
Student Success

ISSN: 2205-0795

Volume 9, Issue 3, pp. 37-49

July 2018



The long and winding road: Experiences of students entering university through transition programs

Theresa Millman and Jacinta McNamara
University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia

Abstract*

This article presents outcomes of two studies which focus on the lived experience of transition by students entering higher education in NSW (New South Wales), Australia, from two divergent pathways: Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and a university based enabling program. The studies intersect in two fundamental ways. First, the theoretical foundations (Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory and Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory) which emphasise the role of habits of mind and the habitus respectively in an individual's life. Second, both studies have identified the primacy of the contribution of education to changing notions of self. The studies have found that successful students reappraise and reimagine their self-identity inclusive of possible future selves. The studies reject deterministic and often deficit models of socio-cultural influences on self-concept, and instead embrace the perspective that adult learning can not only realise, but also build upon latent capabilities, and ultimately that it is an empowering experience for many transitioning students.

*This article was first presented at the 2018 STARS Conference in Auckland, New Zealand in July 2018 and was selected via the peer review process as one of the top-rated papers. The authors have kindly given their permission to have this article published in this special issue of the Journal and it has undergone a further review by the editors to confirm it aligns with the Journal's standards.

Please cite this article as:

Millman, T., & McNamara, J. (2018). The long and winding road: Experiences of students entering university through transition programs. *Student Success*, 9(3). 37-49. doi: 10.5204/ssj.v9i3.465

This article has been peer reviewed and accepted for publication in *Student Success*. Please see the Editorial Policies under the 'About' section of the Journal website for further information.

Student Success: A journal exploring the experiences of students in tertiary education



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). As an open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings. ISSN: 2205-0795

Introduction

In recent years there has been a massification of higher education where entry to university has been opened to a more diverse, heterogeneous range of students many of whom are from low socio-economic (SES) and First-in-Family (FIF) backgrounds (O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts, & Harwood, 2016). Increasingly, these students transition into higher education through a wider variety of pathways including TAFE and enabling education. This article discusses findings from two studies with transitioning students from two divergent pathways: students from TAFE (Study 1) and those undertaking a university-based enabling course, the University Access Program (UAP) (Study 2) who, on successful completion of their respective courses, all transitioned to a regional Australian university given the pseudonym of Westview University.

While both studies were primarily focused on the transition experience, they had different concerns to address. Study 1 focused on the experiences of transition and the potential for adult learning to be a transformative experience. Similarly, Study 2 focused on the transition experience and its outcomes for students accessing higher education. However, it further investigated the impact of social and cultural capital on students' identities in the process.

Theoretical considerations

The two studies have drawn upon two different theories: Mezirow's Transformational Learning Theory (1990) and Bourdieu's Social Capital Theory (1967). There is compatibility between these theories and the stated objectives of both studies. The common intersection most readily apparent is the role of the habitus (Bourdieu) and habits of mind or meaning perspectives (Mezirow) through which individuals negotiate their worlds. Bourdieu asserts that the habitus or individual disposition is an unconscious aspect of the self. Likewise, Mezirow (1990)

equates habits of mind as unconscious cognitions, which can be brought to conscious awareness through reflection. Further, both Mezirow and Bourdieu assume that to some extent there is flexibility and fluidity in held beliefs, and that given the right set of circumstances, these beliefs may change, or be transformed. Mezirow and Bourdieu attribute values, beliefs and ways of thinking to the socio-cultural influences individuals are inculcated with in childhood. These normative cognitions are embodied in individual perspectives on self and place in the world and come to represent who individuals perceive themselves to be. As such, there is great power in the ways the habitus and habits of mind form and develop the personality and constructs of self. As Mezirow (1990) states, it is through "cultural assimilation" and the collective hegemonic ideology that perspectives, largely unquestioned in childhood, become part of the enculturation process, and create or indeed limit expectations of the self, according to the socio-cultural world that is inhabited (p.3). Similarly, in Social Capital Theory Bourdieu (1967) posits that the cultural influences that come to define us, need not remain embedded and unquestioned, or go unchallenged.

