

MATURE-AGE MEN'S EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION:  
AUSTRALIA AND ENGLAND COMPARED.

A LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Chapter One

### Mature-age male students: problem and definitions

This literature review was prepared in response to a growing awareness that there is a significant gap in the existing literature on transition to university and university experience of mature-age male undergraduates. Interest in the experiences of students making the transition into Higher Education has been prompted in part by the rapid expansion of the sector. Governments in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations, and most developed nations, have been intent on transforming higher education from an elite to a universal system in which more than 50% of potential applicants are enrolled in a degree in the belief that increasing the number of graduates will increase economic productivity and prosperity (Trow, 2006). Australia and the UK have both set ambitious targets. In Australia the *Review of Australian Higher Education [Bradley review]* set a target of 40% of young people (especially from low-SES backgrounds) to attain a minimum of a bachelor-level qualification by 2020 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008), while in England it was intended that by 2010 50% of 18-30-year-olds would have some experience of studying courses offered by higher education institutions (Higher Education Funding Council [HEFCE], 2003). The twin and, to some extent competing, aims of increasing opportunities to participate in higher education (as underpinned by values around social justice) and the importance ascribed to higher education as contributing to a nation's knowledge economy (signifying a more utilitarian and human capital approach) have been key drivers in terms of the access and widening participation policy agenda in both countries.

Given these drivers and the resulting changes in the policy context for higher education in the UK and Australia, there has been a move to open up higher education and move away from attracting only those applicants who were once described as 'traditional students' (Anderson & Vervoorn, 1983). Historically, traditional students were those coming from white, upper-middle and middle class backgrounds, usually educated at private schools, aged 17-19 when embarking on university study, and more often than not, male. Somewhat wryly, Anderson and Vervoorn (1983) described the traditional Australian student of the 1960s and early 70s:

... the son of a doctor, lawyer or someone else with a house in St Ives or Kew. Because his parents wanted him to have the best education money could buy they sent him to a private school, to study academic subjects and learn the importance of not getting his hands dirty. He went direct from school to college, avoiding the real world *en route* except for glimpses through the windscreen of the sports car his parents bought him. After a few years he too becomes a doctor or a lawyer, and so begins to accumulate the money necessary to build a house larger than his father's and to send his children to university (p. 1).

By the 1980s, the focus shifted to the recruitment of students under-represented within the existing undergraduate population: women, students from other culturally and linguistically diverse students, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and mature-age students (Gale & Parker, 2014). In the UK, the number of mature-age commencing undergraduates grew at a considerably faster rate than the number of students aged less than 21 up to the 1990s (Fuller, 2001), but has declined since then owing to a number of factors including changes to tuition fees and the overall economic outlook (Universities UK, 2014). As mature-age students are not a recognised equity group in Australia, exact figures for the same period are difficult to determine; however, the overall trend appears similar (Department of Education and Training, 2015). Despite these fluctuations, the emphasis on lifelong learning and university expansion has led to a substantial increase in the number of students aged in their twenties, thirties and forties enrolling after a significant gap in their education.

One consequence of these changes in enrolment patterns has been an increase in research into the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, including mature-age students. We now know, that in general terms, mature-age students are more likely to enter university without formal school qualifications, and that this increases with age. Their attrition rates are higher and timely completion rates are lower; however, their academic performance appears comparable to younger students in most cases (Kahu, 2014). Nevertheless, there are significant gaps in our knowledge about their experiences, motivation and aspirations.

There is a large body of literature, which dates back over 30 years, documenting the experiences of mature-age women returning to study or entering higher education for the

first time. We do not suggest that this topic has been exhausted, or that no further research needs to be undertaken. Nor can it be assumed that if men are in a minority in higher education that they are necessarily a disadvantaged minority (Berry, Foster, Lefever, Raven, Thomas & Woodfield, 2011). However, the experiences of mature-age male students who make the same journey into higher education are largely unknown. The primary purpose of this literature review is to provide a foundation for further research, and to act as a starting point for an analysis of current policies and procedures by university leaders and senior administrators.

The under-representation and under-achievement boys in education emerged as a research topic in the late 1970s and 1980s, coincident with emerging discourses surrounding masculinities. Interest in the under-achievement of boys coincided with an interest in the experiences of students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds who were enrolling in higher education in increasing numbers; for example, Little's (1975) *Faces on campus: A psycho-social study* examined the experiences of a number of female and male students from non-traditional backgrounds. However, there has been little academic research that dealt specifically with the experiences of men, particularly men from what has been termed 'disadvantaged' backgrounds or ethnic minority groups, in higher education over the same period in spite of the fact that proportion of male students relative to female students has been declining in both Australia and the UK (Berry et al., 2011; Matthews, 2014). Indeed, this scenario is not confined to Australia and the UK; across OECD countries, on average 54% of first year students are women. Only Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland and Turkey are the exceptions to this pattern (OECD, 2015). Exact comparisons between Australia and the UK are difficult owing to differences in the academic year and data reporting methods; however, in 2012-13 56.2% of British undergraduates were women (Higher Education Authority, 2013), while in Australia the figure was 55.6% in 2013 (Department of Education, 2013).

Limiting the scope of the review presented challenges. After discussion, we limited ourselves to examining what appeared to be the most relevant themes emerging from the questionnaire and interviews that formed the scoping study. As a consequence, we have discussed, but not examined in great detail, themes that we know to be relevant (such as boys' experiences of schooling), but which did not emerge from the data as of major

significance. Instead we have concentrated on the themes which did emerge, including poverty, class-based aspirations and gendered expectations of masculinity. At the same time, we are very aware that the intersection of poverty, class and gender has a profound impact on young people's experiences at school. In addition, the paucity of research into the experiences of male mature-age students obliged us to rely on a close reading of reports and papers on the experiences of all mature-age students in order to extract any reference to men than might be found therein.

Another challenge was the imprecise definitions of some of the key terms used in investigation of this topic. 'Mature-age students' may be defined as those who are more than 20 years of age, more than 22 years of age, or alternatively those who completed their secondary schooling at least three years prior to enrolling at university. Kahu (2014) defines mature-age students as those over 25 years of age in their first year of enrolment, pointing out that many, if not most, school leavers will turn 21 while at university. Bekhradnia (2009) notes that changes in the methodology used to calculate the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) have created uncertainty over the numbers of mature-age students enrolling for the first time, particularly mature-age men. In order to include as wide a range of responses and experiences as possible, this study has opted to use the lowest age limit of 20 years; however, we are mindful of the distinction between younger mature-age students (20-40 years) and older mature-age (40+ years) (Findsen & McEwen, 2012; Mallman & Lee, 2014a).

Initially, this review focused on research since the 1990s as it was not intended to be an exhaustive, historical account. However, the experiences of male students have not been examined in detail in almost three decades, and so we widened the parameters of our search to acknowledge earlier work and clarify the context of our study.

The review is divided into two sections – research into the reasons why some men are excluded from higher education or do not complete their degrees if they do enrol, and research that offers strategies to increase participation or improve retention. These sections are followed by our conclusions and recommendations for further research and action. The review closes with a select bibliography on both topics as a substantial amount of research

examines the causes of non-participation and attrition, before suggesting solutions, and we did not wish to list the same publications more than once.

## Chapter Two

### **Studies of reasons for non-participation and non-completion In higher education**

The discourse on widening participation is predicated on the assumption that graduating with a degree is a benefit to the individual and to society as a whole (Brennan, Durazzi & Sene, 2013). Just what is meant by a 'benefit' depends on the how the value of education is interpreted. If education is understood as having value in itself, then the exclusion of particular groups, including mature-age men is an injustice, even though many men continue to possess advantages in the labour market, since they are excluded for existential reasons outside their control. If, on the other hand, education is simply about ensuring an adequate supply of appropriately qualified personnel, then widening participation is an economic issue and the sex of the students is immaterial (Berkhedina, 2009) Education is understood to confer other benefits: human capital theory argues that higher levels of educational attainment correlate with higher productivity and increased skills (Boeren, Nicaise & Baert, 2010). Participation in higher education also leads to an increase in participation in social and cultural activities which promote health and well-being. Education, particularly education that continues into the post-compulsory years, is believed to increase social cohesion, and to reduce criminal and anti-social behaviour (BIS Research Paper No 146, 2013; Brennan et al., 2013; Jha & Polidano, 2016).

