

# STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY

**Rosalind Martins**

University of Western Sydney

*r.martins@uws.edu.au*

As university students, particularly non-recent school leavers, re-position their lives according to the challenges of higher education, there are concurrent changes to their sense of identity. This paper reports on a case study of three students, their experiences of tertiary study, and their sense of identity. There are many different theoretical frameworks that can be used to investigate the experience of higher education on the construction of identity; this paper looks at how the case study data provides links to several areas, including issues of gender, socioeconomic and educational disadvantage and empowerment. Some of these issues are introduced in the light of the students' changed and evolving perspectives on their lives.

**Keywords:** *mature age university students, identity*

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## Introduction

As university students, particularly non-recent school leavers, re-position their lives according to the challenges of higher education, there are concurrent changes to their sense of identity. For most mature age students, the educational process has stopped or been interrupted. They have had time to consolidate a perception of themselves in roles other than a learner. Combinations of several roles may include parent, spouse, carer, wage-earner, professional, community participant. For the older person, they may well have “settled in” to a particular view of themselves in their world, which will be challenged in the tertiary study environment. Thus the changes experienced can be dramatic, for the better, for the worse, or just very different. In this preliminary study, the changes reported on from the participants’ perspectives seem to be mainly positive.


Changing views of self, and perceptions of identity are part of everyone’s life to some degree. The process of formation of identity is subject to what Melucci (1996, p. 49) refers to as ‘metamorphosis’:

“Identity, then, is a process involving constant negotiation among different parts of the self, among different times of the self, and among the different settings or systems to which each of us belongs. In its various components, identity considered as negotiation involves the capacity to respond to the multiplicity and contradictoriness of the elements of which we are composed at any given moment”. (Melucci 1996, p.49)

Changes in perceptions of identity, or metamorphosis, then, for mature age students, can be heightened during the period of deciding to embark on tertiary study and by the educational and social experiences encountered during the course of their studies. It is the nature of these changes and choices that forms the focus of interest here.

This paper reports on a case study of three mature age students and how they perceive their changing identities during their tertiary studies. Although the study was not specifically limited to women, or to students from disadvantaged backgrounds,

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the three cases presented here are of mature age women students, two of whom identified that they were from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds as part of the university enrolment processes. The main themes that emerged from this case study are connected with the students' perceptions of themselves as wives and mothers, as university students 'becoming' professionals, and as people for whom a university education was the means by which they could achieve personal freedom and empowerment.


## **Background**

The educational experience of mature students has become a significant focus of research as their participation in higher and further education has increased from the late 1970's onwards (Britton & Baxter 1999). The emphasis of most of the earlier studies of large-scale quantitative research has been on the documentation of participation rates and the educational background and achievements of mature students. Studies by Smithers and Griffin (1986), and Woodley et al (1987) are cited in Britton & Baxter (1999) and reflect the situation in the UK. In Australia the publication of 'Mature Age Students in Australian Higher Education' (eds. Hore & West 1980) drew together a series of large-scale studies from 1970 onwards to provide a comprehensive overview of the situation here, and was since updated in a report in 1986. Many American studies, some of which drew on material as early as the 1950s, have been cited in Lavin and Hyllegard (1996). Such research tended to stress the homogeneity of mature students and their difference from conventional age students.

More recently, research in this area has shifted away from a preoccupation with quantitative indices to studies that focus on the quality of the mature age student experience. Such studies are necessarily qualitative in approach, and tend to be based on interview data from fairly small samples of selected mature students (Britton & Baxter 1999).

In contrast to quantitative indices, selecting some of the more recent studies, one can trace the increasing interest in identity formation from a variety of perspectives. In their UK study, Britton and Baxter (1999) draw on accounts of twenty-one mature


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age students to highlight similarities and differences of how they came to be at university. They argue that “for all these mature age students education is a key site for the construction of identity”, but also that it varies for individuals (p.1). They focus on gender differences and how these construct the experience of returning to education. Many other studies have concentrated on gender as a differential, for example, Winefield’s (1993) quantitative study of older students’ perceptions of study satisfaction and social support, which found that women students were as committed to study as were the men despite previous studies which suggested lower rates of participation and levels of achievement. Winefield concludes that “sex role differences may have declined in size” (p.65) as the commitment to academic and career success in women students has increased. Paasse (1998) also explores the impact of higher education on the identity formation processes of mature age women students within a framework related to feminist theorizations of identity and difference. It can be seen that ‘identity’ in various forms and from different perspectives has been an important focus for many of the more recent research studies.

