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'Hey you! You've Got this and You ARE Smart': Motivated Women Drawing on 'Sisu' to Persist and Succeed at University

Introduction

This chapter builds upon previous chapters to focus on the culmination of the university journey, the stage at which students are approaching graduation. Applying the concept of 'sisu',[1] this chapter seeks to deeply understand persistence and success in higher education (HE), in particular how sisu is enacted by mature first-in-family (FiF) women. Sisu is a recently theorised Finnish term with no exact English equivalent. In this chapter, we consider the notion of sisu to explore the inner fortitude that enables individuals to push through adversity, defying the odds to accomplish life goals (Lahti, 2019, 2022). As the previous chapters have noted, FiF students encounter a range of obstacles and diversions in their HE journey, and sisu has provided an innovative framing to consider the nuanced interplay of such motivation.

Sisu is described poetically by Lahti as 'run[ning] deeper than perseverance … the depth more like a canon of fortitude with a multitude of tunes … played through the instrument of our effort' (2022, p. 55). As a concept, sisu holds promise for exploring and understanding persistence

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[1] Sisu: pronounced 'SEE-soo' or 'SIH-soo'

through its capacity to capture a multiplicity of inner strengths and capabilities which were evident in the narratives of the mature women in our study. The chapter draws on data from Study C (see Chap. 1) gathered from FiF students in Australia and Europe (Ireland, UK, Austria) through interviews and surveys conducted between 2017 and 2018. We argue that sisu provides insight into the deeply personal, collective and complex nature of persistence behaviours. Despite differences in geographical and educational contexts, there were similarities across these older FiF women, including the embodied nature of pursuing university study and the drive to persist regardless of obstacles enroute to achieving their goals.

Background

The research in this chapter was designed to provide in-depth understanding of how FiF students persist at university in order to provide targeted support for those considering departure, particularly students from educationally disadvantaged or 'equity'[2] groups. The study built upon prior research that considered how FiF students utilise existing cultural, familial and knowledge capitals during their transition into, and engagement with, university (e.g. O'Shea, 2016, 2018; O'Shea et al., 2017, 2018) as well as related studies on the experiences of HE participation for Indigenous students (Harwood et al., 2014–2018) and rural/remote students (Delahunty, 2022; Delahunty and Hellwig, 2022; O'Shea et al., 2019).

Turning Attention from Student Retention to the Nature of Persistence

Retaining students in HE is a key policy initiative within Australia. The previous Australian government committed to a performance funding framework linked to student satisfaction and graduate employment from

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[2] There are currently six targeted equity groups in Australia, including people from (1) low socio-economic backgrounds, (2) rural and isolated areas, (3) non-English-speaking backgrounds, (4) women in non-traditional areas of study, (5) Indigenous peoples and (6) students with disability.

2020 (Tehan, 2019), with policies undergoing further reform in 2022–2023 under the newly elected Labor government (https://ministers.education.gov.au/clare). While retention rates vary across universities and student populations, there has been continuing disparity in degree attainment for under-represented groups. For example, the proportion of regionally located Australians with a degree qualification is consistently half that of their urban counterparts and lower still for those from remote/very remote areas (ABS, 2021). Across the sector, attrition rates have been in excess of 25% for the entire first year population of half of all registered university providers, with an average departure rate of 20% recorded (TEQSA, 2017). However, focus on attrition should not only be in the first year of study as thoughts of departure shadow many students throughout their university careers, and particularly students belonging to multiple equity categories (Henderson et al., 2020). In the 2020 Student Experience Survey (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching [QILT], 2021) 20% of all undergraduate students indicated they had considered leaving during that year (similar to 2019 and 2018 results). Around 22% of the FiF subgroup (comprising 42.7% of all commencing students), indicated intentions of early departure (QILT, 2021). While this signifies some overall improvement since Coates and Ransom (2011) reported more than a quarter of FiF students had considered leaving in the first year of study and over a third in later years, thoughts of leaving for FiF are still higher than for all other students (19%) in Australia (QILT, 2021), a pattern similarly identified in the UK (Henderson et al., 2020).