Over the last two decades, the issue of men's participation in higher education has grown in importance as enrolment figures for male undergraduate students have declined overall, and declined more sharply among men from particular sociocultural backgrounds. The gender gap is increasing (Hillman & Robinson, 2016); women are more likely than men to apply for a place at university and more likely to graduate. It would appear from a preliminary examination of enrolment and completion data in Australia and the UK that some men are being deterred from undertaking university level studies, notwithstanding policies in both countries that have made widening participation a priority (Bradley et al., 2008; Gale & Parker, 2013; Uden, 1996; Watson, 2006). Vincent-Lancrin (2008) suggested that the proportion of men in higher

education in the UK may drop as low as per cent by 2025. Research over the last decade indicates that men from white, working class backgrounds and culturally and linguistically diverse communities are the least likely to enter higher education and among the most likely to experience difficulty in making a successful transition to university study (Onuora, Merseyside, Hunt, Bhattacharyya, Woodfield, Mirza & Richardson, 2008).

This is an important issue for several reasons. Recent reports examining the future of work and modelling occupational change in Australia (Hajkowicz, Reeson, Rudd, Bratanova, Hodgers, Mason, & Boughen, 2016) and the United Kingdom (Störmer, Patscha, Prendergast, Daheim, Rhisiart, Glover & Beck, 2014) point to vast changes in the type of occupations available and also to the nature of employment. In Australia, it is anticipated that 50 percent of current jobs will be replaced by automation and/or computerisation by 2035 (Hajkowicz et al., 2016). *The future of work: Jobs and skills in 2030* (Störmer et al., 2014) did not include specific numbers relating to occupational change in the UK, but it stressed that the 'middle' of the workforce – middle-level, middle-income white collar jobs – is most at risk from changing work patterns and the need to develop new skills. Workers will need high level technical skills, but they will also require excellent problem solving skills and the capacity to work independently. Rather than trying to predict what jobs will exist, governments need to develop a broad general education that will provide a foundation on which people can build specific skills as required. If this scenario develops as expected, men from working class backgrounds and minority sociocultural groups are at risk of becoming marginalised in the new knowledge-based, globalised economy. Such a situation has significant social, as well as personal, consequences (Berry et al., 2011) and it is not surprising that policymakers are becoming uneasy about the existence of a substantial number of men in the community who are alienated, and who lack sufficient education to engage with the normal structures of society.

However, 'policymaking is not a zero-sum game in which you have to choose between caring about female disadvantage or the socio-economic gap or male underachievement. All three matter' (Hillman & Robinson, 2016, p.12). Where policymakers once argued that excluding women from higher education risked wasting valuable talent, we would argue that excluding men from certain sociocultural backgrounds is also detrimental to economic and social

progress. Moreover, as issues of educational disadvantage tend to be interconnected, neglecting the needs of men from low socioeconomic backgrounds or ethnic minorities does nothing to reduce inequality overall (Hillman & Robinson, 2016).

### **Excluded Men**

Veronica McGivney's (1999) *Excluded Men* is still cited as a seminal text on this topic. The book was motivated by her concern that men, particularly working class men, were missing from considerations of post-compulsory education and training. She wrote:

higher education data indicate that, despite the expansion of the sector, the overall social profile of students has not substantially changed: the majority still come from a middle class, and especially professional and managerial class, background... white British women tend more than men to engage in learning activities which are connected with self-development and which will expand their interests and activities and lead to educational progression. Men appear to be more single minded, focused and practical in their motivation to learn, seeking to further specific goals or particular interests ... men with low literacy levels, no or few qualifications or skills and a history of unemployment are underrepresented in all types of education and training provision, as indeed are women with these characteristics (pp. 4-8).

McGivney (1999) went on to argue that it was timely to examine the reasons for the absence of certain groups of men from organised education and training especially as it was a relatively neglected area of research. Writing a decade later, Person (2009) concurred, arguing that researchers have been so intent on distinguishing between the attitudes and behaviour of women and men, and between femininity and masculinity, that they have not systematically explored the wide variety of ways in which masculinity may be expressed by men from different cultural, religious and class backgrounds and how these might change over time. It would appear that nothing much has changed in the interim. Stone and O'Shea (2012) point out that much of the literature on mature-age students' experiences over the past 20 to 30 years focuses exclusively on the female experience, and indeed, this lack of information was a major prompt for this study.

As there is little published research on the gender gap in higher education enrolments from a male perspective, we have relied on interpretation of the literature about the experiences of female students, and mature-age female students in particular, to explain changes in the gender gap. Booth and Kee (2009) examined the proportionate growth of female students and suggested a number of reasons including changes to gender stereotyping that had previously discouraged women from enrolling at university, including the idea that a woman's primary role was to be a home maker and mother, or that women in the workforce were occupying positions that rightly belonged to men. Social changes led to women entering occupations and professions that had previously been regarded as belonging to men thus making investment in higher education worthwhile (Archer, Pratt & Phillips 2001). The availability of reliable contraception also made it possible for women to postpone child bearing until they had completed a university degree (Booth & Kee, 2009). Another significant factor is the impact of credentialism of what were typically female jobs. A generation ago, primary teachers and nurses were trained on the job, but these jobs now require a university degree. Privatisation and restructuring has led to the disappearance of many jobs in the civil service, offices, banks and shops that were acceptable to young women from lower middle class families, pushing young women towards degree courses in ways that have not applied to young men from similar backgrounds (Laming, 2012)

Working within a sociological framework, Burke (2009) notes that the unequal distribution of male and female students in British higher education, which persists in spite of the discourse surrounding widening participation, has been attributed in part to Thatcherism. It has been argued that Thatcher's economic and social policies undermined or destroyed working class men's role as the family provider and did irreparable harm to their sense of self-worth. However, she asserts that the perceived 'crisis of masculinity' (p. 82) is insufficient to account for this imbalance, particularly when her interviewees, all of whom were men, resorted to the discourse of 'natural' masculine traits such as laziness to protect themselves from the disheartening possibility that their potential would remain unrealised. Burke also argued that neoliberal individualisation works both with, and against, contemporary ideas of masculinities. Moreover, the argument about the relative disadvantage of female and male students begs the question of which female and which male students were thriving and which

were struggling to succeed. Disadvantage is complex, multi-layered and intersectional making it very difficult to determine the extent to which non-participation in higher education is the result of gender differences, ethnic or cultural differences, or other factors such as disability. It would seem more probable that the decision not to participate in higher education is the outcome of the interplay between some, or all, of these elements (Equality Challenge Unit, 2016).

Nevertheless, the impact of neoliberalism cannot be overlooked entirely. Writing in *The Guardian*, Mason (2016) reiterates the link between Thatcherism and low participation in higher education by working class men. He asserts that Thatcherism destroyed traditional English working class culture while denying working class men access to middle class culture. The result is that white working class boys and men have been left without a guiding narrative relating to education and employment. Even when they succeed in gaining entry to universities, male students from non-traditional or disadvantaged backgrounds continue to be vulnerable. It has been argued that male students often receive preferential treatment in classrooms (Stalker & Prentice, 1998); however, Kell (2006) found that mature-age male physiotherapy students were disadvantaged by the curriculum, and achieved lower grades overall than expected based on their initial learning profiles. Similarly, Laming and Horne (2013) found that mature-age male students enrolled in teaching courses often struggled to adjust to the attitudes and expectations of their instructors and supervising teachers.

In a similar vein to Bowl (2003), Morris (2009) argues that mature students from under-represented groups stand to lose out in a higher education system where the overall resource for teaching has diminished. Learning is seen as a largely individual endeavour and the student is more often than not constructed as being unencumbered by responsibility and able to negotiate the culturally-laden and tacit norms and behaviours expected within the university environment (Mallman & Lee, 2014a).

### **School, Access and Participation**

Although the topic of boys' schooling is not a major focus of this review, we have included some research on this topic since the capacity to undertake university studies depends to a

significant degree on young people's experiences at school. In examining the educational aspirations and experiences of secondary school students, James (2000) argued that a large part of the school population lacked the skills and knowledge to contemplate any form of further education, let alone university study. It is probable that a substantial number of those unprepared students are male. Collins, Kenway and McLeod (2000) found that a greater proportion of Australian girls than boys completed secondary school (with some regional variations), and that the average girl in Year 12 outperformed the average boy. They concluded that the postcompulsory years of secondary school, i.e. Year 11 and Year 12, had a different significance for young men and women based on their employment prospects and gendered expectations of their future roles.

