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Who do you think you are? Exploring the experiences of students transitioning from TAFE to higher education

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Who do you think you are? Exploring the experiences of students transitioning from TAFE to higher education

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to investigate the potential of learning to be a transformative experience. The aim of the study was to develop a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of adult learners. This was considered through an exploration of the learning experiences of a small group of students in transition from the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector to higher education in New South Wales, Australia. The study focused on seven students from four different Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges who enrolled in various undergraduate degrees at one regional university in NSW. The study was framed by an examination of the degree to which students' perspectives, identities and aspirations were transformed as a result of their engagement in further and higher education. A qualitative approach was taken, with narrative interviewing deemed most appropriate to the development of understandings of transitions and transformations. The conceptual underpinning of the research was influenced by Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1990), in which learning is viewed as a potential portal for transformation of the habits of mind and the meaning perspectives that adult learners hold. It is Mezirow's (1990) contention that, ultimately, change in these domains opens the door to potential transformation to ways of perceiving the self and one's place in the world. It is clear from the outcomes of this research that learning, as defined within the parameters of this study, has the potential to transform individual perspectives, identity and aspirations. It is also apparent that the transition experience is potentially one which holds many challenges, as well as rewards, for adult learners. The ability of learners to address the challenges in order to reap the rewards may hold a significant place in their learning outcomes. This study paves the way for further inquiry in the field of transition and transformation, particularly for research which seeks to foreground the voices of adult learners as they are engaged in the transition process.

Acknowledgements

Researching and getting to the pointy end of submitting this thesis was a journey that was both laborious and exacting but, ultimately, so very important to me on a personal level.

I would like to thank my parents for teaching me through example that anything is possible provided you are prepared to put in the effort. I would like to thank my children for their unwavering belief in me. To my long-suffering friends I say thank you for asking me periodically how it was all going and hoping I wouldn't give you the long answer.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my supervisors, Associate Professor Sarah O'Shea and Associate Professor Pauline Lysaght, who gave so much time and attention to the development of this thesis, and who somehow managed to maintain their sense of humour throughout. I am grateful for their ongoing encouragement and support.

Last but not least, I acknowledge and thank the seven participants in this research who gave up their own time to tell their stories. Their willingness to share their learning experiences and the trust they placed in me to represent their experiences fairly was profoundly humbling.

Certification

I, Theresa Millman, declare that this thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Doctor of Education, from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Theresa Mary Millman

November, 2018

List of abbreviations

ANTA   Australian National Training Authority. An Australian government initiative for the promotion of the national Vocational Education and Training (VET) system

AQF   Australian Qualifications Framework. The national policy for the regulation of qualifications in Australian education and training

ASQA   Australian Skills Quality Authority. The national regulator for Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector to oversee the provision of nationally approved quality standards

ATAR   Australian Tertiary Admission Rank. A score based on student performance in the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in New South Wales (NSW)

AUQA   Australian Universities Quality Agency. A former government body designed to audit all universities in Australia

CBT   competency-based training

COAG   Council of Australian Governments. The peak intergovernmental forum in Australia

Credit transfer   Credit granted by institutes of higher education for VET studies undertaken

FiF   First in family. Students who are the first member of their family to participate in higher education

HEPPP   Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Programme. Provides funding to Australians from low-SES backgrounds to study at university

HSC   Higher School Certificate

ISCED	International Standard of Classification of Education. A statistical framework for organising information on education maintained by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
MCU	Mountville City University. A pseudonym for the regional university attended by the seven participants in the study
NASWD	National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development. Defines the roles and responsibilities for Commonwealth and states and territories in services across the skills and workforce development sector
NCSEHE	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education. Informs design, implementation, and institutional practices for improvements in higher education participation for marginalised and disadvantaged people
NCVER	National Centre for Vocational Education Research. An independent body responsible for research and statistics about vocational education and training (VET)
NPASR	National Partnership Agreement on Skills Reform. Formerly involved in reform of the vocational education and training (VET) sector to deliver a highly skilled workforce and to develop skills and qualifications needed in the labour market
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning. Assessment process to determine the outcomes of an individual application for credit
RTO	Registered training organisation. Training providers delivering VET
TAFE	Technical and Further Education. State government providers of vocational education and training (VET) in Australia.

TEQSA　　　　　　Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. Australian
　　　　　　　　　　Government agency that regulates the quality of the higher
　　　　　　　　　　education sector

Grattan Institute　　Non-partisan body that provides independent, practical solutions.

***Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Bradley Review)**
　　　　　　　　　　Reported on directions of the higher education sector and the
　　　　　　　　　　options for reform.
TPC　　　　　　　Tertiary Preparation Certificate (Certificate IV). A Year 12
　　　　　　　　　　equivalent qualification that provides a pathway to university
　　　　　　　　　　entry.

VET　　　　　　　Vocational education and training. Provides further education in
　　　　　　　　　　Australia which focuses on development of skills and
　　　　　　　　　　qualifications for the workplace.

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Chapter 1.   The beginning of change

Introduction

For many learners, the decision to engage in formal education as an adult can be predicated on the need to gain or build on workplace qualifications. In Australia, when this is the case a vocational education and training (VET) course is usually the most appropriate (Griffin, 2017). Some learners who gain their VET qualification decide to then continue learning by enrolling in a higher education degree.

During my work in the learning unit of a regional university in NSW Australia, many former VET students from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges accessed the university's learning unit service. The learning unit service offers academic assistance for students through the development of academic skills and covers areas such as critical thinking, academic writing and research skills. Assistance is provided in the form of group workshops and individual consultations.

The students who sought consultations with the learning unit often reported the struggles they experienced due to the extra academic demands that university placed on them in comparison with the academic expectations of TAFE. The difficulties these students encountered at university may to some degree be attributed to the adherence by TAFE to a competency-based training (CBT) curriculum. The CBT approach to teaching and learning involves development of skills which are delivered through training packages and assessed against industry standards (Smith, 2010). According to Forward (2018), one of the key problems associated with CBT is the focus placed on skills acquisition as determined by employers. While this may not appear to be problematic given that CBT matches skills with workplace demand, Forward (2018, p. 14) argues that such a narrow, reductionist approach to learning creates a situation that reduces teacher access to theory and metaknowledge, thus denying student access to higher forms of knowledge. A lack of theoretical knowledge was often the reported reason that many former TAFE students, accustomed previously to CBT, sought help and guidance from the learning unit.

Yet, despite the challenges faced in their academic endeavours, most of the students I met were highly motivated to succeed. They often reported that their lives had changed because they had attended TAFE and then university. This duality of experience—and the personal qualities they exhibited as hard working, enthusiastic students—were the catalysts for this study. I wanted to hear what the students were experiencing in the process of transition to higher education and whether they observed changes within themselves because of their engagement in learning.

Specifically, I wanted to know what the transition from further education to higher education involved for learners as a lived experience. Further education in Australia is associated with TAFE as a key provider of technical and further education (Education and Employment Reference Committee, 2014), whereas higher education, also referred to as tertiary education, is usually provided by universities (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2018a).

I was also interested in the possibility of transformative outcomes as a result of adult learning. These questions underline the purpose of this study, which has investigated the transition experiences of students moving from TAFE to university and the potential of learning to transform learners' lives. Three aspects of transformation were considered in the study:

- *perspectives*, the beliefs and values learners hold

- *identity*, self-concept or the ways in which learners define themselves and the beliefs they have about themselves and their place in the world

- *aspirations*, the goals and ambitions learners hold for the future.

The principal aim of the study was to provide a deeper understanding of the transition experience of students as they navigated their way through the first semester of their higher education degree. This was done by foregrounding the stories of one cohort of students who reflected upon their adult learning experiences. These participants were seven TAFE students who, on completion of their TAFE qualifications, had made the decision to articulate to higher education. Their narratives will add to understandings of what transition involves at an individual lived level.

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The premise of this study is that adult learning institutes have limited knowledge of what the transition experience involves on a deeply personal level for students. There is insufficient information in the literature about the lived experiences of students in transition and what this means as they navigate their way from one educational system to another. This lack of information represents a significant gap in understandings about the transition experience—understandings needed by educators, administrators, students and others who have a vested interest in educational transition. The results from this research may inform dual-sector approaches to teaching and learning in a dialogic and beneficial way for all those concerned with the adult learning experience.

Chapter 1 considers four key areas:

1. the diverse pathways to higher education learners may take, and the definitions of VET and higher education
2. the role of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)
3. the pilot study conducted prior to the main study and the background of the main study
4. an introduction to the theoretical framework of the study.

Figure 1.1 presents the stages of the chapter. This diagrammatic representation of the chapters is used as a guiding tool throughout the thesis.

The diversity of routes to higher education in Australia. Defining VET and higher education | The role of the standardising agencies: the AQF and TEQSA | The pilot study. Background to the current study | The conceptual framework of the study
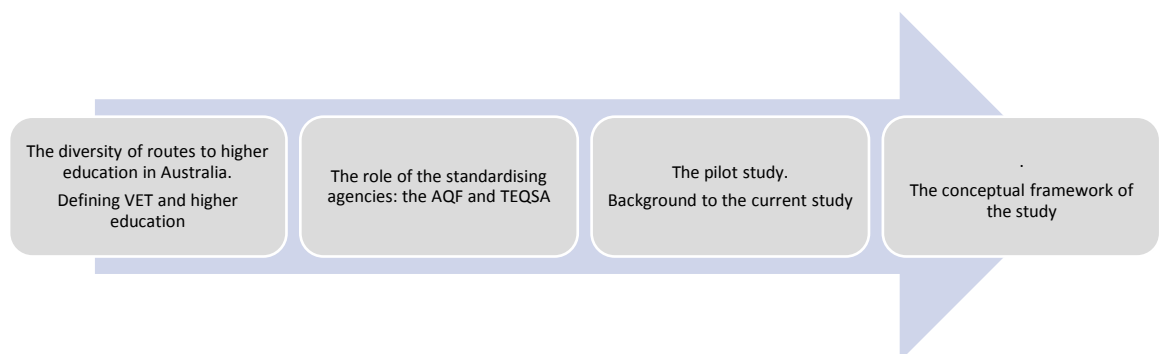
Figure 1.1: Chapter 1 framework

The diversity of routes to higher education in Australia

In Australia, increases in student enrolments in higher education over the past decade may be directly attributed to government policies aimed at widening participation and access (Burke, 2016; Cunninghame, 2017). These policies were established primarily

as an outcome of the *Review of Australian Higher Education: Final Report* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008), more commonly referred to in the literature as the Bradley Review.

The Bradley Review (2008) was undertaken in a climate of global change during which there was a critical need to build the capacity of the Australian higher education sector to compete in a global higher education market. The then Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, instigated the review with the purpose of considering the future directions of the higher education sector and to determine its ability to meet the needs of the Australian public as well as remain globally competitive (Bradley et al., 2008). Drawing on input from many sectors of Australian society, including both individuals and organisations, the outcome of the investigation was an awareness of the need for significant reforms in the higher education sector which could build on existing strengths and position Australia more robustly as a global competitor in higher education (Bradley et al., 2008). Consequently, the review panel made a number of significant recommendations which principally highlighted the need for increasing participation in higher education by building accessibility for marginalised students, increasing funding for students and providers, and streamlining accountability (Bradley et al., 2008).

To encourage and support the aim of widening participation and access, one of the key recommendations of the Bradley Review (2008) was the development of cross-sectoral links between VET and higher education as a means of increasing equitable pathways and access to higher education. This aspect of pathways transition was also noted by Watson (2008), who argues that there is a need for greater levels of collaboration between the TAFE and higher education sectors when offering students pathways entry to higher education via a TAFE course. This collaboration should entail developing strong inter-sectoral communications as best practice, incentivised by the need to build a rewarding student experience.

Incentives that inspire greater access to higher education are supported by Matheson and Sutcliffe (2017, p. 22), who encourage 'decolonising' approaches to education that acknowledge diversity. Indeed, as Abbott-Chapman (2011, p. 59) contends, to embrace

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equality of access is to recognise and value the 'personhood' of individuals seeking to participate in higher education. Consequently, pathways to higher education in Australia are increasingly diverse and include students from many different pathways besides those who have completed the Higher School Certificate (HSC) in Year 12, the final year of compulsory schooling in Australia. Students who exit secondary school with a HSC result have usually applied for a university place based on an Australian Tertiary Admission Rank (ATAR) score. The ATAR serves primarily as a criterion for articulation to university in Australia, whereby individual students are given a ranking of between 0 and 99.95 (Pilcher & Torii, 2018, p. 4). Students are selected for entry to educational institutes according to the ATAR they receive, in line with the requirements of individual institutes and courses.

However, in Australia there are other forms of admission to university besides an ATAR. As Figure 1.2 illustrates, there is a range of pathways to higher education in Australia, and students with an ATAR comprised only 26% of total university admissions in 2016.
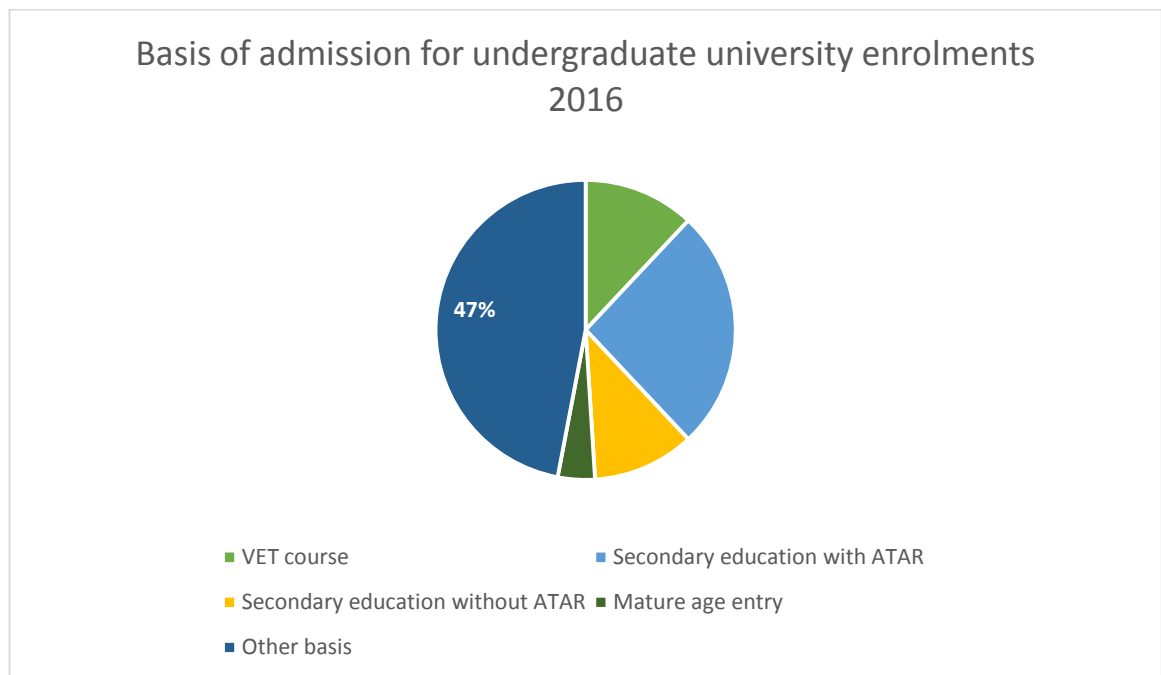
Figure 1.2: Basis of admission for commencing domestic undergraduate university enrolments in Australia, 2016 (adapted from Pilcher & Torii, 2018)

Figure 1.2 indicates that in 2016 entrants to university from secondary school with an ATAR (26%) and without an ATAR (11%) comprised 37% of all admissions. Students who had entered higher education via a VET pathway comprised 12% of admissions, while 4% of entrants were based on mature-age entry provisions. The remaining 47% of entrants came from other pathways, including students who had previously completed a higher education course and those who held a professional qualification. Students from a higher education course included those who studied in a similar course at university with a lower entry requirement or those who transferred from one university course to another (Pilcher & Torii, 2018, p. 8). Those with a professional qualification from the workplace, which could be used to determine their selection rank, were also granted entry via this pathway (University of the Sunshine Coast,2018).

Defining vocational education and training (VET) and higher education
As this study investigated the experiences of students at TAFE colleges and university, it is important to establish how the two sectors—that is, VET and higher education—are defined and what their principal roles are. This section of the chapter provides definitions of VET and higher education within the context of the guidelines from the AQF (2013) and the *Higher Education Report 2011–2013* (DET, 2014).

The AQF (2013) identifies three separate educational sectors in Australia: schools, VET and higher education. The International Standard of Classification of Education (ISCED, 2011) defines VET as a provider of educational programs that increase skills and competencies leading to a qualification for an occupation in the labour market, and which prepares participants for direct entry into specific occupations without further training. The *Higher Education Report 2011–2013* (DET, 2014) considers the higher education sector to comprise the public and private universities in Australia as well as a number of other providers.

As this study is concerned only with TAFE and university, in the interests of clarification, it maintains the AQF (2013) and the *Higher Education Report 2011–2013* (DET, 2014) distinctions between the VET and higher education sectors. That is, according to the AQF (2013), TAFE as part of the VET sector is distinct from schools and higher education. The *Higher Education Report 2011–2013* (DET, 2014)

meanwhile states that universities are part of the higher education sector, which does not include TAFE. How TAFE is situated within the VET sector is described more comprehensively in Chapter 2.

Figure 1.3 illustrates the various educational sectors in Australia, showing that schools in Australia are defined by the parameters of primary school, which generally caters for the education of children between Kindergarten and Year 6, and secondary school, which generally covers the education of students from Year 7 to Year 12. It should be noted, however, that there are overlaps between the various educational sectors, and complexities in these overlaps not represented in Figure 1.3. For example, VET courses in Australia are offered through several different training providers as well as TAFE. This presents a competitive market for VET providers, who must vie not only for student interest but also for government funding. These competitors include private providers, community education providers, registered training organisations (RTOs) and some schools (National Centre for Vocational Education Research [NCVER], 2017b). Some universities in Australia also offer VET courses (Fowler, 2017). Higher education, which is most commonly represented by universities, can be offered by other providers, including some private colleges (DET, 2014). However, in this study these sectoral complexities were not apparent, as all participants began their adult learning experience at TAFE and continued it at university.
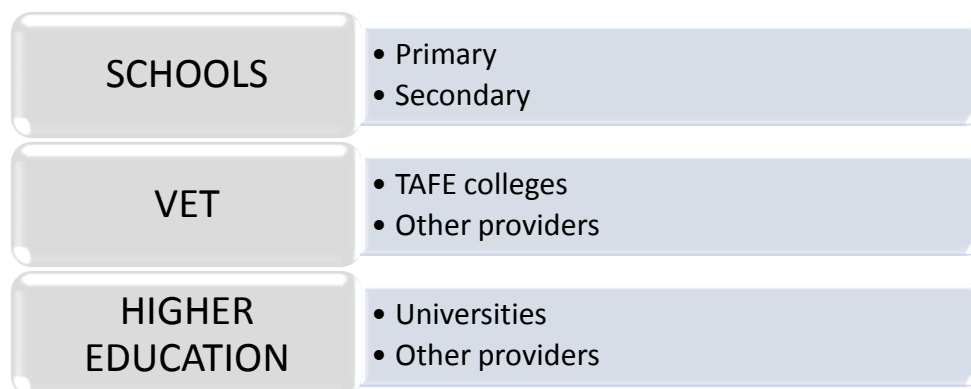
Figure 1.3: The three distinct sectors of education in Australia according to the AQF (2013) and the Higher Education Report (DET, 2014)

The following section of this chapter examines how both the AQF and TEQSA map, interpret and implement learning equivalencies between VET and higher education.

The section then considers TAFE Certificate IV and TAFE Diploma levels, as these specific qualifications and equivalencies are applicable to the participants in the current study.
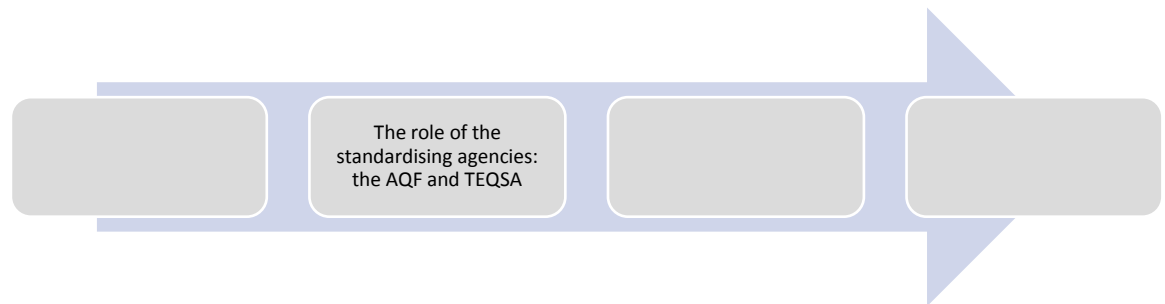
Figure 1.4: Role of standardising agencies section in chapter framework

Role of the standardising agencies

Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)

Given the complexity and often overlapping nature of the different educational sectors in Australia, the AQF is an essential framework for the governance of credit arrangements and credit transfer policies between adult education sectors (AQF, 2013). Further, when considering the myriad enrolment variations available for students in the different educational sectors, this policy document has an added important role to play in accommodating diversity in pathways approaches through the standardisation of educational qualifications (AQF, 2013). Through development of a rigorous taxonomy of descriptors, the primary purpose of the AQF document is to make transparent the requisite levels of knowledge and skills students should be able to demonstrate across 10 different levels of learning.

This study was concerned only with students exiting TAFE with either a Certificate IV qualification or a Diploma. The AQF (2013) situates the Certificate IV at Level 4 of the framework. At this level, students should demonstrate broad factual, technical and some theoretical knowledge, as well as broad knowledge and a range of cognitive, technical and communication skills (AQF, 2013). The AQF (2013) situates a Diploma qualification at Level 5 of the framework, whereby students will have specialised skills for work or further learning and should be able to demonstrate technical and theoretical knowledge. (Appendix 1.   AQF qualification type learning outcome descriptors

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provides the 10 levels defined by the AQF, which include knowledge and skills levels appropriate to higher education degree stages.)

Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)

TEQSA is responsible for interpreting and implementing the AQF. Following recommendations from the Bradley Review (2008), TEQSA was established in 2011; by 2012, all operations from the previous Australian Universities Quality Agency had been transferred to TEQSA, with a focus on ensuring that 'higher education providers meet minimum standards, promote best practice and improve the quality of the Australian higher education sector' (TEQSA, 2017).

While the AQF specifies the qualifications for tertiary education on a national basis, the role of TEQSA is to regulate the providers of higher education to ensure they meet the standards according to the TEQSA Act 2011 (Australian Government, 2014). TEQSA applies the Threshold Standards and the Qualification Standards to all higher education providers and governs the mapping of higher education awards against the corresponding specifications in the AQF (Australian Government, 2014). Fundamentally, both the AQF and TEQSA have important roles to play in the regulation and quality control of higher education, its pathways, credit transfer, recognition of prior learning (RPL) and articulation (Australian Government, 2014).

A key aim of the pathways policy is to maximise transparency of equivalencies and seek creative solutions for RPL through the granting of credit for some TAFE courses (AQF, 2013). 'Equivalence' refers to mapping of content that is very similar and which ultimately may lead to the granting of credit transfer from VET to higher education (Baker, Peach & Cathcart, 2017).

It may be determined from the literature, however, that, while equivalencies have indeed become more transparent, transference of credit, which usually results in advanced standing for some subjects and indeed often for a whole year or more, may not always lead to successful student outcomes (Delly, Brunken & Brown, 2015; Logan et al., 2017; Penesis et al., 2015; Watson, Hagel & Chesters, 2013; Wu & Myhill, 2017). This results in significant implications for students. For example, the

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current pathways from TAFE to university have been developed on the basis of recognition that students, having completed a TAFE qualification, are now ready and sufficiently prepared to move on to university. This eligibility may be granted with entitlement to credit transfer towards their university degree. However, problems may arise with the reality of the differences in sectoral academic expectations, which are not always apparent until students have made the transition to higher education (Millman, 2013). Such differences may, however, be ameliorated by building inter-sectoral communication as a normative response to the struggles often faced by transitioning students, which can be representative of significant challenges for these students, especially in the early days of transition. This outcome was observed in the experiences of respondents in a study by O'Shea, Lysaght and Tanner (2012, p. 269), which highlighted gaps in depth of knowledge and academic literacy levels for transitioning students in the study. This aspect of transition will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

The next section of this chapter introduces the pilot study that preceded the current study.

The pilot study.
Background to the current study
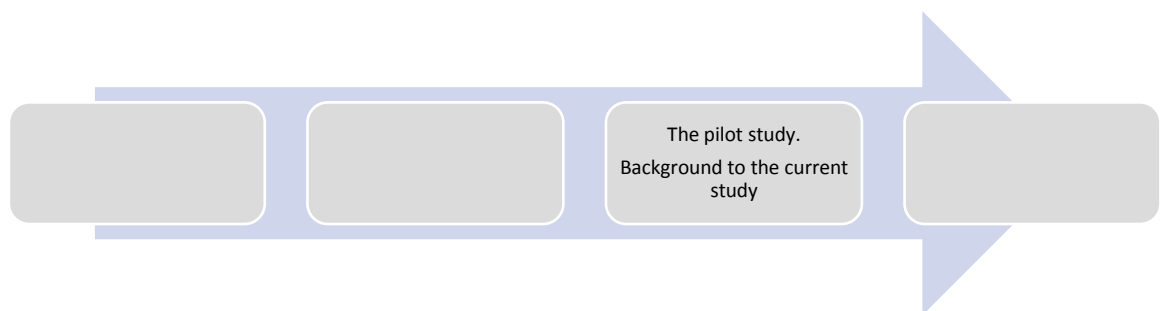
Figure 1.5: Pilot study and background sections in chapter framework

The pilot study

My interest in investigating the transition experiences of learners was developed by a smaller study that took place in August 2012 and focused on two aspects of students' experiences:

1. the challenges TAFE students expected to face on commencement of their university degrees and the ways in which they might manage these challenges
2. the transformative potential of formal education.

Participants

Ten TAFE students took part in the pilot study. These participants were very typical in some respects to the TAFE students who transition to higher education every year. For example, eight of the students had not achieved an ATAR sufficient for direct entry to university. Eight of the students had worked for a few years and then decided to enrol in adult education to gain a qualification for the workplace or as a pathway to higher education. These are common learning patterns for many TAFE students (Griffin, 2017).

Method

The pilot study was a two-phased process. In the first phase, students completed a survey about their feelings towards the transition process, what it may have involved and how they felt they would manage the changes from one learning environment to another. Questions included 'What issues do think you may face at university that are different to TAFE?' and 'What can you do to deal with any issues that may arise at university?' (see Appendix 2. Survey questions for pilot study).

The survey was followed by a focus group during which the students were encouraged to voice their opinions based on the issues that had arisen from the surveys. For example, a recurring theme in the surveys was the challenges students expected to face at university. Therefore, I raised this issue as a question during the focus group session (see Appendix 3.   Focus group questions for pilot study).

During the focus group, as a means of exploring the potential for learning to be a transformative experience, the students were asked to reflect on whether they had changed any of their core beliefs or values since attending TAFE. Some of the responses from this reflection included a growing awareness of the bigger issues outside their own lives and experiences, a greater awareness of political issues, and increased engagement with others. For example, the participants reflected on ways they had become more conscious of their social world and how they had changed personally. Some of the responses included, 'increasing awareness of multiculturalism', 'awareness of social issues and politics', 'more engaged with the

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world' and 'being a role model for my kids' (see Appendix 4.   Sample responses from focus group).

Summary

Three key findings were evident from the pilot study:

1. The students reported that TAFE had helped build their confidence to the extent that some could aspire to university study.
2. The challenges students expected to face at university included greater workloads, the need to be more self-directed, having to cope with higher levels of theoretical knowledge and managing e-learning.
3. The students were concerned about the differences between the 'nurturing' environment they were currently experiencing at TAFE and the anticipated more impersonal environment of university.

This pilot study was of great value as the outcomes provided useful directions for further research to follow, and it demonstrated the possibility of change through formal education.

The next section provides an overview of the main study, which built on the outcomes of the pilot study. The section introduces the background to the current study, research questions, significance of the study, method and participants.

Background to the current study

One of the ways higher education in Australia has risen to the challenge of providing equitable opportunities for inclusion in higher education learning, set by global market and political forces, is to diversify entry pathways to university (Noonan, 2016). This study is concerned with students who have entered university via pathways other than the trajectory of secondary school to higher education—specifically, VET students who have accessed pathways from TAFE to higher education. This pathway continues to be a means of accessing higher education for many students (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis, 2015). Understanding what this access meant for TAFE students engaged in transition to university was a key factor in developing the study. The importance of understanding issues which arise for students transitioning from the vocational education sector to higher education can be identified on a number of levels. This is

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especially relevant in a climate of government policies of inclusion and equity in higher education and the consequent increased numbers of students from the vocational sector who continue to access higher education (Burke, 2016). The experiences of these students have consequently become an area of research interest (Catterall, Davis & Dai Fei Yang, 2014). Primarily, this cohort may be construed as representative of a change from the more 'traditional' and unitary pathways to higher education, and they are often older students who are working while studying (Christie, 2009, p. 125). Consequently, developing understanding of the experiences of students who have a part time study load and are often mature age can provide important information about the positive aspects of their transition experiences but also about the challenges. If these students come from low socio-economic backgrounds and are first in family students, then knowledge of their particular experiences can further contribute to understandings about ways to build a rewarding student experience.

It is clear from the research that for many of these transitioning students, the experience is a positive one. However, attrition rates at Australian universities are significantly higher for some student cohorts than for others (Kift, 2015). This includes part time students, those with lower levels of academic preparedness and those who are disengaged with the university (Kift, 2015). According to Cherastidtham and Norton (2018, p. 10) '… part-time and mature-age students have among the lowest completion rates'. This may be due in part to the fact that they commence their studies at a later age and have other responsibilities to contend with at the same time. Statistically, students with a vocational qualification have an attrition risk of twenty-eight per cent (Cherastidtham & Norton, 2018, p.23). This is important as Christie (2009) notes that a common driving force in the decision by non-traditional students to attend university is the more promising avenues for work that a degree can confer. However, there is a relationship between the number of subjects taken and the risk of dropping out. For example, Cherastidtham and Norton (2018, p.13) found that if students take a part time subject load their dropout rate may increase by fifty per cent. A further issue raised by the researchers is that part time students are often engaged in work while studying, often up to 30-to-39 hours a week (Cherastidtham & Norton, 2018, p.14).

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The level of academic preparedness of students also seems to be a significant factor when considering attrition. Kift (2015) notes that lower levels of academic preparedness among vocational students can increase the drop out risk, while Cherastidtham and Norton (2018) state that students with low pass rates at university often decide to drop out of university and suggest that students who participate in part-time study may not have as strong a sense of engagement with the university as full-time students and this can impact on their student experience. Indeed, the researchers state that the greater the level of engagement, the more likely students are to complete their degree (Cherastidtham & Norton, 2018, p.16).

Despite these concerns there is also good news about students transitioning from the vocational sector. For example, those students who choose to articulate to university are probably academically capable and motivated and are familiar with the expectations of study, unlike those who have not completed a vocational qualification (Cherastidtham & Norton, 2018, 24). Cherastidtham and Norton (2018, p. 28) further point out that those university students who have chosen a degree in line with a career trajectory are more likely to persist in their studies. Catterall et al. (2014) point out that the provision of information about the expectations of higher education could alleviate some of the stresses many of these students' experience. Therefore, as Kift (2015) notes, it is particularly important in the early days of transition to create ways to channel information to students that is pertinent to this trajectory. This is an optimal way of preparing them for the challenges they are likely to face during the transition process. These are some of the key issues noted in the literature on transitioning vocational education students to higher education, which will be explored in the current study.

Significance of the current study

Students who have transitioned from TAFE to university are defined as those students who do not meet the minimal requirements for direct entry to university and so do not take a direct route from school to university (Chesters & Watson, 2014a). Developing understanding of the experiences of learners who take an alternative pathway to higher education is especially relevant in the current climate of adult education policy and

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rhetoric which actively encourages and promotes wider participation in higher education (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Norton, Cherastidtham & Mackey, 2018; Pilcher & Torii, 2018). Furthermore, little research in Australia considers the transformative potential of adult learning, particularly with reference to TAFE students transitioning to university. By focusing on seven learners in this under-represented cohort and by explicitly drawing on their stories, it is anticipated that this study will add to a greater understanding of the lived experiences of pathways students.

The research questions of the current study

The research questions of the study were established following identification of the purpose and aims of the investigation. Consideration of the three aspects of learner transformation—that is, perspectives, identity and aspirations—led to the overarching research question:

> *In what ways may the experience of adult learning transform individual perspectives, identity and aspirations?*

Research sub-questions

To further focus the scope of this overarching research question, the following sub-questions were developed:

1. *How do students articulate their reasons for attending TAFE prior to university?*

2. *What influences the decision of TAFE students to articulate to higher education?*

3. *What do students experience in the transition from one sector to another?*

These sub-questions recognise that the concept of adult learning is broad in its application; hence, the particular focus in this thesis will be on the transition from TAFE to higher education. That is, the research sub-questions explored the experiences of the learners from their initial decision to attend TAFE, their reasons for then applying to undertake a university course on completion of their TAFE course, and their experiences of transition in the first semester of university.

Method: A qualitative approach

It was determined that this investigation would be best driven by a qualitative approach. This approach draws on the constructivist/interpretive nature of inquiry in real-world settings—that is, settings where people are engaged in communication with each other (Golafshani, 2006, p. 600). Specifically, the use of narrative interviews was viewed as the most effective means of drawing on the learning stories of transitioning students, as a way of providing depth to understandings and knowledge of their individual experiences (Creswell, 2013). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) note, the nature of reality can be found in the different ways that reality is constructed. A qualitative, narrative inquiry offers opportunities for a richer student 'profile' to be developed and, consequently, a greater understanding of the potentially complex nature of pathways experiences to be uncovered. Therefore, in endeavouring to understand the learning experiences of students and to discover any transformative events or moments in their learning process, their emerging stories were central to the research.

The participants

This study focused on seven students from two courses that enabled a pathway from TAFE to higher education: the Certificate IV in Tertiary Preparation (TPC) and the Enrolled/Division 2 Nursing Diploma. All the participants articulated to Mountville City University (MCU) on completion of TAFE.

MCU is a regional university in a medium-density city in NSW, Australia. It has a diverse student body comprising both domestic and international students, who have a choice of over 120 undergraduate degrees (Australian Education Network, 2018). The seven participants in the study who graduated to MCU came from four different TAFE colleges in NSW. Two of the colleges (Warravale TAFE and Riverside TAFE) were located in the same district as MCU, while two of the colleges (Penfield TAFE and Greenbelt TAFE) were located more than 50 kilometres outside the city centre in which MCU is located.[1]

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[1] Mountville City University, Warravale TAFE, Riverside TAFE, Penfield TAFE and Greenbelt TAFE are all pseudonyms

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On completion of their TAFE course, the three TPC participants entered the first year of their respective undergraduate degrees at MCU. The four participants from the Enrolled/Division 2 Nursing Diploma (the Diploma students) entered directly into the second year of their degree, also at MCU, as a result of credit transfer. The transition experience of direct entry students to university with credit from a further education course has increasingly been the focus of research over the last decade (Christie, Barron & D' Annunzio-Green, 2013; Cram & Watson, 2008; Logan et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2013). However, more research is needed in this area to understand the challenges that these students often face when entering directly into second year of their degree.

The final section of this chapter presents a brief overview of the conceptual framework of the study.
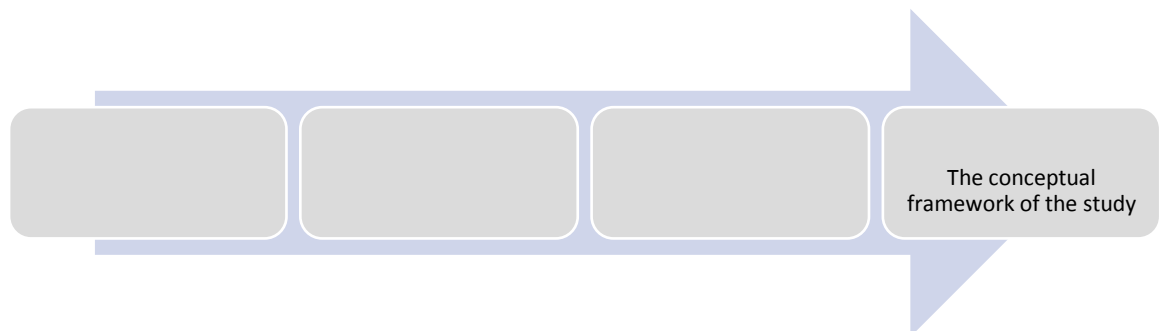
Figure 1.6: Gaps in the literature and conceptual framework sections in chapter framework

The conceptual framework of the study

Based on the view that learning is a potentially transformative experience, this study draws upon Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1990). Mezirow (1990) contends that culture and past experiences have influenced the development of beliefs, or frames of reference and notions of self. Essentially, an individual's frames of reference are described as the predisposition of 'intentions, expectations and purposes'—that is, 'habits of mind' or points of view (Mezirow, 1996, p. 163). Mezirow (1990) asserts that, once recognised and reflected upon, beliefs or habits of mind may be changed through learning, which can act as a portal for transformation.

In other words, habits of mind are representative of what individuals have come to expect of the self and/or the situation, and characterise the lens of habitual beliefs, values and ideologies through which experiences may be analysed and interpreted. The primary goal of transformational learning is to become an independent thinker, who can critically think and reflect (Mezirow, 1998). Mezirow (1996, p. 160) states, 'to understand others, one must gain access to their lived experience so as to clarify and elucidate the way they interpret it'. The proposed study rests on the contention that re-engagement with learning offers opportunities for a transformative experience that changes lives. Drawing on the lived experiences of the participants in this study was therefore essential in developing a deeper understanding of transition and transformation.

Outline of chapters

This thesis is presented as seven chapters.

Chapter 1 has presented an overview of the pathways to higher education and the importance of the AQF and TEQSA. It has outlined the pilot study and the main study and has presented significant issues in the literature. Finally, it has introduced the conceptual framework of the study.

Chapter 2 examines the literature in the field of transition and transformation and presents the theoretical underpinning of the study. It identifies important readings in the policies and practices of VET and institutes of higher education. The chapter focuses on some of the potential intersections and diversions in these sectors and the impact these potential crossovers and digressions may have on the student learning experience. The theoretical framework supporting the study is discussed in relation to the potential of learning to transform perspectives, identity and aspirations.

Chapter 3 details the method of the study, which was based on a qualitative approach using narrative inquiry through semi-structured interviews. The chapter then presents the steps in the research process of the study, including data-gathering and analysis of the data. The chapter finishes with a discussion of the ethical concerns of research.

Chapter 4 introduces the participants through their individual stories. These narratives comprise their thoughts and feelings about the TAFE experience, their projections and expectations of the impending university experience, and reflections on those experiences at the end of the first semester of university. The stories capture the ways in which the participants discussed changes to their lives and their self-perceptions and how their goals and aspirations have been formed and reformed in accordance with their experiences.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed analysis of the seven common themes of the study which emerged from cross-case coding of the data. The analysis in this chapter focuses on data relevant to the three research sub-questions of the study.

Chapter 6 presents an analysis and discussion of the overarching research question and draws together the literature, conceptual framework and key findings from the study.

Chapter 7 draws overall conclusions from the research and makes recommendations for ways to maximise the student transition experience. The chapter notes the limitations of the study and offers directions for future research which may build on the findings from the study.

Chapter 2.   Continuing the adult learning experience

Introduction

This chapter examines the literature centred on transition and transformation and identifies gaps in the research that the study will address. The study investigated the transition experiences of seven adult learners articulating from TAFE to higher education. In the process of the examination, the study further explored the transformative potential of adult learning for this cohort of learners.

The ways in which adults identify themselves may be informed and developed by the educational context they are in. When adults in Australia decide to enrol in post-compulsory education, a VET course may be preferable as a first option rather than applying directly to university (Burge, 2016). Therefore, as a first step for some learners on the path to adult learning, the vocational education sector can be crucial in the determination of a student identity for adult learners. This may especially be the case when learners have been absent from formal education for some years, for example mature age students. When students then continue their learning experience in higher education, the parameters and perspectives of student identity may require some adjustment and renegotiation. Further, when learners experience significant differences in educational expectations and academic requirements between the sectors, their capacity to achieve success may be questioned by the learner. This may lead to a negative consideration about their student identity. However, when learners successfully negotiate the educational differences, confidence may be consolidated by their achievements and their academic aspirations may grow as a consequence. These aspects of the adult learning experience are integral to this study and considered within the context of the TAFE system and the higher education system.

VET is recognised as a provider of principally work-oriented qualifications; therefore, the choice may be determined purely by the need to gain or upgrade skills for the workplace (Burge, 2016). The decision to enrol in a VET course can also be based on the need to test learning abilities and interest in what students may perceive as a less

academically demanding environment than university (Brown, 2017). The choice of a VET course over a university degree has other incentives, including cost; in Australia, a VET course is much less expensive than a university degree (Brown, 2017). The differences in fee structures between VET and higher education can be significant; consequently, a qualification from TAFE with credit transfer can mean substantially lower university fees and a considerable reduction in the final cost of a degree. While higher education fees can vary from one university to another, the Australian Education Network (2018) notes fees established in 2018 at one large-scale regional university to be a fair indication of university costs. For example, fees for an undergraduate business degree were $26,448; a degree in arts/education cost $23,856; and a degree in engineering/science cost $32,400 (Australian Education Network, 2018). In comparison, the cost of a TAFE college Diploma of Business in 2018 was $2,850; a Diploma in Visual Arts cost $10,000; and an Advanced Diploma in Engineering cost $8,260 (TAFE, NSW, 2018).

The decision to enrol in a VET course rather than a university degree may, however, lie in a lack of confidence or belief in oneself as being capable of studying at university level, of not being university 'material' (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Griffin, 2017; Savelsberg et al., 2017; VET in NSW, 2018). Or it may be that students simply do not have the entry requisite for a university degree. However, when a TAFE course leads directly to higher education via a dedicated transition pathway, the decision to enrol in a university degree may be made more easily.

The experiences of student transition to higher education, particularly the challenges of transition, have been explored widely in the literature; however, this exploration has concentrated either on the trajectory from school to university (Anderton, 2017; Delly et al., 2015; Harvey, Szalkowicz & Luckman, 2017) or, more broadly, from VET to university (Barber, Netherton, Bettles & Moors-Mailei, 2015; Beckely, Netherton, Barber, & Schmah, 2016; Delly, 2016; Delly et al., 2015; NCVER, 2017a; Watson, 2006; Watson et al., 2013; Wyman, McCrindle, Whatmore, Gedge & Edwards, 2017).

The process of transition, specifically from TAFE to university, is an underexplored focus of research, although a number of studies in this specific area stand out (e.g.,

Ambrose, Bonne, Chanock, Cunnington, Jardine & Muller, 2013; Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos, & Crosling, 2017; Cram & Watson, 2008; O'Shea et al., 2012; Savelsberg et al., 2017; Watson, 2008).

This study focuses on the possibility that students in transition from TAFE to university may be transformed by their learning experiences. The possibility of learner transformation has largely been ignored in the research, and examination of the possibility of the transformation of former TAFE students who enrol in a university degree is rare. An exception to this was a study by Benson et al. (2010) which considered the influence of transformative experiences on pathways choice.

This chapter presents the literature across three main themes:

1. the role of TAFE as a place of learning and a pathway to higher education
2. examination of what transition from TAFE to higher education actually involves, including the challenges and management of these challenges
3. Transformational Learning Theory and its applications to adult learning and the current study.

Chapter outline

Following on from information presented in Chapter 1 about the role of the AQF and TEQSA in defining the parameters of learning equivalencies and the regulation of education standards in Australia, this chapter begins with a brief history of key developments in VET and TAFE and considers the position of TAFE as a learning provider in Australia today and into the future. The chapter then examines the role and impact of TAFE as a place of learning and how it may influence students' decisions to transition to higher education. This is followed by an examination of research into the transition experience of adult learners, including the challenges and management of issues of transition. The final section presents Transformational Learning Theory as the conceptual underpinning of the research. The key concepts of the theory are outlined, and the application of the theory to adult learning praxis is explored. Figure 2.1 illustrates the framework of this chapter.

| A brief history of VET & TAFE | TAFE as a place of learning | The experiences of transition | Transformational Learning Theory |
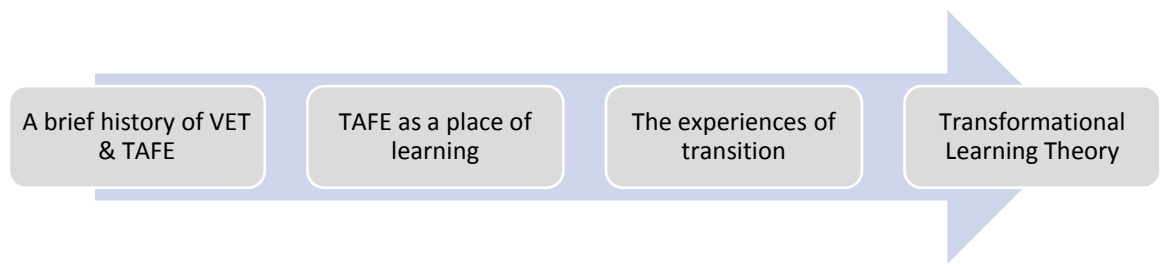
Figure 2.1: Chapter 2 framework

A brief history of VET and TAFE

VET began in the early days of the colonisation of Australia as a response to the need for skilled workers, and it was based on the apprenticeship system already operating at that time in Great Britain (Goozee, 2001). From its earliest beginnings, TAFE has played a significant role in the VET field in Australia; the focus of TAFE continues to be a system of education primarily designed to encourage 'job ready' skills. White (2014, p. 9) states that VET courses are designed to be 'task oriented and performance focused'. The 1970s was a time of growth and development of VET both nationally and from state to state (Noonan, 2016). From the 1970s through to the present, VET governing bodies have implemented various changes which have affected TAFE and continue to do so.

TAFE has traditionally nurtured and maintained strong links with industry and continues to seek to build competence in the development of work skills for students. Bedi and Germein (2016, p. 125) note that the pedagogical basis of VET has characteristically been one of an 'uncritical response to industry demands for skilled labour'. However, as Bathmaker (2017) suggests, the internationally driven widening participation agenda has seen an excessive increase in higher education enrolments with a consequent increased need for skilled workers from the vocational sector. Subsequently, vocational education providers are undergoing significant systemic change in policies and practice (Bathmaker, 2017). In Australia, this is apparent as TAFE nationwide is in a state of flux while systemic restructuring is taking place.

The changing face of TAFE

The restructuring of TAFE is in response to a perceived need by state and territory governments in Australia to overhaul the VET system, particularly TAFE;

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consequently, a number of measures have been implemented to ensure the future of TAFE as positive and beneficial to all stakeholders (TAFE NSW, 2017). Statistics from NCVER (2017b, p. 8) indicate that, overall, for the period 2015–16, student participation in VET increased by 4.9% to 2 million nationally. Of this participation, private training providers, which compete with TAFE to provide VET courses, dominated student enrolments, with almost double the number of subject enrolments compared with TAFE (NCVER, 2017b). During the period January to June 2017, there was a 5.3% overall decrease in VET student enrolments (NCVER, 2017b, p. 5), most likely due to the current state of upheaval in the VET system as the restructuring continues.

The future of TAFE

Following an initial and dramatic drop in student enrolments in the last few years, figures indicate that TAFE is beginning to regain some lost ground, with government-funded students predominantly accessing the TAFE system over other providers. For example, just over 57% of government-funded students were enrolled at TAFE institutes and other government providers in 2017 (NCVER, 2017b, p. 5). This result may reflect incentives such as the new TAFE NSW Strategic Plan 2016–22 (TAFE NSW, 2016), developed to address the need for TAFE in NSW to build its sustainability in the new competitive educational market. The strategic plan is designed to implement measures to modernise TAFE and enable it to keep step with the evolving changes in the adult education sector (TAFE NSW, 2016). The plan has projected aims which are expected to revitalise the organisation and build on its current strengths as the leading 'public face' of the VET sector (TAFE NSW, 2016).

Most recently, in 2018, DET (2018b, p. 17) stated that in 2017–18 the NSW government provided '$131.0 million to the TAFE Commission through the capital expenditure program'. It would therefore seem that, while significant changes were taking place in TAFE nationally, measures were simultaneously being enacted to ensure the ongoing successful delivery of its VET programs.