As well as research that approaches the experience of mature students from the perspective of gender, other perspectives include socioeconomic and educational disadvantage. Greagg (1979) refers to ‘second chance’ education and says that being an older undergraduate was thought of as a second-chance experience for mature starters who had been denied a place when younger because of inadequate financial resources or because of blunted aspirations due to lack of confidence or social pressure. Munns et al (2000) investigates the educational experiences of a group of students who accessed tertiary education through alternative entry programs, in the light of ‘second chance’ education. The authors say that the students had to challenge and redefine the identity they had accepted and utilized as a resource since they had left school: “Reconnecting with education coincides with wider processes of individuals defining and redefining their identities in the period between school and university” (p.4). These were students who had perceived themselves as failures at school, having formerly rejected and / or been rejected by the educational system. The individual and collective stories in this study have shown how they were able to renegotiate a precarious educational path and so more productively reposition their own lives.


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In trying to determine the relative importance and roles of the different factors that influence changing perceptions of identity during university study, Lavin and Hyllegard (1996) cover some interesting ground. They encapsulate the possible role played by universities when they say that higher education provides fertile soil for intellectual and psychosocial growth and development. University should be intellectually empowering, should nurture the ability to think critically, to help broaden cultural interests, tastes and perspectives, and stimulate greater concern with civic issues and participation in the political process. It has also been seen as an important catalyst in personal development, which aids the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Although there is disagreement about how this transition should be characterized, Lavin & Hyllegard (1996) conclude that it is generally thought to involve the further acquisition of moral sensibility and the on-going development of personal identity, self-esteem, a sense of control over one's life and feeling of personal well-being. Each of these areas is worthy of investigation in relation to students' changing perceptions of self, and the renegotiation of their place in the world.

When the characteristics of university transitional experiences are applied to mature age students in particular, the experience of these changes can be dramatic and significant. Whether in fact university does produce such benefits for all students and, if so, what elements of this experience might have that effect, are questions that have stimulated a huge volume of research over the past four or five decades. This body of work has been reviewed, critiqued and synthesized in three encyclopedic works - Feldman and Newcombe in 1969, Bowen in 1877 and by Pascarella and Terenzini in 1991 (cited in Lavin & Hyllegard 1996, p.175). But the limitations of this work are that it deals with predominantly American middle class students who went straight to university from school, rather than students from minority backgrounds, who entered university as adults, have children, and hold full-time jobs. The work McGinnes and his team (2000) has surveyed Australian universities to provide a comprehensive view of 'the first year experience'. Valuable information on the major patterns of stability and change in the previous five years are presented, but apart from examining work and study patterns of students in different age groups, the data generally relates to all students in their first year, and does not differentiate between mature age and school leavers in reporting on the major trends.


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Rather than the university experience itself being the catalyst for change, one of the narratives produced by Britton and Baxter's (1999) study focuses explicitly on changes in the self and identity as the catalyst for returning to education. It strongly indicates that the significant changes in identity which are frequently seen to be the result of undertaking higher education (Maynard and Pearson 1994) are in fact part of the process leading up to the move into higher education. Thus change in perception of identity is complex, and possibly influenced by a combination of internal and external factors, with those engendered exclusively by the university experience being secondary and /or complementary. The issue of self-directed learning or self-regulation is one which may impact on the change of identity for mature students in this way. Radloff & Styles (1998) cite many studies that support the claim that students who are self regulated learners are also likely to be effective and successful learners. Adult learners as a group are often characterized as self-regulated or self-directed learners. (Candy 1991; Confessore & Long 1992, cited in Radloff & Styles, 1998). Some of the mature age participants in Radloff and Styles' study mentioned changes in their views of themselves as learners with the majority reporting increased confidence. Significant numbers also reported a broadening of horizons, better self-knowledge, increased self-assertiveness and feelings of self-satisfaction and pride. Negative aspects of the experience of study included "stress, lack of time with family and loss of contact with friends" (Radloff & Styles, 1998, p.5, 6), which could contribute as strongly to changed perceptions of identity.

