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Parents Managing University and Family Life

Introduction

Many first-in-family (FiF) students begin their university journey not as traditional school leavers, but as mature-age students who have busy family lives, often with young children, as well as working lives to manage. Those who are the first in their family to begin university means there may be no-one in their home, or even in their close community, who has any previous experience or knowledge of university to share with them. Indeed, there can often be a misalignment of family assumptions and expectations with the reality of a student's actual experience of university. While families can be powerful sources of inspiration, support and encouragement, as has been shown in Chap. 7, their demands and expectations can also be problematic and stressful, at times needing careful negotiation. This chapter explores the role that family played in the lives of the mature-age students with children, who formed a significant part of the cohort in Study B. It also draws upon findings from previous studies with mature-age FiF students (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Hook, 2015; Longhurst et al., 2012; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Reay et al., 2002; Stone, 2008; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Both the positive contribution of

family, as well as the complications arising from family needs and demands, are examined, in relation to the lives of these parents as students. This cohort of students demands more attention from researchers, universities and policymakers as they are now a significant feature of higher education (HE) participation in Australia.

Growth in Mature-Age University Students in Australia

The number of mature-age students at Australian universities has been increasing steadily since the 1970s. The most recent figures (2020) identify how 25% of all commencing undergraduate students are aged 25 years or over; a figure which has grown from an average of 22% since 2012 (Universities Australia, 2022). The trend towards more mature-age students entering HE internationally dates from as early as the Second World War, when legislation to re-establish service men and women into civilian life allowed them to apply for degree programmes (May & Bunn, 2015, p. 133). This trend was given further impetus through the 1960s, when UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) proposed the concepts of 'lifelong education' (Bagnall, 2006, p.25), and the 'the learning society' (May, 2005), followed by the development of an international agenda, from the 1970s onwards, of Lifelong Learning (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). This agenda rapidly gathered pace in Australia, advocating the need to encourage and widen access to post-compulsory education (Longworth, 2004, p. 7). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Australian HE equity agenda placed increasing emphasis on reducing barriers to HE, including the barrier of age. Two international reports in 1996, the UNESCO report "Learning: The Treasure Within" (Delors, 1996) and the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) report 'Lifelong Learning for All' (OECD, 1996) further accelerated the international movement towards 'mass and universal participation' (Skilbeck, 2006, p. 117), including participation by older students. Subsequent Australian Government policy initiatives, including reviews such as what is known as the 'Bradley Review' of Higher Education (Bradley et al.,

2008), have continued to ensure that university is not just the province of the young school leaver. The Bradley Review recommended that targets be set to increase the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds with undergraduate degrees, from 29% to 40% by 2020, as well as increasing the proportion of low socio-economic status (low SES) students to 20%. While subsequent Australian governments have moved away from setting targets, the equity agenda has remained strong, with universities being rewarded financially for increasing their enrolments of students from certain groups, including those from low SES backgrounds. In the years immediately following the Bradley Review, universities focused on recruiting low SES students, amongst whom a high proportion are mature-aged, and provided them with alternative pathways into university, such as through enabling programmes. Many enabling programmes are aimed specifically at mature-age students who did not have the opportunity to enter university straight from school (May & Bunn, 2015).

Even though Australian universities currently define a mature-age student, for the purposes of mature-age entry programmes, as any student aged 21 or over, much of the discussion about mature-age students refers to those who are at least 25 and over and who have had a number of years out of school, in the workforce and/or with other adult responsibilities such as raising families. This means that they are likely to be at a very different life-stage than the more traditional school-leaver student.

In this chapter, we will be looking at those mature-age FiF students who have children, and who are therefore in a very different position from younger students who have recently left school. How these parent-students manage the competing demands of university study along with home and family responsibilities is a subject of much interest and relevance to those responsible for educating and supporting these students on their learning journey.

Who Are the Parent-Students?

Amongst the 274 FiF students surveyed and interviewed for Study B, 29 interviewees and 49 survey respondents reported having dependent children. The 29 interviewees ranged in ages from 29 to 52 and their children

were aged from one-year-old to late-teens. Five were men and 24 were women. Three had pre-school children, while all the others had at least one child at school, mostly a mixture of primary and secondary school. Six had high-school-aged children only. Thirteen of the women were lone parents and the other 16 parents reported that they lived with their partner. Eight of the women and one of the men were not in paid employment, while the other 20 parents were working full- or part-time.

