2020; Weaver-Hightower, 2010) and Europe (Brändle, 2017; Riddell & Weedon, 2014), providing pathways for those seeking to achieve social, career and personal attainment as well as increasing productivity for their nations' economies.

Increased rates of university attainment provide an important stimulus to economic development in Australia and internationally (Deloitte Access Economics, 2015). The paradigm shift in the increased access to tertiary education (Gumport et al., 1997; Stuart, 2012) is based on the presumption that economies improve due to higher productivity and benefits flow onto society from enhanced educational levels of the population, thereby presuming that the changes are always beneficial for the students involved. Much of this boom in student numbers has been driven by government policy (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). From a financial perspective, Australian men enjoy improved lifetime earnings of more than $800,000 if they complete a university degree compared to those males who finish education at Year 12 (Norton et al., 2018; Shergold et al., 2020). This also means graduates will pay higher income tax on their earnings. Furthermore, employment rates for those with university credentials are higher than the national average leading to less drain on governments' social security resources (Social Research Centre, 2021).

However, this economic rationalist view of universities, which regards students as consumers and education as a product, is contested by many researchers in the field (Boni & Walker, 2013; Burke, 2012; Devlin & McKay, 2018; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). They argue that the focus on human capital, profit making institutions and entrepreneurialism can be at the expense of the student experience (Kemmis & Mahon, 2017; Marginson, 2019). From a neo-liberal standpoint, when society has higher engagement with further education the productivity of the whole country should increase, giving a competitive advantage in an increasingly globalised marketplace. Many government policies in Australia and internationally refer to this driver of higher engagement with education (Australian Government, 2020; Marginson, 2011b; Tomlinson, 2005). Whether the individuals involved necessarily always benefit from such engagement is open to debate and was one of the reasons for exploring the lived experiences of the participants in the current study.

It appears that there are two somewhat contradictory forces at play. On the one hand, the neo-liberal agenda of many governments espouse development of human capital using

business terminology to describe the benefits of HE for society, the economy and the individual concerned (Marginson, 2019; Tomlinson, 2005). Their arguments are based on notions of productivity and business profits that are afforded by having a more educated, digitally literate and mobile workforce. On the other hand, there are those scholars such as Black (2018), Burke (2012), Marginson (2016) and Walkerdine (2011) who see the argument of neo-liberalism as too simplistic and favour social inclusion perspectives. Rather than considering that the role of universities is to produce job-ready graduates, many scholars posit that the emphasis should be on “investigation, discourse, creativity and reflection” (Blackley et al., 2020, p. 1) which focus on the social good universities bring to both individuals and society.

Notwithstanding many more students entering HE, there remains far less enrolment into Australian universities from those in lower-SES groups, particularly male students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020b; Norton & Cakitaki, 2016). The situation is similar in the UK (Thomas, 2020b) and the USA (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Weaver-Hightower, 2010) where both countries have recorded lower numbers of low-SES students attending colleges or universities than those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. When low-income students enrol, they predominantly favour the less prestigious institutions, endorsing the stratification of the university sector (Bexley, 2016; Marginson, 2016; Reay, 2002a).

In order to improve participation rates by low-SES or working-class students, an approach of “aspiration-raising” has been developed, particularly in the UK (Gale & Parker, 2015; Stahl, 2015a) where conservative commentators emphasise the need for working-class students to be more ambitious and motivated (Loveday, 2015). This strategy presumes that by raising working-class students’ aspirations more of them will decide to enter universities. However, Harrison (2018) contends that “aspiration-raising is unable to explain patterns of participation and that it risks ‘blaming the victim’ by failing to appreciate the structural constraints forged through their sociocultural context” (p. 1). Aspiration-raising can be seen as an attempt to force middle-class values onto working-class students (Loveday, 2015).

Furthermore, there is the presumption that there exists a level playing field for all, regardless of their social, economic and cultural circumstances, offering a somewhat simplistic view of a complex situation (O'Shea et al., 2016; Reay, 2018). Many researchers in the field view this as a deficit discourse where blame for lower enrolment rates of low-SES students rests with the students themselves and their families (Harry & Klingner, 2007; Loveday, 2015; Mallman,

2017; O'Shea et al., 2016). This study takes an alternative stand and regards the opportunities afforded by WP and access to university as a human right (Burke, 2012), where society should support and encourage all students who choose to access university, regardless of their background (United Nations, 2020).

2.3 Journeys of widening participation

Notwithstanding the disparity between social groups' enrolments, universities have now opened their doors to a wider diversity of students with a massive increase in enrolment numbers in the past decades both in Australia and internationally (Burke et al., 2018; Harris & Price, 2011; Younger et al., 2019). However, for those from lower-SES households, the journey to university is rarely straightforward, with students from under-represented backgrounds often not entering university directly from school (Millman & McNamara, 2018; Pitman et al., 2016). Increasingly, universities are accepting alternative entry pathways for students, in order to encourage access and equity in HE. For current Australian students commencing university, less than half have an ATAR recorded (Pitman, 2019) as there now exist an array of alternative entry schemes available for diverse cohorts of students (Irwin et al., 2019). Abbott-Chapman (2011) refers to a "mosaic of students' education and employment experiences, with a multiplicity of nonlinear pathways" (p. 57) which encourage WP. Enabling education is one such pathway.

Internationally, there are various models of alternative access to HE. The USA has a history of community colleges which provide an "attainable entry gate into higher education for many people who may not otherwise be able to study in a postsecondary institution" (Grubbs, 2020, p. 193). There are similar colleges in Canada, however, they are more vocationally oriented (Lehmann, 2009; Skolnik, 2020). Furthermore, the United Kingdom Open University (UKOU) offers increased opportunities for students, particularly mature-age students using distance education (Guri-Rosenblit, 2019), as well as colleges which students can use to transition to university (Foster et al., 2020).

Evaluation of the efficacy of such alternative programs can be contested (Burke et al., 2018). Again, using the lens of human capital, statistics such as completion and attrition rates from these programs can be measured (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2019a). However, evaluating the personal, social, and transformational impacts of such initiatives requires a social justice framework that emphasises a "praxis-based approach" (Burke et al.,

2018, p. xiv). Pleasingly, there is recent development in this area with research by Burke (2018), O'Shea (2020b), and Stone and O'Shea (2019) adopting a social justice perspective.

Longitudinal research was conducted by O'Shea and Stone (2011) and Stone and O'Shea (2012) with mature-age women returning to education using narrative inquiry. Their findings have recognised that for many of the participants university provided not just an educational but a transformative experience for the students and their families. These narratives of achievement outline the importance of understanding the journeys of mature-age learners for those in the HE sector.

Furthermore Reay's (2002a, 2004a, 2018) insightful work in the UK with working-class students entering university has given valuable perspectives into the experiences of such students. Based on narrative inquiry and case studies Reay has adopted a Bourdieusian approach which assists in exploring notions of social and cultural capital. She has explored the barriers faced by many of these students both male and female. However, Reay's work is based in Britain and cannot necessarily be translated to the Australian context.

Stahl (2015) has also used narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of working-class British students, specifically boys as they progress through the education system. Stahl's more recent work with colleagues based in an Australia adds a valuable insight into the ways working-class males transition to university (Stahl, G., & Loeser, C., 2018; Stahl, G., McDonald, S., & Young, J. ,2020; Stahl, 2021).

However, there remain gaps in the literature on the specific impacts of WP and alternative entry schemes on the educational experiences and outcomes for the individuals involved, particularly mature-age males in Australia. This is particularly so for those students progressing through enabling courses. This project attempts to build on the available research, with a focus on the lived experiences of a group of men transitioning into HE through an enabling course.

2.4 Enabling Education

Enabling education offers a second chance at learning often for mature-age students. Such programs with supportive pedagogical practices and staff have existed in Australia since 1974 (Baker, 2020). Students who attend these programs bring with them many life experiences as well as commitments outside of study.

When measuring the effectiveness of these programs', retention and attrition rates are used by government departments to calculate successful or negative outcomes. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) defines attrition as the ratio of first-year HE commencing students in a year who neither completed nor returned to study in the following year, to the total commencing students in that year. This ratio encompasses courses at all levels including sub-bachelor/enabling courses. While such measures are important their focus can be overly narrow and do not necessarily allow for the diverse experiences of many enabling students who often take longer to complete courses due to personal, family and work concerns (Habel et al., 2016). Furthermore Hodges et al. (2013) state that "the standard measures of retention and attrition suited to undergraduate programs do not provide useful insight into effective attrition in enabling programs" (p.5). Many educators (Habel et al., 2016; Hodges et al., 2013; Pitman et al., 2016) have argued that reporting retention and attrition measures alone do not allow adequately for changes to study patterns such as part-time study and breaks from study due to other commitments for those non-traditional students.

Staff working in enabling programs are generally employed primarily as teachers rather than researchers meaning that few have time to conduct detailed and ongoing research projects (Baker, 2020). Baker et al. (2020) in their detailed scoping study posit that to date there has been "no comprehensive account of how enabling education has organised itself into a field of study as well as a practice" (p.2). Many papers are presented in local conference proceedings or in Australian focussed journals rather than internationally (Baker et al., 2020). Additionally the scoping study (Baker et al., 2020) concludes that more than half of the papers scoped did not rely on "specific theories or concepts" (p.8). Baker and her colleagues' recommendation was that much more academic research is required on enabling courses.

Notwithstanding Baker et al.'s (2020) conclusions, a body of research in enabling education has developed, including the establishment of the National Association of Enabling Educators of Australia (https://enablingeducators.org/connections/) with the aim of encouraging research in the field and collaboration between Australian and international practitioners. So too the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) has promoted exploration in this field (Pitman et al., 2016). Current research into enabling education can be divided into the following areas of focus: curriculum, student well-being, equity and diversity, and transition experiences. Generally speaking, the research aims are often to promote the value and continuation of enabling programs.

Projects such as that by Relf et al. (2017) have developed an evaluation of specific curriculum design principles in enabling courses as has Bennett et al.'s (2016) report on enabling pedagogies. Their value is in the recognition that enabling students are often diverse with differing backgrounds to many first-year students. Student centred curriculum and pedagogical approaches have great resonance with those in the sector.

The well-being of enabling students is an important area of research focus generally using qualitative inquiry. For those working with enabling students the pastoral role of teachers in providing safe spaces for student well-being is emphasised in the work of Pedler et al. (2021), James and Walters (2020) and particularly Seary and Willans (2020; Willans & Seary, 2018a, 2018b) who examine the psychological well-being of students and the very clear link between retention rates and student well-being.

Additionally, a recent study on psychological distress amongst enabling students by Nieuwoudt (2021) used a cross-sectional design with an online survey consisting of self-reporting measures assessing psychological distress, grit, and students' use of their time. This research provides a useful addition to understanding the pressures faced by enabling students. The author concluded that enabling students "experienced psychological distress at higher levels than Australian undergraduate university students reported in previous studies and the general Australian population" (Nieuwoudt, 2021, p.15). This is a concerning finding.

As a number of scholars have found, enabling courses comprise a more diverse body of students. This has led to many researchers focusing on issues of equity and diversity in enabling education. Jarvis (2021) examined in detail the risk taking encountered by many enabling students as they transition through their programs and onto university studies. For those learners from low SES backgrounds costs of study including forgoing work opportunities can also be a heavy burden (Baxter & Britton, 2001).

While some of these studies focus particularly on women, who make up the majority of enabling students, less is known about the journeys through enabling education of male students, particularly mature-age males. However, one study which specifically explored male students in enabling education was undertaken by Armstrong et al. (2018) at a Queensland university college. Armstrong (2018) and his colleagues used narrative inquiry based on semi-structured interviews to examine the lived experiences of males in an enabling program. The participants were interviewed once towards the conclusion of their

course. This study came to some important conclusions that the males benefitted from the course and improved their confidence and aspirations for the future.

One gap in many of these studies is the limited contact with participants as individuals navigated through the programs, in most cases the participants were only interviewed at one point in time during their enabling courses. One of the reasons for focussing on this area relates to a desire to see what changes occurred both during their attendance in an enabling course as well as during transition to their first semester at university which required a longitudinal approach. I also considered that the insights from the teaching staff of the enabling students could bring a further lens of understanding to the area. This research project then builds on the work of other scholars in the field by examining a specific group of learners, that is mature-age males in an enabling program, using a longitudinal narrative case study.

2.5 Prior Findings

Prior to this current study, I undertook a preliminary study which explored the experiences of under-represented students entering an enabling program at the College. The preliminary study examined which factors contributed to students successfully completing their transition course, as attrition is particularly high in enabling courses (Hodges et al., 2013; Pitman & Koshy, 2015; Pitman et al., 2016). The preliminary study was funded by an Australian Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP)[6] grant (Australian Government, 2021a) which resulted in the production of a report to the university at the conclusion of the project entitled *Social Inclusion Project Scheme, Connect to College, July-August 2013* (McNamara, 2013).

The preliminary study was conducted in 2013 using the same location as the main research project, although it involved different students from a different course. The preliminary study involved students enrolled in the *Connect to College Program,* a six-week fee-free course open to students of all ages, whereas the UAP course, which is the focus of this doctoral study, was designed for mature-age learners.

[6] Higher Education Participation Partnerships Program (HEPPP) is the Australian Government's response to improve access to undergraduate courses for people from low-SES, regional and remote and Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds https://www.dese.gov.au/heppp

Four student volunteers participated in the preliminary research, one female and three males, whose ages ranged from 19 to 26. The study enabled me to explore with the participants some of the issues affecting their studies, including barriers to study. The four participants engaged in a total of three focus group interviews held at distinct stages of their course. In order to broaden the perspective of the study, I also interviewed three teachers across different subject areas of this group to question them about their perceptions of the students that they taught (McNamara, 2013).

The preliminary study examined whether institutional factors or personal factors led to the participants successfully completing their enabling course. Institutional factors included curriculum and in-class strategies, teacher support and College support while the personal factors encompassed family and peer support, and financial access to resources and a job. This small study concluded that for the students interviewed, their personal factors outside of College had more bearing on their decisions to remain enrolled or to leave early. This then informed the research questions for the current study, which focussed on the personal experiences of male learners, their social and cultural capitals, existing identities and educational and personal outcomes.

This preliminary study enabled me to develop a more focussed and informed inquiry for the final direction of this thesis including expanding my research skills and developing relevant research questions for this current study. While small in scale, the preliminary study gave particular insight into the lived experiences of students' transition into HE from an enabling course.

2.6 Weighing the risks of HE

For many students returning to study through enabling pathways, the risk of taking on a large financial debt weighs considerably on their decision to enrol into study (Harvey et al., 2016). Furthermore, both internationally and within Australia the actual cost of HE has a huge impost upon government coffers and some, particularly those on the conservative side of politics, are continuing to question the huge expense involved and its ultimate benefit to society (Norton, 2012). As governments grapple with the financial consequences of WP, the proportion of debt accrued by individual students has increased dramatically, and in 2021 there have been major increases to course fees for many Australian students (Australian Government, 2020; Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). While those who graduate and move into well-paid professions can ultimately repay this debt, many students, who are only able

to work sporadically or part-time, may never finalise their repayments (Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). Concerningly, as a sizeable proportion of students from low-income backgrounds do not complete their courses, they are left with the perverse situation of not having attained a qualification while incurring a debt that needs to be repaid (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Loveday, 2015). Concentrating on increasing enrolment levels by governments and HE providers needs to be tempered with the reality for those involved in the process.

Many students from low-SES backgrounds perceive engaging in HE as a risk-taking venture (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Jarvis, 2018; Measor et al., 2012; Raciti, 2019; Reay et al., 2010). Prospective students must weigh up the risk of foregoing immediate employment and income for a more stable career in the distant future. This is very concerning for many low-income students who, as noted, appear reluctant to take on large debt in order to complete university study and forego immediate income security. This can also act as a major deterrent to applications from mature-age students with parental responsibilities (Kettley et al., 2008). However, journeys into HE require a certain amount of risk-taking be it financial, social or psychological (Devlin & McKay, 2018). Consequently, successful transitioning into and through university requires perseverance and persistence (Jarvis, 2018; Whannell, 2013).

For mature-age learners leaving paid employment to pursue HE requires taking a risk (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Baxter & Britton, 2001; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2019). Transitioning from a familiar workplace and social environment to one which is much less familiar and comfortable is the experience of many mature-age students who embark upon the journey of further education as older learners (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Willans & Seary, 2011). Combined factors of disadvantage can also further complicate the learning progression for older students. Those from under-represented groups often have to manage a delicate balancing act of commuting to campus, family responsibilities and earning an income to support their studies (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Thomas, 2020b). Although Australian students have access to the Australian Government funded Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) (Australian Government, 2021b), research indicates that it is the daily living and commuting expenses that weigh heavily on their minds (Munro, 2011; Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018).

Despite the risks involved, there have some advances in HE participation with around 17.6% of Australian domestic students in 2019 being from low-SES backgrounds (Department of

Education Skills and Employment, 2020b). In previous generations many of the low-SES males in this group would have entered trades rather than the professions which require HE credentials (Myles et al., 2017). According to Stahl et al. (2020), post-industrialisation in low-income communities has provided a catalyst for many males to consider turning to university for their future prospects. Although there are increasing numbers of students commencing tertiary study, the completion rate for low-SES students in 2019 was only 66.9% compared to 78.0% for high-SES students (Australian Government, 2019a), indicating that there remain significant challenges for some students.

Financing study is difficult for students from lower SES backgrounds, most particularly for those whose families are unable to offer them direct monetary support (Devlin & McKay, 2018). This has led to most students now spending a great deal of time at part-time jobs while they are studying, attempting to combine the roles of both worker and student simultaneously (Hordósy et al., 2018). University timetabling and bureaucratic structures do not appear to provide flexibility for these students who are compelled to work as well as study (Lyons, 2006). Students returning to study from outside the academic environment are required to adjust to a new social and cultural world which is at times quite different from those with which they are familiar.

2.7 Cultural capital theory

In order to understand changes more fully in WP in HE, notions of access and equity need to be explored in more detail; this entails examination of sociological factors at work both inside and outside institutes of higher learning. WP has provided many more avenues for access to HE to those from lower-SES backgrounds who were not previously able to take this academic pathway, however issues of inequity persist (Archer, 2007; Burke et al., 2016). Cultural capital theory with its concepts of habitus, capitals and fields, originally devised by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1977, 1985) and developed further by other researchers (Lehmann, 2014; Reay, 2015; Webb et al., 2017), provides a useful toolkit for exploring the lived experiences of diverse students.

2.7.1 *Habitus*

The concept of habitus, as outlined by Bourdieu (1985), can be defined as a set of acquired dispositions of thought, behaviour, and taste, which constitute the link between social structures and social practice (Bourdieu, 1985; Scott, 2014). Reay (2004b) further notes that

"habitus is a complex interplay between past and present" (p. 434). While it is developed by family circumstance and schooling it also reacts and changes in response to everyday circumstances and experiences. However, an individual's habitus is not fixed in time or unmalleable. It has an evolving structure based on a person's particular context at a particular time (Costa & Murphy, 2015). The habitus of the individual changes according to the circumstances in which they find themselves and these "agents" can exert some autonomy in their reactions with the environments in which they live.

However, some scholars have viewed the concept of habitus as deterministic and not allowing for agency of the individual as he or she interacts in the field of play (Reay, 2004b; Tittenbrun, 2017; Yang, 2014). In particular, feminist scholars and those examining intersectionality and race (Crenshaw, 1991; Crossley & Bottero, 2014; Yosso, 2005), have expressed concerns about the widespread use of the term habitus and it has been likened to "intellectual hairspray" (Hey, 2003). Nevertheless, for the purposes of this research project the concept of habitus provides a useful way of understanding how students from diverse backgrounds make decisions and act the way they do.

Interaction with family, social groups and culture, as well as life experiences, develop in individuals or agents their own habitus of which they may not be entirely aware. Habitus influences decision making, behaviour and dispositions and is embodied in the person (Bourdieu, 1990). For example, researchers have found that the habitus of students from low-SES groups may influence them to believe that attending university is not an option for them although they may have met the entry requirements (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012; Reay et al., 2010; Stahl, 2015a). It may also influence them to choose to study at less prestigious universities close to their home to feel like a "fish in water" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127), rather than moving to a capital city and feeling like a "fish out of water" (Reay et al., 2001; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2019). Low-SES students may visualise themselves as pretenders or interlopers who will be exposed as frauds in the alien environment of the university (Mallman & Lee, 2017). This feeling of being out of place has been termed "imposter syndrome" and affects a number of low-SES and FiF students entering HE for the first time (Clance & Imes, 1978; Luzeckyj et al., 2017; Parkman, 2016; Ramsey & Brown, 2018).

Thus, moving into new fields of endeavour can be a confronting experience for many students. Students bring with them their own habitus (Bourdieu, 1967), which may well be at odds with the systems of thought espoused in their new educational setting. Some may

choose to adapt to this change and become immersed in a different social, economic and cultural capital while others maintain their unique habitus for the duration of their study rather than undertake a radical conversion or transformation (O'Grady, 2013; Reay et al., 2002).

Entering enabling and university courses may prove especially challenging for those students from low-SES and blue-collar backgrounds (Reay, 2001). These students may experience many challenges adjusting from their more familiar environment with its own social mores to the social and academic environment offered by a university or pathways college (Bowser et al., 2007). The literature has reported that there is a process experienced by many diverse students where they have to confront their own assumptions about themselves (Bowser et al., 2007; Munro, 2011). What is at stake is not only adaptation to change but also fear of failure, particularly when past educational experiences have been negative, with students' perceptions of themselves as "the other" or outside the mainstream of the educated class (Reay, 2001).

However, as universities widen participation the situation may be changing. According to Byrom and Lightfoot (2012), there appears to be a generational shift and "habitus adaptation" (p. 132), at least in the UK, and arguably in Australia, where there is an increasing acceptance of HE participation amongst families without a previous history of education at this level. Stahl et al. (2020) refer to the development of "upwardly mobile working-class young men" (p. 16) in their research with final year Australian school students working part-time. Despite the disparities between educational access and outcomes for low and high-SES students (Australian Government, 2019a; Reay, 2001; Weaver-Hightower, 2010), social inclusion may have begun to show benefits for those who are first in their families to enter HE. While social mobility remains challenging globally, Australia does have some of the highest rates of educational mobility among OECD countries (Clark & Maas, 2013; Stuart, 2012).

2.7.2 *Stratification and institutional habitus*

As well as the habitus of individual students, universities themselves have developed their own "institutional habitus". Institutional habitus can be understood as "the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation" (Reay et al., 2001 para. 1.3). Thomas (2002, p. 438) concludes that,

> An institutional habitus that is accepting of difference, and which facilitates greater match with the familial habituses of students from different social and cultural backgrounds goes some way towards explaining higher rates of student retention in some widening participation institutions compared to others (p. 438).

Many students, whose habitus has developed outside academia, look towards universities whose habitus more closely aligns to their own (Reay, 2018).

Marginson (2011a) describes universities as “instruments in the creation and reproduction of social status....Leading institutions attract leading students and high achieving staff in an on-going process of status exchange” (p. 31). Few low-SES students enrol into the elite institutions such as the Ivy League in the USA, the Russell Group in the UK and the Group of Eight in Australia (Bexley, 2016; Cahalan, 2013; May et al., 2016; Reay et al., 2010). This has led to the stratification of universities where more affluent students are attracted to the more prestigious institutions, while those lower-SES students who manage to access HE tend to gravitate towards local universities with less status (Marginson, 2016). As noted by Edwards and McMillan (2015), and Stevenson and Clegg (2013), low-SES students transitioning to university are much more likely to attend second tier institutions which are geographically situated close to their homes, often through enabling programs (Abbott-Chapman, 2011). While this transition is predominantly related to the limited financial circumstances of students, it is also connected, according to Reay et al. (2010), to the institutional habitus of the university itself where students feel more comfortable and less alien attending a campus with students similar to themselves. Conversely, more affluent students appear drawn to those prestigious institutions which have more middle-class cultural trappings of success (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012; Reay et al., 2001). The proportion of higher-SES students enrolled at the elite institutions is much greater than at regional campuses and these more affluent students tend to enrol in prestigious courses such as Medicine, Law and Engineering (Bexley, 2016; Reay et al., 2010; Watkins, 2020).

2.7.3 *Cleft habitus*

What then happens to low-SES students when their habitus and that of the university are quite different? On the one hand students may experience “feelings of incongruence” (Webb et al., 2017, p. 142) when the environment and their classmates are distinct from their home environments and friends. These feelings of incongruity may lead to what Bourdieu et al. (1999) described as a “cleft habitus” (habitus clivé) where an individual attempts to maintain

two different concepts of his or her identity simultaneously (Lee & Kramer, 2013; Lehmann, 2014; Mallman, 2017). Habitus clivé is a "habitus divided against itself…doomed to a kind of duplication, a double perception of self" (Bourdieu et al., 1999, p. 511). This division can require quite a stressful emotional "juggling act" for students.

On the other hand, research has found that a cleft habitus does not always develop for under-represented students. According to research in the USA, a cleft habitus may be linked to class differences but not racial differences (Lee & Kramer, 2013), while Byrom and Lightfoot (2012) in the UK have stated that "for students who continue to live with their families, their identity transformation or transgression from a family-based habitus is not as pronounced as for students who leave home and live on campus" (p. 126).

2.7.4 *Social capital*

Bourdieu (1986) understood capital to be more than just monetary acquisition. He reframed the notion of capital from a financial focus to the demonstration "that economic capital, social capital and cultural capital can be interchangeable" (Yang, 2014, p. 1524). Capitals, using Bourdieu's framework, can be understood as a type of currency in the game of life.

An important aspect of an individual's access to and familiarity with HE is related to their social capital. Social capital has been described as "the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures" (Portes, 1998, p. 6). According to Bourdieu (1986) the more highly developed our social networks, the more social capital we acquire. When an individual enjoys highly developed familial and social networks of high standing, he or she is able to gain access to more powerful people who can open doors into privileged positions. While the current system of access to university may appear to be equitable, that is based on equal access with equal qualifications, further examination deconstructs this notion as a "veneer of meritocracy" (Waller et al., 2015, p. 620) which papers over inbuilt disadvantage (Walker-Gibbs et al., 2019). Those students with access to influential social capital are provided with many avenues of access and support into and through HE (Bennett et al., 2021).

Ultimately those with highly developed middle-class social networks and capital have a distinct advantage over low-SES and blue-collar students entering university (Reay, 2001). According to Bourdieu (1986) a person's "network of relationships is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at

establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 250). Having family, friends and acquaintances with knowledge and experience of universities and developing these networks can prove extremely valuable for students who wish to enter the academy (O'Shea et al., 2017; Stuart, 2012).

2.7.5 *Cultural capital*

Alongside social capital is a person's cultural capital which is accrued over time based on their family, class background and educational experiences. Cultural capital refers to the external and internal attributes of a person particularly relating to language, manners, preferences and orientations (Bourdieu, 1973; Stahl, 2015b). Universities are "heavily enculturated spaces" (Habel et al., 2016, p. 11) which may seem alien to students who do not share that cultural capital. Bourdieu saw cultural capital existing in three forms: the embodied state, the objectified state and the institutionalised state (Bourdieu, 1986). The embodied state can be the use and accent of educated language. The objectified state may comprise art, books and clothing, while the institutionalised state can be educational qualifications. For students studying at university the type of institutionalised cultural capital that has currency is "academic capital" (Naidoo, 2004, p. 458).

Academic capital can give middle-class students a clear understanding of the expectations of study and familiarity with language and processes involved in HE. Universities privilege "particular cultural characteristics, individuals with similar cultural capital to the higher education institution are more likely to succeed than those who find the environment confronting, alienating or discouraging" (O'Shea et al., 2016, p. 324). More affluent students have internalised the knowledge of what Bourdieu (1990) called the "feel for the game" (p. 66). Not only have they been dealt "the better cards in a high-stakes game, but have internalised the knowledge through economic and cultural advantages, of when and how best to play them" (Bathmaker et al., 2013, p. 740).

While Bourdieu's theories remain significant in educational studies, they have been criticised for privileging middle-class culture over working-class culture. Bourdieu (1973) described a "hierarchy of economic capital and power" where those occupying the "lower position" in society including "workers" and "tradespeople" are excluded from participation in "high culture" (p. 259). Indeed, Bourdieu's assumptions have been challenged by contemporary researchers, particularly in regard to factors of race and gender as well as the whole

phenomenon of WP and its impact on HE (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; Goldthorpe, 2007; Reay, 2004b; Watkins, 2020; Yosso, 2005).

It is worthwhile viewing students' experiences through a strengths-based approach rather than a deficit approach (O'Shea et al., 2016). The students' own cultural capital, which may be distinct from the university's, makes it no less valuable (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; O'Shea, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Nevertheless, notions of social and cultural capital provide useful tools for understanding sociological concepts when undertaking fieldwork as their application allows for an understanding of the inequalities across different strata of society (Costa & Murphy, 2015).

2.7.6 Fields

Habitus, capital and fields can be used as intrinsically interlinked thinking tools to understand practices in the real world (Webb et al., 2017). Bourdieu's concept of field can be seen as a place of struggle where individuals "strive for different forms of capital that give them a position and a place in the social structure" (Costa & Murphy, 2015, p. 7). According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) "in a field, agents and institutions constantly struggle…with various degrees of strength…to appropriate the specific products at stake in the game" (p. 102). Students' interactions with the university setting and academic capital can be regarded, using Bourdieusian terms, as the field of play (Bourdieu, 1990) where some rules may be unwritten and indeed unknown to those interacting in the field. Privileged students may have been born into the game and are therefore unaware of their position of advantage in the field (Bourdieu, 1990); whereas low-SES students coming into the field of HE may have difficulties understanding and navigating this space. The concept of field assists researchers to "uncover the workings of power and inequality in particular social spaces" (Bathmaker, 2015, p. 65), concepts which will be examined as part of this research project.

2.8 Education, work and gendered identities

Experiences of education and the workplace for individuals are inexorably connected to their habitus, cultural and social capitals, family backgrounds, SES status, as well as gendered identities (Connell et al., 2013). It is not always easy to pinpoint which of these factors has the most influence on particular individuals' identity development. Nevertheless, as this study focusses only on male learners, it is worthwhile exploring the literature around gendered experiences of education and the workplace with a particular focus on males in the Australian context.

2.8.1 *Males in education*

Traditionally, schools and universities have privileged males and male perspectives (Burke, 2009; Connell & Pearse, 2015). It is only in more recent times with the influence of feminism and feminist scholars who have questioned this privileged position, that gradual improvements have been made in access and equity for females in educational systems (Burke, 2009; Eate et al., 2017). However, debate continues over the so called "crisis" in boys' education due to its ongoing "feminisation" (Armstrong et al., 2018; Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2013). Weaver-Hightower (2010) describes this as the "boy turn" in gender equity and educational reform. Such crisis discussion is frequently punctuated with anti-feminist rhetoric, often led by populist writers and journalists rather than academics (Browne & Fletcher, 1995; Dent, 2018). In reality, research does not support the premise that advancement of girls has led to the decline in boys' education (Cappon, 2011; Eate et al., 2017; Mac an Ghaill, 1996; Vickers, 2013). In fact, differences in academic outcomes are much more closely aligned to familial SES and parental education levels than by gender (Skelton, 2001; Vickers, 2013).

It must be noted, however, that for some males, particularly those who are not white, middle-class and heteronormative, progress through education systems may be impeded due to cultural expectations around ideals of masculinity (Connell, 2002). These behaviours, notably "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), "laddishness" (Jackson, 2010; Stahl, 2015b) and "toxic masculinity" (Flood, 2018) can be exhibited both inside and outside the classroom.

Hegemonic masculinity can be understood as the pattern of practice that allows men's dominance over women and other less assertive men to continue (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Combined with hegemonic masculinity on display in educational settings, is often the loutish or disruptive behaviour of some working-class boys which has been referred to as laddishness particularly in the UK (Jackson, 2010; Stahl, 2015b) or "larrikinism"[7] in Australian parlance. This can be seen as a reaction to feelings of alienation and disempowerment from the educational system where some boys engage in disruptive behaviour (Connell, 1989; Stahl, 2015b). A more extreme example of laddishness is toxic masculinity, a term used to describe extremely negative aspects of male behaviour (Flood, 2018). Flood (2018) describes toxic masculinity as "the narrow, traditional, or stereotypical norms of masculinity which

[7] In Australia, a "larrikin" is a boisterous, often badly behaved young man (A. Stevenson, 2010).

shape boys, and men's lives. These norms include the expectations that boys and men must be active, aggressive, tough, daring, and dominant" (p. 14). However, other scholarship disputes these categories of male behaviour as being too limited to describe the range of masculinities in Australian society (Adegbosin et al., 2019).

The expectations and experiences for males in educational settings varies by SES status (Connell, 1989). Low-SES males' disengagement with education has been found across many English-speaking locations, including Australia (Burke, 2007; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell et al., 2013; O'Shea et al., 2016), the UK (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Raven, 2018; Reay, 2002b; Reay et al., 2010; Stahl, 2015b), the USA (Fredricks et al., 2019; Henry et al., 2012; Weaver-Hightower, 2010) and Canada (Lehmann, 2014). However, it is simplistic to assume that the experiences of all males or all females are consistent, and that gender alone determines educational outcomes. The salience of language, culture and class play a significant role in the lived experiences of students. While gender remains an important issue regarding access and opportunity in schools and HE, it cannot be easily untangled from these other factors.

As previously noted, the reason that many blue-collar male students decide to attend university is the perception that it provides a useful pathway to employment (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Lehmann, 2009). Research in Australia by Abbott-Chapman (2011) indicates that blue-collar families who encourage their children to further their education mainly do so for practical and utilitarian reasons. These reasons are predominantly related to employment outcomes rather than an elevated sense of self actualisation available through higher learning. This was supported by Lehmann's (2009) study in Canada which concluded that as working-class students lacked access to necessary social capital their only access to middle-class careers was through professional applied degrees, thus making university a "form of vocational education for working-class students" (p. 144). According to Danielsson et al. (2019) in their Swedish study, male working-class students often favour enrolments into Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM)[8] subjects, which have more practical and vocationally oriented outcomes.

Racial and cultural differences also influence male educational outcomes. Inequity in education continues to be experienced for those from culturally diverse backgrounds (Koshy,

[8] In Australia in 2020 around 445,100 people were studying Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics (STEM) fields with 72% of these students being men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020a).

2020). Research suggests that in the USA, racial factors can impede the progress of many students, particularly males from minority groups (Kim & Hargrove, 2013; Weaver-Hightower, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Kim and Hargrove (2013) note that black men comprised “less than 6% of the entire U.S. undergraduate population in 2010” (p. 300) lagging well behind their female counterparts and other ethnic groups. Furthermore, refugee students from a diversity of backgrounds also face disadvantage as they navigate the HE landscape both internationally (Stevenson, 2019) and within Australia (Baker, Field, et al., 2021; Bond et al., 2007; Earnest et al., 2010; Hartley et al., 2018). For Australian students from Indigenous[9] backgrounds, statistics of those completing university remain well below those from other groups (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2019a). While there has been a notable increase in Indigenous enrolments, moving to 2% in 2019 (up from 1.6% in 2014) (Koshy, 2020, p. 6) the numbers remain well below those of other students particularly for Indigenous males (Foley, 2013; Frawley et al., 2017; Shalley et al., 2019).

There are many reasons why working-class males do not access HE. They include pressure to be the family breadwinner (O’Shea et al., 2017); lack of family role models; and shame and stigma associated with academic success (Stahl, 2021). These can feed into students’ habitus and perceptions of self. This is why further research is needed into their complex journeys.

A major contributor to our recent understanding of males in education is the work of Stahl and his colleagues using qualitative methods particularly narrative inquiry (Stahl, 2015, 2021; Stahl & Loeser, 2018; Stahl & McDonald, 2022; Stahl et al., 2020). Stahl has produced a number of detailed studies focussing primarily on males from low SES backgrounds both in the UK and Australia. In Australia, Stahl’s work with colleagues has included researching individual mature-age students (Stahl & Loeser, 2018) as well as group case studies (Stahl, 2021) providing in-depth qualitative research primarily using semi-structured interviews. Much of Stahl’s work focuses on student change and learner identity. His research (Stahl et al., 2020) has also incorporated the possible selves framing to examine masculine identities with a group of Australian school boys in presenting three longitudinal case studies where the participants developed their unique sense of agency based on their imagined masculinities into the future.

[9] Indigenous (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) students: Students self-report as Indigenous to their higher education provider, either at the time of their enrolment or during their studies (Koshy, 2020).

In particular Stahl's (2021) recent research on working-class masculinities in Australian HE foregrounded the journeys of six boys transitioning into university using semi-structured interviews. The conclusion was that despite their working-class backgrounds these "upwardly mobile working-class men" (Stahl 2021, p.184) were able to negotiate a sense of belonging at university. However, Stahl (2021) cautions that the group comprised a small minority and that "many universities are still predominantly composed of the middle class, upper middle class and elites" (p.184).

Notwithstanding the detailed findings by Stahl and other researchers there remains a gap in our understanding of blue-collar mature-age males who access university through enabling courses. This research project addresses this lack of knowledge of students' individual and collective experiences in the field of play of contemporary HE.

2.8.2 *Males in the workplace*

Differences persist in both educational and workplace experiences for men and women. Despite improvements to equality between genders in Australian society,[10] there remain persistent gendered roles in many occupations. The workplace in Australia remains highly segregated along gender lines (Vickers, 2013), particularly in non-professional areas. Industries with the highest proportion of men are construction (87%) and mining (83%), while for women it is health care and social assistance[11] (78%); and education and training (72%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020b), which are sometimes referred to as "pink-collar" occupations (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2016; Parker, 2017).