Research on boys' relatively poor performance at school divides into two sections – research that highlights individual factors and research that focuses on systemic reasons. An example of the former is Sax (2007). He identifies four factors, which in his opinion are driving the 'epidemic' of unmotivated boys and underachieving young men in schools. These include:

- changes to school structure and pedagogy,
- video games,
- medications for ADHD, and
- the prevalence of endocrine disruptors such as polyethylene terephthalate in the environment.

One of the changes in schools to which Sax (2007) refers is a greater emphasis on academic learning at the expense of sport and creative pursuits. In his opinion this has advantaged girls, who are better at sedentary activities including reading and writing, at the expense of boys who require more activity. Blaming attempts to treat female and male students equally is not a new phenomenon (Lingard, 1998). As work towards the *Australian Gender Equity Framework* (1997) progressed, the popular discourse on boys' academic performance gave way to stories about poor boys, lost boys, damaged boys, under-fathered boys and boys at the mercy of feminist teachers. In short, in the minds of many policymakers, the problem was that boys were not allowed to be boys (Elium & Elium, 1992; Gilbert, 1998). In discussing men's poor performance in higher education relative to women, Berry et al. (2011) noted that the personality traits which are cited as probable reasons for poor performance, such as risk taking and assertiveness, were once regarded as the reason for men's academic superiority.

Nevertheless, it is incontrovertible that some boys and young men are not succeeding at school and, as a consequence their ability to progress to university is limited.

In response to the apparent crisis in boy's education, a number of researchers began to differentiate between students' experiences. Among the earliest research to address this directly, Teese, Davis, Charlton and Polesel (1995) found that although individual boys (and girls) make decisions that have long reaching effects on their post-school destinations, the ways in which schools, procedures and the curriculum affect those decisions are more powerful within genders than between genders. Upper middle class boys have no difficulty in negotiating the path through school and on to university, but lower class boys face obstacles at every level and are outperformed by lower class girls (Teese, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Teese, Davis, Charlton and Polesel, 1997). These arguments have been confirmed by analysis of data from the destination surveys of thousands of school leavers in the Australian state of Victoria (Teese, Polesel & Mason, 2001; Teese, Polesel & Mason, 2004).

With a nod to social Darwinism, Booth and Kee (2009) noted that girls began to out-perform boys at school from the 1970s onwards in literacy and numeracy with significant impacts on performance in the non-compulsory years and post-school destinations. As socially constructed barriers were removed or reduced, capable female students displaced less-capable male students. While there may be some truth in this argument, this explanation overlooks the ways in which school experiences are mediated through students' sociocultural background. This argument was made more than 30 years ago in England by Willis (1977), who described the ways in which working class boys often resisted the middle class values of schooling and, in the process, became embedded within their class status. In France, Bourdieu and his colleagues outlined the ways in which the education system reproduced the class system (Bourdieu, 1974; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), and the nature of masculinity (Bourdieu, 2001). Other studies, for example James (2000), James (2002) and Whelan (2011), examined particular aspects of the process in the Australian context. Laming (2012) argued that there has been a long tradition of marginalising students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and that the process remains the same, although the ethnic identity of the students has changed over the previous thirty years from European, to South-East Asian and then to African.

In the UK, questions have been raised about the validity of the discourse on 'widening participation'. Gorard, Rees, Fevre and Furlong (1998) argue that patterns of participation in education are predictable and form lifelong 'trajectories' for specific social groups. The key predictors they identified can be discerned quite early in an individual's life since they comprise the period in which the person was born, their place of birth and subsequent migration patterns, their gender, their family background, their experience of initial schooling, and the interactions between them. Policy may be directed at 'overcoming barriers' to participation in university education, but Gorard et al. (1998) conclude that many of these policies are misguided – too little and far too late to make a significant difference. Universities talk enthusiastically about the need to enrol students from diverse backgrounds, but this is at odds with their behaviour. Conscious and unconscious practices continue to exclude mature, working class and ethnic minority students. Brine and Waller (2004) conclude that widening access has meant access to the new, post-1992 universities, which have been more prepared to accommodate students from diverse backgrounds. Elite universities such as the Russell Group in the UK and the Group of Eight in Australia have not felt the need to make substantial changes to their practices since they are assured of securing sufficient enrolments. Where they have accepted students from recognised equity groups or diverse backgrounds, they have been able to select those individuals who appear most likely to adapt to the culture of an elite university. Both male and female students from non-traditional or disadvantaged backgrounds report feeling alienated on campus and unsure of what is expected of them and unwelcome to varying degrees (Bowl, 2003; McGivney, 2006; Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009; Waller, 2006; Widoff, 1999), but there is less information available about male students, in part because they are less often likely to respond to surveys or requests to participate in research (Sax, Gilmartin & Bryant, 2003).

Mature-age students do appear to feel the stigma of being different in an organisational culture that is dominated by younger students (Mallman & Lee, 2014a; Mallman & Lee, 2014b, Waller, 2005), but once again we know far more about the experiences of mature-age women than men. Stone and O'Shea (2012) examined the experiences of women who were enrolled in higher education although their opportunities to take this step as school leavers did not exist, or were forestalled for some reason. They found that mature-age students are more likely to gain entry to higher education via alternative pathways. We may infer that

university entrance policies and regulations affect men who left school without a matriculation qualification, or who have been outside of the formal education system for more than three years, in similar ways. The importance of an intermediate stage between secondary school and university, whether it takes the form of an access course at university, a Foundation Degree at college or additional support after enrolment, is well recognised (McGivney, 2001; Sargant, 2000). If they are to succeed in higher education, mature-age students will need to ensure that they have the relevant skills, and even more important, that they understand the nature of the path they have chosen (Harris, 2009).

In considering why some institutions have been unable to meet the European Union target of 12.5 per cent participation in lifelong learning, Boeren et al. (2010) suggest that there are three factors which have an impact on participation:

- the individual, including their sociocultural background and individual experience;
- the educational provisions available to applicants;
- and the socio-economic context, including the authorities that regulate both the demand and supply of education and their attitudes to participation and inclusion.

Examining adult education programmes, which in many cases provide the first step to higher education for mature-age students, Desjardins, Rubenson and Milana (2006) conclude that many individuals with a high need for learning are unlikely to participate either because they do not recognise their need or they are unable to access the educational opportunities available in their community for some reason.

Rational choice theory suggests that people will conduct a cost-benefits analysis when faced with an important decision such as undertaking a university degree (Allingham, 2002). The discourse on widening participation assumes that prospective students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds will look for the best return on their investment in post-school education, taking into account both direct costs such as tuition fees and indirect costs such as additional child care and transport, and the intangible costs of balancing house work and study and loss of income. They will evaluate different types of education and decide rationally that the benefits of a degree, such as a more highly paid job, outweigh any disadvantages. The difficulty with this assumption is that benefits such as a higher salary are

usually deferred while the costs are current, and people are often less able to envisage the rewards that come from completing a degree (Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert & Muspratt, 2004; Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004).

Mature-age students of both sexes may feel uncomfortable in social situations on campus owing to their age and previous experiences (Waller, 2005; 2006). They may lack confidence in class as they may not have similar levels of academic literacy to their younger peers. Familiarity with information technology is also a major hurdle for some older students, but the nature and impact of this discomfort, and the possible reason that men have greater difficulty in seeing themselves as graduates, lie in gender expectations and men's understanding of masculinity.

### **Masculinities and Class**

Assumptions about gender and masculinity have a profound impact on participation and retention rates among male students and these two concepts are deeply intertwined. In Australia, Richard Teese (2000) argued that social class is the most important single factor determining young people's progress through school and into work or further study. Laming's (2012) study of the connection between family background, the intention to attend university and the type of degree chosen supports this conclusion. Gorard and Smith (2007) concluded that inequalities between socioeconomic groups in England appear early in life and remain important in attainment at school, in the range of the options available and selected at key points during secondary school in the decision to participate in higher education or not. They recognised that there are specific barriers to participation in higher education, and that overcoming these may be an important step for some individuals, but argue that the role of these barriers is marginal in contrast to systemic issues. Gender relations and masculinities reflect both the sociocultural background of the individual and their temporal context; they produce and reproduce discourses of power; they are multiple rather than unitary or monolithic (Bowl & Tobias, 2012; Widoff, 1999).