Finally, in considering the changes in perceptions of identity of mature age students, it is interesting to relate them to the wider context of what Gergen (1995) describes as 'social saturation', a phenomenon of the twenty-first century that brings with it more challenges to the construction of identity. Gergen (1995, p. xi) discusses the impact of 'social saturation' on our ways of conceptualizing the human self and related patterns of social life. He maintains that a new culture is in the making because with the intensifying saturation of culture (globalization, variety of high technologies etc), our previous assumptions about the self are jeopardized. There has been a "massive increment" in social stimulation which results in "radical changes in our daily experiences of self and others and for an unbridled relativism in the academic sphere". With social saturation, "all beliefs are thrown into question by one's exposure to multiple points of view. This is no less true in academic matters of

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truth and objectivity than in our daily experiences of self” (Gergen 1995, p.xi). By taking into account the different issues already identified in the literature as being significant to the experiences of mature age students, this case study focuses on the perceptions of changing identity of three mature age students at the University of Western Sydney.


## **The case study**

Having taught in many university orientation, bridging and undergraduate programs over the last ten years, my informal observations of mature age students is that most undergo quite significant changes during their years of tertiary study. Increased confidence is the most obvious external change, although there are others such as improved communication skills and greater self knowledge. In order to explore whether changes in students’ perceptions of identity do take place, a number of mature age students are being interviewed. Three students were selected for this case study and took part in the first of a series of unstructured in-depth interviews in a one-on-one situation. This paper reports on a preliminary analysis of these interviews. Each participant is a female student from the western suburbs of Sydney at a different stage of her studies. All normal methodological and ethical issues such as voluntary participation and confidentiality, were addressed. The following portraits use pseudonyms.

### *Pia*

Pia arrived at the interview, smiling and confident and very enthusiastic to tell her story. She relaxed back in her chair and spoke about her childhood in Argentina. She had been a good student at school and was very interested in art, so when she was offered a post-secondary scholarship to study a craft in Europe, she left Argentina with the blessing of her family. Her subsequent marriage and birth of her children tied her to a narrow domestic life that continued when she and her family migrated to Australia. At the age of forty she decided that her gradual “intellectual death” had to be stopped. She desperately wanted to read about “philosophy and ideas” and applied to the university to study for an arts degree. After a year studying in a part-time enabling program, she started her Bachelor of Arts, and when she completed

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that, continued with a second degree in languages. She is now qualified as a secondary language teacher, and is about to start her professional teaching career.

### *Carmen*

Carmen bustled in for her interview, in a very businesslike way. She had finished her work shift in a nursing home and was fitting in her interview before an evening class. Like Pia, she had been a good student at school in Chile, but had left to marry at fifteen. Three children followed and although she was happy and working successfully part-time, she agreed to migrate to Australia at 20 because her husband wanted to join his family here. Socially and financially it was a tremendous struggle. Although her husband was employed, he persuaded her that she needed to work too in order for the family to survive, and for sixteen years she performed all the traditional domestic tasks, looked after the children, and worked seven days a week in a nursing home. She also taught herself English “on the job”. Finally she decided that she was tired of “cleaning up s---” and applied to study nursing. Now in her mid-thirties, with her eldest child at university, she is determined to start a new life for herself, where she is in control. She is studying in a university preparation program and will start her Bachelor of Nursing next year.

### *Barbara*

When Barbara arrived for her interview, she said she was anxious about whether her story would be of any interest. She interrupted herself several times during the first ten minutes to say “Am I talking too much?”, “Is this all right?” On being assured that everything was fine, she slowly relaxed and spoke more fluently and with more spontaneity, eventually laughing at herself and her anxieties. Barbara had never been particularly interested in study at school but had always been in the “B” class. Of anglo-celtic background, she had been born and lived all her life in the western suburbs of Sydney. She did not see herself as educationally disadvantaged. She had left school at 17 without any plans other than to marry and become a mother. Working part-time after her youngest child started school, she was successful in a bank, and then started working as a teacher’s aide. Now that she is forty-five, she wants to become a primary teacher and is currently in her second undergraduate year.