Notwithstanding the differences in employment types and rates of pay, the situation for blue-collar males can be challenging. Research has indicated that societal expectations for males, particularly those from blue-collar backgrounds, are often influenced by gendered stereotypes especially those associated with being a family provider (Archer et al., 2001; Jensen, 2008; Patty, 2018; Reay et al., 2010; Stahl, 2015b). According to Stahl and Loeser (2018) paid work provides an important means of identity for many blue-collar males. The importance of the male as family "bread-winner" persists (Adegbosin et al., 2019; Werth, 2011) and the "battler" or working-class man continues to provide an important role model

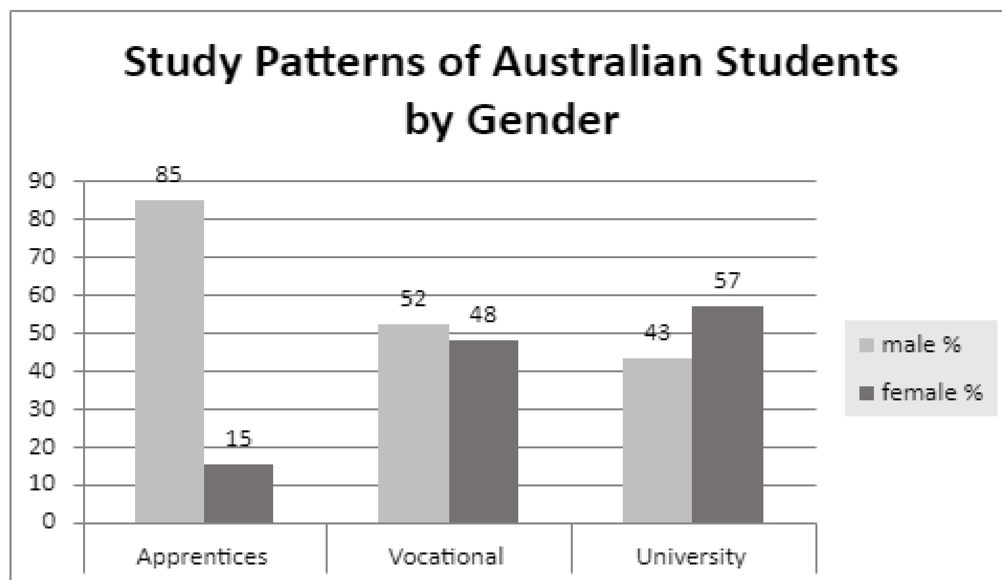
[10] The following laws were introduced: Federal Sex Discrimination Act 1984 and NSW Anti-Discrimination Act 1977 (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2021).

[11] Social assistance includes supporting people with childcare, aged care and disability services with many workers female and working part-time (Australian Government, 2021b).

in Australian society (Stahl & Loeser, 2018; Whitman, 2013). A similar expectation has been noted in the USA for males from low-SES backgrounds where there is pressure to be "man of the house" providing income support for their families (Roy & Jones, 2014, p. 2).

Male students transitioning from blue-collar to white-collar careers move through a variety of educational sectors which in Australia differ in their enrolments by gender, outlined below in Figure 1 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020b; NCVER, 2021). Data for 2020 show that while vocational education is fairly balanced between men and women, there is a large disparity in the uptake of apprenticeships. Males comprise 85% of apprentice and traineeship places, while the situation in universities and enabling courses is reversed, reflecting a lower percentage of male student enrolments of only 43% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020a; NCVER, 2021). These different education patterns for males and females in Australia lead to differing and gendered experiences of employment.

Figure 1: Graph of Study Patterns of Australian Students by Gender



(Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020a, 2020b; NCVER, 2021)

Due to the changing nature of the economy, outlined in Chapter 1, some males from low-SES backgrounds may decide to commence university studies later in life as mature-age learners. Often this is necessitated due to major changes in their workplaces resulting in the need for higher-order skills' levels (Heath, 2020). For males in blue-collar areas, education is viewed primarily as a way of gaining credentials to improve employment prospects rather than a rite of passage (Lehmann, 2009). Mature-age males from blue-collar backgrounds remain a small but growing section of contemporary student cohorts, (Coelli et al., 2012; Irwin et al., 2019;

Pitman et al., 2016) however, there remains limited research on their lived experiences particularly for those entering studies through enabling pathways (Armstrong et al., 2018; Fenge, 2011; Hancock, 2012; O'Shea et al., 2012; Rose, 2012).

2.8.3 *Identities in transition*

A significant challenge for adult learners from blue-collar backgrounds can be moving from the familiarity of the home and workplace into a different setting, such as a university, which can lead to confrontation with their established identities. Identity can be seen as a "person's social role and his or her perception of it" (Corsini, 2001, p. 468). Our identities continue to develop as we move through the life cycle and deal with challenges that are encountered along the way (Bee, 2000).

For Australian males, from blue-collar backgrounds, commencing university presents some unique challenges particularly to their gendered identities which can "be a time of substantial identity work especially for students from working-class backgrounds" according to Stahl (2021, p.13). Research by Habel and Whitman (2016) with Australian enabling students using phenomenological methodology has noted that some students who enter HE through enabling courses have reported "a difficult transition, a sense of isolation from their previous identity and family relationships" (p.80). As noted earlier, the situation can prove challenging for these learners who may feel uncomfortable and imposters in this new environment (Ramsey & Brown, 2018; Stahl & Loeser, 2018). This may lead to the formation of a "hybridised form of masculinity" (Ward, 2014, p. 721) or cleft habitus (Bourdieu et al., 1999) as they navigate their roles as mature-age learners.

Changing roles as older learners presents further difficulties for many students in transition, with research suggesting that for many blue-collar men, workforce participation may provide affirmation of the male roles of provisioning, caretaking and production (Stahl, 2015a). Therefore, changing to the role of tertiary student can be problematic with the intersection of social class and masculinity, a theme explored in Reed's (2011) research in the USA. The author notes that low-SES white males are less successful than their female counterparts in attaining college success, positing that these male students experience a disconnect between their blue-collar masculine habitus and the perceived effeminate middle-class culture of post-secondary education (Reed, 2011; Weaver-Hightower, 2010). Similarly, Stahl (2015a) and Raven (2018) have noted the tensions experienced by working-class males in university settings.

Baxter and Britton (2001) posit that universities are key sites for the development of new identities but that this process can be a “painful transition” (p. 87) for many mature-age students from working-class backgrounds. However, their research was conducted in the UK where class divisions in particular are arguably more rigid than in Australia (Sheppard & Biddle, 2015). With the advent of WP there has been a gradual broadening of university entry and more diversity of student enrolment particularly in less elite institutions (Marginson, 2016). Moreover, Adegbosin et al. (2019) caution “that the lived reality of gender is complex and diverse, but there is constant pressure to simplify, stereotype and overly reduce this complexity, even in academic circles” (Adegbosin et al., 2019, p. 566). Furthermore, as noted in recent research by Stahl et al. (2020), the situation may be changing for younger Australian males from working-class backgrounds who are more exposed to the advantages of HE in their interactions with peers in the workplace leading to the development of “upwardly mobile” aspirations (2020, p. 16). Further research in this area will determine if this is a developing phenomenon.

2.9 Long-term outcomes, transformation and future selves

Students commencing tertiary studies from the workplace undergo a substantial transition both academically and socially which can be difficult to negotiate (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012). When examining overall statistics, the challenges in pursuing a university degree are still significant. The “drop-out” or attrition rate can be used as a proxy for measuring success or lack thereof for these students. In 2018, the national attrition rate for commencing domestic bachelor students across HE providers was 14.6% (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2019b), however it is important to note that there are significant differences in attrition rates between fields of study and student demographics as well as variations between institutions (Pitman & Koshy, 2015; Pitman et al., 2016). The major factors influencing attrition include being male, aged over 25, coming from a low-SES background, being Indigenous and living in a regional or remote area (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). Additionally, attrition rates are higher for students at regional campuses (Nelson et al., 2016). Students who drop out of studies leave university with no credentials, loss of income for a time and a student debt which needs to be repaid into the future. Factors of intersectionality are apparent in these student outcomes (May et al., 2016).

2.9.1 *Outcomes for students*

Outcomes for students in HE are regularly measured by governments and universities with a particular emphasis on rates of attrition and retention (Australian Government, 2019a). While it is important to keep track of such data, there are other outcomes for students which, while harder to measure, may be of more significance. The benefits of HE for the individuals involved are substantially more than the credentials obtained and a professional occupation status. Achievement in university and education more broadly also leads to improved outcomes in income, health and life expectancy (Abbott-Chapman, 2011). Additionally, Norton and Cherastidtham (2018) have noted that there are benefits even for those who do not complete their studies, such as learning useful skills and making lasting friendships and connections.

There are many factors which lead to students from under-represented groups having higher attrition rates at university. However, it is important not to lay the blame on individual students and their perceived inadequacies or lack of academic capital. Rather than focussing on negative aspects of students' experiences, it is worth considering an alternative view of students' capacity that is espoused by Yosso (2005). She posits community cultural wealth as an alternative form of capital for students from different backgrounds who bring their own capital to their studies (Yosso, 2005). Rather than viewing students through a deficit lens of what they do not possess, Yosso asks us to focus on the very rich capital that students bring with them to study from their communities, particularly mature-age students who may have vast life experiences. Reay (2012) and O'Shea (2015) also would prefer to view students from a strengths perspective, examining what institutions can do to build on the very rich capitals that students possess before entering the institution.

2.9.2 *Transformational learning*

Notwithstanding the challenges of returning to study, the impact of education can be transformational to the lives of mature-age students involved, particularly those from blue-collar and low-SES backgrounds (Mezirow, 1997). For Mezirow (1997, 2000), who was one of the leading advocates of the benefits of adult education, learning involves more than filling empty vessels with knowledge. Based on constructivist learning theory, his initial studies in the 1970s conducted with mature-age female students provided the catalyst for what he termed transformational learning (Mezirow, 1978b). These women were resuming their education in order to secure employment. Using a qualitative study Mezirow (1978a) sought

to identify factors that impeded or facilitated progress in their courses. What he found was that the participants had undergone what Mezirow (1978a, 1978b) described as "personal transformation" and identified 10 phases that they could experience. He posited that students move through these phases before transformation takes place. Students' frames of reference are challenged including the "cognitive, conative and emotional components" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5) as they engage in critical reflection. The outcome for the students, he observed, were changes in their perspectives as they confronted some of their previously held values.

Transformative learning can be considered "a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions" (Kitchenham, 2008, p.104), while Merriam and Bierema (2014) describe transformational learning as dramatic and fundamental change involving cognitive, emotional and social interactions. These can have a profound impact on the learners involved. However, the transformational impact of further education has been increasingly downplayed in current discussion on educational outcomes (Black, 2018; Golding & Foley, 2011).

Critics of the concept of transformational learning, notably Newman (2012), describe all learning as being about change which should be the expectation from well-resourced and delivered programs. Furthermore, other scholars state that attention should be given to changing or transforming society rather than focussing on individual transformation (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Notwithstanding these criticisms, transformational learning remains a useful concept for viewing the learning journeys of adults from diverse backgrounds.

Transformational learning does not narrowly focus on retention, attrition and employment outcomes but rather on the personal transformation of adult learners. This learning for personal growth, development and transformation has been significantly under-emphasised or completely ignored in neo-liberal discourses (Atkinson, 2018; Freire, 1970; Yasukawa & Black, 2016). Atkinson (2018) has argued that many policy makers consider learning as "a quantifiable, transferable and saleable commodity based on prescriptive pre-set employability skills" (p. 505), which is a very narrow view of the purpose of education.

2.9.3 *Possible selves*

A further lens for viewing the learning experiences of students from low-SES and blue-collar families is provided by using the possible selves framework. Originally devised by Markus and Nurius (1986), with later development by other researchers (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2021; Harrison, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019; Stahl et al., 2020), this approach asks students to reflect on who they are and who they could become in the future, including both positive and negative possibilities. According to Markus and Nurius (1986) being able to visualise one's possible self allows for thinking about what one would like to become as well as what one is afraid of becoming, thus providing a "conceptual link between cognition and motivation" (p. 954). Inherent in the concept of possible selves is the notion of future aspirations or possibilities of what may occur (Stahl et al., 2020). Simultaneously students may hold an array of visions of themselves at a future time. Possible selves is a useful concept for those undergoing transitional life periods, such as moving from the workplace to university study (Stevenson, 2019), when both affective and cognitive processes are in play (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). This approach provides a framework for developing educational research particularly with mature-age students entering HE from diverse backgrounds (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2021; Henderson et al., 2019; Stahl et al., 2020).

Researchers in the UK have explored university students' possible selves as they attempt to imagine their future identities (Henderson et al., 2019; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). These are "agentic stories about how students negotiate new roles into the future" (Stevenson & Clegg, 2013, p. 27). Similarly, Gale and Parker (2015) note that aspiration may be viewed as a cultural capacity for change in students' lives. However, Stevenson (2019) has cautioned that students from poorer backgrounds do not necessarily have access to the material and emotional resources needed to become their future selves as do more privileged students.

Recent Australian research with both secondary and tertiary students by Delahunty (2022) using the possible selves model enabled "positive but realistic ways to understand the needs of students from regional and remote areas" (p.15). Students from these areas often face multiple disadvantages. Using possible selves allowed "the student voice to emerge, giving insight and clarity around how students imagined their future, the end-states they were drawn to, and how they might be working towards those" (Delahunty, 2022, p.15).

Furthermore Jones et al. (2021), in the UK, adopted the possible selves model for their qualitative research project with further education colleges to understand why there were

low rates of students transitioning to university. One of the benefits of applying a possible selves framing was, according to these authors, the implied move away from discredited discourse of aspiration raising discussed in Section 2.2 of this thesis.

However, the possible selves model has its own flaws and complications. Erikson (2007) reminds us that "motivation is not formed in a cultural vacuum" (p.23) while Henderson (2019) cautions that ignoring students' environment and focussing primarily on individual experiences could undermine our understanding of inherent inequalities in the HE system. While the studies above bring added insight into how the possible selves model can be used with tertiary students, few studies focus specifically on male students entering university from the workforce who would bring with them different perspectives on their possible positive and negative selves, based on diverse lived experiences.

Rather than taking a deterministic approach to the future of students from low-SES backgrounds, university can be viewed as providing an opportunity to all students to bring about change for themselves and their futures (Armstrong et al., 2018; Hancock, 2012). Education itself can play a transformative role in students' lives leading to changed outlook, status and perception of their roles in society (Lehmann, 2009; Mezirow, 1981; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Stuart, 2012).

2.10 Summary

This chapter has reviewed the literature related to the impact of globalisation on the economy and HE with particular emphasis on the effects of these changes on the lives of blue-collar and low-SES males in Australia. The phenomenon of WP and enabling education have been examined as well as the nature of social mobility both in Australia and internationally. Included has been the theoretical framing for this project, notably cultural capital theory. The chapter has explored the impact of education and its interaction with gender and identity. Finally, the long-term outcomes for students were examined, including transformational learning theory and possible selves' literature.

The following chapter details the methodology of the research commencing with an overview and the research questions. Following these is an examination of the theoretical underpinnings and perspectives as well as details of the research background, design and analysis.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Overview and research questions

During recent decades, both in Australia and internationally, there has been a momentous change in the volume and demographic backgrounds of students accessing HE (Marginson, 2016). This has been driven by many factors including the ongoing transition in developed countries from industrial to service-based economies, as well as government policies, which promote increased social inclusion in HE so that university cohorts now comprise a more heterogeneous range of students (Gidley et al., 2010; May et al., 2016; Riddell & Weedon, 2014). Research has begun to develop on the impact of WP on the personal, nuanced experiences of the students themselves (Habel et al., 2016; May et al., 2016; O'Shea, 2020a; Pitman et al., 2016; Stahl & Loeser, 2018). This project adds to research in the field by exploring the lived experiences of those who form part of the WP phenomenon.

In the previous chapter, the literature related to WP in HE, and its impact on students involved was presented. In this chapter, a detailed account of the current research study will be presented. This study is an exploratory one which aims to address several important questions regarding the impact that returning to study, as mature-age learners, has on those males undertaking the process of moving through an enabling program into university studies. The research questions are quite broad in nature. This has allowed for various findings and viewpoints to emerge from the data in an inductive manner. The voices and experiences of individuals as well as their collective experiences are represented.

The main research question was:

What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into higher education from an enabling course?

In order to further develop an understanding of these experiences a number of sub-questions were asked,

1. *In what ways do learners' social and cultural capitals impact upon their experiences of transition?*

2. *How do existing identities influence the students' transition into university?*
3. *What are the educational and personal outcomes for male students during this process of transition?*

This chapter will outline the methodological underpinnings of the research including the theoretical framework that was adopted. The chapter also explains the particular approaches to recruitment, data collection and analysis that have been utilised. The qualitative approach has given space for the research participants to voice their experiences and has allowed me to further analyse and explore the stories narrated by the participants involved. This approach was informed by my theoretical perspectives, which are as follows:

Table 3: Structure of Methodology Chapter

Section	Contents	
Theoretical Underpinnings and Perspective	• Ontology • Epistemology	• Narrative case study • Narrative inquiry • Case study
Research Background	• Background to the study • Site details	
Research Design	• Insider research • Recruitment of participants • The participants • Interviews of students and teachers	• Participant reflection • Researcher reflexivity • Other sources of information
Data Analysis	• Transcription • Coding • The analysis process	

3.2 Theoretical Underpinnings

3.2.1 *Ontology*

Ontology may be described as a "philosophical belief system about the nature of social reality" (Hesse-Biber, 2017, p. 6). Broadly speaking ontological positions for research may be described as "realist" or "relativist" where realist perspectives are based on beliefs that the real world exists independently from us and can be objectively described and analysed predominantly with the use of quantitative methods. Researchers operating from this

perspective rely on traditional scientific methodology using terminology such as objectivity, validity, reliability and empiricism in order to explain their positivist or post-positivist worldview, which regards reality as being knowable, quantifiable and predictable. Positivists espouse that "physical and social reality is independent of those who observe it and that observations of this reality, if unbiased, constitute scientific knowledge" (Gall et al., 2007, p. 16).

In contrast, those researchers who hold a relativist ontology reject such direct explanations and regard the world as being far less structured and diverse with understandings based on specific cultural and social influences (King & Horrocks, 2010). These researchers make much more use of qualitative research methods based upon this ontological viewpoint where social reality is understood to be constructed by the individuals who take part in it (Gall et al., 2007). The ontological perspective in this study recognises that there is a multitude of diverse meanings, which may be gleaned from the world around us and that there is not one particular way of viewing society. Social reality may only be superficially understood, and each researcher brings their own perspective to the study, which is why social constructivism is a particularly effective approach for this project. Logically therefore, in order to understand more fully the journey of the research participants we need to delve deeply into their worlds and their perceptions through qualitative means.

3.2.2 *Epistemology*

It is important to note that research is not merely collecting data and drawing conclusions, rather any research study needs to rest on an understanding of how the world is viewed and what is meant by knowledge itself. This is known as epistemology, which can be termed the relationship between the inquirer and the known which derives from the Greek word *epistêmê,* meaning knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Sykes, 1979). Epistemology may be described as "the philosophical theory of knowledge" (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 8) or when specifically related to research "the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology" of the researcher (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). Scholars from a positivist or post-positivist theoretical perspective then rely upon an objectivist epistemology that assumes that truth can be known from their observations of the natural world.

This study takes a different epistemological standpoint. It assumes, conversely, that knowledge is a human construct rather than an objective truth, therefore social

constructivism is a preferable epistemological position to take. The focus of the constructivist researcher is to discover the way that meaning is interpreted and constructed. Knowledge and meaning are contingent upon human practices where meaning is made within the social context itself not from an external source (Crotty, 1998). Individuals and societies create their own reality which may differ from place to place as they are transmitted by various social agencies and processes (Gall et al., 2007).

Social constructivism allows meaning to be made from examining a complexity of views and interpretations arising from the data collected rather than imposing a predetermined construct before engagement with the participants; that is, using an inductive rather than deductive approach (Creswell, 2013). Using an iterative approach to data collection and analysis, combined with my reflexive practice of journal keeping allowed me to construct meaning from participants' narratives (Charmaz, 2005, p. 508).

The interaction of the researcher with those she researches, the participants, is of primary importance to constructivists. Others' lives can only be fully understood and appreciated if they are examined in a place and time context as this has a marked impact on their agency and power in various situations (Habel et al., 2016). Charmaz has noted that "truth can be local, relative, historically based, situational and contextual" (Charmaz, 2006, as cited in Puddephatt, 2006, p. 9). The participants in the current study were mature-age male students enrolled in a regional campus who experienced change and dislocation as they moved from a workplace environment into the unfamiliar space of university study. Therefore, this project attempted to move beyond the policies and rhetoric associated with the WP agenda and delve much more deeply into the lived experiences of those returning to education and learning. In this way, a rich set of data was produced, giving an in-depth understanding of this specific cohort of male students at a particular place and time.

For the purposes of this study, the means to gain a full appreciation of the participants' experiences was best explored using the qualitative approach known as narrative case study. This enabled the individuals' as well as the group's stories to emerge throughout the research process in an iterative manner, which is described below.

3.3 Theoretical Perspective

Overview: Narrative case study

Due to the nature of the phenomenon being investigated, I adopted a qualitative methodology. Rather than focussing on a large cohort of students my focus was on one group (n=10) of learners so that a deeper understanding could be achieved of their individual experiences, enabling a fuller examination of the research questions.

The specific methodology employed for this project was narrative case study inquiry, which combined both the storytelling aspects of the narrative approach with the bounded parameters of case study methodology. This encompassed a strategy which focussed on the in-depth, holistic and in-context study of one or more cases using multiple sources of data (Punch, 2006). Creswell (2013) describes a narrative study as one which gathers data though the collection of stories, reporting the individuals' experiences and chronologically ordering the meaning of those experiences. Furthermore, according to Brandell and Varkas (2001), the narrative case study is a research instrument that is used for the in-depth study of various social and clinical problems, to understand stages or phases in processes, and to investigate a phenomenon within its environmental context. This narrative case study approach enabled narration of the stories of the 10 individual participants on their journeys, as well as outlining the story of the group's progress entering tertiary study. In this way, this project has combined the best aspects of both narrative and case study enquiry which are outlined below.

3.3.1 *Narrative inquiry*

The term "narrative" is used in common parlance; however, it holds more specific meanings for those researchers using qualitative inquiry. One of the leading writers in the field, Riessman (2008), outlines that

> the term narrative in the human sciences can refer to texts at several levels that overlap: stories told by research participants…interpretive accounts developed by the investigator based on interviews and fieldwork observation…and even the narrative a reader constructs after engaging with the participant's and investigator's narratives (p. 6).

While narratives are open to differing interpretations, they remain both a personal yet powerful means of communication, which for the participants in this project, enabled them to relay their own experiences in meaningful detail.

Storytelling is an age-old tradition across all human societies, cultures and languages. It is a way of making sense of the complexity and disorder we all experience in our daily lives. The stories of the 10 participants could be examined in all their richness by using a narrative approach, which enabled a nuanced and detailed understanding of their transition into university. However, a narrative cannot be understood as a complete truth or understanding but as a way of giving meaning to a person's life experiences. Narratives make use of

> imagery to construct identity, including symbols, objects and metaphors that are dependent upon the cultural and historical context we experience….narrative knowing is a fundamental means through which people come to understand themselves, organising interpretations of the world in storied form (King & Horrocks, 2010, pp. 211 & 231).

Narrators attempt to make sense of their personal experience in relation to cultural discourses in local and international contexts (Chase, 2011). Further, as noted by O'Shea and Stone (2011) "narrative analysis is an interpretative approach, necessitating interpretation from both narrator and researcher, leading to a joint construction of meaning" (p. 278).

Life stories and life histories began to be used as methodological approaches by researchers in the twentieth century, to examine the experiences of those whose stories were little known by mainstream society and who often held low social status. This approach provided a way of understanding and interpreting the meaning of their experiences (Chase, 2011; Riessman, 2008). Life stories may be explained as the story we tell about our lives while life histories locate the life within its historical context (King & Horrocks, 2010). Developing further from life stories and life histories, narrative inquiry has emphasised the importance that the voice of the narrator gives to his or her own storytelling. The researcher must become a patient listener and interlocutor so that a successful rapport can develop with the participants. Despite its challenges narrative inquiry has some important methodological advantages in generating and interpreting biographical data (Britton & Baxter, 1999). It provides a depth of understanding of the multi-layered context of other people's lives (Creswell, 2013).

Each of the participants in this study had his own unique story, even though all were following similar pathways. Their individual experiences were able to be foregrounded by using the narrative approach. Narrative inquiry presents a clear way of developing an understanding of the lived experience of others by listening to their personal stories as they

narrate them (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). However, it is a complex process. Chase (2011) cautions that "narrative interviewing requires emotional maturity, sensitivity and life experience – all of which may take years to develop" (p. 423). The open-ended questions used and conversational design of the interviews provided opportunities for the participants to outline their individual experiences as students. They detailed their engagement with learning at a mature-age on a regional university campus. I used data from these narratives to develop a fuller understanding of themes associated with the transition experiences for both the individuals and the group involved as they progressed through a period of their tertiary study. This proved to be a valuable research technique.

With any narrative inquiry, the success of the research is based largely on the relationship between the researcher and the subjects. This level of trust between the participants and myself developed over the 12-months of the research project as the students became more comfortable with disclosing sometimes highly personal information. The narrative process allowed me to compile rich sources of data enabling thick description of the participants' lived experiences.

3.3.2 *Case study*

Case study research "investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Case studies offer more "detail, richness, completeness, and variance…for the unit of study" (Flyvbjerg, 2011) than other forms of research. I was interested in exploring the experiences not only of the individual participants, but of the group as a whole. In order to achieve this, the narrative approach was supplemented with a case study design. The project focussed not only on single participants but also on these participants as a cohort of students experiencing a similar transition to university life at the same time as each other so a case study approach was appropriate.

Case studies have been used in both quantitative and qualitative research. The advantage that case study had for this research project was that it added rigour to the trustworthiness of the project by using multiple sources of information such as university and government documents, archival records, open-ended interviews as well as participant and researcher reflectivity. These added further rigour and depth to the analysis, providing thick description (Yin, 2009). Relying on information other than just the interviews of participants enabled the students' transition experiences to be explored more fully.

3.4 Research Background

The following section outlines the design of the research project. A description of the site chosen for the research will be given as well as an explanation of the timeline for the project. Additionally, the participants will be introduced and an outline of the interviews as well as other sources of information described.

3.4.1 *Site*

The research was conducted on the campus of a large regional Australian university, which has been given the pseudonym of Westbeach University. The main campus is located approximately two kilometres (kms) from the centre of a coastal city, encompassing 80 hectares of land, and at the time of this study had around 28,000 students enrolled onshore, 17.52% of whom were from low-SES backgrounds (University of "Westbeach", 2020). The College is located on this main campus and its students have access to the university facilities such as the library, sports facilities and other student support services.

In June 2015, the research participants for the current project enrolled in the 14-week UAP at the College. The cost of the course for students was $A3,096 which most students funded by accessing Australian Government student loans (Australian Government, 2021b). Course enrolments in UAP were much lower than in undergraduate studies with around 100 or fewer enrolling each academic session. At the time of this project, 77 students in total were enrolled in UAP, 40 males and 37 females.

UAP was developed by the College which delivers a range of programs for domestic and international students which were outlined in Chapter 1. Having UAP taught on the university campus allows students to become accustomed to academic studies before commencing undergraduate degrees (Habel et al., 2016; Hodges et al., 2013; Pitman et al., 2016). The university itself was located in a city undergoing what might be termed a regional transformation from an area dominated by heavy industry to a more service-based and tertiary economy (Australian Government, 2013, 2015; Beissel et al., 2013; Blackmore, 2001; Burrows et al., 2015).

3.5 Research Design

In order to develop the narrative case study, I used four components of data collection: student interviews; teacher interviews; students' written reflections; and my research journal. To gain further understanding I also compiled a collection of student, university and

government documents and reports. These enabled a fuller and more detailed examination of both the participants involved in the project as well as the environment of which they were a part. I was also mindful that I was researching at my place of work so needed to ensure this did not unduly impact on the research project or the participants. Ethics approval had been given by the university's ethics committee (see Appendix K).

3.5.1 *Insider research*

In working with participants from the institution where I was employed, it is vitally important to acknowledge the role this may have had on my relationship with the participants as the difference in status can affect participants' responses (Pelias, 2011). I worked as the Academic Support Co-ordinator at the College, a role intended to give added support to students rather than that of a Subject Co-ordinator or Head of School. As such, I was not directly in a position of authority over the participants; however, a power differential was inherent in the role I held. It must be acknowledged that my role as a representative of the College may have impacted upon the responses of the participants (Luck & Rossi, 2015). To minimise this impact the interviews were conducted in a neutral environment and participants were assured of privacy and confidentiality (see Appendix A). Interviews were conducted in a professional manner based on principles of mutual respect (Cook et al., 2013).

3.5.2 *Recruitment of participants*

As previously mentioned, I was interested in exploring particular issues relating to male students, predominantly those from diverse backgrounds. The 10 volunteer student participants comprised around a quarter of those eligible for participation. Participants were recruited in their first week of study at the College premises by means of an advertising flyer (see Appendix G). As an incentive to participate all participants received two free movie tickets. The research was advertised to all male UAP students so the sample who volunteered may be termed a convenience sample. Females were excluded due to the nature of the research questions, which focussed on male students only. Approval for the research was granted by the University Ethics Committee (see Appendix K).

Ten student participants volunteered, and each was given a pseudonym for the study. They were all interviewed by me, and their personal details are outlined in Table 4 as shown below. Participants were informed at the first interview that this was an ongoing project, and they would be required for three further interviews during the course of their studies. While

all agreed to this provision initially, it proved difficult to engage all the participants with the further interviews partially due to some of them withdrawing from or failing the UAP. As an added incentive, students who continued with the interviews received $A20 gift vouchers from an office supply store.

It had initially been envisaged that there would be a wide demographic range of participants, including their age and ethnic diversity. What eventuated was quite a homogenous demographic group with all the participants identifying as being from English-speaking and Caucasian backgrounds and aged from 20 to 35 years. However, despite a relatively narrow focus, the study did enable an in-depth insight into one cohort of male learners who were representative of the changing workplace and education patterns in the region.

3.5.3 *The participants*

It is important to note that students enrolled in enabling courses from diverse backgrounds are much more likely to withdraw from studies early and be less engaged with university (O'Rourke et al., 2013), while those who do complete enabling courses do not necessarily continue to undergraduate studies (Pitman et al., 2016). Factors such as age, low academic achievement and low-SES status are all associated with higher attrition (Higher Education Standards Panel, 2017).

Having 10 volunteers provided some variety of experiences and allowed for the inevitable attrition which is common for research over a 12-months project, particularly for volunteers from diverse backgrounds (O'Rourke et al., 2013). Table 4 below details the participants' backgrounds. The average age of participants was 22.1 years. Two were partnered, one with children, while the others were single males. All the participants had worked in unskilled, semi-skilled or trades backgrounds prior to enrolment which could be described as blue-collar jobs, however their families had mixed backgrounds with some families such as Sam's, focussing on construction work, while Terry's parents were both from white-collar professions. While the participants themselves had blue-collar backgrounds they resided in a range of geographic areas of mixed-SES status according to SEIFA[12], from Ben in an advantaged area (9/10) to Troy in a disadvantaged location (1/10). While none of the

[12] SEIFA Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas is an ABS product that ranks areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage. The indexes are based on information from the five-yearly Census of Population and Housing. Deciles range from highest advantage 10/10 to lowest 1/10.

participants' fathers had university qualifications, four of the participants' mothers had completed degrees, two of them as mature-age learners. Many of the participants had siblings who were university students. In total five of the 10 participants could be classified as FiF using the definition of students who are the first member of their immediate family, including siblings, to attend university (Luzeckyj et al., 2011).

This range of backgrounds made classifying the participants for the purposes of this project quite problematic. First-in-family was suitable for half the group only and strictly speaking they were not all low-SES due to their addresses. Due to differences in their mothers' and fathers' occupations the term "working-class" was not suitable and this term is not generally used by Australian scholars (Michell et al., 2015; Scanlon, 2014), although widely accepted internationally. Ultimately, I decided to favour the term blue-collar as all the participants had recently been employed in trades, services or other manual work or had been unemployed. While not ideal the term, blue-collar did seem to capture the general experiences of this particular group of students.

The 10 participants interviewed were generous enough to outline a great amount of detail about their lived experiences of returning to study as mature-age learners. Their individual stories have been developed as cameos outlined in Chapter 4.

Table 4: Details of Student Participants at Commencement of Research

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Previous Education Level	First-in-Family	UAP Stream	University course	SEIFA Index of relative socio-economic disadvantage 2016 Decile
Ben	24	Not disclosed	Year 11 TAFE Diploma	No	1	No enrolment	9
Colin	26	Single	Year 12 Vocational Diploma	No	3	International Relations	5
Dean	22	Single	Year 10 Apprenticeship	No	1	Health and PE	5
Jack	26	Single	Year 12	Yes	2	Nutrition Science	4
Kevin	21	Single	Year 12	Yes	2	No enrolment	4
Luke	25	Living with partner	Year 10 Trade certificate	No	2	Science	6
Mark	35	Married with four children	Year 12 Apprenticeship	Yes	3	Science	8
Sam	21	Single	Year 12	Yes	1	Social Science (Education for Change)	8
Terry	20	Single	Year 11	No	1	Business	4
Troy	21	Single	Year 12 TAFE Cert 111	Yes	2	No enrolment	1

3.5.4 *Student participant interviews*

The preliminary study (detailed in Chapter 2) informed the nature of questions asked of participants in the main research project, however, as the main project was conducted over a 12-month period, this allowed for a much greater depth of response on the part of the participants. In contrast to the preliminary study, individual interviews were used exclusively for the main study. This created opportunities for a variety of responses to be heard and

recorded where the participants had greater freedom to express their individual opinions confidentially.

Successful qualitative interviews are based upon building rapport with the participants, which comes with the development of trust with those being interviewed, enabling the participants to open up about their experiences (King & Horrocks, 2010). During the interviews for this project, the participants were encouraged to elaborate upon their answers and include other information about their lives that they felt comfortable to disclose. An advantage of semi-structured interviews is that the storyteller rather than the interviewer decides the direction of the conversation (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). Interviewing differs from ordinary spontaneous conversation in that one party does most of the questioning and the other does most of the responding (King & Horrocks, 2010). Rather than relying upon an overly structured set of questions, I needed to be a listener and not interrupt the flow of discussion that took place which allowed the participants to direct the topics of the interview. Using techniques such as sensitivity to non-verbal cues, effective use of probes and prompts and developing rapport with the participants over time, allowed for the facilitation of effective and insightful responses from the participants, thereby enabling in-depth data to be collected for the project.

I interviewed the students individually in a meeting room of the College with each interview lasting around 30 to 40 minutes. The location was private and in neutral territory for the students as it was not a staff member’s office or classroom. Each interview was based on a previously written set of open-ended questions approved by the university’s ethics committee (see Appendix C) and was digitally recorded. These recordings were later transcribed by me or a professional transcriber. I attempted to make the students feel relaxed and explained that they were not obliged to answer any questions about which they felt uncomfortable, and that any information they gave was strictly confidential. All participants were given written information to this effect (see Appendix A).

Narrative inquiry is based on gaining a detailed understanding of the lived experiences of participants. In order to achieve this the student participants were interviewed four times over the course of 12-months from June 2015 to June 2016 outlined below in Table 5. The data collected gave rich details of the participants’ experiences as both College and university students. It also allowed for a trusting relationship to develop between the participants and me, which is an important aspect of qualitative research.

3.5.5 *Interview schedule*

The initial plan for this research project was to interview the 10 student participants at four important times during their transition experience as well as the completion of a one-page written reflection of their experiences at the conclusion of the project. These times were chosen as they represented significant junctures in the students' transition experiences – commencing and finishing the UAP, and then commencing and completing their first semester of university study.

The interviews were not strictly separate from each other but worked as a continuing conversation between me and the participants. Topics raised in one interview were also discussed in later interviews, enabling the participants to elaborate upon their answers and to further develop the topics.

The first interviews: July 2015

Topics covered: Previous education and employment, family background, motivation to study, expectations, family and friends' expectations and feelings about studying.

The first set of interviews was conducted in June 2015. Seven semi-structured questions formed the basis of the interviews (see Appendix C). The questions concerned the 10 participants' previous experiences of education, their family and employment backgrounds as well as feelings about their first day back at study. The purpose of the interviews was to establish the beginnings of a relationship with the participants as well as to elicit some contextual information particularly regarding whether they were first in their family to attend university and details of their educational, social and family backgrounds.

The second interviews: September 2015

Topics covered: Knowledge of university, changes in and perceptions of self, positive and negative experiences, new friendships, learnings and relationships.

By the time of the second interview, students had completed the 14-weeks' UAP, so the interview was a time for reflection on the course itself and how the students were experiencing the transition to life as a full-time university student. Seven of the previous 10 students continued taking part in the interview process. Participants' answers from the first interview were used as triggers to commence the new set of interviews. Further questions comprised reflection upon their studies thus far as well as upon their own lives. They were

asked whether there had been any changes in their social and family relationships as a result of their studies. They were also questioned as to how they now perceived themselves as part of the wider community.

The third interviews: March 2016

Topics covered: Challenges or barriers to study, self-perception, feelings, peer interactions, future hopes and expectations.

The third interview marked the start of a new year and the juncture of the participants' progression from UAP into university, so it was a time of transition from the supportive and smaller College environment to that of the larger scale of the university proper. Six of the participants from the previous year took part in the third set of interviews. The attrition rate from the study is mirrored by the attrition rate of students coming back to university study through other enabling courses (O'Rourke et al., 2013; Whannell, 2013).

The remaining participants were questioned about adjusting to university expectations and any changes they had noticed in themselves. They were also asked how they perceived having younger students around them, particularly recent school leavers, and their feelings concerning this.

The fourth and final interviews: June 2016

Topics covered: Memorable experiences, changes to self, major milestones, "highs" and "lows", impact on family and friends, and impact of the research project.