Tobias (2012) recognises a range of masculinities across time in a number of former British colonies. He identifies gentry masculinities, bourgeois masculinities and hard masculinities, all of which may manifest in different ways in a variety of contexts. Gentry masculinities,

which have influenced elite forms of secondary and higher education, have been challenged by social, economic, political and cultural forces in the last four decades by other forms of masculinity, particularly bourgeois models of masculinity that draw on evangelical, utilitarian, pragmatic and liberal philosophies to produce rationalist, regulated and managerialist discourses on masculinity. These bourgeois masculinities are attuned to entrepreneurial, individualist and corporatist ideologies that have supported the expansion of elite forms of education as well as technical and general education to assimilate the leadership of working men. Traditionally, hard masculinities 'have supported anti-intellectual ideologies and contributed to the emergence of sharp gender divisions in society' (Tobias, 2012, p. 69).

McGivney (2004) argues that men in the western world are often regarded as suffering from uncertainty and insecurity as a result of changing employment patterns and diminishing distinctions between male and female roles. As a consequence, working class men continue to present a specific model of hard masculinity as mainstream on the one hand, while on the other they demonstrate anxiety and anger that this role is becoming unviable (Whitman 2013). According to McGivney (2004), men's attitudes to education are closely linked to a general malaise and loss of identity resulting from the rapid social and economic changes. She links this brand of masculine identity with unsatisfactory experiences of school, 'laddish' behaviour and 'fear of failure' which may also typify a certain kind of working class Australian masculinity represented by the 'bloke'. Prominent among other barriers to non-compulsory education is the importance of work. In the minds of some Australian and British men, engaging in learning is not what 'real' men do and they will lose face with their peers if they depart from the established norms of male behaviour to opt for further study no matter how lucrative the rewards might be. This model of masculinity has lost its pre-eminence as the number of jobs requiring hard physical labour has declined. Other models of masculinity have emerged alongside skilled occupations that rely on different dynamics (Connell, 1995), nevertheless it is important to note that different masculinities are produced in the same cultural or institutional setting as well as in different settings (Burke, 2009). Schools tend to direct 'unruly' boys, who appear to be developing an oppositional masculinity, into less academic streams or into vocational programmes, whereas boys from the same milieu who conform to the school's requirements and seem to have an aptitude for academic work will be pushed towards university, sometimes against their better judgement (Connell, 1995;

Laming, 2012). Connell (1995) insists that recognising diversity in masculinities is not enough; schools (and by implication university admission programmes) must also recognize the *relations* between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination.

Following a detailed study of primary schools from a wide variety of social, economic, sociocultural and geographic contexts in Australia, Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert and Muspratt (2002) concluded that many boys were reflecting the expectations of their families and teachers. They were careful to stress that boys are not a homogenous group; however, most boys share some common experiences of *being* a boy in Australian society, and are influenced by dominant discourses of masculinity to a greater or lesser degree depending on individual factors including cultural background and class.

The importance of these common elements is borne out by the work of Wolf, Jenkins and Vignoles (2006) who conducted an ethnographic study of students participating in a university preparation course that had been running for more than 20 years. They identified three types of students; the nomenclature used was derived from the students' own words:

1. 'Banana-heads' – defined themselves as poor academic achievers because they had low grades and family problems, were rebellious and too easily influenced by their peers.
2. 'Dead-middle students' – accounting for over a quarter of the students, they had average grades and although capable, they did not exert themselves. They often believed that they were 'picked on' by teachers.
3. 'Full-bore academics' – of whom there were only four, received good grades, liked studying and were well organised.

Arguably, one of the most profound things to come out of this research, despite the typologies, was that the students were very well aware of the risks they were taking in returning to study, but believed that it was worth taking the risk because from their perspective 'there was nowhere else to go' (p. 21) if they were to improve their life circumstances.

Constructions of masculinity in relation to class and ethnicity are explored in Archer et al.'s (2001) study drawing on discussion group data involving 64 working class men drawn from diverse ethnic groups. Participation in higher education was, for the most part, linked to 'negative, undesirable images of masculinity (socially inadequate men who enjoy study) that were incompatible with, and derided in terms of, particular (working class) masculine ideals and demands of 'doing working class masculinity' (p. 436). These views were found to have an influence upon some men's decisions not to embark on a programme in higher education. In contrast, Findsen and McEwen (2012) found that men over the age of 50 were at an advantage in this respect. Their greater age, or established status with their communities, allowed them to let go of stereotypes about masculinity and apply for courses that were personally rewarding.

This struggle in terms of the self and forging a new identity (or not, as the case may be) is in keeping with the gap between the aims and aspirations around widening participation and the lived experience for many working class students in transition within a university: higher education 'has become a mass system in its public structures but remains an elite one in its private instincts' (Scott, 1995, p. 2). This is also borne out in the substantial review of widening participation literature carried out by Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Admett and Slack (2006) when they observed that higher education was not intended to be available to all and is, unlike other lifelong educational opportunities, based on selective entry. Particular forms of qualification for higher education act as a 'substitute variable summing up the prior individual, social and economic determinants of 'success' at school and beyond' (p. 124.)

Moreover, there is no agreement on the direction of causality. Some researchers, such as Walters (2000) and Burke (2002), suggest that a desire for self-development or discovery drives people to enrol at university, while others, including Adams (1993) and Bowl (2003) suggest that self-development/discovery are consequences of returning to higher education. Mercer's (2007) conclusion on the topic is worth reproducing in full:

For the non-traditional adults in this study there was an expressed relationship between academic and personal development. It is suggested that the latter should not be viewed as a 'further benefit' but an important and integral part of successfully negotiating the learning environment for such students. This is essential, for if, as practitioners, we are to truly embrace non-traditional students

within the academy we need to understand their experiences. The role of personal growth and development, epitomized here by a changed sense of self, also deserves such status because, as Wenger (1998, p.263) indicates, this represents education in its deepest sense which 'concerns the opening of identities – exploring new ways of being that lie beyond our current state' (p. 31).

It appears that working class students are particularly vulnerable to the notion that if they have not achieved academic success, it is due to their lack of endeavour (Reay, 1998; Reay, 2001; Reay, Crozier, Clayton, Colliander & Grinstead, 2007; Yorke, 2000).

### **Aspirations and Employment**

Generally speaking, prospective students applying for a university place expect that acquiring a degree will have an economic benefit. They expect to be able to obtain a better job – one that is reasonably well paid, not overly strenuous, interesting and well-regarded in the community. There is a connection between higher education and social mobility, but the nature of that connection is contentious and in the process of changing. In their study of the occupational aspirations and attainment of young British men, Bond and Saunders (1999) examined two traditions in the research on social mobility which privilege agency or structure respectively. The traditions differ in both the questions they seek to answer and the methodologies used to answer them; consequently, they produce widely different explanations for the same phenomena. Using the work of John Goldthorpe, who measured changes in upward social mobility over time based on occupational status, Bond and Saunders (1999) argue the conventional sociological explanation of academic success is a product of the class system and they enumerate such factors as:

cultural capital in middle-class and working-class homes (Bourdieu 1974), the susceptibility of working-class boys to anti-school peer group pressures (Willis 1977), the supposed bias in the educational system favouring middle-class linguistic codes (Bernstein, 1965), the operation of streaming and setting as disguised mechanisms of social selection within the education system (Abraham, 1995), and the impact of social and physical deprivation in the home, such as lack of parent support and ambition, or physical overcrowding (Douglas et al., 1968) (Bond & Saunders, 1999, p. 218)

However, they also suggest that it is equally plausible that middle class children are more likely than working class children to make more of an effort with their studies for a range of sociocultural reasons, and that they may in fact have higher levels of ability. This perspective

rests on the type of social Darwinism inherent in a meritocracy thesis. According to Bond and Saunders (1999), these two theses are not necessarily at odds, and both social conditions of existence and motivation/ability may play roles in social origins and class destinations. They offer a third alternative, which seeks to address the relative importance of different factors that contribute to people's ability to realise particular occupational levels. They state that:

the status attainment approach has generally taken as its dependent variable some measure of occupational status organized as a graded hierarchy, and has tried to predict individuals' positions on this hierarchy with reference to various attributes such as their socio-economic background (e.g. parents' occupation and education levels), their education and qualifications, and their measured intellectual ability. This has entailed the construction of path models in which the standardized effects on occupational status of the various independent and mediating variables are computed, and the overall model fit is assessed according to the proportion of variance in occupational status that is explained by all the variables in the model (Bond & Saunders, 1999, p. 219).