Section summary

This section has presented a summary of the development of VET and TAFE and the current position of TAFE as a provider of adult education in Australia. The following section examines the role of TAFE as a place where adult learners can develop and gain skills, competencies and qualifications. TAFE offers the possibility of choices for learners which can enable them to consider future career directions, including taking advantage of TAFE as a pathway to higher education.
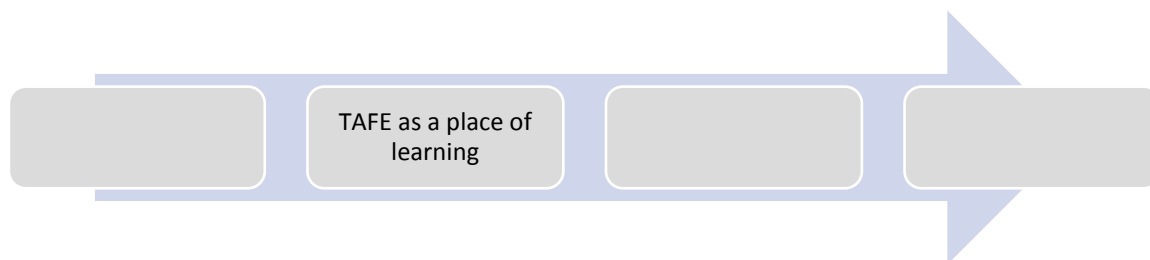
Figure 2.2: TAFE as a place of learning section in chapter framework

TAFE as a place of learning

Vocational education is generally regarded as providing opportunities for learners to have a 'second chance' at developing workplace skills in a less academically exacting environment than higher education, but at the same time also offering the chance to build qualifications suitable to entry to higher education (Bathmaker, 2013, p. 89). This view is supported by the DET (2018b, p. 29), which states that in Australia, 'TAFE is an important provider of second chance education and is often a pathway to employment and university, avenues that are frequently supported through partnerships with industry and universities.' NCVER notes that, in 2017, 86.1% of all VET graduates were either employed or enrolled in further study on completion of their VET course; of these, 13.9 % were enrolled in a university degree (NCVER, 2017a, p. 8).

Within Australia, TAFE has been notable as a place where anyone in the community can go to learn a trade or to improve their life chances in some way, regardless of their educational background, income stream or academic abilities (Savelsberg et al., 2017, p. 36). In other words, TAFE has long held the position of an 'everyman' site of learning. As a vocational institute, and unlike the often rigorous entry criteria for higher education, TAFE is accessible to learners at different levels of ability. For

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example, the AQF descriptors for levels 1 to 5 (see Appendix 1) indicate the potential range of abilities of learners who enrol in different courses through VET (AQF, 2013). Research by Griffin (2017) notes that, in 2016, 80.7 % of TAFE students nationally nominated employment-related reasons as their main motivation to enrol in a TAFE course.

Current literature suggests that the value of TAFE is apparent as a safe and comfortable place where students can develop their potential in an environment offering a structured and guided approach to learning (Delly et al., 2015; Savelsberg et al., 2017; Weadon & Baker, 2015). As the literature indicates, for many, TAFE represents a low risk way of 'sampling' the field of adult education and can assist in the decision to enrol in a university course (Cao & Tran, 2015). In other words, TAFE can help determine whether adult learning is the path to take in life (DET, 2018b); TAFE can provide students with the confidence and means of coming to terms with being a student again (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Griffin, 2017; Savelsberg et al., 2017). These findings are mirrored by international studies, such as that by Fuller and MacFadyen (2012, p. 14) which highlighted perceptions of vocational education as a more 'relaxed and collaborative approach to learning', where relationships with peers and staff were important to the overall experience.

Another key feature of the TAFE system is that it provides pathways links to higher education for some of its programs and therefore represents an important opportunity for TAFE learners to explore the possibility of articulation to university on completion of their TAFE course.

Section summary
As a starting point of the adult learning experience, TAFE appears to offer a safe space for students to develop their skills and competencies while adjusting to the demands of being a student. TAFE can also play a significant role in opening doors to further learning, through its pathways to university programs.

The next section of this chapter considers the literature focused on the challenges that transitioning students may face and the means by which they may be able to deal with

these challenges. While the literature focuses primarily on VET students in general, this paves the way for a discussion on what is involved in the transition experiences for TAFE learners specifically. This is an area of research yet to be fully understood. This study seeks to address this gap by drawing on the voices of its participants, as one way to develop understandings in this field.
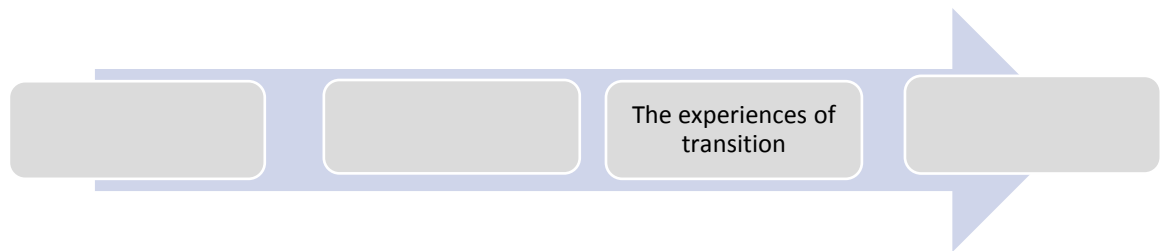
Figure 2.3: Experiences of transition section in chapter framework

The experiences of transition: The challenges

No studies in the field of transition have explicitly focused on TAFE learners during that period when they are making the decision to articulate to university, nor followed them during their initial transition experiences over the first six months of university. Research that focuses on pathways to university cohorts tends towards a quantitative approach (e.g., Barber et al., 2015; Bunney, 2017; Chesters & Watson, 2014a, 2016; Daddow & Schneider, 2017; Griffin, 2017; National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education [NCSEHE], 2017; Wyman et al., 2017). Where studies do draw on the voices of students (e.g., Alao & Mann, 2017; Elliot et al., 2016; Elsom et al., 2017; Logan et al., 2017), they focus on pathways broadly, rather than on TAFE. Research that does include TAFE to university cohorts (e.g., Abhayawansa, Tempone & Pillay, 2012; Cram & Watson, 2008; Watson, 2008) also tends towards a quantitative approach.

For many students transitioning from TAFE, the new learning pathway they have embarked upon at university can be one of mixed experiences. For example, they may have successfully engaged in further education while at TAFE and subsequently developed new ways of studying and thinking, or they may have built on existing skills. Those students who then decide to enrol in a university course will enter a system different in many ways from the TAFE college experience to which they have

become accustomed. Understanding what this means for students at a deeper level than that presented in the literature to date was a key objective of this study. This section considers five key challenges in transition:

1. adapting to different knowledge paradigms and building academic literacies
2. managing different pedagogical approaches
3. establishing a university student identity
4. developing a sense of belonging
5. finding a study/life balance.

Adapting to different knowledge paradigms and building academic literacies

The challenges students can face in transition include the need to adapt to the gaps that may exist in the different knowledge paradigms and academic literacies between the VET and higher education sectors. This can be especially apparent when students from a practical-based further education course like those offered at TAFE enter the more academically rigorous higher education sector (Ambrose et al., 2013; Baker et al., 2018; Bathmaker, 2013; Christie et al., 2007; Christie et al., 2013; Christie et al., 2016; Watson, 2006; 2008). These knowledge differences can be particularly problematic and challenging for students with credit transfer who enter directly into the second year of their degree and who may not have developed the academic literacies expected of them at this level (Chesters & Watson, 2014a; Christie et al., 2013; Delly et al., 2015; Logan et al., 2017; Penesis et al., 2015; Wu & Myhill, 2017).

The experiences of credit transfer students are not rigorously explored in the literature, and those studies that offer insights into this area are generally pessimistic about the experiences of these students. For example, in their case study analysis of distance learners, Logan et al. (2017) point to the disadvantage some credit transfer students may experience when faced with a deficit in theoretical knowledge as they enter higher education from the VET sector. This deficit may be further aggravated when higher education, which focuses primarily on the development of criticality (Brown, Withers, Down, Figgis, & McManus, 2011), represents a significant difference in the learning paradigms of VET, with its usual focus on technical competencies. Primarily, this may be viewed as the difference between procedural knowledge, which is the usual focus of VET, and declarative knowledge, the focus of higher education (Gabb & Galisher,

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2006). However, as Hodge (2019, p. 146) notes, the mastery of bodies of knowledge is not the ultimate goal of transformative learning as defined by Mezirow (1978), but rather it encompasses the 'inwardly significant journey of the adult learner'. Hodge (2019) does however concede that there is possibly a greater potential for transformative outcomes of learning when knowledge is gained in the communicative sphere as opposed to the instrumental sphere. Most obviously, this is associated with competency-based training programs such as those of the VET sector. Nevertheless, it is Mezirow (1991) himself who asserts that adult learning, whether instrumental or communicative, is a portal for understanding more about the self and, with critical reflection, learners in either sphere may experience transformation. As Hodge (2019, p. 149) asserts, emancipatory learning can result when critical reflection is employed in either domain and perspective transformation can follow. This is a crucial tenet of Transformative Learning Theory which will be discussed later in this chapter.

More broadly, it is often the case that students moving from VET to higher education who enter the second year of a degree program usually lack the 'embedded knowledge' that students already familiar with the academic literacies of university possess (Penesis et al., 2015). Initially, those entering directly into the second year of a course often struggle through a lack of 'academic scaffolding' (Jackson, Dwyer, Paez, Byrnes, & Blacker, 2010, p. 6). This may be due to the level of implicit knowledge students gain from experience with the higher education system. This is described as knowledge that is located in the 'emergent routines' of university life and, therefore, by definition, knowledge that needs to be experienced, understood and realised over time and with familiarity (Christie et al., 2007, p. 14).

The need to develop academic literacies in all students new to higher education is important if they are to broaden their ability to engage in critical thinking and other academic skills (Jefferies et al., 2018). Indeed, the strictures imposed by rigid adherence to a competency-based curriculum such as those of VET may impact on the development of critical thinking for some students, as noted by Jefferies et al. (2018), and ultimately impede the transformative potential of learning (Mezirow, 1978). This suggests that, when TAFE students enter a different educational sector such as

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university, some may lack experience in critical and analytical thinking to the level expected in higher education. However, the way that this can affect their experiences during transition is not explored adequately in the literature.

On a more positive note, research by Anderson, Wason and Southall (2016) and Christie et al. (2016) highlights the relationship between the development of academic literacies, critical reflection and new ways of knowing. Christie et al. (2016) suggest that, when students comprehend the social construction and the complexities of knowledge, there is the potential for transformation to occur with such a revelation. It is therefore heartening to note the conclusions of Bedi and Germein (2016, p. 127), who state that, in a bid to become more sustainable, VET is beginning to focus more on 'transformative, learner-centred, constructivist and socially critical learning modes', but much more still needs to be done in these areas. Research by Ryan et al. (2017) supports this view, calling for a greater emphasis on reflective learning and development of criticality in all VET students. As Christie et al. (2016) observed in their comprehensive longitudinal study of transitioning students in the UK, it takes time to develop critical thinking skills, yet such skills were deemed the key to successful transition.

As noted by Hodge (2019) engaging in the acquisition of formal knowledge is consistent with the principles of humanism and emancipatory learning. It is the emancipatory role of adult learning that occupies an important place in Transformational Learning Theory. This imbues the process of adult learning with the significance it deserves, and yet, there are gaps in the research attendant on the focus of learning as a means of transforming lives. The reality of the knowledge divide and how it impacts on the student transition experience is yet to be sufficiently investigated by research that utilises the voices and experiences of students who are transitioning from TAFE to university. This gap in the research speaks to the need for investigation into the actual lived experiences of students entering higher education, especially those with credit transfer, who may have to spend additional time 'catching up' while simultaneously producing academic work. By listening to students who are representative of this cohort, there is an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding

of their experiences when they first enter the higher education system and to discover the extent to which knowledge differences and insufficient academic literacies impact on the student experience in the early days of transition. This study focuses on three former TAFE students entering the first year of a degree, as well as four former TAFE students entering second year with credit transfer; hence, it has the potential to contribute knowledge and understanding of comparative student experiences.

Managing different pedagogical approaches

Transitioning students may further be challenged when confronted with approaches to teaching and learning different from those they have been accustomed to at TAFE. Some of the research on TAFE teaching has criticised its highly structured nature, which focuses on developing a list of competencies; the argument is that there is a lack of pedagogical flexibility, thus denying students the opportunity to develop reflexive, evaluative responses to learning (Ryan et al., 2017).

Different pedagogical approaches can also bring the challenge of greater expectations of independent learning at university (Tett et al., 2017) compared with the more guided approach to teaching experienced at TAFE. On entering the higher education system, there is usually an expectation that students will have the ability to undertake independent research and to learn with autonomy, but for many students transitioning from TAFE this is simply not the case (Brown et al., 2011). This point is supported by Southgate, Douglas, Scevak, Macqueen, Rubin and Lindell (2014), who describe the learning context at university as one requiring the ability of individuals to be responsible for their own learning and to develop independent learning skills to be successful. This can be a particularly challenging situation for former TAFE students, who may have been more accustomed to a great deal of ongoing classroom support in the past at TAFE (Delly et al., 2015; Savelsberg et al., 2017; Weadon & Baker, 2015).

The need to become an independent learner is an ongoing challenge for many transitioning students, regardless of their pathway to entry, and there is debate over how much systemic academic support students should be able to expect at university, and how resourceful they may reasonably be expected to be. For example, White (2014, p. 17) points out that, while support is important, students need to 'take some

ownership and agency over forging a pathway'. Indications from the literature suggest that development of agency may be particularly important at the TAFE level, as a means of preparing students for university and the greater need for independent approaches there. As Fuller (2014) notes, the relationship between beliefs in 'meritocracy' and the need to succeed through independent effort is integral to the approach that some students have to their studies; there is the deeply ingrained belief that hard work is the key to success. Likewise, Bowles, Fisher, McPhail, Rosenstreich and Dobson (2014, p. 221) point to the efficacy of learner 'effort' as a likely 'endogenous' contributor to student success—that is, effort that comes from an inner source rather than one that is external to the learner, such as that provided systemically in many universities. Similarly, Christie et al. (2016) note that the capability of being a proactive learner plays a vital role alongside willingness to take responsibility. Perhaps not all students have such capability; therefore, the transition from a 'passive … learner to an active and autonomous' one (Tett et al., 2017, p.16) is something that may take time to develop as transitioning students settle in and learn how to manage the new system of higher education.

As Christie et al. (2016) observe, once students begin to prioritise study, they can often recognise the need for a more independent approach to their study commitments. Christie et al. (2013) also suggest that students' independent approaches to study, coupled with an ability to adapt to the demands of higher education, are characteristics of successful transitioning learners. This raises the issue that, potentially, it is not only a willingness to be independent but the capability of being adaptable to new circumstances and demands that increases chances of student success. However, debate on the issue of independent learners also suggests that, if institutes of higher education want to reduce attrition rates, they need to share the responsibility for the student learning experience. For example, Crosling (2017, p. 2) asserts that, while it is incumbent upon students to persist in their studies, institutes need to be 'dynamic and student responsive', especially when considering the diverse nature of students and their needs.

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Clearly, a greater understanding of the needs of students specifically transitioning from a TAFE pedagogy to that of higher education is needed. This understanding can be more comprehensively developed by research that draws directly on student voices reflecting on their transition experiences from TAFE. It is anticipated that this study will help to develop this understanding.

Establishing a university student identity

In discussions of transformative learning, Newman (2012) notes that in in Mezirow's (2009) ten phases of transformation, Transformational Learning Theory emphasises the roles that individuals play as contributors to the formation and often, changes to identity. In other words, taking on new roles, involves new forms of identity. As Illeris (2014, p. 155) notes, in order to answer questions such as, 'who am I' and 'who do I want to be?' it is necessary to constantly think about changing identity. Indeed, he asserts that if adults are to transform elements of their identity, they must have a good reason to do so, or the motivation to do so (Illeris, 2014). As Illeris (2014) states, frames of reference and meaning perspectives make up parts of the identity, uncovering the basis of these is elemental in determining who we are and who we may become. This is a process Mezirow (1991, p. 161) refers to as 'an empowered sense of self' which results from the taking on of new roles and perspectives. As Tett (2019, p. 156) asserts, 'the relationship between transformative learning and the concept of a learning identity is important because meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind are substantial parts of identity'. Significantly, Tett (2019) further notes that when changes to identity do occur, changes to imaginings of one's future can also occur, especially when previously negative learning identities have been instrumental in limiting the ambitions or aspirations of the individual.

Therefore, alongside the challenges already mentioned in this review, when students leave the VET environment and enter university there is often the need to establish a new, university student identity (Fuller, 2018; Tett et al., 2017). Indeed, Christie et al. (2007) assert that newly transitioning students sometimes face a sense of loss of identity on first entering the higher education system, as the successful student identity they had adopted at college is no longer replicable in the larger, more impersonal

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environment of university. Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009, p. 1112) refer to the 'crisis of confidence' students can face in the early days of transition to higher education. It can take time for some former VET students to feel they can legitimately claim to be a 'university student' (Tett et al., 2017). This can be especially difficult as they navigate the ways in which patterns of beliefs and socio-cultural frames of reference change and develop. Mezirow (2009, p.22) points out that frames of reference have cognitive, affective and conative dimensions. He further notes that meaning perspectives upon which these frames of reference are built, can be shaped by many influential factors including 'social norms, cultural and linguistic codes or social ideologies… feelings and actions' (Mezirow, 1991, p. 188). As such, Howie and Bagnell (2013) argue, frames of reference may be viewed as aspects of identity, which can undergo change and be transformed. Significantly, Tett (2019) asserts that it is learning which, while important to the development of skills and practices, is also an important precursor of changes to identity. It is often the socio-cultural or shared identity of the social world to which they are affiliated or feel a sense of connection to that can colour students' perceptions of identity (Mezirow, 1990). To this end, Mezirow (1991) states that the cultural context of who we are and of what we value and know is transmitted generationally and represents what we recognise as truth. However, it is problematic when these negative concepts of self emerge as a result of this contextualized development of meaning perspectives, but engaging in formal learning which allows space for new perspectives to be formed is one way such perspectives can be transformed. As Mezirow notes, critical reflection can bring about new understandings and new ways of viewing the self. Tett (2019, p. 168) declares, it is possible for learners to 'surmount negative social positioning…' when changes to understandings of who they are and who they might become, take place. This lends veracity to the idea that when changes or transformations to identity occur, so too the possibility of aspirational changes increases.

New adaptations of identity may therefore be required by participation in higher education, especially if transitioning students have no established socio-cultural pattern of participation in higher education. However, Taylor and Cranton (2013) note that it is important to recognise that changes to perceptions of self, values and beliefs,

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previously based on socio-cultural understandings can be fraught if those changes result in a sense of loss of connection to community and culture. Therefore, as Illeris (2014) has determined, it may be assumed that individuals would need a strong sense of motivation to consider changing their perspectives. Alongside this, is the finding by Tett (2019, p. 167) that when learners are able to cast off negative notions of self, they can begin to envisage 'a better life in which they could keep going forward'. Kasworm (2010) points out that it is possible for individuals to make considerable changes to perspectives about the self, because identity is constantly shifting and changing as adjustments are made to self-perceptions and place in the world. Similarly, Gale and Parker (2013) note that the transformation of notions of self as a university student is representative of a significant identity change, which suggests there is no 'fixed' identity but rather one of fluidity subject to ongoing negotiation.

The mutability of identity as the new university student adopts the shifting identities appropriate to work and home further highlights the potentially changing nature of identity through adapting and changing to fit circumstances in positive ways (Christie et al., 2007). Kasworm (2010, p. 56) concludes that adult learners 'mediate' and negotiate identities 'within the cultural context of a … university'. But how learners achieve this is underexplored in the literature.

The suggested mobile nature of identity raises the question of what this might mean for transitioning TAFE students who are accustomed to the VET system but as yet unfamiliar with higher education. This may be especially challenging if students have been highly successful at TAFE and have yet to develop their academic skills at university. By foregrounding the spoken narratives of a small number of transitioning TAFE students, it is anticipated that this study will add to understandings of identity formation during transition.

A final consideration here is how much the renegotiation of perspectives and learner identity should rest on the shoulders of students themselves and how much should be shared by higher education institutes. For example, Fuller (2018, p. 102) discusses what role higher education can play in developing the ability of students to 'renegotiate the classed identity' they have grown up with, and to challenge the permanency of this

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habitual way of thinking about the self. While the literature points to the significant role that VET can play in shifting perceptions of identity by enabling learners to have a positive learning experience in a safe environment, there is little to indicate that higher education is involved in this process in significant ways. Limited data exist that considers what may be involved in the process of renegotiating an identity that allows former TAFE students to adjust to the new environment of university in a timely way. Yet, arguably, to be successful and to enjoy the experience of learning, adults must be engaged and involved and see themselves as belonging to the learning community.

Developing a sense of belonging

Associated with the challenge of developing a sense of identity as a university student is the need to establish a sense of belonging to the new learning community, which is often lacking in the early days of transition (Burke, 2016; Habel et al., 2017; King Luzeckyj, McCann, & Graham, 2015; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017; Tett et al., 2017). This may be associated with the experience of the difficulties of adapting to the less collegial, more impersonal environment of university (Habel et al., 2017). Developing a sense of belonging to the university can take time and evolves as the individual becomes more familiar with their new circumstances and begins to see themselves as a university student (Christie et al., 2007).

However, during the transition process, students such as those transitioning from VET to the higher education system often experience a sense of 'alienation and marginality' (Leece, 2014, p. 50). As Leece (2014) explains, a sense of marginality is often increased by a lack of familiarity with the concept of being a university student. This points to the fact that one of the key enablers of a sense of belonging is linked to the development of one's identity as a university student, as someone who now attends university and is therefore entitled to see the university environment as theirs and as a place to which they rightfully belong. However, Hoggan, Malkki and Finnegan (2017, p. 53) take a cautionary tone towards this aspect of adult learning and in particular cite the 'consequences' that may arise for some learners who, on choosing a higher education path, may be alienating themselves from their key social groups, simply through the action of transforming perspectives about themselves.

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Feelings of not belonging, while often a fundamental part of the transition experience to university, can be exacerbated by the lack of friendships that others have already established (King et al., 2015). More research is called for to test this assertion and explore the ways in which transitioning students develop their sense of belonging. Some studies have examined the challenge of developing a student identity that incorporates a belief in the self as a university student (Fuller, 2018; Tett et al., 2017) who 'belongs' in the higher education system (Burke, 2016; Habel et al., 2017). However, the voices of the students for whom this may be pertinent have not been foregrounded to a sufficient degree.

Finding a study/work/life balance

A final but equally important challenge to be considered is the necessity often faced by students to balance the many facets of their complex lives in ways that accommodate their study needs while also accounting for their lives outside university (Baik et al., 2015; Chesters & Watson, 2014b; Christie et al., 2013; Christie et al., 2016; Habel et al., 2017; Wilson, Murphy, Pearson, Wallace, Reher & Buys, 2016; Tett et al., 2017). This is often particularly difficult in the case of transitioning students who are mature age, already working and have added family commitments (Habel et al., 2017; Tett et al., 2017). These added responsibilities can necessitate 'juggling' the competing demands of outside work and study requirements while maintaining some quality of life.

The need to constantly balance the competing demands that transitioning students can face is highlighted in literature that finds a connection between part-time study mode and high attrition rates (Norton et al., 2018). For example, Norton et al. (2018) state that the single most defining factor in whether a student is likely to drop out of university in Australia is their status as a part-time student who is also working. The report found that 40% of part-time university students work between 20 and 29 hours per week; consequently, almost 40% of part-time students will consider leaving their university course because of an inability to find a suitable study/life balance (Norton et al., 2018, p.28). As noted by Wilson et al. (2016) and Christie et al. (2013), time management is often an ongoing issue in the early days of transition. Headspace (2016,

p. 30), a mental health initiative funded by the Australian Government, finds that almost 65% of mature-age learners cite the difficulty of finding a workable balance as the key impediment to academic success.

The statistics presented here offer a grim picture of the learning outcomes for many students who study part-time and work. However, the statistics do not adequately consider those students who do find ways to balance their competing responsibilities and successfully continue their studies. It is important to investigate not only the problems experienced by transitioning TAFE students but the ways in which many realise their learning goals. Listening to the lived experiences of learners can help to uncover how they manage this particular challenge in all its intricacies and complexities.

Section summary

This section has presented some of the key challenges noted in the research. In particular, it has examined literature on the knowledge and academic literacies of VET students as they enter higher education. The conclusion reached is that, while TAFE can help to build confidence and belief in learner abilities, the TAFE approach to learning and teaching—with its heavy emphasis on a structured, competency-based approach—may result in a false sense of security in terms of what learners know and what they can do. This security may falter when these same students are faced with the need to develop skills in higher order thinking and academic literacies in higher education.

The section has further highlighted the challenge of establishing a new learner identity and sense of belonging, especially when students who have been successful in the VET system have to renegotiate their identity in the new system of higher education. This review notes that, in defining the self as a university student and feeling a sense of ownership of this reimagined self, it is likely that learning can provide a means by which individuals may come to question taken-for-granted or assumed ideas about their self and place in the world. Renegotiation of perspectives and their learner identity to fit the new circumstances in which they find themselves has been reported as being an experience for many TAFE students entering university for the first time (Tett et al.,

2017), yet it is still under-recognised in the literature and remains largely underexplored. This review has also examined the difficulty faced by many transitioning TAFE students in terms of balancing study, work and life commitments. This is an important aspect of the transition experience, as it is linked to academic failure or success, often dependent upon how successfully learners can navigate these different responsibilities.

It is quite confounding that, when investigating the literature and research focused on transition, the same issues and challenges continue to appear over time. Much more needs to be done in the field of transition to develop greater awareness of not only how challenges can be addressed by all stakeholders but also how that knowledge can translate into a successful and rewarding student experience. A greater understanding of the challenges of transition can be developed through awareness of the lived experiences of students. Further, this awareness could provide understanding of why, despite the challenges, some learners manage to stay on track and achieve their learning goals.

The following section discusses the role of the support networks that students in transition can draw upon and the influence that the dual roles of adaptability and resilience may have on the transition experience.

Managing the challenges of transition

Introduction

Literature on transition focuses primarily on the challenges that students often face in the early days of transition, but how students manage the challenges they face remains largely insufficiently researched. This section considers two key aspects of how students manage these challenges: first, the kinds of support that learners may draw upon from the support networks available to them; second, the inner resources that may be available to learners, specifically the ability to adapt and to be resilient in the face of challenging events. The extent of the influence of learners' own resources on their learning outcomes was a further point for exploration in this study.

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The role of support networks

Research shows that the influence and support of others for students in transition cannot be underestimated and is important to the student experience, especially in the early stages of university participation (O'Shea, 2015; Southgate et al., 2014). Transitioning TAFE students have usually graduated from a system that provides learning in a nurturing environment (Weadon & Baker, 2015) where one-to-one attention is a normal part of the learning experience and, generally, classes have small numbers. On entering the university system, these students usually encounter larger classes, lectures as a common mode of information delivery, and a more impersonal approach to learning; therefore, support for these students is particularly needed in the early transition period (Watson et al., 2013, p. 30).

Studies that address the issue of support often focus on the value of the kinds of systemic academic support available to students (Bunney, 2017; Logan et al, 2017; Mackenzie & Egea, 2016; NCSEHE, 2017). However, other kinds of support may be equally or more important, such as the support of important others in a learner's life, including family, friends and peers. For example, research highlights the value of peer support as a means of maintaining open communications with fellow students and developing a sense of belonging (Anderson et al., 2016; Rushton, 2016; Tett et al., 2017). This is especially relevant as peer support can engender a greater sense of community and lead to increased chances of academic success (Brouwer, Jansen, Flache & Hofman, 2016; Burge, 2016). Interestingly, when peer support is provided as a formal, university-supported transition intervention, its impact is often increased. This is particularly the case when mentors are involved, as they can be a significant means of developing a sense of connectedness to the university (Burge, 2016; Loane, 2015).

However, research does not adequately explore whether support from others—such as family or peers—impacts on a student's ability to manage the challenges of transition, or whether, in fact, learners who can draw on their own inner resources have a greater capacity to manage. For example, alongside support from others is the potential role that adaptability and resilience can play in managing the challenges of transition

(Millman & McNamara, 2018). These personal attributes are also referred to in the literature as agency (Lovett, 2016), persistence (Chesters & Watson, 2014b) and determination (Habel et al., 2017; Masika & Jones, 2015). Chesters and Watson (2014b) note that persistence is a quality that ultimately can lead to educational success, especially when it is coupled with confidence, and suggest that such attributes in students are important for those who wish to succeed in higher education. Similarly, Fuller (2018) asserts that confidence and determination were leading qualities in the academic successes of higher education students in her study. The prominent role these kinds of attributes can play in student success needs to be explored more thoroughly in research into the experiences of students transitioning from TAFE to university.

Adaptability

Adaptability has been described in the literature as involving a complexity of behaviours, including an individual's motivation to succeed, determination, taking responsibility and being self-directed (Habel et al., 2017). When attempting to manage the many challenges transitioning students face in a higher education setting, the importance of the ability to adapt and adjust to the demands of a new academic environment should not be underestimated. This is especially the case when, as Crosling (2017) suggests, adaptable students are less likely to become disaffected in new situations because they find ways to adjust.

The ability of learners to change their perspectives about many aspects of student life is an important consideration in developing understanding of the power of adaptive strategies to cope with challenging learning situations. The efficacy of perspective change that can act as counterpoints to these challenges can be most notably associated with Mezirow (1990), who states that one's perspectives develop over time as habitual ways of thinking or unconscious habits of mind but, with reflection, perspectives can change or transform.

There is a limited amount of research that identifies student adaptability as a factor to be considered in the transition experience. The research that does exist points to the need for students to be aware of the demands they are likely to face at university, compared with those they faced at TAFE, before entering the higher education system

(Habel et al., 2017). In so doing, students may pre-emptively consider adaptive measures that can assist in the development of successful adjustment to a new and often highly differentiated educational environment. For example, Habel et al. (2017) found that, on leaving the learning environment of TAFE, some students reported the reality of transition as a shock when they found themselves in what they termed 'big-kid's uni' (p. 16), with the subsequent skills of navigation this required. These navigational skills may involve, for example, the need for students to become self-regulated and to be able to plan and monitor their time effectively (Christie et al., 2013). Significantly, it is likely that students who can adapt to new environments (Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Christie et al., 2013), when faced with demands, are more likely to have a successful learning experience.

The ability to adapt may be even more important for students with direct credit transfer to the second year of their degree. As noted earlier in this review, it is likely that these transitioning students will have a limited epistemological schema of the depth of knowledge and metacognitive requirements of higher education study. But usually there will be a requirement for these students to almost immediately produce high-quality, well-written and critically developed texts. Research that examines the ways in which credit transfer students from TAFE adapt to and manage this expectation is yet to be sufficiently developed. This study will add to understandings of this issue.

Resilience

The suggestion by some researchers that attributes like adaptability and resilience may be confounded by social variables including social class, gender and age is a legitimate one. However, the literature on the role that resilience and adaptability play in academic success and the genesis of such attributes is inconclusive and at times contradictory. For example, Abelev (2009, p. 116) who describes resilience as not only the ability to navigate challenges in life but also includes 'problem-solving…the ability to plan, to be flexible and resourceful, and to use critical thinking and insight', also argues that resilience is class-based and related to the habitus. Morales (2008) however, disregards background as an important precursor to the development of resilience and instead focuses on individual differences. Other studies, for example, Sheard (2009)

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discuss the impact of age and gender on resilience, while Wiks and Spivey (2010) point to the role that social support plays in the development of resilience.

Abelev (2009) offers an interesting perspective on the influence of social class in determining the ability to be resilient or not. She argues that indications from her study pointed to the fact that a working-class background is likely to engender a habitus that blocks the development of resilience, whereas a middle-class upbringing creates a habitus of 'entitlement' and thus builds resilience (Abelev, 2009, p. 134). However, Abelev's (2009) perspective may be construed as a somewhat generalized oversimplification of the origins and continuity of a resilient attitude. In contrast, Morales (2008) argues that habitus may indeed be changed as academic successes lead to new evaluations of ability and self-image. He states, the self-image of students improves 'as a result of survival and excellence in the academic contest' (Morales, 2008, p. 164). While Morales (2008) offers hope for the transformation of habits of mind in this way, he does however present a thought-provoking discussion of the many potential disadvantages students who lack familiarity with academic environments can face. He suggests that factors including cultural, language and class background can test the ability to be resilient, especially when the gap perceived between the individual and the academic culture they are in is seemingly wide (Morales, 2008). However, Morales (2008, p. 161) also suggests that the resilient student is one who can maintain a positive self-image despite the challenges of displacement and otherness that an academic environment can engender; he asserts that '…resilient students often have to learn that they are good students.' Also important in the ability to be resilient is the support from friends, regardless of class, age or gender of the recipient. Wiks and Spivey (2010, p.284) affirm the value of support, which can 'bolster resilience in the face of academic stress' and can contribute to the growth and maintenance of resilience. As noted by Mezirow (1978), persevering with new perspectives in new circumstances such as engagement in adult learning, may be difficult and may depend on the support of others and a shared view of the new perspective.

It appears that when strategies have been put into place to successfully manage challenges in transition, the way is open for students capable of being resilient to

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succeed. For example, Reay et al. (2009) in their UK study of working-class students in higher education found that the ability to deal with adversity and to be resilient in the face of difficulties was an important precursor to managing the higher education experience for students unfamiliar with university. This finding accords with the view of Illeris (2014, p. 584) that when learning becomes demanding it is essential that the individual embraces these new demands rather than meets them with 'defence or resistance'. This is where resilience as well as adaptability may be critical. It is Zepke's (2013) contention that self-belief in one's strengths is a major contributing factor to engagement and success in adult learning and as such is associated with notions of resilience and commitment. There is also a suggestion in the literature that resilience may be associated with the long-term development and maintenance of wellbeing of transitioning students in their first year in higher education (Taylor, 2017).

In an interesting discussion of the role of resilience in adult learning at university, Rowe and Fitness (2018) note that certain personal predispositions can play an important role in the ability to manage negative emotional responses resulting from the stresses and tensions associated with academic achievement and learning outcomes. However, this view of resilience stands in contrast to those of Taylor (2017) and Hays and Reinders (2018), who assert that, rather than being an innate quality or attribute, resilience can be developed. For example, Taylor (2017) refers to the development of resilience not as an attribute but as an outcome of providing important information to support students new to university at just the right time. This aligns with the assertion by Hays and Reinders (2018) that resilience can be built, and it is up to educators to find ways to do this. However, somewhat contradictorily, Hays and Reinders (2018, p. 13) also acknowledge the relationship between 'adaptive capacity' and resilience. This suggests a belief that it may be necessary for learners to have an innate ability to adapt in order to develop resilience. Such contradictions and uncertainties in the literature about the genesis and role of these attributes suggest the need for clarification of what appear to be important elements of a successful learning experience

Gaps in the research

A number of gaps are apparent in the literature and research on transition. Primarily, few studies focus specifically on students transitioning from TAFE colleges but rather take a broad approach to transitioning VET students in general. The current study, in contrast, narrows that focus to explicitly explore the role of TAFE as a place of learning and its relevance to the experiences of transition and transformation.

Much of the literature that explores transition from TAFE to university identifies the significant challenges students may experience. This includes inconsistencies in knowledge equivalencies (Baker, Irwin, Freeman, Nance & Coleman, 2018; Christie, 2013; O'Shea et al., 2012), the duality of pedagogical and paradigmatic approaches (Chesters & Watson, 2016; Delly et al., 2015; Ryan, Gwinner, Mallan & Livock, 2017; Savelsberg, Pignata & Weckert, 2017; Weadon & Baker, 2015) and the need to develop a student identity (Burke, 2016; Fuller, 2018; Habel, Whitman & Stokes, 2017; Tett, Cree & Christie, 2017).

The challenge of inconsistency in knowledge equivalencies has been particularly noted by Baker et al. (2017), Christie et al. (2013) and O'Shea et al. (2012). That is, VET students—such as those from TAFE—may have an inadequate knowledge base and academic literacy before they commence university (Christie, Tett, Cree & McCune, 2016). This can be especially problematic for those students with credit transfer (Christie et al., 2013; Cram & Watson, 2008; Delly et al., 2015; Logan et al., 2017; Penesis et al., 2015; Smith & Brennan Kemmis, 2014; Wu & Myhill, 2017). Essentially, as noted by Watson (2006) and Watson et al. (2013), credit transfer can potentially disadvantage students who may not have the requisite academic literacies needed to successfully achieve at the level of university study that credit transfer enables. This is a problem not confined to Australia. Indeed, international research, such as that by Christie et al. (2013), points to similar difficulties for direct entry students from colleges in the United Kingdom (UK) who, on commencement of university study, find that they are often academically underprepared. This lack of preparation can be experienced in terms of their academic readiness for the rigours of higher education study, the greater need to be independent learners, and an assumption

by educators that these transitioning learners are at an equal academic level to other students in second year of university (Christie et al., 2013).

The duality of pedagogical and paradigmatic approaches in VET and higher education has also been identified as a significant challenge for many students transitioning from VET to higher education (Chesters & Watson, 2016; Delly et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2017; Savelsberg et al., 2017; Weadon & Baker, 2015), but the ways in which students manage the differences is often underexplored.

Studies have also looked at the challenge of developing a student identity that incorporates a belief in the self as a university student and the need to establish a new identity as a university student (Fuller, 2018; Tett et al., 2017). This is particularly important for those students who may feel initially that they do not belong in the higher education system (Burke, 2016; Habel et al., 2017). However, understanding these aspects of identity and belonging in relation to former TAFE students in the process of transition is underdeveloped in the research.

The potential for transformative educational outcomes resulting from adult learning is a relatively new area of research, particularly where relevant to students who are transitioning from TAFE to university. This study will help to bridge this significant gap, by bringing the voices of students in transition to the forefront of the research. While it is the case that some researchers have presented students' stories through the lens of the learner (e.g., Alao & Mann, 2017; Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell & McCune, 2007; Christie et al., 2016; Elliot, Shanks & Skerman, 2016; Elsom, Greenaway & Marshman, 2017; Logan et al., 2017; Tett et al., 2017), there is a space yet to be filled with an in-depth narrative inquiry detailing the lived experience of transition, particularly as students transitioning from TAFE to university are actually engaged in their transition process.

Section summary

Research shows that the support of others can play a significant role in the ability of students to manage the challenges they encounter during the transition to university. These supporting roles can be taken by academic advisors, family, friends and peers.

The extent to which learners are responsible for their own successes through their ability to be adaptable and resilient when faced with challenges is less well known, and yet the ability to adapt to new situations by changing their perspectives may be a significant aspect of successful involvement in adult learning (Millman & McNamara, 2018). It is important to build on knowledge about the extent to which others can influence the academic outcomes of learners in transition, as well as to determine the potential of individuals to bring about their own academic successes. This study considers the relevance of these influences on the learning experiences of students in transition from TAFE to university.

The final section of this chapter will provide the conceptual underpinning of the study—that is, Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1990). This theory relates to key aspects of the current inquiry into the potential for learning to transform perspectives, identity and aspirations.
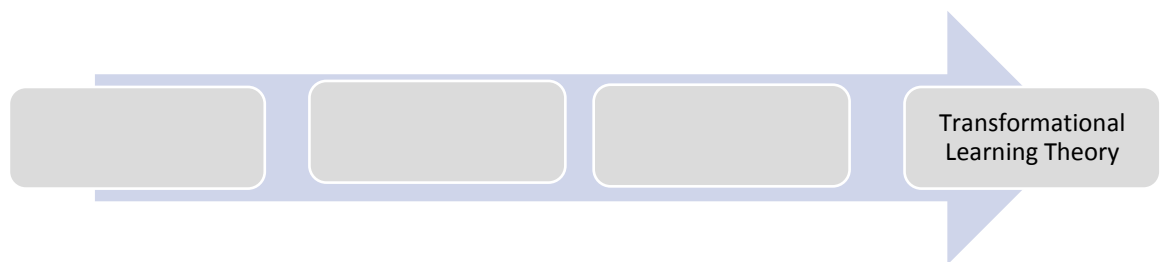
Figure 2.4: Transformation Learning Theory section in chapter framework

Transformational Learning Theory

Introduction

This study focuses on understanding the experiences of participants through the lens of Mezirow's (1978) Transformational Learning Theory. Mezirow (2000, p. 19) refers to transformation as 'a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives'. To understand the role of learning as a potential tool for transformation, the stories and voices of student participants are central. However, there is little in the literature and research that draws specifically on the firsthand accounts of learners about transformation and less again on the transformations experienced by students transitioning from TAFE to university. This section of the chapter presents the central tenets of Transformational Learning Theory

and its relevance to adult learning. This theory was initially developed by Mezirow in 1978, but it has continued to be evolved by Mezirow and others (e.g., Mezirow, 2003; Tennant, 2005; Willans & Seary, 2011). Some criticisms of the theory are also presented, as well as a discussion of the application of Transformational Learning Theory to adults in transition.

Early influences

The early iterations of Transformational Learning Theory were epistemologically based on Habermas's Critical Theory (1971). Mezirow (1978) drew analogies with Habermas's notion of 'emancipatory action', which he equates directly with his own notion of perspective transformation. This emancipation may be best manifested in changed views of who we are as individuals and who we could be, given opportunities for reflection and action (Mezirow, 1978). Mezirow (1981) developed his ideas about Transformational Learning Theory from his 1975 review of 83 mature-age women returning to education. Mezirow (1981) found that, for these women, enrolling in a college course after time away from formal learning had involved significant cognitive and perspective shifts. Principally, due to their decision to re-engage in formal education, the women developed a sense of freedom or emancipation from the roles in life they had always considered to be their destiny, and which they had believed could not and should not be questioned (Mezirow, 1981). In other words, transformed by their educational experiences, these women challenged their own socio-cultural beliefs and patterns of life, and in so doing were freed from the constraints of long-held, restrictive meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1981).

In his early development of the theory, Mezirow (1981, p. 10) referred to the notion of 'reification', in which beliefs gained through socialisation are assumed to be immutable and predetermined. Mezirow (2007) states that, while an individual's beliefs, including their self-concept, are initially shaped by social and cultural influences (e.g., parents and peer groups), these habitual ways of thinking are not necessarily static. In fact, with reflection, frames of reference, or habits of mind and interpretations, may be held up to scrutiny (Mezirow, 1990). This is an important consideration, as through conscious reflection beliefs may be re-evaluated and changed and by such means the

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individual is transformed. However, as the individual is always contained within their own biases, it is necessary to talk with others, thereby validating or testing ideas within a climate of mutuality and empathic alertness (Mezirow, 2000, p. 14). Mezirow (1990) states that testing of ideas may primarily occur through engagement with learning, during which adults have the potential to realise their beliefs, reflect on the relevance of those beliefs and transform them. The extent to which this may be experienced through engagement in learning at TAFE or university is yet to be explored.

The central role of meaning perspectives

In Transformational Learning Theory, meaning perspectives occupy a fundamental place in the way in which an individual's personal life is formed and takes shape. Mezirow succinctly refers to a meaning perspective as 'a frame of reference made up from a system of meaning schemes' (1985, p.21). Meaning schemes incorporate actions, values and feelings and guide our understanding of experiences, judgements and actions (Mezirow, 1985). Meaning perspectives may be viewed as 'the psycho-cultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experiences' (Mezirow,1981, p.6). These assumptions include the roles in life one is expected to play and the internalised feelings and predispositions surrounding these roles. Mezirow (1985, p. 22) further states that a meaning perspective or frame of reference is 'a personal paradigm involving cognitive, affective and conative dimensions [that] position us for action'. Essentially, this means that changing meaning perspectives involves knowing and understanding the perspectives held and the feelings associated with the process of transforming perspectives, and the intentional actions needed for transformation of perspectives to occur (Mezirow, 1997). Mezirow (2000, p.6) purports that the cognitive dimension also contains affective and conative dimensions, that is, 'all the sensitivity and responsiveness of the person participates in the invention, discovery, interpretation and transformation of meaning'. However, the cognitive, affective and conative dimensions of a frame of reference may or may not be located within conscious awareness (Mezirow, 2008).

In discussion of the affective dimension of meaning perspectives and the dynamics of transformation, Mezirow (1978) argues that to the extent that it is culturally possible,

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individuals restructure and reorganise frames of reference as they move through their adult lives. This can happen in ways which, without critical analysis, lead further away from personal perspectives and more towards the social, but when there is an anomaly between a meaning perspective and new circumstances, then transformation through critical reaction to held perspectives can result (Mezirow, 1978, p.104). However, as Mezirow (1978, p.105) also points out, there is an existential dimension to the process of perspective change, it is not a simple step, but rather one which involves 'thought, feelings and will', and as such holds the potential to induce anxiety, to see the dilemma contained with the process of changing perspectives and to experience strong associated emotions as a result. The affective dimension of learning is one that is critical to Mezirow's (1985) theory as it acknowledges the sometimes-epochal nature of transformation that can be at once liberating (emancipatory) and painful as it necessitates a reassessment of the self and one's life up to that point. As Mezirow (1985) notes, taking actions in the face of such transformation is not an easy choice, particularly when actions go against the dominant social group beliefs and values to which one has thus far adhered. Importantly, Mezirow (1996, p.165) asserts that Transformational Learning Theory provides a 'dialectical synthesis' of objectivist and interpretivist paradigms of learning by the incorporation of 'the concept of meaning structures' and a focus on the emancipatory quality of critical reflection which frees the individual from the confines of culturally imposed meaning perspectives and frames of reference and in so doing, adds to identity transformation.

Meaning perspectives further incorporate sociolinguistic, psychological and epistemic codes, which according to Mezirow (2008) are not discrete, but in fact overlap, shape and sometimes distort meaning schemes and perspectives. Sociolinguistic codes incorporate social norms and ideologies or cultural canon, language codes and theories (Mezirow 2008). There is the added element of the significance of language in meaning making to also be considered because as Mezirow asserts (1996, p.164) knowledge derives from the interpretations and socio-culturally constructed realities that language creates. Psychological codes include self-concept, personality characteristics, learned responses from childhood and disposition, while epistemic codes refer to learning styles and preferences (Mezirow, 2008). Mezirow (2000, p.5) maintains that

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transformative learning relates to epistemic cognition whereby adults 'reflect on the limits of knowledge, the certainty of knowledge and the criteria for 'knowing'.

Significantly, Mezirow (2011) states that transformation to meaning perspectives can occur with critical reflection on the three types of distortions; epistemic, socio-cultural and psychic that can arise through the unquestioned acceptance of others' values. Epistemic distortions are associated with the nature and use of knowledge and ways of knowing. Mezirow (2011, p. 5) argues that reflectivity has '…permeable and integrative' qualities and leads to new ways of knowing. He further notes the role of reification in epistemic distortion as the belief that some phenomena are beyond human agency or control and may even extend to the way one perceives identity as being immutable and formed through socialisation in childhood (Mezirow, 1981, p. 10)

Socio-cultural distortions have their genesis in the taken for granted beliefs systems that the individual has grown up with, including the perpetuation of power in the social world (Mezirow, 2011). Mezirow (2011, p. 50) points to the 'false consciousness' that such distortions can produce, and which are often a means of preserving the dominant, hegemonic social ideologies and practices. Mezirow notes that an individual's cultural assumptions that have not been held up to the light through critical and conscious analysis, are probably reflective of the many dynamic social systems within which individuals live, including the social, political and educational (1978, p.104). Furthermore, these assumptions have psychological dimensions, that is, the emotional content or feelings held about the cultural assumptions that have been internalised. Mezirow (2011, p.6) refers to psychological distortions as the 'presuppositions' engendered in childhood that adults often hold and the anxiety that can ensue when they think about changing their assumptions and behaviours. These presuppositions may be accompanied by both rational and irrational emotional responses which block actions that can lead to the transformation of these distortions. Mezirow (1985) argues that distorted assumptions instilled in childhood continue to be played out in adulthood, however, he contends that learning is a means by which these psychological distortions can be brought into the conscious mind and dealt with by reflecting on long-held assumptions and applying new perspectives on old thoughts and beliefs.

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The ten phases or dynamics of perspective transformation

In earlier renditions of his theory Mezirow suggested ten phases of transformation which may occur when meaning perspectives are becoming clarified. However, he later noted that not all these phases are necessary or experienced by individuals in order for transformation to occur, that they may not occur in the same order in which he originally created them, and they may also contain variations (Mezirow, 2008). The ten phases explored by Mezirow (2008, p. 28) are:

1. A disorienting dilemma: this can be a sudden or 'epochal' insight or a gradual or cumulative realisation that revision of some assumptions about the self is necessary

2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame

3. A critical assessment of assumptions

4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared

5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action

6. Planning a course of action

7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans

8. Provisional trying of new roles

9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

The importance of reflection and critical reflection

Mezirow positions reflection and critical reflection as crucial aspects of the transformative experience. According to Mezirow (1998), by consciously and critically reflecting on the assumptions upon which interpretations, beliefs and habits of mind or points of view are based, frames of reference may be reviewed, and specific attitudes, values, beliefs or judgements may be transformed. In such ways, he contends, new ideas may be formed, and new points of view emerge, at which point learning may be said to have occurred and with it changes to the self (Mezirow, 1998).

