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Transitions and turning points: exploring how first-in-family female students story their transition to university and student identity formation

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The purpose of this article is to explore how one group of students reflect upon their transition into the higher education environment. This qualitative research project followed one group of female undergraduate students as they moved through the first year of study. All of the participants were the first in their family to consider further education and each participated in four semi-structured interviews over one year. Drawing on the conceptual lens of ‘turning points’, the intent is to provide a ‘close-up’ analysis of the complex process of identity formation within the university landscape. By revisiting the students at various points over time, richly descriptive detail about what this undertaking means for those involved can be presented and the significance of these turning points explored in terms of their wider political implications.

Keywords: transition to university; first-in-family students; mature-age students

Introduction

This article sets out to explore how a group of first-in-family, female students storyboarded their first year at university while they were engaged in the process of moving into and taking up their place in this environment. The study provides insight into how the social world of the university is perceived and negotiated by these women, a particular cohort uniquely delineated by both educational status and gender. Women, particularly those who have been absent from education for some time, may regard themselves as ‘imposters’ (O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007, p. 313) within the university community. This sense of being an outsider may be further emphasised by being the first in the family to attend. As Thomas (2002) argues, anxiety about ‘not fitting in and not being able to cope may be reinforced in families and communities where HE is not the norm’ (p. 8).

On the surface, the perceived ‘gender divide’ in higher education seems to no longer exist. This is very clear when examining male/female enrolment numbers within Australia. Reporting on a decade of statistics, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) highlights how the proportion of people aged 15–64 years with a Bachelor degree or above increased by 5.1% for males and by 8.3% for females. In 1999, some 16% of both males and females held a Bachelor degree or above; by 2004, these proportions had increased to 18% and 20%, respectively. The
proportions of males and females with a Bachelor degree or above have continued to increase, reaching 21% for males and 25% for females by May 2009. Similarly, Evans (2009) reports how the ‘gender gap’ in the UK’s higher education sector has ‘virtually closed’ (p. 341) and Wakeling and Kyriacou (2010) point out that this is a trend repeated internationally. However, the growth in female students does not necessarily equate to equality within this educational field. Instead, while women have increased their participation across levels of education, this continues to be focused on traditionally feminine ‘caring’ disciplines, for example, social sciences and education (Wakeling & Kyriacou, 2010).

Literature on women returners has also identified how older females face a unique set of issues when they return to higher education, equally young girls from working class or low socio-economic backgrounds are also regarded as being restricted in their choice and aspirations relating to higher education (Evans, 2009; Gorard et al., 2006; Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). The particular constraints experienced by women prompted the focus on female students within this study. However, this focus does not suggest that males who are deemed to be non-traditional in university discourse, i.e. older, ethnically diverse or those who follow alternative pathways to university, are not also constrained but rather that these restrictions are qualitatively different for women and deserve attention in and of themselves. Acker (1994), for example, argues that women should be treated as a discrete group within educational research but this focus should not lose sight ‘… of the diversity of women and the dangers of generalization’ (Acker, 1994, p. 158).

Earlier studies that focus on women in university emphasise how particular female cohorts are disadvantaged by both social class and gender inequalities (Campbell, 1993; Edwards, 1993; Leonard, 1994; Merrill, 1999). The impetus for this current research was derived from my own professional context at the time, within university student support services, which enabled insight into the range of factors that impacted upon commencing female students and how, despite hurdles, most of these women continued to persist in the university environment. At the time of commencing the research, I assumed that the findings from earlier studies in the 1980s and 1990s would no longer be applicable to a cohort of women in 2006–2007. However, I was struck by the fact that the stories of the women in Edwards’ (1993) and Merrill’s (1999) studies, despite being interviewed nearly a decade or more beforehand, reflected themes and issues that this particular cohort of women continued to experience in the twenty-first century.

The issues encountered by the women in this study, while uniquely individual, were commonly structural and emotional in nature, particularly for the older women. Structurally, the economic costs of attending university were very much foregrounded, as some had given up employment to return to education at this later stage. Emotionally, the struggles that ensued in terms of managing both study and family were apparent, as was the resistance from partners around this decision. The latter was sometimes overt but for others it was somewhat hidden behind a veneer of selective ‘helpfulness’ or subtle ‘domestic sabotage’ (Wisker, 1996, p. 5). Despite difficulties, 16 of the 17 women in the study persisted throughout the academic year. Through repeated interviews, the study provided an opportunity for a ‘close-up’ analysis of the lives of these women during this time, revealing how the decision engendered change on many levels. Methodologically, a narrative inquiry approach was adopted in order to enable subjects to present the personal realities of creating and maintaining meaning in a world characterised by obstacles,
interruptions and constant renegotiations. As Merrill (1999) explains, the life of institutions becomes most ‘meaningful’ when it is explored from the ‘perspectives of the actors’ involved (p. 203). Hence, drawing on the experiences of the students themselves provides a more nuanced representation of the lived experience of attending university. This article focuses on the women’s transition to university and the changes this engendered in identities, exploring how these processes are contextualised by a series of ‘turning points’.

**Literature review**

**Context**

Returning to education for many women is a necessity. Tian (1996) maintains how the increasing rates of divorce and separation mean that women require education to maintain economic viability. For older women who may have partnered early in life and taken up the roles of mother and homemaker rather than primary breadwinner, the demise of the relationship and the resulting economic ramifications may prompt this decision. For others, the increasing credentialisation of the workforce has resulted in university degrees becoming a requirement rather than an ‘optional extra’.

While attending university is increasingly perceived as a need or expectation in contemporary society, university discourses and practices continue to constrain this opportunity and experience. Evans (2009) demonstrates how despite taking up positions in higher education at an increased rate, the choices and aspirations of the young women in her study clashed with the ‘individualistic ideologies about educational achievement’ (p. 341). The almost ‘mythic’ qualities of the independent learner reflect the current economic and material contexts of higher education, representing an ideal student who can proceed efficiently through the system without support or additional assistance (Read, Archer, & Leathwood, 2003, p. 272). This need to be ‘independent’ is a key facet of the neo-liberal political discourse, where subjects are expected to, ‘take full responsibility for their own lives and future lives as self reliant, self-managing autonomous individuals’ (Leathwood, 2006, p. 612). However, this concept is based upon a self ‘that is unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self doubt’ (p. 615). Hence, this identity is one that is fraught with difficulty for many students within the university domain, not only women but also those whose culture, ethnicity and personal circumstances do not comply with such expectations.