Bond and Saunders (1999) argue that class background is a small part of the explanation as to why some school leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds aspire to university and are able to make the transition, while other are not. They acknowledge the importance of parents in raising aspiration and encouraging diligence, but they remain convinced that individuals' own characteristics, talents and attributes such as their motivation, their pursuit of qualifications and, above all, their ability – are the principal causes of differences in outcomes.

In contrast, Scanlon (2008), who notes that 'adult motivation for returning to study...is one of the most widely researched [issues] in adult education' (p. 21), offers a framework for understanding mature-age students' motivations for returning to study within the context of the Australian political economy. There are clear connections between private aspirations and national expectations, and aspirations to increase participation, particularly of low socio-economic status members of society:

There has been an unqualified acceptance of the discourse of human capital theory in policy texts. The result, Kenway et al. (1994) argue, is a fantasy amongst Australian education policy-makers that they will soon have a perfect match between education and the new economy. This link between education and economic prosperity is unquestioned, therefore, it is seen as simply a matter of

getting the link right. In turn this has led to the reconstitution of education and training through the conflation of the traditional models of general and vocational education along with the development and implementation of competency-based education and training. This reflects the way Government educational policies, specifically in the post-compulsory sector, have become increasingly directed towards economic goals (Wolf et al., 2006) (Scanlon, 2008, p.21).

Kenway and Hickey-Moody (2011) argue that strategies which aim to increase non-traditional students' participation in higher education are simplistic and at risk of being ineffective if they focus only on getting a qualification for a better job. To be effective, policies that address widening participation must be informed by research on the links between students' aspirations and changing life experiences, particularly with regard to the many, often subtle, ways that power and privilege operate to encourage or undermine their plans (Reay, Ball & David, 2002; Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001). It is ill-conceived to consider that all young men either do, or do not, aspire to participate in higher education. Kenway and Hickey-Moody (2011) insist that 'aspiration is a disposition, an attitude, a psychological and individual state' (p. 152), which has its roots in social, cultural and spatial inequalities. In their opinion, the 'normalization' of aspiration towards higher education is tantamount to symbolic violence. In summary, their theoretical perspective states:

'Official' school knowledge can be likened to de Certeau's (1984) map knowledge. It is an atlas of knowledge trajectories, a command geography. It identifies a set number of knowledge grids and shows how they intersect. But official school knowledge can also be likened to the tour guide-book, for it 'sends' students along these predetermined grid lines. Indeed, it conventionally sends certain social class groupings of students along particular lines. It also ascribes more merit to certain lines on the grid than others and, in so doing, helps to distribute students' life chances (Kenway & Hickey-Moody, 2011, p. 153).

The idea that there is nowhere else to go is an important one when considering the motivations of male university applicants. Changes in employment patterns and the shift from a manufacturing to knowledge-based economy have disadvantaged young men, while

changing employment patterns and credentialism have encouraged young women to enrol at university. Teaching and nursing, which have long been popular occupations for girls from mid to low socioeconomic status backgrounds, became degree courses in the 1980s. Privatisation and rationalisation of services has led to the disappearance of many of the 'good jobs' in banks, government departments, private companies and other large retailers, particularly in regional areas. Girls were pushed into undertaking further study no matter their personal inclination (Laming, 2012; Laming, 2010; Whelen, 2011).

The motivations of mature-age university applicants of both sexes are less well-understood. Research needs to take into account adults' immediate motivation and opportunity as well as social factors, including their previous experiences and history. It is likely that the desire to attain a degree is motivated by pragmatic reasons among mature-age students, particularly those from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and those who are first in family (Davey & Jamieson, 2003), but it is also likely that there are differences in motivation between female and male mature-age students. In a UK-wide study of adult learning, Sargant (2000) found that men were more likely than women to undertake study for work-related reasons and that considerably more employed men, than unemployed men, were engaged in some form of study. It is also supported by Cleary's (2007) study of Scottish men enrolled in further education; they preferred short, vocationally oriented courses that would equip them with specific skills and knowledge and let them return to work as quickly as possible.

While it is simplistic to assume that all students from less prestigious sociocultural backgrounds are driven to enrol for purely instrumental reasons (Waller, 2006; Widoff, 1999) there is a strong correlation between class and attitudes to education (Laming, 2012; Reay, 1998; Reay & Ball, 1998). There are students from families with no experience of higher education who are deeply engaged with the idea of university education as a path to a better life (Mallman & Lee, 2014b). However, the idea of the 'self' as an always unfinished project is to a large extent the province of the middle classes. In reality, returning to education as a mature student may be a period of profound self-development, change and growth; yet credentialism is inherent in many of the accounts of the reasons why mature-aged people return to, or embark upon higher education (Mercer, 2007). Cleary (2007) noted that working

class men's preference for short courses was grounded in their view of themselves as breadwinners; time out of the workforce for study unrelated to work was an unimaginable luxury. It must be recognised that the reasons underpinning the decision to enrol are multi-faceted (Findsen & McEwen, 2012). There are mature-age students who are motivated by a desire to find more satisfying employment *and* to change some aspect of themselves (Walters, 2000).

A process of change or self-discovery, such as described above, may entail losing something of one's self and becoming something/someone entirely different. However, there is no consensus on the nature of this change. Reay's (2001) often-cited article, *Finding or losing yourself? Working-class relationships to education*, examines the experiences of working class, mature-aged students, using a Bourdieuan theoretical framework. Reay (2001) argues that although 'finding' oneself through university study is a dominant topic in the research, it is essentially a middle class pursuit. As the title of her article implies, in attempting to 'find themselves' through university study, many working class students 'lose themselves'. Underpinning her argument is Green's (1990) assertion that England provides the most explicit example of 'the use of schooling by a dominant class to secure hegemony over subordinate groups' (Green, 1990, cited in Reay, 2001, p. 333) is prevalent in the education system. Reay's (2001) assessment of the class implications of education policy is equally valid in Australia (Teese, 2000; Teese & Polesel, 2003).

Reay (2001) asserts that the middle class commitment to educating working class children in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was not motivated by philanthropy. Working class education was different in every conceivable way from the reformers' version ideal of middle class education and in her opinion was a way of ensuring that the subordinate class would acquiesce in their subjugation. The mismatch between the type of education most working class children and adolescents receive, and what is expected in higher education (or at least in the more elite universities), adds another dimension to the idea of losing oneself – they may not be able to succeed in their new environment, but they are unable to go back to their old ways of thinking either. Ultimately the factors governing reasons for participation and non-participation in higher education are complex, multi-faceted and rooted in contextual factors that require further investigation.

## Chapter Three

### Reports on Strategies for Increasing Participation

Government policy in Australia and the UK has promoted the idea of widening participation in higher education by non-traditional students since the early 1990s. Policies and programmes intended to increase participation by students from diverse backgrounds tend to focus on distinct aspects of transition to university depending on the way in which the policymakers have interpreted the issues preventing access or retention.

Gale and Parker (2014) argue that student transition is conceptualised in higher education research, policy and practice in three distinct ways:

- induction: sequentially defined periods of adjustment involving pathways of inculcation, from one institutional and/or disciplinary context to another;
- development: qualitatively distinct stages of maturation involving trajectories of transformation from one student and/or career identity to another;
- becoming: a perpetual series of fragmented movements involving whole-of-life fluctuations in lived reality or subjective experience, from birth to death.

Approaches based on the concept of transition as an induction process frequently use metaphors relating to a pathway or journey into higher education in which the students pass various milestones. The emphasis is on learning to navigate institutional norms and procedures within a relatively fixed structure. Transition is perceived as a linear progression through chronological stages from first year to completion. Activities tend to focus on orientation for students and professional development for significant staff including support staff who provide 'just-in-time' information on university procedures. Specialised training is often provided on 'first year pedagogy' to academic staff teaching first year students. All of this is intended to assist students who may undergo crises as a result of culture shock.