Importantly, it is Mezirow's (1990) assertion that it is the ability of learners to engage in a renegotiation of 'self' or identity that can lead to transformation. That is, through learning, an individual can develop their self-concept on a number of planes. As Mezirow (1996, p. 163) states, 'the most personally significant transformations involve a critique of premises regarding one's self'. In other words, habits of mind and dispositions represent individual identity, self-portraits and points of view. These habits of mind define and determine the individual until transformation occurs through engagement with reflective practices (Mezirow, 2000).

Figure 2.5: The four stages in which reflection may enable learning to occur (Adapted from Mezirow, 2000, p. 19)illustrates the central role of reflective practice in learning. In the first instance, frames of reference are elaborated, followed by the adoption of new frames of reference. When these new frames of reference are consolidated there is a transformation in points of view and habits of mind.
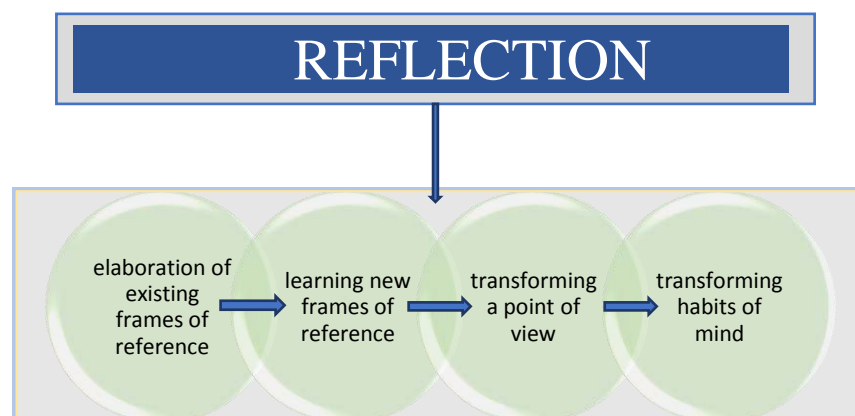
REFLECTION

elaboration of existing frames of reference → learning new frames of reference → transforming a point of view → transforming habits of mind

Figure 2.5: The four stages in which reflection may enable learning to occur (Adapted from Mezirow, 2000, p. 19)

Reflection as a means of thinking about habits of mind opens the door to changes in beliefs, thoughts and behaviours. As Mezirow (1998) states, the point of reflectivity is to examine the ways in which individuals see or perceive the world and their place in it. Reflectivity therefore has a fundamental role to play in adults' lives as it is an essential means of consciously examining long-held views and beliefs often unconsciously held, not only about the self but also about the place one holds in the world (Mezirow, 1998).

Figure 2.6 illustrates Mezirow's (1990) contention that actions may be the result of habit or reflection. Mezirow (1990) further contends that reflection may draw attention to those presuppositions or habits of mind that may be changed (or not) depending on the outcome of the reflection. Alternately, habitual behaviours will not change without reflection.
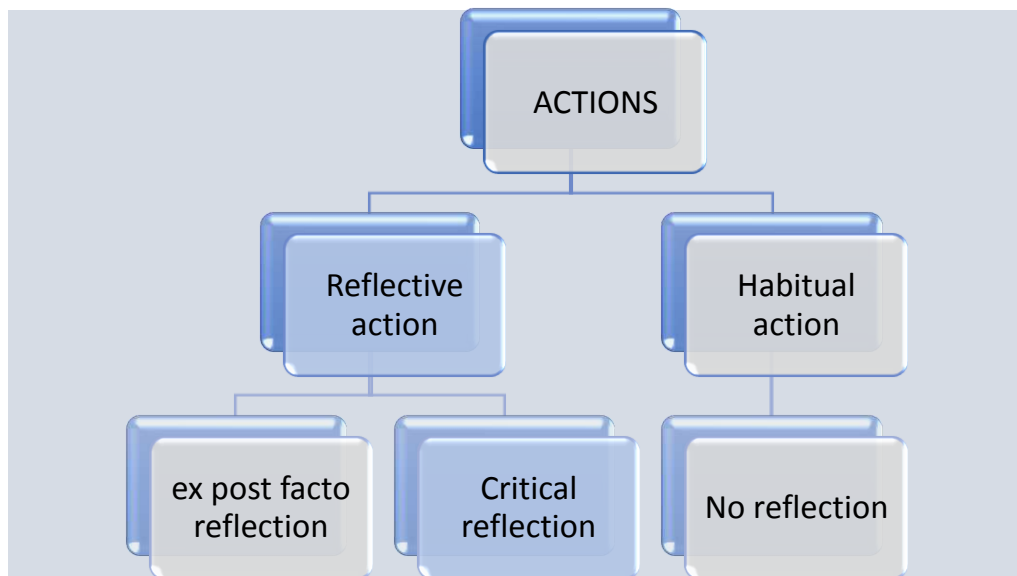
Figure 2.6: Process of critical reflection (adapted from www.learningandteaching.info)

Reflection as an adult function

It is important to note Mezirow's (2003) view that, essentially, reflective practice is solely an adult function. Mezirow (1998, p. 185) states that reflection, critical reflection and critical self-reflection are 'central to understanding how adults learn to think for themselves'. Mezirow (1998) defends the assertion of reflection as an adult principle by expounding the belief that, before an individual can question their world premises, they must first understand them. It is through life experiences that adults have had time to develop the ability to be critically self-reflective and to judge or assess assumptions and expectations (Mezirow, 2003). He states that reflection is a 'distinctly adult' learning function and one which lends itself to the integrity of being an adult (Mezirow, 1998, p. 187).

Fundamentally, adults can examine those beliefs and ideologies that have been internalised to the extent that they seem immutable givens; through such examination,

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adults can be transformed by the knowledge that these are merely sets of assumptions and habits of thought that, as such, can be changed. Testing this view in relation to learning experiences has been a key element of this study.

According to Mezirow (2000), discourse or discussion is the most influential of all learning activities, confirmed by the principle tenets of critical dialectical discourse. Ultimately, it is necessary to engage in critical reflection in order to understand the self and others. This is a view supported by Tennant (2005, p. 105), who describes the 'autonomous self' as that which emerges through questioning, reflection and agency. As Willans and Seary (2011, p. 136) also assert, through such behaviours the subjective self as learner can be transformed, self-doubt reduced and the 'tensions' associated with changing perceptions of 'self' underscored by the new perceptions that transformative learning may bring. How such opportunities are created to allow these steps in the transformative process to occur is a question which should occupy educators in a climate that encourages lifelong learning and educational aspirations for adult learners (Burke, 2016; Cunninghame, 2017).

Criticisms of Mezirow's theory

Mezirow's theory and its application to learning is not without its critics. For example, in an early critique, Clark and Wilson (1991) questioned the validity of Mezirow's assumption that perspective transformation is available and readily accessible to all adults engaged in learning. They argue that this assumption is based on the notion of the existence of a 'unified self' in which inhibiting influences are not as influential or powerful as human agency (Clark & Wilson, 1991, p. 80). It is a valid point and one which presents opportunities for further research to explore the premise. This study touches on this by providing examples of the participants' experiences.

Both Merriam (2004) and Taylor (2008) criticise Mezirow's assertion that transformation is an outcome of adult engagement in transformative learning, although for different reasons. Merriam (2004) argues that Mezirow's theory calls for an essentially high level of cognitive functioning in order to engage in dialectical discourse and for transformation to occur. Merriam (2004) suggests that 'mature' cognitive development, while a 'prerequisite' for transformation, is not necessarily

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readily available to all adults, and questions the assumption that all adults have the cognitive capacity needed to engage in reflective and critical discourse. She defends this stance by citing studies which indicate that for many adults, functioning at a high cognitive level is not possible or demonstrated (Merriam, 2004). This seems a valid suggestion as Mezirow (1991, p. 189) discusses the value of rational discourse in terms of the ability to 'weigh the evidence and fairly assess the arguments, and critically examine the assumptions behind them'. Interestingly however, throughout iterations of his theory, Mezirow (2000, p. 21) conceded that transformation can also occur through 'mindless assimilation' when the individual's 'situation changes … beyond [their] scope of awareness'. Mezirow (1991, p. 189) further concedes that more valid discourse is created when conditions for discourse include 'full information, freedom from external and internal coercion, critical reflection [and] equal opportunity to participate in discourse…'. Conditions which while optimal, may not always be present.

Taylor (2008) questions Mezirow on two counts: first, in relation to his emphasis on the ability of all adults to experience transformative outcomes from learning; second, Taylor (2008, p.11) suggests that transformative learning encompasses much more than Mezirow's assertion of the value of rational discourse and critical reflection and that, rather, it also involves 'holistic' elements of feelings and intuition. In a later critique, Taylor and Cranton (2013) return to this theme and emphasise the importance of empathy as a means of promoting the development of transformative outcomes, but which they argue is largely missing from the theory even though empathy as an emotional response to others is important to dialogue and reflection. Mezirow (2000, p. 45) does however, discuss the role of empathy alongside the importance of 'feelings of trust, solidarity [and] security…as essential preconditions for …discourse'. However, Newman (2012) takes this aspect one step further by suggesting that empathy, while an admirable quality, is not always possible, as we do not always like the people we are engaged in discourse with.

Mezirow (2008) acknowledges criticisms of the theory which point to the lack of consideration of the emotional, intuitional and imaginative elements of transformation.

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He discusses the subjectivity involved in construing a sense of self and the experiences of the individual, and notes that in particular, the centrality of imagination is lacking (Mezirow, 2008). That is, the ability to imagine a different self and potentially a different set of values and beliefs is fundamental to the transformative process. However, both Newman (2012) and Dix (2016) question the validity of a theoretical model that emphasises self-awareness as a requirement for transformative outcomes, preferring instead to view problem-solving as a more relevant focus. When considering transformative learning, Newman (2012, p. 40) in particular is wary of subjective claims of transformation made by individuals and argues that due to the subjective nature of perceptions of change, transformative learning may simply be 'a plaything of the mind'. Dix (2016, p. 144) further criticises Mezirow's theory which depends so heavily on transformations to the 'self' which involve disruptive or painful emotions and suggests instead that even when challenges are disorienting, they can be 'exhilarating' rather than problematic and can occur even when 'Socratic self-critique' is absent. Mezirow is further criticised for his emphasis on the individual rather than on the 'communal' (Collard & Law, 1989, p. 103) which does not coalesce with an added emphasis on the social nature of communication through discourse.

Mezirow (2008) further notes critiques of the theory based on his emphasis of the role of rationality in transformative theory, particularly in considerations of contextual differences including social class and gender. However, he reinforces his belief that an epistemology based on rational discourse and metacognition must include the ability to reason and to revisit problematic meaning perspectives in a climate of critical dialectical discourse (Mezirow (2008). Mezirow (1992) defends his assertion against the critics that critical reflectivity is an adult function whereby adults, unlike children, have the capacity and life experience to question the rules of society and to judge them in a rational, reflective way. Merriam (2004, p. 61) however, argues that in order to be a critically reflective learner, one must have a high degree of cognitive ability, indeed an 'advanced level of cognitive development'. Merriam (2004, p. 61) supports her argument by suggesting that engaging in discourse with others and having the ability to judge one's own and others' values and beliefs and to engage in dietetical thinking, are all signs of 'mature' cognition.

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However, despite these critiques of the theory, this study finds the value of Transformational Learning Theory to far outweigh the criticism. For example, Hoggan Malkki and Finnegan (2017, p. 49) note that Mezirow's theory remains the most robust theoretical elucidation of learning in the whole corpus of literature concerned with transformative learning'. As an explanation of the transformative potential of learning, Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1990) offers a considered and pertinent conceptual framework for examination and discussion of adult education research that seeks explanations of change and transformation through engagement in learning. For example, Mezirow (1997) contends that, when adults reflect on and question frames of reference, transformation can follow—and engagement in learning is the means by which this can occur. This theoretical premise was a significant path of inquiry in this study, and it is directly relevant to the overarching research question. When the experience of transition, in itself a feature of change, is also considered, the efficacy of this theoretical approach is underlined as applicable to understanding the complex and multidimensional nature of the adult learner engaged in the learning process. For example, when considering the potential for transformative outcomes to be experienced by individuals who have returned to learning as adults, it is important to understand changes that may take place between the self who begins the learning experience and the emergent self who appears during the learning process. That is, the perceptions individuals hold about themselves at the beginning of their learning journey may be very different to their later self-perceptions as they assess their values, beliefs and self-identity as a consequence of the learning experience. Transformational Learning Theory, with its focus on adult learners and the emancipatory potential of learning, provides a sturdy theoretical grounding for investigations into adult learning experiences—a key focus of this study.

There has also been some criticism that Transformational Learning Theory lacks a social dimension. However, Hoggan (2016, p. 59) supports the basis of the theory as one which was developed 'specifically to address the learning involved in broad social change'. For social change to occur, individual change is necessary. Hoggan, et al (2017, p. 55) assert that Mezirow's theory draws clear connections between the development of meaning perspectives and the culture and social context to which we

relate. Further, Mezirow (1989) asserts that critical reflection, an essential element of transformation in his theory, can lead to both individual transformation and to social transformation. Indeed, the transformative potential of self, rests heavily on the ability to engage with others through critical discourse, testing one's own and others' ideas about meaning perspectives in a dialogic relationship; this makes it a social act (Mezirow, 1989). Importantly, it is through the social context of learning that meaning perspectives are 'culturally assimilated' (Mezirow, 1991, p. 190). Mezirow (1989, p.173) further emphasises that transformational learning is 'profoundly intersubjective' and that questioning or reflecting on one's meaning perspectives necessitates awareness of the socio-cultural antecedents of notions of the self. In particular, Mezirow (1991, p. 188) refers to the way in which these perspectives are formed and developed through sociolinguistic factors such as 'cultural and linguistic codes or social ideologies' as well as psychological factors, 'feelings and actions'.

The affective dimension of discourse is important to Mezirow (2000, p.11) when viewed as an essential component of reflective discourse because he equates effective discourse as one which includes 'emotional maturity'. That is, that the individual is mindful of the social relationships that reside within the discourse and involve 'awareness, empathy and control' (Mezirow, 2000, p.11). Therefore, in order to develop on an individual level, one must have social competencies and social skills that reflect an ability to empathise, to listen to others, to be honest and to have integrity (Mezirow, 2000, p.11). Mezirow (2000, p.27) states that 'human beings are essentially relational' and that we live in an 'intersubjective' reality which binds us to others, as 'it is within the context of these relationships…that we become the persons we are'. Mezirow (2003, p.16) further notes the value of community development as a means of encouraging learners to actively seek out opportunities for resolutions for 'collective community problem-solving' which may result in 'collaborative discourse leading to action'. The value of such an approach is twofold; learners maintain or develop stronger social ties which lead to social actions, and as individuals, they can develop new roles for themselves and subsequently new ways of defining self and actions in their social world (Mezirow, 2003).

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Transformative Learning theory is focused on adult learning and relies on attributing the social dimensions as well as the individual dimensions to learning. Indeed, as Mezirow (2000, p.7) emphasises, Transformative Learning Theory acknowledges the role of 'human connectedness' and the need to test new meaning perspectives through dialectical discourse. As Mezirow (2000, p.8) states, 'transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying assumptions'. Rational discourse allows this process to occur.

Transformation and adult learning research

Mezirow refers to transformation as the ultimate aim of learning, while Dirkx (1998, p. 9) refers to 'self-actualisation' as the ultimate goal within the 'rich, multi-focal, multi-layered nature of adult learning'. However, the contention is the same; that is, Dirkx (1998) asserts that learning on any level always has the potential to allow for the reconstruction of self-concept and place of self in the world, but before this can happen the cultural and social constructions of self must be challenged or at least questioned. For example, Dirkx (1998) states that the multidimensional nature of the self, including its multiplicity of selves and identities, raises the level of consciousness of how change is occurring in both the self and being in the world and the relationships one has in that social world. This is a powerful picture of the potential for learning to be transformative at a deeply personal level, and suggests that such an experience, whether evoking positive or negative emotional responses, is always dramatic and life-changing. Mezirow (2000, p. 21) refers to this as an 'epochal' experience. Such potential for learning to change and transform the lives of learners lends itself to research such as the current study, which has explored this possibility through the lived experiences of the seven participants in the study.

Little research has focused on transformation and adult learning drawing distinctly upon Transformational Learning Theory, and there is very little evidence of research that uses this theory to draw upon the voices of learners engaged in the learning process. However, two exceptions stand out. In an earlier but significant study, Benson et al. (2010, p. 48) applied narrative inquiry as the best means of understanding the lived experiences of transition and as a method that '[nurtures] discourse'. The

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researchers examined the influence of perspective transformation on the decision to enrol in higher education using Mezirow's theory as their criterion for evaluation (Benson et al., 2010). While the researchers agreed with Mezirow in relation to potential transformation for adult learners, they also argued for further research utilising the voices of students to more robustly examine the lived experience of transition. Similarly, with a focus on learners, Brock (2010, p. 126) suggests transformation has taken place if students report changes to values, beliefs, opinions and expectations. These changes may in turn include changes to aspirations because of variations to points of view and habits of thought (Brock, 2010).

This view is supported by Fuller (2014), who suggests that, when students follow through with their aspirations to attend university, there is evidence of a conscious determination to improve their lives and build independence. Similarly, Høj Jensen and Jetten (2016) note the positive influence that learning can exact upon students in the formation and development of their professional imaginings. Interestingly, the literature suggests that these kinds of perceptual changes can occur throughout the learning experience and can impact on aspirational goals, not just at an individual level but, potentially, for family members in other generations. For example, this trickle-down effect is noted by O'Shea, Stone, Delahunty and May (2016, p. 11), who, when referring to intergenerational attitudes inspired by and inspiring first-in-family (FiF) student participation in higher education, refer to family 'discourses of betterment and opportunity'.

Conclusion

This chapter began by presenting an overview of the development of VET and TAFE and the current government initiatives to restructure and revitalise TAFE. The literature review has found that TAFE offers learners the chance to re-engage in learning as adults and to develop skills for the workplace and opportunities for further educational goals, via pathways to higher education. The literature points to the fact that students are often motivated to attend TAFE either as a means of gaining a qualification for the workplace or as a stepping stone to higher education. However, while pathways from TAFE to higher education continue to be encouraged by both educators and

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government policy, there are still barriers to a smooth transition experience for students; therefore, when learners choose a pathways option they may face a number of challenges during transition. These challenges include acquiring key skills related to academic literacies that may be lacking, an issue particularly pertinent for direct credit transfer students. There are often also different pedagogical approaches to which students need to adjust, usually resulting in the need to be more independent and self-directed. The review includes consideration of the difficulty some students have in feeling like a university student and having a sense of belonging to the higher education environment. It has further noted the increased need to find some means of balancing all the demands on students' time, such as commitments to outside work and family responsibilities.

Reviewing the literature on these challenges raised the question of how some students manage to successfully engage in learning and have an experience that is rewarding, as clearly many students do. As demonstrated in this review, perhaps the key to success lies in the resources that learners draw upon. These resources may include not only the support of others but, perhaps more importantly, the inner resources learners bring to and develop through their experiences, the ability to adapt and adjust where necessary, and an attitude of resilience with respect to the tasks and demands at hand.

Finally, this chapter presented the key tenets of Transformational Learning Theory, which asserts that adults have the potential to experience transformation of their beliefs and perspectives, their self-concept or identity, and the ways in which they envisage their future, or their aspirations. As Mezirow (2007, p. 10) states, 'transformative learning occurs when we find that our old ways of understanding are no longer working well for us'. This supports the idea that Transformational Learning Theory is a suitable conceptual framework for examination and discussion of research that seeks explanations of change and transformation resulting from engagement in learning. The ways in which the meaning perspectives of the participants in this study may have been impacted upon through their learning experiences has been one of its key aspects. Exploration of this facet of learning is viewed by the researcher as an essential

precursor to further research that can build on this important aspect of the adult learning experience.

The literature review in this chapter confirms that, while interest in the field of transition is growing, there is still little research that focuses on the firsthand experiences of transition as related by former TAFE students actively involved in transition to university. There is much more to learn about the experiences of transition and transformation, especially from the personal viewpoint of students engaged in the transition process. This is a gap that this research sets out to address, by presenting narratives of the lived experiences of students currently in transition from TAFE to university. This thesis contributes to understandings about this under-represented cohort in the literature by listening to their stories and by foregrounding their voices.

The following chapter details the study's method. The rationale for a qualitative approach is presented. Specifically, the use of narrative interviewing as a way of understanding the lived experiences of the participants in the study is supported. The chapter presents in detail the steps taken to 'restory' the individual narratives of the participants. Their stories are presented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3.   Exploring adult learner experiences

Introduction

My interest in the field of adult learning and transformation was sparked by my observations of the ways in which the lives of learners were often changed in very positive ways because of their involvement in education. As a former TAFE teacher, I had first observed these changes as learners participated in their TAFE course. It was clear to see that many learners derived immense pleasure and benefits from their participation in adult learning at TAFE. Some began to envisage different futures that encompassed new ways of thinking about themselves, their capabilities and aspirations. Later, as lecturer in the learning unit of a regional university, I consulted with learners who were former TAFE students who had transitioned to higher education along a TAFE to university pathway. The learners who accessed the learning unit were often struggling with significant challenges in the early stages of transition. Many of these same challenges have been discussed in detail in Chapter 2 of this thesis and are a continuous theme of discussion throughout the thesis.

It was interesting to note that while the transitioning learners were facing challenges, they were generally also managing these challenges and importantly, their lives were changed because of their transition to university. It was these observations that determined the focus of this study and led to the research questions. The narrative approach to the study was important as I wanted to capture the experiences of the learners as they described them. I wanted to hear their stories in their own words as a means of establishing the authenticity and uniqueness of their experiences. Further, the voices of learners in transition from the TAFE sector to university are still quiet, as research on this specific cohort of learners, while growing, is still relatively sparse. Understanding their experiences and enabling them to decide what changes, if any, they had experienced from adult learning was a further focus very much determined by the wish to investigate ways to build and grow a rewarding student experience. Primarily, attention in this study has been focused on a very specific student cohort which raises the question of whether they can be said to be representative of the experiences of other students in transition. There is also the potential that the subjective

nature of recounts, such as the stories of the participants in the current study, can be viewed by others as a misrepresentation or distortion of the experiences of other learners. However, fundamentally it can be argued that our personal experiences, feelings and perspectives are our 'truths', and as such, by telling their stories this small cohort of learners has added a deeper dimension to understandings about what transition and transformation involves.

A qualitative approach was deemed most suitable for this study. This approach was informed by two key considerations. First, as the literature review presented in Chapter 2 indicates, there is insufficient research that adopts a qualitative paradigm. The perspectives of learners during the transition experience is especially lacking when investigating the TAFE pathway to higher education. Second, research that uses a narrative method in which the voices of the participants are foregrounded is also minimal in studies of transition. These limitations in the body of research on transition and transformation presented a methodological gap which this study is designed to address.

The first part of this chapter focuses on the methodological underpinnings of the research and discusses the ontology and epistemology of a qualitative design which utilises narrative research. This examination includes an analysis of the value of such a method in studies of transition and transformation. The chapter then outlines the study design, with an emphasis on narrative interviewing, and introduces the participants. Details of the steps taken in the data collection procedures of the study are then presented through a description of the interviewing process and the steps taken in coding the data. This section also describes the development of the seven themes of the study, which resulted from two interviews with each of the seven participants. The chapter ends with a discussion of the ethical considerations of human research.

Figure 3.1 presents the framework of the chapter.
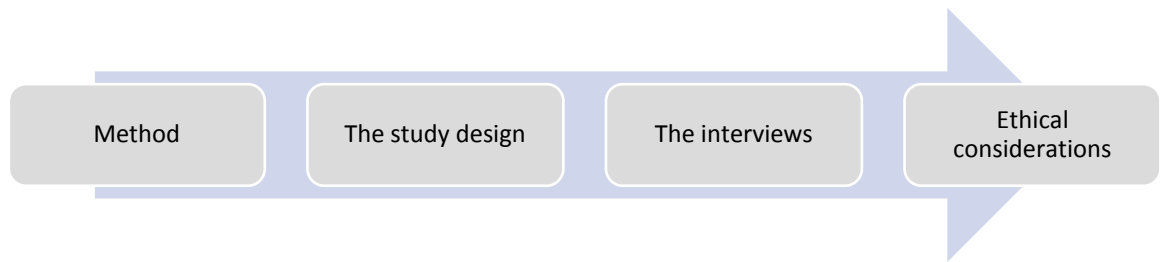
Figure 3.1: Chapter 3 framework

Method

A qualitative approach

To understand the experiences of transition and to explore the notion of transformation, this study employed a qualitative approach. Through a series of interviews, the research focused on the personal, lived experiences of each of the seven participants in the study as they transitioned from TAFE to university. This method of inquiry is in keeping with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of a qualitative research paradigm. As Flick (2009) asserts, a qualitative approach to research is most appropriate when the perspectives of participants are at the forefront of that research.

Ontological assumptions

The ontological assumptions of qualitative research recognise the nature of reality or the multiple, subjective realities of individuals in a study and the different perspectives of their experiences that they bring to the study (Creswell, 2013; Khan, 2014). For this reason, this approach was considered to be the most appropriate for the study, and one most likely to help answer its research questions. Cheu-Jey (2012) points out that constructivism assumes a relativist ontology and that this ontological assumption positions a constructivist approach differently to that of positivism. The ontological basis of positivism has been referred to as 'naïve realism', whereas constructivism takes an ontological view of relativism, in which there are 'local and specific constructed realities' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 168). As Lub (2015, p. 4) states, the constructivist researcher 'assumes pluralistic, interpretive and contextualised perspectives of reality'. Lincoln and Guba (2000) refer to the 'meaning-making' nature of what is considered to be 'real' and which informs the actions (or inaction) of individuals.

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A defining feature of qualitative research is that the researcher participates in the research when talking to people and capturing their experiences in a socially interactive way. However, arguably no research is value-free; therefore, qualitative approaches run the risk of subjective interpretivism. Essentially, as Lincoln and Guba (2000) note, qualitative inquiry assumes that the knower and the known are not completely independent. Therefore, care must be taken to recognise and diminish the potential for researcher bias that may be situated within interpretivist approaches.

Epistemological perspectives

The epistemological perspective of a qualitative paradigm concerns itself with how knowledge is acquired (Khan, 2014). Epistemologically, knowledge becomes known in a qualitative study by acknowledgement of the subjectivity of experience that individuals bring to the research (Creswell, 2013). Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 168) refer to constructivist epistemology as 'transactional and subjectivist, with created findings'. This was an important consideration in the current study, as the subjective or interpreted experiences of the participants were fundamental to the development of their personal narratives.

In discussion of the measures for validity and reliability in research, Guba and Lincoln (1982) proposed constructivist alternatives to the labels of positivism; that is, research should, among other criteria, demonstrate credibility and transferability. Credibility is defined as the truth of the research findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) and the plausibility of participant information and accuracy of interpretation of the participants' original views (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Lincoln and Guba (2000, p. 177) assert, assumptions and taken-for-granted 'truths' are more likely to be exposed to question and rigour when criteria for credibility is applied to the study findings.

Transferability refers to how easily the results of constructivist research can be transferred to other participants in other contexts and is the term used in place of 'external validity' by quantitative researchers (Lub, 2015). According to Lub (2015, p. 5), transferability can be applied through 'thick description' which includes details about the participants, the research setting and the themes which emerge from the study. These criteria were key components within the method of the current study,

which aimed to develop a rich and deep understanding of the ways in which the lives of the participants were affected by their decision to enrol in their respective learning courses. Essentially, a qualitative, interpretive approach draws on real-world experiences and has the potential to acknowledge the depth of the lived experiences of the individual's reality of their world in all its dimensions. A qualitative approach is a logical and valid method of gaining insights into the experiences of the participants in this study.

Narrative research

'Narrative research' is an overarching term encompassing a multiplicity of forms, and it stems from a wide range of fields of inquiry (Creswell, 2013, p. 70). For example, disciplines drawing upon narrative methods may include psychology, anthropology and sociology (Creswell, 2013). Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2013) suggest that, although narrative research is gaining in popularity, it is far from easy to define and consequently has divergent meanings for researchers. They refer to narrative as 'a popular portmanteau term in contemporary western social research', used to refer to different methods of research and therefore open to interpretation and confusion (Andrews et al., 2013, p. 2).

Essentially, narrative research as a method is a means of gathering narratives or 'stories', although the ways in which these stories emerge may differ according to the style, purpose and nature of the inquiry (Creswell, 2013). Generally, researchers who use a narrative method are seeking to unfold the layers within the stories people have to tell and to imbue these layers with a deeper understanding of the changes that take place in people's lives (Andrews et al., 2013). When discussing narrative, Squire (2008) refers to 'the narrative of experience'—that is, narratives that include a reconstitution of the human experience and that particularly demonstrate that change or transformation has occurred. Given that this approach includes personal narrative in both the telling of past events and the imagining of future events, it is closely aligned with the purpose, structure and inclusions of the current study, which focused on understanding the impact of the learning experiences of the participants across a linear perspective of past, present and future. Fundamentally, the narrative is the story of a

person's life experiences in the contexts of the 'personal, social and historical' (Creswell, 2013, p. 75). As such, it may be argued that viewing these lived experiences through an interpretivist lens brings 'truth' to a research design posited on individual meanings of real experiences within a socially constructed reality.

The value of narrative research lies in the potential of the data to offer richness, complexity and dimension. It allows for the possibility of a robust collection of thick data and is a method suited to narrowing the field of inquiry to gain in-depth discussion of key themes (Lub, 2015). Bold (2012, p. 17) suggests that narrative is an important methodology as it is 'central to human experience and existence [which] helps to define self and personal identity'. Narrative allows participants to broaden their responses in a way that is conducive to addressing the focus of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and, as Creswell (2013) states, the use of narrative is appropriate when the research attempts to capture the experiences of individuals.

Researcher positioning

Research generally stems from a desire for inquiry and, as such, carries within it the interests of the researcher. A significant issue, therefore, in qualitative design that uses a narrative inquiry methodology is the need for awareness of how the researcher's understandings, shaped by their own stories and contexts, may influence their interpretations of the data. Charmaz (2006, p. 67) warns researchers to be wary of imposing 'preconceptions' on data gathered, as these preconceptions may remain 'invisible' and go unnoticed to the researcher. Similarly, Roulston and Shelton (2015, pp. 335–336) note that researchers must be aware of their 'inquirer posture' when interpreting and representing the 'voices' of those who have participated in the research. This signposts the need to rigorously interrogate interpretations made from the data to check for assumptions based on internalised preconceptions of the researcher.

Section summary

A qualitative approach considers the subjective and multiple realities of individuals—in other words, the real-world experiences of participants as they are reported by them,

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which was an essential component of the current study. A narrative inquiry is a means of understanding and comprehending the stories people have to tell and is a way of unpacking their experiences. While narrative inquiry runs the risk of researcher interpretation and bias, it also enables a deeper, richer understanding of the authenticity of the individual's experiences. The following section of this chapter examines the value of narrative interviews in the design of the current study and introduces the participants.
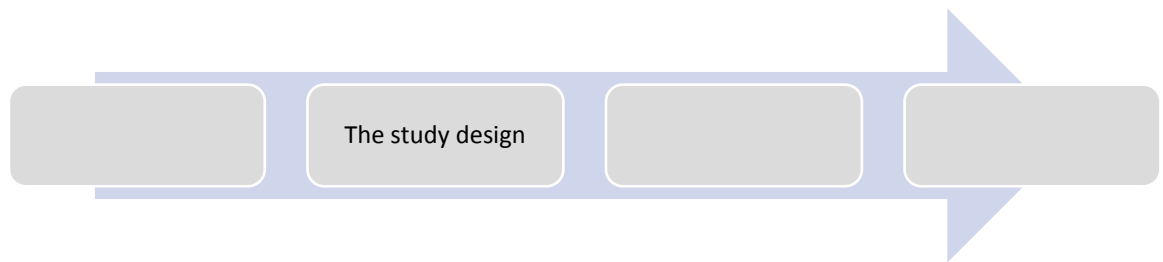
Figure 3.2: Study design section in chapter framework

The study design

This research aimed to elicit individual, subjective responses to, and interpretations of, the research questions associated with transition and transformation. This aim informed the decision to adopt a qualitative, constructivist design as the most effective way to answer the research questions and to gauge the learning experiences of the participants. The context was the learning trajectory from TAFE to university and the human experience of transition between these sectors.

As noted in Chapter 2 of this thesis, important to the overall purpose of the study was examination of the ways in which the participants identified themselves as students. This consideration was particularly important as an aspect of the study, in order to investigate the possibility of problems arising from the educational differences between the vocational sector and the higher education sector, and the potential impact negotiation of these differences may have on educational aspirations. Further, as a fundamental aspect of Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1978) the notion of transformation is directly related to successful reflection on perspectives about self. Consequently, to uncover the individual and personal learning experiences of the participants in the current study, a narrative approach was essential as a means of

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gathering data related to their sense of student identity in both places of learning, their responses to the educational differences they faced, and the influence on learning aspirations these experiences produced.

Narrative interviews

Narrative interviewing as research methodology has a significant and time-honoured place in the field of qualitative research both in Australia and overseas and is one of the most popular forms of gathering data representative of the lived experiences of the narrator (Creswell, 2013). The use of narrative interviews (retelling personal stories) is a valid research methodology, as this technique is a trustworthy means of gathering emergent data and has the potential for conveying an intensity and depth of understanding of the learning experience (Creswell, 2013). Allowing participants to tell their stories is a 'powerful' methodological tool that paves the way for complexity and a measure of 'intimacy' not always available in other forms of inquiry (O'Shea & Stone, 2011, p. 278). The benefits of narrative interviews also include the opportunity for participants to 'self-reflect', which in turn can lead to a greater depth of self-understanding (Wolgemuth et al., 2015, p. 362).

The decision to use interviews as the methodology for data collection was therefore determined by the nature of the research problem itself, represented in the overarching research question:

> *In what ways may the experience of adult learning transform individual perspectives, identity and aspirations?*

It is also for this reason that Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1990) presented a good conceptual basis for research with a focus on the transformative potential of learning.

Mezirow (2003) asserts that, to facilitate understandings rather than to simply gather data, qualitative research methods are most suitable in making meanings and interpretations of discourse. As it was important to be able to retell the learners' stories from their personal perspectives, the most obvious way to do this was to let them tell their own story, in their own words. A summary overview of each of the participants'

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stories is presented in Chapter 4 of this thesis; each story is derived from two lengthy interviews.

Further relevant to the aims of the current study, qualitative, narrative inquiry potentially offers opportunities for a richer student 'profile' to be developed and can consequently lead to a greater understanding of the multifaceted nature of transition experiences for students. While research into transition is growing, only a relatively small number of studies have employed a narrative approach as a means of listening to students' experiences of transition from personal perspectives (e.g., Benson et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2011; Logan et al., 2017; O'Shea et.al., 2012; O'Shea et al., 2016). However, as Mezirow (1996, p. 160) asserts, 'to understand others, one must gain access to their lived experience … to clarify and elucidate the way they interpret it'. For this reason, a narrative methodology best suited this study.

One of the aims of the study was to not only understand the individual lived experiences of transition but also search for common experiences of transition. This could best be achieved by also approaching the data with consideration of how the individual narratives of the participants may be connected and how they may be different. The participants in this study shared similarities through their transition from TAFE, but as individuals they were all different. As Stake (2006, p. 24) suggests, in order to develop a depth of understanding of individual experiences, 'the phenomenon of interest … needs to be prominent in these cases'. That is, the experiences of transition as expressed by the individual participants may also be considered under the umbrella of the experiences of a particular cohort of learners. These learners may have shared experiences of transition and transformation.

The participants

As this study was concerned with the experiences of students in transition from TAFE to university, a purposive sampling approach was taken (Creswell, 2009; Fuller, 2018). This was because the intention was to investigate the experiences of transition over two specific sites: TAFE and university. As noted by Russell and Gregory (2003), purposive sampling is a powerful and logical means of choosing information which can provide rich data, whether about the setting or the respondents, in order to develop

deep understandings in the study and to throw light on the research questions. Therefore, the participants were drawn from a cohort of students who were in the final stages of completion of the Certificate IV in Tertiary Preparation (TPC) at a regional TAFE college in NSW and who intended to apply for admission to the nearby regional university. The study further included students from several different TAFE colleges in NSW who had recently completed the Diploma in Nursing (Enrolled/Division 2 Nursing) and had been accepted into the same regional university but had not yet commenced their degree.

The participants are identified in the study in accordance with the pathway taken to university. Students from the Certificate IV in Tertiary Preparation are referred to in this study as the TPC students. Students from the Diploma in Nursing (Enrolled/Division 2 Nursing) are referred to in the study as the Diploma students.

TPC students

In 2013, following ethics approval by the university and TAFE sites, I arranged to meet with students who were at the time in the final stages of the TPC at Warravale TAFE. These students were chosen as potential research participants because the TPC is an enabling course designed specifically to prepare students for tertiary study. It was therefore assumed that some of the students in the TPC were already considering attending university at some point in the future. This made them a logical addition to the study. At a whole-class meeting of approximately 25 students held in the library at Warravale TAFE campus, I explained the purpose of the study. All of the students were invited to ask questions and were given an information package which included a consent form (see Appendix 5). Those students interested in participating in the proposed study were asked to read the information carefully and sign the form if they wished to participate. At this initial stage, six students expressed an interest in participating in the study.

Diploma students

The second cohort of students in the study were students who had articulated to Mountville City University (MCU) via an established pathway from the TAFE

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Diploma in Nursing to the Bachelor of Registered Nursing but had not yet commenced their university studies. These students were of particular interest because they would articulate directly to the second year of the Bachelor of Registered Nursing. This group offered the potential for an interesting comparison of their experiences with those of the TPC participants who would articulate to the first year of their degree courses. As the Diploma students comprised TAFE graduates from a number of TAFE institutes in NSW, an amended ethics approval was sought to include students from those campuses. On acceptance of the amendment, the same processes for delivering information and registering interest in the study were applied as those that were applied for the TPC students, whereby the information package and consent form was given to the whole Diploma cohort of approximately 30 students. On completion of this initial phase, 11 students expressed an interest in the study. Subsequently, I emailed all of these students to organise an interview.

At this stage of the participant recruitment, it was expected that there would be a combined total of 17 participants from the TPC and the Diploma. This would represent a significant data volume if each participant was interviewed twice, as was planned. However, when the interviewing process actually began, only three of the six students from the TPC who attended the first interviews attended the second interviews. One participant cited personal reasons for no longer continuing with the study and two had decided not to continue to university and so no longer met the criteria for the study. Of the original 11 Diploma students who expressed an interest in participating in the study, only four students responded to the initial email and agreed to attend both the first and second interviews. The final number of participants was seven: three students from the TPC and four students from the Diploma.

This relatively small sample may make it difficult to draw conclusions of a generalisable nature, but the reflections of this participant sample provided deep insights into their specific experiences of transition and transformation. Further, the volume of data collected overall from the 14 interviews that took place was manageable for one researcher to collect and analyse. As Sargeant (2012) suggests, the main criterion for sample size in a qualitative study is that it should be sufficient to

address all aspects of the focus of the study, especially the research questions. Data from the interviews were sufficiently information-rich to provide thick data (Lub, 2015) which were 'richly descriptive' (Meriam, 2004, p. 5). This allowed for a level of depth to be discerned about the learning experiences of the participants and an understanding of their world views (Merriam, 2004; Mezirow, 1998).

The final participant cohort

The seven participants in the study came from four different TAFE colleges in NSW Australia: Warravale TAFE, Greenbelt TAFE, Penfield TAFE and Riverside TAFE. All seven participants articulated to the same regional university: MCU in NSW.[2] Figure 3.2 illustrates the dispersal of the participants across the four TAFE colleges that the participants attended prior to their enrolment at MCU. Three of the participants (Connor, Aishia and Briony) successfully completed the TPC at the Warravale TAFE campus. They entered, respectively, the first year of the Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Health Sciences and Bachelor of Education (Primary) at MCU. The other four participants in the study (Tammy, Sophie, Michelle and Alice) completed the Diploma in Nursing at various TAFE campuses in NSW. Tammy and Sophie attended Greenbelt TAFE, Michelle attended Penfield TAFE and Alice attended Riverside TAFE.[3]

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[2] Names of TAFE institutions and the university in this study are pseudonyms
[3] All names of participants in this study are pseudonyms
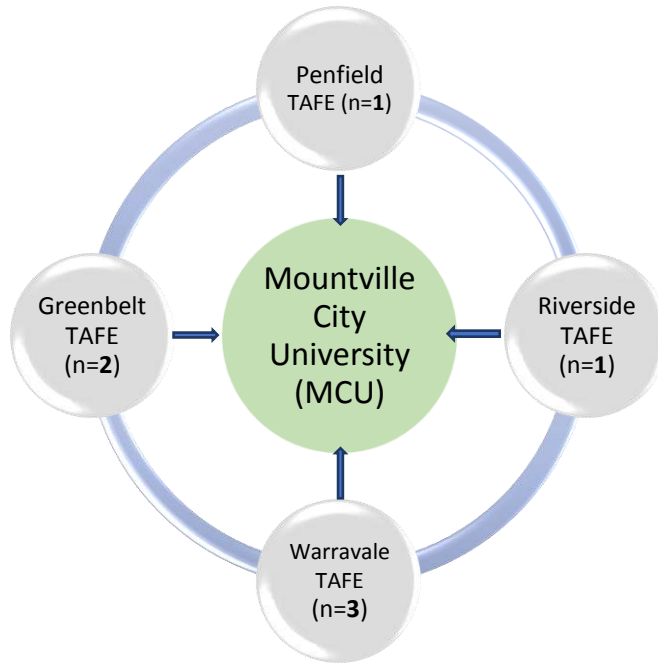
Figure 3.2: TAFE colleges attended by the seven participants prior to enrolment in MCU (n= number of respondents from each TAFE college)

Figure 3.3 identifies the two TAFE pathways from which the participants graduated before enrolling at MCU.
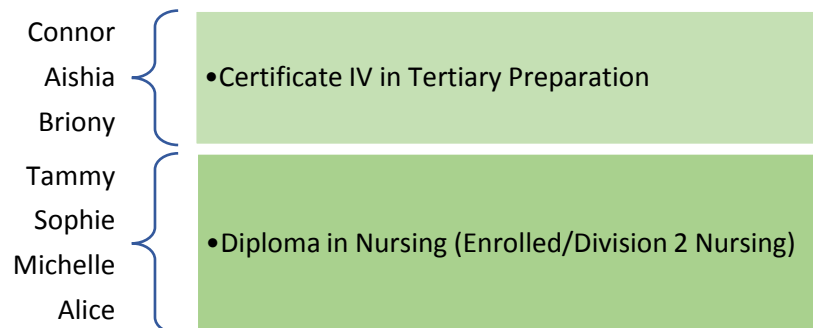
Figure 3.3: The two TAFE pathways from which the seven participants in the study graduated

The demographic profiles of the participants included five females and two males ranging in age from 19 to 43, with a mean age of 28. Six of the participants were born in Australia; one was born in Nigeria. One of the participants spoke a language other than English at home. Three of the participants self-identified as first in family (FiF) to attend university. Table 3.1 highlights the demographic profiles of the seven participants.

Table 3.1: Demographic profiles of participants in the study

Name	Age	Gender	Country of birth	Language spoken at home	First in family
Connor	27	Male	Australia	English	Yes
Aishia	27	Male	Nigeria	English	No
Briony	19	Female	Australia	English	Yes
Tammy	43	Female	Australia	English	Yes
Sophie	29	Female	Australia	English	No
Michelle	27	Female	Australia	English	No
Alice	27	Female	Australia	Polish	No

Section summary

The aim of the study was to gather information about the personal lived experiences of transition for students moving from a TAFE college environment to a university environment. Given that this study was primarily interested in the perspectives that students have of the transition experience, interpretivism was a logical means of viewing how this cohort of learners made meaning about their experiences (Fielding, 2012). In order to evaluate whether or not transformation may have occurred, it was important to understand the experiences of these learners through the lens of their own perspectives. Narrative inquiry was deemed to be the most effective means of realising and understanding the transition experiences of the adult learners in the study. Narrative interviews were the most promising method of developing the stories of the participants, as they had lived the experience of transition. This section has also introduced the seven participants and provided a snapshot of their learning backgrounds at TAFE.

The following section provides details of the interview procedures and the steps taken in coding the data.
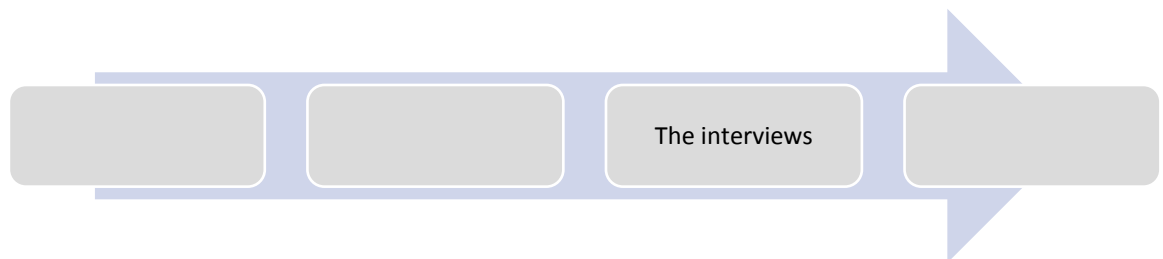
The interviews

Figure 3.4: Interview section in chapter framework

Interviews

Two interviews were conducted with each of the participants. The first interviews took place prior to university commencement, while the second interviews were held at the end of the first semester of university. The linear approach of the interviews was designed to capture reflections about the learning experiences of the participants over a specific period. Squire (2008) contends that it can be useful to conduct follow-up interviews after the first interview as a means of collecting chronological data and revisiting issues from the first interviews. The first interviews focused primarily on the participants' experiences of TAFE, while the second interviews had a dual focus: first, to return to the emergent themes from the initial interviews; second, to potentially gather new data from reflections covering the initial six-month period of university attendance.

The interviews were representative of what Charmaz (2006, p. 25) refers to as 'intensive interviewing', described as providing an opportunity for 'open-ended yet directed; shaped yet emergent and paced yet unrestricted' gathering of data. The dual purpose of the interviews was first to elicit the participants' stories in two phases, governed by the timing of both interviews. The first instalment of the individual stories was developed from data gathered from the first interviews; the second instalment of the stories was developed from data gathered from the second interviews.

The second purpose of the interviews was to identify any common themes—that is, issues raised by all the participants. In the first interviews, the participants were asked to reflect on past learning experiences at TAFE and to hypothesise about future learning experiences at university. In the second interviews, the participants were asked to reflect again on their earlier TAFE experiences and on the projections they had made about university. In this way, by the end of their first semester at university they could consider the intersections and diversions of their projections against their actual experience.

The semi-structured questions in the interviews were open-ended and flexible, depending on the directions of the respondent's narration. This semi-structured approach allowed the participants to engage in reflective thought about their

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experiences and their feelings along a time continuum, and to compare their earlier experiences and impressions with their experiences and impressions after six months at university. Interrogation of the data from the interviews followed a cyclical progression which culminated in the development of the individual stories of the participants and identification of seven common themes, as well as the central concept of 'places and spaces' around which the themes could be situated.

Developing reflective responses

As noted in Chapter 2 of this thesis, creating opportunities for reflection is a key aspect of adult learning and transformation, according to Mezirow's (1990) Transformational Learning Theory. During both interviews held with the participants it was important to facilitate their reflections by allowing time for them to consider their responses and to not interrupt this process. As noted by Qu and Dumay (2011, p. 251), silence and pauses allow time for the interviewee to reflect and to think about their responses, and to 'gather energy' for further disclosure. Consequently, it was important to listen carefully to these responses, and to take note of specific issues the participants might reflect on further. Therefore, creating suitable moments within the interview for careful reflection was a fundamental aspect of the narrative approach taken in this study. Raven (2015) also remarks on the value of such approaches to interviewing that enable and encourage deep reflection and notes that such opportunities can be particularly valuable in drawing out the potential layers of the reflective response. It was also important to provide the opportunity for further data to emerge through prompting. Qu and Dumay (2011, p. 247) assert that giving those being interviewed the time to respond to prompts for further elaboration on particular points raised in the interview can enable the production of 'situated accounts' which represent the subjective truths for that individual. These factors were a key aspect of the reflective interviewing process of the study.

First interview procedures: TPC students

The TPC students elected to be interviewed in November 2013, towards the end of their studies at TAFE. An interview schedule based on the students' availability was determined for the initial six students in the TPC who were interested in taking part in

the study. Their TAFE teacher arranged for a private study room in the TAFE library to be made available, and the six initial interviews were conducted there. The first set of interviews lasted approximately 40–60 minutes. Key questions were used to guide these one-to-one semi-structured interviews, and supplementary questions were available to the interviewer as prompts if necessary. All the questions in the first interviews were open-ended (see Appendix 6.   Interview questions for main study). The interviews were audiotaped, with permission from the participants. At this first round of interviews, participants were asked to nominate their own pseudonym. Following the first interviews, all data were stored on a secure, password-encoded database in a private office at MCU. Related data (hand-written notes from the interviews and signed consent forms) were kept in a locked filing cabinet in the same office accessible only to the researcher. The first interviews were transcribed within the first two weeks of completion.

At this stage, I verified that it would be acceptable to contact the six participants again towards the end of their first semester at university (in July 2014) to arrange a second interview. Subsequently, each participant was emailed in May and June 2014 to organise a date and time for the second interviews. At this stage, two of the initial six TPC students were no longer eligible for the study as they had decided not to apply for university entry, and one student declined. Subsequently, a schedule for the second interviews with the remaining three students was established.

First interview procedures: Diploma students

The first interviews with the four Diploma students took place in January 2014, just prior to commencement of the first semester of the university year. These first interviews were based on the same questions (key questions and supplementary questions) as those of the TPC students. All interviews took place in a private office at MCU and were audiotaped, with permission from the participants. Once again, participants were asked to nominate a pseudonym of their own choice. Data were stored in the same secure way as that from the interviews with the TPC students. These interviews were also transcribed within two weeks of completion. Following these first interviews, I verified with each of the Diploma participants that it would be acceptable

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for me to contact them again to arrange a second interview, to be conducted in July 2014. Subsequently, in May and June 2014, emails and/or phone calls were used to remind the participants of the next round of interviews. At this point, days and times for the second interviews were organised to a timetable which suited the participants' individual needs.

Second interview procedures

The second interviews with all seven participants were held in July 2014, on completion of their first semester at MCU. The interviews were held in a private office at MCU and were again recorded, with the participants' permission. Once again, these interviews encouraged reflective responses from the participants. This was most effective when returning to key issues and significant moments mentioned by each participant in their first interviews. In this way, explicit reflection on these issues allowed for more elaboration and consideration in their responses. Further, the second interviews captured longer term reflections as the participants thought about their experiences of the whole semester and revisited previous reflections on their TAFE experiences at the same time (see Appendix 6.   Interview questions for main study).

Data were again stored on a secure password-protected database, and hard copies were kept in a locked filing cabinet at MCU. The key questions for the second interviews were the same for both student cohorts. However, individual issues arising from the first interviews which I identified as potentially pertinent were also followed up during the second interviews with each participant. The same protocols from the first interviews were applied to the second interview data, and transcription took place within a two-week period. The final schedule for both interviews with all students is shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2: Final interview schedules with the TPC and Diploma students

Group	Interview 1	Interview 2
TPC students	November 2013	July 2014

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Diploma students	January 2014	July 2014

Coding the data

Data from the interviews were coded in two ways. First, the data were examined on an individual basis and represented by the individual 'stories' of the participants. Second, cross-case coding was applied to analyse the data in-depth for common themes. Stake (2006) suggests that it is important to note that individuals have different experiences of the phenomenon under scrutiny—in this case, the complexity of the experiences of transition—which ultimately can add to understanding of whatever is under scrutiny. Identification of both the individual and multidimensional nature of these complexities may add to understandings of the transition experience. It was important then to understand the individual experiences of the participants in the study, while also examining the data from a potentially shared experience. This process was cyclical: data were constantly examined and re-examined for aspects of both these elements. This occurred in three main steps, outlined below.

Step 1: Writing the stories and initial cross-case coding

Creation of first-draft individual stories

Writing the individual stories primarily involved recounting or 'restorying' the experiences of the individuals along a linear time line. Development of these stories involved drawing on information about each participant as a means of introducing them to the reader. This necessitated building individual profiles with sufficient depth so that the reader could gain a holistic sense of the personality and background of each of the participants, as well as offering a window into their learning experiences as they progressed through their TAFE studies and, later, university studies. Therefore, the first step in writing the individual stories was to develop a preliminary profile of each participant, which included their reflections of the period leading up to their TAFE enrolment and extending to the culmination of their respective TAFE courses. This initial step involved focused reading and re-reading of the transcripts from the first interviews, from which a summary of the content of each of the transcripts was then developed. Data from these readings became the individual stories and included

participants' socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. These inclusions were important, as literature suggests that socio-economic circumstances of learners can potentially be a significant factor in their learning experiences (Bathmaker, Ingram & Waller, 2013; King et al., 2015; Mezirow, 1990; Tennant, 1998), and it was identified that the participants had diverse cultural backgrounds.

To present an in-depth profile of each participant through their stories, reading of the first interview transcripts also incorporated examination of the data for issues current to their situations in life. This encompassed possible work-related obligations and commitments and other responsibilities held by the participants at the time of the interviews. It also included the impact their personal relationships may have had on their learning experiences and, conversely, the effect their learning experiences may have had on their relationships. Re-reading the data at this time further uncovered specific and individual problems and concerns the participants had at the time of the interviews. This was important information as it potentially represented individual follow-up foci for the second interviews. A final examination of the first interview data noted the goals and aspirations held by the participants and the influence these goals and aspirations may have had on their decision-making while engaged in learning at TAFE. Following this iterative process, the first 'instalment' of the stories was written immediately after the first interviews, while impressions were still fresh.

It is important to note that in this initial step the summaries were primarily written from a descriptive standpoint. I was not interpreting the data. Angen (2000, p. 379) raises a conundrum often faced by qualitative researchers: the legitimacy of interpretivism over absolute certainty. Consequently, I was mindful of the need to avoid projecting my own interpretations onto the data. Rather, I was taking the stated answers to questions (the data) and presenting them as a 'story' representative of each personally narrated account. Individual demeanour during the interviews, and what this might indicate about the feelings and emotions of each participant, was considered an important addition to the development of the holistic picture of the individual in the story. These impressions were by definition tentative and have been presented as such as they are included in the participants' stories. At the end of this first step, the profiles of the

individual participants had begun to emerge. These profiles would later be further built through the addition of data from the second interviews.

Analysis of data for first cross-case coding

Following the drafting of the first instalment of the individual stories, this first step also involved re-examination of the transcripts from a broader perspective to identify any potentially shared experiences by the participants which could be considered representative of a theme. It seemed logical that a theme was any issue raised by all the participants and was represented by repetition and similarity of words and/or phrases found in all seven of the transcripts. Discovering the themes was a process which involved numerous re-readings of the interview data through a line-by-line analysis of each of the transcripts. These readings represented a continuous scrutiny of the data from the interviews with the participants as a means of discovering duplication of experiences during the transition phase. As potential themes arose, they were colour-coded as a means of identification. For example, the eventual theme of 'identity' was coded according to the explicit ways in which the participants described themselves, that is, their self-concept and the implicit connections that may be made between meaning perspectives or frames of reference and allusions to upbringing. In this way, words or phrases which indicated perspectives about the self were colour coded and highlighted as significant markers of identity. For example, phrases such as *I'm an enrolled nurse… I'm a bit of a go getter… being a mother and a wife*; *I'm not academic… I'm a mature age student…* were highlighted as indicators of identity because they were direct and explicit examples of self-description. While phrases such as *coming from my background…we were not a university family…*were indicative of implicit references to socio-economic factors and influences on identity. Aspirations were coded in a similar way. That is, words or phrases which indicated explicit thoughts and goals about the future were captured as aspirations and were also colour coded and highlighted as identifiers of aspirations. These included reflections on future work opportunities, study ambitions and other indicators that projected a positive outlook for the future. For example, phrases such as, *I wanna be a midwife… I wanna do Care flight Australia… I want to travel… so that's one sort of aspiration…* were highlighted as indicators of future goals and aspirations. (Appendix 7 provides further

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examples of data coding for identity and aspirations from the interview transcripts of the participants). In the early stages of the data coding and after a prolonged and in-depth scrutiny of the data, three common themes became apparent. These were labelled at this time as 'self-perception', 'aspirations' and 'the TAFE experience'.

It should be noted that some adjustments to two of the original thematic titles occurred during this initial step in the scrutiny of the data. That is, 'self-perception' as a theme later became 'self-identity'; however, the final labelling of this key theme was simply 'identity', as this was in keeping with the labels defined in the scope of the overarching research question. Aspirations remained a key theme. The theme 'the TAFE experience' was initially developed by collapsing five potential sub-themes:

- one-to-one attention
- small classes
- TAFE as a safe place
- pedagogic differences
- learner dependency.

Towards the end of this first step in the cross-case analysis, the theme 'the TAFE experience' was renamed 'educational differences'. This new key theme label was sufficiently broad to represent an umbrella term that included four of the sub-themes as representative of aspects of the teaching and learning approach of TAFE. The exception was the theme of 'TAFE as a safe place', which was a perception held by all the participants, less amenable to concrete labelling and instead more intangible and abstract. Consequently, this theme was considered to lie outside 'educational differences'. The participants also spoke about other experiences which included the influence of TAFE on their changing perspectives and identity formation, and on their sense of belonging (or lack of). The participants also reported changes and developments in their aspirations. Therefore, to incorporate these more intangible elements of their TAFE experiences, the concept of 'places and spaces' was developed at this point. This concept, around which the final emergent seven themes were situated, is discussed in detail later in this chapter.

Step 2: Creation of second-draft individual stories

The second interviews covered the period from the completion of the participants' TAFE courses through to the end of their first semester of university. These second interviews provided further data which were incorporated into the individual stories. Primarily, this second set of data included the participants' impressions and reflections of their experiences of transition in the first semester of university. However, before the new data on transition were included, the second transcripts were first scrutinised in line-by-line readings for repetition of data on issues raised in the first interviews. This proved to be a particularly useful process in the examination of the data, as the participants often returned to issues previously raised, and further embellished on them in light of their new experiences at university. Thus, the individual stories were not only continued with new information related to transition and the experiences of the first semester of university but also developed by the reflections of the participants on their earlier experiences of TAFE. As new issues arose, or as previous issues were revisited by the participants, they were incorporated into the relevant sections of the stories at this second step, thereby adding depth and complexity to the participants' narratives.

Analysis of data for second cross-case coding

Following the drafting of the second instalment of the stories, the second step also included cross-case coding the new data from the second interviews for further common themes. Questions in the second interviews represented a link between past and present and were one means of reflection on the transition experience for the participants. Therefore, examination of the transcripts from the second interviews was conducted for information that could add to the shared experiences that had been identified as common themes from the first interviews.

The transcripts were again scrutinised using a line-by-line approach, as were the first transcripts, and the first reading of these data examined additional information on the three common themes already identified from the first interviews. The next readings then explored new common themes. Once again, a colour-coding approach was taken to add to existing themes or identify any new themes. At this second step, two new

themes were identified: 'the challenges of university' and 'the influence of relationships'. The theme 'the challenges of university' originally involved three sub-themes:

- pedagogic differences
- workload
- life balance.

However, it was determined at this time that 'pedagogic differences' could be incorporated into the existing theme 'educational differences', a theme determined in step 1 of the cross-case analysis. Further, because there were overlaps between the ways the participants' reported their difficulties and resolutions regarding the workload at university and the need to find a balance for all their commitments, the themes 'workload' and 'life balance' were eventually collapsed into one key theme, 'study/work/life balance'.

During this second step in the coding, the theme 'the influence of relationships' was recoded as the key theme 'support networks'. This more appropriately labelled the experiences the participants had in terms of the significance they placed on the support they did or did not have access to. It was obvious from further analysis of the transcripts that the participants' experiences of university contained more than just challenges; therefore, 'the challenges of university' was subsumed into the theme 'the university experience'. In a final re-labelling and repositioning of the theme, and due to the intangible nature of the experiences the participants' reported, 'the university experience' became part of the concept 'places and spaces', as had 'the TAFE experience'.

Step 3: Final drafting of individual stories
Writing the stories of the seven participants in the study was an essential aspect of understanding and representing their individual learning experiences, including their reports of transition and transformation, if this had occurred. However, before settling on the final draft of the stories, it was important to allow the participants to read their own complete story and to encourage their feedback and input. As a precaution against bias and misunderstanding, member checking was therefore employed during step 3,

for verification of accuracy and meaning in the study. The stories were subsequently emailed to the respective individuals for checking. All participants were given the opportunity to read through their whole story and were encouraged to make any necessary changes and/or additions they felt were appropriate. Some minor corrections were made, including the age of one participant and the date that another participant commenced TAFE studies. This step completed the individual stories. Figure 3.5 illustrates the steps taken in developing and finalising the individual stories of the participants.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Completion of first interviews (TPC, November 2013; │
│  Diploma, January 2014)                         │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Transcription of first interviews completed (TPC, December │
│  2013; Diploma, February)                       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  First draft of emerging stories developed       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Second interviews held (July 2014)              │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Transcription of second interviews completed (August to │
│  September 2014)                                │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Second draft of stories developed (September 2014) │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Individual stories emailed to participants for member │
│  checking (October 2014)                        │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                        ↓
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Final version of stories completed (October 2014) │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
```

Figure 3.5: Steps in processing the individual stories of the study participants

Additional scrutiny of data for cross-case coding

To complete the cross-case coding of the data, the first and second interview transcripts were analysed one final time, which led to identification of two additional common themes: 'self-confidence' and 'self-management'. 'Self-confidence' as a key theme arose from the use of the word 'confidence' by the participants as they reflected on their experiences at both TAFE and MCU. The theme 'self-management' was later renamed as the key theme 'adaptability/resilience', as these were the attributes most

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apparent in how the participants adjusted their behaviours and managed their lives to succeed in their academic pursuits. The types of adjustments the participants made included adapting their lifestyles to manage the challenges they faced at university and implementing strategies to help adapt to the new demands they encountered in many aspects of their lives. Resilience was part of this adaptation, as the participants demonstrated perseverance and new attitudes of determination to succeed, despite the challenges they faced.

Through this iterative and lengthy process, seven final key thematic categories were determined:

- identity
- aspirations
- educational differences
- study/work/life balance
- support networks
- self-confidence
- adaptability/resilience.

These thematic categories are analysed in detail in Chapter 5. Figure 3.6 illustrates the development of the thematic basis of the analysis and indicates the three steps of the cross-case coding in which the seven final themes of the study emerged.

STEP 3
SELF-CONFIDENCE
ADAPTABILITY/RESILIENCE

STEP 2
STUDY/WORK/LIFE BALANCE
SUPPORT NETWORKS

STEP 1
IDENTITY
ASPIRATIONS
EDUCATIONAL DIFFERENCES
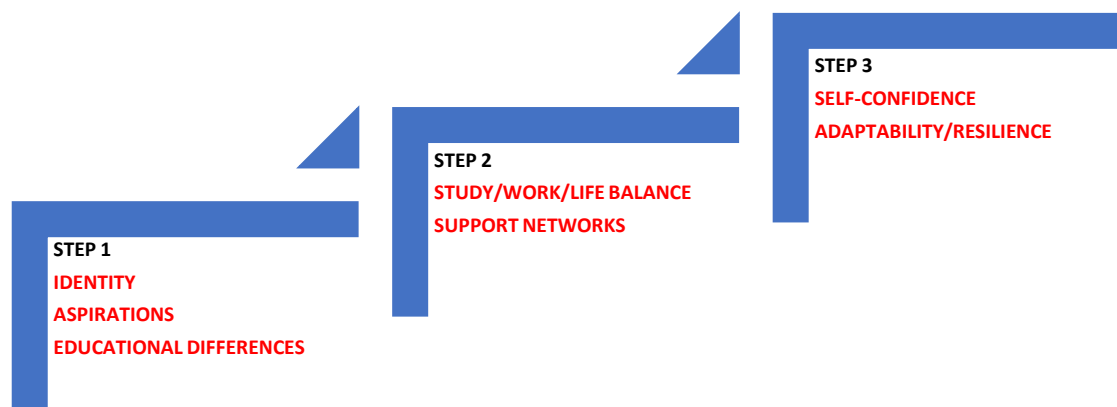
Figure 3.6: Steps of the cross-case coding in which the seven final themes of the study were developed

Key concept: 'Places and spaces'

As identified previously, the concept of 'places and spaces' emerged from the analysis as a defining concept for the intangible nature of the learning experiences of the participants in this study. The concept also provided a point around which the seven themes from the study could be situated; however, defining this term in the context of this study is important.

The concept of 'places and spaces' occupies a broad spectrum of literature inclusive of geography and the human environment, business, science and education, making a definitive understanding of the concept potentially problematic. Indeed, early discussions by positivist geographers emphasised 'place' and 'space' as dichotomous values that provoked tensions in definitions (Portugali, 2004). However, postmodernist and poststructuralist geographers determined that 'place' was representative of 'geographical place' while 'space' was a 'socially produced' notion (Portugali, 2004, p. 648). This is a useful and valid way of differentiating these terms of reference, especially as Gulson and Symes (2007), while recognising that spatial theories have

traditionally belonged to geography, also highlight the notion of space as a social product and integral to educational theory. However, Gulson and Symes (2007, p. 99) also acknowledge the difficulty of definition and point to these often-used terms as 'metaphors' rather than as tangible and material. In other words, there is a drift towards the intangible and, with it, a lack of robust theorisation of these commonly used terms. Nevertheless, there is agreement in the literature that space is a social experience and one which contributes to social relations. It is this sociality of space that dominates discussion and is particularly the case in educational theory, which values the social practices that occur within the educational space (Wenger, 2010). As such, it may be possible to situate the intangible elements of the educational experience within this notion of space.

Space as a social experience is pertinent to the current study as the research also considers the ways in which adult learning may influence the perspectives, identity and aspirations of learners. This involves consideration of how learning spaces impact on these aspects of self. For example, Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) discuss the capacity of higher education environments to welcome or alienate, depending on how the individual situates themselves within this new space and how disposed they are towards the environment. The relationship between space and identity is an important point of similarity in the literature and in the experiences of the participants in the current study. Kolb and Kolb (2005, p. 207) note that educational space can be welcoming as a space where 'everybody knows your name'; alternatively, it can be 'mis-educative', where 'nobody knows your name'. Consequently, the student may feel alienated and lack a sense of belonging.

Field and Morgan-Klein (2010) argue that the liminality of the transitional space of higher education makes it a transitory and temporary experience of renegotiation of identity, while the student goes through the rite of passage of becoming a university student at that moment in time. This is a point also noted by Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009, p. 40), who discuss the 'betwixt space' that can exist between a student's identity at university and the one they assume outside university. Indeed, Dixon and Durrheim (2000, p. 27) suggest that, when the question of 'who we are' arises, the

answer is often contained within the notion of 'where we are'. Palmer et al. (2009, p. 40) argue that the existence of a 'betwixt space' reinforces the liminality of transition as an experience of standing on the threshold, of being in a 'transient space' as students try to adapt to their new learning environment. It is a point similarly raised by Baynham and Simpson (2010, p. 438), who discuss adult learning environments as both a 'liminal space and a space of becoming'. As the analysis of this current study will show, the notion of 'who am I?' was considerably affected by the influences of the learning spaces of the adult learners in the study. As such, it may be possible to situate the intangible elements of the educational experience of these learners within the notion of space.

When considering the concept of 'places and spaces' in relation to the foci of the current study—essentially, to develop a sense of belonging to a particular place and to develop an identity within that space—the physical context of place can be appropriated into a space that can provide a sense of attachment (Dixon & Durrheim, 2000) and perhaps even transformation (Baynham & Simpson, 2010). This presents a powerful picture of possibility, whereby students may utilise educational spaces in ways that enable them to own and belong to those spaces. Ultimately, as Kolb and Kolb (2005) point out, a place of adult learning can have great potential as a space where learners develop skills in discourse and reflection, which, as Mezirow (1990) asserts, can in turn lead to transformation. A place of adult learning may further provide a space where learners not only recognise negative emotional responses which can 'block' learning but are also empowered by taking responsibility for their own learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 208).

Positioning 'places and spaces' in this thesis
The definition for 'place' in this thesis is drawn from Portugali (2004), whereby 'place' may be conceptualised as geographical. That is, in this study, 'place' is represented by the two sites of learning: TAFE and university, as experienced by the participants. 'Space', on the other hand, as an intangible concept, includes the elements and dynamics that occur within social relationships and experiences of learning. Space is

viewed in this study in terms of the personal, interpersonal and social experiences of the participants that developed in the dynamics of the sites of learning.

As noted in Chapter 6, the elements of transformation pertinent to this study—that is, perspectives, identity and aspirations—rest to a large extent on actions and the dynamics that occurred within, or as a result of, the spaces the participants encountered on their learning journeys. Conceptually, the concept of 'places and spaces' also signifies the centre point around which the seven emergent final themes from the study may be situated. The centrality of the concept of 'places and spaces' in this thesis highlights the interconnectedness of the seven themes in the study.

Figure 3.7 illustrates the interconnectedness of the themes from the study to the 'places and spaces' of learning.
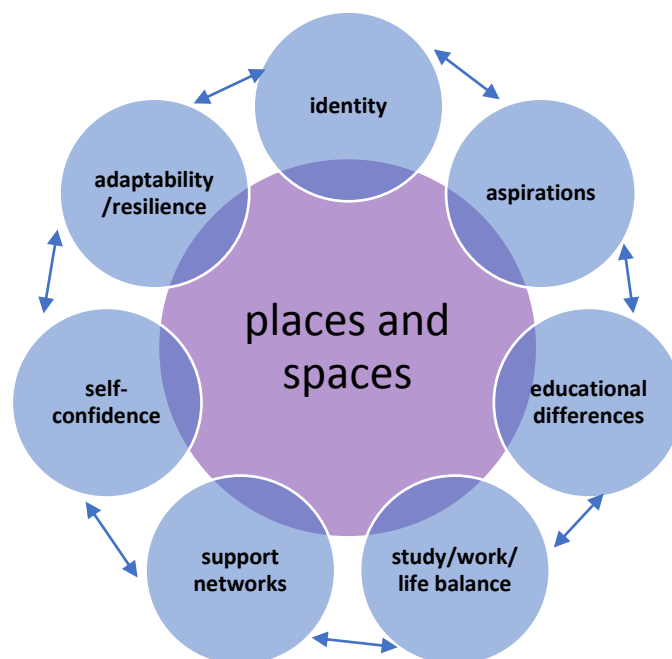
Figure 3.7: The conceptual link of places and spaces to the seven themes in the study

Section summary

This section has provided details of the interview schedules and procedures and has highlighted the steps of the data coding protocols of the study. This has included the steps taken in developing the individual stories of the participants and the ways in which the data were scrutinised for shared experiences, expressed as common themes

in the study. The stories of the participants are presented in Chapter 4. The common themes are presented analytically in Chapter 5. The final section of this chapter discusses the ethical considerations in human research.
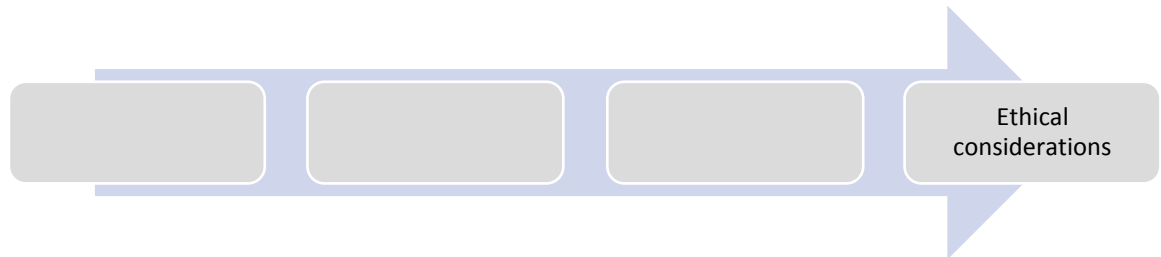
Figure 3.8: Ethical considerations section in chapter framework

Ethical considerations

The moral obligation of researchers to maintain an ethical stance towards the participants and the data they choose to share is an important consideration. There is always a need to maintain respect and responsibility throughout the research process in dealings with the narrators in the research. Researchers are privileged to be given the levels of trust respondents place in them; as such, they are bound to uphold that trust. Contingent on this are the procedural elements of data-gathering, interpretation and storage in order to honour the contractual ethical approach of a study. In this study, these elements were implemented with rigour. For example, at the data-gathering stage, interviews were held in a private room and permission to audio record the interviews was always sought prior to commencement. All data gathered were accessible only to the researcher. Participants were made aware in the initial stages of recruitment that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and they were encouraged to choose a pseudonym by which they were thereafter referred to in the study materials. The completed stories were sent for member checking prior to completion of this thesis. The stories narrators choose to share are made public; therefore, it is incumbent upon the researcher to have regard for the analysis and what it may indicate about the respondents and their experiences. Therefore, attending with sensitivity to those who agree to be part of a research inquiry should always be uppermost in the researcher's mind. All of these ethical considerations were applied in the development of this study

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the method of the study. The method applied emphasises a qualitative research paradigm as the underpinning approach to the research. A constructivist, interpretive design allows the researcher to develop a richer understanding of the phenomenon under scrutiny and to extrapolate data that provide thick description. The chapter has examined narrative as a methodology most appropriate to fields of inquiry which seek to reproduce the stories of people's lives and their experiences in the real world. It has emphasised the value of such an approach to inquiries into experiences of transition as both an individual experience but also as a shared experience. In examining the data from the narrative interviews with the seven participants in this study, the research approach taken has enabled a deeper understanding of what the transition experience involves as it is lived at that moment. Arguably, much more needs to be done to develop the field of narrative as a method in the exploration of transition as experienced by students, particularly within the cohort transitioning from TAFE to university. However, the data from this study are valuable as a means of adding depth to understanding the real-world experiences of learners in transition both at the individual or personal level and in terms of their common experiences. This understanding will provide knowledge of the complexities of the transition experience and potentially offer insights into the multifaceted nature of student transition and transformation in adult education in Australia today. As the following chapter will show, the participants' experiences of transition were mapped at both individual and collective levels. That is, they each recounted their own personal experiences but, at the same time, shared experiences of transition were identified, represented by the seven common themes which arose from the data coding.

The chapter to follow presents the individual stories of the participants in this study. The stories represent the personal perspectives of each of the participants on their experiences of the adult learning context. These experiences began at TAFE and later extended to university. The stories offer insights into the ways in which past experiences, beliefs and values, as well as both TAFE and MCU, influenced the lives of these learners. Thus, the stories developed from the interviews and the common themes which arose not only characterise the individuals who comprised the participant

cohort of the research but also serve as an important lens through which the common experiences of transition may be viewed and investigated.

Chapter 4.   Telling tales: a personal perspective

Introduction

The previous chapter presented the research approach taken. The study drew upon a qualitative paradigm and used narrative interviewing as the methodological design most appropriate to understanding the participants' personal experiences of transition. This chapter presents their individual stories. These stories represent the lived experiences of transition of real people, within the context of transition between TAFE and higher education. The stories represent the outcomes of two interviews, held with each of the participants. The first interviews and thus the first draft of the stories primarily contained reflections on the participants' experiences of TAFE prior to commencement of university. The second interviews addressed their later reflections on their experiences of transition, at the end of the first semester of university, and represent the second and final version of their stories, each of which is represented under three temporal foci: past, present and future.

Developing the stories: Narrator and researcher

In relating the stories, I have considered the 'social, cultural, contextual [and] situational' realities of the individuals (Stake, 2006, p. 28). I have maintained vigilant awareness of the possibility of the imposition of my own interpretive subjectivity; therefore, quotes from the individual participants are liberally used as a means of presenting the 'voice' of each one. As the researcher, I have added tentative assumptions and conclusions that may be drawn from the narrations and observations of the demeanour of the participants during the interviews. Consequently, I have endeavoured to make as transparent as possible any interpretations made, and I have approached with caution any conclusions that may be drawn from the data. Each of the stories presented here is developed under the key temporal themes—past, present and future—as the most logical way to present the reflections of the learning journeys of the participants. In this way, the past is largely related to interview 1, and the present and future are largely related to interview 2.

Connor (27, TPC)

Past: TAFE

I first interviewed Connor in 2013 at Warravale TAFE, towards the end of his TPC course. I began by asking him about his childhood. Connor explained that growing up in a working-class family had given him a set of attitudes and perspectives towards his future in keeping with the aspirations of others in his neighbourhood. The district he grew up in was largely one of council housing (referred to as 'housing commission' in Australia) available to people on low-incomes or who receive a government pension of some kind:

> *Well I grew up in housing commission ... my dad worked but he was low income ... I remember people in primary school asking you what you want to do, but as I got to high school it was never really discussed, around where I grew up, actually my dad was probably the only one with a full-time job ... so generally my attitudes towards work were I was gonna be a labourer, at most a trade ...*

I was interested in discovering why Connor had decided to enrol in the TPC at TAFE. He stated that he had been unhappy in his work and added:

> *I was working as a welder, a labourer; I knew it wasn't for me ...*

I wondered how he knew the work 'wasn't for' him and asked him what was happening at the time. He paused for so long before responding that I thought he did not want to answer the question, but he then went on to explain that as a child he had spent a lot of his free time reading and gaining 'ideas':

> *... I'd go home and sit at the computer and read ideas that I wasn't doing in everyday life, and ... um ... as a child I didn't know that ... everyone knows of course there's a university, you know, but the avenues of how you get there, it's not made apparent where I grew up? ... because when your parents don't have that ... ah ... level of education ... you're not really exposed to that type of thing?*

As a teenager, Connor put these ideas aside, but he went on to say that the ideas were always in the back of his mind and as he got older the internet became an additional source of information. Connor mentioned that, as an adult, he met someone who had

been to university and in some ways this meeting helped to demystify university for him and was perhaps a turning point in his thinking:

> *… she was the first person I'd ever met who'd been to university and … for some reason even though it took a few years of talking to her and dealing with my ideas, it generally sort of made it feel accessible because she was like a regular person who had done it.*

Ultimately, Connor decided to change his life by joining the police force. To be eligible for the police force, he first needed a TAFE qualification.

In 2012, Connor enrolled in the TPC at Warravale TAFE. On successful completion, he would be eligible to commence policing studies. However, while studying at TAFE his ideas about his future began to change. When I asked him about his experiences at TAFE, Connor said his self-confidence had grown and he felt he had developed writing skills and some ability in critical thinking. He enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of discussions, something he was not encouraged to do with his friends:

> *… I still have my social group from going to high school and it's very good but there are certain discussions that you simply just don't have, or you meet everyone after work on a weekend and they simply don't want to have an in-depth discussion of any type … I suppose you could say philosophical discussion …*

When I asked him to elaborate on this point, he said that while his high school friends were not 'openly critical' there did now seem to be a 'gap' that previously had not existed:

> *… while it's always friendly and while you know … we can always continue the friendship … we're all still really close friends, every now and then there is like just a little bit of a gap there, like you know, what do we talk about? Unfortunate, but it's something that I've sort of accepted.*

Connor stressed that one of the key developments in his experiences at TAFE had been learning how to ask questions and knowing what kinds of questions to ask to develop and maintain a discussion.

As we concluded this first interview, Connor expressed his nervousness at the prospect of going to university. His main concern was the amount of work he would have to cope with at university, but he was hopeful that TAFE had given him the necessary skills to manage. He reiterated that it was perhaps his background that was adding to how nervous he felt:

> *… um … again I think coming from that social and economic background … there is definitely that sense of nervousness that I might not be able to handle it …*

Connor successfully completed the TPC in 2013 and then, partly due to encouragement by one of his TAFE teachers, successfully applied to MCU, where he commenced a science degree in 2014.

Present: University

I interviewed Connor again in July 2014 just as the first semester of his three-year science degree was ending. We began by discussing the workload and how he was coping with it. At the time of this second interview, Connor was working 22 hours a week as well as studying part-time. He was also working on the mathematical component of his course in his spare time as, due to a lack of exposure to some of the essential course material while at TAFE, he was not at the sufficient level needed in the course:

> *… some of the maths was just things I just hadn't seen since I left school and … um … it was supposed to be revision [laughs] but … it was brand new, I'd never seen it before …*

Despite the need for this extra revision, he did not seem unduly worried, as he planned to enrol in a summer school session at the end of the year in order to catch up with the other students in his class.

Connor was happy with some aspects of the teaching at MCU, such as the way in which some lecturers presented information 'assuming that people don't have … um … too much knowledge'. Other areas were challenging for him, particularly formal

lecturing as a style of teaching. This was a difficulty he especially noted with in biology studies:

> *... it's all labels for words and ... er ... families ... there's a lot of terminology and as they speak in lectures they jump from one word to another ... at the start of it ... it was like, 'I haven't even heard these words before, what are you saying?'*

I asked Connor what advice he would give others who were thinking about making the transition from TAFE to university. He stated that it was important to listen to the advice of TAFE teachers in terms of the subjects students should take in order to be prepared for university. Connor reminded me that his initial reason for doing the TPC was not to get into university but to join the police force:

> *... university wasn't even on my radar at all, it wasn't till meeting and talking to the teachers and um ... sort of just ... I dunno, learning about new things that you think it was possible ... that it was somewhere I was interested in going ...*

As he reflected more on this change in direction, he talked about the fact that while at TAFE some teachers were 'pushing' him towards a science degree:

> *I had a bit of pressure, people telling me to do science, I probably didn't have time to mess around, I had to do something.*

The pressure he felt at this time, combined with his own varying interests, led in the end to Connor's final decision to do a course that would eventually lead to employment:

> *I chose science mainly 'cos of the job prospects.*

I asked Connor how his family and friends felt about him being at university. He had recently returned from a wedding in Fiji, which his boyhood friends and their partners had all attended. It was clear from the way he described his experiences in Fiji that events there had had a profound effect on the way he was again rethinking his future directions. He drew parallels to his friends' attitudes towards him now and what they were like when they were all at school together:

... like ... they're my friends ... they'll always be my friends but there's like ... all this attitude towards people who try and do things ... if you try and do well at school ... people sort of have a bad attitude towards that, I think they think that you're arrogant or something ... like they have a go at you ... it's just like the accusation when I was younger at school and it sort of popped up again on the Fijian holidays ...

This was the first time Connor had suggested that his educational achievements at a younger age had been a source of discord with his friends. In the first interview, he had stated:

... even though I was quite good at school, I was in the top classes throughout high school and I was good in primary school, I didn't generally view education with any sort of respect ...

So now, in relating his experiences in Fiji, he talked about not only the tensions in his relationships with his friends but the differences in their lifestyles to his. He stated on more than one occasion that he was feeling a lot of '*pressure*' to work full-time. Not only was this pressure coming from others; he was also exerting pressure on himself. He explained why it would make sense for him to leave university and how he might go about this. For example, on returning from Fiji he contacted NSW Ambulance with a view to obtaining employment with them. He seemed self-conscious about this action:

... in the past week since I've been home I've felt a bit of pressure about working, in fact [laughs] I actually rang the er ... NSW Ambulance recruitment the other day ... as much as I enjoy what I'm doing now I look ahead ... I'll be 30 ... 31 ... really the pressure ... it's about earning money ...

Connor was constantly focused on the need to earn a reasonable income. He stated that if he was successful in his application to the ambulance service the knowledge gained so far at MCU would be helpful: '*it may actually give me a foot in the door*', and with the ambulance qualifications, '*I could actually progress into different careers once I'm established in working*'.

Future: Aspirations

Despite the obvious dichotomy he was experiencing about his future, Connor spoke of the importance of university in terms of the kind of role model he could be for children he may have in the future. He reflected on his decision to attend university and the importance of this decision in his life:

> *… coming here was never purely about getting a job … it was something that I wanted to do … something that I could be proud of and something that when I eventually have children I can say, 'Well look you know, I did it, why don't you finish high school' … the big drive for me … was being able to give them advice …*

Although he seemed tense at times at the lack of clarity about his future, the interview ended on a reasonably positive note. He stated that he was feeling more confident and that this growth in confidence was one of the biggest changes he had experienced through his participation in adult education:

> *Now I'm confident … I'm confident that I can do this, but I know that I had that child fear when I was 24 … I think confidence is the ability to say exactly what you think and feel … so that's the biggest change for me … that's something that I've only just actually realised …*

We leave Connor with a somewhat wistful and uncertain vision of his future. On the one hand, the chance to be a good role model for future children was clearly a driving force, but it was also important to him to have knowledge about options available for these potential children, something he would have liked his own parents to have been able to do for him:

> *I really wish that … I wouldn't change my life of course for who I am now but it would've been good to be able to go home and er … say to my parents, 'Well look these are the subjects that are on offer.'*

Ultimately, he wanted the best direction for himself in order to be that role model in the future:

> *… as long as I sort of give some guidance and knowledge of what's exactly out there, to just sort of put myself into a better position and I suppose … er … lead by example.*

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Aishia (27, TPC)

Past: TAFE

Aishia was in the final stages of the TPC at Warravale TAFE when we first met in November 2013. My initial impressions of Aishia were of a happy and confident young man. This was expressed in his readiness to laugh and his open, smiling expression.

Aishia was born and raised in Nigeria. A significant number of his aunts and uncles as well as a brother had been to university in Nigeria, and his mother was currently attending MCU. Aishia's mother had been the community nurse in Nigeria for the area the family lived in, and as a child he was inspired to become a nurse by her work:

> *Um ... actually I was always going to do nursing because my mother was a nurse ... and she used to like ... take care of ... the people in our community, and they come to her and she gives them medication, I used to like ... watch her do it, I just thought I would love to do it ...*

Aishia needed to complete the TPC to be eligible for university. He described TAFE as '*a stepping stone',* which would lead him first into the Bachelor of Health Science at MCU and from there, after one year, to the Bachelor of Registered Nursing program. When speaking about his experiences at TAFE, he initially said, '*I think our class is like ... really fun ... yeah, it's really, really, really fun'*. This opinion was later contradicted.

I then asked him what his strengths as a learner were and what he was good at. He seemed uncomfortable, '*Ooh, Jesus ... um ... [laughs]'*. I wondered aloud if this was a hard question and he replied in both the third person and first person:

> *Not really [laughs] I'm just trying to um ... what is Aishia good at? Um ... I'm good in writing and listening ...*

When I asked him if he had changed in any way through his TAFE experiences, he responded:

> *Have I changed? Ooh has Aishia changed? Um ... not really, I think I've always been myself; nothing has really changed although I've had some like ... really, really bad and stressful days ...*

From this point in the interview, although Aishia appeared quite happy and upbeat, the way he related his TAFE experiences now took on a different tone. He expressed the fact that he had been the subject of some bullying and vilification at TAFE. He first talked about the negative behaviours of other students towards him:

> *... some students try to make me quit this course ... because they're just bitches! Oh sorry! [laughs] ... they're just mean people ... they send me anonymous text messages, calling me names and stuff like that ... I don't really get along with most people in a class.*

I mistakenly assumed at this point that Aishia was referring to his skin colour and that he had experienced racial vilification because of it, but instead he explained that it was because of his sexuality. He said:

> *Yeah, I'm gay! So gay! [laughs] and they're like ... they're really like ... they haven't sort of been around gay people and I'm so like open about it and I um don't really care ...*

The issue of Aishia's sexuality was to dominate the rest of the interview and, to a great extent, the second interview I held with him in 2014. In this first interview, however, he expressed his surprise at the attitudes of the young students at TAFE towards his sexuality:

> *... I was just thinking right, these people they should know better, because they're like ... really young and being gay is like ... really common ... I don't mean you can just like ... get up one day and say, 'I'm gay', if you see what I mean?*

He went on to say that he felt some of the other students had come to terms with his sexuality but, ultimately, he did not care:

> *... I think they're like cool with me, but I don't really care anyway, I'm just Aishia, I'm just being Aishia ... and if you don't like it, that's your problem [laughs]*

I expressed the hope that things would be different for him at university. I asked him if he was ready for that next step and he responded that overall he felt '*prepared*' for university and was ready to '*take the next step*', but he was worried about how much

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work he would have to do and the '*shorter amount of time*' he would have to do it in. The final question related to whether any of his values or beliefs had changed during his TAFE course. Aishia replied:

> *… no, I think it's kind of like the other way round, people actually are struggling … to sort of like … accept like … who I am.*

Despite the negative experiences he had had at TAFE, he was still reasonably optimistic in his demeanour and outlook. The interview ended with Aishia contemplating the prospect of having to make new friends at university. He was a little anxious about this, but he was also determined to succeed in his career ambitions:

> *… it's going to be a little bit hard 'cos it's a different environment, different people, I'll have to make new friends … I'm not really worried, I'm going there to study anyway, so that's like … my main goal.*

Present: University

I next spoke to Aishia in July 2014 at the end of his first semester at MCU. On seeing him again after eight months, I was struck by the change in his demeanour: he had an air of gravitas and solemnity. I started by asking Aishia if he had experienced any key challenges at university so far. He identified the workload and how he was managing it. He said:

> *I'm doing four subjects [full-time study load] … so that's … it's like … really hard and also, I have to study for exams and we have like … um …there are articles that we have to read …*

Despite the study demands he explained that he was generally keeping up with it all by employing different strategies:

> *Um [hesitates] yeah, so far yeah, it's … so far, it's been good, it's been you know a bit hard but I'm trying to like … start an assignment before the due date gets closer so when I know what I have to do I start finding my resources and everything …*

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I asked Aishia if he faced any other challenges while at university. He expressed his concern at the lack of direction from his lecturers; however, he ultimately assumed he had to take a '*mature',* independent stance:

> *Um [long silence] … the challenges I would say have been the lectures and the teachers … I don't really know what to do … they don't really give you that one-on-one help, if that makes sense, 'cos it's uni and you feel that you're mature and so you ought to be able to kind of like … think for yourself and do stuff for yourself …*

This issue of independent learning was the most crucial aspect of the preparation for university according to Aishia. He emphasised the need for students to be prepared to work alone in order to manage:

> *Um, they should be really prepared, they should try as much as they can to like … do stuff of their own …not to kind of like … rely on teachers … 'cos if they do that when they come here … they'll be like … really shocked …*

I then asked Aishia about the challenge he had been concerned with when he was at TAFE, that of having to make new friends at university. We discussed how that was progressing:

> *Yeah, I've met quite a few friends, most of them are females anyway, I don't like to associate with guys 'cos … because too … I dunno annoying [laughs] they don't really think before they talk …*

Elaborating on this point, he spoke about the ways he now dealt with people he either did not like or he did not want to get to know:

> *… I associate with those I wanna associate with and those I don't want to have anything to do with, I don't, I don't talk to them … I do say 'hi' or 'hello' but that's it … I don't want them outside uni so I kind of … I think yeah I've kind of like … drawn um … that line?*

Aishia said that, overall, things had improved for him at university:

> *It makes me … feel better cos I feel like I can control stuff… whereas in TAFE I couldn't really control anything and besides that my mind is a little bit clearer than when I was at TAFE …*

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Aishia returned to the theme of how he dealt with people these days and as he spoke he seemed to become more and more downhearted, even as he contradicted this impression with his words:

> *... you know at the end of the day it's my life ... you only have one life and you die, I don't wanna die and start regretting not doing the stuff that I wanna do because those people didn't approve of me or didn't really like me ... so ... I don't care anymore.*

Future: Aspirations

Aishia reiterated his desire to become a nurse but now he also aspired to qualify as a midwife. This was a new aspiration that would entail completion of the Bachelor of Registered Nursing degree followed by one or two years specialising in midwifery studies. He expressed a desire to work in Africa in poor communities with pregnant women who could not afford hospital care:

> *Um, I also want to travel the world and kind of just like ... help the poor people ... some can't really afford to kind of like ... go to the hospital, to ... give birth ... like a lack of everything.*

Throughout the final stage of the interview, Aishia reiterated his lack of concern about what others thought of him and the need to just be himself. He said he was no longer interested in the opinions of others and this was interwoven with his ambitions and aspirations for the future. He went on to say that, in terms of the way others saw him, he was no longer interested in their opinions:

> *... I wear whatever I wanna wear you know, I talk however I wanna talk, so I don't care anymore ... and yeah, some people ... they go a bit 'oh oh' ... this is how I feel, then this is how I feel.*

I was interested to try to discover what had brought about this quite dramatic change in him. I asked him what had happened since leaving TAFE and why he had changed:

> *Because ... um ... [sighs] because in the past I wasn't living my life ... I cared too much about what people felt about me and that was ... I don't know ... I just got fed up ... yeah and I just wanted to be myself, be who I am ...*

The interview with Aishia finished on a slightly more positive note. He was determined to complete his course and to realise his aspirations. This involved the need to stay focused on his plans for the future:

> *… I'm not going to give up uni … I don't feel like quitting now … um, I think I'm more focused and determined than I was in the past … I'm not gonna quit …*

Briony (19, TPC)

Past: TAFE

Briony was a softly spoken, subdued young woman when we first met in November 2013 as she was about to complete the TPC. She stated proudly that after her TAFE course she would be the first person in her family to go to university. Her father, who had left school in Year 9 to work in a blue-collar job, worked as a labourer at the local steelworks. Her mother had wanted to go to university but it was not within the family's means and so she did not have this opportunity. Despite this setback for her mother, or perhaps because of it, Briony was encouraged to follow her dreams. In particular, her mother had given her strong messages that she should achieve her goals and strive to do what she would most like to do in life.

Briony started by telling me that she had always wanted to be a teacher. Although she had considered other professions such as the police force and NSW Ambulance, she felt that primary school teaching would '*suit me best*'. When I asked Briony why she had gone to TAFE before university, she said:

> *Um … last year I got sick and I didn't want to do nothing this year … I got accepted into TAFE and I'm actually pretty glad that I was …*

Briony explained that she was getting a lot of support from her family in her decision to go to TAFE:

> *Um, well my family is very happy that I got in because something happened in my family last year and that's why I didn't do very well at school, they all thought I'd sit around for a year and do nothing so … they all text me … like this week I've gotten a thousand messages from my family saying like …*

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> *'Good luck with your exams, you know we're really proud of you no matter what.'*

While Briony was receiving a great deal of support from her family, she was also experiencing support in the TAFE environment from the people she had met there. The emphasis Briony continued to place on the support she was receiving made me aware of the fact that something quite traumatic had probably occurred in her life, and this had left her somewhat fragile and vulnerable. So the supportive environment she felt she was in at TAFE was very important to her, as she identified with others who were also vulnerable:

> *We're all here because something's happened in our life and we couldn't finish Year 12 ... the people here you can just talk to them ... like if I have something going on in my life I can talk to anyone here, things are like ... building up and building up and you can't let it go ... everyone kind of understands because they've all got issues?*

I asked Briony if she felt ready for university. She replied that she felt TAFE had prepared her for university in some ways including her attitude towards study and the personal changes she had experienced at this time in her life:

> *... here you don't have to show up for lessons ... and that's the same as at university ... um I don't know whether it's because I've been at TAFE or because my life has been a bit more sorted out this year but I think I'm a lot more calm, I don't think I'd say spiritual but more relaxed and stuff ... it's because I've been at TAFE, my family's proud and that makes me happy and that makes them happy so it's just like a big circle?*

The first interview ended with the question of what she felt the change from TAFE to university would involve. Briony had mixed emotions as she explained that moving on to university would be evidence of the fact that she would finally have achieved her goal of studying to become a teacher. However, she expressed the view that it would be a '*challenge*' for her in terms of getting to know others and managing the different approaches to teaching and learning:

> *I'll finally be where I want to be and there'll be some new people and I've never sat in a lecture before, so I don't know ...*

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Present: University

I next spoke with Briony in July 2014 towards the end of her first semester at MCU. She appeared much happier and brighter—almost bubbly—as we spoke shortly after one of her practicum experiences. She had recently returned from a practical teaching experience in a local primary school during which she was given the responsibility of presenting an art lesson to the children. It was clear that she had enjoyed the experience. This was manifested primarily in her attitudes towards her future as a teacher because of the recent practicum experience which had provided opportunities for her to put teaching into practice and to receive feedback on her performance:

> *… I found that when I first started uni I wasn't sure if that was what I wanted? Because … I don't know … like … I got up today and I taught art by myself and it's just really nice …*

This affirmation of her ambitions gave her the ongoing incentive to continue with her studies:

> *… even when I'm doing my assignments I'm like, 'Oh why am I doing this?' But you know what? It's all worth it in the end, it'll be ok.*

However, she had also experienced a number of challenges during her first semester. In particular, she seemed frustrated by the seeming irrelevance of some of the course material:

> *… it's just that some of the subjects … I find it hard to see where they really fit in with primary education? Yesterday I did an exam … and it was all about … they ask you questions about how the brain functions … like I don't know why I need to know why the hippocampus is a part of the brain!*

She continued to express her dissatisfaction with the course content and the large amount of work required in her course:

> *It's like … also in psychology um … I don't know it's sort of a bit weird but just to me it was a very dry subject and I found it hard to do my work for it … it's just not what I thought primary education would be … the workload is tremendous … I'm doing it all, but I feel like I'm constantly at it …*

I asked Briony if she had changed in any way since leaving TAFE to go to university:

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> *I think I'm kind of like … in the transition stage, I'm getting used to things, like … I can do it, but it's like … ah … it's a bit crazy at the same time?*

Overall, Briony was very positive about her experiences at university. She seemed more content and more energetic than she had been at TAFE.

Future: Aspirations

Briony's earlier aspiration of becoming a teacher was affirmed by her experiences while on practicum. She expressed the tremendous gratification she seemed to have found from these practical teaching experiences:

> *… when I go to my prac, like … the first day of my prac I came away thinking there is nothing else I can see myself doing, like … after being at school for just a day it's totally what I want to do …*

Towards the end of this second interview, Briony stated that she had found some balance in her life by reassessing her work/study commitments and by taking steps to make the necessary changes that would help her to manage. These steps included leaving one of the two jobs she had been doing. However, she was philosophical about this decision: '*Yeah … it was a bit sad to leave but there's things you have to do.*'

Despite her struggles with the workload and the content of certain subjects, overall Briony seemed very happy and enthusiastic about her experiences at university. I had met a very quiet and somewhat withdrawn young woman at the beginning of the research while she was at TAFE. It was interesting to see how much she had changed by the end of one semester at university. While she was unenthusiastic about some aspects of the course, her ambitions and aspirations seemed to have been consolidated by her time in the practicum classroom. It was there that she most felt she was on the right track for the future.

Tammy (43, Diploma)

Past: TAFE

Tammy had completed the Diploma in Nursing at Greenbelt TAFE in 2013 and was accepted into the second year of a Bachelor of Nursing degree at MCU. At 43 she was

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the oldest participant in the study. Like Connor and Briony, she was the first person in her family to attend university. Tammy was self-assured and confident, direct in her responses and very open about her feelings and experiences. At the first interview with Tammy in January 2014, I began by asking her about the circumstances that led to her decision to go to TAFE:

> *I wasn't a very good kid, I was a bit of a scallywag … didn't like authority, so I basically dropped out of school and mum and dad said, 'Right, you've got to do your HSC or get a job.' So I got a job … but as I got older, had my kids, my mother died and I just decided, 'I don't wanna do this anymore.' So life changed sort of thing …*

I asked Tammy whether she felt TAFE had prepared her for university. She was pleased with some of the academic skills she had acquired there, '*Um, it did prepare me 'cos … if I hadn't of done that I really don't know how I would've gone …*' However, she was disgruntled with the delivery of the TAFE course, which she felt had been mismanaged:

> *Oh, they could've done a lot of things better, they could've structured their course better, they crammed in too much … and some subjects would go for an exponentially long amount of time … they really didn't do subject delivery well I don't feel.*

She believed that the TAFE administrative system had failed, too:

> *… there was no real systems in place you know … there was no sort of record keeping … there was a lot of this kind of airy-fairy … it's sort of different people, different processes, it's a bit lazy … laissez faire sort of thing …*

Tammy described herself as a '*regimented*' person, a word she also used to describe the way things should be done at TAFE:

> *… they definitely need to pick things up … I prefer to have it more documented, more regimented … so you have to be more regimented yourself … I mean, I'm just more regimented full stop …*

Towards the end of this first interview I asked Tammy what she felt the biggest challenges might be for her in her degree. She responded that there were two key

issues. The first was the different teaching and learning styles between TAFE and university and what this entailed in terms of her own time management and structured learning:

> *… you come for four hours or whatever your class is and then there's the expectation that you should be doing another 12 hours at home … I don't expect to be spoonfed … but maybe the delivery, just for me, might be a bit wrong … I'm just going to have to always be mindful … I've always done the lectures … I don't think I'm learning enough in class and I do need to worry about it …*

The second concern for Tammy was striking the right balance between study, work and home life. She returned to this theme throughout both interviews and it appeared to become more urgent and pressing as time went on:

> *I have to have one day off and then just really manage my time … I'm trying to find a balance … I just think you get through the next six months, do the next semester and then … just see what happens …*

Tammy was proud of her achievements so far. She said that on finishing TAFE she had decided to continue with her studies, something she had not previously considered:

> *… I didn't think I was going to … but then I realised … I had a wealth of experience and couldn't go any further … and I knew myself that five years later I'd go [sighs] … to get back into that study mode five years later would be much harder than it is now … I'm a bit of a go-getter.*

Present: University

I next spoke to Tammy at the end of her first semester at MCU in July 2014. She was still struggling with the different pedagogies of university and still trying to maintain a workable balance between student life, work and home life. She had already begun to refuse shifts at work in order to find some balance in her commitments and was organising ways to juggle everything. She was also beginning to see herself in a new light. It was evident from her words that she was proud of herself for having completed the first semester and she seemed to have gained even more confidence and self-assurance. However, she spoke about the need to prioritise her family:

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... I've got a bit of a timetable and basically picked a day on the weekend ... that's family day ... I have to delegate chores ... I just have to have one weekend day off ... to enjoy the sunshine and life ... I've tried really hard not to let it affect the kids because it's not their ... you know, not [their] fault because I'm choosing to do this, they shouldn't have many effects other than me not being there ...

At this early stage in her university studies, Tammy was already concerned about the lack of preparation she felt she had done for upcoming tests and examinations:

... we used to get a tutorial at TAFE and we'd be asking questions like, 'What are we doing? What's this? What's that?' ... whereas here they just go, 'Everything we've covered' ...it's just, 'Everything we've covered' ...

She had decided that the best way to approach her studies was to view them on a semester-by-semester basis. In this way, she could control her stress levels to some extent:

I think I'm well prepared for the next semester and I've got a bit more of a plan that I don't feel too stressed about ...

When I asked Tammy about the effect attending university was having on her family and friends, she was thoughtful but on reflection stated that she felt supported, particularly by her husband '*... you know sometimes my husband will go, 'That's pretty difficult ...'* Overall, he encouraged her pursuits.

Future: Aspirations

The second interview with Tammy closed with a question about the advantages she had found in the learning process. Tammy spoke about the ways in which she had personally changed and how, by taking the step to enrol in a university course, she had potentially changed the aspirations of her children as well. About the personal changes, she said:

... I'm doing something for myself ... I never thought I'd go to university and ... I often sort of sit there and go, 'My God, I've done six months of uni and I haven't failed anything yet and I'm still here and I'm still moving forward' ... that's a personal achievement ...

Tammy referred to her children as she spoke about her goals and aspirations, indicating that their futures were a major consideration in her own ambitions:

> *… the other advantage for me is I believe that I'm really teaching my kids some good values … whatever you wanna do in life you can achieve if you set your mind to it … I can say to my kids, 'You know, it's worth doing' … so I think university might be our new normal, you never know …*

It seemed from these interviews with Tammy that, through sheer effort and determination and the ability to be organised, she had so far achieved those goals she had set out to achieve. Along the way, she had begun to see herself not only as someone who was capable of changing her own life but also as someone who could influence the lives of future generations of her family.

Sophie (29, Diploma)

Past: TAFE

I first interviewed Sophie in January 2014, after she had completed the Diploma at Greenbelt TAFE and was about to commence a Bachelor of Registered Nursing at MCU, enrolling in the second year of the degree. She was a confident young woman who explained that as a child she had often been sick. She is dyslexic and had struggled through much of her school life. The difficulties that this condition had imposed on her as a child had instilled the urge as an adult to return to education to fulfil a long-held dream of joining CareFlight Australia (a rapid response airlift ambulance service).

Sophie is part of the first generation in her family to attend university. One of five children, two sisters were also attending university at this time. Sophie explained that her parents had always given their children the message that they should aim to do something in life they would enjoy:

> *'Do things that you enjoy and things you're good at 'cos you spend too much of your time whether you get paid a lot or not … at work to not enjoy it' … My mum's a nurse but she did it yonks ago when you learnt on the job, and my dad's an electrician, so he's a tradie …*

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When I asked Sophie to reflect on her TAFE experiences, she said she liked the combination of practical lessons, such as learning to administer injections and other practical nursing procedures, and the academic classroom activities in the TAFE course. She felt this combination had helped her to prepare for university:

> *… pretty much it works out about half the time at TAFE in the classroom and half the time on prac, you do a lot of prac and so it was hands on which I prefer … I'm a mature-age student so it got me back into the frame of thinking and researching … it gets you back in the right frame of mind …*

However, Sophie emphasised the need for TAFE to encourage more self-directed learning:

> *At TAFE, everything that's in the exam you're taught … it's like at school … it's not like self-directed … you go home and do your assignments, but you're told everything you need to know … TAFE had given me the idea that they're doing everything at university level … but it's not …*

At the end of this first interview Sophie reiterated how much like school she felt TAFE had been. She did not find this helpful once she was at university.

Present: University

I next spoke to Sophie towards the end of her first semester at MCU in July 2014. Once again, she spoke about the gap that existed between TAFE and university and how this gap necessitated an independent approach to learning:

> *The gap is a lot bigger than anyone thinks about or knows about when coming in … um, even for our first class quiz … we didn't even know that we had to take a pencil, we only had pens … there's just so much information that's not told to you and the gap … I guess there's the realisation that you have to teach yourself.*

Sophie reflected further on the key differences between TAFE and university—that is, the academic demands at MCU compared with those of TAFE. As she explained this difference, Sophie commented on her initial impressions of TAFE work as being difficult; however, later, on reflection, she was able to see that the academic demands of university far outweighed those of TAFE. She commented ruefully:

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> *You know when I was at TAFE I was like, 'Oh, this is too hard!' and now I'm like, 'What was I whingeing about?'*

Sophie was particularly concerned about TAFE teaching methods, which she felt created problems in the long term:

> *… at TAFE, you're spoonfed, you're actually taught everything you need to know whereas at university … they don't teach us, it's all self-directed and I never ever knew that university was like that, I always thought that at university you got taught, so I think the gap between the two is so big … I think it's bigger than what TAFE and university thinks …*

Another major consideration at this point was the assumption by lecturers that as a second-year university student she would have a level of knowledge commensurate with her peers:

> *… uni expects us to be at second-year level coming into it so … it's hard … we're going into second year and it's expected … it's assumed that we know stuff like this … the expectations are that much higher because we've done … meant to have done all first year, which we haven't done … so the assumption is definitely there that we are at that level … I think TAFE has to bring us up to university level, like … they shouldn't be spoonfeeding us …*

Added to the stress created by this expectation about the nature of teaching and learning was the cultural unknowns of the university which emerged and appeared foreign:

> *… we didn't even get explained what a tutorial was, what a lecture was … they just assume that we know …*

Like Briony, one of the ways Sophie had found to manage the challenges was reducing her paid work:

> *… I've cut back my work hours and … like I'm here for two years to get this done … you know, I'm not here to party … I've gotta cut back on work and I dedicate the time at home … you know, failing is not an option … it's really sink or swim, like … if you can't draw any focus … you'll just be left behind …*

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I asked Sophie about how she may have changed since coming to university. She stated that she felt she was improving academically. She was pleased with the ongoing support she was getting from other students. These students were her placement group that she had been part of since the commencement of first semester—that is, the group that would undertake their practical work experience at the same time:

> *I think I am improving ... I still need a lot of improvement, it's you know, continuous ... I'm still not at a high distinction ... my group are still together ... we all have the same issues, the same concerns, the same worries ... we do bounce off each other ... we talk about things with each other ...*

Despite the challenges, Sophie was determined to succeed in her course and to put everything into achieving this goal:

> *I ... set the bar pretty high for myself, if I only get 50% then that means I know 50% of what I need to know, and that's not good enough ...*

Future: Aspirations

In the final stage of the interview, I asked Sophie about her overall experiences of university and her plans for the future. I reminded her of her earlier expressed aspiration to join CareFlight Australia. I wondered if this was still an aspiration. She said she had already applied to do her next practical session in Broken Hill, in the far west of NSW, where CareFlight was based:

> *... I'm trying to get a placement on my next prac to Broken Hill 'cos CareFlight has a base at Broken Hill ...I love my degree, I really, really enjoy it, I should have done it years ago, um ... I can't fault it ... you know it was a shock to the system for me ... but ... it's very good.*

She was proud of her achievements to date and was optimistic about the future:

> *... if you'd asked me 10 years ago ... there's no way I would ever have thought I'd be able to get a degree and now I'm looking at ... having three degrees by the time I'm 35 ... to do CareFlight you have to do midwifery and preferably a bachelor of paramedics, so I'm already looking at the degrees I'm gonna do when I finish this one.*

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On the whole, Sophie demonstrated gains in self-confidence and adaptability, qualities that she considered essential in the nursing profession:

> *… I think I've matured, I feel like I've got the ability to adapt … um, to situations … and self-awareness like self-confidence that I can believe that I can do it … you have to be flexible in nursing … you've gotta move with the situation … 'cos nothing stays still in the healthcare industry.*

Michelle (27, Diploma)

Past: TAFE

I first met Michelle in early 2014, after her completion of the Diploma at Penfield TAFE and prior to entry into the second year of a Bachelor of Nursing degree at MCU. Prior to studying at TAFE, Michelle was working with a disabilities service, from which her interest in nursing was born. Michelle attended an orientation day about nursing and described it as, '*the best day, it was wonderful, and I loved it*'. The experience was the catalyst for her to go to TAFE to continue her education and become an Enrolled Nurse.

I asked Michelle about her reasons for attending TAFE prior to university. She was succinct in her reply:

> *I didn't think I was in the … appropriate head space … to come straight to uni … it'd been nearly 10 years and um … I was offered a scholarship so that definitely swayed … I mean it was $15,000 I didn't have to pay …*

She expressed her satisfaction with some of the experiences of TAFE:

> *I can relate everything back to what we've already seen through TAFE or through work … I think my research skills are better than before I started TAFE …*

Yet, despite these positives, she was aware of some of the drawbacks of TAFE, particularly in e-learning:

> *… um I think the year that came after me at TAFE, they had like a Moodle? But we were you know just given handouts and yeah, 'Go and find it for yourself, here's your assignment', you know, 'There you go' …*

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The different pedagogical approach of TAFE and the supportive space in which lessons were provided were also cause for rueful comment:

> *… at TAFE, it's face to face and your assignments are just in your own time … and you know five teachers for the whole year … you're with the same group of people all the time like even on prac …*

This led to a consideration for Michelle about being able to find a balance between work and study once she was at university. She was particularly concerned about managing her responsibilities when on her placement—that is, her practical work experience:

> *… prioritising … especially when we go on placement we're not supposed to work … but you know there's not many people that can just take four weeks off … I need to support myself so that I'm not leaving things to the last minute, so that I'm not going, 'Oh god, I've gotta go to work and I've gotta go to uni and I just don't wanna do it anymore.'*

Despite her worries about what university would entail, Michelle was generally positive in her attitudes towards the direction her life was taking and about her studies:

> *… I love the life I have now, I love the work that I do … it's made me wanna be there and have that knowledge about my patients and you know, just be better at what I do … it sort of makes me want to have more knowledge and experience …*

At this first interview, Michelle also spoke about her aspiration to become a nurse practitioner and perhaps focus on patient education. She clarified what this role would entail:

> *So, it's sort of like specialising in one area, so you might have like a masters in one kind of health and you can prescribe and you sort of … you know … make diagnoses so there's lots more responsibility.*

Present: University

I next spoke with Michelle towards the end of her first semester at MCU, where she was enrolled in the second year of a Bachelor of Nursing degree. She seemed much more relaxed and confident. On completion of her university degree, Michelle will be

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the first in her family to gain a degree. Her father is a labourer and proud of the fact that Michelle is at university.

She said she felt she had improved in the past six months in areas such as writing skills and referencing, and particularly in finding ways to balance her time. Michelle was coping well primarily by taking things one step at a time and planning ahead:

> *I think I've gotten better ... I've got a little table set up for myself, I've got all my uni stuff on it ... and that's where I study and work ... I think it was just sort of you know setting yourself a goal week by week ...*

The practical skills base she had gained at TAFE further boosted her confidence when she reflected on students in her university class who had not been to TAFE:

> *... their ability to write an essay is that much better than mine and their grades are really good, but they still don't have this idea of how the person works or how to deal with them or you know, how to* be, *just what a basic nurse would be ...*

She had also gained confidence in e-learning but was still struggling with the information technology (IT) knowledge she needed:

> *... we use a couple of databases and you type in one word ... then you have to refine it down and then you get to the point where you've refined it so much that you don't have a source for the actual question!*

Michelle seemed to have settled in well to university life and was at last finding her feet:

> *You know, I think it takes a while to work out what they were actually trying to tell you and how to get around all that kind of stuff, but once you ... put it into practice it becomes more helpful ... I'm like ... 'Ah, now I get it' ...*

Future: Aspirations

The second interview ended with the question of whether Michelle still wanted to be a nurse practitioner:

> *Um, I'm not sure, I think further study is likely gonna be on the cards, how I'm gonna go about it [laughs] might be a bit different ... um I don't really*

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> *know what fields I wanna do or where I wanna go ... you know one day it*
> *would be wonderful um ... but I think I need more experience ...*

Michelle expressed a desire to take her time, to focus on the nursing degree and to think about other aspects of her future later. This appeared to be based mainly on a sense of needing more experience and knowledge:

> *Um, I think definitely I'll work as a new grad for the first couple of years you*
> *know looking for a speciality ... you wanna teach people what you're*
> *passionate about, you have to know your stuff right down to the nitty-gritty of*
> *you know ... why something's happening ...*

Alice (27, Diploma)

Past: TAFE

I met Alice at MCU in early 2014, shortly after she had completed the Diploma in Nursing at Riverside TAFE, prior to her entry into the second year of a Bachelor of Nursing degree. Alice was very confident and relaxed during the interviews. Alice's father is a surveyor and her mother is a laboratory assistant. Alice explained that her parents' experiences when they were young had influenced their attitude towards their children's educations and futures:

> *Mum and dad want us to get good degrees and jobs ... 'cos they didn't go to*
> *uni, they did ... diplomas and that sort of stuff because they're from overseas,*
> *so when they came here mum and dad worked really hard to where they got*
> *today, so they were always like ... 'Go to uni, study, get a good job and you*
> *will be fine, work throughout your life, get a good job, good money,' that's*
> *always sort of been the push ... and to live happily ... and not have to*
> *struggle like they did ...*

Alice stated she had decided to complete the Diploma course at TAFE before going to university because she was unsure about becoming a nurse.

I asked Alice what she felt had been advantageous about her TAFE experiences. Generally, she was very positive about TAFE, especially the ways TAFE had prepared her for university:

> *I just feel like I've already got a solid knowledge base where I can sort of grow upon, I've got ... good skills ... so it's like building upon a good foundation of knowledge that I already have. I think I would've felt ready regardless ...*

She further commented on her impressions that some of the teachers at TAFE set quite high benchmarks in terms of their expectations of the students, reflected in their marking of student work:

> *... I did have the select few teachers that did push you, that did mark you like a uni teacher would ... and in saying that I think they did prepare me for uni a little bit as well.*

Alice said that one day she would like to work in oncology and theatre, and she appeared confident in her abilities. When she reflected again on her TAFE experiences, like Michelle, she was confident about the kinds of practical knowledge she had gained. This knowledge made her feel more competent than others in her class who had not had the benefit of practical experiences offered by a TAFE course:

> *I still feel like I know more than the other students in the class just because I've done more clinical wise ... what I've already learnt they're just learning now, so ... it's like a refresher for me but for them it's like they're just learning these sort of skills that I already know ...*

She described these students as:

> *... just kids straight from first year of uni ... they don't know anything, they've gone straight into the degree course ... for example, when we did needles ... I went straight into that class and did it perfectly fine ... but for someone that came to university straightaway in their first year, they were like, 'Oh my god, I don't know what to do, how do you that? How do you know?' It's just that I already had that foundation of knowledge from TAFE.*

Present: University

I next spoke with Alice towards the end of her first semester at MCU. I wanted to know whether she was still as confident as she was previously. She was managing well and, despite some challenges at university in the early days, was more determined than ever to achieve her goals:

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> *… the challenge has really pushed me … it's definitely motivating me, I want to study, and I want to learn … I think it's quite good for me actually…*

The challenges included managing her time as she coped with the workload of four subjects:

> *I think what's difficult is the amount of work, you know you've got four different workloads, I think that's sort of my biggest stress at the moment, just getting everything done … I think that's probably the most difficult thing I've encountered so far …*

Just as Michelle had been, she also continued to be challenged by the level of e-learning that was expected:

> *The lectures are online; we only have tutorials for our nursing things … [sighs] that's one of the things … I feel better if I'm pushed or in front of someone and I think that might be a bit of a challenge for me as … I feel better in a group.*

She referred again to the students in her cohort who had not developed some of the practical skills that she had gained in her TAFE course. She was more confident than ever in this regard:

> *… in their first year they do basically just washing and all that sort of stuff, whereas when you do your ENs [Enrolled Nurse Diploma] you do washing, needles … you do the whole thing … packed into a year, but in here it's based over the three years … I'm so happy that I done it this way … because it really has given me that massive advantage clinically wise you know going into that second year [of a Bachelor of Nursing degree] … you can relate to everything …*

Alice felt she was managing her university experience well:

> *I feel quite confident, I know I can do it, it's just I need to get more into the pace of it …*

Overall, at this early stage in her university studies she was optimistic. She confirmed that she had indeed settled in and things were getting easier for her:

... I've actually really settled in now, it's taken me the whole semester but I feel much more comfortable now, like I know what I'm doing ... it took a little while to get that work in with the four subjects but I feel that I've managed it, I've been able to take it all on and it's been fine ... I've actually been alright ... I've planned things out ... with assignments and work and everything, I feel fine ...

I asked Alice if she had changed in any way since TAFE:

I was definitely a very shy and reserved person ... and obviously, my education levels were quite low ... I wanna learn more ... I don't wanna be that scared little girl that stands in the corner, doesn't do anything, I wanna be in there and I think that interest sparked that confidence to grow.

At the end of the first semester Alice was very positive about her experiences at university:

I do really like it ... it's good, you know you come here, you socialise, you learn ... it's quite easygoing ... I think it's   fine, I love it ...

She also felt that confidence played a big part in a student's success:

I think if you come here and you're not content, then you fall back more and more and then you get into a sort of hole where you think, 'I don't know what to do, I can't get out of it, I'm stuck', and they end up doing quite badly ... but if you do sort of get that confidence ... you'll be perfectly fine ... and maybe it's not that they couldn't do it, but that they didn't have the confidence to feel they were able to do it.

Future: Aspirations

When I first interviewed Alice, just before she commenced her university degree, she had spoken about her aspirations for the future. These had included a number of goals, including more travel and working perhaps in oncology or in surgical theatre, but she was not certain at that stage:

I feel like ... I want to travel for a little bit I think when I've got my registered nursing, when I finish my graduate year here, then I could go and travel overseas for a little bit, could live over there, so that's one sort of aspiration, I think long term I would love to work in oncology and maybe progress higher in that field, I wouldn't mind going to theatre as well, I think that's ...

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> *I love theatre, I thought that was really interesting, so I'd like to go to either of them things at the moment, but I know there are so many other things to go to, so ...*

At the end of the second interview, in July 2014, I asked Alice to revisit the aspirations she had spoken about earlier in the year; they had not changed. Alice had maintained her enthusiasm and it was clear that her confidence in her abilities and her future had developed. In particular, she wanted to first complete her 'new grads', a new graduates program for students who on successful completion of their Registered Nurse degree could apply for a speciality year of experience during which they would be mentored. This program was an opportunity to experience specific fields of nursing and was a very competitive program with limited places. As Alice explained:

> *New grads is a year after you pass, so you apply for it like a job interview, there's only so many in ... like ... the area, you get mentored for the first year and you pick what specialities you want, and you get six months rotation.*

I was interested to see whether or not Alice's aspirations had changed at the end of her first semester at MCU. She was still determined to complete the new graduates year and to travel. She also maintained her interest in oncology:

> *I wanna travel, go overseas, work ... oncology's a big sort of thing for me ... I need to finish my new grads, get some more hands-on experience ... in the hospitals then try and maybe get into an oncology ward and from there just learn, learn, learn and maybe end up being an educator or something like that.*

It was interesting that at this stage she had also added her interest in becoming a nurse educator. I asked her what this term meant. She was not entirely sure but was keen nevertheless to add this aspiration to her list:

> *I'm not actually sure how it works ... I think you may be able to do something throughout the hospital settings, something there, they may do little education sessions, or they may send you back to do another one, I'm not sure ... but saying that I will definitely eventually be looking into it ...*

She was certain that the practical sessions she had participated in on her placement at a local hospital while at TAFE had opened the door to a different future:

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> *... and I did see there that they had specialist nurses and education like nurses, and I was like ... 'That actually is quite interesting,' because they still get to work as a nurse but then go out and educate ... things and I thought, 'That's actually pretty cool and I wouldn't mind doing that,' and from that I was like, 'Maybe that's something I could eventually get into in the long term' ...*

It was heartening to see that Alice still held these aspirations at the end of her first semester at MCU and had perhaps more confidence in her ability to achieve them as a result of her experiences at university.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided details of the learning experiences of the participants in their own words, through their individual stories. These narratives allow a glimpse into their worlds within the realm of a specific context—that is, their reflections about their learning experiences as they transitioned from one educational sector to another. In particular, the participants' stories have provided insights into the lived experience of transition. The narratives presented here are representative of the participants' past and present experiences and incorporate their aspirations for the future. Their reflections include the uncertain and often dynamic nature of their experiences as adult learners. Principally, this has been evidenced in their stories through the stated challenges and rewards of their experiences. The narratives presented in this chapter have provided valuable depth to understanding the personal and individual experiences of learning. Although this participant group was relatively small, a smaller number of participants can sometimes act as a prism for understanding the experiences of a greater number of people.

The following chapter presents a detailed analysis of the findings of this study. The analysis considers the ways in which the individual experiences of the participants have contributed to development of understanding transition from a multiple lens provided by these seven narratives. By taking a cross-case perspective the chapter presents the seven common themes which emerged from an analysis of the interview transcripts of the participants.

Chapter 5.   Transition: A shared experience

Introduction

Chapter 4 of this thesis presented the individual stories of the participants reflecting their personal experiences of learning and transition. This chapter explores these experiences in more detail by presenting an analysis of the shared experiences of the participants. These experiences contributed to the formation of the seven key themes of the study and to the development of answers to the research questions:

> *Overarching research question: In what ways may the experience of adult learning transform individual perspectives, identity and aspirations?*
>
> *Sub-question 1: How do students articulate their reasons for attending TAFE prior to university?*
>
> *Sub-question 2: What influences the decision of TAFE students to articulate to higher education?*
>
> *Sub-question 3: What do students experience in the transition from one sector to another?*

This chapter focuses on data relevant to the three research sub-questions, in order to build towards answering the overarching question, which will be dealt with in Chapter 6. Where pertinent, some literature will be integrated into the analysis. Analysis of research sub-questions 1 and 2 is drawn principally from data gathered from the first set of interviews, which took place prior to participants' commencement of university. In these initial interviews, the participants reflected on their learning experiences at TAFE. Research sub-question 3 draws primarily on data from the second set of interviews held at the end of the first semester of university. At this stage, participants focused mainly on their experiences of transition during the first six months or first semester of university but also reflected on these experiences in light of their past TAFE experiences. This sequence is a logical and temporal approach to the analysis of the data and sets the foundations for answering the overarching research question. Figure 5.1 presents the framework of this chapter.

| The 7 common themes | Defining 'places and spaces' & the relationship to the themes in this study | Analysis from research sub-questions 1 and 2 | Analysis from research sub-question 3 |
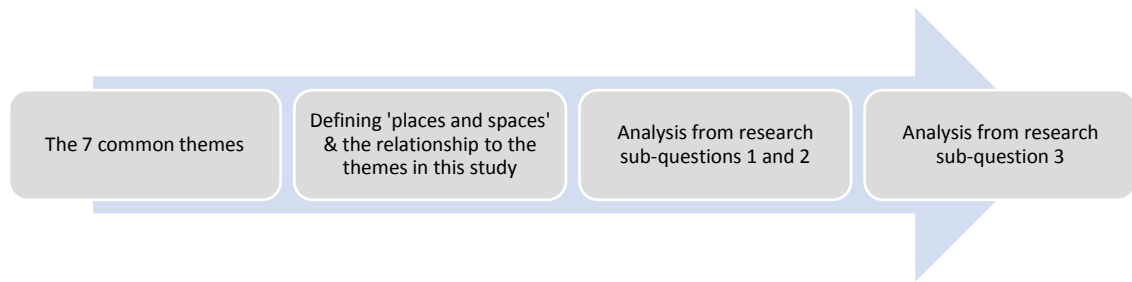
Figure 5.1: Chapter 5 framework

Identifying the overarching themes from the data

As detailed in the discussion of the method in Chapter 3, following a cyclical, stepped process of scrutiny of the interview data, seven overarching themes emerged from a cross-case coding of the data. Some of these themes were later renamed, until they were finalised into the seven themes used in this study. The first step towards identifying the themes from the data involved scrutinising the first interview transcripts; at this step, three common themes became apparent. These common themes were eventually determined to be, 'identity', 'aspirations' and 'educational differences'. Identity was deemed to be a common theme, as all of the participants spoke about the ways in which they had changed, or that their sense of self had been impacted upon through their participation in learning, primarily at TAFE. This theme was later reaffirmed after the second interviews when, once again, the participants reflected on the ways their identity and sense of self continued to change and evolve once they became immersed in the university system. Aspirations as a common theme came about as all the participants spoke about the ways TAFE had influenced their learning directions and goals to include further learning at university. Their aspirations were further developed once they were at university, when some of the participants considered postgraduate study. The theme of educational differences, which initially arose from all of the participants' reflections on their TAFE experiences, was an important inclusion, as they all considered the different teaching and learning approaches between the VET and higher education sectors and the consequent challenges and rewards of these differences.

Step 2 of the data analysis involved scrutiny of the second interview transcripts and revisiting the first interview transcripts. At this point, two further common themes

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emerged, which were finally labelled 'study/work/life balance' and 'support networks'. The need to find a balance for their commitments was a feature of the reflections of all the participants to varying degrees. The challenge was greater and more onerous for some than for others, but they all had to come to terms with the accelerated demands on their time that participation at university entailed. The theme of support networks emerged as the participants spoke about the influence of important people in their lives in both positive and negative terms.

Step 3 involved once more revisiting both the first and second interview transcripts, at which point two final common themes appeared: 'self-confidence' and 'adaptability/resilience'. Changes in self-confidence was something that all the participants experienced, first at TAFE and later, after an interim period of adjustment, at university. This was an important theme, as each participant's self-belief gave them a foundation upon which they could rely to face the challenges of university. Adaptability and resilience, which also appeared at this final scrutiny of the data, was evident in the reflections of all the participants as they spoke about the need to adjust, to be self-responsible, to take charge of their lives, to use agency to manage the tasks at hand, and to instigate measures and strategies to cope with the demands of university.

Table *5.1* provides definitions of the seven common themes from the study. These definitions represent a summary of the thematic categories as they are used in this study.

Table 5.1*: Definitions of the seven themes in the analysis and their application to this study*

Identity: Identity may be defined and interpreted in many ways depending on the context and the field of inquiry to which it relates. In this study identity refers to self-concept as defined by Mezirow (1990). Self-concept is inclusive of participants' reflections about their social class and place in the world.

Aspirations: Aspiration is described by Sellar and Gale (2011, p. 122) as 'the capacity to imagine futures'. Aspirations are identified in this study by words and phrases indicative of ambitions and goals for the future. Aspirations are also identified by an interest in undertaking further studies in the future.

Educational differences: Differences in teaching and learning between TAFE and university are explored in this study. They include the different pedagogical practices between the two institutions, the differential emphasis on independent learning and technology, and variations in workloads.

Study/work/life balance: Balance in the study/work/life arenas is defined by the competing demands of engagement in each area. For the participants, the focus is on the management of these demands in relation to their university study, paid work and personal life, and the accompanying stresses, tensions and successes they experienced.

Support networks: Support networks in this study refers to family, friends and others with whom the participants have significant relationships. This represents the importance and influence of others in the participants' lives during the learning process.

Self-confidence: When describing the stages in the transformative process, Mezirow (2000) includes the need to build self-confidence in new roles. Self-confidence is defined in this study as a growing sense of achievement and confidence in abilities and outlook for the future.

Adaptability/resilience: Adaptability and resilience represent the ability to adjust to change and to 'the capability to navigate change' (Gale & Parker, 2013, p. 4). Resilience relates to the individual's ability for persistence (Chesters & Watson, 2014b) and 'hardiness' (Sheard, 2009, p. 191) in the face of difficulties or challenges.

'Places and spaces' & the relationship to the themes in this study
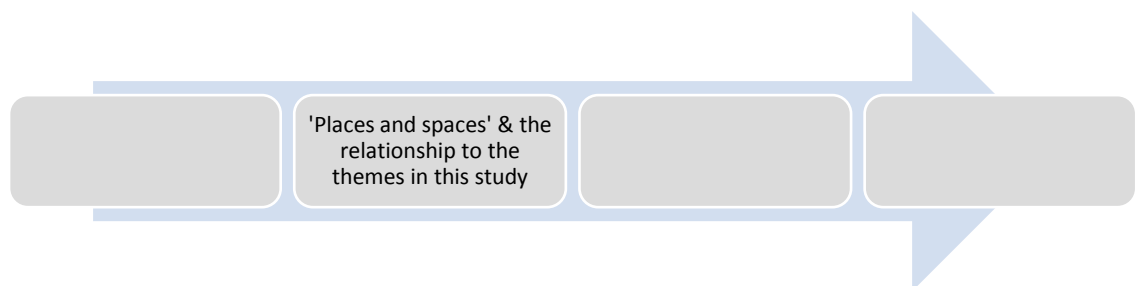
Figure 5.2: Places and spaces section in chapter framework

The relationship of 'places and spaces' to the themes

Pertinent to this analysis is the emergence of the concept of 'places and spaces'. This concept, which was detailed in Chapter 3, was developed from the cross-coding of the data described and derived from collapsing together the original themes 'the TAFE experience' and 'the university experience'. Essentially, 'places' represents the notion of geographical place, represented by the four TAFE campuses the participants graduated from and the MCU campus. 'Space' represents the intangible experiences of the participants in these places—that is, their perspectives, self-perception or identity and sense of belonging, as well as their aspirations. This analysis considers the kinds of learning spaces TAFE and university have provided for the participants. It evaluates the impact and influence these different spaces have had on the lived experiences of the participants. It should be noted that the experiences of the participants which are represented in the themes of the study cannot be conceived as discrete. Rather, in the different places and spaces of learning, the interconnectedness of the themes from the study was apparent in the ways they intersected and overlapped, constantly merged and transected in cyclical ways throughout the learning experiences of the participants.

The meaning perspectives that permeated the participants' experiences of the places and spaces of learning were challenged and changed in many ways as an outcome of learning. The concept of places and spaces refers to the centres of adult learning experienced by the participants in this study and the ways in which these places and spaces have impacted on the participants. This concept may be linked to the sociolinguistic, psychological and epistemic codes defined by Mezirow (2008) and incorporated into meaning perspectives. Mezirow refers to the need to assist learners in identifying those 'reified power relationships rooted in institutionalised ideologies which one has internalised in one's psychological history' (1981, p.18) and which, consequently, have become embedded in meaning perspectives. For example, the decision to return to learning as an adult was significant to all the participants, and it is perhaps particularly telling that they all chose to do this initially via a vocational course. Their stories have indicated that this first step was directly related to their beliefs about themselves as learners who did not consider themselves ready for university. However, as the data indicate, TAFE as a place of learning provided the

space for their learning aspirations to grow as a result of changes to their meaning perspectives about self. By enabling identification and recognition of the perspectives held by individuals, places and spaces of learning can assist learners to understand and critique their feelings and beliefs, which may then be transformed when access to new perspectives is provided. Such is the potential power and emancipatory influence of the places and spaces of adult learning on meaning perspectives and habits of mind.

Christie (2009, p.133) offers an interesting discussion of the ways in which university spaces can be viewed as 'spaces of difference' for some students, especially those who have yet to successfully adopt a student identity and who consequently may lack a sense of belonging to the space. This aspect was evident in the meaning perspectives of some of the participants especially in the early days of transition. Christie (2009, p.132) refers to the 'hidden injuries of class' to illustrate the shortcomings some non-traditional students may feel they have, when comparing themselves to other university students. Such feelings may be difficult to resolve until the student identity has been occupied through the confidence that can accompany academic success and growing familiarity with the university space. Mezirow (1996, p. 17) argues that 'ideal conditions' in adult education can result in optimal learning and include opportunities for, and the ability to be, critically reflective and participative. However, such conditions equally imply willing educators who are not driven or controlled by hegemonic ideologies themselves and who seek ways to create spaces which foster collaborative and integrative learning relationships. In his discussion of a critical theory of adult education Mezirow presents an interesting 'charter for andragogy' which outlines a series of processes adult educators could implement in order to assist learning (1981, pp.21-22). The charter includes helping learners to understand the assumptions and meaning perspectives they have internalised and which hold influence over their perceptions of need. Indeed, Mezirow (1981) contends that the purpose of adult learning is to facilitate ways for learners to consciously appraise and understand the meaning perspectives they hold and to do this through self-directed learning. He therefore urges the need for educators to incorporate social interaction and perspective transformation into adult learning praxis (1981, p. 18).

The following section analyses these findings in relation to research sub-questions 1 and 2.
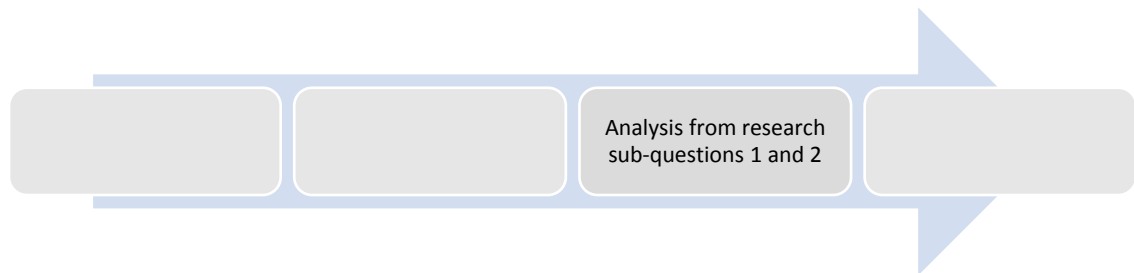
Figure 5.3: Analysis from research sub-questions 1 and 2 in chapter framework

Research sub-question 1

How do students articulate their reasons for attending TAFE prior to university?

It's one step closer to getting there. (Sophie, 29, Diploma)

Introduction

Research sub-question 1 was concerned with the ways in which students discussed their reasons for attending TAFE prior to university. As explored in the literature review in Chapter 2, there are many reasons students generally set out on this pathway, including a lack of confidence in their capability for university study (Abbott-Chapman, 2011) and the perception that TAFE offers a more guided and supportive method of learning (Savelsberg et al., 2017; Weadon & Baker, 2015). Colley, James, Diment and Tedder (2003, p. 478) describe VET as an arena where students may realise different 'becomings' as identity shifts occur throughout the learning process. However, as mentioned in Chapter 1 of this thesis, more prosaic reasons are also apparent, including the fact that TAFE can be a cost-saving step (Brown, 2017) and that the vocational focus of TAFE is a way to increase students' qualifications for the workplace (Burge, 2016; Griffin, 2017). Data gathered in the first set of interviews from the current study found that the participants viewed TAFE as a safe place in which they explored their potential for learning. It was also a place where they developed confidence in their student identity, and TAFE provided them with workplace skills and offered financial incentives to study. This chapter will outline the

data under three broad themes, which were derived from the data pertinent to the three research sub-questions. The foci will be examined under the three following headings:

- TAFE as a safe place
- Development of a confident student identity
- Building workplace qualifications and financial incentives.

TAFE as a safe place

When reflecting on why they had chosen TAFE before choosing to go to university, the narratives of the participants in this study indicate that TAFE was a comfortable learning option. Primarily, this was because there was the perception that it provided a safe environment where the participants could confidently assume a role as an adult student and develop the skills needed for future work or further study. Data from the study indicated that TAFE was generally a relaxed place for the participants in which they could develop friendships and gain both personal and academic support. For example, Briony expressed the view that TAFE enabled students to '*bond a little bit more*' and:

> *In the TAFE studying we're also more closer … so it makes me feel more comfortable to talk, less restrictions … if I don't understand something I'm more likely to ask … (Briony, 19, first interview).*

It was important to a number of the participants that TAFE was a place where students were encouraged to interact and join in discussion. All the participants had the opportunity to engage in group discussions and reflect on their beliefs and understandings. Briony, Connor and Tammy reflected on the development of understanding through group discussion:

> *… with TAFE, I've found this a lot different from school, we have more discussions and it kind of helps you understand it a bit more (Briony, 19, first interview).*

> *I found that sitting in a classroom … not everyone in the classroom thinks the same way, don't get me wrong, but there's always a handful of people you can have a discussion with … and they don't see it as intimidating, or they don't see it as you challenging them, they acknowledge it as simply having a discussion, and so I've found that is probably a part I enjoy about the*

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classroom ... and if you've got something to say ... if you've got the time, it's generally ... you can ask questions (Connor, 27, first interview).

I think when you go to TAFE, or when I did, like my class we were able to have more of a discussion with the teachers and sort of put our points across ... at TAFE you have a lot less work to do but more face-to-face time to learn more (Tammy,43, first interview).

Sophie expressed the view that TAFE was an '*intimate*' and supportive place in which to learn:

... everything is taught to you ... it's like at school, they stand in front of the classroom and they teach you, it's not like self-directed, you don't go home and learn stuff, you go home and do your assignments, but you're told everything you need to know (Sophie, 29, first interview).

Both Michelle and Alice were similarly reflective about the guidance and support they received at TAFE as well as the skills base developed:

TAFE was um ... sort of ... it was more face-to-face um ... and I quite enjoyed that, um ... I really enjoyed my tutes, yeah connected ... they weren't strict ... they sort of guide you (Michelle, 27, first interview).

Alice also reported that TAFE had provided a solid knowledge base that would serve her well in the choices she made about the future:

... at TAFE we sort of went through blocks and that was it, you sort of did one sort of thing at a time ... but definitely like skills and that the foundation from TAFE has been phenomenal ... yep, I feel like once you learn something you get excited , like, 'Oh I know this now, I know this, I can do it,' you understand (Alice, 27, first interview).

Both Aishia and Briony viewed TAFE as an entry pathway to higher education. They had enrolled in TAFE as a purposeful step towards gaining access to university via the TPC pathway, as neither had the qualifications necessary to go directly to university:

Um ... I don't have the qualification to get into uni at the moment ... I'm too dumb for medicine [laughs] (Aishia, 27, first interview).

> *... I've always wanted to go to university but because I couldn't get there I thought this would be the next best thing to do so it's one step closer to getting there (Briony, 19, first interview).*

Aishia had gained from the nurturing environment of TAFE, primarily established by the teachers and teaching approaches he encountered. At TAFE there was more of a '*one-to-one*' focus. However, while at TAFE, he had been subjected to some disparagement and discrimination from his fellow students and he had reported that some of these students had told him he should leave TAFE. It was not easy to escape this hostile treatment from other students. As he noted, in the smaller space of the TAFE campus there was little choice in who one could socialise with:

> *... so, we can't really like ... ignore people that you don't wanna talk to, you still have to talk to them ... (Aishia, 27, first interview).*

Despite this aspect of his TAFE experiences, it was evident that the TAFE teachers had built Aishia's confidence in his academic abilities and enabled him to cope in this learning environment. As he described them, the teachers at TAFE were '*friendly and approachable*' (Aishia, 27, first interview). But later, at MCU, on reflection Aishia criticised the TAFE teaching approach. As his story has revealed, he reported that the guidance and greater emphasis on supportive learning at TAFE had engendered a kind of dependency not suitable to the contrasting approach of independent learning expected at MCU. From his perspective, in some ways the TAFE approach had established false expectations of what university would be like. He noted that at university, students needed to '*do stuff on their own*', which proved to be challenging in the early days of transition. This outcome is mirrored by students transitioning from further education to higher education in a study by Christie et al. (2016), who note that the need to become an autonomous learner is much greater in higher education and therefore the necessity of developing strategies for autonomy is immediate when such students enter university.

Development of a confident student identity

A study by Fuller and MacFadyen (2012, pp. 6–7) examining why students choose to enrol in vocational education suggests that students have a 'personal educational

identity', a way of 'situating themselves educationally', which influences their decision. This suggests the acknowledgement of the power of a socio-culturally determined sense of self and career trajectory, or a lack of confidence in academic ability perhaps associated with this sense of self. However, when students do choose vocational courses it can have a significantly positive impact on their confidence and identity. For example, a significant outcome of their involvement in TAFE for the participants in the current study was the growth in confidence they all experienced. This helped to later establish a strong student identity most notably apparent in the changing learning aspirations of the participants, which included articulation to university.

This was a significant development for all seven participants, including the three first-in-family (FiF) students, Connor, Briony and Tammy. For example, Connor had originally attended TAFE as a preliminary step towards joining the NSW Police Force. But on reflection about his experiences at TAFE he reported that the confidence he had gained while there encouraged him to consider alternative career pathways. Although he did not have an ATAR, because he had dropped out of high school, Connor's successful completion of the TPC was to be the first step towards consolidating his goal of a professional career:

> *I didn't finish high school and I just thought this was the avenue, obviously, I just needed to get a mark, I couldn't just walk in, I didn't have a Certificate IV or anything like that, so I had no prior recognition … (Connor, 27, second interview).*

The development of his aspirations at this time was evident when he was considering his decision to apply for university entry and stated, '*I'm confident that I can do this.*'

Briony's story revealed that, despite her emotional vulnerabilities when she first started TAFE, she had attended TAFE specifically to qualify for university entry. Briony identified the need to re-build her self-confidence after a traumatic year; she viewed the smaller, more intimate environment of TAFE as the best place for her to do this. TAFE offered a space for her to gradually develop not just confidence but academic skills for university, at a pace that suited her needs at this time.

To achieve a successful outcome while at TAFE was also a significant marker for her of being the first member of her family to qualify for university:

> *... last year when I didn't get a good ATAR ... I applied for a lot of things at TAFE ... I just wanted to go and experience it ... because I'll be the first one in my family to go to university (Briony, 19, first interview).*

Tammy also reconsidered her future as a direct result of the confidence her successes at TAFE had engendered. Tammy's perception of herself as someone who had never achieved academically, because she had left secondary school without a qualification, was the main reason she chose to go to TAFE. TAFE was a means of gaining a workplace qualification she could be proud of. Prior to her enrolment at TAFE, Tammy had never considered the possibility of applying for university entry. The TAFE Diploma was initially her primary goal. At the time of making the choice to enrol in a TAFE course, she was at a crossroad in her life; TAFE seemed to be a step in the right direction, as she was interested in a career in nursing:

> *I never had a proper formal education. For me, I didn't finish my HSC so ... I had to do a Certificate III first to get to the level to be accepted to do the Diploma ... I guess I always wanted to be a nurse when I was younger ... (Tammy, 43, first interview).*

Tammy's story reveals how extraordinary it was that she would later re-evaluate her self-perception to encompass attainment of a university qualification.

It seems that, for all the participants, TAFE had laid important groundwork for adapting to the role of student. As Connor explained, from his perspective TAFE had provided the skills for university and the confidence to apply for enrolment in a degree:

> *I think that, hopefully, this course has given me those skills that are necessary to at least begin to deal with it ... my message to you is that it is doable, you find a way to manage your workload ... (Connor, 27, first interview).*

In her first interview Tammy noted the development of critical thinking and writing skills while at TAFE, which seemed to have added to her confident expectation that she could in fact succeed as a student:

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I had never written an assignment before, never referenced, so in that sense it was good for me to get nutted down with the sort of academic credentials, the academic side of things … (Tammy, 43, first interview).

Sophie described some of the specific IT skills that TAFE helped to build and that would help in the transition to university study:

… it showed us like they've got databases that are similar to the university databases … (Sophie, 29, first interview).

Building workplace qualifications and financial incentives

The Diploma participants stated that they had attended TAFE primarily to gain qualifications for the workplace. Specifically, TAFE was a means of achieving their Enrolled Nurse qualification. Tammy had left other work in order to complete the Enrolled Nurse Diploma, which was a means of building her workplace skills and qualifications. She stated:

I have to work to earn money, I need to do something, make money to be productive … I was in TAFE 'cos I just thought I was always, 'Ok I'll have a go at this one and just see…' (Tammy, 43, first interview).

Sophie and Michelle, while interested in attending university in the future, were not confident of their academic abilities prior to attending TAFE. Indeed, as their stories have shown, because of beliefs instilled in them as they were growing up, neither thought herself capable of significant academic achievement. This belief in an inability to be scholarly was deeply embedded in their perceptions of themselves. Therefore, TAFE represented a realistic aspiration for them at that stage in their lives. As with Alice, attending TAFE was the preferred learning option as it would provide a vocational qualification as well as taking them all a step closer to a university degree should they choose to follow that learning trajectory in the future. When all the Diploma students considered why they were not yet ready for university, their reasons included a lack of confidence in their academic abilities. Later, however, when they reflected on their TAFE experiences, it was clear that for all of them TAFE was a useful '*stepping stone*' (Michelle, 27, second interview) to other places.

Michelle reflected on her gains from TAFE and the development of understandings about herself and the work she was engaged in. As she noted, TAFE was crucial to the development of the practical skills and knowledge of nursing and to the ensuing professional confidence this brought:

> *… I don't think anything can be all good because otherwise you can't learn from it, but I think what I've got now has been you know good for me … it's made me wanna have that knowledge about my patients and you know just be better at what I do … (Michelle, 27, first interview).*

The Diploma students also had a financial incentive to attend TAFE through a government scholarship which provided exemption from TAFE fees. These scholarships are offered in partnership with TAFE through NSW Health (NSW Government, 2018). The scholarships include a place in the Diploma of Nursing course; on completion of the Diploma course, students can be employed as an Enrolled Nurse in NSW (NSW Government, 2018).

Significantly, on completion of the Enrolled Nurse Diploma, the Diploma students would also be eligible to articulate directly to the second year of a university degree (the Bachelor of Registered Nursing). Thus, the scholarship reduced the total fees payable for a university course if they decided to follow that path. Sophie described it this way:

> *… we all got a scholarship for $15,000 to do your Enrolled Nurses so that takes up a whole year at uni so … not only do you not have to pay for first year at university, you get so much more experience and job opportunities that it's, you know, crazy not to do it (Sophie, 29, first interview).*

This incentive can be a significant driver in the decision to enrol in higher education. However, as research suggests (Jackson et al., 2010; Brown, 2017), it is not always an incentive that works in the best interests of articulating pathways students. This can be particularly apparent when direct entry is underpinned by a lack of academic literacies expected at university. Certainly, results from the current study point to the inadequacies in conceptual understandings experienced by the Diploma students on

first encountering the second-year academic literacies they were expected to have as direct entry students. This point is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

Section summary

The first research sub-question considered the reasons for attending TAFE prior to university. It was apparent that to varying degrees TAFE had provided a space that either added to learners' self-confidence or consolidated existing levels of confidence. It is interesting to note that all the participants viewed TAFE as a starting point or a kind of 'taster' of the learning process as adults. It seems evident from their stories that TAFE was, generally, a good place to develop an academic frame of mind and to build a confident student profile. TAFE, with its vocational focus, was further perceived as a place where they could develop the skills required for their workplace destinations, and it offered financial incentives for further study should they decide to continue to university.

It was further apparent from the participants' stories that TAFE had provided an environment in which they could re-familiarise themselves with the learning process as adults. TAFE was viewed as a means to an end and was a way to fulfil the participants' personal objectives at that stage in their lives. TAFE ultimately provided the space for the participants to test themselves as students and question the future, including whether they would be likely to succeed at university. For some, confirmation of their abilities at TAFE opened the door to the possibility of a different future to the imagined one they had held when they began their TAFE studies. It seems likely that personal growth, particularly in the realm of academic abilities, played a significant role in the decision by all the participants to later attend university.

Overall, for the participants in this study, TAFE provided a relatively comfortable space in which to re-engage with learning. It was a means of embarking on a new learning journey as adults. TAFE was perceived as a stepping stone to the future, whether academic or vocational. However, the relative smallness of the TAFE campus did not always work to the students' advantage. As Aishia's story has shown, his experiences while at TAFE were to a large extent the exception to the overall positive evaluation by the other participants in this study, who had reflected on the nurturing

and guiding nature of TAFE. Generally, the participants had mostly positive reflections about TAFE. Importantly, this included a belief that by attending TAFE they had built on their academic and workplace skills. Even Aishia reported that overall it had been a good precursory academic experience for university:

> *... TAFE prepares you ... doing all this work and stuff I feel like I'm prepared ... (Aishia, 27, first interview).*

Research sub-question 2

> *What influences the decision of TAFE students to articulate to higher education?*

> *I feel like I'm sort of ready to take the next step (Aishia, 27, TPC).*

Introduction

The question of what influences the decision to articulate to higher education was important to reflect upon why, on completion of their TAFE qualification, the participants in this study chose to continue their studies at university. It was important to understand the possible influences that led to the decision to embark on a commitment to a new path of learning that would involve a considerable amount of time and money. Primarily, the influences on the decision to attend MCU involved growth in confidence about academic abilities and a desire to build career options through the opportunity to travel along dedicated transition pathways to university.

The confidence gained at TAFE by the participants in the study, and the positive aspects of their burgeoning identity as students during their time at TAFE, furnished all of them with a belief in their ability to achieve a university degree. This outcome, based largely on the result of participation at TAFE, is important as it helps to add to understandings raised by Wheelahan (2013, p. 3) about the potential influence of VET on the students' 'cooled or heated' aspirations for higher education. In the current study, TAFE had paved the way in preparing the participants for the next step in their academic careers. It may be said that, alongside the development of self-confidence experienced by the participants, the ways in which they now began to perceive themselves in terms of their abilities and their futures also began to transform.

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Subsequently, they felt ready to move forward and to take the next step on the learning journey.

When considering the initial self-concepts of the participants and their belief that TAFE was the best way for them to resume their education as adults, it seems extraordinary that, without exception, they all made the decision to articulate to university at the end of their respective TAFE courses. This decision is especially significant given that only Aishia and Briony had initially stated their intention to apply for university on completion of their TAFE course.

The academic skills they developed at TAFE helped to build the participants' perception that they were ready for university. For example, Briony, Connor, Sophie and Michelle all reflected on their academic improvements. This included developments in '*research*' (Briony, 19, first interview; Connor, 27, first interview) and in '*thinking*' skills (Sophie, 29, first interview; Michelle, 27, first interview). Tammy reflected that what she had learnt about '*referencing and citing and analysing articles*' provided her with a more academic way to present what she had learnt (Tammy, 43, first interview). Alice, when reflecting on the overall experience of TAFE, summed it up this way:

> *I sort of know what the teachers are talking about, it's like building upon a good foundation of knowledge … (Alice, 27, first interview).*

The focus of this section is examined in the next section, Building career aspirations.

Building career aspirations

In the process of building their academic skills and knowledge, TAFE provided opportunities to reimagine futures. For example, Connor had changed learning and career directions because of his TAFE experiences, and for the first time he was thinking about applying for university:

> *… since I've done the TPC and been in contact with the teachers … um … I've noticed that personally the way I think about things and the way I access and analyse information has led to me to sort of think that perhaps university is the best choice for me (Connor, 27, first interview).*

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Influential to this decision was the confidence he had developed while at TAFE and the encouragement of some of his TAFE teachers to build on his achievements at TAFE:

> *... it's definitely developed to a point where I feel extremely confident now ... it wasn't till meeting and talking to the teachers and um ... learning about new things that you think it was possible ... (Connor, 27, first interview)*

TAFE enabled Connor to rethink his earlier career ambitions and turn his attention to the possibility of undertaking a science degree at university. This was a significant turning point in his life and his self-perception. As was evident from his story presented in Chapter 4, Connor held the perspective that as a working-class man his principal role was to earn a wage. Therefore, the decision to enrol in a science degree was not one which sat lightly; perhaps, therefore, in some ways, his description of his aspiration to gain a science degree was couched in the utilitarian language of a means of gaining employment:

> *I chose science mainly 'cos of the job prospects ... I think a science degree within that sort of field in terms of establishing a career rather than just general duties would be handy ... (Connor, 27, first interview).*

By enrolling in a tertiary preparation course at TAFE rather than in a trades course, Connor was possibly already testing the boundaries of his assumed role and identity as a blue-collar worker. Now he was testing this identity even further by going to university; a step nobody else from his family or friendship group had ever contemplated. The efficacy of the decision to articulate to MCU was one which Connor would later come to question. He constantly struggled to maintain a balance between, on the one hand, his perceived identity and responsibilities as a wage earner and working man and, on the other hand, his interest in intellectual pursuits.

The Diploma students, who would articulate directly to the second year of their degree, were all influenced in their decision to go to university by several factors. Primarily, they cited the desire to build on the Enrolled Nurse qualification they all now held and to expand their career options by continuing to the Registered Nurse degree. They all expressed the view that continuing on to university was a logical step in career enhancement, though they were motivated in this step for different reasons. For

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example, Tammy explained that she would be discontented if she remained an Enrolled Nurse rather than continuing study to become a Registered Nurse. Although she came from a background where university was never discussed, one of the reasons she was persuaded to articulate to university was the high grades she achieved at TAFE, an indication of her academic capabilities. TAFE also added to her awareness of the many career opportunities available should she gain a university degree. When explaining why she made the decision to go to university, Tammy described her need to have a meaningful life doing something she enjoyed. For her, becoming a Registered Nurse was the answer:

> *… it's a realisation that I didn't want to do something that didn't mean a great deal for the rest of my life … and so I thought well I'll take the opportunity while I can (Tammy, 43, first interview).*

Also important to Tammy was the need to maintain the momentum of study she had gained while at TAFE, a drive that might be lost if her study was interrupted or postponed:

> *… to get back into that study mode five years in the future would be much harder than just following it up now … I've been in the zone of studying and been a bit prepared thanks to other skills that I've gained … (Tammy, 43, first interview).*

Alice stated that the Registered Nurse degree was a way to '*better*' herself, as she did not want to '*just*' be an Enrolled Nurse. She seemed to be expressing the view that the merits of being an Enrolled Nurse were potentially outweighed by the limitations such a qualification contains. However, these perceived limitations also acted as a significant catalyst for articulation to higher education.

At the completion of her TAFE course Sophie had no doubts about the next step. She was ready to go to university. As she noted:

> *When I left school there's no way I would ever have thought I'd be able to get a degree … I finished my course in August last year and I knew straightaway that I wanted to do uni (Sophie, 29, first interview).*

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Similarly, Michelle expressed the view that by the end of the TAFE Diploma she '*felt ready*'. For her, university was a means of opening career doors and realising her long-term goals. It seemed evident that attending TAFE had provided the impetus to continue her learning experiences:

> *... I think I always wanted to progress to uni ... I think you just get qualified more ... it's more recognised, isn't it? So, I think it opens more doors for you as well (Michelle, 27, first interview).*

Therefore, while the motivations to attend MCU contained some differences, ultimately the focus on increasing their career opportunities was the same, best described by Sophie:

> *Expanding your opportunities ... in your career path, as an Enrolled Nurse there's not really anywhere else to go whereas as an RN [Registered Nurse] when you've got that degree, the amount of doors that open and the opportunities you know, available to you is completely different (Sophie, 29, first interview).*

As the participants have stated in their own words, TAFE was a means to an end, either as a direct conduit to higher education via dedicated transition pathways or as a motivator for articulation. The experience of TAFE allowed them, to varying degrees, to position themselves within a framework of greater aspirations and to open the door to new discourses of success. While at TAFE, the participants had assumed the role of adult learner in an environment which no doubt eased them into their role as a student. At the same time, the confidence gained enabled them to articulate to higher education and this new aspiration was realised on gaining acceptance to MCU. When contemplating the next step, Briony encapsulated the reservations and excitement of all the participants who took the opportunity offered to them to enrol at MCU:

> *I think it's gonna be a bit difficult, but I think it's a welcome challenge ... (Briony, 19, first interview).*

Section summary

Analysis of research sub-question 2 has identified different motivations for the decision to articulate to university. For the adult learners in this study, the process of articulating

to higher education involved the need to make a conscious choice to take this step. Elliott (2005, p. 153) describes the notion of 'reflexive modernisation thesis', which contends that individuals make decisions and take actions that add shape to their lives in ways that they choose. Elliot's (2005) view is reflected in the decision made by each of the participants in this study to continue their learning journeys as adults. It is Mezirow's (1990) contention that conscious choices, such as these potentially life-changing ones, are premised on the transformations that have taken place to an individual's habits of mind and frames of reference. This is an important consideration, as the decision to attend MCU may be viewed as a significant marker of the transformations that were beginning to emerge in the participants' perspectives, identity and aspirations.

The stories of the participants further indicate that learning at TAFE was, for most, a rewarding and confidence-building experience. Their reflections on the TAFE experience suggest that the benefits from their participation at TAFE were more complex than merely gaining a qualification. Their experience had also engendered changes in their perspectives, identity and aspirations. As Alice described it, TAFE provided a '*kickstart*' for the participants towards their career and educational aspirations. These reasons contributed eventually to the decision by all the participants to continue to university on completion of their TAFE qualification. As their stories have indicated, this decision was taken despite the expressed anxieties and doubts they each held about what the higher education experience would entail, and about their ability to be successful in what they expected to be a more demanding learning environment. The participants' lived experiences of the transition from the VET sector to higher education were both positive and challenging. This dichotomy is explored in the following section, which analyses results in relation to research sub-question 3.

Analysis from research
sub-question 3

Figure 5.4: Analysis from sub-question 3 in the chapter framework

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Research sub-question 3

> *What do students experience in the transition from one sector to another?*

> *I've achieved everything that I've done even with a lot of obstacles in the way (Tammy, 43, Diploma).*

Introduction

The question of what students experience during transition was particularly relevant, as a key focus of the study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of transition from TAFE to university. Identifying these experiences could provide important understandings for stakeholders, including students and educators across both the VET and higher education sectors, about the kinds of experiences common to transitioning cohorts. Such information may be valuable in determining future practices within the sectors in relation to supporting the needs of students in transition and in identifying the strengths students bring to the transition experience.

In answering research sub-question 3, it is noteworthy that there were both beneficial and challenging transition experiences reported by the participants in this study. As has been noted, an important outcome of TAFE was the increased confidence the participants had experienced, which was an asset for them once at MCU. Their gains in confidence reflected learning competencies and laid the foundations of the participants' perspectives as successful adult learners consolidating their beliefs in their academic abilities. As noted in the outcomes from research sub-question 2, the participants also reported feeling ready for university because of their time at TAFE, while simultaneously expressing apprehension about what a university degree may entail. Despite their increased sense of readiness for university, for some of the participants the decision to articulate to higher education was a brave choice and one which, in the early days of transition, caused them to question their identity as a university student.

There were two significant challenges for the participants in the transition process. First, they had to cope with the unexpected educational differences between the VET and higher education sectors. These differences were complex and included the lack of individual attention, the need to be more self-directed and independent learners, and a greater emphasis on online learning at university. Second, they needed to find ways to

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manage a study/work/life balance that would allow for flexibility to cope with the competing demands of their different life roles. However, two important positive outcomes were also noted: first, the significant role that support played in the experiences of most of the participants while they grappled with the new university environment; and, second, the influence that attributes of adaptability and resilience had on all the participants' transition and learning experiences.

These foci will be examined under the following headings:

- Educational differences
- Study/work/life balance
- Support networks
- Adaptability and resilience.

Educational differences

From the participants' comments about their anxieties about university and their observations about how prepared they felt they were because of their TAFE experiences, we can see that the participants felt that, although essentially TAFE and university would be similar, university could be more demanding. However, when faced with the new environment of university and new ways of being a student, the participants found the educational differences between the VET and higher education sectors to be particularly challenging, on a number of levels. Wheelahan (2010) argues strongly for the need for VET providers to review curricula which heavily emphasise workplace progression but do not place the same weight on knowledge and skills in preparation for higher education. This need was indicated in the current study by the fact that, despite the participants' confident expectations that they could be successful in the more demanding higher education environment, initially they needed to make some significant adjustments. Primarily, this involved accepting the realisation that, while TAFE had provided important academic skills, there was clearly a significant divide between the two sectors in many ways. As Sophie had described it, '*the gap'* in academic literacies was much '*bigger'* than anyone realised. This gap was manifested in different ways. For the Diploma students, the gap was evidenced, and was therefore more challenging, by their lack of theoretical grounding when entering the second year

of their studies. This was a challenging gap. Similarly, the gap in educational differences experienced by all the participants was described as having to adjust to less '*one-to-one*' attention (Aishia, 27, TPC), lack of '*teaching*' (Tammy, 43, Diploma), greater emphasis on independent learning (Sophie, 29, Diploma) and greater reliance on technology (Michelle, 27, Diploma).

For example, it was Aishia's belief that the one-to-one attention experienced and enjoyed at TAFE was ultimately disadvantageous as it created a sense of dependency. He struggled without the same approach at MCU. He expressed his frustration:

> *… they should have given us less one-on-one time to kind of like prepare us 'cos now that I'm here and I'm not getting that … (Aishia, 27, second interview).*

This was a theme similarly visited by Sophie:

> *TAFE is exactly like school, the teacher comes in and you're in the same classroom all day and they put everything up on a slide show and you write down … fill in the blanks, whereas here … you're starting and everything's new and you're trying to work out how to do essays, how to do this and you've still gotta work out how to go home and sit down and spend that time … dedicate that time to doing that … educate yourself, it's not like you can just listen to a lecture without actually taking it in cos you're gonna get tested on it, you've gotta know …(Sophie, 29, second interview).*

In the participants' experiences at TAFE, the teachers were more available for one-to-one tutoring, '*we used to get a tutorial at TAFE and we'd be asking questions*' (Tammy, 43, second interview). Unfortunately, this same availability was not apparent at university, with the larger student numbers and different pedagogical approaches. This is a finding supported by results from Christie et al. (2013), who noted in their study of students who were transitioning from college to higher education that not only were university lecturers less available and able to offer limited support but the level of independent work required of learners was vastly different to that of college expectations. As Sophie explained, the experience of university in the early stages of transition was daunting as students were expected to work independently:

... we're expected to get around the high distinction mark and anything less is like unacceptable sort of thing, but they're not willing to help us get there (Sophie, 29, second interview).

The differences in approaches to teaching added to later frustrations for both Tammy and Sophie, whose perceptions of their early university experiences included the belief that their lecturers were not '*teaching*' them in the way they had been accustomed to at TAFE. They were both very frustrated by this approach. Tammy responded:

I want you to teach me, I feel that I'm coming to an institution to be taught ... I'm coming here to be taught and I feel that you need to teach me ... I just felt that's not the way to teach someone ... and sort of like ... they actually need to teach us something you know (Tammy, 43, second interview).

Associated with this difference in teaching approach was the significant challenge of the greater need to take responsibility for becoming a self-directed learner. This challenge was particularly significant for the direct entry Diploma students, who expressed their anxieties:

... I'm quite surprised by how much self-directed learning there is ... (Tammy, 43, second interview).

... at TAFE they teach you every function of the body, like once you leave there your brain switches off, you do your assignments, but at university you're just given you know the structure and then it's up to you to go home and figure out what goes where and how to do it (Sophie, 29, second interview).

Sophie was particularly critical of the TAFE approach, which she felt had disadvantaged students intending to articulate to university:

... like TAFE say that there is a standard and they try to adhere to the standard of university ... but you know we learn ten different ways to reference and we used ten different ways of referencing and we all got marked correct ... they should really educate us and teach us the correct way ...university's not like this, it's not a classroom where we stand up and teach you ... it's not like that at all, like it's self-discipline, self-directed learning that you have to teach yourselves ... (Sophie, 29, second interview).

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The cross-sectoral differences were problematic in other ways; arguably, greater inter-sectoral communications may offset some of these differences. One of the key differences, noted by Michelle and subsequently a challenge for the other participants, was that, while TAFE had a '*face-to-face*' teaching approach, university lectures and other teaching and learning resources were often online. It was difficult for Michelle to find the motivation to listen to these online lectures. For example, when talking about her own experiences of adjusting to the differences in pedagogies between TAFE and university, she remarked:

> *It's very different to TAFE where it's all face to face ... I'm struggling to prioritise the lectures when there's no person ... listening to them was very hard without a face to put to it ... (Michelle, 27, second interview)*

Alice was also unimpressed with the need to motivate herself to work independently via online lectures:

> *I think it's the motivation to sit there for the full hour or two or however long it is and sit there and have to listen, I think that's just ... yeah I don't really know ... it's boring! (Alice, 27, second interview).*

Furthermore, students were expected to be able to navigate online platforms such as Moodle with little or no training. This navigational capacity was an essential skill as Moodle sites contain lecture materials, study resources, discussion forums and other crucial components of course work. However, for the students in this study, the need to develop e-learning expertise was an ongoing challenge, and one which was not addressed systemically. As Michelle noted:

> *... and you've gotta go through this Moodle and that Moodle to get to this Moodle ... to get to ... it's all quite intricate (Michelle, 27, second interview).*

Some of the participants incurred serious disadvantages stemming from their initial lack of expertise in this field, including lack of access to important pre-test information. However, eventually, Moodle proved to be less onerous over time as all the participants adapted to the requirements of e-learning. As Connor (27, second interview) stated, '*I've got used to Moodle,*' which summed up the collective experience of the participants by the end of their first semester.

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Study/work/life balance

While the students adjusted to the different pedagogies and accelerated demands of higher education study, they also tried to maintain a flexible study/work/life balance. The difficulty of trying to balance the competing demands of study, work commitments and life outside university primarily required managing their study workload. The increased workload at university was often experienced as extra pressure by the participants and highlighted once again the differences between TAFE and university. As Alice noted:

> *The challenge has been the assignments, the really big, big essays and just trying to get them all done … the workload is a lot bigger than at TAFE … (Alice, 27, second interview)*

While the workload was challenging, it was, however, a situation that Briony expected to improve over time, primarily due to her own determination to implement strategies to enable success:

> *I've got all my assignments in time, I'm doing it all, but I feel like I'm constantly at it, I feel like I'm in the transition stage, I'm getting used to things… (Briony, 19, second interview)*

Implementing management strategies proved to be important to all the participants in settling into the early transition phase of the first semester at MCU. These strategies assumed by the participants involved taking responsibility for meeting assignment deadlines while simultaneously 'finding their feet' at university.

Tammy's story demonstrates some personal tensions that existed as a consequence of her decision to enrol in a university course. Primarily, these tensions arose in trying to establish a comfortable complementarity between her roles as wife and mother and her new-found interest in study at MCU. Tammy was the only participant who was married with children. She was working on ways to alleviate the tension through a time management approach:

> *I've just really tried to allocate my time and look at it as a job … in trying to find a balance … the workload, the work/life/home balance thing … like I*

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> *won't study at all on a Sunday … I just have to have one weekend day off for myself and my family (Tammy, 43, second interview).*

Tammy always prioritised finding a balance among these competing demands of her time and energy:

> *I have to delegate chores … to enjoy the sunshine and life … and so I just really have to time plan it, you have to have some time off, you can't just study seven days a week, you've gotta have some fun too and just really manage that … I think it really comes down to that micro-managing of your time … and lists and that sort of thing, do you know what I mean? (Tammy, 43, second interview).*

For six of the seven participants (with the exception of Aishia), it was necessary to continue working while engaged in full-time study. This presented another challenge as they attempted to juggle the varied demands on their time. Managing this challenge successfully included a willingness to instigate the necessary steps to cope. For example, all the Diploma students had taken the rather drastic step of reducing their paid working hours by refusing shifts at work. Sophie best identified the situation:

> *… I have to keep working … I've cut back my work hours … I know I've gotta cut back on work so that I do have time to focus on it … I've just gotta get it done; put my head down and do it … I have to focus and dedicate the time at home … (Sophie, 29, second interview)*

Tammy similarly had to resort to reducing her paid work demands:

> *… like I had to knock back a whole heap of shifts this week because I just couldn't do it, like … there was just no time and like I said I still don't feel like I'm studying enough … (Tammy, 43, second interview)*

To manage her time effectively, Briony, who had more than one part-time job, had made the decision to resign from one of those jobs:

> *Yeah, I've gotten my stuff together, like … 'cos I was doing two jobs and I quit one … I'm so much calmer now that I only have one job, so I can focus better … (Briony, 19, second interview).*

Connor could not reduce his paid workload and was consequently working long hours—'*20/22 hr a week*'; he was '*tired … worn out*' (Connor, 27, second interview).

Despite the exhaustion, he continued to try to balance the competing demands of work and study. Primarily, his main dilemma appeared to be the ongoing stress of the dichotomy between his perspectives of the responsibilities of his role as a breadwinner and his motivation to continue studying in the science degree. He constantly struggled with the belief that he should be in full-time employment rather than being a full-time student:

> *Every now and then I get a bit of pressure about working full-time … I'm 27 and I should be working full-time … I'm just thinking to myself you know, what's going on? I'll be 30 … 31 … really the pressure … it's about earning money … (Connor, 27, second interview).*

Support networks

An important aspect of the participants' learning journeys was the influence of the support networks of those with whom they had personal relationships, including peers, family and friends. Peer support was particularly important to the Diploma students entering the second year of their degree. Sophie and Alice spoke about the sometimes dialectic nature of the support they received from other students:

> *Most of us group together so we can all debrief together, we always talk about things, we do have that same support for each other … but like … at the same time sometimes that's our downfall because we have no-one else really to say, 'Well, what was it like previously?' or, 'How was this? What did you do?', so it's like … good for support but then bad because we have no-one to really interact with … we're still together … we all have the same issues, the same concerns, the same worries … like we do bounce off each other … (Sophie, 29, second interview).*

> *So, you've got all of them people and you've got you know, maybe not all your whole lot of peer group but you've got that small 20 group … that you can really fall back on and get help from and that's brilliant yeah … sometimes I look at it and think, 'I have no idea what this question means', then I will go and get that peer support and it's been great, the whole of our group's really been quite good (Alice, 27, second interview).*

Michelle was also happy with the peer support she had access to and the practical help her fellow students offered:

Yeah, I have a couple of people that I work with ... and um, they're really supportive as well which is good, like ... um ... I think a lot of the other students, they may not have known each other well but they knew each other a little bit ... they're like, 'Oh yeah, I had that assignment,' or 'I had this study,' or, 'This is where I got this from,' you know, 'This textbook isn't the only one, I got this one and it was amazing' ... (Michelle, 27, second interview).

Six of the participants reported that their respective family members were very proud of their achievements, and this was a significant factor in their learning successes. Tammy encapsulated her family's responses to her university enrolment:

My family's really proud of me, my kids are proud of me, my husband's proud of me ... my dad, my sister ... (Tammy, 43, second interview)

However, the support the participants needed from family and friends was not always forthcoming. Connor had no close family members living nearby and was experiencing significant pressure in his personal relationship to work rather than pursue his academic aspirations. He reported feeling increasingly distant from his friends, who he stated had '*an attitude*' towards him because he was at university. Connor's main social group consisted of friends he had known since childhood and with whom he had gone to school. However, as he stated, the '*gap*' between them had been growing since his decision to enrol at TAFE, and the gap continued to widen while he was at university. His friends did not seem to understand why he was at university and were at times hostile towards him because of his decision to persist with his studies. This hostility was an ongoing source of tension:

... why do people have a go at you just because you're trying to get ahead? (Connor, 27, second interview).

Certainly, Connor was breaking all the rules and projected norms of his social group by attending university. This very likely added to the tensions he increasingly felt while in his first semester at MCU.

Tammy, who was spending more time on study and less time socialising, also felt the strain on relationships that Connor had noted. As a result, some of her friendships had

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dissolved. This loss of some friendships was something she expressed regret about but which she chose not to let interfere with the attainment of her goals:

> *Yeah, some of my friendships have definitely suffered and some of my friends don't understand ... um ... I don't see my friends as much ... but I'm doing something for myself ... (Tammy, 43, second interview)*

Unlike his experience of lack of support by his peers while at TAFE, Aishia's family was very supportive of his decision to articulate to MCU. This was especially the case with his mother, who had encouraged him to pursue his nursing goals. While he was at MCU, Aishia's mother was also studying there, as he explained:

> *... my mother is here ... she's happy for me and tries her best to ... help (Aishia, 27, second interview).*

Support networks as a theme in this study is important as it represents a significant aspect of the learning experiences of the participants. Mezirow (1990) emphasises that, for new meaning perspectives to be maintained, especially when new habits of mind challenge preconceived notions of self, the support of family is particularly important. It is this support that can help to consolidate new notions of self as a university student; in other words, 'identity is formed in webs of affiliation within a shared life world' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 27). Most of the participants had encountered positive responses from important people in their lives, and this had created a supportive foundation for them. However, for some, the reactions of others were negative. Nevertheless, these negative responses did not detract from the focus of achieving their aims. This may be attributed to the fact that, when encountering difficulties in the transition process, all the participants were resourceful in finding ways to counteract the challenges. They did this by using adaptive measures and adopting attitudes of resilience and determination to succeed.

Adaptability and resilience

A significant finding from this study is that, by drawing upon inner reserves of adaptability and resilience, it is likely that the participants optimised their chances of academic success. Mezirow (2000) states that the conative dimension of transformative learning lies in our willingness to act in ways which reflect new intentions and beliefs,

that is, changed meaning perspectives. For example, when examining the role of adaptability in the outcomes of the study, this concept is an aspect of the conative dimension through the use of conscious volition by the participants to manage changed circumstances. As noted previously in this thesis, the ability to be adaptable was a significant factor in the promotion of the on-going academic successes of the participants while at university. Implementing adaptable measures involved the participants drawing upon meaning perspectives which endorsed the need for agency and supported the behaviours necessary for adaptability to continue. Resilience also resides within the conative dimension. Mezirow notes that even when a new meaning perspective is adopted the 'will or determination to persevere' must be present (1978, p. 105).This was evidenced in the ways in which the participants not only rose to the challenges they faced but also in their acceptance of the need to take control, to be organized and to persevere. When meaning perspectives are critically scrutinised a number of sequential steps may take place. Reflecting on these meaning perspectives according to Mezirow (1981, p. 20) can help the development of a 'crucial sense of agency over ourselves and our lives'.

The differences between TAFE and university, while challenging in the early stages at MCU, highlighted the degree to which the participants could adapt to these differences. For example, the view stated by Sophie that, '*at TAFE you're spoonfed*' was an indelible part of the collective narrative of the participants and points to the need for pedagogic change at some level. However, despite the experience of dependence this 'spoonfeeding' approach may have produced at TAFE, once participants were at MCU, where it did not exist, they all demonstrated a high degree of determination and flexibility in their attitudes towards succeeding at university. In the process, they employed adaptive measures they felt were warranted to be academically successful. Michelle encapsulated what appeared to represent the beliefs and resolve of all the participants—that is, to succeed at university the onus of responsibility was on them and it was up to them to find ways to step up to the challenge. As she emphasised:

> *… I need to be a more organised and prioritised person, I need to set myself*
> *tasks and lists and due dates … so that I can set things out properly … there's*

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a lot of self-learning and you have to be self-motivated … (Michelle, 27, second interview).

The ongoing emphasis on taking an independent approach to their studies was exemplified by Tammy, who summed up the adaptive attitude of the participants:

I'm pretty dedicated … you have to take the onus on yourself, be self-disciplined … I need to set aside time, it's full-time learning and I need to put in some really serious hours … for those benefits to come back (Tammy, 43, second interview).

Adapting to the new situation took time. Without exception, they were strongly motivated to be successful and prepared to put into place strategies that would help them achieve their goals. They were all aware of the necessity of adjusting to the new regime of study. They did this by engaging in more self-directed learning and the consequent need to factor new approaches and perspectives into their everyday lives and responsibilities to maximise their learning experiences. A willingness to take the initiative for this to happen is summarised by Sophie:

… it's adult learning, it's up to you to go home … and figure out how to do it, you've gotta … educate yourself … be prepared to put the work in … to sacrifice a few things, put the time and effort in … just keep adjusting … (Sophie, 29, second interview).

Most of the participants in this study, on reflection, viewed the nurturing and pastoral environment of TAFE as having created an unrealistic picture of adult education. Consequently, while they had the expectation that university would be challenging, they felt they were ready for the challenges. This misperception was later regarded by them as having added to the difficulties of adapting to the demands and differences of university study, but it was a challenge that also motivated them and for which they developed individual coping mechanisms. These mechanisms involved being more organised and proactive in taking responsibility for their learning outcomes.

The ability to find ways to manage the challenges faced during the transition phase can be identified in the resilient attitude that the participants displayed in the face of these challenges. The reward for the resilience and determination demonstrated by the

participants was a greater sense of having the ability to embrace the higher education experience. This was a key feature for them all, best captured by Aishia's approach:

> *I'm still here; I'm not going to let anyone discourage me … I'm going to keep going and keep pushing and keep fighting until I get where I want to be. I just wanna keep going and keep going, it's gonna be hard but I'm up for a challenge (Aishia, 27, second interview).*

Section summary

Despite the challenges experienced in transition, the need to quickly adapt to the different teaching and learning environment of university and to balance all their commitments was a skill the participants managed to incorporate into their individual experiences of university. As Christie et al. (2013) note, the ability to manage time effectively and to find strategies to balance numerous commitments is often a key indicator of student success in higher education. However, time management as a concept and practice is, according to Bennett and Burke (2017, p. 5), oversimplified when historical disadvantage and inequality is ignored. They present a compelling argument that merely explaining the value of time management to students is to dismiss the power and capital that resides outside the 'meritocratic' understandings of time (Bennett & Burke, 2017, p. 5).There is merit in an argument that calls for a restructuring of homogenised understandings of time, student access to it and the simplistic notion that all students have equal access to time management as determined by the amount of responsibility they take to organise their time appropriately.

It is important to note that balancing commitments was a process that also relied on the support and encouragement of significant other people in the lives of the participants. Their support networks helped them to stay on track. The exception to this was Connor, who seemed to face more antagonism and conflict rather than support from significant others in his life. The study also highlights that participants' ability to adapt to competing demands in ways that demonstrated resilience was an essential feature of their learning success.

There is no doubt that the support of others was also an important factor in the transition experience of the participants in this study. Support of family, friends and

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peers helped with the ongoing commitment to new study aspirations and aided the lifestyle adjustments apparent in the stories of the participants. However, lack of support, as also noted, was at times a source of tension for some. Despite this, all the participants demonstrated some common qualities that enabled them to focus on the reasons they were at university. These qualities included greater degrees of self-confidence, adaptability and resilience in the face of challenges and high degrees of personal motivation to do well and to persevere despite the challenges. The learning journey of the participants has been complex and has included challenges that have required them to be self-directed and adaptable. However, the need to draw often upon inner resources to maintain their study commitments also points to the need for educational institutes to find ways to proactively minimise the stresses and tensions that are often experienced by students in the early stages of transition.

Conclusion

This chapter has primarily explored the results of the three research sub-questions in preparation for a discussion of the overarching research question governing this study. The analysis has identified the common themes underpinning the experiences of the participants who took the initiative to continue to higher education on completion of their TAFE course. The chapter has analysed the reasons why these participants chose TAFE as their initial step in adult learning and later made the decision to articulate to university. The analysis has further exposed some of the apparent complexities of the transition experience. Through an examination of the lived experiences of transition, the duality of the highs and lows characteristic of that experience has been highlighted.

The seven themes which emerged from the data and the connecting conceptual feature of places and spaces reflect the unique qualities of the different places and spaces of TAFE and university as well as the different ways in which these sites of learning impacted on the student experience. As a starting point on their adult learning journey, for six of the seven participants, TAFE was overwhelmingly a positive experience and an invaluable personal and academic experience. To some extent, TAFE had laid the foundations for the academic skills needed in higher education and had provided all seven participants with the confidence to explore other options on completion of their

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respective TAFE courses. However, as their stories have revealed, following their successes at TAFE the participants experienced an initial dip in confidence on first encountering the inherent educational differences and expectations of university.

It is perhaps understandable that the participants to varying degrees experienced some tensions during the transition period to university. They had left the smaller, more intimate space of a TAFE college to venture into the larger and more impersonal space of a university environment with which they were all unfamiliar. At TAFE they had experienced a high degree of guided support in their academic development, and the academic expectations were, on reflection, not as demanding as those of university. This was especially the case when confronted by the academic demands of university study with its greater emphasis on independent learning and technological skills. At MCU, they were faced with accelerated demands, not just academically but also in the need to adjust many facets of their lives, including their working lives. Once the difficulties they encountered had been faced, however, and measures put into place to counter them, the participants' confidence levels generally rose.

It is not entirely possible to determine or compare the differences in perspective transformation or the extent of preparedness of the two groups of students; the TPC students with that of the Diploma students for university. Indeed, to do this would be to define the participants' transformations and preparedness at a 'group' level rather than to perhaps more accurately gauge them from an individual perspective. However, despite this caveat, some interesting anomalies did appear in the data according to the pathway chosen by the participants. These included the fact that while the Diploma students may have felt better prepared for university because of their TAFE experiences, as direct entry students they were in fact at times potentially more disadvantaged than the TPC students because of the expectations of assumed knowledge of second year students, and other factors including a lack of academic and theoretical scaffolding as second year students. The TPC students, while focused on matriculation to university in their enabling course, were nevertheless unprepared for the level of academic rigour expected at university. It is fair to say however, that the TAFE experience was important to the development and nurture of academic habits of

mind, that is, TAFE began the process of learning for the participants on their adult learning paths. However, despite this, the gap in academic skills was noticeable for all the participants in the initial phase of transition to higher education. Nevertheless, the need to close this gap was not a deterrent to the participants, but rather a situation that motivated them to strive for better outcomes at university. It was also clear that perspective transformation and levels of preparedness advanced and changed at different points along the learning continuum on an individual basis regardless of pathway. For example, Connor's perspectives regarding the changes he had made in his career choices were never completely resolved, while Briony's decision to follow her dream of becoming a teacher was consolidated early in her university life. Tammy worked constantly on new perspectives which embraced her new role as student alongside the other roles in her life, finding a balance for these was an on-going concern. In terms of being prepared, Michelle found the technological demands of university study to be difficult to overcome initially, while others adapted to this aspect of university very quickly. However, while the analysis indicates that the participants were faced with many challenges during the transition phase, the supportive relationships they had with others helped them in the management of these challenges. Further, by drawing on their own inner resources of adaptability and resilience, the participants without exception found ways to create a positive learning experience. The achievements and successes of all the participants as they progressed through the first six months of higher education gave them the confidence to keep going. In turn, transformations to perspectives, identity and aspirations occurred in the lives of all the participants to greater or lesser degrees.

The following chapter discusses these findings in detail. In particular, it focuses on the overarching research question by determining the extent to which transformation may have occurred in the domains of perspectives, identity and aspirations as a result of the participants' engagement in learning.

Chapter 6.   A question of destiny

Overarching research question

> *In what ways may the experience of adult learning transform individual perspectives, identity and aspirations?*

> *Oh, I've changed so much … (Michelle, 27, Diploma).*

Introduction

This research has been concerned with the potential for transformation in the lives of adults engaged in formal learning. The study has focused on the experiences of seven adults during their transition from the VET sector to higher education. Chapter 4 presented the participants' stories, tracking their individual learning journeys from TAFE to the end of their first semester at university. Chapter 5 presented the cross-case analysis of the data, which examined the shared experiences of transition, principally in response to the three research sub-questions. This provided the foundational basis for the focus of the current chapter, which considers the overarching research question:

> *In what ways may the experience of adult learning transform individual perspectives, identity and aspirations?*

Previous research into the transition experience has principally concentrated on the most common challenges and rewards of adult learning (e.g., Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Baik et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2011; Christie et al., 2007; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017; O'Shea et al., 2012; Watson et al., 2013). These are important aspects of transition. However, the current study expands the scope of transition research by adding a further dimension to knowledge in the field of transition. Specifically, the value of the current study lies in its investigation of the potential role that learning may play in transformation in the domains of perspectives, identity and aspirations. This has been explored through the lived experiences of students transitioning from TAFE to university.

The study operationalises the term 'transformation' according to Mezirow's (2000) definition noted in Chapter 2 of this thesis. That is, transformation is 'a movement

through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives' (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19). Mezirow (2000) asserts that an important first step in the transformative process is that an individual's frames of reference, or meaning perspectives, are identified. This is a fundamental aspect of change which, when recognised, can lead to knowledge and understanding of one's predispositions or habits of expectation. If these habits of mind and habits of expectation are then reflected upon, the interpretations of self and experiences may change. This is what propels transformation. This process was evidenced in this study in different ways and to varying degrees as the perspectives, identity and aspirations of the participants were transformed by their engagement in learning, first at TAFE and later at university.

As discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 of this thesis, the educational context can have a profound effect on how adults identify themselves as a student. It is important to consider this feature of adult learning as the context of learning can build a student identity, and perhaps learning aspirations. However, if the educational differences are seemingly insurmountable, the student identity may falter remain indeterminate. As noted in the stories of the participants in the current study, the ability to adapt to the changed educational environment was essential in achieving academic success and consolidating the notion of self as student. In so doing, aspirations may be fostered, and lives transformed as perspectives about self are transformed.

Transformational Learning Theory focuses on the transformation of meaning perspectives in order to bring about transformation of beliefs and assumptions about the self and in so doing act as an agent for change in many aspects of an individual's existence. Fundamentally, (Mezirow, 1978) argues that perspective change in one arena affects perspectives held about other areas, including redefining of self and relationships with others. This was apparent in the stories of some of the participants, particularly those of Connor, Tammy and Aishia, who all had to manage changes in these areas as a consequence of changes to long-held perspectives about self. They demonstrated Freire's notion of conscientization, which Mezirow (1978, p.103) notes includes not only a growing level of 'critical consciousness' as a means of personal development but the important role that adult education can have in this development.

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Mezirow (1981) further notes the emancipatory aspect of perspective transformation in which there is critical awareness of the constraints of previously held assumptions which in turn leads to new understandings and new ways of behaving. All of the participants demonstrated this critical awareness as they challenged earlier perspectives about their academic abilities and as they gained in academic confidence.

In his example from the women's movement as a force for change, Mezirow (1978) describes the way in which a new sense of identity can be developed through critical awareness of the roles previously played which have conformed to cultural expectations and been maintained through the unquestioned internalisation of the veracity of these roles. He notes in his charter of andragogy that one of the key ways educators can help to foster a learner identity is by reinforcing the 'self-concept of the learner as a learner' (Mezirow, 1981, p.22). In this study, it was apparent that TAFE had acted as an incentive to the participants to extend their notions of self as learner to encompass a broader perspective, one which included aspirations for higher education. Mezirow explains that the roles individuals play is deeply embedded in feelings about behaviour and the cultural expectations that determine those behaviours. Mezirow (1981, p.10) refers to those 'childish' assumptions carried within from childhood which may thwart or create barriers to the adoption of new perspectives on roles, behaviours and other cultural 'myths'. Fundamentally, perspectives remain 'uncritically assimilated' unless they are scrutinised through processes of critical reflectivity, which can be developed through adult learning (Mezirow, 1981, p.11).

Optimistically however, Mezirow (1985) states that the meaning perspectives acquired through childhood can be transformed in adulthood through processes of reappraising beliefs and taking corrective actions which transform perspectives no longer relevant or authentic to our lives as adults. Transformative learning is one of the ways in which individuals can enhance 'an empowered sense of self' through the adoption of new roles and relationships and a greater awareness of new perspectives (Mezirow, 1991, p. 161). Transformation to meaning perspectives is often accompanied by a new feeling of 'agency' which is influential in determining the dynamics of new relationships with others who share these perspectives, and ultimately may lead to new levels of

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'autonomy and self-determination' (Mezirow, 1981, p.9). Mezirow (1997, p.9) further equates autonomy with 'the understanding, skills and disposition necessary to become critically reflective of one's own assumptions and to engage effectively in discourse to validate one's beliefs through the experiences of others who share universal values'.

Evidence of new intentions and beliefs may be located within the participants' changed aspirations. Mezirow does not specifically refer to aspirations as a dimension of transformation, however, it is possible to extend the notion of transformation to aspirational endeavours when viewed through the lens of changes to perspectives that inform and influence beliefs about the self. As this study has shown, when self-confidence is restored and built upon, possibilities for the future can be developed and aspirations can be changed. In other words, notions of self and capabilities can be reimagined and transformed.

Outline of the chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to address the overarching research question. Chapter 7 then presents the conclusion to the thesis which draws together the discussion of the research sub-questions in Chapter 5 and the discussion contained within Chapter 6. This chapter begins by first discussing each of the domains of transformation separately, while simultaneously acknowledging and analysing their interconnectedness. In doing so, the voices of the participants are once again drawn upon as they reflected on their learning experiences. The chapter concludes with a discussion of two related key attributes that emerged as themes from the data: adaptability and resilience. The study identifies the importance of these attributes in enabling the learners in this study to successfully engage in learning. Figure 6.1 illustrates the framework of this chapter.

| Transformation and perspectives | Transformation and identity | Transformation and aspirations | Adaptability and resilience |
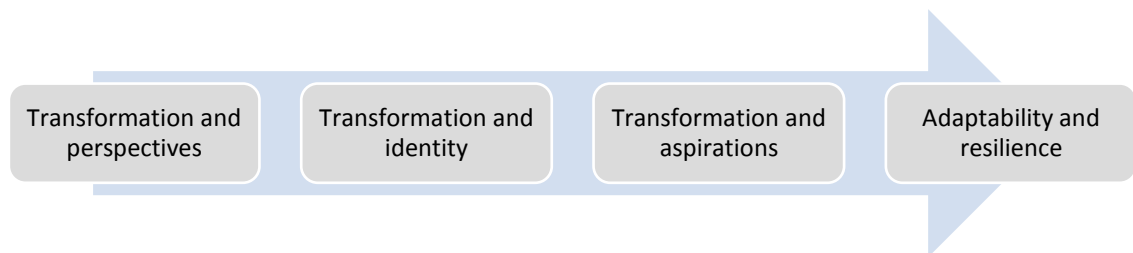
Figure 6.1: Chapter 6 framework

Transformation and perspectives

Introduction

This section analyses the ways in which the perspectives, or values and beliefs held by the participants, were influenced first by their experiences at TAFE and later again by their experiences at university. The definition for perspectives in the study is taken from Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1990). The central tenets of the theory were presented in detail in Chapter 2. Essentially, the theory states that meaning perspectives, or habits of mind about values and beliefs, are instilled from childhood according to the accepted belief patterns of the socio-cultural surrounds of the individual. Mezirow (2000, p. 8) refers to the 'cultural canon, socioeconomic structures, ideologies and beliefs about ourselves', which often support conspiracies of conformity and adherence to norms and which disavow notions of agency and individuality. It was clear from the data that the social background of a number of the participants was reflective of the ways in which their concept of self had been shaped in their earlier lives. This is indicative of Mezirow's (1978) assertion that individuals are shaped and influenced by their historical and cultural systems. For example, Mezirow (1978) discusses the cardinal role that learning has on how individuals are enmeshed within their own history and how they relive it. Examples from the data that have been drawn upon to highlight this aspect of the theory include the stories of Connor and Tammy, who both acknowledged the ways in which their upbringings not only shaped their life trajectories but also challenged the new perspectives and new directions they were taking.

Mezirow (1978) further notes that learning can heighten awareness of assumptions both cultural and psychological that are held as a result of this historical learning and thus, such assumptions can be influential in developing identity or sense of self and the patterns of an individual's life. There was clear evidence from the data that this aspect of the theory was pertinent to the lives of the seven participants. For example, in the stories of both Sophie and Michelle, it was apparent that ideas of what they were capable and not capable of academically, had been an important facet of how they perceived themselves. The perception that they were best suited to 'hands on' work had

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determined the pattern of their lives to this point. As Mezirow (1978, p. 101) states, the meaning perspectives we hold are 'a personal paradigm for understanding ourselves and our relationships, they are 'the structure of cultural assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experience'. The stories of Sophie and Michelle were significant in identifying new self-concepts, and like Tammy, the changes to self-concept that being a successful student brought were momentous when held up to the light of previously perceived academic shortcomings. In the case of Sophie, this was highlighted in her statement that she was now 'a student'; a declaration made with pride as she was able to overcome the challenge of dyslexia. Michelle too was proud of her new student identity as she had overcome limiting notions of self from childhood that she was not academically strong.

Important to Mezirow's (1978) theory is the premise that culture can be a facilitator or an inhibitor of change depending on the kinds of social relationships embedded in a particular cultural context. For example, traditional or 'Gemeinschaft' cultures can be deeply resistant to change when their existence is determined by the interconnectedness of family groups, social class and the psychological imposition of associated values and cultural expectations (Mezirow, 1978, p.106). Once again, it was clear from the data that, particularly in the case of Connor, there was significant antipathy from his social group concerning his decision to enrol in a university course. This affected him deeply and caused him to question his decision and his aspirations. Tammy's story has also provided evidence of a loss of friendships as her life direction changed. Perhaps there is a greater possibility of these kinds of outcomes for first in family students as they test the historical and cultural boundaries of upbringing by actively seeking ways to change.

However, as Mezirow (1978) notes, cultures which emphasise the individual over the group may offer more opportunities to develop new perspectives. To this end a pluralistic society, he argues, offers more scope for perspective transformation, but this is not guaranteed. This was evidenced by Connor's story when he spoke about how his working-class background was instrumental in determining that he would follow a similar pattern of life and work in his own life, that in fact, this is who he was. There

was an implicit inevitability that given the neighbourhood he grew up in and the fact that no-one in his family had ever gone to university, he too would remain a blue-collar worker as all his childhood friends had. However, Connor's story reveals that he challenged many notions about himself, and this created a sense of achievement and a parallel sense of angst, as he worked towards the development of a new identity that could encompass his academic aspirations and the maintenance of his personal relationships.

Mezirow (2000, p. 25) further emphasises the importance of social support from relationships and the environment which makes it possible for the individual to develop confidence and 'personal efficacy. Mezirow (2000, p. 25) highlights the importance of having a self or selves more capable of becoming critically reflective…' and capable of revaluating sometimes long held and nurtured beliefs about the self but who can then take action based on these insights. There was evidence of this from the stories of the participants. For example, Tammy had also grown up in a working-class family in which university was not an aspect of family discourse at any time. Tammy saw her identity primarily attached to her roles as wife and mother, but once she had made the commitment to study at TAFE to improve her job prospects, she began to change aspects of her self-concept by recognising that she could in fact continue study at university. This was not an insignificant realisation for her, she was in fact surprised at her abilities and immensely proud of her achievements. She was changed by her university entry to the extent that she now saw not only herself as a university student, but the possibility of university for her children as well. Therefore, the decision to question these absolute truths or perceptions of self, developed from childhood can be challenging, but the reward can be that the experience of becoming a student may also be an experience of the emergence of a new or transformed sense of self, as was apparent for these participants. As Mezirow (1981, p. 10) suggests, human agency or control may influence the way one perceives identity as being immutable and formed through socialisation in childhood.

Importantly, Mezirow argues that meaning perspectives supported and promulgated by socio-cultural structures can be transformed through involvement in adult learning

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(1990). The current study reveals that, when adults participate in learning, transformations to individual perspectives are possible and that such transformations can be both affirming and challenging. It is Mezirow's (1985, p. 23) observation that, while perspectives result from past experiences and assumptions about the self, transformation can occur when a 'false assumption' is consciously reappraised. This has been evident in this study to some extent in the stories of all the participants. For example, at TAFE the participants experienced a growing sense of confidence resulting primarily from development of their academic skills. Their subsequent academic successes while there contributed to validation of their role as a student—that is, as someone capable of academic achievement. Their success further helped to build new aspirational learning directions which focused mainly on articulation to university. On entry to university, the participants brought their gains in confidence and academic skills to the university experience, though it took time for them to settle into and manage new academic demands and expectations. The perspectives they all held about taking responsibility for their experiences and their willingness to embrace change added strength to the measures they took to succeed. Tensions were, however, apparent as the participants struggled initially to adapt to the new environment of university and the increased stresses they faced in different aspects of their lives. Tension was, for some, further evidenced when new ways of thinking challenged previously held perspectives about themselves, their abilities and their place in the world.

TAFE: Beginning of perspective change

This study positions TAFE as an important resource in the learning continuum and signifies the value of TAFE as a place where the potential for changes to perspectives about future learning pathways should not be underestimated. Indeed, it may be the case that for some students TAFE, as a precursor to higher education, is a step more likely to lead to articulation to higher education and retention once there, simply because of the provision of the kinds of significant outcomes experienced by the participants in this study. For example, the individual narratives of the participants presented in Chapter 4 of this thesis indicate that TAFE played a significant role in influencing the perspective changes that occurred for all the participants during their time there. Perspective changes included new appraisals about academic abilities and

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the aspirations that ensued. Data analysis presented in Chapter 5 of this thesis further positioned TAFE as an important preliminary learning experience which was influential in the decision of the participants to transition to university.

As a first step in adult learning, TAFE had provided a space for the participants to successfully build confidence through development of competencies. When identifying changes in confidence gained from their learning experiences at TAFE, the participants were very clear about their awareness of this change. For example, Diploma students Sophie and Alice were optimistic about how growth in confidence built by their TAFE experiences had enabled a greater belief in their ability to achieve academically:

> *I definitely have more confidence in myself that I can do it (Sophie, 29, Diploma).*

> *I feel quite confident, I know I can do it, I feel like now that I know more I'm more confident, I know what I'm doing, so I think that's the main thing, definitely my confidence has grown in the last few years (Alice, 27, Diploma).*

The finding complements research by Abbott-Chapman (2006; 2011), Hodge (2011) and Weadon and Baker (2015). Self-confidence as a catalyst for change was an outcome noted in a study by Hebdon (2015) and is a finding which supports the assertion by Masika and Jones (2015) that increasing levels of confidence can in turn lead to greater determination to persist in studies. Similarly, results from the current study confirm that increased confidence, combined with encouragement from their teachers and developments in their academic skills, provided the opportunity for the participants to expand their perspectives about the future directions they may take.

As their self-confidence grew, changes to the perspectives of the participants about their academic ability and learning trajectories also occurred. This was evidenced by the fact that, on completion of their TAFE studies, all seven participants made the choice to continue their studies at university. For these learners, TAFE was a primary motivator for consideration of higher learning goals. Connor from the TPC noted the changes to his perspectives about his learning directions:

> *... initially I didn't want to go to university ... I picked subjects that were based on just getting the TPC ... now I look ahead at the next two and a half years ... I might want to do something academic (Connor, 27, TPC).*

Tammy's decision to continue to university after TAFE was completely out of her normal frame of reference. Once there, she described her amazement at her achievement and the subsequent changes in her perspectives that this decision created:

> *I hated school, I detested it ... yeah, I've just never thought that ... unconsciously that's where I'd always be but now that I've consciously decided to move above that, yeah, that's been really interesting (Tammy, 43, Diploma).*

Michelle had thought that she might go to university '*one day*', but TAFE was the preferred first step as she was not in the right '*head space*' for university and, even then, university as a second step '*wasn't set in concrete*'. However, despite this reticence and because of her TAFE experience, she later continued to university.

The TAFE experiences of the participants in the current study led to renewed validations of academic capabilities and influenced the decision by all of them to enrol in higher education. This outcome accords with that of Hodge (2011), who found that transformative outcomes are possible because of participation in TAFE. As the next step on their learning journeys, the decision to articulate to university was a matter of some import and provided an experience that presented both opportunities for change and challenges for all the participants.

University: Building on new perspectives

The confidence the participants gained while at TAFE and the changes to their perspectives this enabled continued, after a period of adjustment at university. These changes were most apparent in the affirming self-appraisals some had about their continuing academic abilities, even while trying to adapt to their new situation. The stories of Sophie and Michelle are especially indicative of the influence that learning can potentially exert in bringing about change in the lives of learners. For example, as their stories have indicated, the academic successes at TAFE experienced by Sophie and Michelle allowed them to largely debunk the long-held perspective that they were

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not academically skilled. At university, over time they could see additional capabilities and demonstrate new strengths in their learning abilities. Michelle, though sometimes overwhelmed by the sheer amount of work she had to do at university, was happy and positive. She acknowledged the way she had changed perspectives about her new-found strengths, especially in areas of study:

> *It's very different to TAFE … the workload is still quite overwhelming … sometimes the lectures take me four hours to work out … but I think I'm getting there [laughs] … I feel like I've gotten a better handle on it … some weeks have been a lot harder than others … I've got a different mindset (Michelle, 27, Diploma).*

Clearly, the stories of Sophie and Michelle have revealed the initial lack of belief in their academic strengths to have been overturned by new perspectives developed through participation in learning.

Alice too gained new perspectives with the realisation that, while the Diploma course had been challenging and university was potentially even more challenging, she could achieve more academically than she had thought possible. Reflecting on her abilities enabled her to create new perspectives about her life and her future. She reflected positively on her experiences at university and her attitude towards her academic work:

> *… I'm enjoying uni, I don't feel like it's a burden or anything for me … I felt that once I get into it I do it to a good standard, so I'm doing well … (Alice, 27, Diploma).*

Although Briony and Aishia from the TPC had expressly enrolled in TAFE with the ambition of articulation to university, it was clear that TAFE had been an important precursor to university. For Briony especially, it was there she had developed the initial confidence to see her dream become reality. However, Aishia's learning experiences at university also brought about changes to his perspectives in ways that were reflected in the changed ideas he had about his future working pathway, as well as about his identity. As his narrative has shown, after six months of university, he was reflecting on the prospect of postgraduate study, as he began to redefine the possibilities for his future and to become more comfortable expressing his sexuality.

The perspective changes the participants experienced during their learning journeys enabled them to reflect on and re-evaluate their academic strengths and the directions their lives were taking. The examples presented here highlight the important role that learning institutes such as TAFE and university can play in the potential for transformative outcomes. The changing perspectives of the participants brought about by their learning experiences provided opportunities to reflect on long-held beliefs. To some extent, they could reappraise these beliefs in light of the successful ways they were all managing to adjust to the changed environment of higher education. However, alongside the gains they were experiencing at university, tensions were also apparent.

Perspective change: Transition and tension

Mezirow (1990, p. 12) asserts that anything which challenges our 'conventional criteria of self-assessment [is] always fraught with threat and strong emotion'. Consequently, changes in the domain of perspectives can potentially bring dissonance. In this study, the experiences of Connor and Tammy, both first-in-family (FiF) students, particularly highlight this dissonance. For example, by enrolling in TAFE Connor had followed an acceptable 'working man's' pathway to gaining employment credentials. Although he had left work to concentrate on his TAFE studies, this step did not overly challenge his habituated concept of what was 'normal' for someone from his socio-economic background. Significantly, his decision to go to university did present challenges. Tennant (1998, p. 374) refers to the ability of learning to expose the 'social and cultural embeddedness … in which the self is located' and, ultimately, presents a bias for refusing to be so positioned, determining instead to change 'the text of experience' and to reconstruct the self in the process. This fundamental premise suggests the potential for learning to exert a major impact on perspectives. Connor's story points to the fact that, while enjoying the intellectual stimulation of university and performing well in his studies, he was nevertheless constantly challenged by the perception that he should prioritise work over study.

It was perhaps the social embeddedness of Connor's perspectives about his obligations in life, and the way his enrolment at university defied these perspectives, that caused angst among his social group, who identified the changes he was making and

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subsequently criticised him for them. The disjuncture this criticism created became a source of ongoing tension. Ultimately, the different directions in which he was pulled became particularly acute when on holidays with his friends. It was there that the differences in disposable income were obvious and the economic pressure to work instead of study was building. This pressure was further influenced by veiled criticism from his friends about his decision to study at university. But Connor did not want the drudgery of '*just waking up and going to work every day*'. Some of the tensions experienced by Connor may reflect what Fuller (2018, p. 5) refers to as the 'existential tension' of making choices which, when different from the expected career trajectory of class or gender, may provoke anxiety and concern.

Mezirow (1992) states that reflection can result in the decision not to change, or to postpone change until the prerequisites are in place. The decision to postpone change proved to be partly the case for Connor, whose decision to stay at university remained tinged with angst throughout his first semester as he continued to reflect on and question his decision. He vacillated constantly between staying in the science degree he was enrolled in and leaving to pursue his initial path of joining the police force.

Like Connor, the perspective transformations in Tammy's life and the actions she took to accommodate them were accompanied by some degree of anxiety and tension. These actions were compatible with her changing perspectives but incompatible with the maintenance of some of her relationships. For example, her decision to enrol in the Registered Nurse degree involved attempts to reconcile family and work responsibilities with the demands of university. While she was finding fulfilment in her academic pursuits, not everyone was happy with these developments. However, opposition to her decision was never a deterrent to Tammy. On the contrary, she rejected those friendships that were no longer supportive of her new direction. She spoke about the changes in her friendships:

> *I don't see my friends as much … if you really are a good friend you sort of make allowance, you know, 'Ok, I won't see you as much during semester but we'll still get to catch up' … I think they're those type of people that just … that if you're not sort of there all the time … they go, 'Well you're just not around as much' … then I think they've just had to fill in that space you*

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probably filled in for them before, and then you've been sort of taken away because you're sort of moving on with your career (Tammy, 43, Diploma).

What is missing from the narratives of Connor and Tammy is discussion with others about these issues. This suggests there may be value in adult education providers overtly recognising the potential for such tensions to arise for students in transition. Implementation of systemic strategies for managing discordance that can arise could be a valuable intervention in the early settling-in phase for all transitioning students. This point is corroborated by research from Postareff, Mattson, Lindblom-ylänne and Hailikari (2016) that argues the need for a continuation of 'emotional' support for transitioning students in their first year at university.

Section summary

The findings from the current study support Mezirow's (1978) early assertion that, by understanding the historical and cultural systems of beliefs that have shaped and informed us, we can become aware of our meaning perspectives. Ultimately, as Mezirow (1978) argues, the 'personal paradigm' of how we view and understand ourselves and our relationships within the world is not immutable and can in fact be impacted upon through engagement in learning. In other words, the dispositions and interpretations we inherit about ourselves and the world can be transformed.

Outcomes from the current study demonstrate that engagement in learning can present significant opportunities for reflection and transformation of individual perspectives but can also lead to tensions. The perspectives of the participants in the current study concerning their academic experiences, capabilities and future directions changed over time through their involvement in learning. They reflected on and questioned some beliefs and in the process reappraised the way they thought about their academic lives and futures. For these participants, engagement in learning invited a willingness to embrace the complexities and life changes that transformations to perspective may offer.

It is not entirely possible to determine or compare the extent of preparedness of the TPC students with that of the Diploma students. Indeed, to do this would be to define

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preparedness at a 'group' level rather than to perhaps more accurately gauge it from an individual perspective. However, despite this caveat, some interesting anomalies did appear in the data according to the pathway chosen by the participants. These have been discussed in some detail already in this thesis including the fact that while the Diploma students may have felt better prepared for university because of their TAFE experiences, as direct entry students they were in fact at times potentially more disadvantaged than the TPC students because of the expectations of assumed knowledge of second year students, and other factors previously discussed. Primarily, this included a lack of academic and theoretical scaffolding as second year students. The TPC students, while focused on matriculation to university in their enabling course, were nevertheless unprepared for the level of academic rigour expected at university, however, this emerged as a common theme among the seven participants. The perspectives of all the participants were transformed as a result of their TAFE studies. The TPC fulfilled the criteria for entry to university for Connor, Briony and Aishia and gave them the confidence to progress to higher education. The Diploma students were similarly inspired by their TAFE studies and the changes to perspectives this created emboldened them to continue their studies at university. It is perhaps more notable that the Diploma students, whose initial intentions were to simply complete the TAFE course, chose the higher education path. However, this should not undermine the importance of the decision by the TPC students to maintain their course of action by following through on their decision to continue their studies at university on completion of TAFE. There is no doubt that the perspectives of the participants were transformed by their attendance at both TAFE and university, the differences while tangential may be evidenced by the ways in which they envisaged their futures.
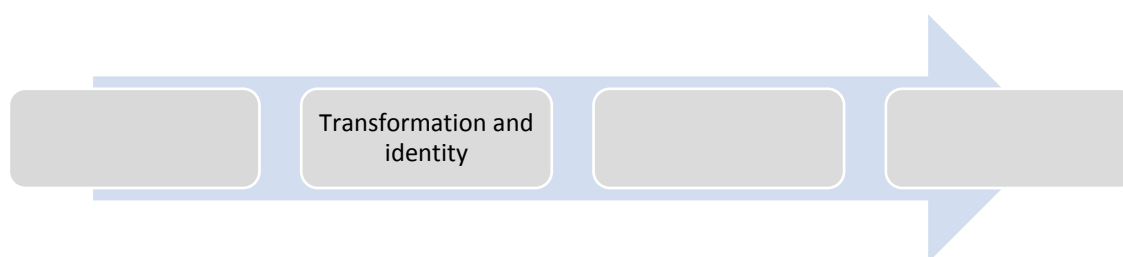
Figure 6.2: Transformation and identity section in chapter framework

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Transformation and identity

Introduction

It is the case that identity is a multifaceted concept and the development of a sense of identity is interconnected to the many selves that individuals have in the many roles they hold in life. In his development of understandings about meaning perspectives, Mezirow (1994) includes the psychological codes as fundamental elements in the development of an individual's self-concept. In particular, Transformational Learning Theory recognises transformation to identity as changes to self-perception (Mezirow, 1990). Changes to identity are linked directly to changes to meaning perspectives, or frames of reference. As Mezirow (2000, p. 18) states, 'our sense of self is anchored in our frames of reference [which] provide us with a sense of … identity'. Mezirow (1990) further posits the notion that meaning perspectives or frames of reference define experience and ultimately contribute to self-concept or identity. Therefore, if change occurs in the realm of perspectives, it can then occur in the different ways individuals perceive themselves. The key contention of the theory is that with awareness and conscious reflection, habits of mind developed from one's socio-cultural background can be changed (Mezirow, 1990). This is not a straightforward process, as the formation and maintenance of a sense of self-identity developed as a habit of mind is an integral and deeply embedded aspect of the self-concept (Mezirow, 1996).

One of the primary concerns in this thesis was to explore the possibility that engagement in adult education could lead to transformation to identity. The focus of this aspect was on the development of a student identity. However, in this process it was clear from the data that other aspects of identity had also developed. For example, the data indicated that all the participants had experienced some level of struggle with the construction of identities that fitted their lives and the perspective changes that were emerging about their self-concept and the possibilities for the future. For example, first in family students Connor and Tammy experienced quite significant changes to their beliefs about who they were in light of their lack of familiarity with university. Christie (2009) has examined the ways in which students from non-traditional backgrounds who enter higher education develop their identities as students.

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She suggests that for these students, the process of identity formation can be convoluted and complex as they move through stages of developing academic confidence (or not) and as they become more affiliated with the higher education context and their own sense of engagement (Christie, 2009).

To a large extent all the participants, while initially struggling to see themselves as students, became more confident over time, not only in their ability to be successful university students, but also in their imaginings of what they could accomplish academically beyond the initial goal of gaining an undergraduate degree. Sophie's declaration that she was 'a student' highlights this growing awareness of her strengths as a university student and the increased confidence this awareness brought. In the words of Christie (2009, p.130) 'making the transition to university and becoming a student was about fashioning a new and successful identity'. When considering transformation and identity Illeris (2014, p. 12) notes that the concept of identity in Transformational Learning Theory is bound by meaning perspectives, frames of reference and habits of mind. However, he argues, it also encompasses other dimensions, such as 'the cognitive, emotional, and the social learning and mental processes' (Illeris, 2014, p. 12). It was clear from the data that for FiF students Connor, Tammy and Briony, the reality of being a university student was a significant change in their lives, indeed this was also the case for Sophie and Michelle whose backgrounds had, like those FiF students, been one which had largely discounted university as an option for them.

Illeris (2014, p. 153) offers a substantial discussion on the value of labelling the concept of 'self' as identity, as this allows self-perception to be understood 'internally in relation to the individual and externally in relation to the individual's interaction with the surrounding world'. Once again it is possible to see from the stories of the participants that encompassing a student identity was not only important on the individual level but was significant to their friends and families, and of course for the Diploma students, new knowledge was extended into their working lives as nurses. Illeris (2014, p. 153) argues that identity as a concept incorporates a more balanced view of 'the learning dimensions as a coherent whole'. In this way it may be said that

student identity as viewed by Mezirow (1985) is a particular form of identity, and one in which the cognitive aspect in particular is emphasised as crucial to the development of transformation in learner identity.

Evidence from the current study suggests that transformations to student identity occurred for all the participants, first at TAFE and later at university. These transformations, closely connected to the evolving nature of their changing perspectives about themselves as students, were at times paradoxically affirming and problematic. Further, recognising the role that learning can play in transforming identities uncovered some layers of intricacy in this study. For example, the study reveals how validation and renegotiation of identity can influence identity transformation and in turn lead to reconstructions of student identity. Importantly, validation of the self as a student at both TAFE and university was a significant outcome of the learning experience for all of the participants.

The study, however, acknowledges the discord experienced by some of the participants in this reconstructive process. Other tensions were also apparent. First, some participants in the early days of transition experienced a need to build a sense of belonging to the university. As Christie et al. (2007) contend, the experience of having to renegotiate a student identity can involve losing a sense of security, not only in how learners had previously perceived themselves but also in their learning abilities. Indeed, the need to develop a sense of student identity and belonging in the higher education environment may be a common experience which must be navigated over time by all new students (Millman & McNamara, 2018; Tett et al., 2017). Second, for some there was the additional tension brought about by making choices which went against socio-cultural frames of reference and habits of mind. This section of the chapter discusses the ways in which identity was validated, renegotiated and reconstructed and considers the tensions that emerged throughout this process.

Validation of identity

It was clear from the outcomes of the study that participation in learning helped to validate the student identity of the participants. In turn, this validation led to increased learning aspirations. Validation or the creation of a sense of authentication as an adult

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student began for the participants while at TAFE and was a process requiring ongoing negotiation as they navigated their way through the learning experience. The participants' TAFE experiences encouraged their perspectives as successful students and helped to not only build their student identity but also underline the impetus to enrol in higher education. Such outcomes are corroborated by research which suggests that TAFE can act as a catalyst for a renewed self-appraisal of the development of a student identity (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Griffin, 2017; Kasworm, 2008; Savelsberg et al., 2017).

However, the early stages of transition challenged the positive learner identity the participants had developed while at TAFE. This is an outcome similarly noted in research by Tett et al. (2017) which found that the established identities students had built while in further education had to be reconstructed once at university, often due to a loss of self-confidence early in transition. However, outcomes from earlier research by Christie et al. (2007) demonstrated that increasing student independence coupled with the rewards of high marks can lead to increased levels of self-confidence, which can help to authenticate the student identity. This reflects the assertion by Blair, Cline and Wallis (2010) that the process of identity formation is an ongoing and negotiable one when adults engage in new learning experiences, and that it is a staged progression requiring a reflexive approach.

Participants underwent ongoing negotiation of learner identity as they recognised their strengths both in the learning process and what they brought to that experience and in the way they worked hard to eliminate their perceived weaknesses. The stories of the participants provide evidence that their achievements at university were significant signposts that the decision to articulate to higher education was the right one; as time went on, the validation required for this decision was provided through these achievements. Interestingly, Christie et al. (2013) observe that, when students become more involved in their university study, they can develop a greater sense of identity as a student and a sense of belonging to the university. This was similarly reflected in the participants' narratives at the end of their first semester at MCU. Research further suggests that the ability for a student to renegotiate their learner identity is key to their

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overall success as a student (Høj Jensen & Jetten, 2016; Kasworm, 2008). Research indicates that increasing involvement in study and a consequent development of a sense of belonging can be attained through measures designed to build connectedness (Burke et al., 2016). This process can be further enhanced through building networks of friendship and collegiality within the university (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Brouwer et al., 2016). It seems logical then that building a sense of belonging and an identity that encompasses university participation should be an intervention that occupies educators in higher education, especially in an era of encouragement of lifelong learning.

Validating the self as a student was important to the participants in this study, as it provided the key to renegotiating self-constructs and opening the door to new futures. By implementing necessary changes in perspectives and approaches to learning, they were able to continue the process of renegotiating their identities to fit the circumstances and their own needs. Tammy succinctly described an aspect of these identity changes not only in how she viewed herself differently but also in the changed way her children also saw her:

> *… well I guess I never really had a belief that I would do it … my kids are seeing a different side of mum … a completely different side of mum (Tammy, 43, Diploma).*

In Transformational Learning Theory, Mezirow (1990) emphasises the relationship between learning and the ability of adult learners to rethink how they see themselves and how they would describe themselves as they engage in renegotiation of 'self' through changed perspectives. Through the narratives of the participants, this study identified the ongoing and flexible nature of this personal assessment and consequent reconstruction and transformations to identity as negotiated by the students themselves.

Reconstruction of identity

It is Dirkx's (1998) contention that adults engaged in formal learning often find themselves situated between old frames of reference and the need to create new ones, which involves letting go of old constructions of self and reconstructing a new identity. It can take time to establish an identity as a university student, especially as students transitioning from TAFE to university often need to renegotiate identity to be

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comfortable in the new higher education environment and to feel that they belong. This study highlights the fact that the participants ultimately found ways to reimagine and reconstruct a sense of self, according to the different ways they chose to navigate their learning experiences. For example, the confidence FiF student Briony experienced as a learner proved to be an important precursor to her evolving self-concept and the academic mobility her successes provided. Following initial doubts about her abilities on first entering her degree, she became more confident about her decision to go to university:

> *Yeah, I found that when I first started uni I wasn't sure if that was what I wanted, but yeah, yeah I'm definitely positive about it (Briony, 19, TPC).*

As her story indicated, Briony flourished in the teaching degree at MCU and began to reassess old constructs and perspectives and, in the process, to construct a new identity as a strong and confident student teacher. This reconstruction of self was reflected in the affirming sense of pride and achievement she had on completion of her first practical teaching experience.

Reconstruction of identity was also apparent in Sophie's story. As noted previously, at the end of the first semester at MCU Sophie had declared that she was a student. This seemingly simple statement belies a potentially important reconstructive and transformative marker for Sophie, as it signified the development of an identity that incorporated her new-found confidence and reflected new discourses of abilities. Declaring herself to be a student summarised the pride she experienced in her successes at university. Significantly, it may have also indicated the rejection of her former identity of someone who was not capable academically. Michelle's story was somewhat similar: her identity prior to university had included the belief that she was best suited to the practical teaching and learning approach of TAFE. However, as Dirkx, Mezirow and Cranton (2006) contend, learning can contribute to a re-evaluation of beliefs and values, so that individuals become more aware of self, place in the world and aspirations. This is in keeping with Mezirow's (2000, p. 7) notion that 'cultures enable or inhibit the realization of common human interests, ways of communicating and realizing learning capabilities'.

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Identity formation and discord

As evident in this study, while identity transformation established by building on new frames of reference and new discourses about self can be rewarding, it can simultaneously be accompanied by discord and tension. As noted in Chapter 2 of this thesis, in early iterations of Transformational Learning Theory Mezirow (2008, p. 28) explored ten phases of the transformative process. These phases are reproduced here:

1. A disorienting dilemma: this can be a sudden or 'epochal' insight or a gradual or cumulative realisation that revision of some assumptions about the self is necessary
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

These phases of transformation are identified in the current study particularly in the decision made by the participants to articulate to higher education, where they then began the process of identifying as a university student, during which the accumulation of knowledge, as well as their own capacity to adapt, gave them the confidence to succeed.

Mezirow (2008, p. 28) notes that the preliminary phases (phases one and two) could involve discord and tension, or 'dilemma' and associated negative responses including 'fear, anger, guilt or shame'. These aspects of the transformative process were evident to some extent in the reported experiences of the participants. For example, data from the study indicate that dissatisfaction with their lives may have been a factor for some of

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the participants in making the decision to return to study. This phase may not have been dramatic enough to be accurately situated as a 'disorienting dilemma' for all of them, but the affective dimensions of a disorienting dilemma' are not outlined by Mezirow to accurately gauge this. Indeed, Howie and Bagnall (2013, p.22) argue that the notion of a 'disorienting dilemma' as a construct is 'problematic' given the myriad of definitions and meanings of a 'dilemma'. However, Mezirow (1978) also refers to the 'crises' that may be experienced in life, these crises can include any experience which can lead to difficulties of both a personal and social nature. The stories of Tammy and Briony in particular point to the experience of a crisis in each of their lives which prompted the need for change. For example, Tammy had faced a series of quandaries that provoked a re-evaluation of who she was and what she aspired to in life. Her story has revealed that within a short space of time she had lost work she had held for many years and her mother had died. These events raised questions for her about the next steps she could take, subsequently she made the decision to return to study in her 40s and in the process significantly changed many beliefs about herself. In her first interview, Briony had stated that 'something [had] happened' which had clearly exacted a profoundly negative impact on her for a period of time and was manifested by her inability to continue with her studies and to withdraw from school. The aftermath of the crisis she had experienced was further evidenced by her demeanour during the first interview during which she was quiet, withdrawn and reserved. It is therefore likely that she had experienced this phase of transformation perhaps more so than the other participants.

However, the presence of a quandary which acted as a catalyst for change was also apparent to varying degrees for the other participants. For example, Connor indicated that he was dissatisfied with his working life and was drawn to further study rather than continue to work in a blue-collar role. Consequently, as his story has shown, he made the decision to enrol in the TPC at TAFE and later, to enrol at university. His story indicates that this decision was accompanied by some feelings of fear and later guilt as he reassessed his purpose in life. It is likely that he was in fact revising some of the beliefs he had held up to this point about himself and his goals in life. His story has revealed that making the decision to leave his occupation to instead become a student was not an easy decision, as it contributed to disharmony between himself, his close

social group and eventually caused some angst in his personal relationship. Aishia, while at TAFE, had experienced negative responses from many of his peers about his sexuality. This situation may have compelled him to accelerate the need to embrace his sexuality more openly, certainly he seemed to be significantly affected by the poor relationships he had with his peers while at TAFE. Later, at university without censure he found ways to comfortably express himself and his sexuality. The circumstances of these four participants in particular may be captured as some form of discord or tension and may be indicative of the first phase of Mezirow's (2008) ten phases of transformation, a 'disorienting dilemma'. Mezirow (1978, p.101) points out that resolution of a crisis is possible through critically analysing the assumptions that lie behind the roles we play; in turn this critical awareness can lead to 'self-development'. This was especially notable in Tammy's story whereby she actively sought a new role as a student to supplement the other important roles of 'wife' and 'mother' with which she identified herself.

However, if the value of insight and revision of some assumptions about the self are regarded as significant, then the experiences of all the participants in the study can be inclusive to varying degrees of Mezirow's ten phases of transformation (2008). For example, it was apparent from the data that all the participants had experienced some level of apprehension about their impending transition to university, especially in their ability to succeed and deal with the expected differences. Once there, they were engaged in 'exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action'; 'planning a course of action'; 'acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan's; 'provisional trying of new roles'; and 'building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships' (Mezirow, 2008, p. 28) as they successfully renegotiated their student identity to encompass the new learning environment of university.

Each of the phases of transformation are reliant upon the review and reconsideration of assumptions about self. Although Mezirow (2008) determined that the phases of transformation may not be linear, there is a logical implication that the particular phases experienced by the participants would follow on from each other. For example, options for new actions may be followed by plans to take action and the means of implementing these actions. Once in place and new roles have been established in line

with new actions, competence and self-confidence may be built. This trajectory was evident in the ways the participants set about developing the skills to maximise their successes. In so doing they advanced their academic skills and, as each of their stories has indicated, they further developed self-confidence to the extent that their aspirations also expanded and developed.

Mezirow (1981) refers to Singer's (1965) beliefs about identity development which assert that the definition an individual may give themselves, while derived from their experiences, can conflict with the social and cultural expectations of their normative group values. For example, Connor's initial perception of not belonging was most likely the result of familial and socio-cultural understandings of what was viewed as attainable or indeed realistic for someone from a working-class background. This view may explain Connor's initial experience of not feeling quite like a university student because he was one of those people who '*haven't got as much background*'.

The discord and tension that can arise can be a common experience, particularly for FiF students (King et al. 2015) like Connor and Tammy, and for other sectors of the community who have no experience of higher education (Mezirow, 1990). Tensions may arise because understandings about who the self is and how that self may be changed can promote uncomfortable shifts in perceptions of identity. Nevertheless, when change of any kind is experienced, it is impossible to undo the experience. Importantly, Illeris (2014, p. 582) states that, when discord is experienced and even leads to 'withdrawal or regression', this can still be 'a kind of transformation'. For example, while in his first semester at MCU Connor had described himself as feeling like an '*imposter*', while simultaneously holding the perception that he was being true to his intellectual self by studying at university. His story describes in detail the paradox associated with the excitement of being a university student and the related tensions this created in his life—tensions which remained unresolved at the end of his first semester at MCU. However, as Illeris (2014, p. 582) further states, even when the individual must accept that new ways of thinking have not been successful, 'something of importance has happened, things are not as they were before, there is … a difference which cannot be neglected'. This idea presents an urge to speculate on the long-term

outcomes for Connor in the pursuit of his learning and career aspirations, which remain unknown.

Aishia's story demonstrates the important influence that changing perspectives can have on identity transformation. This was especially significant as change in perspectives and identity can lead to renegotiation of aspirations, as evidenced in his story. Aishia's story revealed that, while he had a learner identity at TAFE, which continued to evolve at university, he was restricted in developing a sexual identity he was comfortable with. Unlike TAFE, the larger space of the university environment allowed him to give free rein to his emerging sexual identity, and so begin the process of reconstructing himself in ways that satisfied his need to be true to himself. This was an important aspect of his identity and one that created greater levels of confidence and assertiveness over time. As he reflected on the ways he had changed since his engagement in learning and how this engagement had helped to establish an authentic sense of self, Aishia summed it up this way, '*I'm like … about just being the way I am, yeah*'.

Tammy struggled at times with the new constructions of self she had adopted as she tried to reconcile the pride she felt in her emerging identity as a university student with the other important roles in her life. The tension this dichotomy produced was especially apparent when she reflected on the importance of being a '*good mother*' and role model for her children, while also finding new ways of envisaging herself as a university student and potentially committing to further study in the future. Mezirow (1981, p. 10) notes the 'cultural prescriptions' that women may adhere to when they assign more importance to the socially prescriptive roles they feel bound to play than to their own choices in life. Certainly, Tammy was very emphatic about describing and identifying herself by a 'gendered narrative' (Habel et al., 2017, p. 4) as an '*army wife*' and '*mother*'. However, she also relished the new academic identity she was developing for herself, and she felt she was more '*relatable*' to her children. Tammy's story revealed that, even when discord is apparent in the transformative process, the role that learning can play in transforming lives can be a considerable counterbalance to the dissonance experienced.

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Section summary

The contention that renegotiation of self is possible through learning suggests that identity can never be a static account of the self but is instead an element of the persona that is constantly shifting and changing (Tennant, 2005, p. 106). In other words, student identity which may initially be bounded by limiting assumptions of self as a learner may be negotiated and changed. The stories of the participants in the current study support this by demonstrating that they were capable of change, not just in rethinking perceptions of self but by taking actions which defied previously taken-for-granted notions of self. These actions included making the decision to enrol in a university course, which for most of the participants was a choice that stood outside their usual frames of reference about themselves. As Tennant (1998) notes, the power of adult learning lies in its potential as a medium of exposure of those embedded cultural norms and beliefs.

Adopting an identity as a student is not a simple or straightforward change in self-concept. On the contrary, it can be a source of stress and paradoxical pride and an experience that should be recognised by adult learning providers as potentially common to learners in transition. However, the participants in this study have, through the learning process, shown their willingness to rethink and challenge their notions of self. Their experiences at both TAFE and university demonstrate and reflect transformations to perspectives and identity. These transformations have included making decisions about the future that, for some, negated the previous relative positionality of their life trajectory.
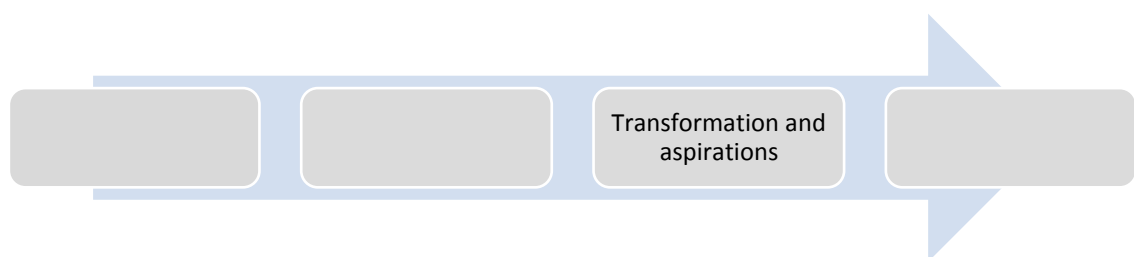
Figure 6.3: Transformation and aspirations section in chapter framework

Transformation and aspirations

Introduction

This study identified a third important element of the transformative process in learning, evidenced in changes to the nature of the aspirations of the participants as they began to envisage the different futures they could create for themselves. Although Mezirow does not specifically use the term 'aspiration', Transformational Learning Theory (1990) recognises that changes to perspectives and self-perception brought about by adult learning can in turn lead to new behaviours and actions which can influence life choices. In the current study, aspirations are defined as achieving learning goals through adult education and wanting to achieve more by further engagement in learning (Blair et al., 2010; Gallacher, Crossan, Field & Merrill, 2002). The outcomes of this study reflect this view of aspirations to varying degrees for all the participants as they progressed through their TAFE course and later again at university.

It was evident from the study that life choices can be influenced by participation in learning, especially when learning is seen to be an investment in the future. Changes to learning aspirations for some of the participants began at TAFE, where new possibilities for the future were introduced, but it is important to acknowledge the willingness of the participants to embrace this new way of thinking. For some of the participants, university then reinforced possibilities for new life directions to be taken and new aspirations to be forged. Stepping outside socio-culturally prescribed habits of mind was not easy or straightforward but, as noted by both Connor and Tammy, changes in their life and new directions for the future could potentially be inspiring for future generations. As the data indicate, for some of the participants the changes they experienced in their aspirations were dramatic and transformational and framed within discourses of positivity. However, there was discord in this aspect of their learning experiences as well.

Creating and building aspirations: TAFE and university
The participants' narratives indicate that the subjective positioning or inner discourses about their learning trajectories were changed considerably, first by their participation at TAFE and later again at university. For example, the Diploma students were

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encouraged to apply for admission to university to continue their nursing studies. Connor too was encouraged to pursue learning at university. From their stories, it was clear that successful participation in TAFE consolidated the ambitions of Aishia and Briony to attend university via the TPC pathway. The capacity for TAFE to bring about transformative career aspirations was a finding confirmed in the study and supported by Alice's statement that TAFE '*kickstarted*' career goals and ambitions. This boost to aspirations was achieved by developing academic confidence reflected in the successful learning outcomes experienced by all the participants while at TAFE and later again at MCU.

By consciously choosing to accept a place at university, all seven participants actively engaged in changing the trajectories their lives were taking at that time. In her first interview, Michelle had spoken about her determination to gain her Registered Nurse qualification and perhaps to become a nurse practitioner—a role she described as a '*supernurse*'. However, six months later, after reflecting on her career aspirations, she had made the decision not to pursue further learning on completion of the Registered Nurse degree:

> *I think this whole idea of reflective practice … I think that gives me better insight into you know, what I want to do and how to change it, and think about what I'm doing … I think nurse education would be awesome, but you know you definitely need a lot more behind you … I'm just sort of seeing that now (Michelle, 27, Diploma).*

The changes to aspirations that the remaining five participants experienced once at university reflect Kasworm's (2008, p. 33) belief that adults may, through processes of engagement in university learning, begin to rethink who they are—that is, their sense of self—and to begin to re-image themselves as 'actors in future learning'. For Aishia, Tammy, Sophie and Alice, the aspiration to attend university they had initially acted upon was enhanced by the end of their first semester at MCU, when they all expressed a desire to engage in postgraduate study on completion of their degree.

Tammy was unequivocal in her assertion that, prior to studying at TAFE, the idea of going to university had simply never occurred to her. It seems likely from Tammy's

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later reflections at MCU that choices which defy culturally prescribed paths such as hers should not be underestimated. Indeed, they may be indicative of a willingness to reject previously normative life directions by embracing new possibilities in life. This was apparent in Tammy's story whereby her engagement in learning at TAFE had opened new realms of possibility for her. The decision to continue learning at university and to then consider the possibility of postgraduate learning was a conscious choice to move beyond limiting perspectives and was a means of changing her life:

> *... now that I've consciously decided to move above that, yeah, that's been really interesting (Tammy, 43, Diploma).*

Aisha, Sophie and Alice had clear ideas about what they wanted to achieve at university when they first enrolled and, like Tammy, by the end of the first semester their learning goals had developed to include more study in the future. Aishia was focused on a career in midwifery, which would require extra years of postgraduate study, the prospect of which was both daunting and exciting for him. Sophie, who had earlier expressed her ultimate goal to be able to work with CareFlight, was likewise now committed to further study. Alice wanted to focus initially on gaining practical experience as an Registered Nurse but would then go back to university to '*learn, learn, learn*'.

Aspirations and discord

The discord and tensions that were evident in this study because of changed aspirations were most apparent in Connor's story, but elements of tension were obvious to some extent in the stories of all the participants. Primarily, this was due to the stresses they encountered because of the decision to articulate to university. These stresses were usually the result of having to manage the demands that accompanied being a university student with other demands in their lives. However, it was Connor's ongoing ambivalence about his future career choices that reflected the significant inner conflict his aspirational leanings created. For example, as evidenced from his narrative, while he was willing to challenge the established career trajectory represented by his socio-cultural background, his decision to attend university was never a comfortable choice for him. Ultimately, as Mezirow (1990) suggests, when previously assumed aspects of

one's life are questioned, individuals may even question their self-predicted or culturally defined destiny. Connor's discomfort may be likened to Du Bois-Reymond's view (1998, p. 65) that aspirations held by individuals may be based on a 'normal biography' or on a 'choice biography'. That is, one may follow a predetermined life course based on the norms of class or gender or one may choose to step outside these parameters, thereby challenging taken-for-granted futures by establishing a new and autonomous path. This was perhaps the basis of the tensions Connor continued to experience.

Intergenerational aspirational change

Blair et al. (2010) and Fuller (2018) note that adult learning can bring about changes in attitude towards the value of education that can then influence the attitudes and ambitions of other family members. A particularly noteworthy outcome of this study was that FiF students Connor and Tammy believed that their own involvement in higher education could pave the way for other family members to similarly aspire. The desire expressed by both Connor and Tammy to be good role models for their children speaks directly to the Australian Government's drive for inclusion and equity in higher education (Burke, 2016; Crosling, 2017; King et al., 2015). Connor hoped that by attending university himself he had demonstrated to any future children he may have that anything was possible and that academic aspirations were achievable. Tammy was proud of her ongoing academic achievements, but she had to overcome many entrenched beliefs about what her family did and did not do. Nevertheless, she expressed the hope that, by attending university herself, her children would one day follow suit. This projected ambition expressed in her story that university might be her family's '*new normal*' was particularly momentous given her earlier perception that they were '*not a university family*'.

Section summary

This study has identified the opportunities that engagement in learning can provide for transformation to learning and career choices, realised through aspirational possibilities. The study has further found that, when individuals act with conscious awareness to change their perspectives and re-evaluate their sense of identity, it is

possible for them to reimagine the future and implement change in their life course. The narrated experiences of the participants indicate that the decision to engage in learning at TAFE set in motion the realisation that a university education was attainable. Their academic successes accentuated the wish by some to encourage similar aspirations in other family members, in the process potentially offering new life pathways built on new possibilities. It is likely that university will be a significant part of the family discourses of all the participants in this study, affecting not only their own but intergenerational aspirations and life trajectories. Sellar and Gale (2011) refer to this as the ability to envisage different futures. This seems a simple idea, but it invites consideration of the complexities of the notion of 'futures', demonstrated by the transformations to perspectives, identity and aspirational outcomes of the participants in this study.

Figure 6.4: Adaptability and resilience section in chapter framework

The role of adaptability and resilience

Introduction

This discussion is not complete without acknowledgement of the important role that the dual attributes adaptability and resilience played in the lives of the learners in this study. These were attributes displayed by all the participants at various junctures of their learning journeys, and it seems highly probable that these attributes served to cement their determination to succeed in their studies. The data from the study show that the ability to adapt to new situations by creating personal strategies for successful learning experiences was a significant indicator of commitment to learning goals. The role of resilience in the face of challenges likewise emerged as an important attribute of the participants in maintaining determination to persist in their studies. Such findings are consistent with those of Abbott-Chapman (2006), who found personal traits such as

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determination to succeed to be significant aspects of student success. This finding accords with those of Reay et al. (2009), who cite qualities of self-reliance, motivation and determination, as well as an attitude of working hard for gains, as the keys to academic success. As the current study indicates, the resolute responses that the participants demonstrated towards their experiences in the transition process played a significant role in their academic outcomes. These responses were primarily a willingness to be adaptable and an ability to be resilient in the face of the challenges they met throughout their learning experiences.

Adaptability

The definition of adaptability has been borrowed from Gale and Parker (2014, p. 4), who describe it as 'the capability to navigate change'. Research that focuses on transitioning students both internationally and in Australia points more towards the sustained difficulties that transitioning students encounter (e.g., Baker et al., 2018; Bathmaker, 2013; Chesters & Watson, 2014b; Fuller, 2018; King et al., 2015; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017; Southgate et al., 2014; Tett et al., 2017). In contrast, the current study recognises the positive role that adaptability can play in managing and ameliorating challenging and difficult situations. The ability and willingness to be adaptable appears to be significant: it was demonstrated by all the participants and was most evident during their attendance at university.

The stories of the participants illustrate their readiness to find creative ways to adapt to their changing circumstances as needed. This creativity involved the application of strategies which emphasised their ability to confront and manage difficult situations primarily on their own. The use of initiative by the participants in this study complemented their resilient approach to the challenges they faced in the early days of transition. This involved, for example, reducing their working hours, resigning from some work commitments, designing study spaces and embracing independent learning approaches. This outcome is supported by studies which have found that an ability to be adaptable and to take charge of their own learning successes is closely associated with academic retention and success (Christie et al., 2013; Fuller, 2014; Maizatul, Mohd, Norhaslinda & Norhafizah, 2012). Fuller (2014, p. 15), while focusing on high

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school students in England, found that students who were 'high educational aspirers' firmly believed that educational success was highly dependent upon their own efforts and the hard work they were prepared to put into being successful. This reflects similar outcomes by Christie et al. (2013), whose UK study noted the sense of responsibility students had for their own learning outcomes.

It is feasible to expect adult students to take measures to manage the demands of participation in education. Mezirow (1981) recognises the value of agency as an important precursor to a more rewarding learning experience and one that builds a sense of autonomy and authenticity. It is his assertion that 'new commitments become mediated by a new critical sense of agency and personal responsibility' (Mezirow, 1981, p. 9). The importance of agency and willingness to ensure a successful learning experience is supported by Christie et al. (2013), who noted the ability of learners to actively seek solutions to problems to be a key factor in successful transition. This recourse to agency was an approach exemplified by the Diploma students in the current study, for whom the knowledge gaps encountered between TAFE and university were considerable. However, the perception held by the learners in this study that the complete onus of responsibility for academic success rested on their shoulders raises the question of why this perception persisted throughout the first semester of university, in possibly the most difficult phase of transition. Perhaps this is because, as the study reveals, while pathways encourage articulation to university and academic support is usually available, there can be systemic silence regarding the tensions that students often experience during transition while learning to adapt to new situations. Ultimately, as highlighted by the participants in this study, a lack of acknowledgement of the difficulties students in transition may face when such tensions arise places the burden of management of these tensions on the students. Certainly, the participants in the current study believed it was incumbent upon themselves to take responsibility for their own successes and failures, without much help from others. For example, Aishia had described the need to take a '*mature*' approach to university study and for him this meant that '*you think for yourself and do stuff for yourself*'.

As noted previously, it is the ability to embrace independent approaches to learning that can often be the difference between a positive and a negative transition experience (Christie et al., 2013). Watson et al. (2013) suggest that universities that take a supportive role, both pastoral and academic, may be more likely to engender successful learning outcomes for their VET award holders. This is a potent argument given the emphasis on inclusive approaches to higher education espoused by the Australian Qualifications Framework (2013), which encourages diverse learners to consider a university qualification. Matheson and Sutcliffe (2017) likewise note the increased diversity of higher education student populations but suggest that acknowledgement of the diversity and consequent challenges students face is still largely under-recognised.

Resilience

Closely related to the ability to be adaptable is the readiness to show resilience in the face of difficulties. Resilience has been described as the ability of adult learners to be 'self-reliant and persistent for academic success' or having the 'special determination' to succeed (Kasworm, 2010, p. 52). The resilience shown by the participants in this study was evident from the first interviews when it became clear that they had each overcome quite significant barriers and potential obstacles in order to engage in learning at TAFE. The participants relied on continued resilience at university to deal with the challenges there. Sheard (2009, p. 190) in referring to 'hardiness' states that the degree to which 'conscientiousness' is present in students determined to succeed is often a more significant determinant of academic success than intelligence.

Resilience in the current study was evidenced in many ways. For example, Connor had to deal with a growing sense of alienation from his core social group, who could not understand why he had left his job to study at TAFE. The resilience he showed at that time, not only to this kind of opposition but to the emotional conflict it produced, remained apparent as he continued his studies at university under the growing pressure from himself and others to work instead. Aishia had fought against ongoing antagonism by other students while at TAFE. As he noted in his first interview, these students had placed pressure on him to leave TAFE, but he was determined to stay to gain articulation to university. His resilience was tested even more at university when

he had to cope with not only greater academic demands but a growing determination to express his true sexual identity. Briony found a source of inner courage to pick up the pieces of her life and restart her learning journey at TAFE. This alone was a demonstration of the remarkable resilience this young person drew upon. She demonstrated a growing resilience at university when the workload and subject content tested her determination to persevere.

The Diploma students too had faced obstacles that tested their resolve and ability to be resilient. When Tammy made the decision to go to TAFE she had the added responsibilities that come with marriage and a family. Significantly, her responsibilities and the increased workload at university only served to consolidate her resolve to achieve despite the many frustrations she experienced in trying to find a workable balance. Both Sophie and Michelle exhibited a great deal of resilience on their learning pathways. The decision to go to university tested their own and others' perspectives about their academic abilities. Nevertheless, in the face of the greater academic and technological demands they experienced at university, they demonstrated their determination to succeed. Similarly, Alice had tested her own limits by enrolling in TAFE and then again by deciding to continue on to university. As she stated, she would no longer have to '*sit in a corner*' and be afraid. On the contrary, she was seemingly very self-confident and proud of her academic achievements.

Resilience was manifested by not only drawing on their inner reserves of strength but actively finding ways to deal with and pre-empt new and challenging situations. The decisions they made to fit the new demands of university into their lives exemplify their independent and determined approach. Cercone (2008, p. 148) describes the characteristics learners often bring to the learning experience: 'independence, willingness to take initiative, persistence in learning, self-discipline, self-confidence and the desire to learn more'. These were characteristics all the participants in the current study demonstrated at various times and to varying degrees, as circumstances dictated.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the possibility of adult learning as a transformative experience. In particular, it has investigated transformation to perspectives, identity and aspirations. The participants in this study were all focused on achieving academic outcomes in their learning journeys that would enable them to create futures for themselves that were compatible with their aspirations. To do this, they had to first reflect on, question and challenge those perspectives that might otherwise have imposed limits contradictory to their aspirations. Re-examination and reflection on long-held perspectives brought about changes to self-perception and, subsequently, to identity and aspirations as the participants engaged successfully in learning.

For most of the participants, simply getting to university was an accomplishment they could be proud of and satisfied with. For some, the gains they then experienced at university and the added confidence this created were the catalysts to consider further achievements in the future. This alone seemed to point towards a new self-confidence which was both humbling and inspiring to witness. As the study shows, long-held perceptions of destiny do not have to be maintained or go unchallenged. As Freire's (1970, p. 35) notion of 'conscientization' contends, and Transformational Learning Theory maintains, awareness of perspectives can be the catalyst for change. This was clearly demonstrated by the seven participants in this study, who made conscious choices that ultimately brought about transformations to many aspects of their perspectives, identity and aspirations.

Another significant finding of this study was that adaptability and resilience were common threads for these participants despite their different backgrounds, ages and other personal characteristics. The capacity for adaptation and resilience appears to have played a significant supporting role in their learning experiences, particularly in the first six months of their transition to university.

The following chapter presents the conclusion to the study and recommends ways in which the student experience at university may be maximised to bring about transformative outcomes. The chapter then offers suggestions for future directions in research on transition and transformation in higher education.

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Chapter 7.   Transformation: The journey continues

Introduction

This chapter presents the overall conclusions to the study based on findings related to Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 which respectively considered the research sub-questions and the overarching research question. This thesis has explored the potential for learning to be transformational through the experiences of seven adult learners transitioning from TAFE into higher education in Australia. Although previous research has examined transition in some detail, more research in the field of adult learning experiences is needed to add to understandings of transition and transformation. This study goes some way towards filling this gap.

As a conceptual basis for this study, Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1990), which focuses on adult learning and the importance of reflection as a precursor to transformation, has been relevant to the narrative research design of the study and to the development of the research questions. It is Mezirow's (1990) contention that transformation through learning is an exclusively adult domain guided by the beliefs, perspectives and life experiences that only adults can reflect upon.

In this study, Mezirow's conceptual framework has offered a comprehensive guide to the development of understandings of how the perspectives, identity and aspirations of adults may be transformed through formal learning. Fundamentally, by relying on tenets of the emancipatory effect of learning, Transformational Learning Theory has complemented and supported the focus of the research into transition and the transformative potential of learning. The study has been guided by the following research sub-questions:

1. *How do students articulate their reasons for attending TAFE prior to university?*

2. *What influences the decision of TAFE students to articulate to higher education?*

3. *What do students experience in the transition from one sector to another?*

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The sub-questions fall under the overarching research question:

> *In what ways may the experience of adult learning transform individual perspectives, identity and aspirations?*

This study has highlighted the outcomes of the learning experiences of the participating students in the research. In the process of understanding their experiences of transition from TAFE to higher education, seven recommendations are made. Table 7.1 outlines these recommendations as they align with each of the research questions.

Table 7.1: Research questions and recommendations

Research questions	Recommendations
Research sub-question 1 How do students articulate their reasons for attending TAFE prior to university?	**Recommendation 1:** Promote TAFE as a valuable VET provider and potential pathway to higher education.
Research sub-question 2 What influences the decision of TAFE students to articulate to higher education?	**Recommendation 2:** Recognise and promote TAFE as a place where student confidence and aspirations for the future can be built
Research sub-question 3 What do students experience in the transition from one sector to another?	**Recommendation 3:** Provide timely online bridging programs for pathways students **Recommendation 4:** Commit to ongoing inter-sectoral communications **Recommendation 5:** Encourage student resourcefulness
Overarching research question In what ways may the experience of adult learning transform individual perspectives, identity and aspirations?	**Recommendation 6:** Provide measures that encourage a sense of belonging **Recommendation 7:** Encourage FiF intergenerational participation in higher education

Research questions and recommendations

This section provides details of the conclusions drawn from the research questions and the relevant recommendations. It first considers the three research sub-questions and then the overarching research question.

Research sub-question 1

> *How do students articulate their reasons for attending TAFE prior to university?*

The participants in this study cited a number of vocational reasons for enrolling in a TAFE course before applying for university. The three TPC students (Connor, Aishia and Briony) had enrolled in this particular enabling course to realise different aspirations. Connor required the TPC to apply for the NSW Police Force, while the TPC provided a bridging qualification to university for Aishia and Briony. The Diploma students (Tammy, Sophie, Michelle and Alice) had all attended TAFE to gain an Enrolled Nurse qualification.

Another finding relevant to the first sub-question was that TAFE was viewed by the participants in this study as a safe place from which to develop the requisite skills and qualifications for work or further study. Their individual stories (presented in Chapter 4) highlight this aspect of the TAFE experience. TAFE has historically been viewed as a place which provides accessible education for all (Goozee, 1995) and, as noted particularly by participants Aishia and Briony, it was an important first step on the adult learning journey to be 'ready' for university.

However, as noted in Chapter 2, TAFE is currently undergoing significant restructuring, which has undermined to some extent its efficacy as the public face of VET. It is nevertheless important that pathways progression to university for students like the study participants continue to be promoted by governments in Australia as a viable response to equitable educational outcomes. The TAFE Strategic Plan (TAFE NSW, 2016) notes the role of TAFE as a place where the needs of diverse learners can be accommodated in an inclusive environment (TAFE NSW, 2016). Most recently, in 2018 the Australian Government has considered the ongoing role of TAFE and notes that, among its other roles, TAFE can 'uniquely provide the most appropriate pathway for mature-age learners with access to pathways qualifications in order to undertake further study' (DET, 2018b, p. 6). This suggests a promising future for a currently embattled organisation. Recommendation 1 is based on these findings.

Recommendation 1: Promote TAFE as a valuable VET provider and potential pathway to higher education

Governments in Australia need to continue to promote and recognise TAFE as a valuable VET provider. The adult participants in this study viewed TAFE as a suitable and beneficial place to recommence their studies. The stories of the first-in-family (FiF) students, Connor, Briony and Tammy, highlighted the value of TAFE as a first step on this learning journey. This was further endorsed by Sophie, who had a learning disability and who consequently believed that TAFE was a viable means to a vocational qualification. The view of TAFE as a valuable asset is supported by research which demonstrates that students often hold the belief that TAFE will 'set them up for success' (Gore et al., 2017). Pardy and Seddon (2011, p. 63) also note that TAFE has the capacity to 'underpin people's capabilities in taking a next step in their respective life courses', which may include career and/or study aspirations. A recent report from Youth Action, Uniting & Mission Australia (2018) reveals that the VET system represents an important step in transitions to further study or the workplace and that it is a place where aspirations for a better life can be realised. The report goes on to cite the important role that TAFE as the public provider of VET plays in providing equitable access for all students, a situation not necessarily offered by other providers (Youth Action, Uniting & Mission Australia, 2018).

Despite the current changes in the VET sector (discussed in Chapter 2), the Australian Government recognises and supports the important role played by public providers (TAFE institutes) in the broader VET sector. Approximately $3.1 billion has been allocated for VET in 2017–18, which acknowledges the importance of TAFE as a pathway to higher education (DET, 2018b, p. 3). The Australian Government is currently examining the impact that new funding changes may have on TAFE as a pathway to higher education, with a view to '[facilitating] more interconnected tertiary and training sectors' with the expectation of improved links and optimised outcomes for students (DET, 2018b, p. 13). Objectives such as those expressed in the report suggest that greater levels of ongoing liaison between the VET and higher education sectors would be valuable in order to promote and provide ready access to viable educational pathways. Recognition and promotion of the value of TAFE could further

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be achieved through varying media, including traditional mediums like television but also social media platforms, in line with evolving forms of communication.

Research sub-question 2

> *What influences the decision of TAFE students to articulate to higher education?*

The participants in this study were influenced to articulate to higher education by a number of factors, including greater levels of confidence and teacher encouragement to build on a TAFE qualification. The study shows that TAFE was an important educational space where the participants developed confidence in their academic abilities and in which most felt nurtured and guided. Their experiences are further indicative of the fact that TAFE helped to confirm new perspectives on the participants' student identity and academic capabilities. These experiences helped to transform some personal beliefs, which in turn influenced the decision of some to build on their original learning aspirations by applying for articulation to university. Recommendation 2 is based on these findings.

Recommendation 2: Recognise and promote TAFE as a place where student confidence and aspirations for the future can be built
When considering the transformative potential of learning, it is important to emphasise how TAFE can provide an important first step on the adult learning journey. This can involve new ways of identifying the self as a student with the potential to aspire to new career and learning goals. Developing new perspectives such as these can be particularly important for building the confidence of those students who articulate to higher education, such as FiF students, students with a disability, and other potentially disadvantaged cohorts.

As noted in a recent report from VET in NSW (2018, p. 9) the VET sector in Australia serves as a 'crucial pathway' for young people seeking a way to increase their engagement in education or in the workforce. Both the Department of Education and Training (DET, 2018b, p. 18) and TAFE NSW (2016) note the unique role that TAFE can serve as a learning space for students in which to develop confidence. This is

particularly important for those learners who may be vulnerable or disadvantaged in some way.

Research sub-question 3

What do students experience in the transition from one sector to another?

Findings from this study indicate that the participants experienced some significant challenges in the early days of transition, most notably due to the gap they reported caused by the educational differences encountered. This gap was most evident in the need to be independent and technologically competent learners at university, and while all the participants noted this anomaly it was especially problematic for the Diploma students entering the second year of a university course through credit transfer. This was a finding not uncommon in the research into direct credit transfer (e.g., Christie et al., 2013; Cram & Watson, 2008; Delly et al., 2015; Logan et al., 2017; Penesis et al., 2015; Smith & Brennan Kemmis, 2014; Wu & Myhill, 2017). As noted by Reay et al. (2009, p. 1112), for any student entering university with a school or college qualification, the 'enormous leap' into higher education can be daunting.

While students graduating from TAFE have clearly managed their studies and achieved the competency standards expected, there seems to be some level of misunderstanding about how much support pathways students may require at university. The study has highlighted how students themselves articulated gaps in their knowledge. Arguably, students directly entering second year are more in need of support than other students, simply because they have not had the same degree of scaffolding available in first year and essential to second-year understandings and academic skills (Hebdon, 2015; Watson et al., 2013). As Christie et al. (2013) note, direct entry students are often invisible at an institutional level and thus their experiences are often under-investigated.

A second significant finding in the current study was that during the early transition phase the learners needed to draw upon inner resources of adaptability and resilience in order to manage the many challenges they faced. The study revealed that transition to university was something of a rollercoaster in the first six months as the participants

experienced both challenges and successes. The challenges were, however, also the catalyst for expressions of self-responsibility, primarily evident in the response by all the participants to strategically adapt to the difficulties they encountered and in so doing display a resilient attitude towards their experiences. They implemented strategies to manage the increased workload at university, including reducing paid work hours, creating study timetables and independently developing their e-learning and other IT skills. The participants' stories have shown that the ability to navigate change when faced with challenging situations was a key factor in their successful learning outcomes and is a potentially important contributor to academic success and transformation. Recommendations 3, 4 and 5 are based on these findings.

Recommendation 3: Provide timely online bridging programs for pathways students
Well-formulated online bridging programs are needed that provide a means of reducing the academic gap often experienced during transition from one educational sector to another. Such programs can also offer support additional to students' own strategic responses to challenges. However, the timing of these programs is potentially important. For example, Wilson et al. (2016) believe that access to bridging programs is particularly vital in the first three weeks of transition. Abbott-Chapman (2011), however, argues that preparing students *prior* to university enrolment is a key factor, along with continuing support throughout the first year of university. Therefore, bridging programs could begin before commencement of the degree, building skills and knowledge before university entry. This could potentially reduce the 'catch-up' phase some students' experience.

Inclusion of online orientation programs may be a further means by which students can begin to build the academic knowledge and understandings needed for higher education. Bowles et al. (2014) and Wilson et al. (2016) suggest that bridging programs should include learning tools for new pathways students, such as online self-learning portals. Weadon and Baker (2015) support the role of blended learning for students newly transitioning from TAFE to university, as a means of enabling the development of learning skills in different domains. These include online learning, face-to-face

learning and the incorporation of some of these learning activities on TAFE campuses (Weadon & Baker, 2015).

Programs may also include a focus on development of essential academic literacy skills, which may help to build confidence and assist in bridging knowledge gaps for adult learners. Indications from the experiences of the Diploma students in the current study suggest that programs which include development of skills in independent learning, research and e-learning may be the most valuable as targeted support for pathways students with credit transfer. The need for these kinds of skills was further highlighted in the analysis of this study, which revealed that the participants were accustomed to a system at TAFE that did not promote independent study or place emphasis on e-learning to the extent that university did. Consequently, the Diploma students reported that they struggled at times to keep up with the study demands that direct entry to second year of university entailed.

Recommendation 4: Commit to ongoing inter-sectoral communications
Indications from the current study are that educators involved in the pathway from TAFE to university need to effectively communicate with each other on a regular and ongoing basis to best support transitioning students and to maximise the potential for transformative outcomes for students. Abbott-Chapman (2006; 2011) states that objectives emphasising equitable outcomes must consider liaison as an important step in the process. Findings from the current study suggest that some of the frustrations the participants attributed to the gaps in knowledge during their transition may have been minimised had there been closer sectoral links. Cram and Watson (2008) and Watson (2008) support the need for closer collaboration between the TAFE and higher education sectors, if the experiences of students transitioning from TAFE are to be improved.

Inter-sectoral discussion could include regular close mapping of course content across the sectors to provide transparency of skills and knowledge sets, and a review of the academic skills students have on articulation from TAFE. Closer mapping could identify and address potential gaps in knowledge that students with credit transfer may experience (Watson, et al., 2013). This mapping would assist not only in reducing the

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gap often experienced by transitioning students but also in building positive learning experiences.

Recommendation 5: Encourage student resourcefulness

Development of student resourcefulness through encouragement of characteristics such as adaptability and resilience may contribute to a more satisfactory and successful transition. Collie, Holliman and Martin (2017) argue that places of learning that provide an emphasis on the relationship between 'effort and achievement' may go some way towards helping students understand the self-efficacy of developing an ability to adapt to the demands of university. In other words, teachers can help students understand that achievement rests on effort. One way to encourage an adaptive, resilient approach to learning is to create situations where students draw upon their inner resourcefulness when faced with the demands of university learning. Wilson et al. (2016, p. 1024) suggest that creating and building a sense of 'resourcefulness' in transitioning students can add to overall success in the new environment. In turn, these successes may pave the way for potential transformations to the ways in which learners view not only their learning abilities but also their learning aspirations.

Resourcefulness can be developed through focused orientation sessions that map the academic commitment expected in terms of study hours required, promoting the need to balance other demands on student time and encouraging a self-regulatory approach (Wilson et al., 2016). Anderson et al. (2016) suggest holding sessions with previous year students at the beginning of the university semester. Listening to the experiences of students from both TAFE and higher education who had gone before them may help to build an understanding of the need for greater self-reliance in the new learning environment.

Overarching research question

> *In what ways may the experience of adult learning transform individual perspectives, identity and aspirations?*

The experience of learning for the participants in this study indicated transformation to perspectives, identity and aspirations. These transformations were most apparent in

changes to notions of self and the future. Previous chapters of this thesis have outlined the development of transformative outcomes for the participants that began at TAFE, where a solid foundation of confidence in abilities was created. Research suggests developing confidence and encouraging a greater belief in academic capability (Blair et al., 2010) may promote new aspirations in professional goals and ambitions (Høj Jensen & Jetten, 2016). The building of confidence was perhaps the most important outcome of the initial foray into learning for the participants, as this enabled them to reappraise long-held perspectives.

Changes to perspectives and identity

As noted in Chapter 2, which presented the conceptual underpinning of the research, it is Mezirow's (1990) contention that adult learning has the potential to be a transformative experience. Mezirow (1975) came to this conclusion following his early investigation into the experiences of a group of mature-age students returning to education as adults. Following his observations of this group, Mezirow determined that, through learning and with reflection, changes to habits of mind or meaning perspectives can occur and, with this change, transformation to self-concept or identity may also develop (1990). There is an immense sense of empowerment in this premise, as it encourages the notion that one's thoughts, ideas, beliefs and future are not immutable. Colley et al. (2003) suggest that agency plays an important part in the decision-making processes of students as they construct their identities. Indeed, the stories of the participants presented in Chapter 4 of this thesis indicated that changes to perspectives and to the way they reflected on their capabilities had led the participants to begin to rethink and reformulate their learner identity. This is an important finding, particularly as Brouwer et al. (2016) and Anderson et al. (2016) note there is a relationship between building a student identity and ongoing academic success. The development of this relationship was evident for each of the participants as they successfully completed TAFE and continued to build on their successes at university as they settled into the role of a university student.

However, it took time for the participants to adapt to university, to understand the academic demands of the new environment and to feel that they belonged. In other

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words, they needed to be able to reimagine themselves as university students. Mezirow (2000, p. 18) contends that the dispositions we hold create a portfolio of 'meaning schemes' which in turn shape our 'idealised self-image'. This accords with Wilson et al. (2016, p. 1024), who refer to the need for transitioning students to have a sense of 'personal fit' as a university student, which comes with a sense of belonging. The importance of developing a sense of belonging to the university is supported by unmasking and refuting any notions of a singular, homogenous identity of what a university student is (Cunninghame, 2017; King et al., 2015; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017). Identification as a university student can additionally include having a sense of connection with others in the university environment (Wilson et al., 2016) and establishing a sense of being part of the student body (Anderson et al., 2016; Brouwer et al., 2016; Tett et al., 2017). By such means, it is likely that the student experience in the first year of university will be more enriching and inclusive.

Changes to perspectives and aspirations

Mezirow (1978, p. 101) considers the role of the cultural 'assumptions' individuals have adopted that contribute to self-concept or constructs of identity. He argues that these assumptions, which exert great influence over the way we think about self and place in the world, in turn lead to reliving 'patterns' or culturally determined expectations of how we live our lives and ultimately the goals we set for ourselves: our aspirations (Mezirow, 1978, p. 101). In other words, the ways in which individuals view their world, their beliefs, their habits of thought and their values may all be subsumed within the taken-for-granted assumptions of self and relationship to the social and aspirational boundaries that define that self. This reinforces the importance of thinking about and questioning the habitual cognitions which may impede or obstruct transformation in the realm of aspirations.

Ultimately, as the participants' stories have attested, the confidence gained at both TAFE and university led to significant re-evaluations and transformations to aspirations. At the beginning of the university semester, all the participants had spoken only of wanting to complete their university degree. However, after six months of study, four participants expressed their intention to continue to postgraduate study.

Through their university participation, FiF students Connor and Tammy envisaged personal and career futures vastly different from their previous expectations. Aishia too became more ambitious when considering new pathways for the future that involved postgraduate study, while Sophie and Alice similarly reappraised their career ambitions.

Potential for intergenerational change

This study has further indicated that aspirational transformations experienced by individual learners may in turn be reflected in the lives of other generations to follow. This finding is supported by research from Burke, Bennett, Burgess, Gray and Southgate (2016) which indicates that parental and family influences can significantly shape individual aspirations and belief in self as a student. In turn this may encourage other generations to aspire to university. This was exemplified in the case of Tammy: the academic successes she achieved accentuated her wish to encourage her children to aspire to university, a significant transformation in her views. Likewise, Connor had expressed a desire to be a role model to future children by encouraging them to aspire to university. It seems likely, therefore, that learning can potentially be a portal for intergenerational transformation. Research in the field of FiF students lends support to this notion (Blair et al., 2010; O'Shea, 2016; Smith, 2011). Recommendations 6 and 7 are based on these findings.

Recommendation 6: Provide measures that encourage a sense of belonging

To optimise the potential for transformative outcomes for students, findings from this study indicate that higher education providers must consider implementing, early in the transition stage, measures that promote a sense of belonging to the university. Burke et al. (2016, p. 55) suggest that 'legitimisation as a proper and deserving' student of higher education centres on discourses of belonging. A sense of connectedness may be built by encouraging pedagogies that promote working together in pairs and groups. Research shows that placing students in small groups can often enhance interaction towards learning (Anderson, 2016; Crosling, 2017; Masika & Jones, 2016) and help build 'peer capital' (Brouwer et al., 2016, p. 110). Indeed, if Mezirow's (2000) contention of the value of dialectical discourse is accurate, then it is important that

students be provided with opportunities to engage in critical reflection and the testing of new premises with others.

Research also suggests that programs offered in the early days of transition encouraging students to build social networks within the university can increase engagement and raise aspirations (Anderson et al., 2016; Brouwer et al., 2016; Burke, 2016; Mezirow, 1978; Tett et al., 2017; Zepke, 2013). Perhaps, as Bathmaker et al. (2013, p. 6) assert, over time some students learn the rules of the 'game' and through active involvement in university life—for example, through membership of university societies and clubs—create more access to useful capital and ultimately find their place in the system.

Recommendation 7: Encourage FiF intergenerational participation in higher education
The three FiF students in the current study were working throughout their degree program, which added to the pressures they were experiencing during the transition phase. Discourses centred around equity and access to higher education could therefore include incentives that ease the financial burden some FiF students experience. This may go some way towards alleviating potentially disruptive or discouraging outcomes. Research indicates that FiF students are highly likely to come from a low socio-economic status background, necessitating participation in the workplace while they study (King et al., 2015, p. 8). The struggle to balance the ensuing study and work demands may increase the likelihood of FiF students not only eventually discontinuing their own studies but also discouraging other family members from attending university because of these additional pressures.

Section summary
The findings and recommendations presented here are based on the outcomes of research that has focused on a specific group of learners engaged in the transition experience. The experiences of the participants in this study attest to the notion that learning can be life-changing, whether through vindication for taking on the task of commitment to further education such as a degree program or through the personal benefits derived from the learning experience. The benefits highlighted in this study

included changes to perspectives that incorporated a reimagining of the self and the opportunity to reimagine the future. There is still much more to discover about the challenges and rewards that learning can bring and the different ways individuals experience the changes that accompany transition from the vocational sector to higher education. The potential for change and transformation through learning is an area of inquiry to be developed further but, as this small study shows, it has significance in the field of transition.

Contributions of the study

This study provides important understandings about how support for students can be optimised to ensure they have the skills needed to participate effectively in the workplace and to successfully complete their studies. This research contributes to knowledge in the field of transition in two key ways. First, by enabling the voices of the participants to be heard through first-person narratives, the study provides an important dimension to transition research. Previous research has provided depth and richness to the knowledge base about the transition experiences of adult learners. However, by foregrounding the narratives in the current study and thus drawing on the first hand perspectives of the learners, deeper insights into the lived experiences of transition have been made possible. This outcome further provides opportunities for educators engaged in adult learning to consider how best to facilitate a positive and rewarding student experience.

The second contribution of the study lies in the in-depth focus on the potential for learning to be a transformative experience. This is an important contribution as it raises the prospect of adult lives being changed in significant ways as a result of learning. In so doing it reinforces the efficacy of Australian government initiatives which have increased opportunities for equity and access to adult learning for all Australians. In turn this suggests that educators have a responsibility to optimise the conditions for transformation to be made possible, thereby potentially creating a learning experience that goes much further than accumulating knowledge. Research indicates that when students test their perspectives in safe and supportive places, transformative learning may occur (Brouwer et al., 2016; Hermann, Bager-Elsborg & McCune, 2016; Masika

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& Jones, 2015; Matheson & Sutcliffe, 2017). Results from the current study indicate that transformations can begin at TAFE and continue at university and can include reimagining identities and futures. The participants in this study have demonstrated that when students, through learning, aspire to change their lives the assumption of 'This is who I am!' may transform into the question 'Who do I want to be?' perhaps making possible the realisation of aspirational transformations in the process.

Limitations and implications of the study

This study focused on student transition from two TAFE pathways into one university. It is possible that exploring the transition experiences of students at just one university may have elicited institute-centric experiences, rather than those which may have been elicited by simultaneously canvassing a number of universities. It is also likely that a larger number of participants would add to understandings of the transition experience thereby increasing the generalisability of the results of this study. It is important to acknowledge the singular nature of the research in an Australian context; however, the broader discussion has incorporated research from a wider, international field. Finally, the study covered a period in the lives of the participants which followed them from the completion of TAFE to the end of the first semester of university. It may be assumed that a longer study could offer even more insights into transition experiences, simply because of the greater time factor in which these experiences may be developed and monitored.

Nonetheless, the seven participants in this study have provided valuable data and deep, rich insights into the transition experience. They came from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. They were from varying age groups and had diverse lifestyles. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that, though they comprise a small sample, these participants represent a realistic snapshot of students engaged in transition in Australia. In the process of sharing their experiences, the participants have provided deeper understandings of what is involved in the lived experiences of transition and how it impacts on a deeply personal level.

Directions for future research

More research is needed to extend on the findings presented here. To address the limits of this research and the gaps yet to be filled, four avenues for future research are recommended, outlined below.

Build firsthand narratives to develop understanding of issues in transition

It is important to give greater space to the voices of students in order to build strength-based approaches to the experiences of transitioning learners. The literature review in Chapter 2 identified that, while the field of transition research continues to grow, there is still insufficient research with a focus on student narratives of the lived experiences of transition. By recording the stories of transitioning students, it may be possible to extend educators' understandings of their experiences. By listening to the firsthand accounts of learners, the depth and complexity of transition will be better understood, and measures can be introduced to enrich the transition experience.

Explore the influence of intrinsic attributes on student academic success

Research exploring the roles that attributes like adaptability and resilience may play in student academic success is proposed to add to understandings of the potential relationship between such attributes and students' perseverance in their studies. Evaluation of the ways in which these attributes may impact the student experience could provide insight into the causes of attrition and substantiate ways to reduce 'dropout' rates in the first year of higher education.

Map intergenerational aspirations to higher education

Research into intergenerational influence on aspirations is sparse. Smith (2011), however, argues that, by simply sharing their accounts of their own experiences of higher education, students can provide encouragement to other family members to consider university as an option. Results from the current study suggest there is scope for to strengthen intergenerational aspirations to attend university, evidenced particularly in the narratives of the FiF participants. Their stories suggest that research exploring such trends across the generations of FiF students could be a valuable

indicator of the potential for higher education to change the lives and stories of the generations that come after those who are the educational pioneers in their families.

Investigate transformative outcomes of adult learning

It would be interesting to determine the viability of adult education as a long-term agent of change. Longitudinal research in adult learning could focus on the ways learning may result in transformations and whether these transformations are sustained or lost over time. Research could include investigation of the potential variability of the manifestations of transformation in people's lives—for example, in changes beyond perspectives, identity and aspirations. In turn, outcomes of this research could inform sectoral practices inclusive of transition students in both VET and higher education.

Final words

Embarking on this study, I sought to clarify and understand just what the transition experience involved for students entering university via a TAFE pathway. I hoped that developing this understanding would allow me to identify ways in which pathways students could be supported and encouraged at a personal and institutional level. From my earlier work as a learning advisor, I also wanted to investigate the potential for learning to be an experience that could transform the lives of transitioning students. I believe this study has achieved these goals and that Transformational Learning Theory has provided a comprehensive conceptual framework to underpin the findings.

The participants in this study have been inspiring in their 'boots and all' approach to the challenges and demands faced during transition. They have demonstrated a constant willingness to persevere with their studies, to manage the challenges and to look positively into the future by drawing on inner resources to experience transformational outcomes in different ways. Through firsthand accounts, they have shared the challenges and rewards of learning and have shown the complexity, often underrated and under-recognised by adult education providers, that transition can involve. In telling their stories, the participants remind us that transition via educational pathways is exciting, daunting, challenging and rewarding, with these outcomes often being cyclical as new situations are confronted and experiences successfully processed. By

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choosing to embark on an extended learning career, they have demonstrated that it is possible to reconstruct self-beliefs, redesign futures and, ultimately, transform lives in ways previously unimagined.

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Appendix 1.   AQF qualification type learning outcome descriptors

Table A 1: AQF qualification learning outcomes, levels 1–6 (AQF, 2nd ed., January 2013)

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Graduates at this level will have knowledge and skills for initial work, community involvement and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have knowledge and skills for work in a defined context and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have theoretical and practical knowledge and skills for work and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have theoretical and practical knowledge and skills for specialised and/or skilled work and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have specialised knowledge and skills for skilled/paraprofessional work and/or further learning
Graduates at this level will have foundational knowledge for everyday life, further learning and preparation for initial work	Graduates at this level will have basic factual, technical and procedural knowledge of a defined area of work and learning	Graduates at this level will have factual, technical, procedural and some theoretical knowledge of a specific area of work and learning	Graduates at this level will have broad factual, technical and some theoretical knowledge of a specific area or a broad field of work and learning	Graduates at this level will have technical and theoretical knowledge in a specific area or a broad field of work and learning
Graduates at this level will have foundational cognitive, technical and communication skills to: • undertake defined routine activities • identify and report simple issues and problems	Graduates at this level will have basic cognitive, technical and communication skills to apply appropriate methods, tools, materials and readily available information to: • undertake defined activities • provide solutions to a limited range of predictable problems	Graduates at this level will have a range of cognitive, technical and communication skills to select and apply a specialised range of methods, tools, materials and information to: • complete routine activities • provide and transmit solutions to predictable and sometimes unpredictable problems	Graduates at this level will have a broad range of cognitive, technical and communication skills to select and apply a range of methods, tools, materials and information to: • complete routine and non-routine activities • provide and transmit solutions to a variety of predictable and sometimes unpredictable problems	Graduates at this level will have a broad range of cognitive, technical and communication skills to select and apply methods and technologies to: • analyse information to complete a range of activities • provide and transmit solutions to sometimes complex problems • transmit information and skills to others
Graduates at this level will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy in highly structured and stable contexts and within narrow parameters	Graduates at this level will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy and limited judgement in structured and stable contexts and within narrow parameters	Graduates at this level will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy and judgement and to take limited responsibility in known and stable contexts within established parameters	Graduates at this level will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, judgement and limited responsibility in known or changing contexts and within established parameters	Graduates at this level will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, judgement and defined responsibility in known or changing contexts and within broad but established parameters

Table A 2: AQF qualification learning outcomes, levels 7–10 (AQF, 2nd ed., January 2013)

Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9	Level 10
Graduates at this level will have broad knowledge and skills for paraprofessional/highly skilled work and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have broad and coherent knowledge and skills for professional work and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have advanced knowledge and skills for professional/highly skilled work and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have specialised knowledge and skills for research, and/or professional practice and/or further learning	Graduates at this level will have systematic and critical understanding of a complex field of learning and specialised research skills for the advancement of learning and/or for professional practice
Graduates at this level will have broad theoretical and technical knowledge of a specific area or a broad field of work and learning	Graduates at this level will have broad and coherent theoretical and technical knowledge with depth in one or more disciplines or areas of practice	Graduates at this level will have advanced theoretical and technical knowledge in one or more disciplines or areas of practice	Graduates at this level will have advanced and integrated understanding of a complex body of knowledge in one or more disciplines or areas of practice	Graduates at this level will have systemic and critical understanding of a substantial and complex body of knowledge at the frontier of a discipline or area of professional practice
Graduates at this level will have a broad range of cognitive, technical and communication skills to select and apply methods and technologies to: • analyse information to complete a range of activities • interpret and transmit solutions to unpredictable and sometimes complex problems • transmit information and skills to others	Graduates at this level will have well-developed cognitive, technical and communication skills to select and apply methods and technologies to: • analyse and evaluate information to complete a range of activities • analyse, generate and transmit solutions to unpredictable and sometimes complex problems • transmit knowledge, skills and ideas to others	Graduates at this level will have advanced cognitive, technical and communication skills to select and apply methods and technologies to: • analyse critically, evaluate and transform information to complete a range of activities • analyse, generate and transmit solutions to complex problems • transmit knowledge, skills and ideas to others	Graduates at this level will have expert, specialised cognitive and technical skills in a body of knowledge or practice to independently: • analyse critically, reflect on and synthesise complex information, problems, concepts and theories • research and apply established theories to a body of knowledge or practice • interpret and transmit knowledge, skills and ideas to specialist and non-specialist audiences	Graduates at this level will have expert, specialised cognitive, technical and research skills in a discipline area to independently and systematically: • engage in critical reflection, synthesis and evaluation • develop, adapt and implement research methodologies to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice • disseminate and promote new insights to peers and the community • generate original knowledge and understanding to make a substantial contribution to a discipline or area of professional practice

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Graduates at this level will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, judgement and defined responsibility:	Graduates at this level will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, well-developed judgement and responsibility:	Graduates at this level will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, well-developed judgement, adaptability and responsibility as a practitioner or learner	Graduates at this level will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, expert judgement, adaptability and responsibility as a practitioner or learner	Graduates at this level will apply knowledge and skills to demonstrate autonomy, authoritative judgement, adaptability and responsibility as an expert and leading practitioner or scholar
• in contexts that are subject to change within broad parameters to provide specialist advice and functions	• in contexts that require self-directed work and learning within broad parameters to provide specialist advice and functions			

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Appendix 2.   Survey questions for pilot study

Questionnaire

This survey asks you to consider what challenges you might face when you start your university course and what strategies you might use to help overcome any challenges. It is hoped that your answers will contribute to better ways for both TAFE and Wollongong University to provide a rewarding and effective learning experience for you and future students. Your privacy and confidentiality is guaranteed as no names will be used in reference to these responses.

Age ---------

Male---- Female----

What is the main language spoken at home?--

What was your highest level of schooling before attending TAFE?   I left in Year ----------

TAFE

1. Why did you enrol in a TAFE course?--
----
2. What have been the main benefits of TAFE for you?

i) on a personal level--

ii) as a student---

3. What do you wish you had gained from TAFE but feel you didn't?----------------------------------
----
----
4. Is there a particular teaching style you don't like?---
----
5. What can you do when a teacher fails to capture your interest in a subject?--------------------------
----
6. What is the most important quality in a teacher?--

UNIVERSITY

7. What is your motivation for attending university?---
----

8. In what ways do you feel TAFE has prepared you for university?-----------------------------------
----
----

9. What issues do you think you may face at university that are different to TAFE?--------------------
----
----

10. What can you do to deal with any issues that may arise at university?---------------------------------
----
----

11. What do you think the role of the university lecturer is?--
----

12. Is this different to the role of TAFE teachers? (PLEASE CIRCLE) Yes/no

If yes, can you give an example?---

Any other comments you'd like to add?--

Thank you for your participation in this survey

Appendix 3.   Focus group questions for pilot study

1. What have been the main benefits of TAFE for you?
2. What do you wish you had gained from TAFE but feel you didn't?
3. In what ways do you feel TAFE has prepared you for university?
4. What issues do you think you may face at university that are different to TAFE
5. What can you do to deal with any issues that may arise at university?
6. Has attending TAFE changed any of your core values or beliefs about yourself or life?
7. What does the term REFLECTIVE THINKING mean to you?
8. Would you consider yourself to be a reflective thinker?

Appendix 4. Sample responses from focus group

Q1. What have been the main benefits of TAFE for you?

Theme: Growing socially and personally

It's a different learning environment, it's freer, with different people of different ages, different backgrounds.

You learn about different cultures, it's a better environment.

There are smaller classes; we all chose to be here.

TAFE has helped me socially.

Making friends.

Feeling comfortable around people.

Being confident speaking.

Q2. What do you wish you had gained from TAFE but feel you didn't?

Theme: Career and study directions and uncertainty about what they could do with their qualifications once they finish either TAFE or university

I would have liked more defined career directions, to show me where I'm going.

Work experience.

I want to try different things to see what I want to do.

We have to do work placement but we have to find it ourselves.

It's a requirement of the course.

Q3. In what ways do you feel TAFE has prepared you for university?

Theme: TAFE has provided valuable experiences and knowledge

There's more freedom at TAFE.

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More independent study.

You have set hours at university but you're free to manage your own time here at TAFE but you have help when you need it.

We've done presentations using PPT.

With gaps in study, TAFE is a good bridge for us for university.

It gets you ready to go.

How much you want it [university] depends on how much effort you make here at TAFE.

TAFE is practice for how I'm handling the workload, but if there's no pressure, I find I'm leaving it till the last minute.

We have so many assessments that it gets you ready for the workload.

Q4. What issues do you think you may face at university that are different to TAFE?

Theme: Assumptions about knowledge and pressures of independent learning

Less attention from the teacher.

You have to have more self-discipline and be more organised.

The whole social dynamic is different here to what it's going to be like over there.

Smaller classes create discussion rather than a big lecture room.

Here we can have some really good conversations that help us learn about what we're doing, you can't do that sort of thing in a lecture.

More intimate environment here at TAFE.

Assumed knowledge.

Assumptions we know about theory, we'll need to catch up on that or make friends with people who've already done the course.

You can have basic knowledge but not the details.

Independent learning.

I learn by watching and listening, e-learning doesn't help that.

You have to do the work yourself.

Be determined to do it yourself.

You can't say they're all going to be awesome or approachable, they're all individuals.

They'll probably lay out what to do if you miss classes.

Q5. What can you do to deal with any issues that may arise at university?

Theme: Support services

Counselling.

Learning development.

Careers advice.

Peer or student groups or study groups to catch up, help each other.

Maybe there's someone who looks after the group?

Q6. Has attending TAFE changed any of your core values or beliefs about yourself or life?

Theme: Increased awareness

I don't watch television the way I used to, watching news, I'm now critiquing and being a less passive observer.

Here you have the ability to speak which has been difficult but they're assessment tasks.

Speaking to others and increasing awareness of multiculturalism, I'm a lot more aware of it.

Being at TAFE has made me more aware of it [multiculturalism].

Awareness of social issues and politics, I actually know stuff about politics now, it's a reality check.

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A lot of people are disgruntled or disillusioned about high school and have that attitude but going back to study makes me realise just how important it is and how out of touch with the world we can be without it.

More engaged with the world.

Being a role model for my kids, I want them to know that you have to stay in school, I can't do that if I don't show them.

Q7. What does the term 'reflective thinking' mean to you?

Theme: Analysing, assessing, learning

Brainstorming.

Thinking about the past experiences.

Re-assessing perspectives and the past.

It's communication skills both formal and informal.

If you think about the past, you can learn in so many ways.

Beneficial in many ways.

Two-way communication, one when you send the message, one when you receive it back.

It's better to learn from others' mistakes, that way you don't have to do them yourself.

Take it in when they share their experiences, and you can relate to that, and you can say I'm not going to go that way, I'm going to steer clear of that.

Q8. Do you consider yourself a reflective thinker?

Sometimes.

You can 'regroup' and analyse and learn from it.

Analysing, pulling it apart, remembering what I've said and thinking, ok what were the effects of what I've said, how do I feel about it now? Did I get the message across or did I just sound like an idiot?

I think about what I've said later, and think should I have said that? Should I not have said that?

You can think about things but it doesn't really matter if you don't then compare it to where you are now.

The scientific process of trial and error is good.

I think if you're a reflective thinker, you're sort of adaptable, like your theory can change, you're constantly reflecting on what you're thinking so you're always open to change.

Reflection means you're always changing, like there is no 'absolute', nothing is stuck in stone, and if you are then you don't grow, you don't become more mature.

I think reflective thinking can also help you confirm your beliefs, if you think about them then you can say yeah, I was right to think that, it's all subjective.

You can know what you want to do differently.

Appendix 5.   Consent form and participant information sheet for main study

Consent form for Theresa Millman (1/10/2013)

Research Title: *Who do you think you are? Exploring the experiences of students transitioning from TAFE to Higher Education.*
Researcher/s: Ms Theresa Millman (Student Investigator) Faculty of Social Sciences (School of Education)

Assoc/Prof Pauline Lysaght (Principle Supervisor) Faculty of Social Sciences (School of Education)

Dr Sarah O'Shea (Second Supervisor) Faculty of Social Sciences (School of Education)

I have been given information about the research: *Exploring the experiences of students transitioning from TAFE to Higher Education* and discussed the research project with Theresa Millman who is conducting this research as part of a Doctor of Education supervised by Assoc/Prof Pauline Lysaght and Dr Sarah O'Shea, in the Faculty of Social Sciences (School of Education) at the University of Wollongong.

I have been advised of the potential risks and burdens associated with this research. This includes spending approximately one hour for each of the three interviews. I have had an opportunity to ask Theresa Millman any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect my relationship with TAFE or the university I am enrolled in, in any way.

If I have any enquiries about the research I can contact Ms Theresa Millman by email tmillman@uow.edu.au   or mobile: . If I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Ethics Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, Office of Research, University of Wollongong on 4221 3386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au

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By signing below I am indicating my consent to (please tick):

- ☐ ***Participate in the first interview and have this interview audio-recorded***
- ☐ ***Participate in the second interview and have this interview audio-recorded***

I understand that the data collected from my participation will be included in a doctoral thesis at a later stage and I agree to the use of any materials contributed by me in the interviews being used as part of a doctoral thesis and possible publications in the future

Name:--

Signed……………………………………………………….. *Date* ..../....../......

Telephone…………………………………………….

Email address………………………………………………………………………..

Participant information sheet

Dear participant,

This is an invitation for you to participate in a study conducted by researchers at the University of Wollongong.

The research title is: *Who do you think you are*? Exploring the transformative experiences of students transitioning from TAFE to Higher Education.
Investigators:

Ms Theresa Millman (Student Investigator) Faculty of Education
tmillman@uow.edu.au   mobile:
Assoc/Prof Pauline Lysaght (Principle Supervisor) Faculty of Education
Dr Sarah O'Shea (Second Supervisor) Faculty of Education

Aims of the research:
The proposed research seeks to discover whether the learning experience has changed your life. The study will explore your learning and identity journeys at a personal level, in a bid to understand your lived experiences as you the TAFE environment and move on to university. In drawing on the learning stories of transitioning students like yourself, the proposed study seeks to provide depth to understandings and knowledge of the experience.

Research procedures
If you agree to become involved in this study you will be asked to participate in three (3) interviews to discuss of some of the issues related to your adult learning experiences.

The interviews are expected to take a maximum of one hour each and which will be audio taped for the purposes of transcription at a later date. There will be a mix of structured and open-ended questions.

Sample Interview questions

1. *What made you decide to come to TAFE?*
2. *What has surprised you about yourself since coming to TAFE?*
3. *Have your career goals changed in any way since attending TAFE or university?*

Privacy

Results of this study will be discussed as part of the requirements for the Doctorate of Education. The information will be published as a thesis. However, at no time will your identity be revealed. Your participation is voluntary and your decision not to participate will be respected, and will in no way affect your relationship with Illawarra TAFE or the University of Wollongong. Should you agree to participate and then wish to withdraw, no penalty will apply and no reason for withdrawal will be necessary. However, should you wish to withdraw after completion of the interviews, your information may still be used. However anonymity and privacy will continue to be guaranteed.

Ethics Review

This application has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Wollongong. If you have complaints regarding the way this research has been carried out, please contact the Ethics Officer on 42213386 or email rso-ethics@uow.edu.au

Thank you for your interest in this study.

Appendix 6.   Interview questions for main study

First interview questions (prior to university)

NAME---DATE----------------------------------

TAFE course---

GENDER----------------------------

AGE---------------------------------

YEARS OF SCHOOLING--

Sub-question 1: How do students articulate their reasons for attending TAFE prior to university?

What messages were you given in childhood about the kind of work or career you should have?

Have you changed a previously 'expected' life course path?

Whose expectation was it?

What made you decide to come to TAFE?

Why did you come to TAFE before university?

How would you describe the classroom environment at TAFE?

How are you encouraged to participate in the classroom?

Have other people's reactions (e.g. family/friends) changed towards you since you enrolled at TAFE?

What assumptions do you have about yourself as a learner?

Have any of these changed since you attended TAFE?

What has surprised you about yourself since coming to TAFE?

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In what ways has attending TAFE changed you?

What have been the benefits in attending TAFE?

In what ways do you feel TAFE has prepared you for university?

In what ways has coming to TAFE changed your goals or future plans?

Has getting to know others at TAFE changed the way you see things?

Have any of your beliefs/attitudes/values changed since coming to TAFE?

What are your hopes and dreams for your future?

What are your career goals?

How do you feel about the way your life is changing?

Have you changed any of your values or beliefs as a result of others in your class?

If some of your values have changed how do you feel about that?

Sub-question 2: What influences the decision of TAFE students to articulate to HE?

Why do you want to go to university?

Was there any change in your perspectives that led to the decision to enrol in university?

What influenced your decision to articulate to HE?

What do you think the transition to university will involve?

Second interview questions

Sub-question 3 and overarching research question

Name:-- Date---------------------

Have you changed any beliefs about yourself since coming to university?

Have other people's reactions (eg family/friends) changed towards you since you enrolled at university?

How has learning impacted upon yourself and your family?

Has the experience of learning changed your identity, perspectives and aspirations in any way?

Have you got new or different career goals or expectations?

If so, why have these changed?

Are you thinking about changing your course, withdrawing or deferring?

Have you experienced any challenges in the transition from one sector to another?

Have you experienced any particular knowledge gaps?

What do you think are the main advantages of learning?

How satisfied are you with your experience of university so far?

Has getting to know others at university changed the way you see things?

Was TAFE helpful in your transition to university?

If so, in what ways?

Has credit transfer been positive for you or not?

What kinds of resources have you found helpful?

What are your hopes and dreams for the future?

Can you sum up how you see yourself since you first went to TAFE and who you are today?

Are there any important challenges future students should be aware of?

How can the transition experience be improved?

Appendix 7.   Coding the data

The following are extracts from interviews with the seven participants indicating examples from the data coding for identity and aspirations.

Identity

I grew up in housing commission… So generally, my attitudes towards work were generally I was gonna be a labourer, at most a trade… I was working as a welder, a labourer…I'm a disorganised person… I'm 27 and I should be working full time (Connor, 27, TPC)

I've always wanted to be a teacher… I'll be the first one in my family to go to university (Briony, 19, TPC)

I'm old right? I'm gay, so gay! I'm a lot happier… I'm like about just about being the way I am (Aishia, 27, TPC)

I was a bit of a scallywag…being a worker and then also being a student… I'm an army wife…I'm an enrolled nurse… I'm a bit of a go getter… being a mother and a wife (Tammy, 43, Diploma)

I'm not academic… I'm a mature age student… I have to have more self-awareness and self-confidence…ten years ago when I left school there's no way I would ever have thought I'd be able to get a degree (Sophie, 29, Diploma)

I think I need to be a more organised and prioritised person…I'm not very organised… I love the life I have now, I love the work that I do (Michelle, 27, Diploma)

I'm not a good self-learner… I'm a nurse… I'm doing nursing because I want to help people… I'm a very social person…very much a people centred… I'm a very open-minded person… I was definitely a very shy and reserved person… I'm more confident (Alice, 27, Diploma)

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Aspirations

My primary goal in doing the TPC was to apply to the police force… I think a science degree…would be handy (Connor, 27, TPC)

Obviously I want to be a teacher (Briony, 19, TPC)

I wanna be a midwife… I also want to travel the world and kind of like just help the poor people (Aishia, 27, TPC)

I think I probably do have a goal, like I might like to do clinical… I'd like to be a nurse specialist or something (Tammy, 43, Diploma)

I wanna do care flight Australia… I'm opening my eyes to what else I can do degree wise… to do Careflight you have to Midwifery and preferably a Bachelor of paramedics so I'm already looking at the degrees I'm gonna do when I finish this one (Sophie, 29, Diploma)

I really want to stay in like nursing um… and the education, like patient education and have a specialty I wanna do like a nurse practitioner sort of role……it's like a supernurse! you know one day it would be wonderful (Michelle, 27, Diploma)

I want to travel… so that's one sort of aspiration…, I think long term I would love to work in oncology and maybe progress higher in that field, I wouldn't mind going to theatre as well… I don't want to just get to a registered nurse and that's it, I wanna sort of go further than that (Alice, 27, Diploma)