Five participants remained for the final set of interviews, which was a time of reflection for the students and an opportunity for them to outline their experiences of the previous 12-months. Participants outlined extended accounts of their experiences over the course of the project. Now that some rapport had developed between the participants and me, the answers to the questions were generally longer and the interviews became more conversational which was beneficial for the narrative technique being utilised. This interview was an opportunity for exploring the highs and lows of the preceding 12-months. Participants were asked if, with the advantage of some hindsight, they thought their decisions to return to study as mature-age learners was beneficial. They also commented upon the effect, if any, that being part of the research project itself had on them. This gave them the opportunity to reflect on and evaluate the process of which they had been a part.

While I had anticipated completing all interviews with all student participants, not everyone was available despite repeated attempts to contact them. Details of interviews conducted, and the submission of written reflection pieces can be seen below in Table 5.

Table 5: Final Interview Schedule for Student Participants

Participant pseudonym	Interview 1: June 2015	Interview 2:September 2015	Interview 3: March 2016	Interview 4: June 2016	Written Reflection: July 2016	Total Interviews/ Reflections	Academic progress
Ben	✓	✕	✕	✕	✕	1	Withdrew from UAP after four weeks.
Dean	✓	✓	✓	✕	✓	4	UAP and Uni. session
Troy[13]	✓	✓	✓	✕	✕	3	Completed UAP but did not progress to university
Colin	✓	✓	✓	✓	✕	4	UAP and Uni. session
Jack	✓	✓	✕	✓	✕	3	UAP and Uni. session
Kevin	✓	✕	✕	✕	✕	1	Completed UAP but did not progress to university
Luke	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	UAP and Uni. session
Mark	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	UAP and Uni. session
Sam	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5	UAP and Uni. session
Terry	✓	✕	✕	✕	✕	1	UAP and Uni. session
Total Interviews and Reflections	**10**	**7**	**6**	**5**	**4**	**32**	

[13] Troy completed three interviews; however, the third interview was conducted at the beginning of his repeating the UAP.

As can be seen in Table 5 above the participants varied in their interactions with the research project. While Luke, Mark and Sam took part in all activities, Ben withdrew early and was only briefly engaged. Of the 10 participants who commenced the UAP in this study, seven, Colin, Dean, Jack, Luke, Mark, Sam, and Terry successfully transitioned to university. Of these seven, Sam failed the first university semester and withdrew while the other six continued with their studies at the time of this research.

Although not all participants were able to attend all four interviews and complete the written reflection, their transcripts have been included as part of the data collection to give as wide a range of views and experiences as possible. Despite these difficulties, the data which emerged from both the initial and subsequent interviews was richly descriptive and highlighted the many issues and considerations that this cohort of male students encountered when moving from an enabling program into a HE setting.

3.5.6 *Teacher participant interviews: October 2016*

In addition to interviewing the students, five teachers of the participants were interviewed in October 2016, using open-ended questioning, to garner their perspectives of the students' transition (see Appendix F). The rationale for including teacher interviews was to gather as many perspectives as possible about students' experiences in UAP. Yin (2009) recommends relying on multiple sources to "corroborate any insight" (p.107) given by the participants. While valuable, the insights of the teachers were not meant to overshadow those of the student participants who are the main focus of this study

Questioning the teachers of the student participants opened an additional lens of inquiry. While the student participants were interviewed four times the teachers were interviewed only once at the conclusion of the UAP session involving the participants. As this time was after the initial student interviews it allowed for useful comparisons with the initial student participant responses, and I was able to modify the teachers' questions based on the students' experiences.

All teachers were experienced staff members and their transcripts provided further insight into the progression of students through an enabling course. Significantly, rather than solely relying on my own understanding of the students' journeys, interviewing teachers in UAP from different genders and various subject areas offered differing viewpoints on the progress

of the participants. As noted, they discussed UAP students in general, but not specifically the 10 student participants. Due to the teachers also being my work colleagues, the interviews were less formal and more conversational in nature. Outlined were: the backgrounds and challenges the teachers had witnessed amongst the student cohort, what factors were similar in successful students and any differences they had noted between male and female students. The teacher participants were also given pseudonyms.

As these teachers who were interviewed were from my place of work, they were recruited via an email sent from another party to avoid any sense of coercion on the part of the staff involved (see Appendix J). It was initially envisaged that three staff members would be interviewed however, as five volunteered, it was decided to interview them all. This allowed for a wider range of data from which to draw information and did not discriminate against any teacher who volunteered.

The five staff members, four female and one male, came from different discipline areas (see Table 6). The disparity in gender reflected the situation of this workplace where females largely outnumbered their male colleagues. Interviews were semi-structured, however, all the teachers were given an Information Sheet, asked the same overarching questions and assured that all information would remain confidential (see Appendices D and F). Each teacher participant signed a Consent Form (see Appendix E). The interviews took place in the College meeting room described earlier, and each was digitally recorded and later transcribed by a professional transcriber. Interviews lasted from 30 to 50 minutes each. The questioning technique was fairly informal with open-ended questioning and discussion forming part of the interviews conducted.

Table 6: Details of Teacher Participants

PSEUDONYM	GENDER	AGE	SUBJECTS	YEARS OF TEACHING UAP
Ellen	Female	47	Language and Literacy	5
Janet	Female	56	Australian Studies	6
Magda	Female	67	Language and Literacy	5
Rupert	Male	53	Chemistry	5

PSEUDONYM	GENDER	AGE	SUBJECTS	YEARS OF TEACHING UAP
Sally	Female	36	Australian Studies	4

3.5.7 *Participant reflectivity*

One disadvantage of me as the researcher conducting and transcribing many of the interviews was that it was possible that my voice might dominate the voices of the participants (Riach, 2009). In an effort to gain an alternative perspective and enhance the trustworthiness of the data, the student participants were encouraged to write reflective pieces about their transition experience. Each participant was requested to write a one-page reflection on his previous 12-months of study, moving from the enabling course to university. This allowed for them to reflect on their transition and to present their ideas directly rather than being filtered by me as researcher. It gave an opportunity for the authentic voices of the participants to be presented.

Encouraging participants to reflect upon their own experiences opened “deeper and richer insights into the phenomena under investigation” (Takhar-Lail & Chitakunye, 2015, p. 2386). While not all participants completed the task, four participants, Dean, Luke, Mark and Sam, produced written reflections of their experiences. The personal reflections from these participants gave the research added depth. The data from these participants was rich and detailed providing a fuller picture of their varied journeys. They have been included as part of the narrative case study analysis.

3.5.8 *Researcher reflexivity*

To further develop the narrative case study, I decided to include personal conscious reflexivity via regular journal entries (Lincoln & Guba, 2006) in order to add to the authenticity of the data collection. Critical reflexivity is an important aspect of qualitative research which assisted in making meaning from the vast array of information collected (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). It is worthwhile to consider the diversity and complexity of our social location and internal contradictions which can "complicate and enrich the analysis of a qualitative research project" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 39). Qualitative research can become more reliable by the use of reflexivity, sharing experiences and insights with the reader, locating inquiry within the process and context of actual human experience (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 592).

I kept a journal throughout the project to reflect upon my interactions with the participants, my own cultural biases, and the research process itself. It also enabled me to reflect upon the meanings that the participants attributed to their decision to return to study. This enabled me to clarify my thinking and collate ideas as they developed. I commenced writing on 7 July 2015 and continued throughout the project, amassing over 25,000 words. This reflective journal encompassed both my intellectual progress and interpretation of data as well as emotional highs and lows throughout the undertaking. It outlined the iterative and complicated process of becoming a researcher, providing a useful source of reflection on the convolutions of the doctoral journey.

3.5.9 *Other sources of information*

In order to complement the data gained from the interviewing process other sources of information were also collected both on the students and regarding broader aspects of HE. As Yin (2009) has noted, qualitative research can be strengthened by reference to quantitative information and policy analysis as part of a case study which can enable development of a strong analytical strategy. With ethics permission, information was collected on the student participants including: distance of residence from campus, enrolment details, course progress, student's age, attendance and choice of undergraduate degree.

Locating the participants contextually in their own time and place gave an added dimension to an understanding of the research question regarding the experiences of male learners transitioning into HE from an enabling course (Charmaz, 2005). Analysing these other documents gave me added insight into the experiences of the participants of this study. The participants' agency and choices were affected by the environment in which they found themselves with HE policy and funding directly impacting their experiences of study. The range and variety of information collected allowed for thick description of the participants' progress (Gall et al., 2007).

University documentation including strategic plans, admission and course progress policies and demographic information about the whole student body were analysed. These provided a comparative point for that of the participants. Another source used was the Grattan Institute which produced Annual Reports on the current state of HE in Australia, detailing statistics on university student attrition and completion rates (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016; Norton et al., 2018). Additionally, the NCSEHE disseminates valuable research to inform public policy design and implementation, and institutional practice, in order to improve HE participation and success for marginalised and low-income people. Furthermore, Australian government policy documents such as the *Bradley Review* (2008), Office of Learning and Teaching, *Enabling Course Review* (Hodges et al., 2013) and the use of Local, State and Federal government websites enabled an understanding of the participants' stories in both a place and time context (Australian Government, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2019a; Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2020b; "Westbeach" City Council, 2018, 2020).

3.6 Data Analysis

3.6.1 *Transcription*

Qualitative projects by their very nature produce a large amount of data. In all, 28 student participant interviews from 10 students and five teacher-participant interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed over the 12-month period. I transcribed the first 17 student participant interviews, and a transcriber was used for the remaining 11 student participant interviews and the five teacher interviews. The decision to use a transcriber was based upon time constraints. In order to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the interviews the transcriber signed a Confidentiality Agreement (see Appendix H).

Reading and re-reading the transcripts allowed me to delve into a deeper analysis of the nuances of the interviews. As each interview progressed, the student participants were more

candid and open to exploring their journeys with the interviewer, including their own insights into their previous educational experiences and motivations. Riessman (2008) cautions that the process of transcription itself is an interpretation of what has occurred during an interview. The transcript is only one possible way of recalling the experience of the interviewer and participant, however, the interviews provided a most valuable source of data for giving an understanding to the research questions posed.

3.6.2 *Analysis process*

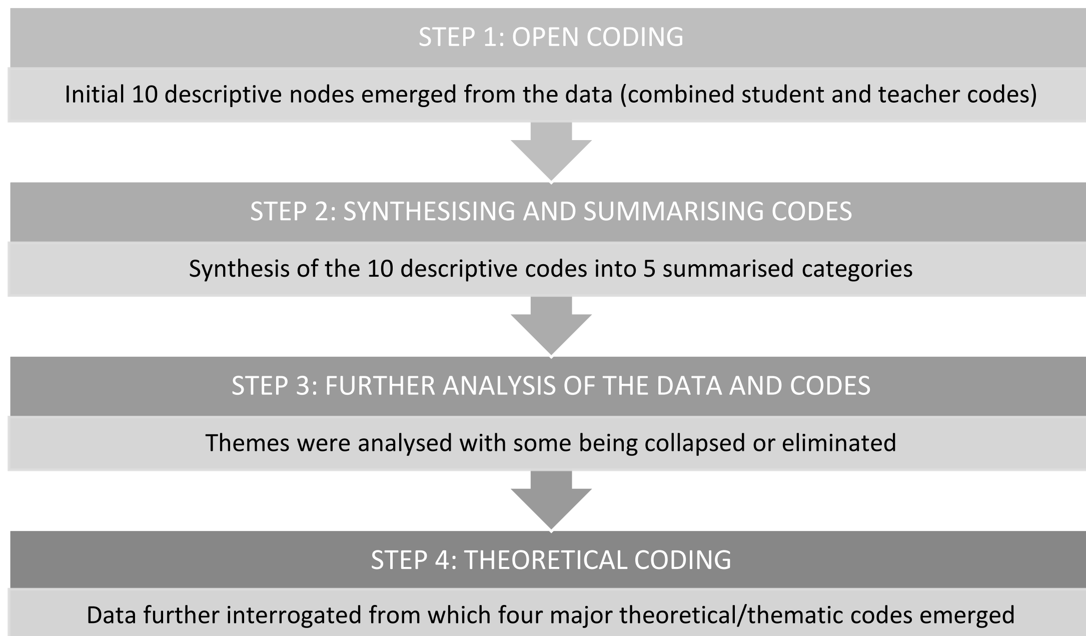
In order to explore the experiences of these male learners, coding of their interviews and reflections along with those of the teaching staff was undertaken. Coding is the important process in qualitative research of organising the data into a structure that can be analysed by the researcher, thereby attempting to create order out of the plethora of information. It is a valuable and necessary process for the researcher to undertake which involves both descriptive and analytical coding (Richards, 2010). Bazeley and Jackson (2013) describe coding as moving through two main stages, from the initial labelling of data and sorting into topics, to a further interpretation and analysis whereby the researcher creates new categories or overarching themes.

In order to assist in handling the large volume of data, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used, NVivo (versions 11 and 12) ("NVivo Software," 2021). This allowed for the rich text-based data to be stored and analysed across the 12-months of the project. While this software is useful for managing the data it cannot replace the analytical skills of the researcher (Houghton et al., 2017). All interview transcripts and reflections were entered as sources and then coded on the basis of descriptive themes, based primarily on the semi-structured interview questions. This was an iterative process allowing many themes to become apparent from the data (see Table 5). These were further refined until there appeared to be some stronger thematic elements emerging. Each code was constantly compared with other codes observed in each participant's transcript using the constant comparative method of qualitative analysis (Boeije, 2002). This enabled the management of the data into various parent and child codes (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012).

In total, 16 initial codes (labelled as nodes in NVivo software) ("NVivo Software," 2021) (See Table 7 below) emerged from the 28 interviews that were conducted. Each of these parent codes contained varying child codes which held further sub-categories on that particular theme. For example, the parent code labelled "employment experiences" consisted of four

child codes labelled, “casual work”, “professional”, “trades” and “unemployment”. All student participant interviews and reflections were labelled under these 16 parent and child codes. Furthermore, the five teacher interviews were initially coded separately with 13 codes emerging from this particular data source. All data were stored in NVivo for further analysis. Figure 2 (below) is a flowchart of the coding process that was used.

Figure 2: Flowchart of Coding Process

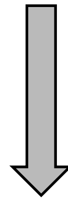


The coding commenced with Step 1 open coding where I re-read the participants’ transcripts to identify themes and recurring patterns of data. Using an inductive process as part of constructivist methodology (Charmaz, 2011) allowed for themes to emerge from the data rather than using a deductive process using established parameters. This involved an iterative process with themes being added, subtracted or combined as further analysis took place (Creswell, 2013). The 16 student codes and 13 teacher codes had many similarities which were combined into 10 descriptive codes. The second step of the process involved further analysis and cross-checking which led to the emergence of five major categories. These five major categories were then further analysed in Step 3 of the process with some categories being collapsed or eliminated. This then led to Step 4 with the emergence of four main thematic codes which formed the basis of the Findings Chapters. Again, this was an iterative process that took place over time, based on my own reflections and ongoing discussions with my supervisors.

The process continued enabling the emergence of various themes and patterns which provided responses to the research questions posed at the beginning of the inquiry. Table 7 (below) details the initial coding process used. Specific details of the analysis will be explored in Chapters 4 and 5.

Table 7: Initial Coding

Initial student codes (16)	Initial teacher codes (13)
Friends' education	Age
Attitude to other students	Aspiration
Attitude to UAP	Background
Employment experiences	Barriers to education
Family attitudes	Change
Family relationships	Commitment
Feelings about study	Confidence
Financial issues	Families
Future expectations	Gender
Health and learning problems	Identity
Influencers	Motivation
Motivation	Social Interaction
Parents' employment	Socio-economic background
Possible self	
Reflectivity	
Educational experiences	



Combined student and teacher codes (10)
Education
Employment
Family
Finance
Future expectations
Health and learning problems
Identity
Influencers
Motivation
Peers

Step 1: Ten descriptive codes listed previously in Table 7 emerged from the initial sweep of data based on both student and teacher interviews.

Step 2: The 10 descriptive codes were further synthesised, cross-checked and summarised into five categorical codes listed below in Table 8:

Table 8: Five Categorical Codes

Code	Description
1	Educational identity
2	The search for security and opportunity
3	Motivation
4	Overcoming barriers
5	Changing identities

Step 3: The data and codes were interrogated to understand thematic connections. Using inductive analysis of the text with continued reflection there emerged some major themes. After due consideration some of these themes were collapsed or eliminated.

Step 4: Further theoretical analysis was undertaken leaving four major themes which most clearly outlined the experiences of the participants as they transitioned into HE from an enabling course. These themes are listed in Table 9 below:

Table 9: Four Major Themes

Theme	Description
1	Changing learner identity
2	Contrasting experiences of employment and student life
3	Motivations and motivators
4	Shifts in thinking

This final synthesis into four major themes provided the cornerstones of the narrative case study. The stories and experiences of the individual student and teacher participants and the

common threads that intertwined these journeys have been presented using these four themes as a frame of reference. These findings are outlined in the Chapters 4 and 5 which follow.

3.6.3 *Ethical considerations*

An important ethical consideration was the need to be conscious of the power differential between me as researcher and the student participants, and to ensure that their privacy and dignity were maintained. I was employed at the institution where this research was conducted, consequently the ethics documentation emphasised that students' participation in the project would remain confidential and have no bearing on their relationship with the university or College. With this in mind the research was conducted from an ethical standpoint based upon the principles of relationality, reciprocity and a commitment to transformation as outlined by Cook et al. (2013). Relationality refers to relationship building with the participants with the underlying assumption that the research was based on the development of goodwill amongst those involved. Reciprocity acknowledged that the research was designed to bring some benefit to both the researcher and the participants, while transformative research supported the reflective process promoting positive change (Cargile Cook & Grant-Davie, 2013). The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the university and followed all required procedures (see Appendix K). All participants, both students and teachers, were volunteers and data were de-identified.

No coercion was involved as students were invited to take part during their College orientation. Students then contacted me by email or telephone if they wished to take part. Once at the interview each participant was given an Information Sheet (see Appendix A) outlining the details of the project and its voluntary and confidential nature as well as information regarding ethics approval from the university and their ability to withdraw at any time. Each participant then signed a Participant Consent Form (see Appendix B) before proceeding with the first interview. These documents were then stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office on campus. All participant data were de-identified and the participants were given pseudonyms.

The teacher participants engaged in a similar process. They were all volunteers who were recruited by email sent from another colleague and there was no coercion on their part to be involved in the project (see Appendix J). Each was interviewed individually, and data associated with them was de-identified with all teachers being given pseudonyms. Each

teacher was given an Information Sheet (see Appendix D) and signed a Consent Form (see Appendix E) which I stored securely. All data collected from student and teacher participants were stored electronically on my university home drive secured with a password.

3.6.4 *Limitations*

The research focussed on one group only of 10 mature-age males transitioning into university study at a mature-age. Rather than broad, population-based research data, this project looked for detailed descriptions and understandings based on the interviews of the participants, thereby offering in-depth examinations of their lived experiences using social constructivist techniques.

Additionally, the relative homogeneity of the participants, for example their economic and ethnic backgrounds, has limited the scope and applicability of the findings. However, this narrow focus led to an in-depth exploration of this particular cohort of male students and drew out some interesting parallel experiences amongst the group. As expected, there was some attrition of participants across the 12-months of the study, however, all the interviews produced a variety of data on which to base the findings. These data provided rich details of one group of students in a particular place and time. The design of the research, which included, student interviews and reflections, teacher interviews, and my own reflexivity, ensured trustworthiness and authenticity (Chase, 2005; Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 2006). As with all qualitative research, it cannot be easily translated to a larger population but did allow for a detailed understanding of the individual and collective experiences of this group of learners at a regional institution.

Despite the intention to reflect an accurate representation of the participants' experiences it is important to be aware that "narratives are composed for particular audiences at moments in history...consequently narratives don't speak for themselves, offering a window into an 'essential self'" (Riessman, 2008, p. 3). The participants interviewed were conscious of me the researcher as audience so their narratives would have been tailored to the listener rather than their friends or families. Chase (2005) refers to narratives as, "situated interactive performances" (p. 657) produced for a particular setting, a particular audience, for a particular purpose. As well as the constraints of the narrative interview itself, any narrative analysis conducted afterwards is inevitably an interpretation of reality from the perspective of the researcher who is the conduit between the participant and the reader. However, with

this caveat in mind the interviews brought forth a rich and diverse tapestry of the lives of the participants.

3.6.5 *Summary*

This narrative case study has examined the lived experiences of 10 males transitioning from an enabling course into university study from a relativist ontological perspective. I have used social constructivist epistemology to build knowledge inductively from the data collected. Using a wide range of sources, I examined various viewpoints to enhance the trustworthiness of the data. Having teacher participants' viewpoints, student participants' interviews and reflections, policy documents, statistics and my reflective journal enabled multifaceted explorations of the research questions. The narrative case study methodology enabled construction of an understanding of these male learners returning to study at a later age. It gave a privileged window into the experiences of the participants and allowed their individual and collective voices to be heard. In the next chapter the participants will be introduced in more detail through short cameos which both reveal their individuality and similarities in terms of biography, contexts and educational aspirations.

Chapter 4: Participants' contrasting experiences over time

4.1 Introduction

The findings from this study are detailed and presented across two chapters, Chapters 4 and 5. This chapter contains three parts. First, the individual participants are introduced by means of brief cameos. Second, the chapter focusses on the first of four themes that emerged from the participants' collective experiences, *Changing learner identity.* Finally, the chapter concludes with the second theme *Contrasting experiences of employment and student life.* Subsequently, Chapter 5 details how participants described their motivations and shifts in thinking across their year of study.

The previous methodology chapter outlined the narrative case study undertaken in this project, exploring the lived experiences of the participants. This study employed a narrative approach and encouraged the participants to tell their own stories to foreground the multiple facets of each individual's life. While not all participants were able to complete the enabling course successfully and progress to university at this juncture in their lives, each had identified a range of personal goals to pursue.

The first part of this chapter outlines the individual stories of the 10 participants. These short vignettes were developed after analysing the transcripts based on responses given by the student participants to the open-ended questions that were posed, and other information collected such as the participants' enrolment and demographic details. The chapter then outlines the first two of four distinct themes that emerged from the data.

4.2 Conducting the research

In order to explore details of the participants' experience of transitioning into HE from an enabling course I conducted interviews with each participant asking questions regarding their family, work and educational backgrounds and reasons for enrolling in the course. From information based primarily on the first interviews I constructed a cameo for each male. In the following sections, participants' comments are noted by the following abbreviations.

Interview One (i.1), Interview Two (i.2), Interview Three (i.3), Interview Four (i.4)

4.3 Participant cameos

In any narrative research project, it is important to gain a detailed understanding of the individual lives of the participants so that a full picture can emerge of their experiences. The cameos presented here contain a short introduction to the participants and include reasons they outlined for this return to study as mature-age learners. I drew upon the participants' stories based on their initial recorded and transcribed interviews. The cameos are not meant as a full biography of the students involved but as a preface to their stories.

The cameos focussed on the participants' responses to questions regarding four main areas concerning their backgrounds. Details included:

- Previous education and occupation;
- Geographic and family context;
- Motivations; and
- Hopes for the future.

The participants are grouped according to the number of interviews they attended;

- **Group 1** attended one interview (Ben, Kevin and Terry).
- **Group 2** attended three interviews (Dean, Jack and Troy).
- **Group 3** attended all four interviews (Colin, Luke, Mark and Sam).

4.3.1 *Group 1 (Attended one interview)*

Ben (Age 24)

Leaving school after Year 11, the penultimate year of secondary schooling, Ben then completed a Diploma of Information Technology at TAFE. Following this, he worked in a variety of casual occupations including bartending and serving at a fast-food outlet but was working in music events at the time of this study. While he enjoyed this work, he disliked the "long, long hours" (i.1) required of him in this type of employment. Ben was living independently from his family in the capital city 87 kilometres from the campus at the commencement of this project. While he seemed interested in returning to study, having been encouraged by his mother who had recently attained her undergraduate degree, and his sister who was studying at university, he ultimately withdrew from UAP prior to completion.

He explained that he wanted to “focus on study” because “my mind’s been about making money not studying” (i.1). Ben wished to experience “the uni. life” (i.1) and his motivation to study was connected with his events management career. Rather than remaining as a worker in the industry, his ambition was to be a manager of the events. He explained his reasons: “I wanted to come to uni. to change my education. I wanted to do Commerce (Event Management) because I worked in the industry as setting up the events so wanted to study Commerce” (i.1). His motivation was vocationally focussed. His hopes for the future were presented in the following way: “I just want to get a degree and get a job and my dream job is to like travel the world” (i.1). His ambition was to move away from his current lifestyle and to take a new direction in life.

Ben presented for one interview only. He did not complete the UAP and was unable to be contacted for further interviews. The financial and time costs of daily commuting such a long distance may have been a factor in his decision to withdraw from studies at this time. Often personal factors outside the course itself have been found to have a major impact on mature-age students’ decisions to withdraw (O'Rourke et al., 2013).

Kevin (Age 21)

While Kevin was very enthusiastic in the first interview, particularly when describing his love of Biology, he was not available for subsequent interviews. After completing Year 12, Kevin attended a local TAFE college and although he had a casual job “just washing dishes at a pub”, (i.1) he had not been able to find secure employment in the local area. Describing the regional working environment, Kevin outlined: “It’s all trade work and labour work which is just not what I’m good at” (i.1). Having been raised in Westbeach, Kevin lived with both of his parents neither of whom was employed at the time of this interview. He explained: “I mean, they don’t work or anything” (i.1). Kevin and his family resided seven kilometres from campus in what is classified as a low-SES part of the city according to the SEIFA (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Kevin was the first in his family to attempt tertiary study.

Kevin was motivated by a desire to pursue this area of study and to work eventually in the field, stating: “I just love Biology basically” (i.1). His motivation for attending UAP was to find work and follow the “pathway I wanted to go into which was Biological Science” (i.1). Kevin’s hopes for the future were to be engaged in Biology and studies of the environment. He explained: “In five years I am hoping to finish my degree at least” (i.1).

Kevin was interviewed only once. Although he appeared enthusiastic at the outset of his studies, Kevin was unsuccessful in UAP therefore unable to progress to university studies at this stage of his life.

Terry (Age 20)

Terry had left school during Year 11 stating: "I couldn't focus, and I was just always getting in trouble" (i.1). He further elaborated: "I was like medicated, like I've got ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder], but I took myself off the medication when I was probably in Year 7 or 8," (i.1) and eventually just stopped attending school. Subsequently he undertook a wide variety of positions including working as a surf instructor, a carpentry apprentice and as a teacher's aide. However, he articulated that he had always wished to study at university, stating: "I decided what I wanted to do, and I always knew…that I wanted to go to uni. eventually" (i.1).

Terry's family encouraged him to apply for UAP. His parents were divorced and Terry lived with his father but stated he was on good terms with both parents. He mentioned that he had many friends and family members studying at Westbeach University and this was a great incentive for him to join them stating: "They keep telling me, go to uni.…you'd be better off" (i.1). Once enrolled in UAP, he said: "My girlfriend's happy, dad's happy, mum's happy. Like they were super stoked" (i.1) indicating that having his family and friends supporting his decision to return to study as a mature-age learner was very encouraging. Terry's motivation was to get a "well-paying job" (i.1) but also as a means of self-fulfilment to reach his potential as he described himself as "smart and capable" (i.1).

He was looking to the College and university to provide both vocational and also personal opportunities for fulfilment. However, Terry lived approximately 79 kilometres from campus and was concerned about the long commute, stating it was a "nuisance because sometimes the trains don't really align" (Terry, i.1).

Terry attended the first interview only. In the interview he stated that in five years' time he wished to "hopefully finish my degree I assume and by then maybe start my own business or be working for someone else…working for one of dad's ones [businesses]" (i.1). Despite his learning difficulties, Terry graduated from UAP and progressed to university study in the Bachelor of Business at another campus of the university closer to his hometown. However, he decided to take no further part in this research project.

4.3.2 *Group 2 (Attended three interviews)*

Dean (Age 22)

Dean appeared a little nervous at being interviewed. He left school early at the end of Year 10 and followed his father into boiler-making. He somewhat regretted this decision due to injuries he sustained, explaining: “I broke my leg at work….That put me out for six months” (i.3). Additionally, he was concerned about the insecurity of manufacturing in the Westbeach area, outlining: “The industry’s kind of going downhill so a lot of companies are just like making people redundant” (i.3) which was a common experience for young men in the local area (“Westbeach” City Council, 2020).

Dean lived with his father and step-mother around 19 kilometres from campus having made the decision to stay at home due to the financial constraints of becoming a student. He was motivated to return to study for two reasons both vocationally oriented. First, was the avoidance of risk in an increasingly insecure and dangerous workplace and second, he had really enjoyed the fulfilment he experienced when teaching younger apprentices. In fact, this was the reason he gave for wishing to enrol in an education degree. He explained: “During my apprenticeship…I was starting…to…teach other apprentices how to do their job and I quite enjoyed it” (i.1).

Dean’s future hopes were to combine Physical Education (PE) teaching with teaching metalwork, thus incorporating his background as a boiler-maker. He explained: “I’d still like to push into the PE teaching. I was hoping to still be able to get into the metal work teaching as well just through my trade” (i.3). He hoped that these two areas would provide him with more career opportunities in the future. Dean successfully completed UAP and his first session at university. He attended the first three interviews and also submitted a written reflection at the end of the project.

Jack (Age 26)

Jack was interested in nutrition and health and decided to enrol in university to pursue that interest. After completing Year 12 Jack commenced a TAFE course in architectural drafting which he did not complete. He explained: “I haven’t had a career so to speak,” (i.1) as his workplaces had involved motorcycle repair and supervising go-kart racing. Rather than

continuing to work in these areas he was looking for a change in occupation based on his passion for health and nutrition.

Having moved to Westbeach to study, Jack had relocated within five kilometres of campus where he lived independently from his parents. Jack was an only child and described his family as comprising "a deaf mother and a working father with alienation issues. A very quiet household" (i.1). Jack noted he had led a "fairly standard life" with "a stay-at-home mother and a father 9-to-5 weekdays with a proper job" (i.1). Neither of his parents had studied at university. He outlined that they had a very "hands off" (i.1) attitude to his education allowing him to make his own decisions. Jack was the only participant in this study who had changed residences for study purposes.

Jack was motivated by a desire to change from the previous "monotony" (i.4) and lifestyle in the city which "has everything you need but nothing you really want" (i.4). He further explained that he was looking for "self-value and achievement" (i.4). This wish for change was combined with his very strong interest in well-being. Describing himself, Jack stated: "I've never done drugs. I drink twice a year" (i.1) and he was intrigued to know more about the workings of the human body. This motivated him to start UAP before moving into a Bachelor of Nutrition Science.

Jack aspired to a professional career in nutrition, describing his future aspirations as, "hopefully in a stable place where I can learn to improve friendships without the stress of finances or worrying about that" (i.4). So, as well as a career path Jack looked towards developing his social networks as a result of his interaction with university studies. Jack successfully completed UAP and his first session of university. He attended Interviews 1, 2 and 4 but did not submit a written reflection.

Troy (Age 21)

Troy had completed Year 12 and a Certificate in Information Technology (IT) at TAFE however, he was unable to secure employment in this field. At the time of the study, he was working casually as a barman at a racecourse as well as attending College. Troy had emigrated from the UK to Westbeach during his primary school years. Both Troy's parents, with whom he still resided, were working but neither had been to university. While his father was encouraging of his study, Troy felt pressured by his mother to take on more casual work,

which was “making a bit of a grind between me and her” (i.1). An added issue for the family was caring for Troy’s younger brother who was “physically disabled” (i.1).

His decision to enrol in UAP was heavily influenced by his peers at TAFE. He explained: “I guess meeting those people changed my view on University” from it being only for “the smart upper elite to something that most people could attain, if they tried” (i.2). His motivation to gain tertiary qualifications was based on the desire to have more permanent employment in a professional field, and he expressed a desire to study Engineering at university.

Troy’s hopes for the future included “finishing up my thesis for a Civil Engineering Degree hopefully,” (i.1). While he showed a great interest in IT and enjoyed playing computer games, he repeated the UAP course twice and was not successful in gaining entry to the university at this juncture in his life. He did not disclose why he struggled to complete the course however, he revealed being quite ill during the course of his studies with “pneumonia” (i.3) and he may have had ongoing financial issues balancing his work and studies, which he had alluded to in the interviews. Troy attended the first three interviews only, with the third interview completed when he attempted UAP for the second time. He did not submit a written reflection. He also did not continue his studies into university.

4.3.3 *Group 3 (Attended all four interviews)*

Colin (Age 26)

Colin described himself as someone who really enjoyed learning and engaging with new ideas. He completed Year 12 and then continued studying an eclectic mixture of courses. He stated: *“*I did a Diploma in IT networking, but I didn’t finish it. I did a Cert. 1 [Certificate 1] in meat retailing, so just a butcher pre-apprenticeship and I did a Diploma in Clinical Hypnotherapy and Neurolinguistic Programming” (i.1). He also disclosed that he was receiving a Disability Support Pension and suffered from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Dyslexia and had not yet gained secure employment. I noted in my reflective journal that he may struggle to complete UAP due to these issues, however this proved to be incorrect.

Colin lived closer to campus than any of the other participants and was able to walk to his classes. He lived with his mother and sister, as his parents were divorced. Colin explained

that his mother and extended family were very encouraging of his studies. Colin stated: “They all love education” (i.1). Further, he elaborated that as a child he had a vivid imagination and liked to invent “amazing tech.” (i.1). He wished to explore these options at university as his way of “leaving a mark on the world” (i.1). Initially he was interested in Engineering as a degree but later changed to International Relations as he became more attracted to the field during his UAP.

However, combined with his desire “to work research and development for a long time” (i.1), was the need to find employment. Colin explained, “One of the biggest reasons for coming back was there…is no work out there for young people” (i.4). Similar to the other participants the need for secure employment was a strong motivating factor for returning to study as a mature-age learner. Colin wished to gain employment and not be dependent on Centrelink[14] benefits that he was receiving. His future hope was to travel and work for the United Nations (UN). Colin successfully completed UAP and entered university. He attended all four interviews but did not submit a written reflection.

Luke (Age 25)

Luke appeared to be a serious student who described himself as being particularly focussed and dedicated to his study. While he had attended a selective high school,[15] Luke stated that he was not engaged in study at that time due to his “inattention and apathy” (i.1). Additionally, he had been diagnosed with “hyperactivity disorder” (i.3). He decided to leave school early after Year 10 to follow his father into a career as a chef. This lasted for some years until there was a falling out between Luke and his father with Luke later moving into employment as a disability support worker, which he continued part-time while at College and university. He left home at 16, after his parents had divorced, and later moved in with his partner whom he married during the course of this study. Having grown up in the local area he now lived about three kilometres from campus. While his father and step-father had held blue-collar jobs as a chef and in mining respectively, both his mother and step-mother

[14] CENTRELINK is a Department of Human Services master program of the Australian Government. It delivers a range of government payments and services for retirees, the unemployed, families, carers, parents, people with disabilities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, students and apprentices. The majority of Centrelink's services are the disbursement of social security payments.
[15] In New South Wales (NSW) selective high schools cater for academically gifted students with high potential who may otherwise be without sufficient classmates of their own academic standard. Students are selected by a placement test.

had returned to study as mature-age learners which had encouraged Luke to pursue further studies. Luke revealed: “I sort of take some inspiration from having seen that” (i.1).

Luke was interested in a career in research and stated that he would like to proceed to post-graduate studies. He was influenced by his school friends from the selective high school and, he wanted to emulate them and stay in that social group, noting that: “I’ll finally sort of be at an intellectual or academic stage in my life where I’m on their level” (i.2). Luke was hoping to achieve a career in Science. He outlined: “I don’t want to be rich, but I want to be successful….I’d like to work for a company involved in colonising Mars” (i.1). Luke successfully completed both UAP and first semester university with outstanding results. He completed all four interviews and also submitted a written reflection.

Mark (age 35)

Mark was the oldest of the participants at 35 and he was the only one who had his own children. He seemed to enjoy the chance to discuss his life and studies. Mark, however, did not have fond memories of his school days. He attended school until Year 12 and then undertook a building apprenticeship. He revealed: “I didn’t really think much on study” (i.1) also disclosing having been bullied throughout his schooling. He conceded that he “fell into the trade” (i.1) and went onto working as a builder, running his own business, but times were tough financially as, “work fluctuates badly” (i.1) and he felt compelled to make a change in career to ensure a better future for himself and his family.

Mark was an only child and described his parents as more interested in money than education. He explained: “Since I started work, every time I’ve got ahead there’ll be some reason why I have to pay them money” (i.4). Neither of his parents had university qualifications. Mark was married with four children and his wife was not working so he had the added responsibility of providing for his family as well as studying. Additionally, he had to commute 70 kilometres each way to campus.

Mark explained that “the last two years particularly, it’s been quite hard with work,” (i.1) stating that financially he felt he was going backwards. Combined with financial pressure however, Mark had a keen interest in Science. He outlined: “One of the sort of things I’ve always liked was Geology stuff….always sort of been interested in that, astronomy and stars” (i.1) and he was looking to this as an alternative to a career in the building trade.

Mark admitted that once enrolled in UAP he felt “weirdly scared” (i.1). He aspired to a career involving Science but displayed uncertainty when asked about the future. He wished to make a career change for himself and his family but was unsure exactly what this would entail. Mark successfully completed UAP and his first session at university. He attended all four interviews as well as submitting a written reflection.

Sam (age 21)

Sam had been working in the construction industry. His whole family, which was quite large, was involved to some degree in the building trade. Sam stated that he had enjoyed school and had completed Year 12 studies however, he conceded in a later interview that “in high school I was really immature” (i.3). Following school, he attended an enabling course at another institution before enrolling at Westbeach College. Sam and most of his family with whom he resided were employed in construction and trades. Additionally, he stated: “I’ve done fencing with a friend. I’ve done panel beating with my mother….I’ve worked at car shows with friends of family. I’ve done help at butchers and really a lot of mixed just general things, shearing sheep” (i.1). He was first in his family to attend university and expressed a desire to become a primary school-teacher.