Developmental approaches describe transition to university as a process of transforming from one identity to another, or of maturation. Here the emphasis is on navigating new

sociocultural norms and expectations, but as in approaches based on the concept of induction, progress is linear, cumulative and non-reversible as students develop discrete, singular, consecutive identities. Developmental approaches regard student crises as critical incidents in the process of character formation (assuming that the student receives appropriate support and passes through the crisis).

In contrast, approaches that are based on the concept of transition to university as a process of becoming highlight students' subjective or lived experience. They describe transition as rhizomatic, zigzag or spiral arguing that students often navigate multiple identities that are fragmented and fluctuate throughout their enrolment and beyond. According to this approach, any crisis that a student might experience is neither period nor stage specific and not necessarily problematic.

Policies and programmes intended to increase participation by students from diverse backgrounds have focused on distinct aspects of transition to university depending on the way in which the policymakers have conceptualised transition and interpreted the issues preventing access or retention. However, many policies have tended to adopt the first perspective identified by Gale and Parker (2014). Often they regard students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds and ethnic minorities, and mature-age students, as being on a journey into higher education. The idea of 'barriers to participation', and thus a focus on the removal of such barriers, has proved to be an attractive one. The majority of funds allocated under the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) go to outreach programs designed to raise awareness among young people who might not otherwise have considered university as a post-school destination, and access or bridging programs to assist applicants who do not have the usual entry qualifications. Less funding is devoted to supporting students after enrolment or investigating ways of reducing attrition (Department of Education and Training, 2016).

Outreach programs that raise awareness have proliferated, and some have achieved considerable success (Scull & Cuthill, 2010). However, the utility of the barriers metaphor has been questioned by a number of researchers, notably, by Gorard et al. (2006) who emphasise that reasons for non- participation in higher education are more complex and involve the

'lifecourse' of individuals. This view was reiterated by Watson (2006) in a discussion paper for the UK's higher education funding body, HEFCE.

### **Widening Participation**

Universities in Australia (Gale & Tranter, 2011) and the UK (Watson & Taylor, 1998) were elite institutions until the 1960s. Students were typically upper-middle class and privately educated. In all probability their parents were also graduates (Anderson & Vervoorn, 1983). Changing demographics in the post-war period led to an increase in the number of students who did not fit this stereotype; however, change was slow and research into students' transition to university and the experiences of first year students was sporadic until the mid-1990s when a more systematic approach was developed (Nelson, Clarke, Kift & Creagh, 2011). There were a variety of reasons for this change in interest level; however, in Australia, the impact of two Commonwealth government reports cannot be overlooked.

In 1988 the Commonwealth released the White Paper, *Higher Education: A policy statement* (Dawkins, 1988), which stated the government's intention to expand the university sector and make it more responsive to the needs of the economy. It also signalled the government's intention to develop a national statement on equity and a set of guidelines for universities to use in developing their individual policies. This statement, *A fair chance for all: National and institutional planning for equity in higher education* (Dawkins, 1990), identified six equity groups as being significantly under-represented and marks the beginning of efforts to open up university enrolment to students from diverse backgrounds. The groups identified were:

- people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds,
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,
- women, particularly in non-traditional courses and postgraduate study,
- people with disabilities,
- people from non-English-speaking backgrounds,
- people from rural and isolated areas.

Mature-age students were not included in the list; however, it was understood that many of the potential students coming from one or more of these equity groups would also be older

as their opportunities to proceed to university directly from school would have been severely limited.

Since 1995, the Australian Commonwealth department of education (under various names) has collected extensive data on access, participation, retention and success for students from designated equity groups. This data enabled the creation of policies and programs intended to encourage students from recognised equity groups and other 'non-traditional' backgrounds, who were often the first in their family to apply for a place at university. In many respects these policies and programs were successful, particularly with regard to women. In fact, the increase in the number of women students in higher education is the success story of the last 40 years and the Australian government had ceased to identify women as an equity group in their own right by 2000.

Much of the early research on students from diverse backgrounds was concerned with access. Australian researchers began to examine the experiences of students entering university; for example, McInnis, James and McNaught (1995) and Pargetter, McInnis, James, Evans, Peel and Dobson (1998) examined the experiences of first year students. Subsequently, particular attention focussed on the experiences of students belonging to one or more equity group; for example, Alloway et al. (2004) focussed on rural students, while Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite and Godfrey (2004) looked at mature-age rural students. It was expected that a better understanding of the factors that had impeded applicants' progression to university, and their experience as students following enrolment, would enable universities to determine the best way to support students from diverse backgrounds through their studies.

Research in the United Kingdom followed a similar approach, although change does not appear to have been precipitated by a single seminal report comparable to *A Fair Chance for All* (Dawkins, 1990). Instead, a series of reports or papers dating back to the Robbins Report in 1963 outlined the inequalities of the traditional elite model of higher education and offered suggestions for changes in policies and selection procedures (Greenbank, 2002; Thomas, 2002). By the mid-1990s, it was generally accepted that increasing participation in education, including university education, by underrepresented groups was necessary to improve

economic competitiveness and to enable all to have an equal opportunity of sharing in the benefits of growth (Uden, 1996).

In terms of widening participation, 1996 was a significant year. The government commissioned the Dearing Inquiry and HEFCE commissioned a detailed examination of participation by non-traditional students (Hogarth, Maguire, Pitcher & Purcell, 1997). The Dearing Inquiry was charged with making recommendations on the purpose and scope of higher education funding, including support for students, to support its development over the next 20 years. Among the main recommendations in the final report were that:

- the provision of higher education be expanded to allow for widening participation, particularly among women, ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities;
- there should be diversity of provision of higher education;
- public funding of institutions should take more account of student choice.

Without question, the way in which these recommendations were interpreted and implemented was changed by the results of 1997 general election, which occurred between the commissioning of the inquiry and publication of the final report; yet the Dearing Report marks an important, if limited, development in the discourse on widening participation. To a large extent, the Dearing Report focussed on getting students from disadvantaged or non-traditional backgrounds to apply for a university place, but it ignored their experiences of university after enrolment and did not consider how the universities might respond to these students (Greenbank, 2006).

The HEFCE report, *The Participation of Non-traditional Students in Higher Education* (Hogarth, Maguire, Pitcher & Purcell, 1997), was also concerned primarily with access and took the step of defining non-traditional students as those who had at least one the following characteristics:

- from an ethnic minority group;
- had a long-term disability;
- possessed non-standard qualifications on entry to higher education;
- were aged over 25 years on entry to university;
- were from lower socio-economic groups of origin.

In contrast to the Australian report, *A Fair Chance for All* (Dawkins, 1990), HEFCE identified mature-age students as underrepresented in higher education, and therefore an equity group, but did not mention gender. The study followed the pattern of analysing and comparing the earnings, labour market participation and characteristics of traditional and non-traditional students. It included the results of a survey of 2500 students who graduated in 1996 from 15 higher education institutions located in England about their experiences, and added five case studies of higher education institutions to identify, in general terms, the costs and benefits to the institution of enrolling non-traditional students (Hogarth et al., 1997). Information about student characteristics was then used to construct guidelines for the universities on ways of achieve the goal of widening participation in the form of a good practice guide (HEFCE, 2001). The guide contained four main sections:

1. strategic issues relating to the preparation and development of a comprehensive widening participation strategy;
2. activities to widen participation at each stage of the student life-cycle (aspiration raising, pre-entry activities, admission, first term or semester, moving through the course, and employment);
3. a discussion of student success that draws the previous themes together;
4. support available for institutions from the HEFCE.

More recent research on the topic of increasing participation and/or reducing attrition among applicants from diverse backgrounds has tended to evaluate existing initiatives; for example, Krause, Hartley, James and McInnis (2005) evaluated a decade's worth of research into the experiences of first year students, while Devlin and O'Shea (2011) revisited institutional policy and practice in supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In the UK, Owen, Green, Pitcher and Maguire (2000) reported on ethnic minority students' achievements in education and employment. Bekhradnia (2009) examined past trends in the participation of female and male students, and both young and mature-age students, to produce a detailed analysis of the situation and determine at least some of the causal factors. In Australia, Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis (2015) reviewed findings from two decades of research into student diversity. Other researchers elected to focus on the circumstances of particular groups of students; for example, Stevenson (2012) examined the experiences of black and

ethnic minority students. Nevertheless, participation and retention among students from underrepresented groups has continued to cause concern.