Defining identity

Despite the intrinsic nature of the socio-cultural construction of self and identity, both Mezirow and Bourdieu purport that reconstruction of the self is possible. As Mezirow (2000) states, individuals can, through adult learning, reformulate "reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives" (p.19). Mezirow (1990) refers to the 'self-concept' when defining identity and the impact learning can have on the ways in which individuals begin to change their notions of self. Bourdieu refers to the restructuring of the self as a response to exposure to the different 'fields' inhabited or that may be encountered. Mezirow further discusses the importance of the roles of reflection and dialectical thinking to bring

unconscious notions to the surface. This is what Taylor (2008) calls the 'paradigmatic shift' that can occur when reflective practices result in changes to the meaning perspectives individuals hold. Once recognised and critically evaluated, such perceptions of self can then be challenged, negotiated and reimagined if the individual so desires. Bourdieu discusses the embodied nature of the habitus but he too states that reconstruction is possible. In other words, the habitus may be transcended by new responses to the social world and circumstances of the individual. The habitus may be an agent of negotiation, a way to change.

Students bring their own habitus with them to transition courses, which may conflict with that which permeates their new institution. It can be a confronting experience for these students as they move into changing fields of endeavour. Some may unconsciously adapt to their new 'field' and assume a different habitus while others maintain their unique habitus for the duration of their study rather than undergoing an alteration in line with their new setting (O'Grady, 2013; Reay, 2002b). The personal paradigm of how individuals view and understand themselves and their relationships within the world is one that Mezirow (1996) like Bourdieu, suggests is open to choice. One might deduce then that habits of mind or meaning perspectives which display opposite elements to choice and agency, are based on meaning schema that have not yet been questioned, examined or tested for their on-going validity.

Literature review

Transitioning into higher education as adults is an increasing phenomenon both in Australia and internationally (O'Donnell & Tobbell, 2007; O'Shea, 2013). However, for those students whose families have not previously accessed university study, the transition experience can be quite challenging, particularly when trying to adjust to the social and academic expectations of an unfamiliar institution (Bowser, Danaher, &

Somasundaram, 2007; Reay, 2001). Researchers have reported that the process of adapting to the new environment can be stressful for many, particularly where they must confront their own expectations and fear of academic failure (Munro, 2011; Reay, 2002a). Bourdieu (1967) has posited that students from diverse backgrounds bring to university their own 'habitus' which may be quite different to that of the institution. Consequently, students often see themselves as 'the other' or not worthy enough of being a university student (Byrom & Lightfoot, 2012). This can be a confronting experience and can lead to high attrition rates particularly for students who are over 25 years and from low SES backgrounds (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). However, related to the concept of habitus is students' understanding of themselves and their unique identity while undertaking study. For many students the journey into higher education can be quite transformational (Mezirow, 1981). This article focuses on the notion of identity and the impact this can have on the students' transition experience.

Methodology of the study

Both qualitative research projects used narrative inquiry involving interviews with participants on multiple occasions, (Study 1: two times and Study 2: four times) which gave the researchers a window into the lived experiences of the two groups. Although entering university through different pathways, the participants themselves shared many similarities; predominant among these were origins of low SES and FIF backgrounds. Participants from both studies were recruited on a voluntary basis with approval from the institution's ethics committee and according to the eligibility criteria for inclusion in the studies. These criteria included an intention on the part of the participants to apply for articulation to university and the success of their application. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Table 1

Demographic details of the participants

<i>Demographic details of the participants</i>		
	Study 1	Study 2
Number of participants	7 (3 from Tertiary Preparation Course; 4 from Diploma of Enrolled Nursing)	10 (all from UAP Enabling Course)
Age range	19-43 years	20-35 years
Mean age	27 years	24 years
Gender	2 males/5 females	10 males

Demographic details of the participants are recorded in Table 1 above.

Data analysis

Although narrative inquiry gives an in-depth and detailed analysis of the participants' lived experience of transition these research projects were limited by the relatively small number of participants in a particular place and time. However, they do allow insight into the successful learning journeys of those interviewed. Data from both of the studies resulted primarily from the interviews held with the participants, however, the ways in which they were analysed varied to some extent. The first study considered the data from two perspectives; the individual experience of transition and the shared experiences of transition. This involved analysing the data from an individual case-by-case basis, and simultaneously through the lens of a multiple case study approach. Study 2 was developed as a narrative case study based on five sources of data collection: student participant interviews, teacher participant interviews, student participant reflections, researcher reflexivity (journal keeping) and university data. These were initially coded into ten descriptive themes.

After further analysis and cross checking of data six final themes emerged from the study.