Globally, research in the field of university retention has largely focused on the complexities of attrition rather than on the nature of persistence. Aljohani's (2016) review of literature across Australia, UK, US, Europe and Arabia found that most early research was mainly concerned with identifying predictability factors of attrition based on common student characteristics. These foci have shifted to include broader sociological, educational and organisational factors that may impact on decisions to depart early. However, much research retains focus on the 'why' of departure rather than exploring the reasons or rationales that students have for staying. In shifting attention to those students who may have been considered 'at-risk' of early departure and exploring how they have

successfully managed to reach graduation, this chapter arguably makes a significant contribution to the field. Turning attention to persistence rather than retention, will enable a better understanding of the nature of persistence. This aligns to Tinto's (2016) challenge to institutions to find out what *they* could do better to improve the student experience, which may mean adopting more of the student perspective.

The perspectives of FiF older women at university are both complex and varied (O'Shea & Stone, 2014; Stone & O'Shea, 2012) as these students typically encounter multiple external, and at times, internal challenges (such as self-confidence), which can place inordinate strain on their emotional, mental, social and physical resources and energies. However, because of these complexities and life experience, mature-age women nearing completion of a university degree are well-equipped to provide deep insight into the nature of persistence. As in previous chapters, this discussion is framed by a strengths-based perspective that focuses on how a geographically dispersed group of mature female participants narrated their stories of persistence. This is analysed through what Lahti refers to as an *action mindset*, described as

> *[a] consistent courageous approach towards challenges … to lean into the unknown and even seek out situations that are likely to test the individual.* (Lahti, 2019, p. 66)

As outlined in Chap. 1, we initially explored the nature of persistence by drawing on narrative inquity, informed by sociological (Bourdieu, 1986) and philosophical understandings of social justice (Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1992) to explore how FiF participants enacted persistence through their university studies. The application of sisu to the narratives of older female students, further extends the range of theoretical frameworks we have used to analyse the nature of persistence (see Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019, 2021; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018, 2022).

Before describing sisu and the potential it holds for understanding the complexities of persistence, we first discuss the notion of grit, which has become influential in contemporary educational policy across the world. In the next section, we critically engage with the concept of 'grit' because

this term continues to permeate discourse and attitudes towards persistence, particularly in the neoliberalist Western world.

Grit

Grit comes from the field of psychology as a way of explaining why some individuals succeed, whilst others do not. The notion was developed from the data of highly successful individuals in their field who, in rising to the top, demonstrated a combination of perseverance, passion and exertion of effort, considered the three essential qualities of grit (Duckworth, 2016). Those who succeed are described as 'gritty' while individuals who fail are considered 'not [at all] gritty', and by implication do not possess the requisite qualities. This understanding of achievement was driven in part by questioning how something as 'intangible' as grit could be measured (Duckworth, 2016, p. 8), and was subsequently demonstrated formulaically as a two-stage process: 'talent x effort = skill; skill x effort = achievement' (Duckworth, 2016, p. 44). However, applying such formulation to the multifaceted processes of learning and achievement has been criticised for being too simplistic (Tewell, 2020; Bonfiglio, 2017; Golden, 2017; Saltman 2016). Saltman (2016) argues that grit 'relies on a few key assumptions and fallacies about learning, knowledge and intelligence' (p. 44) with one of these being that complex, contextualised and dynamic processes of skills mastery can 'be boiled down to [simply] putting enough hours … [into] deliberate practice' (p. 44).

Ironically, oversimplification, as Saltman (2016) pointed out, contributes to the intrinsic appeal of grit, as does 'its professed ability to be measured with relative ease' (Tewell, 2020, p. 142) through the grit scale (Duckworth, 2016) which has also been challenged. Credé et al. (2017) question the validity of this measurement 'as a predictor of performance and success and as a focus of interventions' (p. 492). Tewell (2020) argues that the influence of grit on performance has been overstated, which may feed into the fallacy that 'overcom[ing] inequalities' (p. 141) is simply a matter of students working harder. This places the onus on the individual for their own success, with little regard for broader systemic, social and

policy failure that continues to disadvantage students from equity backgrounds.