Sam admitted to not feeling quite like the rest of his family and not enjoying being a manual labourer. He explained: “I can’t talk to people at work about books” (i.2) and furthermore outlined: “I’ll never go back to doing my trade. I couldn’t stand it. I can’t stand working with my family. I don’t know why I’m different like that” (i.3). He lived with his parents and four younger siblings over 65 kilometres from campus in an area he described as being “more like a farming community” (i.1). Being short of funds rather than making the return trip using up petrol, he would sleep overnight in his car at the local beach in order to attend the College course. As well as wishing to move away from manual labouring, Sam expressed a desire to go into teaching explaining: “I’ve always been good with younger children and helping” (i.1) and one of his teachers had suggested that he would “be good at that apparently” (i.1). Additionally, he wished to return to his old primary school and teach the current cohort of students now enrolled perhaps redressing some of the issues from his own school education which he explained had not helped him at all.

Sam was hoping for the security and opportunity of a career as a primary school-teacher. He was optimistic that “it’s going to be good in the future for myself” (Sam, i.2). Although

successfully passing UAP, showing resilience and versatility with regard to his study and overcoming barriers, once Sam was at the university proper with its larger classes and less built-in support, he was unable to complete successfully his first session of undergraduate study and left the university. Sam attended all four interviews and submitted a written reflection.

Conclusion

The first part of this chapter has introduced the participants, outlining background details including: educational and occupational experiences; geographic and family contexts; motivations for returning to study; and hopes for the future. These cameos suggest that the primary reason the participants returned to study was to improve their career prospects. The participants' experiences of their workplaces were generally unsatisfactory, and they hoped that continuing their education would give them more choices into the future. Most had not enjoyed their school years; however, they were willing to engage now in further studies. Participants' backgrounds were varied with half (n=5) FiF to commence tertiary studies. The students expressed a mixture of emotion including excitement but also nervousness at the prospect of taking on a new educational challenge.

What will now be examined is the transition of the group as a whole comparing the similarities and differences in their journeys as part of this narrative case study (Punch, 2006). The following section discusses the commonalities and differences in the experiences that each of the participants outlined as part of this transition into HE from an enabling course.

4.4 Theme 1: Changing learner identity

4.4.1 *Introduction*

The area explored within this theme is the participants' changing learner identities as they progressed through their studies. The participants described chronological aspects of their educational transition through previous educational experiences and attitudes towards learning before commencing UAP. The learners further outlined their experiences at school and at technical colleges where they had previously studied. These reflections were then compared with the learners' experiences once they commenced their College studies and began to re-engage with the learning process. The section concludes with the participants' thoughts on returning to study and changes they had noticed in both their academic and personal lives.

4.4.2 *Transition from primary to high school*

Transitioning through educational systems had proved challenging for many of the participants. During the first set of interviews, conducted at the commencement of UAP, the participants described their previous experiences of education. While five of the participants focussed only on their high school days, the remaining five, Kevin, Troy, Colin, Terry and Luke, also outlined their primary school experiences. Kevin explained: “Primary school was…just pretty average,” (i.1), while Troy, Colin, Terry and Luke explained their difficulties in transitioning from primary to high school. Troy had attended primary school in the UK and found transitioning to an Australian high school quite challenging. He explained: “I was in Year 7 at the time in England and when I moved here, we got pushed back to the Sixth Grade…so I’ve had a bit of turbulence through school” (i.1). Similarly, Colin had really enjoyed attending his Montessori primary school, finding it difficult to adapt to moving to a comprehensive high school thereafter. He compared the two saying: “I really didn’t enjoy high school for various reasons. I really did enjoy primary school though and I’ve always loved...learning and education” (i.1). Interestingly Colin made the distinction between enjoying learning and enjoying school.

Likewise, Terry stated that he, “went to a Catholic school, a primary school and I was always like a pretty smart kid”, (i.1) indicating his engagement with primary education. In a similar fashion Luke said, “I excelled fairly well at primary school…I was told by teachers that…I was above the class and everything, but I never had to put in a lot of effort” (i.1). However, Terry, Luke and Troy subsequently had negative experiences once in high school, which will be outlined in the next section. It is concerning that the enjoyment experienced in primary education did not continue into secondary education for these participants. These findings may indicate transitional difficulties for some boys moving from smaller and supportive primary schools into larger high school environments. This is an area worthy of further research.

4.4.3 *Experiences at high school*

Transitional difficulties continued into high school which was a difficult experience for most of those interviewed. There were those who enjoyed school – Ben, Dean and Sam, – and those like Kevin and Jack who seemed fairly indifferent. Other participants, Mark, Troy, Colin, Luke and Terry appeared to have felt quite alienated by the experience of secondary school. Even the participants who enjoyed high school qualified their statements with references to

how they could have been more diligent as students. Dean stated: "I did enjoy school yeah. I wasn't dedicated but definitely changed once you get out of school" (i.1). He explained that once he joined the workforce, he really had to work harder than he had done at school. Dean outlined relying on his sister to assist him with schoolwork stating: "I was kind of leeching off my sister to try and help me with everything" (i.1). As an adolescent, he described not being dedicated to his studies.

Sam conceded that at high school: "I didn't really care too much but I did enjoy it" (i.1). Although he enjoyed some aspects of schooling, he was not particularly engaged in learning at that stage of his life. Similarly, Ben stated that while he enjoyed school he was "on and off like doing the work, the homework" (i.1) again reflecting a superficial engagement with learning at that time. Jack recalled his school days in the following way: "To be perfectly honest I wasn't a very good learner in school days" (i.4). He also elaborated: "I think we'd all rather really like to go back and kick ourselves five years' ago for what we did or didn't do" (i.2). Similarly, Kevin stated that while primary school was "all right" by high school he "just lost a lot of interest" (i.1).

The other participants Colin, Terry, Troy, Mark and Luke recalled particularly negative memories of their high school days. Mark pondered: "I sometimes wonder what I would have got as a UAI [University Admissions Index][16] if I did study" (i.1). Troy too described his experiences: "I went to Warwick [pseudonym] high school, which has a rather tarnished reputation….Nobody really wanted to be there I suppose….I didn't exactly have the best…education" (i.1). He felt that his secondary school did not have an engaging environment and that it had a poor standing in the community.

Colin's adjustment from primary to high school was very difficult for him. He explained: "That's 'cause I went from a system that was working really well for me back into the system that did nothing for me. So, I had no idea what to do" (i.2). Colin's transition from primary to secondary education proved quite challenging for him. The pedagogical approach of the Montessori primary school, about which he enthused, was replaced by a system that Colin found unengaging and not serving his needs as an adolescent learner. Terry too floundered in secondary education, stating: "By the time I was like 15, 16, I was surfing, had older mates, just never went to school, surfed all day" (i.1). Luke too left school at Year 10 before

[16] The Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) replaced the Universities Admission Index (UAI) in NSW and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) in 2009.

completing his Year 12 Higher School Certificate (HSC), blaming his own shortcomings, stating: “I left school because you know I wasn’t doing very well” (i.1). These three participants also disclosed learning difficulties, which will be outlined in the following section.

Colin, Terry, Mark and Luke viewed their schooling experiences in a negative light and pondered if their academic outcomes would have been different in an alternative learning environment. Engaging now with learning again at the College provided an opportunity for all the participants to take a different approach as mature-age learners.

Seven of the 10 participants, Ben, Dean, Troy, Colin, Luke, Mark, and Terry, blamed themselves and their own perceived failings and inadequacies for poor educational attainment. The language they used to describe themselves as students was quite deprecating. They used expressions such as: “you’re a dumb bum” (Mark. i.4), “I was pretty lazy about it” (Sam, i.1) and “I just let…laziness get the better of me” (Luke, i.1) through to Colin’s harsh criticism of himself: “I just thought I was an idiot….I just thought like I’m stupid, education sucks” (i.3). The participants seemed to attribute the major blame for poor achievement squarely on their own shoulders rather than examining any wider societal and institutional shortcomings, which may have exacerbated their situations.

Colin, however, who was a little older at 26, also shared some thoughtful insights into how he perceived that secondary school had failed boys like himself. He offered this paradox: “I didn’t enjoy high school, [but] I’ve always loved learning” (i.1). His perceptive observation was “the system, the way they taught students really just didn’t work for me…I like to have a purpose…I like to be able to work through it” (i.1). He had found that just taking notes from the board and having a very teacher-centred pedagogical approach mitigated against learning for him in these important high school years.

As young men from predominantly blue-collar backgrounds, schooling did not seem to be particularly relevant or resonate with most of the participants’ interests or pursuits at that time. The participants generally took responsibility for their poor attitude and lack of commitment to learning but also the atmosphere of their previous institutions was mentioned. The insight from Colin outlined systemic issues with pedagogical approaches in secondary school. As a previous high school-teacher myself, I noted in my reflective journal that the participants’ comments gave me pause for thought on the school experiences of many young men. This finding of low-SES boys’ disengagement with schooling is echoed by

research into boys in education both within Australia (Burke, 2007; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell et al., 2013) and the UK (Reay, 2002b; Reay et al., 2010; Stahl, 2015b).

4.4.4 *Learning and behavioural difficulties*

Similar to many other males, some of the participants reported experiencing learning and behavioural issues during their schooling (Tilling, 2013). Three of the participants who found transitioning to high school to be a challenging experience (Colin, Luke and Terry) also disclosed that they had a late diagnosis of serious learning difficulties. While Luke simply mentioned he was diagnosed "when I was younger" (i.3), Terry was not diagnosed until Year 9 and Colin around the same time when aged 14.

Terry stated that he had enjoyed his schooling until he struggled with a behavioural disorder and eventually stopped taking the prescribed drugs. While he saw himself as "smart" (i.1) in primary school his perception was that his disorder had prevented him from thriving as a teenage learner. Colin had similar experiences to Terry at high school where behavioural and learning disorders impacted upon his academic progress. He explained, "Look, being someone with dyslexia and ADHD it's not, the system definitely is not the best for someone like me" (i.2).

Luke also described the impact of behavioural issues on his learning from his perspective as an adult. He described having hyperactivity disorder at school and its impact:

> I wouldn't like to see that as a crutch, but I think that's definitely a contributing factor to not achieving very well at school because I was just constantly distracted and just disinterested in what people would – I felt like it's just pushed upon you and it's irrelevant and Mathematics is irrelevant, and Science is irrelevant and now I see the folly of that but it's just, yeah, at the time it didn't seem important to me to put any effort into it. (i.3)

Notably, he used the word "folly" to explain his attitude to study as an adolescent learner but much later had come to realise the importance of Mathematics and Science, eventually enrolling into the Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health at university.

The late intervention into addressing the learning problems of these participants meant that they were struggling with schooling for much of the time they attended. While all three were

eventually medicated for ADHD, prior to the diagnosis it is likely that their learning difficulties affected their learning experiences and educational progression. Notably, Colin's disclosure of dyslexia is becoming increasingly common for students studying in HE among whom there are higher attrition rates and little university-based support (Murphy, 2019, pp. 80-81). The disclosure of learning and behavioural difficulties by almost one third of the participants in the current study, whilst small in number, may be indicative of the lack of formalised diagnosis and support for boys who struggle with concentration during school. These participants reported that their learning difficulties compounded their lack of engagement with education during high school.

4.4.5 *Transitioning to College*

Despite these previously negative encounters with education, each of the participants had made the decision to re-enter an educational institution with the aspiration of changing their future paths. They discussed what their expectations were of moving into tertiary study and what they hoped to achieve from UAP itself. The responses varied from Mark saying he wanted "to pass, simply" (i.1), which perhaps indicated a level of nervousness or lack of confidence as a learner returning to education. Further detailed explanations provided by participants outlined the skills they hoped to achieve. Ben was expecting: "I'll learn a few things…like academic writing…because I'm not very good with that", (i.1) and Dean who explained: "I was hoping that I could learn how to study properly" (i.1). Kevin was looking forward to having "a really good set up position for a degree" (i.1). Terry described UAP in the following way: "It just gets you back into the habit of studying again, which is the main thing I was scared of" (i.1). They all expressed interest in learning the fundamentals needed for study, which seem to have been overlooked during their schooling. The enabling course they were undertaking was a worthwhile opportunity to compensate for what had been missed during school.

As well as developing academic skills, some of the participants were hoping for assistance with study practices to engage again with learning, such as Luke who explained: "I probably didn't have any study techniques before" (i.1). As well as academic skills, they were hoping to enhance their capacity as learners. These participants were hopeful that UAP could provide some skills training and support from teachers so that their re-engagement with the learning environment would be a positive experience.

The participants looked forward to productive experiences and outcomes for their new educational venture. Sam was hoping his participation in the College would offer him a fresh start after having previously attempted an enabling course at another institution. He explained wanting to "do it again properly" (i.1) as "the circumstances at that time" (i.1) had not allowed for this. Timing is always important for adult learners and readiness to learn is an important aspect emphasised by Mezirow (1981) in his research with adult learners. Colin, who had reflected so positively on his primary school experiences, hoped that UAP would mirror that constructive experience. He anticipated: "that it would be…much more like my primary school experience where I got to take more responsibility rather than my high school experience" (i.1).

The decision to return to study could be termed a leap into the unknown for most of the participants who had to adjust from being members of the workforce or unemployed to becoming mature-age students. Six of the participants specifically mentioned feeling "nervous" on their first day of the UAP. Troy stated that in class he was, "looking at this work rather dauntingly" (i.1). Two of the participants, Sam and Luke, revealed being overwhelmed by the "size" of the campus. Furthermore, Ben hoped "to be around people that wants [*sic*] to study" (i.1) as did Troy who was "worried about getting distracted in class" (i.1). Due to their previous experiences in the schooling environment, it was not surprising that feelings of anxiety and nervousness accompanied them on their entry into UAP.

However, combined with the feeling of nervousness was a sense of anticipation that the course would bring about a positive change in their lives and futures. Colin wished for "a fun educational experience," (i.1) with Dean stating: "I kind of wanna be here", (i.2) and Kevin outlined: "I knew it was going to be positive" (i.1). The affirmative comments outlined by the participants displayed their optimism in making the decision to return to study as mature-age learners and to take on the challenge of re-engaging with education. They were willing to trust the educational system again despite their previous experiences. This expectancy was encouraged by the participants' first encounters with their enabling course which somewhat assuaged their concerns. This will be discussed in the following section.

4.4.6 *Initial experiences*

The first weeks of a new course are an exciting yet challenging time for students, particularly those coming back to study as mature-age learners. Initially Mark said he struggled "just getting my head around a few things I'm not used to" (i.2). However, as the course

progressed, and he began to receive positive assessment results his confidence improved. Mark stated: “Sort of since that start, I’ve realised I may not be as dumb as I think” (i.1). Other participants compared studying UAP to their previous studies. Kevin explained: “This one is a lot better than anything else I’ve studied” (i.1). Troy agreed that he experienced, “everyone actually wanting to try and learn and trying to get something decent out of university. It feels a lot different than high school” (i.1). The environment of the College classes was a welcome change from some of the participants’ memories of high school. Importantly, the College seemed to offer a more positive learning environment. Three of the participants, Dean, Mark and Troy, had engaged with the College’s Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS)[17] which Dean described as “actually helping” (Dean, i.1), offering an important means of support. The participants’ perceptions of the relevance of education seemed to be shifting once they engaged with their enabling course.

Terry compared his experiences of studying Mathematics at high school to those at the College. He explained: “In high school…they’d give you a textbook and pretty much you had to teach yourself what to do and I found my Math teacher [at College] she was really good…explained things like really well” (i.1). Colin was excited that his hopes of College being similar to primary school had come to fruition stating: “I feel like when I was in primary school. I wake up in the morning saying I want to be at uni., which is great” (i.1). This was a real turnaround for Colin whose experiences at high school had been overwhelmingly negative.

Luke outlined his initial trepidation, but this was followed by feeling he could manage to balance his studies and casual employment. While at first feeling “pretty daunted” (i.1) he eventually “felt more comfortable about the workload and fitting around work” (i.1). However, both Luke and Jack were concerned about the fast pace of some of their lectures. Luke explained: “The pacing of some classes…is quicker than I’m comfortable with” (i.1), while Jack gave his perception of the time frames involved in Mathematics stating: “The speed of one lecture let’s say an hour…of your uni. time equates to eight to ten weeks in the HSC” (i.1). Adjusting to tertiary study and the pace and workload of the classes was challenging for these learners who had not studied for some time.

[17] PASS sessions are led by 'PASS Leaders', senior students who have excelled at the subject in the past. The focus is on integrating the course content (what to learn) with academic reasoning and study skills (how to learn).

Notwithstanding these concerns, the general consensus of the participants was a favourable reaction to their College course. Ben outlined: "I've experienced it really good, so I just want to stick to it and not be overwhelmed with work" (i.1). Dean explained: "I'm just really happy" (i.1) and Sam stated he felt "very content like and happy" (i.1). Jack described his first day as "very good actually" (i.1). Similarly, Terry felt he had begun to master the Mathematics course, stating: "well the Math is super easy for me", while Luke stated that after attending his first class: "It sort of abated some fears" (i.1). The College provided a new start for the participants where they could engage more fully in learning in a supportive atmosphere.

4.4.7 *Adjusting to student life as mature learners*

As they progressed through their studies some of the participants were conscious of being older than other students which they thought put them at a disadvantage. Mark, Sam, Dean and Troy thought university structures privileged younger students straight from school. Mark, at 35 years, initially felt out of place amongst his younger contemporaries, stating: "I may not be, but I feel old" (i.1). He further noted that that the younger students "wouldn't have half the responsibilities" (i.1) that he had and that "maybe the unis need to be a bit more accommodating for the older students" (i.3). Troy observed those students going straight from school to university "don't see how difficult it is for some people just to get on in the day to day" (i.3) and that "I think they have less respect for the working-class in some cases" (i.4). Although only aged 21 Sam observed, "I know I'm not too old compared to them but I still feel like older" (i.4), while Dean observed the differences in behaviour between the two groups. "I've noticed a lot more of the younger people still find it a bit of a joke type of thing, like still playing around and mature people are trying to crack down and get into it" (Dean, i.3). The participants had to navigate their way through studies as part of the minority as mature-age learners.

Nevertheless, being mature-age also had its advantages. According to Jack, "I thought being a bit older coming into a learning environment would be difficult to absorb the information. That's not really the case" (i.4). Luke too explained that "maybe my maturity's an advantage" (i.4) and that he really appreciated the "more mature relationship" (i.2) which the older students were able to develop with their teachers.

Around mid-way through this study, during the second set of interviews, when the students had completed their 14-week UAP, the theme of adjusting to student life began to emerge. The remaining participants (7 of 10) appeared to have become more comfortable in their

role as students and were less nervous about studying than they had been at the start of the project. They described their increasing confidence now that they had completed UAP and were about to embark on their university studies.

For example, Dean was concerned at the start of the enabling course explaining: “After the first three weeks I wasn’t sure if I could do [it]” (i.2). Ultimately, however, his nervousness at being a student again was replaced by a sense of achievement by the third interview. Dean stated: “I’ve been keeping up to date and I haven’t had a test that I’ve been below 80%” (i.3), which boosted his confidence.

Luke outlined some of the journey he had traversed: “At first it was pretty daunting but now that I’ve done it…I’m very happy with the results I got” (i.2). Luke’s confidence in his educational abilities was beginning to return as he made positive progress. Jack reflected, “I can’t think of a single negative thing to say about coming back” (i.2). Sam had a similar attitude with increasing confidence stating his results were “rewarding, after you’ve done all your work” (i.2). He expressed that the College course not only improved his educational outcomes, but it was also contributing to his improved self-confidence and social standing.

Troy’s family lived in a suburb classified as Level 1 (the lowest level) on the SEIFA index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). He outlined that university studies had previously been out of his reach, financially and academically. Troy explained: “I think I was somewhat jaded from my old high school experiences….and now going through this program I believe that university is definitely something I can achieve” (i.2). Now that Troy was actually studying on campus, his view of university and confidence in his own abilities had improved considerably. Similarly, Colin had enjoyed UAP much more than his high school days. He stated: “I’m much more confident in my own ability now…I can do this whereas in high school I came out thinking I can’t do anything because that’s kind of what was said to me all through high school” (i.2). The negative attitude of his high school-teachers had weighed heavily upon him. When asked about his College subjects he replied, “I love all three of them (i.1)”. This emotional response stands as a direct contrast to his perceptions of school.

Mark had stated that he surprised himself in his abilities by receiving a “HD [High Distinction] overall” (i.2) but was still concerned very much with balancing his studies with work commitments. “It was a bit of pressure, mainly to keep the money coming into the home because it was a pretty big workload 30 to 35 hours a week which is a full-time job really”

(i.2). He had ongoing concerns with balancing his studies and financial commitments throughout the 12-months of this research.

These various responses to the transition experience outline the way in which these mature-age learners were adjusting to the role of being a student again after returning to study. At the commencement of this project, the participants had discussed their previous schooling and education in a negative light with the majority not being engaged or successful as high school students. The participants began to adjust to different demands as their confidence in their academic abilities started to blossom. Their interaction with the College seemed to have assisted in rewriting the learning narrative of these participants.

4.4.8 *Personal changes*

The fourth set of interviews were the final ones undertaken for this study. These were conducted as the participants concluded their first semester of university study in June 2016. Five students completed the final interviews, Colin, Jack, Luke, Mark and Sam. As well as the interviews, the participants were asked to submit a one-page reflection on their experiences across the course of the project. Four completed the written reflection (Dean, Luke, Mark and Sam). Their written submissions posed an added opportunity for the participants to reflect upon the previous 12-months and the academic and personal changes that had taken place.

The five remaining participants who completed the fourth interview had begun to feel more comfortable and confident in their abilities as students. Colin quipped in his final interview: “I’m a genius now”, (i.4) which was in distinct contrast to his first interview where he described himself as “an idiot” (i.1). He further explained: “Uni. has really allowed me to just sort of find what actually interests me” (i.4). For Colin, entering university improved his self-confidence and provided more opportunities for him to pursue ideas that were of interest to him which in some ways empowered him. This enabled him to have more control over his life’s direction.

Mark too had become more comfortable in his role as a student and upon reflection regretted his approach to study at school, writing in his reflection “I feel I should have done my study and tried at my HSC and gone to university after my schooling. However, all I have done since then has led me here so that can only be a positive thing”. Nevertheless, he still combined university with his work in the building trade, outlining in his reflection: “It has

been the hardest to juggle it all. Harder than the actual material. But I believe it has been and will be all worthwhile". Despite the difficulties, Mark was optimistic and believed that he had made the right decision in returning to study.

Dean explained the impact of UAP: "During my first few days of the UAP course, the workload was overwhelming and proving difficult" (reflection), however he persisted through this challenge and onto his university studies in Education. Jack too had surprised himself and was pleased "my resilience [*sic*] to learning is actually pretty good" (i.4). He further explained that he could, "definitely see the path of progression" (i.4). This indicates that Dean could now see the relevance of education to his future career, gaining an understanding of how the concepts outlined in UAP and degree course could enable him to further his career. Sam wrote in his reflection:

> It was harder for me than most students, as I had to sleep in my car for a majority of session. In total I feel that my experiences of university were helped to be better because of the knowledge I previously received at College in the UAP program.

Further reflecting on changes he had undergone, Sam stated: "I think I'm more analytical about things than I was before this" (i.4). His interaction with education was impacting upon his view of the world as well as his learning.

Luke was attempting to improve academically as he continued on the student journey. Even though he achieved excellent College and university results, he still strove to improve himself. He had come a long way from "laziness" getting the better of him at school, which he outlined at the commencement of the study. Luke wrote in his reflection: "Having now completed my first semester at university I can see that going through the UAP has allowed me to be confident about my abilities". These statements show that Luke had gained an appreciation of the relevance of UAP to developing his academic skills, which led to increased confidence and knowledge applicable to his Science degree.

4.4.9 *Teachers' perceptions of students' changing learner identity*

Their reflections are recorded separately to those of the students as they provide an alternative view of the students' transition experiences, however the main focus of this study is the experiences of the male learners themselves. The five UAP teachers, Ellen, Janet, Magda, Rupert and Sally, had witnessed many of the changes reported by their students both

academic and personal. Ellen explained that initially the students experienced “feeling quite overwhelmed and quite nervous”. She further added: “It’s transition to the institution, it’s not just transition to the content”, while Janet observed that initially many students “come with very fixed ideas, particularly about things like Indigenous Australia and refugees. They come with this really black and white view”. The teachers were aware of students’ poor experiences of school and their challenges in adjusting to an academic institution where they needed to “become more independent learners and be a bit more self-driven” (Ellen).

Rupert also noticed students’ changing learner identity over time stating: “They might be quite shy initially; later on, they’re emboldened to express their views and ask questions more easily”. Magda summarised: “I cannot remember seeing a single student who has completed the program that hasn’t improved in their skills” with Sally noting: “you do kind of see both that personal and academic shift”. With their teachers’ support and encouragement, the students progressed through their studies making changes over time to both their learner identity and personal perspectives.

4.4.10 *Conclusion*

Overall, the participants had taken on the challenge of returning to education despite some quite negative experiences in previous educational systems. They adapted to their new role as students in both College and university studies. The participants showed agency in their decision making to return to study as a way of dealing with the changing vocational, economic, and personal circumstances around them. This took some courage to overcome their previous negative experiences at school in order to move forward into new roles as students who were part of the WP process in an Australian university setting. With the support of their teachers the participants were moving from regarding themselves as outsiders in education, and not capable as learners, to becoming comfortable in their new role as students within the university environment.

4.5 Theme 2: Contrasting experiences of employment and student life

4.5.1 *Introduction*

The following section covers employment experiences of the participants. These are comprehensive accounts because the participants described the insecurity of employment in the local region as one of the motivating factors for them to search for new opportunities leading them to enrol at the College. They gave quite detailed descriptions of the experiences

of being a male in the local area and attempting to gain employment, maintain a job and navigate casual and insecure employment arrangements. It is worth exploring these experiences as detailed by the participants as it allows for deeper understanding of the issues involved in this decision than that provided by statistical information alone and gives a background to the roles expected of Australian males.

The participants in this study had grown up and been educated in what had been a traditional industrial region of Australia. According to government data, female dominated areas of health care and social assistance now provided the bulk of employment in Westbeach ("Westbeach" City Council, 2020). These structural changes to the workplace impacted greatly on the security of employment in the local area which acted as a catalyst for the participants to return to further education.

Of the 10 participants only two had worked in the social assistance category, with Luke as a disability support worker and Terry as a teacher's aide, while the remainder were involved in the more traditionally based male occupations. This meant that for most of the participants their futures as lower-skilled male workers were precarious and unpredictable due to major economic changes in the region. In their discussions the participants were aware of the employment situation in the Westbeach area and were looking for a "better lifestyle" (Jack i.1) and increased "earning potential" (Luke, i.2.) that HE qualifications could provide. The initial motivation for most participants was education to improve employment prospects.

In order to gain an understanding of the cultural and social background of the participants they were asked to describe their previous employment and that of their family and friends. Their experiences fell into three categories: unemployment, casual labour and trades. For their families' occupations there was a distinction between the types of employment undertaken by their mothers and step-mothers, which were mainly white-collar, compared to their fathers and stepfathers which were mainly blue-collar.

For the 10 participants the main driving force behind their decision to enrol in the College course was to move away from insecure work and improve their future employment status. The previous occupations of the participants (listed below in Table 10) included: three having full-time work, five in casual jobs across a range of settings, and two being unemployed. This job insecurity for most of the group is reflective of the workforce across the region

("Westbeach" City Council, 2020) and acted as motivation for the participants to commence College studies.

4.5.2 *The perils of employment*

Table 10: Previous Occupations of Student Participants

Participant name	Workforce participation	Occupation
Ben	Casual work	Bar tending, setting up music events, fast-food work
Colin	Unemployed	None mentioned
Dean	Full-time work	Boiler-maker
Jack	Casual work	Supervised a go-kart business, repaired motor-bikes
Kevin	Unemployed	Brief experience as dishwasher at pub
Luke	Full-time work	Chef, disability support worker
Mark	Full-time work	Builder
Sam	Casual work	Construction work, fencing, panel beating, butchery, working at car shows, shearing sheep
Terry	Casual work	Carpentry, surf school, teacher's aide
Troy	Casual work	Bartending

The sections below cover insecure employment experiences, traditional male employment areas and the dangers of the contemporary workplace.

4.5.3 *Unsatisfactory employment experiences*

All the participants expressed dissatisfaction to varying degrees about their working situation prior to enrolling at the College. Two of the participants, Colin and Kevin, were unemployed before commencing UAP. Of the other participants, five, Ben, Jack, Sam, Terry and Troy, were casually employed prior to commencing their College studies. In Australia a casual employee does not have a commitment in advance from an employer about the length of their employment, whereas full-time and part-time employees have ongoing employment with the expectation of regular hours each week (Australian Government Fair Work Ombudsman,

2021). The remaining participants, Luke, Mark and, Dean had more experiences of permanent positions but these had presented their own challenges which will be outlined below. The insecurity and uncertainty associated with lack of permanent and sustainable work remains an ongoing problem for many young men in Australia, particularly in regional areas (Denny & Churchill, 2016).

Kevin and Colin described their unemployment experiences which were reflective of the local workforce outlined in Chapter 1. When asked about his previous jobs Kevin explained: "I had a job for a little while…and then lost that because they said they didn't have enough work and other than that nothing really" (i.1). His parents, unfortunately, were in a similar situation and were unemployed. This highlights some inter-generational unemployment experiences in the local area which were not uncommon (Najman et al., 2018). Colin who was in a similar situation to Kevin outlined the circumstances for young people like himself. He aptly summarised the situation from his perspective: "We have the highest youth unemployment rate of any city in the country, so I decided well I'm going to go to uni." (i.4). Kevin and Colin, despairing of finding steady jobs decided to return to education regarding this as a possible pathway leading to a different trajectory and occupation.

Those participants who had been able to secure work were often occupying casual situations which lacked regular hours or remuneration. Troy's main problem with casual work was the unpredictability of the shifts at his job as a barman "which is sporadic work at best. It's about once every three weeks or once every two weeks" (i.1). Troy explained that his mother wanted him to work more hours stating: "My mother wants me to pick up a part-time job in the times which I'm not studying [but] I keep trying to explain to her that I need to spend more time to study" (i.1). This created some tension at home for him trying to balance his studies with his employment schedule.

In contrast, other participants who had casual employment were concerned about the excessive number of hours they had to work. Ben complained about the "long, long hours" (i.1) working in casual employment in order to support himself. Similarly, Sam stated: "I'd go home from work go to sleep and then go back to work" (i.2), indicating the drudgery of long work hours, particularly in construction. Now that he was a student, Luke said: "I'm only doing about 35 to 40 hours a week so that's fairly low I suppose, compared…I used to do 60 to 70 hours" (i.2). Jack explained that while he had not had a career as such, he had experience of casual work at a go-kart raceway explaining: "The work there is scheduled in

shift work, so I didn't have a routine week to week" (i.1). The sentiments expressed by these participants showed their lack of control over their working conditions. They often had to perform shift work as well as excessive hours to maintain their employment.

Even with long hours the financial rewards were not plentiful. Jack, who was 26, explained that he "had some fundamental issues with trying to micromanage enough money to survive" (i.1). Sam described his situation in the following way: "I've been pretty money struck" (i.1). Casual employment, according to the participants, did not allow for a regular routine to develop and financially it also proved to be an unpredictable and precarious existence.

Furthermore, both Sam and Terry outlined that they actually disliked the work in which they were involved, finding it quite unfulfilling. Sam stated: "I did enough work with my dad that I know that wasn't what I wanted to do….I don't want to be lugging wood around all day…and that's not me" (i.1). Similarly, Terry who had started an apprenticeship as a carpenter stated: "I did that for a while and realised that I didn't really enjoy the whole carpentry and the tradie life" (i.1). He moved onto other occupations before coming to university. Despite Terry's learning difficulties mentioned in the previous section and a succession of various occupations, he did eventually fulfil his wish to enter university as did Sam.

These males in casual work were all aged in their twenties and at a crucial point in their lives where they were making decisions about careers and the direction in life they wanted to take. Rather than persisting with the risk, unpredictability, long hours, drudgery, and lack of progression in their employment, they took an important decision to upgrade their educational qualifications so they could progress into more professional career choices and perhaps break away from the blue-collar expectations of the local area. They were hoping for more security and opportunities in their future vocations.

Four of the participants had experiences of apprenticeship which remains a traditional pathway for many males once they leave school (see previous Figure 1). The percentage of students studying through this system is still dominated by males, while increasingly females outnumber males on university campuses (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020b; NCVER, 2021).

Terry had commenced but not completed an apprenticeship as a carpenter, while Luke had completed his apprenticeship as a chef with his father but subsequently moved into a different occupation. He described working with his father: "We had a pretty strained

relationship so that probably affected my experience of cooking and the industry" (i.1). Luke later moved into disability support work which he enjoyed, however he stated, "disabilities – is a good industry and I do enjoy the work but there's not a lot of room for progression really" (i.1). Luke was hoping that university would offer him further work opportunities particularly in the Science field.

Both Dean and Mark had completed apprenticeships and had continued working in their trades in a part-time capacity while at the College and university. As time progressed Dean's work as a boiler-maker had become insecure and he explained: "we all got made redundant" (i.3) necessitating him to work for a labour hire business. He found the move unsatisfactory, as he was not able to engage in quality workmanship as he moved from workplace to workplace.

Mark too was very concerned about the situation in his workplace as a builder. As his own business had not been financially successful, he also worked for another builder to complement his salary. He outlined his workload from the previous year: "I was doing 40 [hours] for the boss and 40 myself, 80-hour weeks" (i.1). The stress of trying to maintain a steady income weighed heavily on Mark, as was trying to make enough money to support his wife and four children. However, this was proving difficult to manage. His voice started to quiver as he disclosed the situation. Over the previous Christmas work break he had contemplated his future, stating: "During that time trying to see where I was sort of heading" (i.1), when he made the decision to come to university to study Science, a dream he had always had. Mark was searching for a new career, which could improve his circumstances and offer a more financially stable income for his family.

Working in trades is a common pathway for many males in Australia. For a number of the participants their journeys as tradesmen followed the same vocational trajectory as their fathers. A significant aspect of working-class masculinity in Australia involves the value given to making a living as the average "Aussie battler" in male dominated professions (Whitman, 2013, p.50). However, while the participants initially followed this work pathway, according to the experiences of Terry, Luke, Dean and Mark, it did not always provide a secure environment with certainty of employment and adequate remuneration. Each of these participants in different ways was hoping to change their careers and their life's direction by coming to university to study, a move they hoped would provide more security and opportunities in the future.

4.5.4 *Dangers of the workplace*

Traditional male workplaces in Australia, particularly in the local area, involved heavy industry, building and mining, which are some of the most dangerous places to be employed (Safe Work Australia, 2021). Some of the participants had initially been involved in occupations in these areas and provided details of their experiences. Insecurity of the workplace for these participants meant more than just a lack of financial security. An unexpected finding of the research was the number of references made by participants to the physical dangers they experienced in their workplaces. Jack understood this predicament explaining: "A lot of people develop back problems, middle-aged rather than old age, and these are the things that I wanted to stay away from" (i.1). Although he had manual skills and had worked with go-karts and motorbike repairs, he did not see this as being a viable career option stating: "I am not interested in a messy job that's going to give me arthritis at 50 or less" (i.2). His preferred option was to study health and nutrition, as he was interested "in the benefits of having a really healthy body" (i.2). His change in career choice was partially based on the wish to avoid the risk, uncertainty, and danger of the workplace.

Luke expressed similar concerns about his previous occupation explaining: "The cooking industry's is…pretty tough you know…it takes a toll on you over the years" (i.1). Sam using similar language outlined the long-term difficulties of his construction workplace stating: "It is a lot of hard work, and it does take a lot of toll on you" (i.4).

Dean too had experienced minor burns and had scars from his work as a boiler-maker, "from sparks dripping down onto me" (i.3). He elaborated further explaining the atmosphere of working at the steelworks as a boiler-maker where there were a "lot more different types of fumes come up and the majority of boiler-makers die from cancer so I kind of want to get out of that" (i.3). However, his most graphic example of danger at the workplace was that his leg had been broken in what he believed to have been a preventable accident.

Although quite young men, Jack, Luke, Sam and Dean had all experienced the hardship and dangers of contemporary workplaces, choosing to leave them behind to pursue more secure futures. For these young men university was seen as offering this opportunity. Furthermore, the oldest participant, Mark, declared that he "couldn't do the building trade continually particularly, yeah, ever-increasing retirement age" (i.2). As retirement age increases in Australia, the physical difficulties of maintaining a blue-collar job into the future were seen

as problematic and another reason for these males to leave their previous workplaces (Gray & Bray, 2016).

Many participants, when interviewed, expressed frustration in their attempts to secure safe, ongoing, stable and fulfilling employment. This was their main motivation for returning to study as mature-age learners so they could change the direction of their lives to some extent. Enduring the difficulties of their insecure and sometimes dangerous workplaces was a significant motivation for the participants to re-engage with learning despite their previous predominantly negative experiences in educational settings. They reimagined their futures where they had opportunities as individuals to pursue professional careers rather than relying on insecure and hazardous employment to provide an income.

Transitioning to the student experience

The following sections outline the participants' transition from their previous work environment into the university space, outlining the physical as well as the social space involved. The first section examines students' existing capitals and attitudes to campus life, particularly the physical attributes of the campus itself. This is followed by an in-depth exploration of the barriers the participants had to overcome in order to progress as students. These barriers included the problem of commuting to campus and the financial worries experienced by participants who had become full-time students. It concludes with the perspective of the participants' teachers who gave some insight into their views of student transition from a working to an academic environment.

4.5.5 *Existing capitals*

Although the participants had entered UAP from a different environment they brought to this new setting their own capitals which had previously been developed. While not academic capital per se the participants mentioned other capitals such as maturity, life experience, skill sets and social connections. Describing the other students Troy noted that: "Everyone wants to succeed. Everyone wants to learn" (Troy, i.3) and similarly Luke stated that "most people were very mature and they were clever in their own ways" (1.2).