Study 1: Data from this study were collected over two interviews with each of the seven participants. Each interview lasted for approximately 40-60 minutes. The first interviews were held when participants had completed their TAFE course but not yet commenced university. The second interviews were held six months later at the end of the first semester of university. The data were analysed in two key ways, first data from the individual's interview transcripts were collated as a means of developing the individual narratives or 'stories' of each of the participants. Second, data were cross case coded in a multiple case study approach as a means of identifying shared 'themes' or those issues common to all seven participants. The overall analysis involved three main steps:

Step 1: Data from the first interviews were collated into the first 'instalment' of the individual 'stories'. This data included the background of the participants and their impressions of their time spent at TAFE. At the same time the interview transcripts were scrutinised for any commonly occurring issues. At this initial step, three common themes emerged.

Step 2: On completion of the first semester of university, data from the second interviews were added to the stories to create the final draft of the individual stories. At this time the new data from these second interviews was also scrutinised for further common themes. Two more became apparent.

Step 3: In this final step the stories were sent to the participants for member checking and were subsequently completed. Also at this final step the data from both interviews were again scrutinised and two final themes appeared. In total, the cross case coding identified seven key themes. These themes were: identity, aspirations, educational differences, study/work/life balance, support networks, self-confidence and adaptability/resilience.

Study 2:

The student participants were interviewed four times across the 12 months of the project at crucial transition points in their studies while the five teacher participants were interviewed once at the beginning of the project. The student participant interviews averaged 25 minutes in length while the teacher participant interviews averaged 22 minutes. The initial interviews elicited background details concerning the participants and their motivations for returning to study as mature-age learners while the later interviews allowed students to detail experiences of their enabling and university courses. Throughout the study the researcher collected relevant student data, such as attendance rates, and engaged in researcher reflectivity by use of a journal.

Step 1: All of the student participants were males from English speaking backgrounds whose experiences had a number of commonalities. In order to assist the researcher in handling the large volume of data, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) was used, NVivo (version 11). From the initial sweep of the data based on these interviews there emerged 16 nodes using this

software. These were later summarised into ten major descriptive themes.

Step 2: The five sources of data from the student and teacher participant interviews, student reflections, university data and researcher journal were further analysed and cross-checked with six major themes becoming apparent from the perspective of participants, teachers and the researcher herself.

Step 3: After the student participant interviews were finalised and coded each of their stories was developed into a narrative. Furthermore, these and the other data were further analysed to reveal the major themes emerging from the project which included: disengagement, insecurity, transition, adversity, identity and future selves.

Findings from the studies

Exploring the lived experiences of transition of the two groups of participants has given the researchers some insights into the students involved. Analysis of the participants' transcripts showed much commonality between the two groups in transition. In particular, our findings indicate the importance of student agency, resilience, persistence and the role of identity on their progress.

The importance of resilience and persistence

For many of the participants in the two studies there were some significant barriers to overcome in the early stages of their degree programs at Westview University. Primarily these were financial barriers, learning disabilities and the long commute some had to make each day. However, a standout feature of all the participants was their commitment to their learning experience, exemplified by the resilience and persistence they demonstrated in managing the barriers they faced. All the

participants from both studies implemented various strategies to accommodate the different and competing demands they encountered as students who had to rely on their own resourcefulness.

The majority of participants faced financial barriers. For example, all but three of the 17 participants in total were working and studying simultaneously. This created time pressures which most reconciled by reducing their paid work hours in order to develop a more focused approach to their studies. As Toni (43, Study 1) described it, "I look at [studying] as a job ... I'm trying to find a balance." Sophie had "cut back my work hours" and Bella had "quit" one of her jobs in order to "focus on my studies".

However, one student, Chris (28, Study 1) maintained his work and study timetable despite the obvious stresses this caused, and the tensions this provoked for him. Chris was constantly feeling the 'pressure' to maintain his work commitments from all sides, including his partner, his friends but he was also keeping the pressure on himself because as he stated, "coming from a working-class background ... I should be working fulltime". So too was Toby (21, Study 2) feeling pressure from his family, "my mother wants me to pick up a part-time job in the times which I'm not studying ..."

Furthermore, Bill (35, builder) from Study 2, who was married with four children, disclosed that providing for a family as well as studying was extremely problematic, however he persevered in combining both responsibilities. "I have a lot outside of study as well. My four children particularly, not to mention the bills that come with that ... I try to not think too far ahead, and focus on the present moment."

A number of participants from both studies disclosed learning disabilities. Sally from Study 1 self-reported her dyslexia, which had created learning problems throughout school, and ultimately tested her belief in her ability to achieve academically. Sally had been told by her

mother from an early age that she "just not academically minded" and should concentrate on a job that required "hands on" skills. Her successes at TAFE however, ultimately enabled her to reassess her abilities in a positive light and she thrived academically at Westview University to the point where she was on track to achieving a long-held dream of working with Careflight, Australia, which was her "ultimate" dream.

Similarly, three of the Study 2 group, Tim (20, surf instructor), Cooper (26, unemployed) and Charles (25-disability support worker), disclosed learning difficulties at school associated with dyslexia and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Tim shared his experience. "Like I was medicated, like I've got ADD ..." Cooper disclosed, "I was 14 when it was found out that I had ADHD ... I've got mild dyslexia so it still affects me." This was similar to the situation with Charles. "I've had like sort of behavioural disorders. Like I was diagnosed with hyperactivity disorder when I was younger." Despite the negative impact these had on their school experiences, they were all able to successfully transition through the UAP course to university. The experience of being adult learners in a different environment to school was very positive for them and assisted their confidence in transitioning into higher education.

Another barrier faced by the participants was the substantial daily commute to campus. For example, Study 1 students Toni, Sally and Ashley all lived over 50 kilometres from Westview University as did the Study 2 group of Sean (21, construction worker), Brian (24, casual worker), Tim (20, surf instructor) and Bill (35, builder), which meant a substantial journey each time they were required to be on campus. Sean decided the easiest solution was to sleep in his car overnight at the local beach to save on petrol. "At the moment I've been pretty money struck so I've just stayed in my car". While Tim experienced the long commute as he lived 79 kilometres from campus. "So I normally

drive to Kent [pseudonym] and then catch the train from there to Westview, which is a nuisance because sometimes the trains don't really align." So too did Bill have a 140 kilometre round car trip to attend classes. However, distance did not deter them, it simply added to the challenge of persevering with their chosen pathway. Such findings suggest that successful transition involves a large measure of student ability to draw on inner resources to persevere.

Transition and agency

The participants without exception quickly adopted attitudes of self-responsibility early in the transition phase. Added to this, was the common experience that building their academic knowledge was a skill they generally had to master on their own. Adam (27, Study 1) believed that as a mature age student he was responsible for his own learning successes and failures, as he stated, he would "keep pushing ... and fighting ... and do stuff for [myself]" in order to achieve his dreams. Likewise, Toni (43, Study 1) noted how much "self-directed" learning there was at university. Cooper (26, Study 2) noted that, "Yeah, I'm definitely persistent," while Jeremy (26, Study 2) stated that "... my resilience to learning is actually pretty good."

This independent approach by the students from both studies lends support to the notion that these students, most of whom have come from low SES circumstances and working-class backgrounds, have drawn upon a seemingly in-built or learned ability to stand on their own two feet. Toohey and Doran (2013) highlight a number of attributes students use to cope with challenges faced in transition including, "maturity, discipline, determination [and] ... time management" (p.6). Taking responsibility and being self-directed was evidenced by the participants' approaches to learning and their willingness to incorporate changes in self-perception and behaviours as needed. As Illeris (2014) asserts, when learning does become demanding it is essential that the individual

embrace these new demands, rather than meeting them with "defence or resistance" (p.584). It was apparent from the present studies that the participants were motivated to succeed and were willing to take on the responsibility for that achievement. This attitude was a very prominent part of their discourse even while expressing the anxieties and stresses they were experiencing at university. Monica (27, Study 1) when noting the differences in approaches to teaching between TAFE where it was "all face to face" and university where it was "all quite intricate" also accepted that she must rely on her own abilities to adjust and succeed. Nevertheless, they exhibited the ability to be independent, self-motivated learners, who viewed problems as challenges to overcome. In addition, with increased levels of self-confidence came positive changes to how they thought about their abilities at university.

Freire (1970, p.75) discusses the notion of the 'ontological vocation' to describe the role that agency may play in adult learning experiences. The implication of Freire's concept is that adults, through the reality of their own life experiences, have the capacity to apply agency or self-responsibility when engaged in learning. The underlying assumption is that individuals are capable of acting on their world in a conscious, participatory way. Arguably, when perspectives and points of view gleaned from conscious appraisal are held up to the light, individuals then have a choice as to their role in the education process. This is exemplified in findings from both of the current studies, and is supported by the literature (Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos, & Crosling, 2010; Crosling, 2017; Kasworm, 2010; Sheard, 2009; Smith & Blake, 2009; Toohey & Doran, 2013; Walls & Pardy, 2010; Willans & Seary, 2011). Taking responsibility and being self-directed was evidenced by the participants' approaches to learning and their willingness to incorporate changes in self-perception and behaviours as needed. Wilkins, Butt, Kratochvil and Balakrishnan (2016) discuss the notion of

'commitment' as an important indicator of academic achievement. This notion is further supported by the view that an optimistic approach to study combined with a perception of the self as a successful student, can lead to academic success (Norem 2001 as cited in Postareff, Mattsson, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Hailikari, 2017).

Transition and identity

Research in the field of transition suggests that the issue of identity development can be problematic for students on first entering the higher education domain and can make for a difficult transition experience (Blair, Cline, & Wallis, 2010; Gallacher, Crossan, Field, & Merrill, 2002; Høj Jensen & Jetten, 2016). This was apparent to varying degrees for the participants in both studies in the early stages of university life. However, findings from the two studies point to changes to the perspectives or habitus of the participants. When asked about the differences between his employment experiences and those of university Sean (21, Study 2) telling noted that, "From the workplace to here is like from Earth to Mars. It's entirely different".

The time it may take to develop a sense of being a university student may also be influenced by past learning experiences. Kasworm (2010) notes that students' perceptions of self can be changed for the better through involvement in adult education, and for the most part, this outcome was reflected in the narratives of all the participants in these studies. The transition to higher education was an experience which offered both complexity and profound perspective changes for some of the participants. Generally, in order to adjust to their new learning environment, they needed to find new ways of thinking. For example, Ashley was "more confident" in her abilities, Toni had made the "conscious" decision to change her life through study, Monica on reviewing her progress at university felt she was "getting there". While Sean (21, Study 2) noted that, "I'm

constantly thinking about things I wouldn't have normally thought about." In other words, changes to their dispositional habitus was essential if transition was to be successful. Changes to self-perception brought about by changing perspectives were apparent in the studies, when the students had transitioned to university. This was evidenced primarily in the stated views of how they had changed and the ways in which they saw differences in 'self' and the roles they held in life. Ashley from Study 1 who, on reflection stated, "Oh, I've changed so much" exemplified this.

When adult learners enter the field of education they bring with them the internalised and embodied rules of their social world, reflected in the place they see themselves as holding in that world. They may begin their learning journey with the fixed notion of 'this is who I am', however, this may change with learning (Mezirow refers to the outcome of this process as transformation). For example, Study 1 participants, Chris and Toni were both FIF students who overcame lifelong held perspectives that people from their background did not go to university. Toni expressed the perspective that "I never thought I would go to university" and Chris stated that "university was never part of my background". Indeed, no one in their family had ever been to university and university was never part of their normal family or community discourse. However, their participation in TAFE disavowed them of these limiting perspectives and eventually both went on to successfully transition to Westview University. In this process, Chris began to change the way he thought about himself and by articulating to university, Toni also positively challenged her notions of self. She was no longer "just a wife and mother" instead she was able to think about a future that embraced these important roles for her but also included new career directions in nursing.

Sally and Monica from Study 1 had held negative evaluations of their academic abilities, however their participation in TAFE led both to

reappraise their abilities and they too transitioned to Westview University. Thus, lending credibility to the notion of identity shifts through changes to habitual cognitions and the habitus. Similarly, many of the Study 2 participants at the commencement of the study expressed concerns about their previous lack of academic achievement, including being FIF students in higher education. However, they were able to overcome these barriers during the UAP course and subsequent engagement with university study. Saxon (22, boilermaker) outlined his concerns "... at the start I felt like I didn't deserve to be here rather than now I feel like I do type of thing, yeah." For Cooper (26, unemployed) the change in demeanour was quite remarkable and transformational, from struggling at high school to becoming confident about his studies in International Relations which he described as "absolutely fantastic." His studies included him travelling to Japan for part of his degree.

Discussion

When adults do engage successfully in education, the sense of empowerment this can bring may be likened to the notion of emancipatory action as defined by Habermas in Critical Theory (Mezirow, 1981). Essentially, the theory posits that education is a means of liberating individuals from internalised and uncontested views of the self. In other words, the 'truths' that individuals are accustomed to through historical acceptance of socio-cultural influences become habituated ways of thinking and believing, until ultimately, they become one's disposition, or habits of mind. However, when determinism is rejected, and beliefs and perspectives are consciously or purposively reflected on, the way is paved for new beliefs and new ways of imaging the self and reimagining the future self. This then offers the opportunity for change and transformation to occur and reflects Taylor's (2008) assertion that with purposeful reflectivity comes "epistemological change" (p.7). The potential

for adult learning to bring about such outcomes is a powerful message. Both Mezirow and Bourdieu argue for the centrality of the learning environment in the development of new cognitions, provided there is an opportunity for reflection (Mezirow) and the presence of embedded social capital (Bourdieu). Without these elements, the resources needed for successful outcomes are largely absent. However, when optimal conditions are in place, students in the process of transition and redefinition of self may experience self-actualisation, increased aspirations and transformation.

Markus and Nurius (1986, p. 954) have outlined the concept of possible selves, which can function as an incentive for future behaviour. This appeared to be a motivating factor for the participants who pictured their future selves as professionals engaged in society rather than as casual and manual workers where they had commenced their working life. Comments from the participants concerning their future aspirations included: Sean (21, construction worker) who stated, "I can become a proper member of society" while Cooper (26, unemployed) expressed that he would "love a job in the UN" whereas Charles (25, disability support worker) indicated "I'd like to work for a company involved in colonising Mars." These are interesting examples of possible selves instigated by their engagement with further education, which are quite distinct from their previous life experiences and expectations.

The participants in both of the studies began imagining their futures, which in turn impacted their habitus and may have led to "habitus adaptation" as described by Byrom and Lightfoot (2012, p. 132). This is supported in the research by Whannell and Whannell (2015), who have used identity theory as a framework to understand reasons for retention and attrition of university students in transition. Certainly, taking the initiative to come to university, notwithstanding their family and educational backgrounds, the students

displayed a great determination, motivation and agency in their actions. Illeris (2014) notes that motivation plays a vital role. However, there must be a sense of the attainable aspirational goal, and this is where engagement in learning is critical.

Høj Jensen and Jetten (2016) note the positive influences that educators can have upon their students in both their identity formation and in the development of their professional imaginings. This is an important point as it highlights the fact that while TAFE and enabling courses like the UAP can nurture the potential of students, they can simultaneously and inadvertently widen the perceptual divide of students' identity when they first enter higher education from such programs. The sense of belonging and capability that TAFE and the UAP engendered, served at times to add to a sense of not belonging in the larger space of university. For example, at university, the learners in both studies had to once again re-define themselves and shift some of their beliefs and self-perceptions in order to negotiate the challenges and expectations this new place of learning presented. However, significant changes to perspectives were apparent for these learners, when it seemed that successful academic outcomes were a key turning point in contesting previous perspectives of self. As Høj Jensen and Jetten (2016) assert, transitioning students often have to "rework" their old identity in order to fit in to the new environment of higher education. It can take time to feel like a university student (p.1034).

Fundamentally, a sense of fitting in and the perspective of belonging is often much more complex than gaining an understanding of the academic culture of the learning environment. It also requires changes to belief systems. The experience of trying to fit in is one which Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) suggest is not unique. Rather, it is a common experience for many students entering university for the first time and one which involves the student renegotiating their

perspectives and learner identity to fit the new circumstances in which they find themselves (Christie et al., 2008). As Zepke (2013) suggests, when self-belief grows there can be a greater sense of belonging. This may be likened to the shifting and fluid nature of identity as the newly transitioning university student adopts the shifting identities appropriate to work and home, thus highlighting the flexibility of notions of identity when the right circumstances prevail.

Limitations

The two studies presented here differed to some extent in the approach to data analysis which may indicate a limitation to the compatibility of the findings of both. However, both studies approached the analysis from the lens of the participants' experiences of transition. In this way they both regarded the emergent themes from the data to be representative of the real-world, authentic experiences of the participants during transition.

Study 1 was further limited to an exploration of student transition from two TAFE pathways into just one university. This narrow focus may have elicited institute-centric experiences. It is also likely that a larger number of participants than the seven students in the study would have added to deeper understandings of the transition experience, subsequently strengthening the generalisability of the results.

Similarly, study 2 focused on one group of enabling students transitioning at a mature age into university study. As such, the study cannot be extrapolated to all other enabling course students entering university. However, the project does give some insight into the circumstances of these participants at a particular place and time. Rather than broad, population based research data both studies looked for detailed descriptions and understandings based on the interviews of the participants so offered in-depth examinations

of their lived experiences using social constructivist techniques.

Conclusion

The two studies on transition presented here indicate that adult learning may encompass a 'long and winding road' with many twists and turns along the way. However, it is heartening to note that both Mezirow and Bourdieu promote the notion that changes to habitual cognitions are possible, and that with such change, new perceptions of self and place in the world are also likely to occur. Outcomes from the studies point to the efficacy of human endeavour and individual willingness to take the initiative to implement strategies for success as significant precursors of academic perseverance. The students encountered challenges associated with the new learning environment of university and made the necessary identity shifts that enabled them ultimately to be successful university students. The participants in these studies largely came from backgrounds where their families had not previously engaged in higher education, and yet, they showed a determination to persevere and to act with agency when faced with challenging situations. As their experiences indicate, the resourcefulness the participants brought to the new learning environment helped to build authenticity of the construct of self as student, as they settled into their new roles and identities at university. When viewed through the lens of adult learning, the perspectives individuals hold about their self-concept, their learning capabilities and their possible future selves, can exert significant influence on their learning outcomes, especially when learners are representative of disadvantaged, marginalised groups such as many of the learners in these studies. Bourdieu's view of the human condition reflects his stance that the perspectives or beliefs that learners have when they first enter the adult classroom may exert some considerable influence on their experience of learning, and ultimately on their overall

perception of the value or benefits of education, and on the development of negotiation of self.

References

- Benson, R., Hewitt, L., Heagney, M., Devos, A., & Crosling, G. (2010). Diverse Pathways into Higher Education: Using Students' Stories to Identify Transformative Experiences. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 50(1), 26-53. Retrieved from <https://www.ajal.net.au/>
- Blair, E., Cline, T., & Wallis, J. (2010). When do adults entering higher education begin to identify themselves as students? The threshold-of-induction model. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 32(2), 133-146. doi:10.1080/0158037X.2010.488355
- Bourdieu, P. (1967). Systems of education and systems of thought. *International Social Science Journal*, 19(3), 338. Retrieved from <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/>
- Bowser, D., Danaher, P. A., & Somasundaram, J. (2007). Indigenous, pre-undergraduate and international students at Central Queensland University, Australia: three cases of the dynamic tension between diversity and commonality. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12(5-6, October), 669-681. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562510701596224>
- Byrom, T., & Lightfoot, N. (2012). Transformation or transgression? Institutional habitus and working class student identity. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(2), 126-134. doi: 10.3844/jsssp.2012.126.134
- Christie, H., Tett, L., Cree, V. E., Hounsell, J., & McCune, V. (2008). 'A real rollercoaster of confidence and emotions': learning to be a university student. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(5), 567-581. doi:10.1080/03075070802373040
- Crosling, G. (2017). Student retention in higher education, a shared issue *Encyclopedia of International Higher Education Systems and Institutions*: Springer Netherlands. Retrieved from <https://www.springer.com/gp/book/>
- Edwards, D., & McMillan, J. (2015). *Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue?* Retrieved from Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) website https://research.acer.edu.au/higher_education/43/
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum
- Gallacher, J., Crossan, B., Field, J., & Merrill, B. (2002). Learning careers and the social space: exploring the fragile identities of adult returners in the new further education. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*,