The following sections focus on the concepts of identity formation in relation to participants’ transition to the higher education environment. In order to contextualise the participants and their stories, literature related to both social class and gender is interwoven throughout this discussion as well as an explanation of the links between transition and turning points in the life course.

**Identity work in higher education**

Identity work within the higher education environment, particularly for those students who are deemed non-traditional, can be both complex and contradictory (Kasworm, 2010; O’Shea, 2011). Research on older students has indicated how returning to study can result in a fundamental redefinition of, and questions around, existing identities (Pascall & Cox, 1993). The identities available in certain
environments do not necessarily fit existing selves and, in some cases, may exist in contradiction to the established self. This can certainly be the case for students who are the first in their family to enter the higher education context. Existing cultural and learning identities may not match the identity positions available, leading to a ‘mismatch between the social contexts, which have constructed their identities in the past, and the new social context, which they are entering’ (Ivanic, 1998, p. 12).

Identity is not composed of essential traits but instead represents constructions that are powerful in their ability to exclude some and empower others. There is not one secure identity but rather there exists a collection of identity positions. Following Johnston and Merrill (2009), the term ‘learning identity’ is used to signify the ‘irregular and complex interrelationship of learning and identity’ (p. 130). This definition recognises that learning identities exist alongside other adult identities, both influencing them and being influenced by them. Learning identities may have been forged in previous educational environments and so entry into higher education may either confirm them or disrupt them, prompting a renegotiation. While the participants in this study were all female and first in family, this was not the limit of their identity positions, which included being ‘single parents’, ‘mothers’, ‘daughters’, ‘derived from low-SES [socio-economic status] or working class backgrounds’, and ‘wives’ amongst others. Transitioning to the university landscape involved a complex negotiation between existing, expected and desired identities.

How these women managed this transition and the various identity positions is the focus of this article; it will draw upon the concept of ‘turning points’ as a means to interpret the data. The following section further defines the nature of transition to higher education in the context of gender and social class, concluding with an overview of how this impacts upon identity formation.

**Transition, gender and social class**

Change in the life course has been named in a variety of ways including transitions, turning points, branching points and life-markers (Ronka, Oravala, & Pulkkinen, 2003). However, what each of these terms essentially describes are, ‘periods or moments of life, [where] past decisions are reevaluated, new role expectations are confronted and changes in lifestyle are considered’ (Ronka et al., 2003, p. 203). Transitions are rarely linear in nature and instead are somewhat fragmented and disrupted. Brine and Waller (2004), for example, show how the transition to university for women, who may be older or deemed to be ‘non-traditional’, is both a period of ‘great opportunity’ and also ‘considerable risk where failure would further damage fledgling identities, now infused with hope’ (p. 103). The literature on transition to higher education is replete with the term ‘risk’ (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Brine & Waller, 2004; Johnston & Merrill, 2009; Reay, 2003; Wakeford, 1994). The term is used to indicate how, for mature-age learners, women and those from low socio-economic backgrounds, coming to higher education can be a ‘risky business’ (Reay, 2003). This risk is commonly articulated in terms of rupture with previous social networks and also, risks associated with identity formation. For example, Johnston and Merrill (2009) discuss how this return to study brings both ‘expectations and risk’ as well as the possibility of identity change (p. 130). Te Riele (2004) argues that these levels of risk are dictated by class and economic considerations; they are ‘mediated by the social and material resources available for negotiating them’ (p. 254). The idea that levels of risk encountered by people differ
across the social class system provides further insight into the nuances of this transition.

In recent years, the concept of ‘social class’ has diminished in the light of post-modern thinking; however, it remains a useful framework for examining how social positioning combines with other categories, such as gender, to stratify agency. Walkerdine et al. (2001) argue that the concept of social class still resonates despite neo-liberal discourses and the postmodern turn, stating that class positioning ‘massively divides girls and young women in terms of their educational attainment and life trajectories’ (p. 4). Dougherty (2011) identifies the complex nuances of social class, arguing that because social class is ‘physically unmarked’, other categories have been used to denote social class: these markers include gender, age, race and disability (p. 87). The restrictive nature of class and gender in relation to educational success and participation has been explored in some depth within higher education literature. For example, participants in Hinton-Smith’s (2009) study indicated that the ‘intersection’ of gender and class identities served to ‘inform [learners’] expectations that HE was not for people like them’ (p. 124). Similarly, Reay, Crozier, and Clayton’s (2010) study points to the ways, ‘self-doubt and anxiety around learning was gendered. It was women more than men who felt that they did not really deserve to be in higher education’ (pp. 11–12). Brine and Waller (2004) argue that the return to education for women may challenge their ‘classed femininities’ (p. 99), a notion of femininity largely bounded by the ideologies of heterosexuality, maternalism and domesticity.

While class and gender can have a limiting function on educational success, such stratification has also been argued as offering skills and qualities necessary for successful transition to the higher education field. For example, West (1996) argues that the shifts and transformations that women encounter in their domestic and family lives, in relation to birthing and mothering, may result in this group adapting to transition more easily as ‘uncertainty’ and ‘improvisation’ have been a feature of their lives. In West’s research, a number of women narrated stories of survival engendered by crisis and change. In these cases, it was the women who held ‘the delicate fabric of families together’ (p. 131) and West contends that such survival translates well into the world of uncertainty that characterises university. Similarly, both Walkerdine et al. (2001) and Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2009) argue how both the emotional dispositions and defences developed by their working-class participants assisted them to cope with the isolation and difficulties of transitioning to the university environment. For the participants in the study reported in this paper, their talk about their transition to university exposed the complex nature of this movement and the impact on their various identity positions. Like Johnston and Merrill’s (2009) participants, the ‘transitional space’ offered by the university enabled opportunities for ‘the working out and reconstructing of identities, dispositions and habitus’ (p. 134).

While previous research uses the term transition to signal a move from one place to another and the resulting implications of this, this paper draws upon a theoretical notion of transition as a movement that involves revisions in identity and agentic affiliations. Ecclestone (2009) further explains:

transitions combine turning points, milestones or life events with subtle, complex processes of ‘becoming somebody’ personally, educationally and occupationally. (pp. 12–13)
Turning points are also associated with reorientation. This reorientation can both constrain or open up opportunities as well as initiate change both on an individual level and also more broadly in relation to others. Cappeliez, Beaupre, and Robitaille (2008) further define turning points as being dispersed throughout life but often concentrated at particular life stages, but acknowledge that there are different definitions of what a ‘turning point’ constitutes. Drawing on the work of Wethington (2003) and also Clausen (1995), Cappeliez et al. (2008) explore how turning points can lead to changes in individual perception about self-identity, life significance and self-concept or what Ecclestone (2009) terms as ‘becoming somebody’. In this paper, the nature of this ‘becoming’ provides an organising feature for the stories told by the women.