More broadly then, grit feeds into a deficit model of education, which raises issues when 'offered as a way to solve underachievement and dissatisfaction in schools, the workplace and interpersonal relationships' (Tewell, 2020, p. 137). Of most concern is the subtlety with which grit has become accepted into educational and societal discourse and practice, particularly as these relate to the notion of student persistence. Part of the appeal may be that it aligns with popularist beliefs about learning and effort, in particular the idea that 'hard work pays off and achievement is strictly a matter of applying oneself' (Tewell, 2020, p. 138). This perspective reinforces the dominant (Western) values of individualism, self-reliance and persistence, and the 'myth of meritocracy', that is, of achievement being individually and unproblematically created and sustained (Tewell, 2020, p. 149).

Sisu

As an alternative to understandings of persistence informed by grit, we have adopted the concept of sisu. This is derived from the Finnish 'sisus', with a literal meaning of 'internal organs' or 'guts'. Over time, sisu has evolved to reflect a more abstract meaning of inner fortitude which is activated in moments of hardship especially when we feel there is nothing more 'left in the tank', likened also to our 'second wind' which enables us to move forward in spite of the odds (Lahti, 2019). Sisu is often illustrated through the winter war of 1939—an against-all-odds war in which the Finnish nation successfully defended themselves against the much more powerful Russian forces. Their success was attributed to possessing sisu, a collective inner determination to not be overcome and manifested in a concerted, united and joint responsibility for action.

However, sisu has only recently been theorised by Lahti (2019, 2022, 2023), whose exploration was informed by over 1200 qualitative survey responses from mostly Finnish participants (95%) with cultural and generational understandings of the term. Lahti concluded that sisu is in fact, universal, 'exist[ing] within everyone and … usually stumbled upon

when one faces insurmountable adversity' (2023, p. 74). Lahti identified six main themes (and 46 subthemes), spanning positive aspects of sisu as well as the harms of possessing too much sisu (see Lahti, 2019, pp. 70–71). The three overarching themes and descriptors relevant to our data are:

- *Extraordinary perseverance*: To endure and remain resolute amidst significant adversities, surpass one's preconceived mental or physical capacities and hold oneself accountable for high standards
- *Action mindset*: A consistent, courageous approach towards challenges, taking action against slim odds and not be bound by the observed limitations of the present moment
- *Latent power*: An inner power potential that exists in every human being and can be accessed when we have consumed our preconceived mental or physical capacities. (Lahti, 2019, pp. 66–68)

These themes represent positive qualities, each offering 'a different angle' from which to consider the nature of sisu. Lahti points out that what unites them all is the 'overarching sense of moving forward no matter what' (2023, p. 73).

While Lahti acknowledges that grit, resilience, and perseverance are part of sisu's DNA, sisu is much more nuanced and holds potential as a meaningful lens through which to better understand different facets of persistence. Our data comprised the persistence narratives of FiF students and the descriptors of Lahti's main themes provided a generative analytical frame for considering the stories of mature female learners in the final stages of study.

In this chapter, we focus on the nature of action mindset within the act of sisu, particularly the ways in which this quality underpinned forward-motion, or as Lahti explains,

> [the] inner inclination and unstated conviction that leans [them] into the headwind with faith and curiosity instead of turn[ing] away. (2022, p. 45)

We have also begun to explore how sisu contributes to this body of work through examining how extraordinary perseverance is enacted through biographies of hardship (Delahunty & O'Shea, Forthcoming),

with additional action mindset subthemes (such as standing up, bold-ness, facing one's fears) and latent power also forthcoming.

Who Are These Motivated Women?