Special mention must be made of the Australian First Year in Higher Education Centre, created in the 1990s as a focal point for academic staff and practitioners working to enhance students' experience of their first year in higher education and to disseminate relevant information. Publications emanating from the Centre, and from the annual conference on first year experience, run into the hundreds. However, work by Kift and Nelson (and their colleagues) is especially notable, not just for the number of publications they have produced, but also for the manner in which their work reflects the evolution of a holistic approach to supporting students from diverse backgrounds and reducing attrition. For example, Kift (2003) addresses approaches to teaching first year law students, Kift (2004) extends this to discuss ways of engaging all first year students in their learning to support transition, Nelson and Kift (2005) argue that an awareness of student transition needs to be embedded into all university policies and procedures. Two years later, Nelson, Kift, Humphreys and Harper (2006) promoted the idea of a holistic approach that included attention to pedagogy, provision of support services and opportunities for students to develop meaningful relationships with their peers. Where the initial work was rather narrowly focussed on specific groups of first year students, it has evolved to into an approach that acknowledges the experiences of all commencing students (including mature-age students) who follow a wide range of pathways into university (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith and McKay, 2012) and has incorporated students' responses to their experiences (Devlin & O'Shea, 2012).

While the First Year in Higher Education Centre kept interest in the issues surrounding access and participation alive over an extended period, the release of the Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, et al., 2008) and the creation of the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) attracted widespread attention and led to renewed interest among researchers. Better known as the Bradley Report, the review examined issues of access, participation, academic success, and long term outcomes for students, and revisited issues first raised in *A Fair Chance for All* (Dawkins, 1990). Funded by the Commonwealth Department of Education, the NCSEHE's purpose was to inform public policy and institutional

practice, in order to improve higher education participation and success for marginalised and disadvantaged people.

One of the most important reports published around this time was commissioned by Universities Australia with the aim of renewing the sector's emphasis on equity and exploring new policy options for achieving equity. *Participation and equity: a review of the participation in higher education of people from low socioeconomic backgrounds and Indigenous people* (James, Bexley, Anderson, Devlin, Garnett, Marginson & Maxwell, 2008) re-examined evidence regarding students' financial situations to establish a definition of low socioeconomic status appropriate to the 2000s, and surveyed specific barriers to entry into higher education. It then analysed existing measures to increase participation among students from disadvantaged backgrounds both in Australia and overseas and examined the strategies used to target low SES students. The report noted that approximately 20 per cent of commencing undergraduates were aged 25 or over, but that little could be determined about their socioeconomic background using residential postcodes as a guide – as was usual in the case of undergraduates who were assumed to have been living with their parents or guardians. While data about other aspects of their lives and experience could be measured accurately, there was no way to measure or describe the circumstances of mature-age students. The authors recommended further study of the educational progress and achievements of mature-age students.

In England, there were a number of reports exploring, reviewing, evaluating or monitoring progress towards widening participation in specific contexts. Two key government-commissioned reports, in particular, mark the beginning of a focus on widening participation in higher and further education: *Higher Education in the Learning Society*, better known as the Dearing Report) published in 1997 by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, and *Learning Works* (DfES, 1997), also known as the Kennedy Report. These reports – in different ways – led the way to changes in higher education that were intended to reach out to potential students from under-represented groups. The publication of *From Elitism to Inclusion* (Woodrow, 1998) by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and Social Class and Participation, was a clear signal to the higher education sector of the importance of recruiting students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The

establishment of initiatives such as widening participation project funding; Aim Higher (which sought to encourage school pupils from cohorts where higher education was not usually an aspiration) and the sharing of information between universities on their success at recruiting students from under-represented groups. A number of reports followed which examined sector commitment to widening access and identified many examples of good practice. Thomas et al. (2005) identified a number of areas for development and a number of these were concerned with structural flexibility, the importance of pre-entry work, the first year experience and transition more generally. The monitoring and evaluation of individual universities' efforts in this area in terms of impact was said to be a key focus for funding and development. The review conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2006) on the work being undertaken in widening participation across the sector by individual universities (following the distribution and completion of a questionnaire) reported on the progress that was being made and how evidence was being built in this respect: what works and why. Jacobs (2008) reported on the Ethnicity, Gender and Degree Attainment project, which was a project undertaken by the Higher Education Academy and Equality Challenge Unit between 2007 and 2008. The project focused on an exploration of student and academic staff understandings and perceptions of variations in degree attainment across institutions, and the ways in which current Race Equality Policies and Gender Equality Schemes helped higher education institutions in addressing issues of attainment variation relevant to teaching, learning and assessment activities and issues. Similarly, Stevenson (2012) reported on the outcomes of Higher Education Academy (HEA) retention and degree attainment learning and teaching summit programme between January and June 2012. The summit was designed to gather research and consider the evidence about the contribution of the curriculum to Black and minority ethnic (BME) student retention and success in higher education. The summit comprised a series of activities designed to generate, collect and review evidence and the synthesised outcomes were presented at a two-day residential event attended by senior institutional managers and national policy makers.

### **Curriculum, Pedagogy and Social Inclusion: A generational approach**

Prior to the development of a mass higher education system, the universities tended to interpret any shortcomings as the fault of the individual applicant. A report prepared by staff at the University of Melbourne concluded that poor preparation at school was to blame

(University Appointments Board, 1956). The universities saw no reason why they should change their approach to teaching to accommodate students. In fact, many academics, and some students, regarded high attrition rates as a test of fitness akin to a process of natural selection (Laming, 2012). However, as the numbers of students who were the first in their family, mature-age or from migrant backgrounds grew throughout the 1960s and 70s, the universities gradually began to accept that the situation was changing and that a response was necessary.

Some of the first responses focussed on the social dimension of integrating students from underrepresented groups into campus life. Researchers such as Kantanis (2000) argued that disadvantaged students and students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds needed to feel welcome on campus and safe in the classroom before they could begin to address academic demands. However, the distinction between academic and social transition, or integration, is artificial and proved to be difficult to maintain as the classroom is often the first place where students make friends. Attention quickly turned to approaches to teaching and learning.

Drawing on his earlier work examining the causes of student attrition (Tinto, 1975), Vincent Tinto has argued consistently since the 1980s that students whose previous experience of education had been less than satisfactory could excel in higher education as long as the universities adopted pedagogical approaches that acknowledged their previous experiences and targeted their particular needs (Tinto, 1987; 1997; 2006). Others agreed, and a long series of publications on 'first year pedagogy' or 'transition pedagogy' followed including Yorke and Longden (2004), Cook and Rushton (2008) and Johnston (2010) in the UK.

Recognising the complexities of this situation, Australian researchers attached to the First Year in Higher Education Centre use the term 'generational' to describe approaches to dealing with the outcomes of policies designed to widen participation by students from underrepresented groups (Nelson et al., 2011). Rather than referring to the years in which the research was undertaken, this term describes the approach to supporting students.

- First generation research focussed on co-curricular initiatives such as learning support, orientation and social activities that would integrate new students into campus life

and peer tutoring programs and enrichment programs that support academic progress (for example, Kantanis, 2000).

- Second generation approaches have focussed on the curriculum, although curriculum is at times a contested term. Some researchers use curriculum to refer only to what happens in the classroom, whereas others include co-curricular activities as well as the syllabus and approaches to teaching (for example, Wilson, 2009).
- Third generation approaches signify a whole of institution approach in which academic and professional staff collaborate to adopt policies, procedures and services that are student-centred (for example, Lizzio, 2009); Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010).

It should be noted that the term 'generation' does not refer to the year in which research was undertaken or published. Researchers have continued to publish material that focusses on first and second generation approaches to transition or inclusion, often highlighting the experiences of particular groups of students or examining practices and attitudes in particular disciplines. For example, Pitkethly and Prosser (2001) advocate a university-wide approach to addressing transition in an attempt to reduce attrition, which is an example of a 'third generation' approach to supporting students, but Wilson's (2005) examination of the prejudice encountered by male nursing students is an example of a first generation approach even though it was published four years later. Incidentally, although Wilson did not set out to record the experiences of mature-age students, he found that almost all of the participants in his study fell within the definition and that male students were on average six years older than female students.