Methodology
The research in this study focuses on ‘first person accounts of experience’ (Riessman, 1993, p. 17) and locating the ‘stories’ in these accounts enables the data to be thought about creatively. The saturation of stories in everyday life means that this is a form of discourse that is familiar and utilised in everyday living. However, narrative stories both reflect values, meanings and experiences as well as affect the conditions of power and authority in personal lives. An examination of such facets involves recourse to what Denzin (1989) terms as interpretive interactionism, which focuses on relationships between social processes and social lives. Interpretative interactionism represents the joining of symbolic interactionism with critical interpretative approaches to inquiry, which includes narrative inquiry. Symbolic interactionism is influenced by a relativist ontology, which assumes that there are multiple interpretations of reality. While things exist outside of individuals and objects have forms that are independent of humans, the meanings imparted upon these objects only emerge upon engagement with humans. Interpretive interactionists immerse themselves in the phenomena being studied or interpreted, providing thick description of the particularities of life. Essentially narrative enables entry into this ‘lived experience’ of individuals, facilitating perspectives that embrace the multiplicity and polyvocality of reality and offer an alternative to the ideal of objective realism. This study adopted Lieblich, Tural-Masiach, and Zilber’s (1998) definition of narrative research which ‘refers to any study that uses or analyses narrative materials’ (p. 2). The stories were examined categorically rather than holistically, the latter requiring analysis pertaining to the narrative as whole while the former focuses on parts of sections of the narrative linked to the phenomena under analysis. The research also reflected on the content of the narrative in terms of highlighting the meaning certain activities or actions had for the respondents, which included analysis of some of the linguistic facets such as the metaphors and phrases used in narration. In this way, the project reflects a categorical-content approach to narrative analysis as defined by Lieblich et al. (1998).

Narrators are not tied to a particular narrative standpoint but may move between perspectives (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998); certainly in the case of these interviews, participants did move between positions depending on whether they answered as a mother, a daughter or a student to name just a few. Such positionality reveals the multiple choices in narrative and also the control an interviewee has in relation to what and how things are heard. Hence, it would be naive to assume that these stories provide a pristine reflection of life as it is lived but rather these forms should
be treated as subjective and biased descriptions. The act of telling can provide a means to work through processes around identity formation but undoubtedly these stories are informed by master narratives around issues such as social class and gender. Yet it is precisely this that makes narrative such a meaningful form of expression, it is in the act of making sense and explaining events that lends narrative its evaluative and explanatory value. If conducted appropriately, the interview can provide the means to engage in active meaning making (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) thereby facilitating an understanding of ‘individuals’ lives in social context’ (Elliott, 2005, p. 26).

By revisiting participants over time it was also possible to observe changes in self and the fluid processes around identity formation. The various ways that individuals choose to interact and react to contexts are highlighted in studies that travel with individuals. This study, while only a year in length, journeyed with the participants in order to explore the various critical stages encountered as they themselves were experiencing them. This year-long engagement not only provided a means to record the various developments over the year, but also enabled rapport to develop between the women and myself. Such a relationship facilitated the exchange of detailed description of their experiences in this academic environment. The study then provides a, ‘close-up shot of real lives with a focus on the plot, story line, turning points and defining moments’ (McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p. 61).

Context and structure of the project

In New South Wales where this study occurred, all children are required to attend school until completion of Year 10; the Year 10 qualification is the School Certificate. If students elect to remain at school for Year 11 and Year 12, the final school credential is the High School Certificate (HSC). The HSC provides entry to university via the University Admissions Index (UAI) score. However, alternative ways to access university are available. For example, the vocational system in New South Wales (Technical and Further Education [TAFE]) provides both general education courses and vocationally based traineeships and qualifications. A number of universities and TAFE colleges have agreements in place around recognition and credit but these are relatively ad hoc and vary between institutions (O’Shea, Lysaght, & Tanner, 2012). There are also various university access programmes available: these vary in length from 6 to 12 months and are mainly offered by individual universities, with entry requirements and cost differing from institution to institution. Finally, the Special Tertiary Admissions Test (STAT) provides another entry point to university; the results of this exam provide the UAI score required for admission.

The study described in this paper occurred at a small subsidiary campus (with 3500 students) of a larger metropolitan university. The region where the campus is located is both economically and socially disadvantaged with higher than state average levels of: unemployment, families in receipt of pensions or benefits, and low-income earners. The latest Labour Force Profile (2008) for the region indicates how it is also educationally disadvantaged with lower rates of high school completion (i.e. HSC certification) (31%) when compared to the nearest metropolitan area (49%) as well as nearly half the number of students enrolled at a tertiary level (5.9%) compared to the metropolitan area rate (9.4%). At the time of the study, the university also had one of the highest national rates of students derived from low socio-economic backgrounds, as defined by postcode indicators.
Table 1. Details of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Programme of study</th>
<th>Brief background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annie (18 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of (Early Childhood) Teaching Full-time</td>
<td>Annie lives at home with her parents and younger brother, Annie completed her High School Certificate (HSC) which provided the necessary UAI for entry. Annie also qualified for additional points awarded to entrants residing in the local catchment area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara (33 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Teaching/ Bachelor of Arts Full-time</td>
<td>Barbara is a single parent living with a two-year-old son; Barbara completed her HSC and a TAFE diploma, which provided credit for entry to university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catherine (44 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Nursing Full-time</td>
<td>Catherine is a single parent with a teenage son. Catherine sat the STAT test which qualified her for university entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clara (23 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of (Early Childhood) Teaching Full-time</td>
<td>Clara is a single parent who lives with her five-year-old daughter; Clara left school in Year 11 but completed an enabling programme which provided the necessary UAI for admission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidi (47 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Social Science Part-time</td>
<td>Heidi lives alone but has three grown-up sons; Heidi completed an enabling course that enabled her to gain entry to this programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen (22 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Management Part-time</td>
<td>Helen lives with her boyfriend and has no children. She did not sit for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) and entered university after gaining credit via a TAFE course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane (32 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education (High School) Full-time</td>
<td>Jane lives with her husband and three children (aged 2, 4 and 8). Jane did not sit her HSC but did complete an Enabling programme which provided the UAI for admission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie (33 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Oral Health Full-time</td>
<td>Katie lives with her husband and two children (aged 6 and 9); Katie completed her HSC but entered university on the basis of her STAT test result</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kira (38 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Psychology Full-time</td>
<td>At the beginning of the study, Kira lived with her husband and five children (aged 6, 8, 14, 15 and 18); Kira had completed a TAFE qualification, which gave her admission to university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda (32 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Arts Full-time</td>
<td>Linda is a single parent who lives with her two children (aged 9 and 10). Linda left school after Year 11 but completed an Enabling programme which formed the basis for university admission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary (18 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Teaching/Bachelor of Arts Full-time</td>
<td>Mary lives at home with her parents and younger sister. Mary completed the HSC and also qualified for additional points awarded to students living in the region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel (22 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Social Science Part-time</td>
<td>Rachel lives at home with her parents and has no children. Rachel completed her HSC but entered university with credit from a TAFE qualification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Seventeen first-year female students were recruited to participate in this study as part of my PhD research on first-in-family university students. Recruitment occurred at the commencement of the academic year. All the participants were derived from the local region and their ages ranged from 18 to 47 years, with a mean age of 32.3 years. The study did not intentionally focus on older students but the campus demographic was characterised by mature-aged students. In the year the study occurred, approximately 60% of the student population were classed as mature aged or over the age of 21, the highest proportions of these being between 21 and 24 years. All the women recruited for the study were the first in their immediate family to come to university, meaning that no siblings, parents, children or partners had previously attended a higher education institution. Nine of these participants had completed High School and obtained the HSC. While none of the participants had previously enrolled in a higher education institution, 10 had completed some studies after High School. This included vocational qualifications \((n = 4)\) and participation in an Access programme \((n = 6)\), both providing credit for university entry. Four students had completed the STAT test to qualify for admission, while one woman was enrolled in an Access programme at the campus. Given the narrative focus in this study, it is appropriate to introduce each of the women in a more detailed fashion, hence Table 1 is designed to provide this in a succinct manner.