The women featured in this chapter participated in Study C (see Chap. 1). The data from female participants over the age of 25 years were then extracted from the main dataset (n = 162), and are summarised in the Table 10.1.

As with the majority of FiF students throughout this book, these women were intersected by multiple equity factors in addition to being the first in their family to attend university. Research has indicated how the compounding disadvantage of multiple equity factors adds difficulty to pursuing and achieving an HE degree (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). In addition to being first and without a family biography to tap into when navigating the university experience, over 70% of these women identified two or more additional equity factors (i.e. 162 participants selected 359 equity factors), summarised in Table 10.2.

Additional equity factors offered for selection were:

- Disability, low SES, refugee background, rural (all participants)
- Non-English-speaking background (Australia, Ireland, UK)
- Non-German-speaking background (Austria)
- Working-class background (Europe)
- Identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, isolated location (Australia)

Questions were replicated across both surveys and interviews, and were designed to examine how individuals defined and reflected upon the

Table 10.1 Summary of data subset: Female first-in-family students aged over 25

Female participants over 25 years (Total 162)	Australia	Ireland	UK	Austria
Interviews (n 42)	36	4	0	2
Surveys (n 120)	94	1	2	23

Table 10.2 Summary showing multiple equity factors (359 factors selected by 162 participants)

No. of equity factors in addition to FiF	No. of participants having additional equity factors	%
FiF plus 1 other factor	47	29%
FiF plus 2 other factors	61	38%
FiF plus 3 other factors	30	19%
Fif plus 4 other factors	20	12%
FiF plus 5 other factors	4	2%
Total	162	100%

enactment of persistence within university and the strategies employed. The consistency across the qualitatively rich data enabled persistence to be explored through the lens of sisu, with specific attention to how action mindset was revealed by this particular group of learners, guided by Lahti's descriptions (2019, 2022). The overarching question guiding our inquiry was: *How was action mindset revealed in the persistence narratives of mature first-in-family female students?*

Action Mindset

Action mindset describes an approach towards challenges that foregrounds how individuals are inspired to take action, even against the odds, and despite limitations of the present moment (Lahti, 2019). Action mindset is the capacity to view a journey as possible, even with an awareness that the 'action' may test the limit of our capabilities (Lahti, 2022, 2023). Lahti further describes action mindset as an orientation 'toward the future [through] an active, courageous approach to challenges that seem greater than our reserves, opportunities and capacities' (2023, p. 77). Iterative and detailed analysis of the qualititative data, themed broadly as action mindset, enabled us to identify a number of subthemes, two of which will be explored in the findings.

Findings

The findings focus on two interwining subthemes of action mindset: (1) to believe in oneself, and (2) to have guts (Lahti, 2019, 2022). These two aspects of action mindset provided insights into the approaches that these mature women took to keep moving forward especially when challenges posed a threat to this (Lahti, 2019).

To Believe in Oneself

To believe in oneself describes an approach towards challenges which is 'consistent, courageous … taking action against slim odds and not be[ing] bound by the observed limitations of the present moment' (Lahti, 2019, p. 67). In this study, self-belief echoed across the participant narratives and, while described in various ways, seemed critical to their persistence through the challenges that arose to completing university study.

Belief in oneself was at times spoken about with a level of incredulity with regard to the capacity to take on university studies. Some of the women had not envisaged the extent of their own potential in terms of achievement. For example, one participant confessed that she was 'by no means tooting my own horn, *but*' she never imagined sitting 'on a really high GPA' (Danielle, Australia). Similarly, another participant 'was surprised' at some of the things she had achieved and 'surprised at the amount of positive feedback' received. These positive experiences boosted her self-belief by confirming 'that actually I am quite good at this stuff' (Baillie, Australia). Many participants thought that university would be too difficult or they believed, or were led to believe, that they were not smart enough for university. One learner was buoyed after undertaking TAFE study (Technical and Further Education) in which she discovered, 'I was not as limited intellectually as my family would have liked me to believe.' This newfound confidence enabled her to move onto university study which had cumulative benefits to 'the belief in myself' which 'develop[ed] with each success' (Survey #A36, Australia).

Working around complex life circumstances, sometimes tinged with guilt as many balanced university study around the dynamics of family

and work (see also Chap. 8), could be precarious for self-belief, with self-doubt quite easily triggered by a negative comment or attitude. This is exemplified in Aleisha's story, whose life and study necessarily revolved around her son's illness. She became quite adept at tackling assignments at her son's hospital bedside. While her son's 'illness and the feasibility of being able to physically get there and do uni' were the main hurdles, she reflected that the 'only other real hurdle' was 'probably just that little bit of self-doubt when things aren't going perfectly'. This referred to a comment made by her usually supportive father, who questioned the wisdom of continuing her study during one of these hospitalisations, which clouded her educational endeavours with self-doubt (Aleisha, Australia).

Overcoming self-doubt provides another insight into challenges for mature learners and into the emotionality of fostering self-belief in their capabilities. For many mature FiF women, self-doubt begins many years prior to the decision to study, as Danielle articulates:

> I didn't think that I was smart enough or that I could do it … you know, just a lot of negative self-talk mostly. It was mostly how I perceived myself that I think held me back (Danielle, Australia).

Finding something within oneself was key to overcoming this sense of not being 'good enough'. Such inner catalysts could transform self-doubt into self-belief:

> I finally figured out what I wanted to do … I was at the point of soul numbing dissatisfaction with my work … I realised that I needed to push myself out of my self-doubt and give myself the opportunity to succeed with studies. Best decision of my life (Survey #A66, Australia).

Belief in Self Boosted by Others

The socioemotional support from others was important for these mature women and contributed to boosting self-belief. Support came variously from a different sources that included encouragement, practical, financial support or from respected others who perceived something within the

individual learner that perhaps they could not initially see for themselves. Immediate family members were predominantly mentioned but mothers especially so, as well as fathers, grandparents, aunties, children and partners (see also Chaps. 5, 7, 8, and 9). Encouragement also came from university staff, colleagues as well as friends. Some students were fortunate to have a variety of such 'champions' to draw upon such as the next participant who provides a succinct description of a 'village' approach to support, and the complementary role that each played:

> [M]y parents supported me and believed in me—that helped a lot when I thought I am too dumb to make it. Teachers who had interest in me and my thoughts and encouraged me that my thoughts are important too. My friends who made it fun for me to be there and also sometimes supported me with infrastructure, like technical support. (Survey #07, Austria)

The support of tutors was also mentioned, especially when they 'really made me feel like I was worthy of something' (Survey #B08, Australia). Some were pivotal in boosting self-belief, such as Josie's experience in Australia. She recollected that she will 'never forget my [TAFE] tutor sitting me down … and [saying], "It would be a travesty if you didn't do your RN"'.[3] Whilst a relatively short comment, these words were powerful, prompting her to reflect 'You know what, I think I could!' (Josie, Australia). Other participants mentioned the influence and support of colleagues. One learner described how her work colleagues encouraged her to attend university 'because they thought I would find [university] not such a challenge as I perceived'. After the first unit, she 'realised that university study was not out of reach at all' (Survey #C02, Australia). Similarly, friends were important sources of encouragement. One participant who had believed she was 'not smart enough' also tried one unit and 'enjoyed it so much' she took 'another unit, then another', acknowledging the support of a friend 'who encouraged me to continue at the times I thought I could not' (Survey #A36, Australia). Recognition from external organisations was also extremely validating for some learners. One participant described the 'boost in confidence in my ability to be a

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[3] RN = Registered Nurse training.

successful student' that came with an offer to join the Golden Key Honour Society[4] in recognition of her academic achievement. She recalled this as 'incredible and I can't describe the sense of pride I felt … when my certificate arrived in the mail, I cried. I really did'. She continued,

> *We all need to feel as though we can do what we set out to do and there will be things along the way that test us. But when you get something that basically says: Hey you! You're doing an amazing job. You've got this and you ARE smart', then you feel like you can take on the world. It is amazing the confidence that being acknowledged can bring (Survey #E09, Australia).*

Receiving various kinds of acknowledgement and support from others built a self-belief that FiF students frequently commented as both appreciated and significant in finding the courage to persist through challenges (see Chaps. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9). However, there were also some instances where self-belief arose in spite of (or despite) others.

Belief in Self in Spite of Others

Some participants experienced overt, covert, and sometimes long-term, discouragement from others, which became a counter-process to building self-belief. An extremely challenging situation was narrated by one participant, who was married for over 20 years to a man who had an 'unfortunate condition' where 'they tend to devalue … they have to put you down to feel better about themselves … there's a lot of gas-lighting'. However, she described herself as 'a very, very strong person'. What 'absolutely pushed' her was a need to prove to herself to 'everyone' that she was capable of studying a degree, but 'especially [prove to] my husband, that I'm not this silly, dumb person that can't put one foot in front of the other' (Heather, Australia). Similarly, Ruth grew up with a lot of discouragement from her mother who was 'a very negative person'. She recalled how,

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[4] Golden Key International Honour Society is the world's largest collegiate honour society for graduate and undergraduate students who are in the top 15% of their class.

any time I had an idea that I wanted to do something, it would be "Oh, that's a good idea but…" and the 'but' would always be "[but] you're too short, you're too tall, you have to get up at… you're not going to…" There was always a 'but' so I always walked away really deflated. I knew that I was smart. I was always smart. I never had any doubt about that. I did really well in primary school … but there was never any suggestion of me going to university. That was for other people (Ruth, Australia).

Whilst Ruth experienced blatant discouragement, on other occasions family members could inadvertently be discouraging, often simply through not understanding the nature of academic study. Questions from family were sometimes perceived as cloaked expectations, especially around paid employment, and particularly if study was not considered 'work'. For example, two Austrian women spoke at length about the frustrations this caused. Lena said that in Austria 'titles are important' and while her family knew that, it still took 'a lot of effort to convince them' that gaining Bachelor *and* Masters degrees is 'what I need to do it in order to achieve the goals I would like to'. Whilst recognising that her family members 'don't mean any harm', at the same time she described having to constantly justify study which generated 'a tough feeling because it feels like I need to defend my decisions all the time' (Lena, Austria). While Phoebe's parents also understood that she needed postgraduate qualifications to achieve her employment goal, she found the barrage of questions from other family members to be challenging:

"Are you still studying a bachelor? Are you not planning to work one day? When are trying to work? Don't you want to get money? When are you having a full-time job?" And I'm like, "But I am working!" (Phoebe, Austria).

Phoebe expressed some frustration at having to justify her academic study as 'work' which did not align to the family view of work as paid employment and revealed a level of confusion about what university study involved.

Other sources of discouragement came from university staff. One participant experienced anxiety about entering the employment market as a mature-age graduate, which arose when one of her lecturers announced

that 'some mature age students just go back to doing what they were doing because they can't get a job'. This made her question the time and effort she had invested, which was in tandem with caring for two children with special needs. She recalled thinking,

> *Well, if I can't get a job, what kind of success am I? I've done all this and put the kids through me trying to meet deadlines and stuff for nothing because I'm going to go back to being a teller. So that as a big thing. I didn't want to go back to being a teller (Bernadette, Australia).*

At the time of the interview Bernadette had in fact defied the (lecturer's) odds and secured a position as a speech pathologist. However, comments like these, especially coming from a lecturer, can cause unnecessary and excessive anxiety. Another participant from the UK was discouraged by the 'middle class environment' of the university, which was 'quite alien' to her. She experienced little understanding from university staff of how her personal circumstances impacted on her studies. She felt 'shunned as a lazy non-attendee' when having to miss lectures due to the need to work to pay rent and bills, although this 'was far from the case' (Survey #X01, UK).

To Have Guts

Intertwined with believing in oneself and withstanding the possible criticism of others, is the theme 'to have guts', which also came through clearly in the narratives. Many of these women were thriving as learners but had significant hurdles to overcome before realising that university study, actually, was not out of reach (O'Shea, 2020; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). For instance, one learner had gone through her entire schooling and into adulthood as illiterate. The process of becoming literate enough to not only gain entry to university, but to also succeed there, was simply a courageous act. The ongoing support of her partner and in-laws, combined with a three-year numeracy and literacy course and a university bridging course, provided the necessary foundations for her to pursue a degree. For this student, initial motivation to go to university was 'to

show people that I can' but she soon realised that this became more 'a way for me to build self-confidence and self-worth'. To achieve this goal required guts, characterised by her 'unwillingness to give up and … not [being] prepared to hear that I can't do something', combined with an inner fortitude derived from 'overcom[ing] so much in my life' (Survey #E02, Australia).

For other participants to have guts was demonstrated through an ability to re-vision earlier 'failure', with the effect of restoring self-belief. Fractured and meandering pathways through study were not uncommon. One mature learner described being 'devastated' after her 'first two failed attempts at university', one as a school leaver and the second when her 'first child was a baby', realising that juggling study as a new parent was simply too difficult (Survey #F23, Australia). However, despite these experiences she decided to 'give university one last try' to 'prove to myself that I am worthy and capable'. Such capacity to keep moving forward imbued with an inner strength underpins persistence behaviour, which Lahti describes as having 'guts'.

The shame of failing a subject twice was felt by another participant, who then had to 'rethink what it was that I was going to do'. At particular moments of frustration she recalled thinking 'No!' to the option of giving up. Her story is a familiar one for mothers, of 'keeping up and then one thing would happen with the kids and then that time I was meant to study, I couldn't [and] I fell behind' (Christina, Australia). In Christina's case, she displayed guts by pushing through seemingly insurmountable challenges, and also in defying the odds of the compounding challenges that came with her own incomplete schooling, low SES circumstances and being a single mother of three young children. Similarly, other women narrated biographies of hardship which required guts to change their trajectory and often that of their family. For example, Eleanor's hardship stemmed from a particularly difficult childhood of abuse, domestic violence and homelessness. From a young age university had been her 'sole focus … the one goal through all the struggles I've been through'. She described how attending university was ultimately a 'lifeline that provides me with direction and something to work towards'. While the struggle with her past is ongoing, she believes that attending

university has fostered 'resilience and fan[s] the flames of my passion for what I believe in and what I want in my life' (Eleanor, Australia).

To have guts to pursue university study sometimes meant having to forego stable work and risk financial instability. For women with family and financial commitments, this was often daunting. One single mother of two teenage children had a secure government job, but 'started the degree just out of passion' and admits that it was 'a massive risk to walk away from that security into something I hadn't done before'. She grew up in low SES circumstances where 'uni was not even a possibility for our family' and admits to 'juggl[ing] a lot of the guilt for a while' because the degree was 'something for me' but also ultimately 'for us as a family' (Molly, Australia). In other cases, to have guts was in stepping up to pursue something that was entirely of personal value. This was epitomised by one participant who began considering study when reflecting on the post-natal depression she suffered after both her births. University provided another avenue for her to contribute in a way that was true to herself, 'this is about me, this really is about me and that's me, that's my selfish, you know … this is about me feeling like I'm important in the world and making a mark and leaving something behind' (Zahlia, Australia). Zahlia articulates clearly the inner strength and fortitude required to enact persistence as an older woman who was deviating from an expected trajectory. Such deviation requires qualities that terms like 'determination' or 'resilience' simply do not capture adequately. By drawing on the framing of sisu we hope to do justice to the actions of these women with the next section providing an overview of implications of this approach.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings both overlap and complement those of previous chapters. However, this chapter is differentiated by the application of the theoretical lens of sisu to focus on persistence, specifically through having an action mindset. We offer sisu as an alternative framing for understanding persistence amongst those learners who may have multiple disadvantaging factors to contend with during their studies. Such alternative, and

we argue, more expansive understanding, is needed if we are truly to understand the capacity of our learners to enact successful student selves. By providing a realist perspective on social justice, our focus remains on the ways that people actually action and achieve justice within different contexts. The deeply intersected nature of this female student cohort also provides greater insight into how persisting at university is negotiated by those who do not always fit neatly into pre-defined categories. Intersectionality is key to understanding how multiple indicators impact on the persistence of university students as Hankivsky (2014) explains,