As well as observations of the group's capitals the individual participants explained their own existing capitals. Jack elaborated: "I'm very confident with myself and I am fairly good at talking to just about anyone" (Jack, i.2), which is a skill set or capital that benefitted him in the university environment. Colin outlined his determination and sense of maturity by

stating: “I’ve got an idea of where I want to be, what I want to achieve, how I want to achieve it” (Colin, i.3), while Mark stated that his advantage was being able to “learn a lot more….because I’ve had a lot more life experience and it’s helped” (i.3). Troy explained: “I definitely find myself far more disciplined” (i.3) than when he was younger while both Mark and Sam mentioned skills of “time management” which had developed through their involvement in the work-place. Similarly, Luke, showed insight into his existing capitals stating: “You need to set yourself goals….Get up, push yourself, you know. Like just do what needs to be done now rather than do it later” (Luke, i.2). He had developed a mature outlook compared to his days at school when he had “procrastinated” with work.

Time management and the discipline of regular work gave the participants capital which they could draw upon during their transition to studies. Mark and Dean had both referred to “perfectionism” when it came to creating the finished product at their workplaces as well as developing teaching skills with apprentices there. All the participants were motivated to improve their lives. Their sense of maturity, organisational skills and self-confidence gave them capitals they could build on as they transitioned into HE.

4.5.6 *Campus environment*

Moving from life in the workplace to that of a full-time student provided an array of contrasts for the participants. In particular, the physical environment provided by the buildings and grounds of the campus appeared to some participants to be safer and more aesthetically pleasing than their previous worksites. Four of the participants, Colin, Dean, Kevin and Mark, specifically mentioned feeling that they were in a safe place on the university campus. When questioned about this Dean stated that compared to his workplace the university was, “a lot safer, yes. Much safer” (i.3).

Mark had chosen this regional campus over a city campus as it suited him much more coming from a country background stating: “It’s a good campus for I suppose I’m more of a rural person” (i.4). Similarly, Colin who lived very close to the campus enjoyed walking through the grounds explaining: “It’s a really nice campus. It’s a good wander, lots of duck ponds, parks that sort of thing” (i.1). Kevin, who was interested in Biology, also enjoyed the natural landscape of the campus. He stated: “You’ve got all the serious study but it’s amongst like a paradise ‘cause it’s like nature and wildlife around” (i.1).

These participants expressed enjoyment of the physical landscape. This learning environment provided a contrast to the dangers and hazards of some of their previous

workplaces. Feeling comfortable and safe on the university grounds was a world away from their previous environments and an inducement to study and to feel part of the university space.

4.5.7 *Overcoming risks and insecurities*

Notwithstanding the participants' generally positive experiences of moving from employment to student life there were still risks and barriers to negotiate. These were not all obvious to them at the initial interviews but developed as areas of concern as they progressed through both their UAP and undergraduate studies. There were two main sources of anxiety: first, the long distances involved in commuting to the campus; and second, negotiating the financial costs of becoming full-time students. Commuting to College could be regarded as the tyranny of distance for half the participants (5 of 10) who lived more than 20 kilometres from the campus. The grind of commuting was an added burden to their experience of being a tertiary student. Foremost of concern for all the participants, however, was the financial cost of returning to study, both in foregoing a full-time income as well as incurring expenses related to study. These two areas will now be examined in more detail.

4.5.8 *The tyranny of distance*

A major barrier to overcome for half of the participants was the travelling distance to campus from their homes – the time out of their study/work schedule and the monetary cost of fuel and time involved. Details of the participants' remoteness from campus are detailed below in Table 11. The distances travelled varied enormously from Colin who resided one kilometre away allowing him to walk to class, to an 87-kilometre trip both ways undertaken by Ben. Five of the participants, Ben, Troy, Mark, Sam and Terry, lived over 20 kilometres away from campus, which added another complication to their lives as students. Research has shown that residential distance from a campus is a disincentive for students to attend university (Cooper et al., 2017) and this presented a considerable barrier which these five participants had to overcome to study.

Table 11: Distance from Participants' Residences to Campus

Participant	Distance from residence to campus (kms)[18]
Ben	87
Colin	1
Dean	19
Jack	5
Kevin	7
Luke	3
Mark	70
Sam	65
Terry	79
Troy	22

Ben, who withdrew early from UAP, had to commute 87 kilometres each way to attend classes. Mark, who worked long hours as well as commuting was concerned about losing time to attend just one lecture. As Mark described it, he was "coming down for one hour but I lose three-and-a-half hours out of a day" (i.3). In an effort to overcome the time taken in commuting he had managed to schedule most of his classes across two days. Mark explained: "So that's been a bit of a struggle yesterday and today…I go from 8.30 to 5.30 straight" (i.3). Condensing timetables and trying to cope with schedules imposed by the College or university impacted upon the students' study life and also reduced opportunities of simultaneously being involved in part-time work.

Terry also had a long commute of 79 kilometres from his home to the campus. He explained the difficulties involved: "I normally drive to Newton [pseudonym] and then catch the train from there to Westbeach, which is a nuisance because sometimes the trains don't really align" (i.1). Sam, as outlined earlier, decided to save money by sleeping in his car overnight at the beach. He explained his financial reasoning:

[18] One mile is equal to 1.6 kilometres.

> Every day there would be half a tank of petrol…that's about 40 bucks, 40 bucks a week and if I stay down here and paid somewhere to stay down here that's 50 bucks extra. So, if I just drive down and stay down here in my car that's 20 bucks just to go to uni. so yeah, it's…I found it would be the cheaperest [*sic*] and the easiest option (i.2).

The participants used a range of strategies to deal with this situation. Luckily, Colin had moved back home to be close to classes as he no longer owned a car. Troy had commenced UAP by using public transport, which was very time consuming but eventually was able to access a car for transport. Both Mark and Sam ensured that they could park close to the university by getting to the campus extremely early, thus avoiding parking fees. Sam observed, "I just park on the road and at 5.30 [am]. I'm the first one there" (i.3), often having slept in his car overnight at the local beach. Jack was the only participant who actually mentioned changing residences before commencing study to be closer to the university. The others remained in their family homes or living with their partners or flatmates.

Additionally, the participants' timetables were a major cause of concern for those travelling long distances. For instance, Troy had to attend an evening class and then return for a 9.00 am class the next day after a long commute. It was frequently not possible to change or adjust timetables to suit journeys as the university had over 28,000 students and there was little flexibility for individual students. On top of the journey time and cost of fuel, parking costs were a concern for these students whose budgets were limited. While universities are working to ensure improved access to study for those students from low-SES and disadvantaged backgrounds, there are obstacles to effective participation in HE, such as these, which often remain hidden within the university landscape.

Despite these difficulties, most of the participants showed persistence with their studies and continued to attend classes and progress with their course. During the university semester, Sam was able to stop sleeping in his car and stay at a friend's place close to campus. He explained: "I pay him like $A20 a week and I get to stay over in the lounge room" (i.4). While Ben had the longest commute and left the course early, the other participants were not deterred by this barrier and persevered with their studies.

4.5.9 *Financial risk*

While there were some differences depending on the individual participant's circumstances, concerns regarding finance were of paramount concern. Research by Pitman and Koshy (2015) suggests that ongoing issues related to financing study is an area of concern for low-income students studying in enabling courses. Nine of the 10 participants specifically mentioned financial concerns as an obstacle they had to contend with during their studies. It was an overriding concern of the group as a whole. For all participants purchasing what they considered to be expensive textbooks and other consumables for their various courses, the cost of commuting to campus and parking and other expenses associated with study weighed heaving upon them as their courses progressed. Similar issues concerning the cost of education have been found to be relatively common for students following comparable enabling pathways (O'Rourke et al., 2013; Pitman & Koshy, 2015), indicating that financial difficulties are a major reason why many low-income students drop out of enabling courses.

Once these participants left the workforce or reduced their work hours so they could attend UAP, they encountered the risk of balancing their studies with their income. Once moving to university study, the fees escalated depending on the degree studied. As all the participants were Australian citizens, they were able to access FEE-HELP which allowed students to defer paying course fees until after graduation (Australian Government, 2021b). Some of this group were also able to access further government support dependent upon their individual financial circumstances. While these government initiatives certainly encourage access to education for those from lower-SES backgrounds, they do not cover the entirety of the cost experienced by students once studying full-time and exclude accommodation, laptops or textbooks.

While all 10 of the participants took advantage of the system, there was also some additional government financial support available for those who had low incomes or a disability. Colin, Mark, Sam and Jack accessed this support. Colin stated: "I'm very, very, fortunate that I got that scholarship and I'm very happy about it too" (i.2). He further disclosed that he was, "on the pension…I'm on disability" (i.1) although he also stated hopefully, he would "get a job and…can get off Centrelink. I hate being on Centrelink" (i.3). He was hopeful of using his education to ensure that he was less dependent on government welfare in the future.

Mark, who was supporting a family, also had reluctantly accessed some Centrelink payments and decided to drop back to part-time study in the following year. He conceded: "I don't

think I could handle full-time uni. next year because I won't be able to earn enough money, even with the Austudy.[19] I had to claim it" (i.2). Financial pressures weighed heavily on Mark throughout the duration of this study. His decision to reduce his study load became his only option once his government payments were later stopped, explaining: "the stupid government's cutting my Austudy so that's caused more problems" (i.4). For mature-age learners with family responsibilities, returning to full-time study can be quite problematic from a number of perspectives.

Similarly, Sam had made use of an EdStart[20] grant for low-SES students, explaining: "It's kind of like a little scholarship thing. I got $A450.00 to spend on my textbooks and stuff." (i.4), which is a useful if small financial support for students in situations such as Sam. Jack too made use of Centrelink and explained the difficulties involved stating: "I decided to go full-time study and live off Centrelink….I've done my budgeting on what I'll be allowing from Centrelink and it's within $A15.00 or so for a fortnight" (i.4). The government payments, although appreciated by the students involved, were quite minimal.

Luke, who was married, was in a similar situation regarding budgeting his finances, outlining: "It worries me that maybe the HECS[21] system will change or the Medicare[22] will change, you know, anything that's going to add to the cost of living is scary to me" (i.4). Even though there were government benefits available for these students, they were quite limited and required careful budgeting to make ends meet. This shows the financial risk and uncertainty for all students with limited means who are attending college and university courses. Troy summed up the situation regarding studying at university in Australia stating: "It was basically a very expensive money sink that eventually got you a job which paid off your student debt" (i.2).

The participants fell into two groups with regard to their accommodation and family commitments, a younger group who were living at home with parents (Colin, Dean, Kevin, Sam, Terry and Troy) with an average age of 21.8 years and a slightly older group who were

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[19] Austudy is the Centrelink payment for full-time students who are at least 25 years old and eligible under the income and assets test limits.

[20] EdStart provides Westbeach University equity scholarships and grants for undergraduate students. These scholarships and grants are awarded to students who can demonstrate financial need. When awarding EdStart, preference is given to applicants who demonstrate financial hardship plus other educational disadvantages.

[21] HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme) was the previous name for FEE-HELP used before 2005.

[22] Medicare is the Australian publicly funded universal health care system operated by the Department of Human Services.

living independently from their immediate families (Ben, Jack, Luke, Mark) whose average age was 27.5 years. Luke and Mark from the latter group were married, with Mark being the only parent amongst the participants. The group of younger participants had the limited financial support from their families of being able to live at home. None of the 10 participants lived on campus although on-campus accommodation was available at Westbeach University. For domestic Australian students in their undergraduate years living at home with their parents is very common, primarily due to financial reasons (Edwards & van der Brugge, 2012).

For the second group, those living away from home, the cost of paying for bills such as rent and food were of great concern. Jack expressed this: "I make ends meet with the money I have just after rent, bills and food and that's me surviving" (i.4). Mark had the extra burden of providing for his family outlining: "The whole thing is to try and keep that money coming in. The four kids keep eating it and all wasting it" (i.3). These students, without the backing of affluent families, were very conscious of being very careful with their funds.

Nonetheless, the younger group living with family members also expressed concerns about meeting financial obligations. Being able to live at home with their families provided some means of ameliorating the increasing costs of student life, however, all participants struggled at times to make ends meet. Dean explained his situation moving from full-time work to life as a student. He stated: "Coming from full-time to like casual…I definitely got to cut my spendings [*sic*] a lot more and now I'm starting to chew into my savings" (i.2). Luke explained trying to balance studying with income generation: "I've probably got two big stresses, it's that trying to work and pay the bills and the other is just not knowing or just seeming to not have enough time to study the content adequately" (i.3). Careful consideration was given by all the participants to financial matters during the course of the interviews. There was the constant grind and worry about money for all the participants involved in this study.

One particular concern was the cost of textbooks for their university courses. Luke explained: "A lot of people aren't getting them I think just because it's a lot of money" (i.3). Sam was astonished: "My Maths textbook alone was $A270.00 for one term," (i.4), while Mark remarked: "I've noticed one of them's $A180.00….I thought you're kidding, aren't you? A bit much….So to buy a textbook I need that grant" (i.3). The university website described the importance of essential textbooks as meaning that "the ownership of the textbook or the ability to access it when required is an essential requirement of the subject" (University of

“Westbeach”, 2019). For these participants and others like them, not being able to afford such resources could have put them at a distinct disadvantage from the other students.

In order to overcome the financial burdens participants used a number of strategies. Five of the group, Dan, Jack, Luke, Mark and Sam, specifically mentioned tighter budgeting and limiting their expenses during their studies. Sam showed resourcefulness in accessing the internet, which he did not have at home by joining three local libraries with free internet access. Dean and Jack, who had worked the previous year, had savings which they were able to access while studying. Furthermore, most of the participants were working part-time as well as studying full-time. While this situation did allow the participants to have available funds for living and study expenses, the disadvantage was the time taken away from their studies. The participants were constantly balancing the time spent at university with their time at work as well as commuting to both places. Simultaneously trying to earn an income, as well as being a successful student, was a difficult undertaking. Sam explained: “Money is far and few between I feel when you’re a student. If you can get a job that works in exactly with your timetable that is perfect, like you’re golden then but sometimes it’s just unlucky” (i.4). Luke concurred with these experiences of, “trying to balance the budget and making sure you had enough time to study and do all your work” (1.2).

This situation is common for many Australian students who continue to earn an income in a part-time capacity while studying full-time. However, there have been growing concerns that Australian university students are coming under increasing financial stress with students from regional and low-SES backgrounds being regarded as high risk for mental health issues due to this situation (Gair, 2018). Similarly, in the UK concerns have been raised regarding the “double deficit” (Hordósy et al., 2018) for low-income students who need to continue working part-time while studying, which can impact the outcome of their degrees and indeed their professional employability.

The 10 participants all struggled to balance their education and financial commitments however, they did display resourcefulness and resilience in doing so. To create a balance in their lives to overcome this significant barrier both Sam and Luke reduced their number of work hours in order to focus on their studies. However, Mark eventually reduced university hours to part-time study in order to continue providing for his family. In his reflection Mark noted that he was “still on Struggle Street”. The goal of improving career prospects, lifestyle

and self-confidence supported the participants' determination to succeed at College and university.

4.5.10 *Teachers' perceptions of students' experiences of employment and student life*

The perceptions of the five UAP teachers provided further insight into the experiences of male learners transitioning into HE from an enabling course. Working closely with UAP students over a number of years gave teachers insights into the difficult circumstances faced by some of their learners. While some of their students had been "successful businessmen and successful in their professional life" (Magda), the majority had come from backgrounds of manual work and insecure employment experiences. Enhancing and advancing their employment prospects seemed to be a motivating force for many students according to their teachers.

The teachers stated that many students had been employed in casual and insecure workplaces before commencing UAP. Sally, who was the youngest teacher at 36, empathised with the students explaining: "there's more casual people than ever before. When you're casual if someone says I can give you an extra shift you feel like you should take it". She elaborated that many of her students had expressed how they did not want to remain in "that physical, manual kind of working-class reality all their life" (Sally). Rupert's understanding was that many students saw UAP as a way "to get a decent job". Ellen recognised that there were students "stuck in a low paying kind of position and they want to try something so that they can get a better job satisfaction and better income". Similarly, Janet explained: "For some of the older men who have been retrenched from their jobs or who aren't happy in the work that they're doing or see themselves as somehow failures and want to come back and improve that situation".

However, there were barriers to progress, and some students left the course prematurely. "They tend to…drop out quite quickly when they realise what they have to do" explained Janet. Magda also noted: "We get quite a few students who are there because Centrelink has told them they must be working or studying in order to receive the benefits." Concerns were also raised about the skill level of some students, particularly with regard to computer skills and Mathematics. Magda noted: "The older students often were really challenged by the technology by doing research online". Rupert was concerned that students were disadvantaged by "their lack of mathematical ability" particularly for his Science based

subject. The teachers' perceptions were that the transition experience was difficult for some students who were not fully committed and had poor previous educational experiences.

The difference between male and female students was observed by Rupert and Sally. For some male learners, adjusting to a new learning environment was problematic. Rupert recalled that "the males are often reticent to ask for help" as did Sally who explained "masculinity is part of I think what keeps them quiet in those spaces", noting a gendered difference in approaches to study.

Despite these perceived difficulties the teachers did consider that UAP provided a successful transition program into the university for many of their students. Rupert shared his insights into what UAP meant for some of his adult learners explaining: "It means hopefully job security for them and financial security….It's not just for their own personal gain but it's for the bigger picture, for their families as well".

Similarly, Janet stated:

> It's about becoming someone different, yeah, I think more than a good job or good money….These are students where that road's been denied for one reason or another and here they are coming back and they're kind of making something different of themselves.

The teachers interviewed showed an understanding of the disadvantages encountered by many UAP students as transitioned from the workplace to HE. While some students did not successfully complete UAP, for those who were able to do so, it offered the chance of an alternative career path and promise of an alternate future direction.

4.5.11 *Conclusion*

The participants in the study were transitioning into further education from unemployment and workplace settings. Most were motivated by the insecurity and uncertainty in their places of employment to search for opportunities further afield in the university sector. Their lived experiences of unemployment, casual labour and work in trades led them to search for alternative career paths into a more secure and safer environment. However, once enrolled into studies there were still risks and insecurities to overcome, particularly financial ones. While studying and, for many, continuing to work part-time the participants navigated a balance between dedication to studies and the need to provide a secure income. The

majority of the participants were able to persevere with their studies and continue onto university through the enabling program.

The next chapter focusses on the second part of the findings where participants' motivations and shifts in thinking across the project will be explored.

Chapter 5: Motivations and shifts in thinking

5.1 Theme 3: Motivations and motivators

5.1.1 *Introduction*

Motivation can be defined broadly as the drive and energy that people put into achieving their goals (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 147). Furthermore, Knowles' (1990) has noted that "while adults are responsive to some external motivators (better jobs, promotions, higher salaries…), the most potent motivators are internal pressures (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, quality of life…)" (p. 63). These internal drivers for students have also been described as the "personal politics of hope" (O'Shea et al., 2017, p. 99), as expressions of desires for better futures for themselves and their families. During interviews the participants provided a variety of reasons, both external and internal, that motivated them to return to education as adults. They also gave details of the significant people in their lives who had acted as motivators by encouraging them to return to study. The details of these motivations and motivators will be unpacked in more detail in this section.

Additionally, the UAP teachers reflected on what they thought motivated their students. As recommended by Yin (2009) multiple perspectives give depth to this exploration of the transition experience however, not wishing to diminish the importance of the learners' perspectives, the teachers reflections are recorded separately.

First, the section will examine two main aspects of motivation as relayed by the participants: vocational, which can be regarded as an external motivation, and personal or internal motivation. Initially the participants described being motivated to seek a solution to their vocational difficulties due to their experiences of insecure and unsafe workplaces. For some participants these poor workplace experiences acted as a "disorienting dilemma" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168) which led them to seek a solution by engaging in further education. However, a second aspect of their motivation to return to study concerned desires to improve participants' own lives in a deeper way by; stretching their boundaries, resolving past regrets, helping others, and fulfilling their own potentials.

Following the examination of these vocational and personal motivating factors an exploration of the significant people in the participants' lives who influenced or motivated them to re-engage with education will be presented. Finally, the added perspective of the

teachers' reflections of motivating factors for mature-age learners will be discussed adding another facet to understanding the experiences of these male learners transitioning into HE.

5.1.2 *Vocational motivation*

When questioned about the reasons for returning to study all of the participants initially explained a need to find alternative employment or to secure employment in the first place. All the participants in this study (n=10) specifically expressed enrolling in study for work related reasons. This aim was predominantly instigated by a collective need to escape from an insecure job environment associated with their previous occupations or lack of work itself. The risks entailed insecurity as well as financial and, in some cases, physical dangers as outlined previously.

Participants hoped for careers and salaries that would give them satisfaction but also economic stability and independence. Combined with financial motivations were the participants' desires to be engaged in interesting and more fulfilling work. Many of the participants' lived experiences of casualization, poor salaries and unemployment flamed their desire to find vocational satisfaction with commensurate remuneration. These findings accord with recent research in the UK (Foster et al., 2020) which describes that motivations for college students to undertake undergraduate study included better job prospects, improved salaries, enhanced qualifications and a new experience. Each of the participants expressed strong concerns about what their future would be if their situations did not change for the better. These concerns combined with poor workplace experiences outlined in the previous section acted as triggers or motivating factors in their decisions to return to study as mature-age learners.

5.1.3 *Personal motivation*

While the participants may have initially been motivated by vocational reasons to enter university, upon further analysis it appeared that personal or intrinsic factors also played a large part in their decision making. From interviews with the participants there emerged three major personal reasons behind their motivation to study again as mature-age learners:

The personal reasons included the following:

- Extending boundaries
- Resolving regrets and helping others

- Fulfilling potential.

Extending boundaries

While these males were working in service, trades and manual occupations, many explained that their interests lay elsewhere, and they expressed motivations to extend the boundaries of their lives. Terry summarised the situation of many UAP students, observing: "Some of them seem to be pushed by their drive to do something different and some of them seem to be pushed by their drive to do things that personally appeals to them" (i.1). Similarly, Troy stated: "I think there's always a drive for earning more money. But in the same sense there's always a drive to do something you enjoy" (i.3). In this way he expressed the dual motivations of many students for better employment but also for personal fulfilment.

Having the opportunity to explore a genuine area of interest provided a strong motivating factor for some of these participants. For Colin a motivating factor was to explore new technology. He explained: "I would read about technology that's being developed and I always just thought, look, I should be there doing that." (i.1). Similarly, Jack, when he was studying architecture at a previous institution, was advised by friends "what you are currently studying is not what you show interest in…so they got me talking about nutrition" (i.1). Moreover, Jack, Colin, Kevin, and Luke were all motivated by their love of the subject matter that they wished to study. Jack's great passion was, "how to help the human body be as durable and strong as possible" (i.2). Colin explained, "I love hearing new ideas and doing new things" (i.2) while Kevin explained his interest in Biology was his reason for wishing to study. Luke similarly said: "I have a love for Science and it's something I'd love to do with my life" (i.1). Interestingly, three of the participants used the word "love" to explain their motivation and desire to pursue the subject matter, indicating a strong emotional motivation for wishing to study in these particular fields.

As the participants had limited experiences outside their local areas, some of them were motivated by an opportunity to stretch themselves beyond the confines of their present circumstances. Both Ben and Troy were drawn to the university atmosphere. Troy was "rather enamoured with the place" (i.1) and enjoyed the environment of the campus. Colin really enjoyed the opportunities afforded him by his engagement with the university stating: "There's so much here that I can do," (i.4) and he fully engaged with many of the extra-curricular activities available on campus including the opportunity to study abroad in 2018. Colin stated: "I really want to see the world…I really want to go live in Japan for a while. Like

that's one of my big dreams" (i.4). They were all looking for engagement that was different to their former experiences.

Jack offered some insight into his previous circumstances during his fourth interview. He disclosed he was: "Just trying to find something that makes me a bit happier outside of being stuck in the rut of the middle of the city" (i.4). Rather than continuing in their regular line of employment and lifestyles these participants wished to expand their horizons and experience an alternative way of life, stretching their boundaries and engaging with new ideas.

Resolving regrets and helping others

As outlined earlier in the chapter many of the participants had regrets from the past particularly in relation to their schooling. They saw the opportunity of returning to study as an attempt to resolve some of these past regrets. Dean explained: "The minute I left school I realised I should have started studying…I would [have] loved to stay in school" (i.2). He was now trying to redress his inability to do so at the time. Luke explained that due to "apathy" he was "the only person in my year to leave [at the end of] Year 10" (i.1). Although Colin had stayed in school until Year 12, he disclosed: "I spent two years going to school, hanging out with my mates and sleeping in class and then I'd stay up all night playing Xbox"[23] (i.1). Mark too pondered: "[I] wonder what would I have got if I did study?" (Mark, i.1) during his HSC. Jack explained: "I definitely wasn't interested in learning….I was very much interested in anything that made me happy and being able to wheelie[24] for longer down a street" (i.4). Sam, on the other hand, had attempted an enabling course at another College but admitted, "I really wasn't ready enough to do it" (i.1). They each regretted in various ways that they did not focus on study in the earlier part of their education.

As well as overcoming past regrets, four of the participants, Mark, Dean, Jack and Sam, expressed altruistic motivations and a desire to help others which may be termed "generative" reasons for returning to study (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 148). Rather than just advancing his own career Mark was motivated by improving his family's situation. He explained in his reflection: "I am changing my career for a better me, but more importantly

[23] Xbox is a video gaming brand created and owned by Microsoft.

[24] A "wheelie" is a colloquial term for manoeuvre performed on a bicycle, motorbike, etc., in which the rider maintains balance while lifting the front wheel off the ground (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 2003).

a better life for the family I dearly love”. His motivation was not only on career improvement but to improve his family’s circumstances.

Jack was interested in studying Nutrition with the ultimate goal of improving the longevity of others. He stated: “I’ve prided myself on knowing what’s good for myself and my human body as a complete package lifestyle to try, and you know, to dream of living forever” (i.1). This was certainly an example of an altruistic motivation to study. While not having family responsibilities both Dean and Sam also wanted to help improve the lives of others. Dean wished to become a Physical Education teacher as he had enjoyed helping apprentices. This was one of his motivations for enrolling into the UAP. Sam too decided to become a teacher in order to assist younger children.

For these two participants looking to assist others as teachers was inspirational and motivational for them to come to university. An important motivating factor for these four students was not only to improve their own lives but also to make a contribution to the lives of others.

Fulfilling their potential

The self-worth of some of the participants had been impacted by negative experiences in their school setting discussed previously. Accessing university provided an opportunity to change their outlook, social and cultural capitals. Four of the participants, Sam, Colin, Terry and Luke, viewed their previous occupations as tradesmen and casual workers as having limited opportunities for them and not fulfilling their potential. Enrolling into the UAP provided a chance to transition into white-collar rather than blue-collar workplaces which they saw could in some ways enhance their career prospects and place in society.

Sam outlined: “I am doing a lot more study than I would’ve in high school…so I think through maturing I’ve become a better student as well” (i.3). Furthermore, Colin wanted to further develop his creativity indicating his frustration with his previous lack of fulfilment. Terry regarded himself as capable of university studies (i.1), stating: “It would be a waste of potential if I just stay at home and became a carpenter” (i.1). While acknowledging the value of having a trade, Terry had a different image of himself and his identity in the future.

Luke, looking to the future, explained that “to say that I’m…a scientist that would be great” (i.2). In particular he expressed that he felt he had not fulfilled his potential and had been left behind by some of his friends. He stated: “I think I’m as intelligent as my friends, but I

feel a little bit left out at times…especially a with a group of my friends who are PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) students" (Luke, i.2).

Each of these participants was motivated by an ambition to change his lot in life and strive towards a different and preferable future role and identity in society to that in which they had previously been engaged.

5.1.4 *Motivators*

The participants described people who acted as influencers or motivators by providing encouragement for them to return to study. Generally, the participants explained that there were significant people in their lives who motivated them to attempt university education. The importance of significant others in enabling students' motivation is also noted by other scholars (O'Shea et al., 2017; Picton & Kahu, 2021; Rossiter, 2007; Stahl et al., 2020). For the participants in this study the significant others included friends and families, but in particular female supporters and motivators including mothers, girlfriends and wives.

5.1.5 *Friends*

The influence of friends and their encouragement of these participants acted as a strong motivating factor for them to commence studies again at a mature-age. Four of the 10 participants, Troy, Luke, Terry and Colin, explained that having their friends at university was a motivating factor for them to follow the same pathway. For Troy, his friends' attendance at university had acted as a motivation for him to do so as well stating: "Most of my friends have all gone to university" (i.1). Luke explained that as he had attended a selective high school most of the cohort went onto university study: "I have a lot of friends that have attended university here" (i.1). Similarly, Terry explained: "Most of my friends are actually studying here" (i.1). Colin too was inspired by a friend to begin the UAP stating: "One of my friends was actually one of the people who said that I should do uni." (i.1). It seems clear that witnessing their peers coming to university and successfully engaging with study helped point these participants in the same direction and allowed them to build on their social capital.

5.1.6 *Families*

Families too were of importance in encouraging the participants to enter HE. For eight of the participants their family's attitude regarding education was positive and supportive. Ben,

whose sister was also studying at Westbeach, said his family "want everyone to be educated" (i.1), while Dean stated his family "were pretty happy I started studying (i.2)". Troy explained: "my parents are very proud of me for getting into the College course" (i.1), while Luke stated that his family "have a fairly positive attitude towards education" (i.1). Similarly, Colin described his family's attitude to education stating: "They all think it's really important and they always encourage me" (i.1). His family seemed to be aware of the perseverance that was required to complete a university qualification.

Jack outlined that while his parents' attitude was "very positive" (i.1) towards education, "they don't have a clear understanding of what it's like [for] someone my age group" (i.1). Jack was entering unchartered territory as he was the first in his family to attend university. Sam was in a similar situation explaining: "the most anyone in my family's gone to is TAFE" (i.1).

On the other hand, Terry had an older brother "in his last year at uni." (i.1) and another brother "coming to uni. next year" (i.1). He said that while his family was "pretty happy" about him commencing UAP "they're still sceptical about like whether I'll stick at it or not" (i.1). Having previously witnessed Terry's problems at school they were pleased about his decision to come to College but not sure he would persist.

Kevin and Mark were the exceptions to receiving positive acclaim for their decision to return to study. Kevin had previously studied a vocational course admitting: "I've stuffed around with TAFE for a few years" (i.1) but acknowledged that he did not really "take TAFE seriously". According to Kevin, his parents' attitude towards him starting College was "they will go along with it…as long as I show interest in it, they will care otherwise they will just think-negative" (i.1). They may have had concerns about his perseverance based on his previous attempts at a vocational course.

Mark explained that his parents did "not really" (i.1) encourage him to do homework at school and they questioned his reasons for commencing university studies. He outlined their attitude stating: "Why do it sort of thing? For what cause?" (i.1). Mark further disclosed: "I don't really talk much with my parents these days" (i.1). Mark too was first in his family to attend university and he did so quite independently from his parents.

Notwithstanding Mark's fairly fractured relationship with his parents and Kevin and Terry's parents' cynicism about them completing their studies, the majority of the participants

experienced encouragement and support from their families once they had made the decision to cross the threshold to HE.

5.1.7 *Female motivators*

The participants' families were an important factor of encouragement for them to return to study however, upon further analysis of the data, it was female motivators from these friends and family groups who primarily inspired and encouraged them to return to study. When participants were asked who supported them to recommence study the answer was overwhelmingly the women in their lives, predominantly mothers, step-mothers, girlfriends and wives. Sam was the only participant who specifically mentioned a teacher as motivator: "I just took his advice and ran with that" (i.1) however, he later explained that his mother was also an influencing force. For some of the males witnessing their mothers and step-mothers furthering their own education, particularly if they had returned to study themselves as adults, was quite powerful. Seven of the 10 participants, Ben, Luke, Dean, Mark, Sam, Jack and Terry, mentioned their mothers as exerting a significant influence on them to return to study.

Ben, whose mother had recently completed university studies at Westbeach, had inspired her son to follow the same course, advising him: "You're never too old to study" (i.1) as she had commenced university aged 45. Ben described his mother's influence: "My mum just finished uni. here so she wants me to" (Ben, i.1). In a similar fashion Luke described his step-mother's effect on him explaining: "[In her] mid-thirties she could still acquire a university degree and then do something with it and she is pretty well off now and makes quite a bit of money" (i.1). The journey taken by these participants' mothers and step-mothers as mature-age learners showed Ben and Luke that despite the challenges, success was possible for mature-age learners.

Furthermore, Dean explained: "My girlfriend is studying here so she told me about it….and she suggested that I should do this" (i.1). In the following interview he further elaborated: "She kind of encouraged me to come here…she definitely helped me get through it all" (i.2). Having his girlfriend already studying on campus provided ongoing motivation and support for Dean.

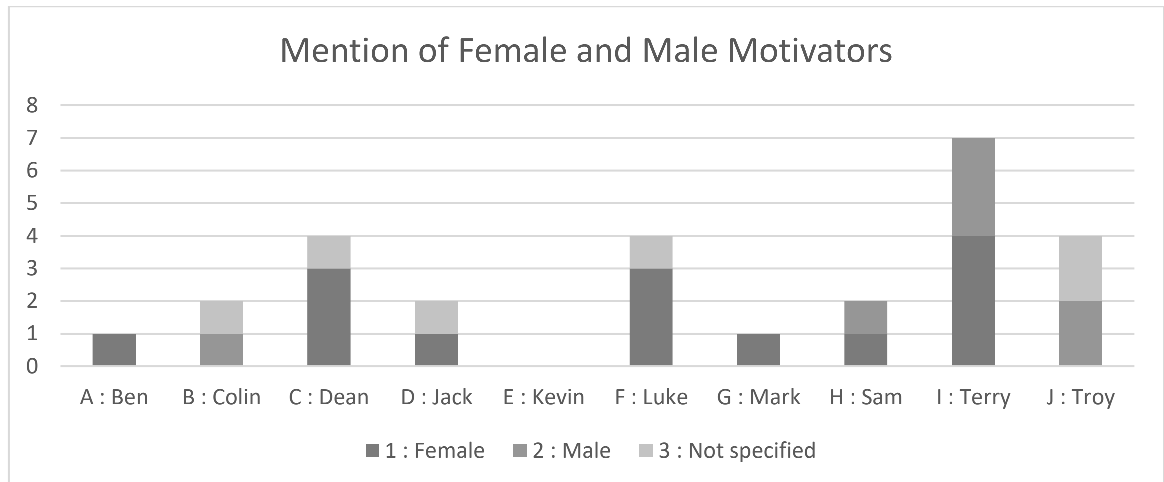
While Mark's relationship with his own parents was difficult, he described his wife's attitude to him coming to university as "fully supportive….She's always thought I was knowledgeable

on different things" (i.1). Sam also explained the influence of his mother: "I'd say mum was very, very supportive of it because she wanted me to do something with myself" (i.2). Jack too described his mother as encouraging of his academic pursuits. Terry's mother, who was a school-teacher, had instigated his re-engagement with further study: "Mum researched it or rang up" (i.1). He also described the influence of his girlfriend who was at university: "She's also like a major reason I'm doing it because she's always hassling me" (i.1).

These significant females seemed to be a strong force in encouraging the male participants to return to study. This finding concurred with scholars in the field who have concluded that the female parent exerts significant educational influence over their children's educational attainment (O'Shea et al., 2017; Reay, 2000; Sáenz et al., 2020). Interestingly four of the participants' mothers but none of the fathers had university degrees. In Australia, children whose mothers had university qualifications were more likely to obtain a degree (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2015). Additionally, research by Harding, Morris and Hughes (2015) concluded that "maternal education increases mothers' access to human, cultural, and social capital and that these forms of capital are then used by mothers in a variety of ways to promote their children's academic outcomes" (p. 62). For participants in this study, their mothers and step-mothers along with other important women in their lives, did exert a strong influence on motivating them to enrol into further education.

Another way of viewing the effects of motivators or influencers on the participants is by using the graphic function available in NVivo software. Figure 3 below outlines the number of mentions by participants of people in their lives who had influenced them to enrol into the UAP. Notably Kevin did not reference a person who had influenced him to further his studies. Of the other participants more were influenced by females in their lives compared to the male motivators as can be seen in Figure 3 below. Although all the participants in this research project were male, seven of the 10 participants, Ben, Dean, Jack, Luke, Mark, Sam and Terry, specifically mentioned influencers who were female. It is apparent that the participants' mothers and girlfriends played a large part in their decision to enter tertiary studies.

Figure 3: NVivo Graph of Influence on Participant's Decision to Enter University by Female or Male Motivators



Rather than the manual jobs and blue-collar careers that their fathers pursued, the males in this study were looking to enter the professional job market which was more in line with their mothers', step-mothers' and girlfriends' occupations. Two of the participants, Dean and Terry, had girlfriends already studying at Westbeach campus, while Jack had met his girlfriend while studying at another institution. The influence of their female family and friends offered genuine encouragement to the participants and the social capital and influence of the female friends and family members exerted a noticeable impact upon the participants' motivation to return to study. In some ways they were moving away from the masculine occupations and identities of their fathers into the more feminised space of HE.

5.1.8 *Teachers' reflections on student motivation*

While the voices of the participants are foregrounded in the study, the perspectives of their teachers are also included to add depth to the findings. Discussed below are some of their insights into what motivated UAP students based on both vocational and personal motivations.

5.1.9 *Vocational motivation*

The five teachers showed insight and understanding into the circumstances of their students and were aware of their need for financial and vocational security and not wanting "to stay where they are forever" (Sally). This seemed particularly pertinent for the older men who had lost work according to Magda. The teachers saw the benefits of UAP in providing a pathway into more secure employment for students in the future. Ellen noted that UAP was

“a gateway to opportunities that they wouldn’t have been able to have without that university degree.” Furthermore, the teachers described their students wanting to “get out of the mire that they’re in at the moment” (Rupert) and “advance themselves” (Magda).