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### ***Wives and mothers***

For all three students, being a wife and mother was a significant issue that had previously led to their feeling unable to pursue their own professional lives because of the demands of their role. They all saw their identity in these terms. Their maternal domestic lives demanded the sacrifice of their own intellectual fulfilment and had precluded their furthering their education until now when their children are older. All three women described their relationships with their children as close. At least one child in each family was at university and the women said that studying together seemed to help their children to remain motivated. Pia's daughter was also her 'best friend'; Carmen's son was transferring from his interstate university to study in Sydney and be closer to his mother; Barbara's children were proud of her achievements, and the son who had dropped out of university was returning to give it another try. As mothers, the sense of identity was intensified as the women perceived their relationships with their children were enhanced by their entering tertiary study. They all felt they had more to offer their children. Their children's encouragement and pride in their studying was also an important confirmation of their changing identity. The stereotyped gender role of mother was still a major part of their psyche, but now there was more.

As wives, the women held different perceptions about themselves from before. Issues of gender and power were strongly linked to these stories. Pia had "got rid" of her husband in her final year of study. Whenever she mentioned him, her nose wrinkled up and she frowned. He had wanted to "hold her back" when now she was "ready to fly". Carmen also had divorced her husband last year after she had been studying for six months. His constant objections to her study and his reluctance to change his own life in any way led her to perceive their relationship in a negative light. In retrospect she could see that she had complied with his wants, sacrificing her own. Now she wanted to regain her true identity that had lain hidden for years and to realize some of the potential she had subjugated. In terms of identity change, Carmen had made some significant external changes. She had reverted to her maiden surname, and to a diminutive form of her first name. She had taken to wearing jeans and cut her hair differently. From my observation of her over two years, I noticed that she moved differently, with more precision and energy. She seemed more dynamic and her spoken English had improved. She had moved in to

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a flat with a couple of nurses and was enjoying her freedom. Her identity was no longer predicated upon being “a wife”. She was still a mother, but also a university student on her way to becoming a nurse.

Given that both Pia and Carmen came from South American backgrounds, we can assume that for cultural and religious reasons, their marriage break-ups were significant.. For example, Pia bemoaned the loss of family friends she had before her divorce and with whom she no longer had contact because she is now “single”. She said she does not have her own house or marital establishment and has lost the status of being a part of a “couple”. For Barbara also, she indicated that being firmly grounded in her Catholic faith, her marital relationship is central to her sense of identity. In relation to the changes experienced at university, she felt guilty that she did not have as much time to look after her husband and family as before, but was coming to an understanding that “they should stand on their own feet”. Although he did not actively encourage her, she said her husband was “quite happy for her to study if it made her happy”. She saw her identity change as “adding on” an extra dimension to the wife and mother she was. For all three students, the strongest family encouragement came not from spouses but from children, parents (especially fathers) and, for Barbara, her sister-in-law.

### ***Teachers and nurses – professional vocation as identity***

For all three students, the decision to embark on tertiary study was the result of a desire to change their lives. For Carmen and Barbara, their sense of vocation, in nursing and teaching, meant the choice of a degree course that would lead to the profession. Their identity was changing in becoming a professional nurse and professional teacher. For Pia, the thirst for knowledge and intellectual stimulation resulted in a sense of changed identity, which then led her to discover that a qualification in teaching languages would provide secure employment. However, in describing her identity now, she still describes herself as “an artist” who has many facets, realized through the confidence gained in her tertiary studies. The women have all sought empowerment through education and the attainment of professional qualifications.

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For Barbara, the change in her identity is described in terms of how she is perceived by others. She still works part-time as a teacher's aide and has noticed that other staff now treat her differently, with more respect and equality. In describing her changed identity, this is the most important to her. Her central role in her home and family life remains almost the same, but it is in the outside world, the professional realm, where she is really gaining a stronger sense of self and self-worth. She related the satisfaction she received from showing her results notification to her work colleagues and how impressed and pleased they were for her. Despite attaining academic results of high distinctions and distinctions, she still lacks some confidence in her academic ability. "I'm really surprised when I get high marks," she said, "when I got my last essay back, I cried, and everyone thought I'd failed." 'Becoming a teacher' is the major change in her perception of self.