Amongst the 49 survey respondents, 44 provided their children's ages. Seventeen had children under five; 12 had children under ten; while 15 had teenage children. Some families had a mix of under-tens, teens and 20-year-olds, and two indicated the imminent birth of babies. Fifteen of these families were lone parent families. The majority of the parents surveyed was aged between 25 and 50, with only two being younger—one in the 18–21 range and another in the 21–25 group. The analysis now turns to a discussion of the ways in which parenting impacted upon the lives of these women and men as they performed their student role.

Impact of Children on the Lives of Parent-Students

Children as Motivators

While the presence of children can undoubtedly complicate the lives of students, their presence can also be a positive motivating force to begin, as well as to persist with study, as touched upon in Chaps. 4, 7, 9 and 10. Wanting to improve opportunities for their children, to set a good example for them and to provide them with a better life were key motivations expressed by the participants in this study. Examples include one of the enabling students who wrote in her survey response, 'My two older children will be completing high school this year and next year. I wanted to show them what study was all about' (female, 40–50, partnered, three teenagers, enabling programme). A desire to demonstrate to her daughter that it was possible to be 'something else' had motivated another of the survey respondents:

I used to hear people ask my daughter what her mum did, and she would reply, “she is just my mum”. As much as I love being their mum I also want to be something else for them. To show them that if you put your mind to something then you can do it. (Female, 25–30, partnered, three children, Nursing, on-campus)

Wainwright and Marandet (2010) in their UK research with student-parents, found that parents were strongly motivated to study as a means of achieving social mobility for themselves and their children, by building ‘a financially sound familial future’ (p. 456), in particular lone parents. In our research, we found similarly that a number of the lone parents strongly articulated a wish to provide children with more options in life; one such example was Talia, single, aged 43, with two teenagers and doing Legal Studies online. Her motivation to embark on a university degree was ‘to make a decent amount of money to be able to support myself and put my kids through college if that’s what they want’. Giving children more opportunities in life was also important to Asha, aged 34, divorced with three children and studying Arts on-campus. Having lived in public housing all her life, she ‘wanted my kids to realise that just because that’s where you come from, it doesn’t mean that it closes off your options’. Asha also wanted to demonstrate to them that ‘if I can do it, maybe they can do it’. Similarly, Ally, aged 39, single with two children and studying Sociology on-campus, wanted more for her children than she had in her own life growing up. Her own background had been quite troubled, and she had battled a drinking problem when younger, yet studying for a university degree was part of providing her children with a different example in life. In her words, ‘I don’t want my children to go down the path that I went down.’

Fathers were equally committed to the idea that, through their studies, they could be a positive example to their children, a point returned to in Chap. 9. Nick, for instance, aged 39, partnered with four children and studying Education on-campus, felt that his own experience of being a student enabled him to ‘teach them and pass on to them ... to provide a lot of that information and knowledge’. Nick also commented that, ‘as a parent ... you want to instil knowledge and instil the best wisdom into your kids so they’ve got the best tools to survive through life’, and through

his studies he felt in a better position to do this 'the diplomatic way'. Others mentioned that already they were seeing their children wanting to emulate them with regard to their studies. For example, Paul (47, partnered, four children, Business, online) described the attitude now amongst his children of 'Oh well, if dad's doing it, I can go and do it', while Lance (46, partnered, two children, Business, online) reported 'my son's started at university since I have'. Richard was very clear that he wanted his daughter to have more choices than he had:

I didn't really know what I wanted to do but there was no encouragement to even make a choice. My daughter, I'll certainly be encouraging to help her to make a choice. (Richard, 29, partnered, one child, Information Technology, online)

Reactions from Children

Many of the participants commented on the supportiveness and positive attitude of their children when they decided to return to study, across all ages. Glenda, single, aged 46, with a teenage son and doing Legal Studies online, reported, 'He's really happy with it. He's a studying kind of person himself so it interests him.' Others reported that their children, although supportive overall, were initially wary about the changed state of affairs. Georgia, for example, said of her 14-year-old son: 'My son was a bit nervous but he was also very supportive' (Georgia, 32, single, one child, Arts, online).

There were a number of examples of parents and children being able to help each other, such as Susanna's experience:

Actually it's been very interesting how it's impacted on the kids. After I'd only done one or two units, my daughter, Naomi, she told me how pleased she was that I was studying because I was actually understanding her school work better. (Susanna, 43, partnered, three children, Arts, online)

Similarly, Allana found that her son was particularly helpful with technology:

[W]hen I do homework, for example essays and assignments, he [son] will be there with me. We help each other because he's very good with computers. I don't know anything about computers so he just comes, click this, click that, everything is good. (Allana, 30, partnered, two children, Nursing, on-campus)

This also was apparent amongst the survey respondents, such as one of the women who wrote, 'My daughter has helped me with questions I have had about certain things' (Female survey participant, 50+, partnered, two children, Science, online). At times an element of guilt about their studies taking time away from their children, as well as perceived disapproval from others, was expressed, such as in Gemma's comment below:

I'm starting getting the complaints, particularly from my partner, that I'm not available, that I am always tired and it's probably from the kids that I don't spend as much time with them. (Gemma, 42, partnered, three children, Arts, online)

Receiving positive responses from children was very important to these students in that it helped to validate their decision to return to study. Guilt can easily stem from 'the gendered expectation that women will carry the primary caring role in the family' (Stone & O'Shea, 2013, p. 110), whereas affirmation from children can help mature-age students to feel more confident in their decision and their ability to take on this new challenge (O'Shea, 2022). Gaining this confidence is particularly important for FiF students, who do not have access to the role models and the experience to help them feel comfortable and confident about undertaking university study. In the words of Reay and colleagues: '[I]t is the newly arrived working-class, minority and female cohorts who blame their own personal and educational inadequacies for their inability to make the transition to HE.' (2002, pp. 14–15)

Longhurst et al. (2012) in their New Zealand research with lone mothers in HE, found a mixture of guilt and pride amongst the mothers they interviewed—guilt for 'taking time away from one's children' yet pride for 'doing something to resolve dependency by participating in education' (p. 296). Our argument throughout this book is that, instead of

employing a deficit discourse to understand the predicament of FiF students, thereby reinforcing their feelings of inadequacy, universities need to acknowledge and build on the considerable strengths of these students. In so doing, pride, rather than guilt, can be reinforced. As the stories below demonstrate, these parent-students are managing complex situations, around family responsibilities, in addition to the responsibilities of being a university student.

Managing Children's Demands and Needs in Conjunction with Study

It was clear from the stories of these students that the gendered role of women as primary carer of children resulted in significant challenges for the mature-age women with children. Previous research has identified a range of challenges for students who are also parents, particularly for mothers (Reay et al., 2002; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003) and lone parents (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Hook, 2015). These include: organising and prioritising; dealing with changes in relationships with partners and children; balancing the needs of study with the needs of others; and, in general, not having enough hours in the day to do all that needed to be done. Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2003) talk about the 'gendered expectations of family obligations and the ongoing disparity with which women take on the "second shift" through maintenance of children and home' (2003, p. 113). Hinton-Smith (2012) comments on the particular challenges for lone parents who are not only responsible for 'meeting both the material and emotional needs of children' but are also the 'sole breadwinners' (p. 44); while Hook (2015) in her Australian research with lone postgraduate students, reports a sense of 'alienation and anxiety' amongst the parents she interviewed, who feared 'that their sole parenting commitments would be viewed negatively in the university context' (p. 116). Perhaps it is not surprising that parents can feel alienated and unsupported by the institution when, as Marandet and Wainwright (2010) point out, university breaks often do not coincide with school holidays, 'making it difficult for students with primary school

children to attend lectures’ (p. 796). In their research they also found instances of ‘coursework deadlines set during school holidays’, ‘deadlines given at short notice’ and ‘for insurance reasons, students ... not allowed to bring children on campus without prior written permission, making any adjustments extremely complex and potentially costly’ (p. 796). Close to a decade or more on from this earlier research, Stone and O’Shea (2022) argue that women with caring responsibilities continue to remain significantly disadvantaged within the HE system, due to the often invisible nature of caring work, and the apparent reluctance of universities to understand and acknowledge the additional load that women with children are generally carrying. They argue that ‘until this additional load and its consequences are recognised and better accommodated within institutional practices, women in HE with caring responsibilities will remain significantly disadvantaged’ (pp. 87–88).

The stories of the FiF students in our research revealed similar challenges in the process of combining their new lives as students with their existing responsibilities as parents, within a family context where university was an unfamiliar concept. Meeting these challenges often required considerable amounts of personal and financial sacrifice.

‘Making’ Time

Mature-age students who are juggling a range of other responsibilities are inevitably ‘time poor’ (Reay et al., 2002, p. 9). Fitting study in amongst work, child care, domestic responsibilities and any possible social life, requires a ‘complex negotiation of time’ (Edwards et al., 1996, p. 213). Marandet and Wainwright (2010) found that 84.5% of the student-parents they interviewed and surveyed (two-thirds of these were women) ‘found it difficult to balance studying and their domestic responsibilities’ (p. 794). Parents in paid employment, in addition to studying, were under the most stress in terms of managing their time.

A number of feminist writers have contended that a different value is placed upon ‘men’s time’ and ‘women’s time’; with men’s time being seen as more valuable and productive while women’s time is time given up to the demands and needs of others (Hughes, 2002; McNay, 2000).

Similarly, Morrison (1996) talked about the 'gender-laden and time-consuming nature' (p. 214) of a woman's role, in which time is "collective" time which others, for example, their families, have a right to lay claim to' (p. 14). This is illustrated in Susanna's words:

And then while the children are not here, that's when I study and everything else has to be done. The children cope better with me doing housework and jobs and other things while they're around; they don't cope with me saying "I need you to be quiet. I'm thinking." (Susanna, 43, partnered, 3 children, Arts, online)

Another example is Wendy who, as a lone parent with three children aged 19, 16 and 8, was working night shifts between 10.30 pm and 6.30 am, five days a week. Wendy had set herself a very strict timetable in order to fit in time for children around study and paid work:

I try to do three hours [study] every day. I get up [from sleeping after night shift] and go and get the kids at 2:00 o'clock—they finish at 3:00 and then I study until dinner time, till 6:00, and then I cook dinner and then it's my children's time and then ... as long as I'm not tired, I'll hit the books rather than try and make it up on the weekend; that is my time with the kids, I will try and make it up during the week. (Wendy, three children, single, Legal Studies, online)

Such stories resonate with the words of Reay et al. (2002) who talk about female mature-age students as being 'caught up in a constant balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money' (2002, p. 10), and, more recently, the work of Stone and O'Shea (2022) who reflect on women expending 'vast amounts of time and energy in planning, time management, multi-tasking and, in many cases, also dealing with family resistance in order to persist' (p. 87).

The interviews and survey data gathered from these students reinforce the view that within the mature-age women's familial habitus (Bourdieu, 1990; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014), their main practical challenge was finding the *time* to accommodate their various habitual roles with their

new role as student. Previous research refers to the ‘juggling act’ (Stone, 2008, p. 278) described by female mature-age students. This term was similarly used by women within this cohort of FiF students, such as Georgia, who talked about it being ‘just a juggling act’. She described the ways in which she managed this juggling:

I listen to my lectures in the car on my way to work and I do my readings in my lunch-break; and the weekend when my son is at his father’s house I spend at the library. I don’t have a social life any more but it’s worth it I think. (Georgia, 32, single, one child, Arts, online)

Similarly, Allana found it hard to imagine how she got so much done in so little time:

At the end of the day I just sit there and just thinking ‘How did I get through with all this’—kids dropped to school in the morning and go to work four days a week and three days at uni; there’s no time off. (Allana, 30, partnered, two children, Nursing, on-campus)

In seeking to ‘make’ time, these women were attempting to re-organise the spaces and places within their lives in order to include their university studies; and in doing so they were broadening their own and others’ perceptions of educational possibilities and opportunities. It is hardly surprising that this could also be an exhausting responsibility:

I’m tired more often or I always seem to be tired now. I know that’s the complaint from my family now that I always seem to be tired. (Gemma, 42, partnered, three children, Arts, online)

As previous research has demonstrated, inevitably what is sacrificed is personal time. ‘Women’s personal time for leisure and friends is sacrificed in order to facilitate the time required for university activities ... putting family and domestic responsibilities first, study second and themselves last’ (Stone & O’Shea, 2012, p. 76). Asha’s words reflect the level of sacrifice that is required to be able to continue with her studies:

I don't have a social life. Everything's got to be planned, you know, six months in advance because I'm "No, I've got an essay due here, I can't do that". You know, sacrifice is the biggest time management. ... Pretty much in every aspect of time it's had a big impact. The easy alternative for me is not to stay studying and I have thought that many times; it is the easy way out but I make it work somehow. I don't know how. I just run on adrenalin. (Asha, single, three children, Arts, on-campus)

Amongst the male interviewees with young children, David was the only one who was the primary carer, in that his wife went to work while he studied full-time online from home. Caring for two children aged one and four, he too found creative ways to 'make' time, studying 'during the middle of the day when my youngest one is asleep' or 'I would have to put my four-year-old in front of the TV or something where he would get out of my hair and I would use those couple of hours during the day to study.' Once David's wife was at home however, she would 'take the boys and do the dinner, bathing and putting to bed while I would study'.

For the women who were lone parents, this type of help at the end of the day was clearly not an option, nor was it necessarily available to the mothers who did have partners. For example:

For me it's about time. Sometimes family responsibilities infringe on my study time and I find myself getting quite frustrated. My husband also requires a lot of time from me ... and that puts pressure on me too ... [He] frequently travels interstate for business so I have done everything with my children single-handedly ... [he is] concerned that studying [takes] me away from my role as wife, mother and employee. (Female survey participant 30–40, two young children, Psychology, online)

The attitudes and reactions of partners in relation to the student-parents' university studies played a significant role in determining how much (or little) support these parents received. Here too gender shapes the expectations of both the students and their partners, depending on which is male and which is female.

Reactions and Attitudes of Partners

Female partners of the student-fathers were generally described as having been supportive and encouraging of the decision to begin university studies, with such examples as David, mentioned above, who described his wife as having ‘been a rock through all of my university’. Similarly, Benjamin said of his wife,

We made the decision ourselves together and from that my wife was very supportive because she was very understanding. (Benjamin, 47, partnered, three children, Science, online)

Nick also talked of his wife’s encouragement and support in the most positive terms:

She supports me in every way. Like when I said I was going to university and basically leaving a secure job and what I know best and a reasonable income, you know, she’s just fully supported; she’s never stood in my way or defied me or made me try and doubt it or deter me in any way, shape or form, which is a good thing. (Nick, 39, partnered, three children, Education, on-campus)

Amongst the mothers, there were also a number of examples of male partners’ encouragement, with comments from the survey such as: ‘My partner is very supportive and often mentions how proud he is that I am doing well with my studies’ (Female survey participant, 25–30, two children, second year, Business, online); and ‘My husband is proud of my achievements and also completely supportive’ (Female survey participant, 40–50, two children, third year, full-time Nursing, on campus).

There were also occasional references to male partners helping out with domestic duties such as:

When I have essays due and my partner is home from work he takes over the cooking and looking after the kids so that I can focus. (Female survey participant, 25–30, three children, Human Resources, online)

Other examples of practical support by male partners came from Hannah, whose husband 'changed shifts at work for one of the weeks to help out' (Hannah, 33, five children, Nursing, on-campus) and also from Emma:

He's just supportive in everything that I do that's good or positive. Yes ... he drives me to uni of a morning and even then just 'Do you want me to pick you up, sweetie' and cooks dinner while I'm studying which he's always done but doing more and yes, he just wants me to succeed and to help out as much as he can. (Emma, 32, partnered, one child, Nursing, on-campus)

As encouraging as these examples are, unfortunately they stood out as unusual within this cohort. More commonly the student-mothers reported that their male partners were at best ambivalent about their studies and at worst actively unsupportive or critical. