Non-traditional students making their way in higher education: An Australian case study
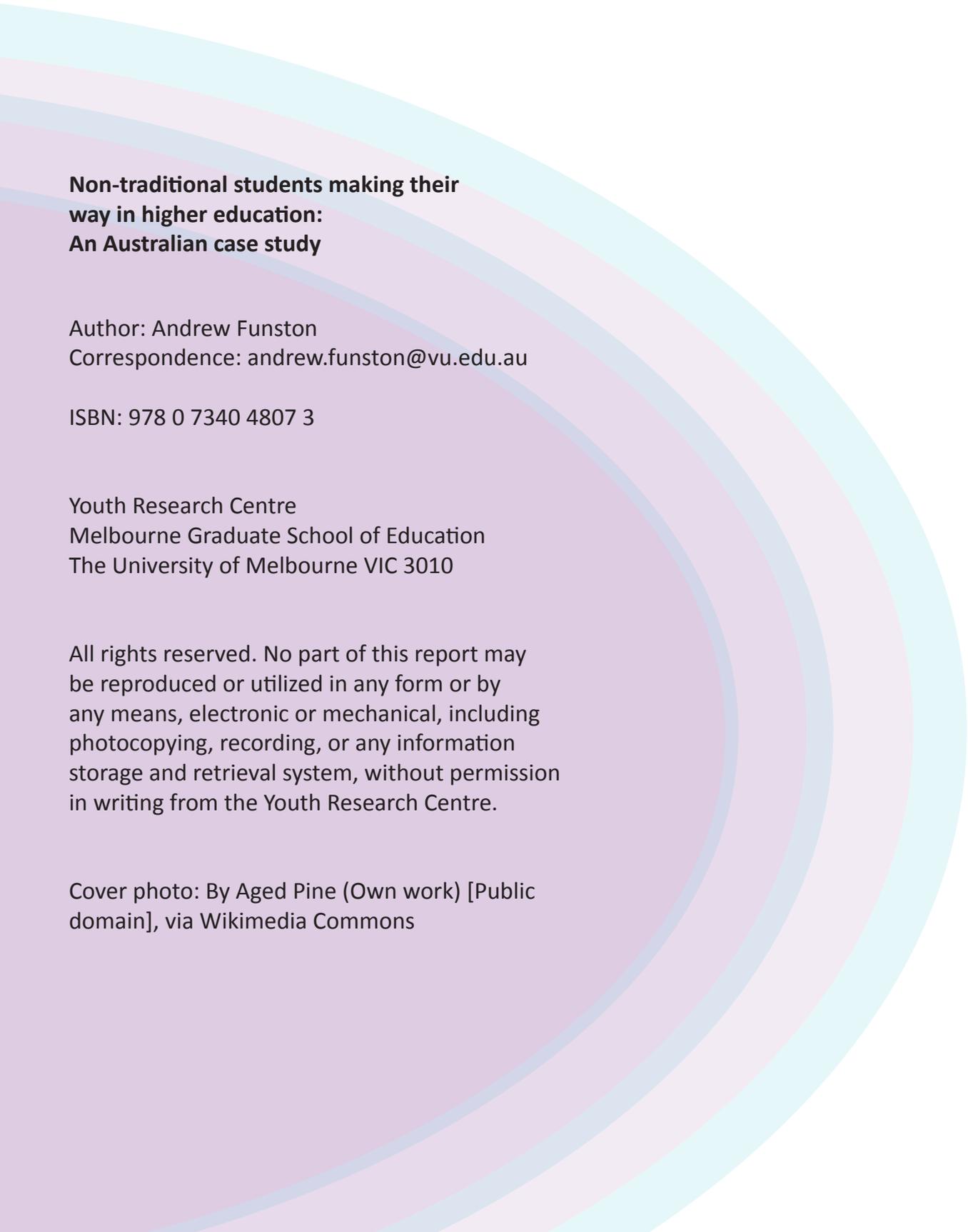
Andrew Funston
November 2012
Research Report 35

**Non-traditional students making their
way in higher education:
An Australian case study**

Author: Andrew Funston
Correspondence: andrew.funston@vu.edu.au

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report highlights findings from a mixed-methods doctoral study undertaken in 2009 – 2011 at the University of Melbourne, Graduate School of Education, which investigated the first year experiences of a 2009 cohort of commencing humanities students at one of Australia's newer universities. Around 22 per cent of these students came from a low socio-economic (SES) background, compared to 16 per cent across all Australian universities.

The study used a sociological framework drawing on strands of youth studies, critical social psychology and narrative inquiry. The research methodology included two surveys of a large cohort (n.470) enrolled in an academic foundations subject, an analysis of these students' first year academic results and second year re-enrolment patterns, and a series of in-depth one-on-one interviews with a smaller group (n.33) who self selected from the larger cohort. The interviewees collaborated on the production of biographical narratives about education in their lives, with a focus on their first year experiences on campus and off campus.

The study confirmed key findings of a larger longitudinal Australian study by James, Krause and Jennings (2010) which indicated improvements for Australia's first year university students across a range of areas; reporting that students were becoming more 'organised, pragmatic and focussed', while also reporting that first year students were spending less time on campus, more time in paid work, and making more use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as they juggled multiple demands placed upon them.

Most of the doctoral study participants reported enjoyable and successful higher education transitions. However around 25 per cent of the cohort did not persist with their course into the second year. That was despite a significant minority of the discontinuing students passing all or most of their subjects. While the study investigated a range of matters – including parents' educational attainments, students' school experiences, arrival on campus, paid work and recreation, ICT usage, students' aspirations and career goals – this report focuses on the study findings about the challenges faced by students on-campus and off-campus which might have contributed to the high attrition rates among these humanities students. The biographical narratives produced from the in-depth interviews help us provide a nuanced and holistic account of education in the lives of first year students, and two of those narratives from student who left their courses early – for very different reasons – are reproduced here, alongside other findings.

INTRODUCTION

The broad context for the study is the shift from elite to mass higher education in Australia, federal Labor government's policies (2007-) aimed at lifting graduate numbers especially among young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds[1], and recognition that while participation is growing first year attrition rates for undergraduates remain high at around 25 per cent[2].   This study reports on the experiences of a cohort who in many respects represent so-called 'non-traditional' (or traditionally under-represented) students who are arriving in increasing numbers on campuses across Australia. Around 22 per cent of students at this new university – established in the late 1980s as a result of earlier federal government reforms – come from families in the bottom SES quartile, compared to a national average of 16 per cent. Many of the study participants were first in the family to attempt higher education. Many are either immigrants to Australian or the children of immigrants and around 40 per cent come from households where languages other than or as well as English are spoken. Most of these humanities students arrived at university with quite low Australian Tertiary Admission

Rank (ATAR) scores; ranging from 50 to 60 and indicating low levels of academic literacy or preparedness for degree level studies.

Retention and persistence in higher education among traditionally under-represented students is a matter of concern for an active Australian 'first year in higher education' community of practice, and many academics working in this field acknowledge the pioneering work of Americans such as Tinto (1993, 1997) and Cuseo (2010) both of whom have addressed major conferences here in Australia. Local scholars also draw on the work of British researchers such as Reay (2001) who describes the blocks and alienation encountered by working-class students attempting degree level studies. Archer and Leatherwood (2003), Burke (2005), and Burke and Jackson (2007) discuss the complex intersections of class, gender and equity issues impacting on students' higher education transitions.

A useful survey of academic literature on Australian studies in this field by Nelson, Clarke, Kift and Creagh (2011) notes that this is a new field of study in Australia but one of increasing importance given the 'trend towards universal participation'. They also acknowledge 'the need for a better evidence base on the first year experience' (iii). Australian studies have tended to focus on curriculum matters and institutional strategies. For instance, Devlin (2010) argues that universities should offer more 'inclusive curriculum' if they hope to attract and keep diverse student cohorts. Kift (2009) argues that universities need to do more to embed scaffolded

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1   The Bradley Review (2008) recommended raising the proportion of young people in Australia with a degree qualification from 30 to 40 per cent of 25–34 year olds by 2025 and raising the proportion of students from a low SES background (bottom quartile) from around 16 per cent to 20 per cent by 2020.

2   The Australian newspaper (26 April 2012 p.3) reports government statistics indicating that '2009 estimates of 458,000 undergraduate places by this year were almost met a year early and the government was forced to upwardly revise the numbers to 517,000 places next year'. The Age newspaper (1 May 2012) reported that 'since 2009...11.1 per cent rise in offers to low-SES students compared with last year'. Less encouraging, The Age (1 May 2012 p.13) quotes the government's Lomax-Smith report as indicating that 'students with an ATAR score between 30 and 60 had a 25.9 per cent chance of dropping out in first year'.

'transition pedagogy'. Less common are Australian studies concerned with 'off-campus' matters such as those taken up by McInnis and Hartley's (2002) in their study on the negative impact of paid work on students' transitions, or Devlin, James and Grigg's (2009) study which points to financial insecurity and its impact on university students, or Polesel's (2009) study which points to the additional financial pressures on students from rural areas, leading to their lower rates of participation and higher rates of course deferral.

While acknowledging the active community of practice and signaling here some of the strands of inquiry in this field, it is also important to recognise that there have been few qualitative Australian studies which draw on students' biographical stories about education in their lives and the complex challenges they face in attempting a degree course at university. Gale and Parker (2011) make the point that 'much research, policy and practice regarding student transition into higher education is disconnected from the extensive research literature on youth and life transitions and from education and social theory' (35).

This researcher shared that view and looked beyond the education research literature to youth sociologists who describe the challenges facing a younger generation of Australians. For instance, Wyn (2009) argues that rapid social changes are 'opening up new possibilities and options for some' while 'creating new forms of inequality and at the same time entrenching older forms of inequality' (xi). Andres and Wyn (2010), reporting on longitudinal youth studies in Australia and Canada, conclude that life-course transitions have become much less clear or linear for this generation. Cuervo and Wyn (2011), in Rethinking youth transitions in Australia argue that 'one of the most significant implications of the period under review is an increase in uncertainty' where social conditions are forcing young people to 'navigate new patterns of life that were very different from their parents' generation' (p.60). These less linear life-course transitions amidst rapid social changes were very

apparent in the biographical stories produced for this study, as will become apparent in the two narratives which conclude this report.

This idea of young people facing considerable uncertainty is also taken up by Woodman (2010) who draws on Beck and Beck-Gernshiem's (2002) 'risk society' thesis to argue for the corrosive effects of increasingly reflexive and individualised identities in late-modernity. Woodman doubts that many young people enjoy what du Bois Reymond called a 'choice biography'. In fact, his investigation of youth transitions in Australia found a debilitating 'de-synchronisation of everyday life'; where 'individualised timetables mixing further education and casual shift-based paid work' (135) is undermining young people's sociality.

A different view of late-modernity is offered by British sociologist Margaret Archer (2007, 2010) who describes 'new kinds of structures, bringing new kinds of agents' in these 'morphogenetic times', where routine action is in retreat in many people's lives. She emphasises the importance of people's 'internal conversations' for planning and making their way in the world. We see evidence of these 'new agents' making their way in higher education at this new university, and the narratives produced for this study were full of highly self-reflexive talk.

This study's theoretical framework linked Archer's ideas about 'new agents' with strands of critical social psychology, including the work of Wetherell et al. (2001) and 'narrative therapist' Michael White (2007). They regard biographical stories as important for constructing shared meanings and producing individual and collective identities. White articulates a therapeutic practice for re-storying lives as a means of escaping self-defeating and often socially imposed identities. These ideas had considerable resonance for our study because several students spoke of their earlier educational 'failures' and their determination to succeed in higher education. This again is apparent in the two narratives reproduced at the conclusion of this report.

METHODOLOGY

Surveys were used to gather some basic information which gave context to our analysis of in-depth interviews. They were administered early and later in 2009 on days when high student turn-out was expected. A common core of students (n.470) completed both surveys. All students were taking a compulsory first year academic foundations subject and were otherwise drawn from one of eight different humanities degrees all of which had ATAR scores (university entrance scores) of between 50 and 60. The larger cohort's first year academic results and their (re)enrolment records (indicating whether they proceeded to second year) were mined and analysed to provide additional data about student progress.

Survey 1 included some questions which were repeated in Survey 2, useful for establishing reliability and confirming certain cohort characteristics. Additionally, Survey 1 asked students about expectations of the course, and Survey 2 asked about experiences and opinions of the course.

Thirty three participants – who self-selected from the larger cohort – were interviewed between 45 minutes and one hour. Interviews took place early in the 2009 academic year and later that year (when 20 of the 33 students returned for a second interview). Each student collaborated on editing his or her transcript.

In reporting on the findings, I use pseudonyms chosen by the participants. All participants are between the ages of 18 and 21 unless otherwise specified.

FINDINGS

Around 30 per cent of these surveyed humanities students were male and 70 per cent female. Less than 10 per cent were part-time students. Indicative of many of these students' non-linear life-course transitions, only 60 per cent were straight from school, around 20 per cent had undertaken some post-school vocational training, and 18 per cent had previously attempted some form of higher education. The smaller interview cohort (n.33) included 22 females (11 straight from school or having taken a gap year) and 11 males (7 similarly from school).

Around 80 per cent of the surveyed students still lived in the natal-family home, and in around 35 per cent of those homes languages other than or in addition to English were spoken. Close to 40 per cent were 'first in the family' to have attempted higher education (this includes siblings). Only a handful of these students had university-educated parents.

The proportion of surveyed students receiving a means-tested government youth allowance rose from around 35 to 50 per cent over the course of their first year at university. Around 60 per cent of the students were in regular paid work (the proportion increasing through the first year at university). Of the students in paid work, 40 per cent regularly worked more than 10 hours per week, 20 per cent worked more than 20 hours. Around two thirds of the interviewed students were in regular paid work during the academic year.

High Expectations and Satisfaction with Courses

These humanities students arrived with high expectations: 98 per cent expected the course to provide a 'pathway or preparation for a career'; 96 per cent expected to gain 'new knowledge and skills'; 68 per cent expected to be 'challenged and extended'; and more than half also anticipated the 'stimulation of meeting new or different people'.

The vast majority of students who completed Survey 2 (late in the academic year) rated their first year of degree level study highly: 42 per cent said it was 'good', 25 per cent 'very good', 10 per cent 'excellent' (only 2 per cent rated it 'poor'). For 63 per cent the course met with their expectations, and for 28 per cent it was 'better than expected'. Most felt they had performed academically at or above expectations: 62 per cent 'about what I expected' and 26 per cent 'better than expected'. Only 3 per cent agreed with the statement 'I got nothing out of this year', 76 per cent agreed with the statement 'I got significant new knowledge and skills', and 67 per cent agreed that 'I met some new and different people'. Less positively, only 54 per cent agreed with the statement 'I understand now what university learning is about'.

Difficult On-Campus Arrivals

Most of this cohort of commencing humanities students at the new university found the early weeks at university a daunting experience, and it is one area where the institution might want to improve orientation strategies and other supports. Lilly talked about her disorientation and an overload of information, 'I was very anxious, very anxious... you know, finding your way around... all the information... all the facilities'. However, and in common with most of the students, she talked about settling in by the third week of semester, 'I'm not finding it too hard now'. Tyler had also settled: 'Well the first couple of days were pretty hard... Once I got to know my way around it was much easier'.

Some students spoke humorously about their efforts to connect with other students. Winston said 'I found that being a smoker actually helps because eventually you run out and you've got to bott a smoke off someone and you talk to them'. Some students spoke of fitting in easily to a social group. Jeff by week four of semester had made friends and study partners: 'It's like I've know them for a while... They're really helpful... we're trying to really work together... later today I'm showing my friend how to use databases'.

Others conveyed an acute sense of social isolation. Holly said 'I was really confused, just getting around ... and when you'd go into classes, or around the university, you'd not know what to do, and it seemed that everyone knows someone, so there were all these little groups, and I didn't know what to do'. Jane was missing her old school friends, 'here I have like no one, so it's been sort of daunting for me, having no one here, but you know I'm always eager to make new friends'. Geraldinique, aged 22, who had immigrated from Chile to marry an Australian, was missing her family and friends back home, and she sounded especially disconsolate: 'Like, I don't know any people here, no one at all... some people don't have the patience to listen to you, your accent, and they're like "whatever", which is so difficult'. Some seemed to blame themselves for their isolation as newly arrived

students. Emmet said 'It's one thing I've found disappointing in myself... I want to go up to them, and like we're alive in the same place at the same time, let's connect'. This was another area where we felt the institution might work more intensively to build or encourage social networks for new students.

Most students spoke of administrative systems working well, and they reported feeling well supported in this regard. Penelope said 'I think they've done a pretty good job', Veronica spoke of everything running 'fairly smooth so far', and Terry, aged 40, compared his arrival with earlier university experiences, saying 'there seems to be much more practical help and assistance... that's a massive difference'. A few students were not so happy. Irene, who was 50, had been poorly advised and enrolled in wrong subjects, and missed the first week of classes, 'so I was angry, I was very disappointed, a little depressed, because it was hard enough as it is... working full time'. It warrants mention that Irene also reported how much she loved university study, which she describes in transformative terms. There were few instances in this study where people expressed anger or deep frustration but poor advice was a common feature in at least three such instances.

In turning to students' early encounters with curriculum, assessments, and class dynamics, we again see a mix of responses. We also see in the students' reflexive talk, evidence of emerging learner identities. For example, Jane described being 'absolutely terrified' on her first day at university, 'but once you get into the flow of things, and started learning where everything is, the processes involved, it became a lot better'. She described her first lecture:

> It was a new learning experience. I found it quite good you know. I suppose the only down point is that the lecturer can't exactly have a one-to-one thing with you, but there's always a chance to ask questions if you don't understand anything. And the really good think is that you can get the notes off the internet later on.

Most students expressed their preference for tutorials over lectures. Lachlan enjoyed being able to 'discuss and express your point of view'. However, some students found the small group dynamic quite daunting. Lilly spoke of her annoyance with people who just 'go on and on' and felt tutors could enforce more sharing of the speaking time by 'shutting those loud people out, just for five minutes'. Dina felt that the free flow of conversation in tutorials gave some people the opportunity to express their prejudices, and recalled a tutorial conversation about treatment of minority faith communities in Australia: 'It's supposed to be about diversity... and hearing what another person says and not just saying "no, no, no", and you get a lot of people doing that... there's a difference between a good argument and people just having a go at each other'.

Most students found the first assessment tasks challenging, although they also reported a sense of relief and accomplishment once that was done. Holly spoke of her initial struggle: 'I really had no idea... an essay plan... referencing... different in every subject... I handed it in and ended up getting a good result... I surprised myself'. Erin, who was aged 44, described her first assignment as 'a bit of a reality call' and recalled long stints in the library but she also spoke of a good outcome and how that made her feel: 'I'm feeling good, I am excited... that's what it's about'. When pressed about this feeling, Erin explained this in terms of her changing identity: 'I never really had any thoughts about what it would be like to be a student. You know I never really saw myself going to university'. This sense of new horizons availed by university study, and the production of a learner identity, is apparent in many of the narratives (and again we emphasise the value of a narrative inquiry method for discovering this). Azra described her first year experience:

> Ah, it's been a big change, like as I said my school was Turkish based, so coming to uni there are so many different cultures and backgrounds and religions especially... Coming here everybody's different, especially your teachers, they have their own views as well, and you get to hear their views.

Needless to say, her fellow students also got to hear Azra's views and it was this sense of hearing voices from minority communities which impressed Irene who observed a generational change in Australia. Irene expressed enjoyment at the way young people were speaking up in class about their cultural backgrounds, she enjoyed the 'clothes that some of the Muslim women wear', and how 'the youth I'm coming across, they are just fabulous, and I wonder where they are going'. Perhaps we should not underestimate the extent to which the first year university experience entails – at least for some students – reflexive encounters with their own prejudice or sheltered backgrounds. Penelope explained, 'I've never had, like had interaction with a gay person and I didn't know how to react and realise they are just normal people... so that was kind of different for me'.

Uncertain Times

The interviews took place (in 2009) at the time of the global financial crisis (GFC) and anxiety about the availability and security of casual jobs, and about parents' employment, featured strongly. With the current economic down-turn, we anticipate similar difficulties for non-traditional university students in 2012; especially in Victoria, where the mining boom, boosting employment in other states, has contributed to a high Australian dollar and shrinking employment in manufacturing and some service industries in Victoria. The GFC seemed to impact less on the mature-age students, like Erin, aged 44 who was in secure paid employment. She expressed the view that 'anyone who wants a job will find a job'. For younger students, however, job security was uncertain. Joe described how at his workplace 'we're all kind of fretting... we might lose our jobs, the company might go under'. Nicole spoke of getting reduced hours, which she also felt came from turning 18 and moving to a higher pay rate. She spoke of having left several phone messages with her employer, asking for more hours, 'but he didn't answer'.

Nada who was studying full-time while caring for a sick mother and several siblings spoke of her anxiety about her father losing his job. She was already working 'about 16 to 20 hours a week' in a fast-food outlet and was finding it hard to study, adding to her anxiety. Such onerous paid-work commitments were common across the study narratives, and several women also spoke of household duties including care for younger siblings. Nada was struggling to juggle all of her commitments. She described her family – in the midst of the global financial crisis – as being at risk and gloomy, 'it's unsafe at the moment, so it's very scary because we've still got the home to pay off', and she reported feeling particularly upset 'just watching everybody stress and not being able to do anything'. Jane was similarly concerned about her Dad losing his job, and talked about how 'nothing's safe these days'.

Not All Departing Students Failed Subjects

The survey results help contextualise the analysis of the cohort's academic results and enrolment records which revealed that around 150 (of 470) students from the cohort had neither re-enrolled for the second year of their course nor formally taken 'leave of absence' (we mention here that students commonly apply to return to the university after an absence without ever having formally applied for leave and are generally readmitted if this occurs within five years). Notably, only 30 of those students who did not return had failed all or most of their subjects, and most had passed or received higher marks for all or most subjects. The study was not able to flag and follow departing students who might have changed institutions.

While 30 of the 33 interviewees had passed all or most of their subjects in their commencing year at university – again indicating some measure of successful transitions – only 20 had re-enrolled at the new university in the following year (and only 5 of those students had formally taken leave of absence, suggesting that between 5 and 13 students might not return). Only 2 of these

departing students had failed all or most of their first year subjects. This raises questions about why students who are passing their courses (members of a cohort who are largely satisfied with their course) are departing early.

The study referred to high attrition rates, nationally and also among humanities students at the new university. The interviewees helped explain what might be going on. Dina, reflecting on her own earlier attempt at higher education, suggested that some people come to university primarily 'because that's what they think people should do... they just don't know what they want to do' and that this makes struggling with the academic work that much harder for some. Madeline suggested that people leave early 'mostly because they don't like their course, or they don't feel that university is what they need to do'. Lilly was convinced that some people only stay for 'the social side', making that less compelling if friendships are not formed or sustained. In her own case, she felt quite isolated in the early weeks of her course and had to keep saying to herself 'I'll give it time, I've got to give it time'.

Penelope felt she was struggling with 'laziness' and lack of motivation. The prospect of years of study also worried Geraldinique who confided 'I don't have this motivation'. Even by the end of the first month Nicole was witnessing a drop-off in motivation amongst classmates 'already set on dropping out because of the workload'. Dina described motivating herself with positive talk 'You've got to look at the bigger picture... if I quit now'. Natasha raised the issue for some students struggling financially, and 'if they can't get a job because of the time uni takes, that could be one of the reasons people drop out'. Tyler, who had moved from his country town to study in Melbourne, also spoke of newly found independence, and 'no-one telling you what to do' and 'not wanting to be tied down at university'.

We turn now to the first of two more extended narratives in which we see the complexity of students' lives and some of the factors motivating some students' decision to discontinue their courses. In understanding one student's academic disappointments and early departure and another student's academic success and growing learner identity it helps to know more about how education features in their lives more broadly, including external or 'off campus' factors which might be impacting on their studies. While curriculum and university transition strategies clearly matter a great deal – and scholarly literature attests to this – other biographical factors also contribute to student persistence and success and these factors are less well researched in the Australian study of higher education. A narrative approach can help to contribute knowledge in this field.

Rajani's story

The new university was not Rajani's first preference and that is not untypical of the cohort; as seen in the results for Survey 1 which indicated that only around half of the respondents had this university as their first preference. Rajani would have preferred to attend another more prestigious university which is much closer to his home in the south-eastern suburbs. He was travelling several hours on public transport to and from university. The other university was where his girlfriend and several mates were studying, but Rajani did not get good enough results in his Year 12. As he described it, that was due in part to his distracting passion for online gaming (a game called 'America's Army'), which 'screwed me up in Year 12', although he also reported that his online games provided him a lot of enjoyment and social connections: 'It's like another family I guess...we talk about a lot of other things'.

Rajani reported that his parents being Tamils and from a rural area had only limited school education in Sri Lanka. They were very keen for him to have more opportunities than they had: 'since I was very young I've had [them] telling me

to go to university, and that has been my goal as well...and I've had my cousins telling me, you know, "university's the way to go", so my goal has always been to go to university'. He explains his parents' enthusiasm for his education in Australia: 'Because if you look at most struggling families, and the more educated middle class and upper class, they are educated and they had that education when they were young and they've been to uni, so yeah I think it's a lot easier for them here.' Similar comments were made by many of the interviewees.

Notwithstanding the level of parental encouragement (he could not look to them for financial support, and was working weekly two or three long shifts in a factory), Rajani was also dealing with some difficulties and disappointments on campus. He enjoyed the 'freedom [at uni, where...] you can do whatever you want, you can choose what you want to study and what you don't want to study'. But he conveys a sense of anxiety or frustration with his early learning encounters:

> *It was pretty hard to be honest. Like just waking up and then catching public transport here, and then you go to the lectures and then you don't know what to do. Like, you're sitting down and you're taking notes but you don't even know if you're taking the right notes, and some lecturers they don't stop, they just go on so fast that you have to scribble everything down and luckily most of my subjects the lecturers send out notes to us, or you can find them on the computer, on the internet. The only thing I find really good about one subject, Psychology, that's the only subject they actually record the lecture.*

There are moments in Rajani's narrative where he conveys some frustration with his parents' concerns about his academic progress, and he links this again to his disappointing academic results in Year 12: 'Mum always asks if I'm studying or if I've got homework...basically nags me but I guess it's for good reasons...I screwed up in Year 12' although he insisted that this was

'not so bad it gets to my head or whatever'. Rajani discussed the way he and his Tamil–Australian mates were supported by families keen for them to continue their education, and the stigma that can attach to discontinuing university.

Being a Tamil–Australian features at many points in Rajani's narrative and we can discern in these narrative fragments degrees of strain or tension; to honour his parents' difficult lives and migration decision, to maintain a hybridised cultural identity, to speak enthusiastically about studying at university while acknowledging on-campus and off-campus difficulties. He describes his parents' daily use of satellite-delivered Tamil TV and radio 'for news back in our country'. His parents were avid watchers of Tamil soaps, particularly popular with his mother, who like his father was a factory worker doing night shifts: 'Just because she's pretty tired when she gets home, she cooks and she just lies in bed watches TV sometimes and just falls asleep watching TV'. However, it was the 'news from home' that featured with urgency in the interview when Rajani reported how stressed the family was as the civil war against the Tamil Tigers was reaching its bloody conclusion and how they feared for family members in the line of fire and often not in communication with the family here in Australia.

Rajani talked quite extensively about his close links to the Tamil community in Melbourne, which involved a circle of Tamil mates with whom he attended Hindu temple for cultural events, and he spoke approvingly of his attendance during his school years at special Saturday language school. In this context, an additional stress for Rajani in his commencing year at university was the opposition he was facing to his dating a Sinhalese–Australian woman whose family were also immigrants from Sri Lanka. His parents initially opposed the match, and hers remained implacably opposed (contributing to his disappointment at not getting good enough marks to get into the other university where she was studying and where he might see her more often):

Like her parents don't really like me because I'm Tamil, which is pretty stupid I'm sorry to say that...Yeah, because we're not living in Sri Lanka any more, and a lot of people are these Tamil people, we are able to get along, it's just because of what they've been through, but they have to be able to learn to accept now I guess, because there's no point living in the past, like hating people.

Many higher education students in Australia make several attempts at post-school education and training, attending different institutions, and this was apparent in the results for Survey 1 where students were asked about prior post-school education and training and around 20 per cent had already attempted another degree course and a further 20 per cent had attempted some form of post-school training, prior to commencing at the new university. Rajani left his course, but returned two years later. In 2009 he was attempting to manage a range of challenges, and not all of these were academic or curriculum based. Not the least of these challenges for Rajani in 2009 was the civil war against the Tamil Tigers which was reaching its violent conclusion at the time of his interview. His relatives 'back home' were at grave risk, and in the interview he conveyed a sense of a family reeling with anxiety.

Jayden's story

Jayden, aged 28, left the new university in 2009 after his first year. He received 'high distinction' results which he used in his application to take up a place (in second year) at a more prestigious university. His biographical story offers a more nuanced and holistic account of education in people's lives than we could hope to find in large-scale quantitative studies. Jayden had left his government secondary school, in another capital city, after failing Year 10. Jayden comes from a middle-class family with university-educated parents. Since Jayden's early departure from school, he has been working, travelling and did some short courses in graphic arts,

where he enjoyed the close contact with some of his TAFE teachers. Jayden is typical of many 'non-traditional' students who had undertaken some form of post-school education prior to commencing their degree studies, and as explained earlier, Survey 1 results indicated that this was the case for around 40 per cent of this humanities cohort. Like several other interviewees Jayden was looking for part-time work in the security or building industry (and had experience in both). In the meantime he was managing to live on a very low income and was about to sell his car because he couldn't afford to insure it. Jayden knew he could ask his parents for some financial help, 'but I haven't asked them for money since I've been an adult, and probably wouldn't'. Not that the prospect of labouring, at a low hourly rate, appealed: 'I guess, I don't know, after getting paid and quite well, and respected in the job that I was doing, I found it hard to be treated rudely and getting paid $18 an hour'.

Where Jayden was not typical of other non-traditional humanities students at the new university is that both of his parents were university educated, one of them working in the Higher Education sector. Not that such a background had prevented his unhappy secondary-school education. He recalls being 'the most rebellious' of his friends, changed schools, but 'just wasn't in the kind of state to be educated I guess'. He presents a complex narrative of school-refusing and rebelliousness:

I was pretty miserable in High School to be honest, but that was never through what I perceived to be a lack of intelligence. I had difficult circumstances when I was growing up, and that kind of thing. Also, I come from quite an academic family, whereas I kind of felt that I grew up in a working-class neighbourhood, and always felt like I needed to reject that [the academic] a little bit, for whatever reason.

I think it was more like a class kind of situation, than the pressure to perform academically. I kind of felt a bit ashamed, to be honest, about coming from a

clearly middle-class family, in the midst of government housing, and this kind of thing, and I didn't want to be associated with that kind of privilege compared to my friends who were clearly struggling.

While keeping Jayden's unpromising secondary-school years in mind, he was able to present a biographical story full of adventures and agency, including extensive travels in Europe which he links to his re-orientation to education. Jayden draws on his travel experiences, and his reflexive realisation that he is intelligent and equipped for study if he puts his mind to it, as he moves beyond his initial state of being 'pretty nervous to be honest' about formal education. He was especially unconfident about his academic writing until his first assignments came back:

I'm 28 now. So it's been quite a long time. I spent the last few years travelling, in Europe, and that was definitely a big contributor to me wanting to come to university. I've always kind of – I don't want to sound like I'm pulling my own chain – but I'm clearly not at the bottom of the intellectual spectrum. And I've always been interested in reading, particularly things to do with social issues, and lots of philosophy.

I was really interested in learning the cultural kind of differences and the political differences of each country [travelled to] and how that kind of reflected and bounced off each other, and what [political] situations created what kinds of social situations in each country.

Commencing university wasn't without its trials for Jayden and he indicates that his more peripatetic years of working and travelling had imposed some costs. He spoke of returning to study at an age (28) where 'most people my age have quite a lump sum of assets behind them, cars, houses, also getting married and possibly having children'. At one stage he describes with relief (this was after completing his first assignment) that 'my confidence has gone up quite a lot since I've been at university'. The doubts he expresses are often related in his

narrative to his earlier educational experiences (a similar connection is made by several interviewees). In this fragment he describes his anxiety about academic essay writing:

> I was pretty nervous to be honest, because like I said I didn't do a Year 11 or Year 12, and I'd failed consistently through High School, and so it goes to one of the questions here, my biggest difficulty at university, my biggest fear, is academic writing. I'm really used to reading about subjects, and I'm used to talking to people about it, but structuring written words in a way that is acceptable at university is quite difficult for me.

Later, Jayden describes a growing self-confidence with the academic work and with settling in to university life. For instance he describes how his 'fear of deferring or dropping out' was retreating, 'I'm over the major hump'. He also describes some emerging professional interests or career goals. He referred to his university-educated sister having found great satisfaction working for an international non-government organisation. He thought her example, along with his travel experiences, 'spending time in countries like Egypt for instance, where you see a lot more poverty', might be contributing to his decision to study units in Political Science (he becomes one of the top students in the cohort). Although he was quick to clarify that 'doesn't necessarily mean I want to be involved in politics directly'. He described how his father had studied ethics at the postgraduate level, 'probably a bit of a leftie' and suggested that also might have similarly opened his mind to a career in aid or development.

Youth sociologist Andy Furlong (2009) observes that for this generation of young people 'transitions take longer to accomplish, they are less likely to involve linear movement from education to work and independent living with "backtracking" and mixing of statuses that were once distinct become even more common.' Perhaps a better account of the sort of 'choice biography' we discern in Jayden's narrative is that offered by Heinz (in Furlong 2009) where he draws our attention to a particular set of pressures on young adults, even clever 28-year-olds from middle-class families:

> I shall argue that the instabilities of the life course stem from the tension between uncertain life chances and the culture of individualism which expects that people actively shape their biographies. At the level of cultural expectations, there is a double-edged message: perform your transition and pathway choices according to market opportunities and institutional rules and do this according to your individual life-determining timing.

The doctoral study was informed by critical social psychology and narrative inquiry methodologies. We find in Jayden's narrative instances of 'identity work' going on. We see the transformative possibilities in narrative where people are able to 're-story' their lives in education, relinquishing a subjectivity burdened by earlier educational failures. In Jayden's narrative – and in the passage below – we see him precisely position himself in relation to his earlier self, his family, and in relation to a wider world in which he might forge a future career:

> My Dad's not particularly politically engaged. My Mum might be because she's got a role in a university so she's probably a little bit more so. I guess I probably am more likely to be engaged than my parents, although that's not really a draw card for me. I thought it was a necessity to study Political Science in order to move into that kind of area and to have an understanding of these things I want to know about.

CONCLUSION

This doctoral study investigated the 'journeys to university and arrival experiences' of a cohort of 'non-traditional' (or traditionally under-represented) students commencing degree studies at a new Australian university. Many of these students were first in the family to attempt higher education, many arrived with low university entrance scores (ATARs), and many found the early weeks and months at university a challenge. These students were dealing with new modes of teaching and learning, difficult course content and unfamiliar assessment tasks, complex administrative systems, and new social groups they were required to interact with. For some students commencing university was a disorienting and lonely time. However, most of the students who participated in this study were finding their way in higher education and felt satisfied with their course and pleased with their academic performance.

Clearly, some of these students had more challenges to face than others, and for some students paid-work was something extra they had to juggle, along with household chores and other responsibilities. For Rajani a combination of factors contributed to his academic struggles and his decision to leave his course for a few years before returning to study in 2011. For Jayden commencing university study represented a new start or new story after earlier 'failures' and unhappiness at school. His departure from the new university was driven by his decision – having excelled in his first year at university after a nervous commencement – to take up an offer to enter a new course at a more prestigious university.

The larger point to make here is that students' biographical stories about education can help us appreciate the complexity of their lives and the range of challenges and opportunities they face and negotiate. The early weeks and months seem particularly fraught for most commencing non-traditional students. It would be a mistake to imagine that university curriculum – including scaffolded transition pedagogy and other institutional support strategies – can address all of those challenges.   Income insecurity and the challenge of juggling study with paid-work and other commitments make the task of settling in that much more difficult for less confident students or those from poorer or unsupportive families. These are areas where government and institutions could consult with students to work out some targeted interventions and new approaches. This doctoral study found that attending closely to what students have to say about education in their lives rewards the listener and may contribute to knowledge about young people's transitions in higher education.

Acknowledgements

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