For Carmen, becoming a real nurse -as opposed to an assistant – is also a major change in identity. The decision to be a nurse was also the catalyst for the other life changes she has embarked upon. Support and encouragement from her friends and colleagues at work sustain her, and her ambition is to continue working in a nursing home with "the elderlies", in a professional role where she can be more useful to her patients to whom she is devoted. She perceives that the construction of her true identity has been "on hold" until now.

For Pia, having a degree – in her case, a double degree – makes her a new woman. Now that her journey to self-fulfilment is well on its way, "there's still so much more to read, to learn!" A professional life beckons that she sees will gain her respect from others in the community. She knows that her new identity empowers her to interact with other people on an equal footing.

## **Metamorphosis**

It appears, then, that for these three mature age students, the beginnings of a change of identity or metamorphosis started before they came to university when the actual decision to study was made. Pia and Carmen applied to enter through bridging programs for educationally disadvantaged students while Barbara applied for alternative entry by doing the STAT test. The time at university is part of the

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process of the reconstruction of identity. Successful university study is a means to freedom, empowerment and enhancement of their maternal roles by their becoming fuller persons and acquiring the benefits of a professional qualification. All three are experiencing or have experienced academic success in their studies resulting in changes in their views of themselves as learners (Radloff and Styles 1998). They exhibit skills of self-regulation in their learning. Organizing their time, managing their households and maintaining jobs are an important part of their achievement, although Barbara still bemoans the fact that her housework is neglected.

These women have benefited from their 'second chance education' (Greagg 1979, Munns et al 2000) and have renegotiated their own position in their world. Lavin & Hyllegard's (1996) contention that higher education is an important catalyst in personal development holds true for these mature age students. It has helped the acquisition of self-esteem, the sense of control over their lives, and their general satisfaction. All reported that when they began their studies, they were very scared of failure and anxious about their perceived ignorance. The unfamiliar environment was initially threatening and they felt out of place. However, their application to their studies and their high motivation to succeed has resulted in their being effective and successful learners.

In this study then, the first interviews with these three students revealed a somewhat surprising and overwhelmingly positive view of the effect of their university experiences on their changed perceptions of self. Even the sacrifices they had made in order to achieve their present positions were seen in a positive light.. The stresses and anxieties they had experienced, also, were regarded as inevitable and necessary, and over which they had triumphed, or were still triumphing. When asked if being from spanish-speaking language backgrounds was an issue for Pia and Carmen, each replied that it was, in terms of how much harder they had to work and how much longer it took them to read and write in English, but they both dismissed it as an issue that was not nearly as significant as the changes in their relationships, and domestic and professional roles. They seemed uninterested to dwell on their NESB status further, preferring to return to the other issues which preoccupied them and dominated their stories in these first interviews. Language background, however, is an area which will be investigated further in subsequent

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interviews. Because this is a preliminary study, several of the issues already raised will be revisited in greater depth, as well as other issues identified in the literature, but not yet come to the surface here. More interviews are planned, and several more participants will be involved in order to investigate further the changing perceptions and redefinition of identity of mature age students.

In general, Gergen's (1995) theory of social saturation and its effect on redefining identity can be said to connect with the ways in which the three women in this study have responded to the changes in their lives. In all three instances, they have moved from one type of social and cultural context to another far more complex life situation resulting in the increased social stimulation which gives rise to redefinition of self. "Conceptually, it is important to shift from a consideration of identity in terms of either/or to a non-linear perspective which includes the possibility of and/and. The back-and-forth between these perspectives depends on who asks the question of identity and from which point of view" (Melucci 1996, p. 51). This description of understanding identity formation resonates strongly with the stories told by the three women in this case study. Rather than changing from one sense of self to another, all three see their identities changing by "adding on" the freedom and empowerment generated by university study.

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