5.1.10 *Personal Motivations*

Stretching their boundaries

The teachers expressed how UAP had impacted upon some of their students. Janet explained: “They have this imaginary world opening up for them”. Being able to move beyond the confines of their previous existence was an important aspect of further study observed the teachers. Sally suggested: “I also think there’s a bit of excitement for some…that they’re going to step into this kind of world”. UAP could provide a new lease on life and positive direction for many students.

While no-one can really know other peoples’ motivations, these teachers were able to articulate their understanding of some of the personal motivations of their students, in particular the opportunity to stretch their boundaries. As well as changing their career path they saw students as using the enabling course to change their life’s direction and explore wider horizons because of their tertiary studies.

Resolving regrets and helping others

The teachers expressed some understanding of the students’ regrets regarding previous education. Ellen explained that many of her students “haven’t performed well at school and then dropped out early”, while Janet felt that poor school experiences impacted more on the male students: “I think men are more affected by the idea that they might be dumb”. Rupert too understood the regrets of some of his students describing “people who have run off the rails in one way or another and want to get their life back on track”. These teachers explained that UAP provided a chance for some students to resolve past regrets and failures in their engagement with education and other life experiences and look forward to a more positive future.

While only three of the participants specifically expressed the desire to help others as a motivating factor, this aspect of motivation was noted by four of the five teachers interviewed. Rupert outlined that many students wanted to be “able to provide in a better way for their kids”, while Sally stated: “They’re conscious that like there’s progress to be made, not just in terms of them but that they can chart what that’s meant in terms of their

family". Furthermore, Ellen outlined the desire of some students to "do a job where they feel like they're giving back to society". Magda had similar experiences describing students who "have genuine ambition to do something, often for society, people often who want to work as nurses or any kind of sort of socially engaged kind of work". Altruism and a wish to improve both their family and society acted as an important motivating factor for many UAP students according to their teachers.

UAP was regarded by some students, according to these teachers, as an avenue to resolve some of their past regrets at school but also as an opportunity to do something constructive and in some ways altruistic with their lives. This could be seen as a generative approach to education where they wanted to improve both their own lives and the lives of others.

Fulfilling their potential

Janet and Sally thought that many of their students were motivated to fulfill their potential and self-worth in society due to their previous negative experiences. Janet explained that some students retrenched from work needed to rebuild their self-esteem and confidence. Tertiary education could provide "an opportunity to have a different life to what they have had" (Janet). Similarly, Sally described changes to students' "sense…of identity, like that it would be good to be a part of this kind of frame, which is uni." which "means achievement and status".

According to these teachers for some students their education was about much more than credentialing and changing careers. They used UAP as an avenue to improve their outlook on life and become a different person. For some students entering the College actually provided a transformational opportunity for them to elevate their social status in life and fulfil their potential (Mezirow, 2000).

5.1.11 *Conclusion*

It is evident that participants' motivations to return to learning were multi-layered. Many participants were encouraged to study by significant females in their lives. While initially enrolling for vocational reasons, particularly related to workplace and financial security, there emerged other motivating factors underpinning the participants' decision to come to College. These personal or intrinsic motivating factors were less tangible.

Many of the participants wanted to stretch their boundaries and explore new horizons outside the narrow confines of the Westbeach environment. For some of the males in the

study the chance to resolve some of their past regrets relating to education and having the opportunity of helping others were strong motivating forces for them to re-engage with study at a mature-age. Finally, the chance to fulfil their potential which they had not previously been able to do was a strong enticement for some of the participants to be able to develop themselves and achieve their goals.

The five teachers interviewed expressed perceptions of the students' motivation, both vocational and personal, which echoed those discussed by the participants and showed to a large extent their understanding of the lived experiences of many of their students. The combination of vocational and personal motivating factors was important to appreciate and to gain an understanding of why these students wished to move away from what they regarded as the previous narrow confines of their working lives and embrace the possibilities of an alternative future. The next section of the chapter will focus more specifically on how participants perceived their future lives.

5.2 Theme 4: Shifts in thinking

5.2.1 *Introduction*

This section contains the final theme of the second Findings chapter. Discussed are the participants' shifts in thinking and changed perceptions about themselves and their world as they transitioned into university study through an enabling course. While some of the participants continued working in a part-time capacity, moving from being predominantly in the workplace to full-time academic studies resulted in not only a physical relocation from their work site to the university campus, but also to changes in thinking and perceptions throughout the transition process.

Although the participants' initial motivation to further their education was primarily vocational in nature, as time progressed, they experienced changes and shifts in thinking that were originally unforeseen. Because this research took place over an extended period of time (12-months) the gradual shifts in thinking and changes that the participants experienced began to emerge towards the end of the project in the third and fourth interviews as well as in the written reflections. The following section will cover academic, social, personal and cultural shifts in perceptions, as well as explore the participants' future perceptions and expectations.

5.2.2 *Attitudes towards learning*

As previously mentioned, these participants were returning to study after a significant break from earlier educational courses. Many of them described difficult experiences in the learning institutions they had previously attended, particularly schools outlined in Chapter 4 and their development of different learner identities. They also discussed an increasing knowledge of their subject areas and positive attitude towards learning.

Compared to the participants' attitudes expressed in their initial interviews, most displayed an increased belief in their academic abilities by the final interviews, which were conducted mid-way through their first year of university studies. By Interviews Three and Four, the participants noted shifts in their perceptions of study. These areas included an increased knowledge of their subject area; an enjoyment of learning; and, overwhelmingly, an improved confidence in their own academic abilities.

A welcome aspect for Mark, Sam and Colin was actually enjoying their fields of study and the academic environment. Once he progressed to university, Sam stated: "I can see like I'm doing different things and enjoying everything a bit more" (i.3). Colin was particularly effusive, stating: "I'm very happy I did come and do the UAP because, it definitely set me up for what to expect at uni." (i.3). One of the aims of enabling education is to boost students' confidence to succeed in their studies, particularly those students from low-SES backgrounds (Habel et al., 2016) and the UAP appears to have achieved its aims according to this small cohort.

As the findings suggest, transitioning into university through an enabling course provided many participants with an increased knowledge of their subject area and improved attitude towards learning. These areas, particularly improved confidence, set the students up for a constructive pathway though their university studies.

5.2.3 *Social shifts/perceptions*

As well as shifts to confidence in their academic abilities, many social adjustments were made by the participants during the 12-months' duration of this project. These included changing family and partner relationships; adjustments to various social groups both within and outside the university context; and changed attitudes towards their roles and status in society at large. These areas will be discussed in this section.

Changes to family relationships

A number of the students reflected on difficult or fractured relationships with family. For some these conflicts had existed prior to coming to university. However, becoming a student appeared to shift or change these feelings of discord. Seven of the participants discussed relationships with their families and how these had altered during the course of their studies.

One of the outcomes of engaging with study appeared to be improved family relationships for three participants, Jack, Sam and Luke. They noted improved relationships with parents, particularly fathers. Jack, an only child who had moved some distance from his parents' home in order to study, noticed an improved parental relationship particularly with his father. He stated: "My bond with my, father has gotten a lot better" (i.2). Sam too expressed an improved paternal relationship stating: "I think me and dad have become a bit closer" (i.4).

Luke's maternal relationship had improved since he commenced studying. He explained that he now enjoyed a very positive relationship with his mother, stating: "she's been really good" (i.3) including her lending him money for textbooks. As his mother was now working on campus Luke was sometimes able to travel with her to university and "have lunch with her" (i.3). On the other hand, he disclosed that now that he was married there had been tensions at home with his wife with both their work commitments and his studying. He elaborated: "We don't see each other a lot and when we do maybe we're a bit stressed and might argue" (i.4). Trying to manage both work and study can prove difficult for any relationship. While his parental relationship had improved Luke was still in the process of negotiating his relationship with his wife now that he was studying full-time.

Maintaining positive relationships with parents was noted by both Dean and Colin who described their families as being very supportive of their studies. Dean who lived at home with his family explained their understanding now that he was a full-time student: "They kind of gave me some slack in a way 'cause I was just trying to study….They were definitely pretty supportive of me" (i.2). In a similar fashion Colin's relationship with his mother remained positive once he had moved back home. She encouraged him to return home "while you're at uni." (i.3). Her support of him was a great encouragement for Colin to continue with his studies. These participants' families generally provided support and encouragement for their sons to continue with their education.

While some participants had noted improved family relationships, other participants' experiences were not as positive. In particular Troy's parents gave mixed messages

concerning his study. While stating they were supportive of him continuing his education, Troy also noted that his “parents are still just trying to push me into work” (i.2). Assessing the risk of studying compared to earning an income can prevail in families with little prior interaction with HE and can be a source of tension within some families (Lehmann, 2009; Reay et al., 2005).

Similarly, Mark, who was an only child, described a fairly fractured relationship with his own parents again involving finances. He stated: “I don’t get along with my parents….I’d call them quite rich and don’t want to part with it” (i.4). This relationship contrasted with Mark’s relationship with his wife whom he described as very supportive of his studies. Additionally, as a parent of four children, Mark explained his role modelling behaviour: “Maybe it’s a bit of the father in me. I want to prove that if you put your time into the study that you can get a good mark. ‘Cause one of the kids of mine won’t really do his study” (i.1). Mark’s new role as student, in addition to that of father and provider, was an important one for him and was in contrast to his relationship with his own parents. He was attempting to create a more positive attitude towards learning within his own family.

All of the participants reported the complexities of navigating family relationships with parents and with partners as they transitioned into a new role as a full-time student. Most of the families had limited exposure to university settings before the enrolment of their sons and this was new territory not only for the participants but also for their family members. Adapting to different roles, financial implications and adjustment to a different lifestyle proved challenging for the participants in this project and their families.

Changes to social relationships

As well as adjustments to family relationships, the participants experienced changes in their social interactions with their peers, both inside university and the College as well as in their previously established social settings. The social changes differed somewhat among the participants. Strikingly, the married participants seemed content to maintain and even reduce their numbers of friends now that they were studying, but on the other hand, some of the single participants made notable changes in their social relationships. The changes to social relationships seemed to be dependent on their ages and whether the participants were partnered.

Focussing on studying rather than socialising was prioritised by the two married participants, Mark and Luke. They specifically stated that they were not interested in making new social

connections as a result of their studies. Mark described himself as being "not really [a] sociable type" (i.2). In fact, he seemed quite frustrated with the younger students at university whom he called "schoolies" (i.2) who were more interested in socialising than in focussing on their studies. Mark was not intent on making new friends at college and university, instead concentrating on progressing well through his course.

A similar attitude was noted by the other married participant, Luke, who described himself as "a pretty solitary person" who did not "actively engage in any friendships" (i.2). Luke wished to excel at his studies and, due to that focus along with his work commitments, he narrowed his social interactions to "quite a small core of people" (i.4). He prioritised socialising with only his close friends. For these more settled participants their attitude to university attendance was dominated by the focus on achieving their goals of successful completion of studies.

Similarly, social relationships remained somewhat static for both Jack and Troy whose social groups did not change dramatically at this stage of their studies but for different reasons. Moving from the State's capital city to Westbeach to study had made Jack's "social life a little difficult" (i.2). During Interview Three he conceded: "I haven't made many friends" (i.3). He explained that moving to the local area had been challenging when it came to making social connections, noting: "It's very hard to break into that next step of relationships" (i.4). Although willing to make new social connections Jack found it difficult to access new friendship groups from the university setting.

Conversely, Troy had chosen not to make new friends at College as he was concerned that too much socialising would distract him from his studies as it had in the past. Troy seemed content to maintain his old friendship group and not instigate new social connections during UAP. Describing himself and his friends as "not very social" (i.2) and "nerds" (1.2) who focussed on "video-gaming" (i.2), he continued this social connection rather than venturing into making new friendships at College. He and Jack maintained their previous friendship groups rather than establishing wider social connections at this stage of their studies.

However, tertiary studies had provided an opportunity for some of the participants to expand their social relationships in new directions and to enjoy interacting with their newfound contacts. Indeed, three participants, Dean, Sam and Colin, discussed changing social groups as a result of commencing at the campus. Their social connections had widened to include different people from those with whom they had previously socialised.

Moving from working in trades to studying education had provided Dean with opportunities to establish new friendship groups. Luckily, he found a friend with a similar background to himself at university. Dean outlined: “He’s a boiler-maker so he’s probably my best mate out of the people I’ve met and he’s becoming a teacher as well” (i.2). Aside from this colleague Dean stated: “I’ve made a few friends so about four of us that hang out now” (i.2). For Dean, transitioning into university through UAP enabled him to commence new friendships and begin to shift social groups from those in trades to friends in tertiary studies.

Coming to university also provided opportunities for Sam to encounter different social groups. He enjoyed having “friends from the bottom” (i.2) of society and “friends from the top” (i.2), including a friend who had “gone to jail” (i.3) and other friends who had “their child…taken from them by DOCS”[25] (i.4). Sam showed an awareness of the diverse groups within society. During the course of this study, he came to some pertinent observations about his own social relationships, noting that at university: “I’ve made more intelligent friendships with other people” (i.2). He explained that his previous friends “were probably the kids that you wouldn’t hang around with” (i.3). By the final interview Sam’s social group had altered significantly. He stated: “I made new friends down here but they’re a lot better than what I was used to” (i.4). Sam had made some deliberate social changes as a result of his experiences of HE, moving into a different friendship arena.

The most dramatic change to social interactions as a result of his studies was experienced by Colin. This may have been aided by his very close proximity to campus, making it easier for him to attend social and extra-curricular activities. In his initial interview Colin described most of his friends as being outside the university environment, working “in security” as “a butcher” and in “odd jobs” (i.1). However, his friendship group began to alter over the course of this project. By midway through the interviews, he was seeing less of his old friends, stating: “they’ve been getting a little frustrated with me” (i.2). Colin also became more interested in the social life provided at university, noting: “I’ve joined two clubs” and “never made friends so easily” (i.2). He was the only participant who mentioned joining any university-based clubs or societies and seemed to benefit from these interactions. By Colin’s final interview he had come to the following conclusion: “I’ve had friends out of uni. that…didn’t care, like they had no goals, no ambition, no nothing. I’m not friends with those people anymore” (i.4). For Colin, university study had provided not only an avenue into an

[25] DOCS (Department of Community Services) was the previous name for the current New South Wales Department of Family and Community Services (FACS).

alternative academic future, but he had also entered a new social and cultural realm of which he was particularly enjoying being part. This was quite a profound social shift undertaken by Colin during the 12-months of this study.

Among the participants there were notable social and, in some ways, cultural shifts during the course of their studies. The older participants, who also maintained long work schedules, such as Mark and Luke, appeared particularly focussed on attending campus just to study and achieve their academic goals. Jack and Troy maintained their previous friendship groups for slightly different reasons. However, for three participants in particular, Dean, Sam and Colin, becoming students also enabled them to change social groups and experience the company of different peers with whom they would not have previously been readily engaged. As Bourdieu (1986) has noted, adjustment to social relationships, including increasing social capital can occur as result of engagement in HE, however this can at times be problematic for those coming from outside the academic environment. Making adjustments to social groups with their differing expectations can incur "heavy psychic costs," (Reay, 2015, p. 13) for many students. The next section will further explore these changes and examine the altering perceptions in social standing and status amongst the participants as a result of their studies.

Changing perception of social status and role in society

When first interviewed, the participants' focus was very much on coming to university to improve their careers. Additionally, part of this study also touched on the changing social status and roles of the participants as they progressed through university studies with the aim of becoming professionals in their future workplaces.

While Mark appeared content with maintaining the status quo of his role as a tradesman, the other participants who were somewhat younger than him, were more at ease in the university setting and were willing, to varying degrees, to adapt to their new role in society of being a student. Mark explained: "I don't really tell too many people that I'm studying at the moment 'cause society you might as well say you can't afford to study and you've got to go to work to earn money" (i.2). He was concerned primarily at maintaining his role as provider for his family. He also admitted: "I don't really like to talk myself up" (i.4). He perceived his primary role as the male bread-winner and was not comfortable in taking on the mantle of being a student.

On the other hand, Troy perceived university as means of raising his social status in society as he seemed to be more aware of social classes than the other participants. Troy described coming from a "working-class family" (i.2) when they arrived in Australia, but they had now "gone up to a higher class" (i.2). He was aware that coming to university and obtaining a degree may move him into a different social stratum. Troy stated: "I can sort of raise myself up in life" (i.2). He was hoping a degree could increase his social standing in society.

Sam hovered between two descriptions of himself. "I'm still a construction worker at…heart but, I like being a student a bit more" (Sam, i.2). Sam regarded that being an educated person was more socially acceptable than being a construction worker. He stated that by furthering his education: "I can become a proper member of society" (Sam, i.2) indicating his wish to change his social status.

Similarly, Dean explained, "Going to uni. you kind of seem smarter in a way rather than just doing a trade" (i.2). In his eyes, the status of studying education at university was more highly regarded than being a tradesman. Jack seemed to be content to describe himself as a "struggling student who likes to partake in sport activities" (i.2), which indicates him moving away from identifying himself primarily in terms of his role in mechanics. These participants' self-perceptions were beginning to change as they transitioned though university studies.

Unlike the other participants Luke identified with university students from his first interview. Describing his close friends, he stated: "There's probably…the core group [who] are doing their PhD" (i.4). For Luke, coming to university was a way of catching up to the intellectual prowess of his peers and also changing from his previous status as a disability worker. Once he enrolled into his degree, he noted an interesting alteration in the way he was regarded by some people, explaining: "I noticed because the degree I'm doing is called Medical Biotechnology, as soon as people hear the word "Medical" they just, oh, that's amazing…you must be so smart" (i.3). Luke had begun to notice changes in others' perceptions of his status as he continued to pursue his goals of academic achievement.

All of these participants noted changes in how others perceived them as a result of engaging in HE. Each participant navigated his way from the role and status of worker into the different role and status of being a university student which they hoped would ultimately lead to a different professional identity. As well as changes to careers, they noted some changes to their social standing in society as a result of this encounter with HE. The following section

now explores the personal and cultural shifts reflected upon by the participants over the course of the 12-months of this study.

5.2.4 *Personal and cultural shifts/perceptions*

Students who attempt to cross the threshold into university studies by way of enabling education often come from under-represented groups of society. The participants in this study were primarily from blue-collar backgrounds in a socio-economically disadvantaged region navigating their pathway into HE. These changes were noted earlier in Chapter 4. However, as well as negotiating the physical space of moving from workplaces such as steelworks, raceways and construction sites, the participants had to adjust to quite different cultural settings. Coming from the workforce to academia required both personal and cultural shifts in order to adapt to differing requirements of the two environments. Negotiating masculine identities and expectations are explored in the following section as well as the transformational impact of the transition experience.

Masculine identities

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, many of these male participants had initially emulated their fathers' lives and entered similar predominantly male dominated occupations. Yet their identity as males was changing somewhat due to their new directions in life. By the fourth round of interviews the participants were looking forward and beginning to envisage what success may mean for them as males transitioning through university to alternative careers. Research has indicated that males from working-class families may be influenced by gendered stereotypes and the male bread-winner model, particularly in regard to education and work settings (Archer et al., 2001; Jensen, 2008; Reay et al., 2010; Stahl, 2015b). During interviews, the participants described what they thought successful males looked like from their perspectives.

Many of the participants had been encouraged to enrol into the UAP by their girlfriends and mothers, showing the influence of females on their decision making. However, Jack, Mark and Troy retained traditional views of masculinity which seemed heavily influenced by their fathers. For example, Jack appeared very aware of his masculinity and physical presence. He described feeling safe when alone at night. "Who's going to approach a six-foot-two fit athlete at night to ask for his wallet? Not many people" (i.4). Describing his identity, he stated, "I'm fairly like my father" whom he described as "a good role model" but also concluded "there's definitely a nurturing side of my mother in me though" (i.4), echoing

gendered stereotypes. Mark too had a traditional view of gender and roles in his family, describing his family unit as “older style” (i.2) with his wife staying at home and him earning the income. His main concern was to maintain the role of provider for his family as well as being a caring role model for his children.

Another participant, Troy, viewed his father positively particularly due to his success at work and “being paid enough that we were able to afford a seven-bedroom house” (i.2). Troy’s vision for his own success was “to progress into a career and get a job and be able to support myself” (i.1), following in some ways the journey of his father.

In a similar vein Terry described his father’s success, stating: “He’s owned successful businesses…but…he always says if you don’t have a uni. degree, you’re kind of limited in what you can do and …he’s like one of the highest people up in the steelworks” (i.1). Terry’s ambition was to follow his father’s success in business. Financial success and emulating his father motivated Terry to heed his father’s advice about needing a university credential and to commence his Business Studies course at the university.

Dean found some challenges moving from his male dominated workplace to HE. He outlined in his reflection that “racism, practical jokes and foul language was consistent in my old workplace”. This sort of behaviour has been noted by researchers of working-class masculinities (Connell, 1989; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). While Dean enjoyed his work in trades, he was pleased to be in the “much safer” (Dean, i.3) university environment. His idea of success related to combining both his trade as a boiler-maker, which was the career of his father, with that of school-teacher, his course of university study. All these participants were moving towards different futures away from some of the gendered expectations of their traditional male dominated workplaces.

Colin, on the other hand, seemed aware of the failings of his own father particularly in regard to employment. He stated: “My dad just does the occasional odd job…but no one really wants to hire him” (i.1) and Colin had not seen him for some time. Colin was aware of the apparent trappings of success for males in the region. He outlined that while many males aspired to having a “nice house [and] car” (i.4) he was more interested in “people who take initiative and…are good at teamwork” (i.4), which he saw as a better measure of success for males. Colin focussed on successful work relationships rather than monetary success.

Luke's relationship with his father had improved over the course of this study which was noted earlier in the chapter. Ideally, he wished to study in the Science field but was also concerned to provide financially for himself and his wife. He noted that he was, "trying to still make money and have a job and do full-time study" (i.3). His concern for success was tempered by his ability to provide the basics for himself and his own family. In common with many other participants, Sam had initially followed his father into construction work as he had felt disengaged at school. Sam stated: "[I] Just thought screw it, I'll get a trade. I don't really care" (i.3), however he later regretted the decision and was looking for a life outside the restrictions and dangers of a building site. Noting the changes he had experienced in the transition; Sam used a colourful simile: "From the workplace to here is like from Earth to Mars. It's entirely different" (i.2). Moving away from construction worksites and having agency and choice over his career was the best measure of success for him. Sam explained: "For me, being successful would be doing what I wanted to do" (i.4).

Despite their experiences in predominantly male dominated workplaces, both Sam and Luke became more aware of gendered stereotypes as this study progressed. For example, Luke thought it important that women were engaged in studying Science as "the Natural Sciences need women….We need to have that flow of good intelligent women coming in" (i.2). Similarly, Sam stated "I never had the sort of gender stereotype in my head at all because mum and dad both went to work" (i.3) and he had become more aware of gender issues after completing his Social Science essay "on gender and sexuality" (Sam, i.4).

Across the 12-months of this study the participants experienced shifts in their thinking and attitudes with regard to social and gender issues. While some of the participants retained more traditional outlooks, for some their engagement with university education was an opportunity to question some societal norms and beliefs. The next section further examines the transition into HE and its transformational impact on some of the participants.

Transition and transformation

Adult education can have a profound and at times a transformational impact on those who participate. This can be particularly evident with those students who had not previously had the educational opportunities afforded others. Mezirow's (1981) initial research noted there were not only educational improvements but actual transformations in students' lives due to their engagement with learning. Similar changes were evident in the experiences of the five participants who completed the 12-months of this study.

Engagement with course content and also being part of the university environment provided catalysts for transformation. Jack outlined his perception that what prevents some mature-age learners from attempting university is the "fear of change" (i.4), so they cling to "a certain degree of safety" (i.4). He explained that he had overcome this fear of change and developed "self-value and achievement" (i.4) as a result of his studies. He now enjoyed "being put on the spot with some sort of controversial topics" (i.4). This was a major transformation from his nervousness on the first day of College. Dean also elaborated that there were many changes he had gone through now that he was a student. He reflected: "The social side of university was vastly different to the industry I come from". Luke too explained in his reflection the personal changes he had experienced writing: "I have achieved results that I can be proud of so far…and I am very excited now to continue down my current path of study". These participants' perceptions of themselves and their capabilities was having a positive impact on their self-perceptions and on their hopes for the future.

Sam stated that his personal reflections had changed since becoming a student. In his final interview he stated: "I'm constantly thinking about things I wouldn't have normally thought about" (i.4). He further elaborated: "In some respects I've probably changed for the better" (i.4). The shifts in thinking speak to a type of transformational experience taking place for Sam. Similarly, in his final reflection, Mark noted in his reflection: "I am at University with meaning….I have changed as a person….It really has opened my eyes to whole new world….I am looking forward to the future in a new career and therefore a more fulfilling life". Mark's critical reflection outlines his personal feelings, perceptions and dreams for the future both personally and professionally. It concurs with Mezirow's (1997) research on the transformation of students' frames of reference as a result of furthering their education.

Those participants who moved from the UAP to university studies experienced a level of transformation as part of the transition process. Changes to their frames of reference included "cognitive, conative, and emotional components" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 55). Of particular note was Colin's transformation and improved confidence over the 12-month period as he distanced himself from being an unemployed male on government benefits. His transition experiences included changing social groups, joining clubs, a political party and enjoying participating in a university exchange program to Japan. He was extremely positive and optimistic regarding his studies and his future. Colin reflected: "It was a much smoother transition than what I was expecting, and I would definitely chalk that up to being at the College and doing the UAP" (i.4). Once he commenced university he stated: "I felt like I was

pretty open minded and then after coming to university and…I've sort of realised…I wasn't as open minded as I thought", (i.4) and he enjoyed being challenged in his ideas and beliefs. This indicates a marked degree of insight and a willingness to engage with ideas that questioned previously held beliefs. The next section of the chapter will explore in more depth the participants' perceptions of their potential futures and their expectations regarding their studies.

5.2.5 *Perceptions and expectations of the future*

As discussed earlier in this chapter, as well as alternative future careers, the participants were able to imagine a different future identity that they could develop as another outcome of their studies. As adult learners, the participants were able to picture themselves at a future state in time. While there were many lingering doubts and concerns about the future, there were many positive comments from participants regarding their decisions to return to study and to be involved in this research project.

Lingering doubts and concerns about the future

Returning to study for mature-age participants is not without its challenges. The men involved in this study had to navigate a variety of risks and uncertainties as they progressed along their paths of study. They found it difficult in some ways to predict their future outcomes.

Uncertainty and worry about the future formed part of the participants' conversations in this study. Mark's response to questioning about the future was: "Good question. See what happens" (i.1), as he seemed unwilling to predict what the future may hold. Sam, however, seemed more positive in his outlook stating: "I'm still a bit stressed out [waiting for exam results] but besides that everything's up….The negative is probably just it's harder and there's the money involved but there's always ways around the money" (i.2).

Furthermore, Kevin, Jack, Troy and Mark were all conscious of the length of time that was required to commit to finalising a university degree. Kevin stated: "I'm excited but very scared at the same time 'cause I've like I waited so much" (i.1), expressing both the expectation about his new course of study but also uncertainty regarding the future. Additionally, studying as mature-age learners would make them older aged candidates entering the job market. Jack discussed the reality of applying for work, explaining: "A 25-year-old looking at three to four years' study – 29 what are your options for a 29 year-old who has experience but not as much as everyone else who's a little younger?" (i.2). Troy was

similarly disturbed, stating: "I'm not going to see any real success until four years down the line" (i.3). Mark too expressed uncertainties: "I have a feeling it will be seven or eight years before I can get anything." (i.2). Temporal concerns weighed heavily upon these four participants.

As mature-age males who were not wealthy, continuing to study and forego income for this length of time was concerning, particularly when the job prospects were still uncertain at the end of the process. They all had to weigh up the risks concerning the benefits of university courses with unknown vocational outcomes at the conclusion of their studies. The next section explores the participants' projection of their future possible selves and how this image affected their experiences of transitioning into HE from an enabling course.

Imagining future possible selves

The participants were able to visualise their possible selves at a future time which contrasted with their current and previous self-perceptions (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These depictions at times acted as a motivating force for many of the participants, in both avoiding what they were afraid of becoming as well as outlining what they would like to become at a future date (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The participants described not wishing to return to their previous occupations with the negative experiences that they had endured. To do so was to envisage a negative possible self into the future. On the other hand, most of the participants were able to visualise a more positive version of themselves which acted as an inspiration for them to continue with their academic studies in hopes for a better future. These reflections on what lay ahead provided the participants with a measure of insight into their own motivations and inspired their long-term hopes. These concepts will be explored in more detail in Chapter 6.

5.2.6 *Teachers' perceptions of students' shifts in thinking*

Along with the participants' shifts in thinking and changed perceptions, the five teaching staff interviewed relayed their views of the way students' attitudes changed during their College studies. Their views coincided quite closely with those of the participants, however, they also had added perceptions from the teaching experience which differed in some ways from the participants' views.

Academic shifts

At the commencement of the academic session at College the mature-age learners in the UAP were described as being "much more committed" (Janet) and "keen learners" (Magda)

than the other younger students. Nevertheless, it was perceived by these staff to be quite challenging for students returning to study as they seemed to be "learning this stuff for the first time" according to Sally. One staff member argued that some of the older students came to study with "rigidness in their thinking" (Janet), writing essays which were "dogmatic" (Janet) until they developed "more critical skills" (Janet). Eventually the "penny drops" (Sally) as they "open their minds" (Magda) during the course of their studies. The College provided a supportive academic environment for these participants to adapt to understanding the academic culture of the university setting.

Social shifts/perceptions

Similarly, the teaching staff noted changes in the participants' relationships with friends and their social standing during their studies. Many of the UAP students were described as "consistently older [and] working-class" (Sally), coming from "poor backgrounds" (Janet). Some of the students they taught had "spent time in prison" (Janet) and "had drug issues" (Janet). Despite these difficult circumstances they looked to further education to break away from friends who criticised them for "trying to get higher than their station" (Rupert). They wanted to overcome the "tall poppy syndrome" (Janet).[26] Some of Sally's students were "keenly aware of their status" and wanted to "move on" to a better life. UAP provided them with the opportunity to change their academic standing in society and these teachers were very supportive of this.

While improving academic outcomes many students also developed new social connections with their peers at College. The teachers observed that UAP students began "knitting together quite well" (Ellen). The "classroom bonds very tightly in UAP" (Janet) which assisted in the students' transition to university as "they've…got friends…to go and catch up with" (Sally). However, Janet noted that the "women tend to band together" (Janet) more so than the men who "remain much more isolated". This seemed to reflect the experiences of Luke and Mark from the participant group who outlined not wanting to make new social connections.

Personal and cultural shifts/perceptions

The college provided an alternative pathway and for male students in particular it offered "a bit of freedom there too" according to Sally and an opportunity, according to Rupert, to

[26] Tall poppy syndrome refers to an Australian expression meaning a desire to diminish in stature those people who have attained excellence (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 2003).

improve their family's future. "They don't want to have what their dad had" (Sally) and were inspired to be "part of this kind of frame, which is uni." (Sally). Extending their horizons was a substantial benefit to the students who undertook this pathway.

While initially students could feel a "bit intimidated by the different kind of environment" (Magda) they developed a "growing confidence" (Ellen) and "sense of personal achievement" (Sally) during the course of their studies. For some students this involved a changing "sense of identity" (Janet). These teachers were committed to playing a role in developing personal and cultural transformation of the students whom they taught.

Future perceptions and expectations

Sally outlined students who had graduated from the College as being at a "crossroad". Achieving their academic goals also meant they could be improving their future outlooks. The students had the opportunity to develop their own possible selves as they progressed through their university studies. This transformational experience had been witnessed by the teachers who helped them on their journey.

5.2.7 *Conclusion*

At the commencement of the study 10 students volunteered to take part in the 12-months project and agreed to be interviewed four times during the course of this transition. By the completion of the study only five of the participants had been able to fully take part. However, all the participants, including those who withdrew, provided a wealth of data related to their shifts in thinking and changing perceptions as they transitioned into HE from an enabling course.

Their thinking shifted from feelings of disengagement and low self-esteem regarding academic abilities, to a growing confidence and sense of optimism about their successful engagement with university studies. While the married participants chose to remain socially isolated, for the younger single participants, life on the university campus provided an opportunity for social and cultural experiences with which they could engage. They were able to make new connections and develop their own cultural understanding as part of this engagement. The participants' descriptions were supported by the reflections of the College's teaching staff who relayed their own perceptions of changes they had observed in their students.

The participants' experiences of study were quite positive and upon reflection they concluded they had developed personally as well as academically and socially. Furthermore, they were able to envisage a future for themselves which was quite different to experiences in the past. Their 12-months of study provided an opportunity for transition into a new academic world and way of thinking. It also gave each of them the chance to picture an alternative reality, the opportunity for a future possible self, which acted as a motivating force to continue along their individual educational pathways.

The following chapter discusses these findings and their relationship to the research questions outlined at the beginning of this study. It also incorporates literature in the field and examines the relationship between these findings and those of other researchers both in Australia and internationally.

Chapter 6: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore, in-depth, the lived experiences of one group of male learners transitioning into HE from an enabling course. While this group of students comprises a minority of university entrants, their particular journeys are important to appreciate in this era of WP as there remains a gap in our understanding of what is entailed in the experiences of mature-age men returning to study (Burke et al., 2018). As more students engage in higher learning from diverse backgrounds, universities need to be mindful of the individual experiences of transition into and through HE. While quantitative studies provide the big picture data this project has sought to outline a more nuanced understanding of what the experience has been for those travelling this pathway.

The theoretical framing of social and cultural capitals (Bourdieu, 1986; Reay, 2002a), transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000; Taylor & Cranton, 2012) and possible selves (Henderson et al., 2019; Markus & Nurius, 1986) has allowed for a very detailed insight into these students' experiences. Male, mature-age learners transitioning into HE from an enabling course are an under-researched group of individuals (Armstrong et al., 2018; Baker et al., 2020; O'Shea et al., 2017). It is worthwhile then to consider their gendered experiences of returning to study, and the impact that participating in HE has on the educational and personal outcomes for these students.

Chapters Four and Five covered four main themes that emerged from the data across the course of the project. These included:

1. Changing learner identity, where the participants' transitions between school, TAFE, the workplace and HE were explored.

2. Contrasting experiences of employment and student life, which illustrated the quite distinct differences between moving from participants' roles in the workplace to their roles as students.

3. Motivation and motivators, which explored the reasons for the participants' decisions to return to study as mature-age learners and the influential people who encouraged this, particularly the females in their lives.

4. Shifts in thinking, where both academic and social shifts were considered as the participants adapted to their new roles and identities as mature-age learners.

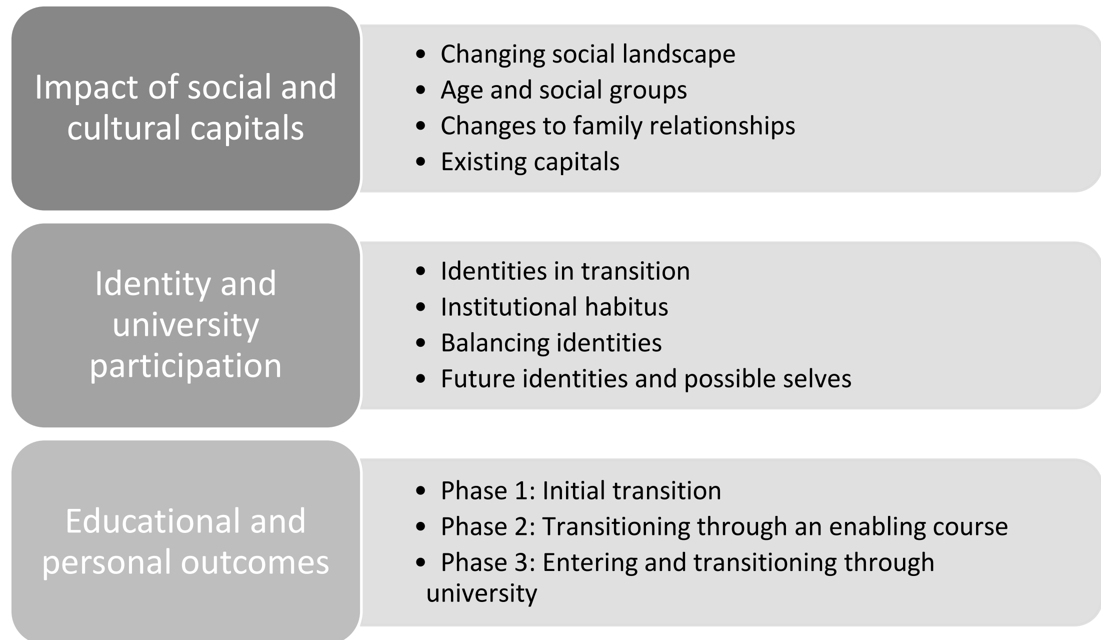
The overarching question of this study: "What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into HE from an enabling course?" provides a basis for the area explored in this study. This question will be discussed in full in Chapter 7 *Conclusions and Recommendations.*

In order to provide the context and detail needed to answer the overarching question, this chapter will address the three sub-questions of the study which analysed the experiences of the participants by responding to the following:

- In what ways do learners' social and cultural capitals impact upon their experiences of transition?
- How do existing identities influence the students' transition into university?
- What are the educational and personal outcomes for male students during this process of transition?

This chapter is structured in three parts, based around responses to these sub-questions above. Each of these parts draws on the literature in the field and also the findings from the previous chapters.

Table 12: Structure of Discussion Chapter



6.1 Part 1: The impact of social and cultural capitals on transition

6.1.1 *Introduction*

Social and cultural capitals strongly influenced the transition experiences of the participants as they journeyed through an enabling course and onto university studies. Their social networks comprised friends, work colleagues and family members. From the initial engagement with the UAP, their social networks, both inside and outside the university, shifted to some degree during this transition. Over time the participants began to interact in various ways with the academic culture they encountered in their tertiary studies. Finally, the participants, in their individual ways, were able to translate their existing capitals in relation to the norms and expectations of the campus.

Cultural capital develops in individuals as "long lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243) which can be seen in cultural goods such as books, computers, art and music. More affluent families are regarded as placing a high value on access to such cultural goods and, in particular, to education for their children which in turn leads to "reproduction" of cultural capital for the following generation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Furthermore, cultural capital can bestow higher "levels of self-confidence and entitlement" (Reay, 2004a, p. 77). Naidoo (2004) has explained that "the type of capital operating in the

field of university education is an institutionalized form of cultural capital that has generally been termed 'academic capital'" (p. 458).

According to Bourdieu (1973) society has developed as a hierarchy, with those in manual labour occupying "lower" positions compared to the intelligentsia inhabiting universities. Those in "higher positions" are able to reproduce this privilege for the next generation enabling them to "make the world in their own image" (Bunn et al., 2020, p. 431). However, Bourdieu's assumptions have been challenged by many contemporary scholars, particularly with regard to his under-emphasis on the salience of gender and race, and the impact of WP on university attainment (Crenshaw, 1991; Goldthorpe, 2007; Reay, 2004b; Yosso, 2005). He has been criticised for being overly deterministic in his views, not allowing for the agency of individual students (Burke, 2012; Webb et al., 2017), however Bourdieu's concepts provide a useful lens for viewing these participants' engagement in HE. The sections below outline the participants' adaptations to changing social and cultural capitals they encountered by entering university through an enabling course.

6.1.2 *The changing social landscape*

The social setting at College presented a contrasting situation to what the participants had experienced at school and workplaces, causing some of them to feel initially that they did not belong (Armstrong et al., 2018; Reay et al., 2010). Research has indicated that students entering university who have already well developed academic social networks have a distinct advantage over those whose family and friends have had minimal contact with HE (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Jensen, 2008). Social capital has been described as the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of…institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership of a group" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248). While some of the participants had limited interactions with university due to the enrolment of family members, for the most part these men were not familiar with the social setting and social capital of the campus (see Part One of Chapter 4 *Introducing the Participants*). However, social structures are not solid frameworks and there were social changes and adaptations made by the participants during the course of their studies. Their habitus, that is their "system of dispositions which acts as a mediation between structures and practices" (Bourdieu, 1973, p. 258) functioning "below the level of consciousness" (Yang, 2014, p. 1525), had developed in different

circumstances to the university setting. Nevertheless, they were generally able to adapt to this new social setting (Reay et al., 2005).

Notwithstanding that four participants' mother had their degrees most of the participants' social connections had developed outside the HE environment. Due to their previous experiences, the participants had developed different social capital to that which fostered initiation into and support with HE (Thomas, 2020b). Moving away from the familiarity of social networks provided by friends and workplaces, meant the participants began to engage with a diverse range of people, whom they met on campus, who often held "very different views on things" (Colin, i.4).

Participants noted contrasts between previous social networks and those at university, requiring them to adapt to different social norms, and for Sam, this required focussing beyond "the footy and the next new tool that's coming out" (i.2). This is not unusual, as previous research tells us that social adjustment can be challenging for many students coming from outside the academic setting (Reay, 2018), where "working-class students run the real risk of making limited social or economic gains while also potentially producing strained or uncomfortable relationships within their communities of family and friends" (Bunn et al., 2020, p. 427). Mark's reflection summarised the situation experienced by some students:

> Most people who know me well, know me as a builder by trade and those people were very surprised and perhaps a little judgmental when I told them of my career change….I felt like that was a reflection of the society we live in, in the sense that in a way, we are all expected to be the same and anything different is looked down upon…but the real support came from my immediate family and that was really all I needed to which I am very grateful.

His experience was that social expectations were for him to continue in his role as builder and not to change course, whereas his immediate family was more supportive. As Reay (2018) has noted, while adjusting to academic requirements is possible for these students, "social adjustment proves to be more difficult" (p. 44). While these participants continued to maintain harmonious familial relationships, the original social groupings of some of the participants, such as Colin, Dean and Sam, began to change over the course of their studies.

By participating in HE, many of these students seemed to be redefining social expectations as Australian males. Influenced by male role models many had left school and entered the workplace, often by means of a trade (Beissel et al., 2013; Reay, 2002a; Weaver-Hightower, 2010). Adapting to a new role as a student, in the new social setting at the College, was challenging at the start for some of participants as they encountered new people with divergent outlooks (Connell, 1989; Stahl & Loeser, 2018). While initially challenging, over the 12-months most participants adjusted to the HE setting, with some of them enjoying the extended social opportunities university provided.

6.1.3 *Age and social groups*

Participants had different attitudes to the importance of developing social capital in this field, and the volume of shift differed between age groups. For some there were limited opportunities to expand social networks because of commitments and commuting distances. For example, the older married participants, Mark and Luke, did not regard socialising at university as important and chose to limit contact in the environment, while some of the younger males took the opportunity to further develop their social capital. This narrower social focus for mature-age learners has been recognised by other researchers (Armstrong et al., 2018; Burton et al., 2011; Thomas & Jones, 2009). On the one hand, the older participants in this study coped with studying and work commitments by focusing narrowly on their studies and not expending unnecessary energy on developing social networks. Mark described enrolment and orientation, with their social activities, as a “bit of a waste of time” (i.3) while Luke explained: “I’m comfortable to just come here and do what I need to do and then go home” (i.4). Universities and colleges need to be cognisant of the fact that socialising and making new friends may be low priorities for some mature-age students with multiple responsibilities.

On the other hand, some of the younger participants, Colin, Dean and Sam, were more strategic in developing social networks, including using social media, and made the most of the social opportunities provided on campus which can be an important aspect of the HE experience (Bathmaker et al., 2013). These participants attempted to develop social capital over the course of their studies, with their friendship groups changing over the 12-months. The younger participants had the opportunity to develop social capital that was not readily available to the older participants due to their commitments outside of study. Sam stated that many of his old friends did not have “the best upbringings” (i.4) and that he now had

more new friends “than up at home….It’s probably a lot better that way” (i.4). Similarly, Colin sought out social connections by joining various clubs and societies where the people had “more goals and they’re more motivated” (i.4.). Whether deliberately or unconsciously, they were increasing the volume of the social capital that they could effectively mobilise by moving into these different social groups (Bourdieu, 1986). They were in some ways mirroring the behaviour of those from more affluent backgrounds whose “networks of friendships at university become a form of ‘social capital’ that reinforce the effects of privileged groups’ increased levels of cultural and economic capital” (Buchanan et al., 2015, p. 297).

For the younger single students who continued studying, making social connections and developing social capital formed an important part of their transition. While they maintained some of their previous social connections they were moving into a new social environment and developed social capital as part of their transition experience.

6.1.4 *Changes to family relationships*

Another key shift was how relationships with different family members changed over the course of the study. These men had initially followed their fathers’ footsteps, to some degree, into the workforce, however, they were later influenced by significant females, such as mothers, step-mothers, girlfriends, wives and sisters, to consider university as a viable educational alternative (See Chapter 5, Part 1 *Motivation and Motivators).* Other researchers have also noted the important role of mothers, in particular, in influencing their sons’ schooling (Reay, 2000) and post-secondary education (O'Shea et al., 2017; Sáenz et al., 2020).

This study, however, has additionally charted the participants’ move away from their initial emulation of their fathers’ roles to changing course based on the advice of their mothers and other female influencers. Interestingly some of the participants’ mothers and step-mothers had developed professional level careers later in life which may well have been influenced by the changing roles of women in society due to feminism (Burke, 2009; Eate et al., 2017). This in turn seems to have influenced the new academic directions of their sons and step-sons.

Over the course of the study the participants also reported changes within their family relationships. These varied from Luke who conceded that studying and work commitments affected his marriage at times, to those whose relationships had improved. Dean received

support for his studies from his boiler-maker father. Furthermore, Jack described an improved paternal relationship while Sam explained: “Mum’s always pissed off at me” (Sam, i.4), but described becoming closer to his father. This finding of improved family relationships for most participants differs from what is reported in the literature, particularly from the UK where commencing university has led to family fractures for some students from working-class backgrounds (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012; Reay, 2002a). The difference may be related to most of the participants continuing to live at home. However, deciding to move into an academic environment can be quite dislocating for some students from diverse backgrounds (Bunn et al., 2020; Thomas, 2002), which could be considered “an act of transgression from a family based habitus” for those involved (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012, p. 132).

However, for the participants in this study who were located in Australia at a regional university, rather than breaking away from the social connections within their families, some noted improvements to their relationships with parents, particularly fathers. This may reflect a cultural difference between Australia (Stahl & Loeser, 2018) and the UK, or the families in this study may be more accepting of university as a normative route for their sons as more Australians from blue-collar backgrounds attain HE qualifications (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Bradley et al., 2008). While this was noted in the experiences of the participants of this small-scale project, it does suggest a more complex relationship between family members and students than suggested in the literature and is worthy of further study.

6.1.5 *Building on capitals*

By entering tertiary study, the participants had to cross the threshold into an unknown territory where the cultural expectations differed from their previous home lives and occupations. Due to their backgrounds, the participants were not always aware of the academic requirements and culture of the university setting. However, the students brought with them their own capitals from their families and workplaces (Yosso, 2005). The participants’ experiences in the local community and workplaces imbued them with their own culture and values which were at times distinct from the university setting. Notwithstanding their own capitals, these did not always align with the expectations of academic social and cultural capitals that pervade university campuses.

The participants entered their studies with different forms of cultural capitals than what is often valued in HE. Universities have established their own culture which can be difficult to navigate for outsiders, however, it is important to view the participants' experiences through a strengths-based approach (Kim & Hargrove, 2013) rather than a deficit approach. It should not be assumed that all university students need to adopt middle-class culture as part of their progression (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Bunn et al., 2020). As mature-age students these learners drew on rich, life experiences which assisted them in navigating their courses (Heagney & Benson, 2017). At universities, cultural capital such as familiarity with academic language, research prowess and intellectualism are highly prized (Stich & Reeves, 2016; University of "Westbeach", 2018). Alternatively, some of the strengths of these mature-age learners included: motivation to improve their lives; perseverance; maturity; discipline of the workplace; organisational skills; self-confidence; and, for some participants, a deep interest in the subject area they wished to study (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Kahu, 2014). To some extent the participants' lived experiences provided a wealth of culture on which to draw in order to sustain them in their studies.

Progression through the UAP enabled the participants to gain some understanding of academic culture and expectations before moving into full university participation. The pedagogy of the enabling course (Kift et al., 2010; Lisciandro et al., 2020) and inclusive approach taken by the staff provided the participants with stepping-stones into the academic culture required of university entrants. The UAP unpacked some of the hidden cultural expectations and provided an opportunity to cross the threshold into university studies. Reflecting on the course, participants stated that the UAP was "a good way to ease a mature-age student into study" (Mark, reflection) and gave a "greater understand [*sic*] on how university is run" (Dean, reflection). Part of this effectiveness was due to the College culture where students were "able to engage with someone who is a teacher but in an equal setting" (Luke, i.2). The importance of enabling courses for students coming from outside academic households cannot be overstated (Armstrong et al., 2018; Klinger & Murray, 2009; Willans, 2020). Ideally these courses are able to ease students' understandings and help them to gain confidence in their own rich capitals and capabilities (Burke et al., 2016).

While adapting to the new cultural expectations of student life, most of these participants wished to retain their existing cultural values and sense of authenticity. When Luke discussed his studies with social contacts outside the university he did not want to "big note" (i.3) himself that he was studying Medical Biotechnology, stating that he would "kind of downplay

it if people talk to me" (i.3). Furthermore, Sam explained wanting to remain true to himself, stating: "I don't really care what other people think of me. I do my own thing my own way" (i.4). For Sam, remaining true to his own background and sense of self was very important. Similar conclusions have been noted in other research, particularly during times of student transition (Reay, 2002a; Warin & Dempster, 2007). While making some cultural adaptations during their time on campus, many of the participants did not wish to forsake their existing familial and social capitals. Their emotional connections to families and backgrounds helped to sustain them through their studies.

6.1.6 *Conclusion*

The learners' social and cultural capitals strongly influenced their experience of transition from the workplace, through an enabling course and onto university studies. Being mature-age, male and from predominantly blue-collar families meant that they had different backgrounds to many other students and staff whom they encountered on campus. While not all participants wanted to move away from their previous social groupings, some of the younger participants were more willing to further develop their social capital during their studies. The participants' backgrounds in the community and workplaces instilled in them their own culture and values which were at times distinct from the university setting. While displaying their own strong capabilities they were sometimes challenged by the academic culture with which they had to engage. However, over time, the participants engaged with this new cultural setting while still retaining their own authenticity.

6.2 Part 2: Identity and university participation

6.2.1 *Introduction*

The participants' identities changed and adapted as they experienced these 12-months at College and university. Individuals' identities gradually develop across the life span from their original family and social influences through to their engagement with a myriad of experiences. Identity consists of a person's social role and also their sense of "uniqueness and independence" (Corsini, 2001, p. 468) which provides a "conceptual bridge that links the individual with society" (Stahl, 2015b, p. 2). According to Baxter and Britton (2001), "higher education, through its culture and practices, is a key site for the construction of new identities, which may conflict with other/prior identities" (p. 99). The transition experiences of the participants led to some re-examining of their identities which are explored in this section through four main themes, namely:

- Identities in transition which explores how these participants variously managed the identity work this transition to university required.
- Institutional habitus which contrasts the participants' habitus with that of the university and the impact on identity formation.
- Balancing identities which involves the process undertaken by some of the participants in managing two identities simultaneously.
- Future identities and possible selves where the participants imagined the possibilities of their identities at a later time after they had completed their studies.

Each person experienced a different personal journey as he transitioned from the role of worker or unemployed to student. For some of the participants this also presented an opportunity for re-examination of their identities. Some of these participants were primarily focussed on the vocational outcomes that a university credential could provide, while others viewed further studies as a means of self-fulfilment and development. Younger participants, such as Sam and Dean, described maintaining separate identities on both sides of the university threshold. Balancing these two identities required a considerable amount of emotional work (Reay, 2015). The transition experience gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on their existing identities and consider alternative future identities.

6.2.2 *Identities in transition*

Personal change is not easy, and these participants took some time to adjust to gaining confidence in their identities as tertiary students in this new academic environment. Most of the participants expressed feelings of uncertainty and dislocation when they commenced their studies, using terms such as feeling "nervous" (Dean and Luke, i.1) and "overwhelmed" (Sam, i.1). Troy disclosed feeling ill-prepared, stating: "If this is the basic stuff, I have no chance at all" (i.1). Moving from outside tertiary studies to transitioning to life as a student was challenging to the habitus of the participants, which had developed from their upbringing in predominantly English-speaking blue-collar families where most males followed the pathway into manual work (Lehmann, 2009). Upon arrival at the campus, the habitus of the participants did not necessarily prepare them to fit neatly into the middle-class environs of a university which Bourdieu regarded as a competitive "field of play" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 67). Their gradual shifts in thinking outlined in Chapter 5, explored their identities which were beginning a process of transition to varying degrees.

For many males, such as these, from blue-collar backgrounds there persists the expectation for them to be bread-winners for their families rather than focussing on their own academic attainments (Armstrong et al., 2018; O'Shea et al., 2017; Reay, 2002b; Stahl & Loeser, 2018). Luke, Jack and Mark felt constrained by this traditional male role of provider. Luke was concerned about studying along with providing funds for himself and his wife, while Jack stated: “I don’t want to bring up a child in that situation [with] this ongoing problem of making ends meet” (i.4). Mark outlined his reasons for not disclosing to others his decision to become a student. He explained: “I still haven’t told many people…because in a way this society just in general judges, ‘oh what are you going back to study for?’” (i.3). Balancing their identities as students, workers and providers for their families was a difficult and emotional challenge. Nevertheless, engaging in education offered an opportunity for some of the participants to forge new social roles.

Adjusting to a changing role in society as males from blue-collar backgrounds was a significant part of their transition experience. Their masculinities formed an important aspect of this. As noted by Stahl and Loeser (2018, p. 610): “The site of paid work endures as a bastion of gendered validity for men”. There can indeed be a privileging of the battler or working-class man in Australian culture from where these participants had come (Stahl & Loeser, 2018; Whitman, 2013), which made adapting to academic culture quite challenging at first. In some ways the participants had to overcome expectations to be part of Australian masculine working culture where intellectual pursuits can “considered pretentious or feminine and…transitioning from one’s working-class identity to an academic identity can be seen as a rejection of one’s core values” (Armstrong et al., 2018, p. 12). Moreover, Ward (2014) has noted that these males can develop “a hybridised form of masculinity, not only trying to escape but also falling back and feeling the pressure to perform traditional classed masculinities” (pp. 721-722). Loosening their connections to male dominated workplace culture and expectations gradually allowed many of the participants to embody a new vision of themselves.

Once enrolled into studies the participants found the environment of the university campus quite different to their work and home experiences. They initially felt “lost” on the campus, both literally and figuratively. These males were confronted by the challenge of stepping into their new identities as tertiary students. Similar situations have been recognised by other scholars, such as Reay (2018) in the UK, where such students “remain peripheral within the

new field" (p. 10). In Canada, Lehmann (2014) has noted that "even those who have been successful in achieving high levels of mobility continue to experience the feelings of unease and being caught between two worlds" (p. 16). Indeed, "becoming a student, particularly a mature-age student, is a highly emotional process" (Mallman & Lee, 2016, p. 687). These participants had to overcome their feelings of uncertainty, and at times alienation, to adapt to their place in this new field of endeavour.

Furthermore, this adjustment to their role in an institute of higher learning felt uncomfortable for some of the participants, with a self-perception of getting above one's "station" in life. Janet (Australian studies teacher) had noted the attitude of some UAP students who thought that university was "for the upper-class, for the elite and we don't do that". Her perception was that some students felt like outsiders in this tertiary landscape. Troy articulated this framing when he explained that he had viewed university as the place "where successful, smart people went" (i.2), however, by Interview Three he described feeling "pretty confident" (i.3) about completing the course, indicating a shift during the transition process. Adjusting to life as a student was quite challenging for the participants as they moved from feelings of dislocation to becoming more confident in their student identity.

Dean described his experience of transition: "At the start I felt like I didn't deserve to be here, rather than now I feel like I do" (i.2) indicating initial feelings of imposter syndrome (Parkman, 2016). The participants compared themselves to other younger students, straight from school, possibly from more affluent families, who seemed to fit into place and adapt with ease to the university setting. Luke "noticed the age gap" (i.4) as did Mark who stated: "Us older ones are confused about what the hell they're talking about" (i.3). Furthermore, Troy explained: "Some people come across as pretty entitled in a sense that they've gone straight from high school to university" (i.3). He was aware that some mature-age learners were disadvantaged in the field of academic studies, and he seemed particularly sensitive to his identity as an outsider being a mature-age student.

As mature-age males, the participants were conscious of being strangers in the university setting and were unaware, at times, of the unwritten rules and regulations of "the game" (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 1414). Some felt they were imposters (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Clance & Imes, 1978) but the situation varied from participant to participant. According to Stahl and Loeser (2018): "This lack of fluidity in terms of identity can be particularly

problematic for working-class mature-age men entering higher education as they may find this space particularly uncomfortable and challenging to navigate" (p. 611). Moving away from their roles as competent workers to the vulnerability of becoming students could be quite confronting.

These initial experiences of entering the university space provided a strong contrast to the previous roles and expectations of the participants. Along with adjusting to the academic rigours required of becoming students were the social and psychological processes of developing their own identities in this unfamiliar territory: "Identity change involves a shift in how one consciously thinks about one's self—a process that occurs in college for many students" (Lee & Kramer, 2013, p. 21). Each of the participants had different experiences and levels of engagement in this transition process as they moved into their roles as mature-age learners.

6.2.3 *Institutional habitus*

Higher educational institutes embody a distinct habitus which may well be at odds with the habitus of many students who have enrolled, particularly those from working-class backgrounds (Byrd, 2019; Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012; Reay et al., 2001). Institutional habitus can be defined as "an institution's values, common sense, beliefs, behaviors, and taken-for-granted positions as situated within historical and contemporary social relations" (Byrd, 2019, p. 194). Reay et al. (2001) have outlined that students whose individual and familial habitus differs from that of the institution can feel decidedly out of place. The result can be that new students from outside the realms of academia can experience feelings of habitus dislocation, where the habitus of the student collides with the habitus of the institution (Baxter & Britton, 2001; Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012; Thomas, 2002).

Instances of this habitus dislocation could be seen in some of the participants' expectations and experiences at the institution. On commencing UAP Ben explained: "I didn't know what to expect cause…I'd never been to an actual uni. College before" (i.1). A further example of this phenomenon was exemplified by Kevin, the young unemployed participant. Kevin (aged 21) did not possess a birth certificate which made accessing enrolment and course materials very difficult. He explained the situation: "I didn't get my birth certificate until today. So, I couldn't look at anything" (i.1). The university habitus had assumed all students possess such identity documents. In a similar way, Sam was concerned by how much he was forced to spend on textbooks which were designed for those students who were "pretty well off"

(Sam, i.4). He explained that “all the questions that were in the exams were in the textbooks so…if you didn’t buy it, you’d be screwed” (Sam, i.4).

The assumptions and expectations of the organisation were that students would know what to expect when entering their studies and that they could easily access personal documents and/or funds for textbooks. This placed many students, such as these participants, in difficult situations due to clashes between their own habitus and that of the institution. The institutional habitus proved challenging at first for the participants and they took some time to adjust to the different field in which they now found themselves, with their identities also beginning to adapt and change in some circumstances.

6.2.4 *Balancing identities*

A number of the participants, Colin, Dean, Luke, Jack and Sam, tried to maintain identities in multiple fields of play, navigating this liminal space, that is, a place of “transition in which a person is no longer what they were, but is not yet what they will be” (Buchanan, 2010). They were caught between the habitus of the workplace and home, and the habitus of the university environment. Participants’ identities oscillated between their various roles while their habitus continued to adapt to the different environments. Some of the participants maintained two distinct identities simultaneously, for example, while experiencing the life of tertiary students they still held onto their outlook from their previous life experiences. Sam hovered between roles as construction worker at home and academic worker at university. This strongly indicated his habitus moving between two different dimensions. By Interview Four he had dyed his hair pink which perhaps could be seen as an outward display of changing identity. Balancing various identities was part of the transition process.

In a similar way Luke was reluctant to assume the role of a student in the early stage of his studying. He explained: “Once I’ve completed the first semester, I’d probably feel more confident to introduce myself as someone who’s studying” (Luke, i.3). His habitus was in flux between one role and the other. Dean had a back-up plan if things did not work out, stating: “I can always go back to my trade if I want” (Dean, i.3). He kept his options open to return to his previous identity. As Lehmann (2014) has noted: “As working-class students begin to develop a middle-class habitus, however, they do not simply shed their working-class identity” (p. 2). Colin described not having time to “hang out with my other friends” (i.2) now that he had moved into different social circles. The participants’ oscillation between

identities formed part of their transition experience. This process entailed difficult emotional work for the participants as they attempted to maintain parallel existences (Reay, 2015).

While some of the participants were able to overcome the sense of not belonging as they adapted to a different culture and environment in the transition to identify themselves as university students, others preferred to maintain their previous sense of identity rather than adapting and changing. Mark, for example, was determined to maintain the provider role, stating: “I’m in debt now but I’d put myself in even more debt if I had to…to help my kids” (Mark, i.4). The adult masculine identity as father and bread-winner remains salient for many blue-collar men, particularly older men (Hancock, 2012; Mac an Ghaill, 1996).

In contrast, participants such as Colin relished the opportunity of identifying as a university student and taking on this new role in life. He embraced his newfound identity as a student, stating: “I want to be out in the world like doing something and contributing” (Colin, i.4). He had found some sense of personal fulfilment explaining: “This is what I want to do, to study something I enjoy” (Colin, i.3). In some ways Colin exemplified “upwardly mobile working-class masculinities” that Stahl et al. (2020, p. 16) have described in an Australian context. Overall, there was a diverse range of experiences of transition with each participant adapting his identity depending upon his own background and expectations.

Adapting to a student identity was an uncomfortable experience for many of the participants. Janet (Australian studies teacher) was aware of students’ feelings of dislocation as they struggled to adapt. She advised them to: “Hang in there. Just sit in the discomfort,” until they overcame their feelings of being out of place. While three participants, Ben, Kevin and Troy, ultimately ceased studies, most of the participants gradually adapted to the new academic environment.

The remaining participants had to make adjustments to their own identities to accept that they had the capabilities to undertake tertiary studies. After completing the UAP Dean explained feeling more at ease in the university setting. Similarly, Jack developed his confidence and skills so that he stated: “In one of the classes I act as the leader” (Jack, i.4), showing his developing identity as a competent and capable tertiary student. Colin too enjoyed working with groups of other students explaining: “Once you kind of get everyone working as a team then everything’s fine” (Colin, i.4). Gaining confidence, developing their capabilities, and knowing that they had valuable opinions to share was an important aspect of transition for the participants which impacted their sense of identity.

6.2.5 *Future identities and possible selves*

Most of the participants looked towards a future identity which was different from their previous identities, and they saw that their academic studies provided a means of achieving this. Using the lens of possible selves, developed by Markus and Nurius (1986) and more recently expanded by other scholars (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2021; Harrison, 2018; Henderson et al., 2019), enabled a closer examination of the participants' concept of identity. The concept of possible selves is particularly relevant to people in transitional life periods such as these participants were experiencing (Stevenson, 2019). Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often look to education as a chance for changing themselves and their futures (Armstrong et al., 2018; Hancock, 2012). Visualising possible selves can act as an incentive to take a particular course of action or direction (Barg et al., 2020; Henderson et al., 2019; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Stahl et al., 2020). Possible selves allows a student to consider what they might become which provides a link between the thinking process and motivation (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

The participants expressed their future identities as a wide variety of possible selves, and this can be looked at in two ways. First, the tragic or undesirable future self which they wished to avoid. The avoidance of this outcome also acted as a motivation for change. Second, there was an idealised possible self which can act as an inspiration to persevere, particularly with studies. Each of the participants fluctuated between various versions of their possible selves at different times in the interviews.

For these participants, the tragic possible self would be the self that spiralled in a negative direction which they wished to avoid. These depictions acted as motivating forces to continue with studies and to develop different and more positive possible selves into the future. The students were able to visualise themselves into the future, in negative or indeed even tragic scenarios if their plans and hopes went awry. Returning to their previous jobs and lives, prior to their engagement in HE, was viewed in terms of being a negative possible self which was best avoided. Negative future selves included Mark's understanding that he "couldn't do the building trade continually" (i.2). Returning to being a full-time builder was not a future that he wished and was actively avoiding, preferring a different future identity. Colin pictured his negative possible self as a person "who sits back and bludges off everybody else's hard work" (i.4), referring to a stereotyped depiction of a "dole bludger" who lives off

government benefits and does not work.[27] Picturing their negative possible selves acted as a motivating force for Mark and Colin to actively engage in HE. Jack had seen his future as having no "light at the end of the tunnel" (i.4) if he returned to working with go-karts. Sam too wanted to avoid being trapped in the role of a construction worker, noting: "It's hard. I know how to do it but I just don't like the actual work itself" (Sam, i.2). They expressed concerns about "personal health" (Mark, reflection), sustaining injuries, such as Dean's broken leg (see Chapter 4, Part 1) or returning to the "chaos" (Terry, i.1) and "stress" (Luke, i.4) of previous workplaces. The types of negative possible selves involved an uncertain lifestyle, being in a never-ending financial predicament, compounded with poor health and well-being.

In contrast to their negative possible selves, the participants also envisioned their idealised possible selves, which served as a motivation for continuing with studies and dreaming of different future scenarios for their lives. The participants seemed to carry both versions of their possible selves simultaneously, the tragic and the idealised, which speaks to the complex nature of human motivation and imagination. The idealised versions of themselves appeared more developed towards the end of the 12-months of this study when the students had more understanding and engagement with the reality of the university landscape. It offered them an achievable and also idealised scenario of what their futures might hold.

Students from blue-collar backgrounds such as these participants, did not have previous experience in HE and the career opportunities available to more affluent students, which is an important aspect of identity formation. Stevenson (2019) has noted in the UK that students coming to education from diverse backgrounds have at times unrealistic expectations of themselves and what they can achieve in HE. "In reality…those who are impoverished or disenfranchised…do not have the same access to material or emotional resources…to become desired future selves as do other more privileged groups" (Stevenson, 2019, p. 144). The participants in this study also had to overcome many barriers, particularly financial ones, to remain enrolled and achieve their outcomes.

Nevertheless, each of the participants was able to picture an idealised version of himself and his career in the future which helped to motivate the engagement with university study. These visualisations can "play both a cognitive and an affective role in motivation"

[27] "Bludger" is an Australian colloquial term which denotes a person who lives off others; a parasite; a person who is lazy and evades responsibilities (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 2003).

(Stevenson & Clegg, 2013, p. 19). Colin's ideal future self was working internationally: "I would really love a job in the UN. I love global politics" (i.3), which was a world away from his identity as the Centrelink recipient that he was wishing to avoid. Similarly, Troy hoped that he "could end up working for an Engineering firm in Europe" (i.2) and Ben wished to travel abroad. The image of moving overseas, taking on new roles and identities appealed to these participants. Jack dreamed that in the future he "could perhaps be a doctor of sorts" (i.4).

Part of some participants' possible selves included benefitting others. Both Dean and Sam aspired to be teachers, with Sam wishing to redress some past educational experiences at primary school. He stated: "What I learnt there did not help me one bit" (i.3), while Dean was motivated to teach as he had enjoyed teaching the younger apprentices in his trade. They pictured themselves in teaching roles helping younger people. Mark wanted an alternative future not only for himself, but also to improve the life of his family. All of these future possible selves acted as strong motivating forces for the students' academic pursuits. Arguably, this visualisation of possible selves was outside the narrow confines and expectations of Australian male blue-collar identities.

6.2.6 *Conclusion*

Each of the participants entered the College with his own identity which had developed from existing biographies. These identities had been formed in part by the norms and expectations associated with Australian blue-collar masculinities (Archer et al., 2001; Burke, 2007; Stahl, 2015b). Once they assumed the role of students in HE, existing identities were at times challenged by the different social and cultural expectations of the university campus. While all the participants' habituses had developed from these particular backgrounds, they still exercised their own agency, authenticity and decision making by entering the field of HE. Some participants maintained their previous identities and sustained their sense of self through the transition. However, there were those who attempted to balance different identities as they navigated their way between the familiarity of home and workplaces with the new environment of the College and the university. This was not a smooth transition and required making adjustments between one role and identity to another. The final element that was observed was the participants' depiction of their identities into the future. Participants' visions of their possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) gave added insight into

how the participants saw their current and future identities as a result transitioning through an enabling course and onto HE.

6.3 Part 3: Educational and personal outcomes of transition

6.3.1 *Introduction*

In order to understand the educational and personal outcomes of the participants, an examination is required of their transition experiences and how the outcomes developed over time through each phase of the process. Transition into and through university has a profound impact on students, particularly those from low-SES backgrounds (Foster et al., 2020; Gale & Parker, 2014; Jones et al., 2020). In terms of WP, transition has developed as a significant concept with the ongoing development of a "transition pedagogy" (Kift et al., 2010) where support for students is not additional to their studies but an integral aspect of the curriculum. This is of particular importance for those in the first year of their university studies as well as those who participate in enabling education (Bennett et al., 2016; Cole, 2017; Kift et al., 2010; O'Donnell et al., 2015).

As mature-age males, the participants had distinct experiences of transition which have not been fully explored in the current literature. These transition experiences were not unidimensional or homogeneous and were quite different for each participant, leading to different educational and personal outcomes. Despite these differing transition experiences, three main transition phases became apparent by the end of this study, namely: from work or unemployment to College; through the UAP; and from the College into university studies. There were significant outcomes achieved by the participants during each of these phases. It is important to note, however, that the participants progressed at different rates through these transitions and that not all participants experienced all three phases.

Rather than using quantitative measures, such as grade point averages, attrition and completion rates, this project has focussed on qualitative measures based on narrative inquiry from a social justice rather than human capital perspective (Bradley et al., 2008; Burke, 2011; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). This has allowed for a much greater understanding of the individual outcomes of this transition for the students involved and its impact on their lives more broadly.

This section of the chapter discusses the educational and personal outcomes of the participants as they traversed each of these three transition phases.

- **Phase One** (10 participants) encompassed the participants' initial engagement with the UAP in their first weeks of study. This phase could be regarded as an induction phase (Gale & Parker, 2014) for participants.
- **Phase Two** (9 participants) covered the 14-weeks of UAP as the participants moved from novice learners to gaining some experience of tertiary studies.
- **Phase Three** (7 participants) marked the final phase of this study, which included the participants entering and transitioning into the first semester of their university degrees.

6.3.2 *Phase One: Initial transition – Entering the UAP from the workforce or unemployment*

Educational outcomes

This section focusses on the participants' early educational experiences as this key theme emerged during their initial interviews. The participants' gendered experiences of schooling, the workplace and unemployment shaped the outcomes of the first phase of transition. Their initial transition, during what could be termed the induction phase (Gale & Parker, 2014), was a particularly important time. As noted by a number of scholars, the first few weeks of engagement in HE and enabling courses are a crucial time for those returning to study (Foster et al., 2020; Kift et al., 2010; Lizzio & Wilson, 2013; O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007). For many of the participants in this study, previous educational experiences coloured their re-engagement with academia and the outcomes during this initial transition.

From an educational point of view, the participants successfully re-engaged with learning at this initial stage. To achieve this, they had to overcome their earlier negative experiences in the school system, where some outlined learning difficulties and self-depictions such as "dumb" (Mark, i.4) and "lazy" (Sam and Luke, i.1) (see Chapter 4, Part 1). These men's memories of schooling had shaped their student masculinities (Burke, 2007). As boys, feeling they did not fit into the constraints of the education system, many gradually disengaged from the learning process. However, the participants' school experiences differed somewhat from descriptions of "laddish" behaviour outlined by Burke (2007), Stahl (2015b) and Francis and Skelton (2005), particularly in the UK. Participants did not appear to have experienced "hegemonic masculinities" outlined by Connell (2005), rather they described less overt masculine displays at school although references to bullying and laziness were similar (Connell, 1989).

Miserable memories of schooling had pervaded many of the participants' stories. Their recollections shared some similarities with Reay's (2002b) "Shaun", a schoolboy from working-class Britain who had to ensure his masculinity was kept intact while endeavouring to achieve academic success. The potency of male peer group culture inhibited some of the participants from engaging more fully in achieving their educational goals while at school. They described themselves as distracted. Luke explained: "I was probably trying to distract myself or distract others" (i.1) with Dean noting: "I think guys are a lot more distracted as in they just want to muck around more" (i.2). During this initial phase of transition, the participants' habituses, which had developed outside HE, made gradual adjustments to the expectations of the UAP and academic culture.

Personal outcomes

From their personal perspectives, the participants referred to the need to deal effectively with the emotional impact of returning to education and overcoming self-doubt that had accumulated from their school experiences. There can be "transitional shock for mature-age students" as they return to study (Mallman & Lee, 2016, p. 689). Participants reported feeling exposed as novice learners even though they were mature-age. This was particularly noticeable for Mark who questioned: "Am I really good enough?" (Mark, i.1). Other participants could be described as experiencing imposter syndrome with feelings of being out of place in HE (Parkman, 2016; Ramsey & Brown, 2018). The familiar male-dominated workplaces from which they had come, held quite different expectations compared to university studies (Gidley et al., 2010).

The students in this project varied in their attitude to the role of males in HE and its impact on their masculinity. All commenced their studies by referring to vocational reasons for attaining a university credential. As noted by Lehmann (2009), working-class students are "more likely to insist on learning useful skills, becoming credentialed, gaining an advantage in the labor market, and getting their money's worth" (p. 146). However, upon further reflection, some of the participants became interested in developing their own capabilities as part of the process of re-engaging with education and breaking away from the limitations of previous expectations.

In particular, some of the younger participants, such as Colin and Dean, seemed determined to break away from blue-collar stereotypes and expectations which Stahl et al. (2020) have described in their recent research as developing "upwardly mobile working-class

masculinities"(p. 16). There were differences experienced by the various participants and there may be generational and cultural differences between these students and those in educational institutions in other countries (Beissel et al., 2013; Jensen, 2008; Lehmann, 2009; Raven, 2018; Reay, 2002b). What is significant to note is that overcoming the concept of education as being unmanly was an important outcome for many of these participants.

6.3.3 *Phase Two: Transitioning through an enabling course (UAP)*

Educational outcomes

The transition across the 14-weeks of the UAP was quite transformative for many of the participants. While one of the group, Ben, left during this phase, nine of the participants remained and completed the UAP. Unfortunately, Kevin and Troy both struggled with course content, and failed the UAP which meant they could not proceed to university. However, the experiences of all participants in the enabling course included gradually developing a "learner identity" (Merrill, 2012; Stahl & Loeser, 2018), which was quite different to their schoolboy identity. As they received positive feedback from teachers, confidence in their abilities and their self-worth gradually improved. Sam (i.2) explained that he "was just hoping just to pass" but actually received some "distinctions and high distinctions". As Luke (i.2) stated his result "gives me confidence that with perseverance I can achieve what I want". Their self-perceptions as male learners were beginning to change.

Participants experienced an improved understanding of academic culture during this transition phase. The UAP provided a positive bridge into university which scaffolded skills development. The enabling course assisted the participants to decode academic language and explained the "hidden curriculum" that the participants needed to unpack (Bennett et al., 2016; Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). Transition pedagogy aided this understanding (Kift et al., 2010) and the participants' positive relationships with College teachers benefitted their transition. In written reflections, three of the participants revealed how they had changed their disposition to learning while undertaking the UAP. Dean described it as "a proper challenge" (Dean, reflection) while Luke explained that this participation provided him with confidence "whilst also providing me with knowledge and experience" (Luke, reflection). Mark described how participating was "opening my mind to study" (Mark, reflection). For these participants, self-reflection on their development as learners was an important aspect of the transformation experience as mature-age students (Mezirow, 2000).