- 21(6), 493-509. doi:10.1080/0260137022000016172
- Høj Jensen, D., & Jetten, J. (2016). The importance of developing students' academic and professional identities in Higher Education. *Journal of College Student Development, 57*(8), 1027-1042. doi:10.1353/csd.2016.0097
- Illeris, K. (2014). Transformative learning re-defined: As changes in elements of the identity. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 33*(5), 573-586. doi: 10.1080/02601370.2014.917128
- Kasworm, C. E. (2010). Adult learners in a research university: Negotiating undergraduate student identity. *Adult Education Quarterly: A Journal of Research and Theory, 60*(2), 143-160. doi:10.1177/0741713609336110
- Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist, 41*(9), 954-969. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.41.9.954
- Mezirow, J. (1981). A critical theory of adult learning and education. *Adult Education Quarterly, 32*(1), 3-24. doi:10.1177/074171368103200101
- Mezirow, J. (1990). How Critical Reflection triggers Transformative Learning. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory learning*. (pp. 1-20) San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1996). Contemporary paradigms of learning. *Adult Education Quarterly, 46*(3), 158-172. doi:10.1177/074171369604600303
- Mezirow, J. (2000). Learning to Think like an Adult. Core Concepts of Transformation Theory. In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress*. (pp. 3-33) San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Munro, L. (2011). 'Go boldly, dream large!': The challenges confronting non-traditional students at university. *Australian Journal of Education, 55*(2), 115-131. doi: 10.1177/000494411105500203
- O'Donnell, V. L., & Tobbell, J. (2007). The transition of adult students to higher education: Legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice? *Adult Education Quarterly, 57*(4), 312-328. doi:10.1177/0741713607302686
- O'Grady, A. (2013). *Lifelong Learning in the UK: An Introductory Guide for Education Studies*. Oxford: Routledge.
- O'Shea, S., Lysaght, P., Roberts, J., & Harwood, V. (2016). Shifting the blame in higher education – social inclusion and deficit discourses. *Higher Education Research & Development, 35*(2), 322-336. doi:10.1080/07294360.2015.1087388
- O'Shea, S. (2013). Transitions and turning points: exploring how first-in-family female students story their transition to university and student identity formation. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 27*(2), 1-24. doi:10.1080/09518398.2013.771226
- Postareff, L., Mattsson, M., Lindblom-Ylänne, S., & Hailikari, T. (2017). The complex relationship between emotions, approaches to learning, study success and study progress during the transition to university. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education Research, 73*(3), 441-457. doi:10.1007/s10734-016-0096-7.
- Reay, D. (2001). Finding or losing yourself?: working-class relationships to education. *Journal of Education Policy, 16*(4), 333-346. doi:10.1080/02680930110054335
- Reay, D. (2002a). Class, authenticity and the transition to higher education for mature students. *The Sociological Review, 50*(3), 398-418. doi:10.1111/1467-954x.00389
- Reay, D. (2002b). Shaun's Story: Troubling discourses of white working-class masculinities. *Gender and Education, 14*(3), 221-234. doi:10.1080/0954025022000010695
- Sheard, M. (2009). Hardiness commitment, gender, and age differentiate university academic performance. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 79*(1), 189-204. doi: 10.1348/000709908X304406
- Smith, P. J., & Blake, D. (2009). The influence of learning environment on student conceptions of learning. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training, 61*(3), 231-246. doi:10.1080/13636820902996517
- Taylor, E. W. (2008). Transformative learning theory. *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education, 2008*(119), 5-15. doi:10.1002/ace.301
- Toohey, A., & Doran, M. (2013). *The odd couple: can skills recognition in VET cohabit with university learning?* In T. Griffin (Ed.), Paper presented at the 21st National Vocational Education and Training Research Conference (pp. 94-101). Adelaide: NCVET.
- Walls, S., & Pardy, J. (2010). *Crediting Vocational Education and Training for Learner Mobility* (978-1-9214-1389-6). Retrieved from <https://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/publication/s/all-publications/crediting-vocational-education-and-training-for-learner-mobility>
- Whannell, R., & Whannell, P. (2015). Identity theory as a theoretical framework to understand attrition for university students in transition. *Student Success, 6*(2), 43-52. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v6i2.286>
- Wilkins, S., Butt, M. M., Kratochvil, D., & Balakrishnan, M. S. (2016). The effects of social identification and organizational identification on student commitment, achievement and satisfaction in higher education.

Studies in Higher Education, 41(12), 2232-2252.
doi:10.1080/03075079.2015.1034258

Willans, J., & Seary, K. (2011). I feel like I'm being hit from all directions: Enduring the bombardment as a mature-age learner returning to formal learning. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 51(1), 119-142. Retrieved from <https://www.ajal.net.au/>

Zepke, N. (2013). Student engagement: A complex business supporting the first year experience in tertiary education. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 4(2), 1-14.
doi:10.5204/intjfyhe.v4i2.183