> [I]nequities are never the result of single, distinct factors. Rather they are the outcome of intersections of different social locations, power relations and experiences (p. 3)

The chapter also outlined that accepted discourses around persistence in university are somewhat deficit in nature and that sisu provides an alternative to understanding what compelled these older, female students to continue in their studies. Examples of the ways in which these women enacted Lahti's action mindset have been presented, and while we have only offered a summary selection of quotes to demonstrate this, it is important to note that across interviews and surveys commonalities of experience were evident. These motivated women, each had life circumstances imbued with difficulties and hardships, which could have become insurmountable barriers to completing their studies, yet each refused to 'give up'.

These women, all in the latter stages of a degree were quite literally, to paraphrase Lahti, leaning into the headwind of university study with a level of fearlessness. That each had 'made it' thus far suggests they had not become paralysed by the effort required of them to negotiate a range of obstacles (Lahti, 2022, p. 45). As the narratives attest, this was not a linear journey into and through university, but one which was both disjointed and complex (O'Shea, 2020, 2021; O'Shea & Stone, 2013). These stories offer a counter-narrative to that of the 'turbo' student who proceeds swiftly through a degree with fortitude of purpose. This chapter presents an alternative perspective to that epitomised by the discourse of

the neoliberal 'gritty' learner or 'the lone individual as economic actor, worker, and consumer' (Saltman, 2016, p. 50).

Instead, through the lens of sisu a more embodied and relational understanding of what persistence requires is presented. In the stories of these women, we see how an action mindset was not the work of an individual but was inherently bound up in the community and family in which each of these women were situated. Many reflected on how their persistence was negotiated around life responsibilities that could not simply be put on hold whilst studying, including a range of family, work and/or community obligations (Stone & O'Shea, 2012). These reflections indicate that sisu can be conceived of as a resource to be tapped into at critical moments, defined by self-belief and having the guts to defy odds in some personally meaningful way. Such understanding provides a necessary framing from which an explanation of persistence behaviours becomes possible for the ubiquitous 'triumph[] against slim odds and overcoming adversity … in the collective narratives of human endurance' (Lahti, 2023, p. 76).

The stories and reflections of these women point to an inner capacity to move through momentary, out-of-the-ordinary challenges, likened to a 'spare tank of fuel' available when needed (Lahti, 2019). Indeed, we argue that it is the hope-inducing nature of action mindset that makes it such a powerful force, rendering it possible to maintain forward-movement, a perspective which enabled these learners to not fixate on the challenge, but rather focus on making it through (Lahti, 2023, p. 79). This is summed up succinctly by Lahti and is also reflective of the ways in which the older females in this study managed to persist in what were often difficult and challenging circumstances:

> *When we perceive that a current challenge is greater than our known resources it's rational to back down—at least from the vantage point of survival. In moments like these, it's easier to be held back by our past experiences than be drawn forward by potential futures. Action mindset refers to orienting ourselves toward the future. It's an active, courageous approach to challenges that seem greater than our reserves, opportunities and capacities.* (Lahti, 2023, p. 77)

This is a fitting concluding chapter to this book as it undoubtedly resonates with earlier chapters and foregrounds the inner strength of not only learners but also the ways in which their community and family networks are integrated with their university studies. Considering how sisu informed and underpinned these women's journey sheds a bright and enduring light on how humans manage to overcome adversity across the educational life cycle.

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