Interviews were conducted at four discrete points over one complete academic year. These meetings were timed to coincide approximately with the beginning and ending of semesters. While each interview was semi-structured in nature, Table 2 reflects the broad themes that were covered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Programme of study</th>
<th>Brief background</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sheila (31 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Teaching/ Bachelor of Arts Full-time(^a)</td>
<td>Sheila lives with her husband and two children (aged 5 and 7); Sheila completed a STAT test, which formed the basis for her entry to university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie (34 years)</td>
<td>Enabling Programme Part-time</td>
<td>Stephanie lives with her husband and three of her four children (aged 8, 9, 13 and 18). Stephanie is currently studying an Enabling course and hopes to gain entry to an undergraduate programme in Education (Primary)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue (39 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Teaching/ Bachelor of Arts Full-time</td>
<td>Sue lives with her husband and two children (aged 8 and 10). Sue did not complete her HSC but gained entry to university after passing the STAT test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susie (38 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Social Science Full-time</td>
<td>Susie lives with her husband and two children (aged 3 and 6). Susie completed an Enabling course, which enabled admission to university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicki (45 years)</td>
<td>Bachelor of Nursing Full-time(^a)</td>
<td>Vicki lives with her husband and three daughters (aged 16, 19 and 22); Vicki had completed the HSC and also an Enabling programme which provided the basis for entry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Some of the students started the year in full-time mode but either dropped a subject (Sheila) or a number of subjects (Kira and Vicki) as the semester or year proceeded.
Using interviews to draw out observations about participants’ current activities combined with reflections on the past allowed a much ‘richer understanding of the past-present relationship’ (McLeod & Thomson, 2009, p. 33) to emerge and arguably this depth was increased by the researcher engaging in multiple interactions with participants.

**Data analysis**

The data in this study were analysed in a circuitous process, which required repeated entry and immersion in the text followed by reflection and verification. Initially, this involved engagement with the text leading to the generation of codes or categories to facilitate focus. This iterative process was complemented by a focused

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Interview timing and themes.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interview</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1 | End of Feb – mid-March | Personal background  
Reasons for arrival  
Initial experience and reactions to university |
| 2 | Mid-May – end of May | Review of feelings about study  
Developments in reactions to uni life  
Suggestions for help and assistance  
Family support/friendships |
| 3 | Mid-August – beginning September | Progress in transition  
Changes in perceptions about university  
Changes in feelings/emotions  
Expectations for second semester  
Highs and lows |
| 4 | November/December | Reflections on the year as a whole  
Observations about the interview process |

![Figure 1. Data analysis process.](image)
examination of the stories that related to coming to university as well as those that explored facets of this experience. Figure 1 represents this diagrammatically.

As a researcher, I also completed multiple readings of the text in order to facilitate deeper reflection; this assisted in identifying connections or relationships within the text. In addition, it was vital to search the text for confirmation of these connections as well as different or alternative explanations. By constantly questioning what is being noticed and why, the intent is to avoid producing what Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 181) refer to as ‘narrative smoothing’ (Spence, 1986), which involves presenting narratives in terms of plot lines. By considering alternative or opposing readings, it was possible to remain alert to misinterpretation. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) regard this as maintaining wakefulness or ‘ongoing reflection’ (p. 184). The objective of the analysis was not to establish universal truths but rather to invite the reader on a journey of interpretation that evokes possible readings, justified by reference to both narrative discourse and also researcher reflexivity.

**Transitions and turning points**

Identity is not derived from essential traits but instead is shaped by a complex interplay between the social, personal and institutional as well as an individual’s biography (Johnston & Merrill, 2009, p. 130). In the postmodern condition, individuals manage with multiple and sometimes competing identities, the emerging learning identity perhaps having to sit uncomfortably alongside others (Hall, 1990). Beck’s (1992) concept of the ‘choice biography’ can be positively regarded as a powerful means to direct life but such an ideal also fails to consider the constraints that most individuals work within. The following stories highlight some of the restrictions that these women encountered during their transition to university and the processes associated with ‘becoming’ a university student. The stories were characterised by turning points, both learning and personal, which reflect both the nuances of this transition and also, the repercussions for the construction of learning identities. The following sections will focus on the turning points as they were articulated in relation to the following three themes:

- Coming to university.
- Persisting in the university environment.
- Changes in thinking.