Arguments over the best way to assist students are far from over. Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) assert that although the idea of academic integration has been accepted in discussions of retention, research into social integration has been neglected. Social integration includes elements of support that have a deep influence on retention and attrition including the ability to maintain or give up existing friendships from school or the neighbourhood, or to make new friends at university, especially when students move away from home to study. Accordingly, the authors argue that:

Making compatible friends is essential to retention, and that students' living arrangements are central to this process. Such friends provide direct emotional

support, equivalent to family relationships, as well as buffering support in stressful situations. Course friendships and relationships with personal tutors are important but less significant, providing primarily instrumental, informational and appraisive support (p. 707).

Concentrating on the experiences of 17-18-year-old first year students who had enrolled at university directly from school, and were expecting to live on campus, Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) found that students were particularly worried about the *social* side of university life in the early weeks of their time at university. They described students' need for both physical and social opportunities, and spaces for making contact with others as urgent. Young first year students believed that other members of a social network were a reliable source of aid in stressful situations. Even when friends could not provide direct assistance, their presence had a buffering effect in stressful situations that might prevent or attenuate a negative response.

It would appear that mature-age students need different, and perhaps less obvious, forms of support to integrate into university learning and life. They are more likely to have established networks of friends and family members off campus; however, this does not mean that they are immune to the need to develop positive relationships on campus. Kinnear, Boyce, Sparrow, Middleton and Cullity (2008) attempted to identify the extent to which diverse student cohorts, including mature-age students, demonstrate commonalities and differences with regard to persistence and progression towards graduation. The authors found that successful students relied heavily on social networks for support, but that support of different types came from different sources – family, staff, peers, parents and friends and took different forms. Emotional support, in the form of encouragement, came from both family members and friends or peers. Mature-age students cited emotional support from family members as more important than younger ones. Mature-age students are inevitably time poor as they attempt to fit their studies around other commitments including work and family, but perceptions about the use of time for study is gendered. Women returning to study as mature-age students were more likely to cite specific examples of practical help such as childcare and relief from domestic duties than men (Stone & O'Shea, 2012), but both mature-age women and men were more likely than their younger counterparts to cite family

or caring responsibilities as an issue. Among mature-age students, financial support often meant that their partner was willing to support the household to allow them to take time off work to study, whereas when younger students mentioned financial support it most often referred to parents or family members who helped to pay fees or provided accommodation. Not surprisingly, younger and older students stated that learning support was most frequently provided by peers. Johnson and Watson (2010) found that mature-age students who were able to reconstruct their identities as mature-age students recognised the importance of developing positive relationships with younger students in social and academic settings as well as other skills such as computer literacy and a realistic understanding of the effort required to learn effectively and complete assessment tasks.

Students aged between 20 and 40 identified personal attributes such as determination and good organisational skills as more important than aspirations in assisting their progression, and this tendency increased with age (Kinnear, et al., 2008). Supportive peers on campus were important, but mature-age students lead more complex lives and have more external responsibilities. Older students considered withdrawal more frequently than younger ones, and were far more likely to identify personal and family issues as the reason. Although the correlation between longer working hours and consideration of withdrawal was strong, there were no parallels between gender or age and hours in the workforce. Sheard (2009) suggested that commitment to study was the most significant positive correlate of academic achievement. Students who were deeply committed to their course of study, for whatever reason, were more likely to perceive difficulties or setbacks as manageable rather than overwhelming. Sheard (2009) also found that women scored more highly on measures of commitment. This superficially stands in contrast to Kettley, Whitehead and Raffan's (2008) finding that female students worry more about their financial circumstances than men, but achieve more highly, suggesting that their coping mechanisms are more effective.

## Chapter Four

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this literature review, and the accompanying report, indicate that mature-age male students face significant adjustments to university life that may result in significant stress, especially if they are from a low socioeconomic or minority ethnic background. Mature-age students are a significant proportion of students within higher education, and one that both governments and universities are keen to encourage. In addition, excluded men represent not just an unacceptable waste of human capital, but a significant example of social injustice. There is a real danger that policymakers and universities will make unwarranted assumptions about male mature-age students on the basis of research based almost entirely on women (Britton & Baxter, 1999). It behoves the higher education sector as a whole to ensure that they understand the needs of these students and provide them with appropriate and adequate support. We would encourage further research in this area for a number of reasons – the most significant of these is the fact that little is known about the male mature-age student. Once universities have a clearer, more accurate understanding of these students' needs, expectations of study and hopes for the future they can begin to provide genuinely supportive programs.

If we accept that governments have a responsibility to promote social inclusion through accessibility to education, then we must also expect that they will provide the higher education sector with appropriate resources. It is evident from research undertaken in both Australia and the UK that a coherent, multi-layered approach is necessary. Poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth, which lead to great inequalities in educational opportunities, appears to be the underlying cause of many of these barriers; inequalities in school funding and resources compound the difficulties facing children from low socioeconomic or ethnic minority backgrounds. Ineffective policies on widening participation in higher education create even more barriers or, worse, create conditions

that are inimical to success. Solutions need to be crafted to address the barriers to inclusion in higher education at each level; in early childhood, at school, in post compulsory pathway programs and in higher education itself.

To begin with, we recommend that outreach programs such as The University of Sydney's Compass program, which begins with children as young as seven, be supported. We also recommend that existing equity programs be examined with a view towards expansion. At present, equity programs tend to be tailored towards students experiencing extreme hardship, however they tend to overlook the needs the majority of mature-age students who are not in dire need, but do experience significant financial stress (Tones et al., 2009).

The universities can begin by making far greater efforts to know their own students and understand their individual needs. Mature-age students are not a homogenous group and their needs as learners are highly diverse. To begin with, it would appear that many older mature-age students would welcome dedicated orientation programs in their first year on campus. Many mature-age students recognise the benefits of mixing freely with younger students, and some oppose the idea of mature-age clubs and societies, but many report feeling out of place at orientation activities intended for 17-19 year olds. At the same time, mature-age students require information and guidance that is relevant to their needs.

Universities also need to ensure that support services for mature-age students are delivered appropriately. Services, such as counselling or courses in academic skills that might help facilitate adjustment to university by furnishing students with study skills necessary to succeed academically, and facilitate the formation of social networks, are often unavailable to mature-age students as they do not operate outside of normal business hours. A substantial number of mature-age students are combining study with work making access extremely difficult if not impossible (Cleary, 2007; Tones et al., 2009). Support services targeted at adjustment to university life, and the benefits of using these services, also need to be promoted far more widely.

We share Cullity's (2006) conviction that universities must prepare all staff, both academic and professional, for dealing with the diversity of mature-age student experiences and backgrounds. All students, including mature-age students, and staff need to develop a shared understanding of academic expectations. The culture of a higher education provider should be one that genuinely and actively values the contribution that mature-age students make to the institution. Appropriate professional development and awareness-raising programs would benefit all students, and improve university life for all concerned. Fostering the sense of belonging that is critical for students in the first year and beyond is at the heart of retention and success for students from under-represented groups in higher education (Moore, Sanders & Higham, 2013)

Mature-age students may need specific kinds of support to make the adjustment to university study that take account of their previous education and work experience as well as academic literacy. Online delivery of course materials has become ubiquitous, but it can represent a significant challenge to some students, particularly those who are over 45. However, academic staff who make assumptions that the mature-age male student arrives without a range of transferable skills that may have been developed in previous employment contexts would be doing them a disservice and be de-motivating. Where a need is identified, mature-age students (and others) may need access to bespoke workshops delivered outside of the normal teaching periods such as on weekends, in the evenings, during semester breaks or immediately prior to commencing coursework (Tones et al., 2009). Just as many universities now offer information to the parents of young commencing students, similar information and workshops should be made available to the families of mature-age students (Kahu, 2016) and their employers to clarify expectations and reduce conflict (Tones et al., 2009).

Finally, issues underlying access to and participation in higher education for the mature-age male student need further scrutiny. We suggest that these issues be explored in such a way that any investigation takes account of the 'diversity of diversity' of such students, their

social, economic and racial characteristics, their previous educational and occupational experience as well as their aspirations.

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