The educational outcome for most participants was their ongoing positive re-engagement with studies and starting to feel at home in an academic setting rather than feeling like imposters or nomads (O'Shea, 2011; Ramsey & Brown, 2018). Transition, for mature-age students, is more than just access to HE. As noted by Mezirow (1997), successful adult education involves the individual gaining confidence to become a "more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others" (p. 11). Increasing confidence in their academic abilities in a supportive environment enabled the participants to develop improved educational outcomes compared to those experiences which they had previously encountered.

Personal outcomes

As well as achieving educational outcomes the participants experienced, valuable personal outcomes such as a sense of achievement and increasing assurance in dealing with academia and ways of negotiating the new arena of social and cultural capitals. Even for those participants who did not progress to an undergraduate degree, Ben, Kevin and Troy, there were advantages such as a clearer understanding of the academic environment and overcoming some of their self-doubts. Students who leave before course completion still find their engagement with HE develops a broader understanding of the world around them, some useful skills and beneficial social connections (Cunninghame & Pitman, 2019; Norton & Cherastidtham, 2018). Non-completion of UAP should not be viewed as a deficit on the part of the students from a binary view of success or failure (Cunninghame & Pitman, 2019). Rather, it was another experience on their journeys of lifelong learning.

As stated earlier, the personal achievements and outcomes of the participants differed widely as each had his own goals to achieve from the HE experience. Some were primarily focused on the vocational opportunities that transition into university would provide, while others viewed further studies as a means of self-fulfillment and development. This points to the very individual nature of education and the importance of enabling education as a means of transition for a wide diversity of students.

6.3.4 *Phase Three: Entering and transitioning through university*

Educational Outcomes

The participants' perceptions of education and of themselves shifted as a result of the process of transition. The third and final phase of transition examined here is that of the

participants leaving their enabling course and entering the university proper. This transition provided some challenges such as negotiating becoming part of the larger university cohort rather than the smaller supportive College environment. Sam noted that there appeared to be “a thousand new people in my course and like lecture theatres are full” (Sam, i.3). While adjustments had to be made, the remaining participants had become more independent learners and were able to adapt. They had further developed their learner identity and perception of themselves as students. Most began to feel more comfortable and deserving of being university students. While educational perceptions shifted more for some participants than others, for Colin the transition was quite affirming. He concluded: “This is where I’m supposed to be” (Colin, i.3).

Six of the original 10 participants continued with their studies into the second university session. This gradual attrition of students parallels the situation more broadly in enabling courses and undergraduate studies (Ajjawi et al., 2020; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2019). Essentially, the data obtained in the project still offer valuable insight into the participants’ lived experiences of transition and adds to the research in this unfolding area of WP.

Personal outcomes

One of the personal benefits of those engaged in this project was optimism for the future. Most participants were motivated to continue working towards their possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Stevenson & Clegg, 2013). They wished to achieve respectable personhood though educational participation (Burke, 2007).

Rather than negative impacts on family relationships, the participants recounted some shifted and improved familial relationships as a result of their studies. Some participants, such as Colin and Sam, had benefitted as well from developing broader social connections on campus which added to their social capital. Furthermore, some of the males such as Dean and Luke had moved from feelings of being an imposter to a gradual acceptance of their roles as university students. While conscious of the opportunities afforded by HE, the participants overwhelmingly retained close relationships to their families and places of origin.

Twelve months after returning to education, the participants were at various stages of transformation in the ways they viewed themselves and society. A particularly dramatic example of perspective transformation was evident in Colin’s journey of transition (Mezirow, 1997). At the commencement of this project, he was unemployed, living on a disability pension and concerned about his learning difficulties. By the conclusion of this project, he

had transitioned to an engaged, confident and successful university student looking forward to a different direction in his life. The personal outcomes of perspective transformation were not only powerful for Colin but also for the other participants.

Conclusion

This section has highlighted both the educational and personal outcomes for these male students through the process of transitioning into HE from an enabling course. Participants went through three phases of transition which included moving from the workplace to study, through UAP itself and finally onto university undergraduate studies. Educationally they shifted from being learners informed by negative school experiences to those who gained confidence in their own academic abilities through the assistance of the transition pedagogy of the UAP and the commitment of their teachers. They showed resilience and perseverance throughout their transition. The participants moved from outsiders in a HE setting to gradual feelings of belonging and self-worth as they adjusted to being students and were overwhelmingly positive about the outcomes that university education could provide.

6.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter has outlined the complex journeys of males transitioning into HE from an enabling course. Responses to the three sub-questions posed at the beginning of the study have also been given. First, how learners' social and cultural capitals strongly impacted their experiences of transition was discussed. Their backgrounds and habituses as primarily blue-collar workers provided a strong contrast with the social and cultural expectations of university life. While some of the older participants retained previous social connections, some of the younger participants used the opportunity of College and university engagement to develop their social capital. Culturally, all of the participants interacted and adapted to the academic capital required as they proceeded through their studies, with the assistance of the transition pedagogy employed by College staff. While adjusting to the different culture, the participants retained their authenticity and built on their unique capitals and capabilities which had developed from their lived experiences.

Second, the existing identities of the students impacted their transition into and through university. Their identities had been built upon their experiences as males in largely blue-collar workplaces as well as situated in particular family and social settings. By entering HE these identity constructions were challenged to some extent with each participant negotiating his identity in his own way. Even though some maintained their original

identities, others tried to balance various identities while simultaneously progressing through their studies. Gradually, most of the participants adjusted to their new roles as students to varying degrees. Their motivation and persistence were enhanced by their abilities to imagine their future selves with the possibility of changing their lives.

Third, the educational and personal outcomes of these participants varied from person to person as each had set out to achieve different goals from their transition. While some focussed on using education to improve employment outcomes, others were looking more for opportunities for personal development. The transition was a gradual process across three phases where there were shifts from feeling imposters in the education system to the gradual development of a learner identity. Combined with educational benefits to the transition experience, there were personal changes for all the participants. Relying on their personal stories of resilience and perseverance they began to feel more confident in their own capabilities and looked forward to future success.

The experiences of the participants have highlighted the impact of WP on the individuals who are at the heart of this process. As well as providing insight into the participants' endeavours, this project has raised significant implications for enabling and university education regarding support structures for students from diverse backgrounds.

The following chapter will address the overarching research question: What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into HE from an enabling course? In addressing this question, some of the challenges offered by WP will be highlighted as well as recommendations for improvements to enhance the experiences of students undertaking this important transition in these uncertain times.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This research has highlighted how there is much more to learn about the experiences of mature-age male learners who commence university both in Australia and internationally. The focus of this thesis was to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of this group as they transitioned into HE from an enabling course. These 10 males, returning to study, had come from families and workplaces where attending university was quite distinct from most post-schooling trajectories. While the aspiration and dedication of these students remained an important aspect of their transition, it is essential to note that many students from such backgrounds may have experienced different transitions due to economic, social and cultural constraints (O'Shea, 2020b; Stevenson, 2019). Using narrative inquiry allowed for the in-depth analysis of this important area of research. It opened a window into the lives of these males and has enabled the unique perspectives of the participants to emerge from the study (Creswell, 2013; Riessman, 2008).

Underpinning the theoretical framework of this research is the theory of social reproduction including the concepts of cultural and social capital, habitus and fields (Bourdieu, 1977). Additionally, Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformational learning and the concept of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) were employed to give a fuller understanding of the participants' experiences.

The overarching question explored in this thesis was:

"What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into higher education from an enabling course?"

This chapter draws together the explorations of the previous chapters and is particularly informed by the findings documented in Chapters 4 and 5. It encompasses both the conclusions and recommendations from this research project. This chapter consists of four sections:

- Discussion of the differing journeys undertaken by student participants
- Interactions between learners and the HE setting
- The value of enabling education
- Further research.

7.2 Differing journeys

The participants' transition experiences depended to some extent on their ages and responsibilities. While the older married participants focussed more intently on achieving their degrees as a means to an end, some of the younger participants wished to become more involved as students and to experience life on campus as part of their transition. Notwithstanding these differences between participants, they all faced similar obstacles as they transitioned through an enabling course to HE. This was partly due to their identities as males in Australian society from traditional blue-collar backgrounds as well as the need to overcome their mainly negative experiences in the school system (Goss & Sonnemann, 2017). As noted by Connell (1989), "masculinity shapes education, as well as education forming masculinity" (p. 298). How the participants perceived their masculinities may have influenced their transition experiences of moving from negative school experiences, through the workforce and onto becoming mature-age learners.

Adopting the identity of a student was initially confronting for many of the participants, with the habitus of the participants colliding at times with the habitus of the institution (Buchanan et al., 2015; Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012; Reay et al., 2001). However, each made adjustments to deal with the changing social and cultural capitals in this field. The identities of the participants had been formed by their family, education and workplaces. At times these identities were challenged by the different social and cultural expectations of HE with some of the participants noting changes to how they viewed themselves by the end of the study. Some of the younger students began to fashion different identities as a result of this interaction.

The theoretical framing of social and cultural capitals assisted in exploring how these students from blue-collar backgrounds interacted with the university space. However, as noted in the previous chapter, the participants had their own wealth of cultural and social capitals which helped to sustain them in their studies (Yosso, 2005). The lens of possible selves shed light onto their hopes and dreams for the future as well as alternative scenarios if their plans did not come to fruition (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Stevenson, 2019). Exploring their identities into the future provided the project with a fuller understanding of the motivation of the participants gave an added dimension to the study. Additionally, Mezirow's (2000) concept of transformational learning was particularly salient with some participants' experiences, such as Colin, whose outlook on life was transformed during interactions with the university.

While this remains a relatively small study, there are many other students from similar backgrounds, particularly at universities such as Westbeach, who embark upon similar journeys each year. The UAP is one example of how WP can provide substantial benefits to many who decide to attend university.

7.2.1 *Recommendations: Differing journeys*

The findings from this study indicate that in order to encourage mature-age learners and males in particular to access HE, there needs to be much more flexibility in the structures of colleges and universities. Institutional awareness of the needs of mature-age learners, including commuting, family and work commitments, is essential in creating an institutional habitus that is more inclusive. Certainly flexibility, in delivery, including online options, now more readily available than previously, are an essential aspect in meeting the needs of these diverse learners (Picton & Kahu, 2021; Sanchez-Gelabert et al., 2017).

As well as flexibility there needs to be ongoing support at universities which is targeted, timely and appropriate to students' needs (Picton & Kahu, 2021; Walker-Gibbs et al., 2019). Continuation of mentoring and peer support programs, such as the PASS program at the College and university, including using male leaders from blue-collar backgrounds, would provide encouragement for students from similar circumstances. These programs have been successfully used in many institutions and should be considered more widely into the future (Devlin et al., 2012; Thomas, 2014). The opportunities available through university participation can lead to improved engagement and positive outcomes for many people and indeed transformation for some students. These and other opportunities for student groups need to be explored further, supported and encouraged.

7.3 Interactions between learners and educational settings

Exploring the habitus of the participants provided a perspective into the social and cultural disjuncture they experienced as they explored their identities and made adaptations. Notions of masculinity were explored particularly in relation to Australian blue-collar men and their relationship to employment (O'Shea et al., 2017; Stahl & Loeser, 2018). Their identities had been formed to a large degree by identification with their earlier vocations as builders, boiler-makers and barmen. A surprising finding was the participants' desire to avoid the inherent dangers of their traditional workplaces compared to the enjoyment they found in the natural bushland setting of the university, or as one participant described it, the "paradise" of the campus (Kevin, i.1).

Common among the participants were stories of the difficulty in transition from primary to high school where they became increasingly disengaged with learning. This is an ongoing area of concern highlighted by researchers in Australia (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Connell et al., 2013), the USA (Henry et al., 2012) and the UK (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill, 2012; Reay, 2002b; Stahl, 2015b). The focus should not be on blaming individual students for their lack of engagement, but on addressing the systemic issues inherent in the school process (Burke, 2011). More engaging secondary curricula, school structures, pedagogies and targeted support, in particular for boys from blue-collar backgrounds, would go some way to improving the current situation. Research has recommended drawing upon family and community knowledge to successfully engage boys more fully (Lingard et al., 2009; Munns et al., 2005).

By 2020 one in three (36%) Australians had qualifications at the bachelor degree level or above compared to only 18% a decade previously (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020a). This trend has impacted on employment and educational expectations for current students, including those from low-SES backgrounds. Families of the participants in this study were generally very encouraging of their entering university. While previously many of the participants had followed their fathers' footsteps into manual trades and occupations, they now experienced the opportunity of HE with its possibilities for different professional attainment. Stahl et al. (2020) have noted this apparent change in some young Australian men from blue-collar backgrounds where seeing males from similar backgrounds entering tertiary education shifted their expectations regarding future careers. There may be echoes of this finding in this particular study where the participants reported aspirations to achieve university degrees.

Although many of the families had limited previous interaction with HE, their support and encouragement was instrumental in the participants becoming mature-age learners. Of particular note was the role played by female influencers, such as mothers and girlfriends, who provided a catalyst for the participants to reconsider HE as a viable option. In some ways the participants moved from the male environment of their fathers to the more "feminised" space of HE (Burke et al., 2013). However, this did not seem to detract from their relationships with fathers. Indeed, some of the participants described improved relationships with their families and fathers in particular.

7.3.1 *Recommendations: Improved educational linkages*

Participants in this study expressed feelings of disengagement from the education system during their school years. An important avenue for overcoming this problem is to ensure closer linkages between secondary and tertiary education, encouraging all students to consider HE as a viable option. Engaging with and informing principals and careers advisers of the opportunities available for all learners, even those boys who may remain on the periphery of the educational system, is one means of achieving this.

Since the *Bradley Review* (Bradley et al., 2008) there has been an increasing emphasis by universities on reaching out to the community, in particular to students and families from low-SES backgrounds. This commendable work needs to be supported and encouraged by governments and universities. The existing social and cultural capitals of students should be valorised, not dismissed as being non-academic. Educational institutions need to be aware that the imposter syndrome (Parkman, 2016) still exists. In particular, there needs to be emphasis on forging closer contacts and respectful dialogue with community groups as a way of encouraging WP and ensuring greater retention of students from diverse backgrounds at regional institutions such as Westbeach. As noted in this research, there are many women behind the scenes who acted as motivators in their families to encourage further education. Universities engaging with all community members, particular women, is a vital way of continuing this engagement for those currently outside the sector.

7.4 The value of enabling education

Enabling education provided important access into HE for these participants. However, these courses currently sit outside the AQF (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2019c) and are somewhat marginalised within the sector (Baker et al., 2021). The College's UAP was relatively short at 14-weeks, low cost and specifically designed for mature-age learners. What all enabling courses have in common is the advantage of providing an avenue into HE for those students who are not able to access this opportunity through other means (Baker et al., 2020; Pitman & Koshy, 2015). They provide the second chance at learning for those who were not previously able to pursue HE pathways, often due to family circumstances beyond their control, which was the case for many of these participants.

Furthermore, the transition pedagogy (Bennett et al., 2016; Kift et al., 2010; Lisciandro et al., 2020) adopted by the sector and this College in particular, enabled many of the participants to overcome their previous negative experiences in the school sector. Focussing on students'

capabilities and providing an encouraging environment enabled the participants to build confidence in their own abilities and create a new learner identity (Merrill, 2012). This learner identity helped the participants overcome their prior adverse educational experiences and assisted them to navigate the corridors of academia. As well as providing academic support, enabling courses "also address the social and personal spheres by helping the student become acculturated to a higher education environment and developing a sense of legitimacy or 'belonging' in the field of higher education" (Pitman & Koshy, 2015, p. 12). Enabling education remains an important avenue into HE for students such as those in this study.

7.4.1 *Recommendations: Promoting enabling education*

These participants took an indirect route into university studies. Traversing diverse pathways is the experience of many other mature-age learners and needs to be commended and supported by the wider HE community. Whether students enter HE through vocational education, alternative entry schemes or enabling courses, it is vital that these avenues are offered to those seeking to advance their educational opportunities. There are many stories, such as these men's, where students who enter this way succeed and thrive because of the second chance at learning (Stone & O'Shea, 2012; Stuart, 2012).

The participants initially sought further education as a way of improving their vocational prospects. As unemployment increases, (Kabatek, 2020), many are looking to improve their educational level and employment prospects as well as their own personal development by commencing tertiary studies (Perales & Chesters, 2017). Access, however, can be problematic. This is why a variety of pathways are needed to support achieving their visions. The *Shergold Report* (2020) has highlighted many such pathways and recommended broadening access into tertiary study, which is beneficial for students and society as a whole. Its findings included that "education should be recognised as a lifelong, but not linear, journey….offering economic opportunity and social mobility to all young Australians, no matter what their background or circumstances" (Shergold et al., 2020, p. 19). As a society we need to recognise a more holistic approach to educational avenues and opportunities.

Given their importance, enabling programs need to be well supported by universities and government policy more generally as a means of encouraging a variety of groups in society to access HE (Baker et al., 2020). The recent government Higher Education Support Amendment Legislation needs to provide flexibility in funding for students entering HE

through pathways including enabling programs (Australian Government, 2020; Koshy et al., 2020). These are vital aspects of maintaining and furthering a society where there are equal opportunities for all citizens no matter their background with HE “accessible to all on the basis of merit” (United Nations, 1948). Successful transition across the threshold of university requires targeted support and dedicated courses, such as the UAP, which are relevant to the needs of these diverse learners.

As HE moves increasingly to online learning rather in person education, it is imperative that enabling courses provide a safe and encouraging space for diverse students (Bennett et al., 2016; Irwin & Hamilton, 2020; Thomas, 2014) where developing students’ sense of belonging is a vital aspect of education (Burke et al., 2016; Kahu, 2014; van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Participants noted the importance of feeling welcome at the College and this sense of belonging needs to be replicated as much as possible into the online space (Wang, 2007).

A recurring theme of this project was the impact not only of the learners’ social and cultural capitals on their educational transition but also their economic capital or lack thereof. As outlined in Chapter 4 Section 2.3, the lack of access to secure ongoing financial support was a great area of concern for all the participants. While some of them were able to borrow from families and access limited government funding, most were forced to work part-time to finance their studies, leaving them in the double deficit (Hordósy et al., 2018) of balancing study and work commitments. Ensuring improved ongoing support for mature-age learners, particularly those with family responsibilities, is essential to the continuing educational prospects for participants such as those in this project. As Engstrom and Tinto (2008) note “access without support is not opportunity” (p. 46). It is particularly important for those students from low-income backgrounds to receive adequate financial support for studies in a safe and welcoming environment (Willans, 2020).

7.5 Further research

Males in enabling education currently comprise a small but important group of learners, however there is limited knowledge available on who these men are, their backgrounds and their experiences at university. Baker et al. (2020) and Walker-Gibbs et al. (2019) in Australia and Moore et al. (2020) in the UK point to the scarcity of data sets available which are needed in order to identify and support students such as these. Combined with improved data and student analytics, larger scale longitudinal studies would further identify the barriers faced by many of these students and the strategies they have developed for successful transition

into and through HE. Detailed research, both quantitative and qualitative, can inform educational institutions about the diverse range of students now enrolled. This should assist in developing strategies to improve retention and support successful academic and personal outcomes for these learners.

There have been some highly regarded studies on mature-age women returning to study (Crenshaw, 1991; Mezirow, 1978a; O'Shea, 2011; O'Shea & Stone, 2011, 2014; Stone & O'Shea, 2012), however, there is not yet a comprehensive body of work detailing the experiences of males during transition. Reay and her colleagues (Reay, 2002a, 2002b; Reay et al., 2005) in the UK have researched extensively the experiences of working-class students both male and female, in schools and universities particularly focussing on concepts of habitus, social and cultural capitals (Reay, 2015). Bridging the gap between family lives and educational expectations seems particularly problematic for many of those in her studies. Both in the UK and Australia, work by Stahl (2015a, 2015b), Stahl and Loeser (2018) and Stahl et al. (2020) has a similar focus, providing detailed insights, in particular, into the lives of males in educational settings, including the possible selves framework. Focussing particularly on masculinities is the ground-breaking work of Connell (1989, 2005) who developed the notion of hegemonic masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) to describe the power plays of affluent males in education and elsewhere. While all these studies have provided a wealth of understanding about males' interactions with the education system there remains some under-researched groups of men in contemporary educational settings.

Where this particular project fills a gap is in the area of Australian mature-age male learners from blue-collar backgrounds entering university through an enabling course. Having already experienced occupations outside university, theirs has been a "long and winding road" into HE when compared with those in previous research (Millman & McNamara, 2018). One of the few studies in this area, focussing on males in enabling education, was conducted by Armstrong et al. (2018) at a Queensland university. While taking place in a different location, many of their participants' experiences were similar to those in this study which provided a valuable comparison, particularly regarding the transformational possibilities of HE. All of these previous studies have provided important sources of information and indeed inspiration to me during the course of this study, nevertheless, there remains a gap in our understanding of mature-age males from blue-collar backgrounds entering the HE space. It is imperative that quality research is conducted in this area to ensure that government and

university policies provide targeted information, encouragement and support for these mature-age males who wish to gain tertiary qualifications.

7.6 Conclusion

The transition experiences for the male learners who took part in this project affected their educational and personal lives. While impacted by their backgrounds primarily from outside the university sector, they nevertheless did not let their previous social and cultural capitals determine their future. Moving away from traditional male occupations and roles they were willing to adopt new identities as university students and looked forward to different possible selves. For some of the participants, notably Colin, engagement with the College and university provided a transformational experience.

Their journeys of entering HE were quite challenging at times, and they were very generous in terms of their openness in describing their families, schooling, backgrounds and the emotions they were experiencing. I have learnt to appreciate the enormity of the undertaking they went through and their courage and fortitude in pursuing what for many of them was a long-held dream.

The participants regarded the College and university as safe places, academically, socially and environmentally, which provided a valuable experience of transition. In these times of uncertainty as we endure a global pandemic, providing access to enabling courses based on principles of equity and inclusion for people from diverse and vulnerable backgrounds is even more important (Burke et al., 2016; Thomas, 2002). The opportunity to engage in higher learning with its access to personal development as well as professional careers is certainly worth pursuing.

These participants, particularly those who succeeded in graduating from their studies, have been afforded chances not necessarily available to others in their families, particularly those from their fathers' generation. As educators we need to remind ourselves of the benefits of entering HE for those on the other side of the threshold. We need to promote avenues of access and issues of equity and act as sponsors for those learners who need our support. Neo-liberalism and government policies of development of human capital are deficient in addressing the holistic needs of these students (Marginson, 2018). As educators and researchers, we need to be advocates for those who could greatly benefit from access to Australia's HE system.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: Student Participant Information Sheet

STUDENT PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

TITLE: ***Crossing the threshold: What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into higher education from an enabling course?***

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by researchers at [redacted] and the [redacted] This study forms the basis of a doctoral research project undertaken by Jacinta McNamara who works at [redacted] as the Academic Support Co-ordinator. The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of male students entering university by way of the enabling course, UAP, in which you are enrolled.

INVESTIGATORS

Dr Sarah O'Shea	Assoc. Prof Pauline Lysaght	Jacinta McNamara
Supervisor	Supervisor	Doctoral Student

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

METHODS AND DEMANDS ON PARTICIPANTS

If you choose to be included you will be asked to participate in four interviews concerning your study. This will involve around two hours of your time, approximately 30 minutes per interview across both your UAP course and your first semester at university. Typical questions will include your reasons for enrolling in the course, your educational

background and your experiences during your course of study both in the UAP and undergraduate study.

You will also be asked to complete a short one page reflection on your experiences of transition, both positive and negative. This can be in point form, handwritten or typed and will be collected at the conclusion of the study.

SOME SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- Tell me about your previous experiences of education.
- Describe your family's attitude to education.
- Describe your experiences, both positive and negative, of undertaking further study.
- In what ways have your relationships with others changed since you started attending [redacted]
- How do you think about yourself compared to one, two or three years ago?
- Can you describe the feelings you have about being a university student?

POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVENIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS

Your involvement in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation from the study at any time and may withdraw any data you have provided to that point. Any information you disclose will have no impact on your College studies or assessment results. Refusal to participate in the study or to withdraw from it will not affect your relationship with [redacted] Please be assured that the interview information is CONFIDENTIAL and your personal details will not be disclosed. This study forms part of the researcher's doctoral program and is in no way connected with her position at the College.

It is possible that you may feel distressed during the interviews when answering questions of a personal nature. If so you have no obligation to complete the interview or interviews and may seek support services listed below.

SUPPORT SERVICES FOR STUDENTS

Should you wish to seek personal support, there are two student advisers at [redacted] who can assist students. Email: [redacted] to make an appointment. They can refer you to other support services.

has a free and confidential counselling service. Phone:

disability services are available by phoning:

There are also online support services for students at

ACCESS TO STUDENT RECORDS

As part of the research we may wish to access your student attendance records. This information will remain confidential and your personal details will not be disclosed.

FUNDING AND BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH

This doctoral research project will give both the College and University a better understanding of the lives of male students returning to study and improve approaches to teaching and support services for students. Findings from the research may be included in presentations or published in academic journals. Confidentiality is assured and you will not be identified in any part of the research or any ensuing presentations or publications.

GIFT FOR PARTICIPATION

Each student who participates in the research will receive a double movie pass to Events Cinema as thanks for your participation.

ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS

This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics of the University of Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the UOW Ethics Officer on 02 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

Thank you for your interest in this study

Jacinta McNamara

APPENDIX B: Student Consent Form

STUDENT CONSENT FORM

Crossing the threshold: What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into higher education from an enabling course?

Researcher: Jacinta McNamara

I have been given information about the research project. I have discussed this research project with Jacinta McNamara who is the co-ordinator of the research project and a member of staff at [redacted] This is part of a Doctor of Education degree supervised by Dr Sarah O'Shea from the School of Education at the University of Wollongong.

I understand that if I consent to participate in this project I will be asked to allow copies of my interviews to be used in the study. I also understand that I will be asked to provide a short one page written reflection on my experiences at the college and university. This will be collected at the final interview. I understand that my attendance records may be accessed by the researcher as part of the study but that the information will remain confidential and only be used for the purposes of the study.

I understand that my contribution will be confidential and that there will be no personal identification in the data that I agree to allow to be used in the study. I understand that some of the interview questions are of a personal nature and it is possible that I may feel distressed at times. If so I have no obligation to continue the interview and may seek assistance from the student advisor or university counsellor.

My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my relationship with [redacted] [redacted] and will in no way affect my course participation or assessment results.

If I have any enquires about the research I can contact Jacinta McNamara [redacted] and/or Dr Sarah O'Shea [redacted] If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human

Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong on 42213386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for a Doctor of Education thesis and may be used for academic presentations and/or publication and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed **Date**

..../....../......

Name (please print)

....

APPENDIX C: Student Interview Questions

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

TITLE: ***Crossing the threshold: What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into higher education from an enabling course?***

RESEARCHER: Jacinta McNamara

POSSIBLE STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The researcher will be using narrative inquiry so these open ended questions will be used as prompts for discussion.

FIRST INTERVIEW

1. Tell me about your previous experiences of education.
2. Describe your previous employment and that of your family and friends.
3. Describe your family's attitude towards education.
4. What reasons do you have for wishing to study at university?
5. What expectations do you have about attending [redacted]
6. What do your friends / family think about this endeavour?
7. Can you describe your first day at [redacted] – what types of feelings did you experience / what stands out in your mind as being memorable?

SECOND INTERVIEW

1. What did you know about university before you came here?
2. Last interview I asked where you wanted to be in 5 years' time. Now think back to 12-months ago, how have you changed as a person since that time?
3. Describe your experiences, both positive and negative, of undertaking further study.

4. Have you developed new friendships (both male and female) as a result of your study?

5. How have these experiences influenced your perceptions of yourself and the wider community? How would you now describe/introduce yourself to others?

6. In what ways have your experiences reflected your expectations of study?

7. Overall, what THREE words would you use to describe your time at [redacted]

8. What have been the main things that you have learnt during this time?

9. In what ways have your **relationships** with others changed since you started attending [redacted] – for example, have you made new friends at College or do you see less of your friends outside of the College? Are there any issues associated with this?

THIRD INTERVIEW

1. You have now had time to reflect upon your experiences of returning to study. Describe any challenges or barriers to your progress and any experiences that have enabled a successful transition.

2. How do you think about yourself compared with one, two or three years ago?

3. What expectations do you have of your university degree?

4. Can you describe the feelings you have about being a university student?

5. How do you think that you will react to the other university students who have come straight from school and not from the college?

6. How do you feel you have changed as a learner since starting your college course?

7. What do you hope that this degree will lead to for your future?

8. What have you learned about yourself from undertaking a course of study at a mature-age?

FOURTH INTERVIEW

1. Now that you have completed your first session at university what have been the most memorable experiences?

2. How would you now describe yourself and in what ways do you think you have changed as a result of returning to study?

3. Thinking back over the last year, what do you think have been the major milestones or the ‘highs’ and the ‘lows’?

4. What other changes in your life have you noted? (Prompt: for example, do you view different television shows, movies or websites? Do you listen to different music or read different newspapers or books? Do you dress the same way as you did before?)

5. What impact has your study had on your family and friends?

6. Explain the impact that being involved in this research project has had on you.

APPENDIX D: Teacher Information Sheet

TEACHER INFORMATION SHEET

TITLE: ***Crossing the threshold: What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into higher education from an enabling course?***

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

This is an invitation to participate in a study conducted by researchers at [redacted] and the [redacted] The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of male students entering university by way of the enabling course, UAP, in which you currently teach.

INVESTIGATORS

Dr Sarah O'Shea	Assoc. Prof Pauline Lysaght	Jacinta McNamara

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

METHODS AND DEMANDS ON PARTICIPANTS

If you choose to be included you will be asked to participate in one interview concerning your experiences of teaching students in UAP. This will involve around 30 minutes of your time. Typical questions will include your perceptions and experiences of students in general and changes they typically undergo as a result of their involvement in the course. (Please see questions in Appendix F).

POSSIBLE RISKS, INCONVENIENCES AND DISCOMFORTS

Apart from the time taken to conduct the interviews we can foresee no risks for you. Your involvement in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation from the

study at any time and may withdraw any data you have provided to that point. Any information you disclose will have no impact on your employment at [redacted] [redacted] Refusal to participate in the study will not affect your relationship with [redacted] [redacted]. Please be assured that the interview information is CONFIDENTIAL and your personal details will not be disclosed.

SUPPORT SERVICES FOR TEACHERS

[redacted] is available to all employees and their immediate family. It is **a free and confidential** service offered by [redacted].

The Program offers face-to-face counselling, telephone counselling 24 hours a day and a number of online services. The EAP offers short-term professional counselling.

To make an appointment from anywhere in Australia [redacted]

FUNDING AND BENEFITS OF THE RESEARCH

This study forms the basis of a doctoral research project undertaken by Jacinta McNamara who works at [redacted]. The research will give both the College and University a better understanding of the experiences of male students returning to study and improve approaches to teaching and support services for students. Findings from the research may be used in presentations or published in academic journals. Confidentiality is assured and you will not be identified in any part of the research.

ETHICS REVIEW AND COMPLAINTS

This study has been reviewed by the Human Research Ethics of the University of Wollongong. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way this research has been conducted, you can contact the UOW Ethics Officer on 02 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

Thank you for your interest in this study.

Jacinta McNamara

APPENDIX E: Teacher Consent Form

TEACHER CONSENT FORM

TITLE: ***Crossing the threshold: What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into higher education from an enabling course?***

Researcher: Jacinta McNamara

I have been given information about the research project. I have discussed this research project with Jacinta McNamara who is the co-ordinator of the research project and a member of staff [redacted] This is part of a Doctor of Education degree supervised by Dr Sarah O'Shea and A/Prof Pauline Lysaght [redacted]

I understand that if I consent to participate in this project I will be asked to take part in an interview with Jacinta McNamara and to allow copies of the interview to be used in the study. I understand that my contribution will be confidential and that there will be no personal identification in the data that I agree to allow to be used in the study. I understand there are no potential risks or burdens associated with this study.

My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my relationship with [redacted] and will in no way affect my employment.

If I have any enquires about the research I can contact Jacinta McNamara [redacted] and/or Dr Sarah O'Shea [redacted] If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong on 42213386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for a Doctor of Education thesis and may be used for academic presentations or journal publication and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed **Date**

..../....../......

Name (please print)

……………………………………………………………………………………………

APPENDIX F: Possible Teacher Interview Questions

POSSIBLE TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

TITLE: ***Crossing the threshold: What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into higher education from an enabling course?***

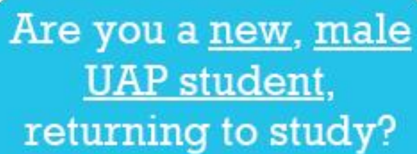
RESEARCHER: Jacinta McNamara

The researcher will be using narrative inquiry so these questions will be used as prompts for discussion.

1. For how long have you been teaching the University Access Program and in what subject areas?
2. Tell me something in general terms about the backgrounds of the students whom you teach, particularly the male students, but please don't identify any students when you do this.
3. From your perspective, do particular factors in student backgrounds assist or act as challenges or barriers as they adapt to tertiary study?
4. This study is examining changes that students experience as they transition through their college course into undergraduate study. From your perspective what are some of the main changes, both academic and personal, that you have observed in the students whom you have taught?
5. From interactions with your previous students, what does achieving a university degree mean to students?
6. In your experience is the transition experience different for male students than female students?
7. Please think of some successful male students whom you have taught. What has distinguished them from the other students?
8. What has distinguished the less successful male students from those who were successful?
9. Has the social interaction between students at college during their course enhanced their transition to university from your observations?

10. In what ways do students appear to be different at the end of their 14-week course than they were at the beginning?

APPENDIX G: Promotional Flyer to Students Regarding Research Project



Are you a new, male UAP student, returning to study?

We need your help to research male students going from college to Uni.

PLUS FOR HELPING:

Free Double Movie Pass

WHAT'S INVOLVED

- Four interviews (about half an hour each) during your college and university course. These will remain confidential and anonymous and have no bearing on your assessment, progress or relationship with the college or the university.
- The study is part of a doctoral research project by Jacinta McNamara, the Academic Support Coordinator.
- If you are interested please see Jacinta after today's presentation or you can email her on jacintam@uow.edu.au

APPENDIX H: Confidentiality Agreement with Transcriber

Promise of Confidentiality

I,.. am aware of the importance of maintaining the confidentiality of the information that may be revealed to me during the collection of data and the analysis of the interviews from Jacinta McNamara's doctoral research project. I am aware that I may be privy to information about individuals that is of a private and personal nature. I realise that by signing this document, I promise not to reveal any of the information contained in any of these interviews to any other person.

Signed: ………………………………………

Date:…………………………….

APPENDIX I: Instructions for Student Reflection

STUDENT REFLECTIONS

Student participants will be asked to submit a short one page reflection at the end of the research project which is their own reflection on their educational experience across their college and university studies.

TOPIC:

Across the course of your studies at the college and university please record any ideas, thoughts and feelings both positive and negative as you undergo your studies. These can be in point form and don't worry too much about presentation. Just one page is fine. You can handwrite or type, whichever you prefer. Please include challenges that you have overcome, the impact of your studies on family and friends and any insights you have into how you may have changed as a person as a result of your studies. These will remain confidential and so please feel free to record what has influenced you during this time and your own reflections. I will collect them at our fourth and final interview.

APPENDIX J: Email sent from Student Services Manager

Email sent from Student Services Manager

Dear Academic Staff

A research project on the experiences of male UAP students is being conducted by Jacinta McNamara as part of her doctoral thesis. "Crossing the threshold: What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into higher education from an enabling course?" As part of this research she would like to interview around three UAP teachers who have taught for three years or more on this program to ask them questions concerning UAP students.

If you choose to be included you will be asked to participate in one interview concerning your experiences of teaching students in UAP. This will involve around 30 minutes of your time. Typical questions will include your perceptions and experiences of students in general and changes they typically undergo as a result of their involvement in the course.

Apart from the time taken to conduct the interviews we can foresee no risks for you. Your involvement in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw your participation from the study at any time and may withdraw any data you have provided to that point. Any information you disclose will have no impact on your employment at the ███ ███ Refusal to participate in the study will not affect your relationship with ███ ███ Please be assured that the interview information is CONFIDENTIAL and your personal details will not be disclosed.

If you are interested in taking part, or have any questions, please email Jacinta at ███

Regards

Felix Lanceley

███

███

APPENDIX K: Approval letter from University

APPROVAL LETTER

In reply please quote: HE15/233

11 June 2015

Dr Sarah

O'Shea

Dear Dr O'Shea,

Thank you for your response dated 5/06/15 to the HREC review of the application detailed below. I am pleased to advise that the application has been approved.

Ethics Number:	HE15/233
Project Title:	Crossing the threshold: What are the experiences of male learners transitioning into higher education from an enabling course?
Researchers:	Dr Sarah O'Shea, Associate Professor Pauline Lysaght, Mrs. Jacinta McNamara
Approval Date:	11 June 2015
Expiry Date:	10 June 2016

The University of Wollongong/Illawarra Shoalhaven Local Health District Social Sciences HREC is constituted and functions in accordance with the NHMRC *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.* The HREC has reviewed the research proposal for compliance with the *National Statement* and approval of this project is conditional upon your continuing compliance with this document.

Approval by the HREC is for a twelve month period. Further extension will be

considered on receipt of a progress report prior to expiry date. Continuing approval requires:

- The submission of a progress report annually and on completion of your project. The progress report template is available at http://www.uow.edu.au/research/ethics/human/index.html. This report must be completed, signed by the researchers and the appropriate Head of Unit, and returned to the Research Services Office prior to the expiry date.
- Approval by the HREC of any proposed changes to the protocol including changes to investigators involved
- Immediate report of serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants
- Immediate report of unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.

If you have any queries regarding the HREC review process, please contact the Ethics Unit on phone 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au.

Yours sincerely

Associate Professor Melanie Randle

Chair, UOW Social Sciences

Human Research Ethics Committee

Ethics Unit, Research Services Office University of Wollongong NSW 2522 Australia Telephone (02) 4221 3386 Facsimile (02) 4221 4338 Email: rso-ethics@uow.edu.au Web: www.uow.edu.au