**Coming to university: ‘it’s a life goal I guess for me’**

For the older women in particular, deciding to enrol at university was a major decision in their lives; often this was taken in the face of resistance from partners and in some cases, family. A number of the women’s partners were unenthusiastic about these educational endeavours. While nine women described expressions of unconditional excitement and encouragement from parents, only two of the nine students in a relationship expressed a similar reaction from partners. Sue’s feelings of elation over getting into university were somewhat negated by her husband’s reaction to
this decision; when asked about her family’s reaction to her initial decision, she tentatively introduced the topic of her husband:

I’m suppose to be honest aren’t I [sighs] well we’ll start with my husband … it’s all been a shock and a surprise to him because in the ten years we’ve been married I’ve never talked about teaching or anything. So it’s sort of come out of the blue for him and … he’ll be my biggest critic, he’s very good cos he brings up all the negatives which gets a bit frustrating at times. (Sue, Interview 1)

Even after commencing her studies, Sue admitted that it was ‘still a bit difficult chatting with my husband about it’, suggesting that maybe he ‘feels threatened’ and, ultimately, ‘waiting for the bad bits’ (Interview 1). Despite the passive resistance that Sue recounted, she seemed determined to continue with her studies and described how she intended to keep family life and university life separate. This strategy was perhaps indicative of the lack of support forthcoming from home.

Despite the covert, or in some cases overt, resistance from home, the older women all reflected upon their arrival in terms of reaching a ‘turning point’ that instigated this decision to enrol. These turning points varied in nature but were all characterised by reaching a point in life where university became a possibility, a necessity even, for the women:

I was going to start a library a librarian course after my HSC but it became more important for me to get out of home because it was a really dysfunctional family and I just had to get out. I was going to then go back but that just never happened, life happened … When I was married … everything that was done was for his career and then when I had a child I was really the rock … after my husband left me … it was taking some steps trying to work out what the hell I wanted to do. (Catherine, Interview 1)

While Catherine’s decision was initiated by the demise of her marriage, both Katie and Sheila explained how the ‘turning point’ for them was recognising that university might offer the possibility of getting more from their current life:

I was actually working three days a week and I wasn’t getting job satisfaction anymore, it got to the stage where I thought there has got to be more to life then getting up going to work and coming home … being unhappy with what I was doing, I thought there has to be more to life. (Sheila, Interview 1)

wanting something more out of my job and wanting. I have a need to learn [so] last year I just really wanted to absorb some new information. (Katie, Interview 1)

Heidi explained how her ‘turning point’ came with the realisation that there was ‘something missing’ from her life; university thus seemed to offer the possibility of fulfilment:

I really wasn’t fulfilled and it didn’t feel right and I use to think well maybe I should get a hobby maybe I should take up pottery maybe that would fulfill me? Obviously that old life was not right … I never thought about coming to uni, but obviously the universe had different plans for me and I saw this ad in the paper about [Access Program] and I thought: ‘That is what I am suppose to do!’ It was like a light went on. (Heidi, Interview 4)
Each of these three women’s explanations explores how the decision to come to university was experienced at an almost visceral level – an embodied desire to do something more than what they were currently able or allowed to do. University was thus perceived as offering the means and opportunity to fulfil this desire.

This ‘want’ or ‘desire’ was an underlying theme in the older women’s narratives. For example, some of the married participants perceived the move into university as enabling a shift away from the domestic space. In the first interview, Stephanie explained how this was ‘something I’ve wanted to do for a long time’ but this ambition became a dream once she ‘started the family’. While the immediate catalyst for coming at this stage was a person that she was working with, Stephanie’s decision was also linked to her own desire; she later explained how her decision was not initially supported by her husband but that her self-determination refused to let the matter rest: ‘it was just me being very headstrong and wanting and wanting and wanting’ (Interview 1). University then was her ‘turn’, a personal right that she intended to claim despite resistance. Similarly, Kira described how she arrived at a point when she wished to do something for herself, the opportunity to limit the ‘shuffle’ she did between children, home and work, which she perceived as taking over her life: ‘I am just getting sick of shuffling … I have been doing it for 18 years’ (Interview 1).

However, moving into the university environment was not without its costs. In the first interview, the women with family and children reflected upon the additional responsibilities of managing the diffuse components of family life. It was largely the females’ responsibility to organise time so that this personal sphere was not unduly stressed by this movement into the public institutional domain. In response to a question about how individuals were managing study with their other roles, Jane explained ‘I have to deal with cleaning, washing and shopping and all those Mum things’ (Interview 1). Jane described her husband, who was also studying, as being ‘pretty good’, for example, helping Jane by bringing the children on campus so they could exchange them between classes and taking time away from work to mind a sick child if required. However, by the end of this first interview, Jane’s ambivalence about this support became more obvious:

he’s really good like on the weekends he has them, he has to have them while I am at work and he takes them out and he goes to soccer or he goes bike riding and he does all the fun Dad stuff. But then I say well you also gotta do the un-fun Dad stuff like give them baths, cooking their dinner, brushing their teeth all that stuff. It’s not just a good-time Dad but a full-time Dad so yeah he’ll get there slowly [laughs]. (Interview 1)

Jane was not the only married woman who described the support from partners as being conditional. Similarly, Vicki anecdotally described a duality in her husband’s attitude to her part-time status – while appearing to be supportive there were subtle undermining undertones:

I mean my husband is really supportive of what I do and would have been supportive anyway but he was sorta saying things like: ‘So all of your holidays are going to be like clinical placements and you’re going to be doing this for 6 years?’ ‘Are we actually going to be taking a holiday over the next 6 years?’ And things like that it’s just as I said for me it just isn’t feasible, I just can’t do that. (Interview 1)
Making this decision to attend required compromise from both the women and also the family members. Such compromises were not typically embraced or welcomed by many of the partners. Yet having made this choice and dealing with the reactions, the environment each of the women entered was neither welcoming nor what was expected. Instead, the initial encounters that students had with the institution, often while completing enrolment, proved to be both complicated and intimidating (O’Shea, 2007). The initial interview indicated how the women struggled to make sense of the learning and expectations they encountered, this difficulty spanning the various age groups:

Well! I’ve nearly quit twice [laughs] and it is so confusing and so overwhelming. (Catherine, Interview 1)

I didn’t know where to go, didn’t know who to ask, didn’t know what to do and people who I did end up asking didn’t actually know either so it was frustrating and stressful and really stands out in my mind. (Rachel, Interview 1)

It’s very daunting and I dunno, I was so scared. (Mary, Interview 1)

For the younger childless students, who included the recent school-leavers, Annie and Mary, and those in their early twenties, Rachel and Helen, the decision to attend reflected a different process. For all of these students the decision to enrol was a logical step, the logic largely derived from vocational and career opportunities. Unlike the older students who were disappointed with their current lives or desiring more satisfaction from work leading to an active decision, for the younger students the decision to come to university was the next step, representing the next stage of their lives. Mary’s decision, for example, was almost automatic as she explained: ‘I didn’t know what else to do so I just thought I’d come.’ Whereas for Annie, while attending university was the next stage in her life, it was also a powerful message to those who told her that university was beyond her reach. The lack of support from her teachers only made her more determined to attend:

I wasn’t as dumb as people thought I was ... they [the teachers] seem to have got the impression ... I would never achieve anything in life. (Annie, Interview 1)

For Helen and Rachel, both in their early 20s, attending university was necessary for success in their careers. For both of these students, attendance at university was preceded by TAFE courses; university was regarded as an ‘enabler’ that would initiate the next stage of life. As Rachel explained, TAFE was ‘the next step up from school’ and university ‘was one step up’ from TAFE. The decision to go to university was a logical ‘step’ from previous educational or vocational endeavours. However, for the women who were older or who had family commitments, this process was more complicated, involving additional facets often pre-empted by a turning point or change in perspective.

Despite encountering difficulties in the initial weeks of the semester, when I returned to talk to all the participants in the second interview, only Vicki had departed. As we reflected on the completed semester, the women explained how their persistence was also characterised by a series of turning points.
Persisting in the university environment: ‘I know that I have accomplished something’

At the end of the first semester, the women were asked to reflect upon some of the ‘highs and lows’ they had encountered during the preceding months. Unsurprisingly, passing and failing assignments or exams factored hugely in their responses. At the beginning of the year, 15 of the students mentioned that their biggest fear was to fail a subject or assignment. This was related to both the financial implications of failure but also the personal and public repercussions such as diminished self-confidence as well as disappointment from self and others. Arguably, this fear may have been exacerbated by not having the knowledge capital implicit to this environment or a knowledgeable other outside the university who could reassure them about their scholarly activities. It seemed that this lack was filled by feedback or results from assignments and exams, where good marks were taken as tangible indicators of belonging to the university community. Annie admitted that only after receiving her first set of results did she feel confident:

I can do it and I am able to do it … I am doing pretty well and I never really thought of myself doing well for the first year. (Interview 2)

Repeatedly during the academic year, assignment and exam results were characterised as significant turning points in the women’s perceptions that they belonged in the university environment, as the following quotes indicate:

reaching the end of semester and getting exam results and thinking: ‘Phew that’s okay.’ Cos you kind of sweat through … it kind of gives you the confidence. (Heidi, Interview 3)

I was really worried when I came cos I didn’t think I would be capable of passing, I thought I would fail … and I am glad I did it cos I did succeed and I have done it and now I am more motivated to keep going cos I know I can do it. (Helen, Interview 4)

Over the years you just sort of dwindle as a person and this year has just been a very big boost for my confidence that I can actually go and read a book and I can do an essay … this year I was happy with 70 I got for the first essay … that was really yeah, I am not as dumb as I thought I was. (Stephanie, Interview 4)

Sheila also described how receiving assignment marks acted as a ‘turning point’ in her attitude about university study. Sheila, who was studying to be a teacher, explained how her assignment results fundamentally shifted her beliefs about herself as a learner in the university environment:

getting all my assignments back and getting high distinctions and that was just never thought possible, I never thought that I could ever do especially in my first year … so it was a really sort of motivating … I was just shocked to think I had been out of school for so long and could do so well. (Interview 4)

A number of the participants had experienced broken or negative prior educational experiences, which had impacted on their identity as learners. Coming into the uni-
they anticipated failure but at the end of the year, their success in university offered the opportunity to re-evaluate existing learning identities, with assignment marks acting as significant turning points in this reconstruction of the self. In the last interview, Linda explains how this transition to university has impacted upon her sense of self:

it has been good I think I have become a bit stronger throughout the year but that is good ... I enjoy stretching my mind so yeah, regardless of whether I continue going or not, I won’t view it as a waste ... it has definitely had its advantages. (Linda, Interview 4)

While some participants expressed changed perceptions of themselves as learners, this change was often negotiated in relation to pre-existing university knowledge domains and acceptance of the terms of membership of the university community. In varying degrees, the women had to learn to ‘speak’ the right language even if they were reluctant participants. While seemingly embracing these expectations and requirements, Sue indicated just such reluctance:

creative writing … I loved that it … it was a pleasure to do and … it’s none of the academic writing and all that sort of rubbish … (Sue, Interview 3)

Clara, Susie and Kira referred to gaps in knowledge or understanding about the university culture or habitus in the initial stages of study. For both Susie and Kira, this gap was described as a form of ‘culture shock’, specifically in terms of not understanding the expectations they encountered. Susie described her initial orientation to university culture as a ‘punch in the nose’ (Interview 1) and then continued by explaining how overcoming this depended upon ‘learning to write again and to get my thoughts down on paper the right way’. Similarly, Clara explained how ‘it’s hard to get your head around it all, just the academic side of it’ (Interview 2). Once these, often implicit, expectations were negotiated, usually signified by receiving ‘good’ grades on assignments, then the women felt more confident to continue moving through this environment. No longer ‘imposters’ but instead members, albeit tentative, of the university community. The significance of such turning points is summed up by the reflections of both Rachel and Kira:

Once you know that you can achieve something and pass or get a credit you feel a lot more comfortable like: ‘Oh yeah, I can do this.’ ... I think back [on] stuff you know, shitting your pants in a way and even up to the first assignment or something. Like how to write it properly and stuff but after that if anyone asked me I would tell them that it gets easier. (Rachel, Interview 4)

I always thought I don’t have the brains for uni and I still think I don’t have the brains for uni but when you look at two subjects I suppose I did pass even though it was only just a pass I still passed. (Kira, Interview 4)

The previous two quotes are derived from the final interview, where the women were encouraged to reflect upon the year in its entirety and how the experience of attending university had impacted on their current and future selves. A number of the participants described shifts in their identity, as they moved from being adults without education to adults with education. This leads to the third significant turning point to be explored in this article, namely changes in thinking.
Changes in thinking: ‘even if I don’t become a teacher … this has been such a learning experience that I have changed my thoughts, I have changed who I am’

Over the year, changes were articulated in relation to practical plans such as career goals and also in terms of fundamental changes to identities. University learning was not only about acquiring knowledge but also provided the means to restore a more positive sense of self or a changed identity. While change occurred at the most fundamental level, even as an attempt to rebuild a life or just the opportunity to tell a different story, the women also talked about dramatic turning points in relational terms. In the third interview, Kira explained how attendance at university had encouraged her to question her life and her place in it, and this development undermined the ownership of knowledge and challenged the power dynamic within the home:

I tried to explain to him [husband] I want ‘why’s’ you don’t. I want to know why I’m not happy, why did it happen, why do you do this, why do you stay out all the time. I want to know why and you don’t, you just want to let it ride. I said a lawyer wants to know why they are not winning a case, a fashion consultant wants to know why that dress didn’t fit. I said I am just like them now, going off to uni I want answers I want to know why things happen … you don’t and therefore we are sailing in different directions. (Kira, Interview 3)

For Kira, attending university was one of the catalysts to the demise of her marriage. However, despite the emotional repercussions of this and the ensuing difficulties of supporting and housing five children, Kira refused to give up on her academic study. While reducing her load to one subject, Kira explained that both her own sense of determination and the gains in her confidence had compounded her desire to continue; Kira was simply adamant that she is ‘not going to give up’ (Interview 3).

While Kira’s relational turning point was quite radical, the combined impact of personal change and the women’s desire to learn led to fundamental shifts in most of the marital relationships. For example, Stephanie described how after her husband was resistant to the amount of time she was devoting to study, she offered him the following ultimatum: ‘he can just pack up … if he wants to leave, leave but I am not going to stop from doing it. This is what I want to do’. Stephanie’s relationship with her husband moved from one characterised by her seeking permission to attend university as described in the first interview where she ‘harped on my husband for a whole year and he’s agreed to it’; to a new status, where she felt powerful enough to challenge his position in the family:

if he doesn’t want to support me for the next 5 years, then if he wants to leave, leave but I am not going to stop from doing it, this is what I want to do. We’ve been together for 16 years and I’ve always followed him to do what he wants to do and I’ve never stopped and said: ‘Hang on I don’t really want to do that’ … I’ve done all these things I’ve gone his way, I wasn’t happy. I’m happy doing this and now it’s his turn to realise that he can still have his way of things and I can have mine and we can work together. (Interview 2)

Stephanie attributed this transformation to witnessing ‘single Mums … coming to uni and … there is no partner, there is no help for them’.
For the other married participants, less radical changes were described. Changes for these women often related to the gradual renegotiation of roles within the domestic space. As the older students became more involved in studying, the invisible work of women became more apparent. Katie’s husband might have been ‘struggling a little bit’ but Katie had realised that:

the house does not fall down if I don’t do everything ... and he can be drying clothes in front of the heater at five in the morning, not my problem. (Interview 3)

There are both compromise and renegotiation in this statement, which is echoed by Susie, who admitted to not minding that she had to ‘sacrifice on some of the housework’ (Interview 3). By choosing to persist at university, the older married women chose to reclaim their lives and changed the boundaries of domestic space; this shift necessitated sometimes radical renegotiations in relationships with family members.

As the year progressed, the emphasis on the personal over the instrumental became more apparent; even those women who had initially described university in more instrumental terms talked more about self-fulfilment and changes in identity by the end of the year. In the final interview, Catherine outlined how her reasons or objectives for studying had undergone a fundamental shift; no longer was attendance simply about ‘becoming a nurse’ but she now recognises that uni ‘satisfies or completes something that hasn’t been done before’ (Interview 4). Shifts in perceptions of self were noted by a further four students in the fourth and final interview; some of these were referenced in moderate terms such as Clara who simply felt ‘proud of myself’ and Linda who revealed that she had become ‘stronger throughout the year’. For others these changes were more radical in nature such as Rachel who reflected on university as enabling her to become a ‘better person’ and Barbara who at the end of the academic year expansively stated: ‘I feel like a different person and I feel like a better person ... I am happy and that is a really good feeling.’

Barbara regarded university as representing a powerful turning point in her life and along with Heidi referred to attendance in terms of self-empowerment and new identity formation. Both of these women had endured difficult life circumstances including illness and marriage break-ups which have clearly affected their confidence and self-belief; yet despite the difficulty of university study, it was this act that engendered a turning point in perceptions of self:

I found it to be a very big self-discovery ... you are learning about yourself what you are capable of, what you can actually do, that you can get through it, that all the hard times are worth it because you just feel proud of yourself for doing it really. (Barbara, Interview 4)

Clearly, Barbara perceived university as not just facilitating her own self-learning and discovery but also, negotiated a new way of thinking about the self. Indeed, in varying degrees, attending university emerged as a significant turning point in the lives of these participants.

Concluding discussion
The women’s stories of transitioning to university indicate how turning points and changes were experienced in terms of who they were, how they related to others,
their confidence as learners and their confidence in themselves more generally. University and the related turning points in self-identity also led some of the women to question the taken-for-granted aspects of their lives. This was most profoundly reflected in the stories of the married women. While other factors outside of the university environment may also have impacted upon the nature and type of these turning points, the stories narrated to me indicated that it was this decision to return to education and the experiences within this context that acted as the primary catalysts for this change. The impact of university extended beyond the lecture theatre and the campus boundaries, effecting and negotiating diffuse elements in students’ lives.

The stories presented here do not do sufficient justice to the extraordinary strength and fortitude that the women displayed throughout the year. Certainly for each of the older, married women in this study, attending university was regarded as atypical behaviour. Like the female participants in Edwards’ study, ‘other mothers did not do the sort of thing they were doing’ (Edwards, 1993, p. 144). For example, Susie’s friends thought she was ‘crazy’ and Kira’s friends thought she was ‘mad’ given that she had ‘a busy enough life as it is without making it busier’ (Interview 1).

Maintaining equilibrium in the home required both sacrifice and strategy. At times the chaotic nature of managing family, children and study seemed overwhelming, yet each of the 16 persisted to the end of the year. Alway (1995) suggests that a dual or bifurcated consciousness captures the, ‘many disjunctions, separations and contradictions that women (and other subjugated groups) experience’ (p. 222). In terms of this study, this bifurcation of consciousness is a good description, conceptualising how the participants coexisted in both the academic world of the university and the domestic sphere. Old identities and practices were not simply jettisoned in favour of new academic activities, rather the women with family commitments also needed to implement quite complex and what sometimes seemed like quite chaotic strategies to manage their time. Katie, for example, described the levels of chaos that the women were trying to deal with by the end of the year:

I am extremely excited I’ve got a new timetable! (laughs) Jim [husband] goes ‘Not another timetable!’ The kids are being picked up by different people some days, after school care some days, mum some days and me. So there is a timetable: ‘This is what I am doing today, this is where I am working, this is who is picking up the kids and you gotta be home by this time for them.’ And then there is another little column for what we do every evening cos we are out everyday playing sport and training and things like that. So we have another timetable this is not uni related and he said: ‘You are going to drive me mad with timetables.’ And I said, ‘At least you know what you are doing and you know where I am and what I am doing and everyone else knows where everyone else should be’. (Interview 4)

Despite such challenges, the older women largely attributed success or failure in this environment to the self and also took responsibility for various elements of their own and their family’s life. All the mothers in this study reflected upon the difficulty of successfully fulfilling such obligations, with reference to feelings of guilt, the impossibility of catering to all facets of their life and the ensuing time demands. The expectation still remains that students will ‘fit’ around academic institutions but this is complicated by the responsibilities outside this environment. The
intention may be that universities need to ‘widen participation’ and enable people to attend, but the reality for many older women is that this activity is circumscribed by existing social and institutional frameworks. Undoubtedly, university access and alternative entry programmes have enabled more people to consider university as a viable option, however those with family commitments, often women, are still expected to fulfil demanding obligations associated with family and parenting. However, for this study’s cohort, there was no perception of structural inequity, whether this was institutional or social in nature. Equally the very incentives to continue at university were derived from some of these constraints, for example the influence of children for the mothers could both be restrictive and also provide inspiration to continue.

Some of the older women also related how their domestic roles had been redefined in this initial year of study: this did not always mean a renegotiation in domestic responsibility in the household but rather that the domestic labouring role became more explicit. This change resulted in husbands, partners and children becoming more aware of the complexities of running a household (such as Katie’s husband) and some of the women being more adamant about the need to share this responsibility. In this way, attending university can be considered as an ‘emancipatory’ experience (Merrill, 1999), as it offers the space to redefine a sense of self and possibly renegotiate relationships with others. Similar to Leathwood and O’Connell’s (2003) participants, some of the students in this study indicated how they had experienced being undervalued or even negated within the social world and that university offered ‘a form of defence against any future assaults of this kind’ (p. 605).

Over the course of the year, the women also expressed change in relation to their perspectives on life and self. Both Barbara and Catherine indicate in an evocative way just how university had emerged as something quite different to what was anticipated; having entered university to explicitly fulfil vocational and financial ambitions, these two students later acknowledged attendance in more emotional and experiential terms. University filled a ‘void’ in life. For some it not only offered the possibility to fulfil something that had been missing but also provided the means to legitimate the self within wider social spheres. Indeed, for some of the women like Heidi, this space was also a means for her to exhibit an intellectualism without ‘being ridiculed as odd’ (Crozier, Reay, Clayton, Colliander, & Grinstead, 2008, p. 174). The stories highlight how the participants in this study cannot be defined in singular terms such as female or mother but instead each had multiple identities negotiated in relation to a range of social and cultural influences. Tracy and Trethewey (2005) propose the metaphor of the ‘crystallized self’ as a means to represent the multiplicity of identity not as problematic but instead as positive. Drawing on the concepts of the crystallized self provides an alternative view of identity, not bounded by stability or a fixed core. As the authors explain:

By conceiving of identities as ongoing, emergent and not entirely predictable crystals, people are forced to acknowledge a range of possible selves embodied in a range of contexts – even as they are constrained by discourses of power. (p. 189)

For the women in this study, this crystallization was most pronounced around how they managed home and university lives, some of the participants moving between identities according to the environment they found themselves in.
Clearly, these women’s stories of transitioning to university reflect wider cultural considerations as well as indicating how individuals made sense of their experiences. The data derived explored many facets of this university experience including hurdles the women faced, strategies employed to succeed and also public and personal changes that this experience engendered. The transition to this environment and the ensuing academic experiences were significant ‘turning points’ in their lives. Their insights indicate how transition was not a time-bounded phase but instead the year was punctuated by a series of turning points that had ramifications for their identity work both inside and outside the university environment.

Authors such as Ingram, Field, and Gallacher (2009) and Ecclestone (2009) have identified how in adult education literature there is a tendency to, ‘… paint transitions as difficult, troubling, even unpleasant. The dominant view is that people must set out to remedy deficits, such as poor literacy skills, weak employability or a lack of cultural capital’ (Ingram et al., 2009, p. 4). Instead, transitions can actually afford learning opportunities, a sentiment echoed by Brookfield (1991), who regards the challenge and risk associated with this process as actually increasing ‘… the significance these episodes hold for students so that these episodes become transformative turning points leading to changes in students’ self-concepts’ (p. 49). Overall, overcoming difficulties were regarded as key turning points for the women in this study as such incidences offered proof of ability and provided a sense of accomplishment in succeeding in activities previously regarded as beyond ability. For example, passing an assignment not only was regarded as indicating belonging but also redefined learner identities.

Houston, Lebeau, and Watkins (2009) suggest that while transition has become increasingly ‘blurred’ and ‘fuzzy’ (p. 147), the phases of transition for university students can still be reduced to three stages, being ‘that of becoming a student, moving from student to graduate and from graduate to employer’ (p. 147). Kirkup (1996) identifies how within the Open and Distance Learning environment the student ideal has been that of the ‘turbo student’ (Von Prummer, cited in Kirkup, 1996), an individual who obtains the degree in the minimum amount of time and seeks the minimum of support from the institution. However, such linearity fails to recognise the intricacies of this process and also, the embodied nature of female transitional experiences as narrated by the participants in this study. Instead, a realistic representation of what transition to university entails can only be derived from the students themselves. For the women in this study, the various turning points encountered in their transition to university and the act of narrating these have clearly provided the means to revision their future not only vocationally, but also in terms of social roles and identity.

By reflecting upon the turning points in this first year of university study, the intent is to move away from portraying first-in-family students or those for whom attendance at university is not the norm, as hapless victims or powerless in the higher education environment. Such categorisations do not recognise the ability of universities to provide what Quinn (2005) terms as ‘liminal space’ that enables individuals to dream new possibilities and share these with others. Exploring these narratives through the lens of ‘turning points’ enables us to perceive how multi-layered this experience is for those involved. Cappeliez et al. (2008) have indicated that for women, turning points are generally negotiated in relation to health and family arenas, while for men they are negotiated around work. This conclusion led the authors to assert that, ‘gendered social roles play a key structuring role in the
construction of one’s life story and sense of identity’ (p. 61). However, for the women in this study, the transition to university unfolded a range of new perspectives and demands that assisted in rupturing these gendered roles and exposed the contested nature of such domains. For these women, the turning points they experienced focused very much on the ‘self’, leading to re-evaluations on both public and private levels.

Note
1. Since 2010, children who are beyond Year 10 and until they turn 17 are required to be either attending school, participating in approved training or a traineeship, in full-time employment or a combination of these.

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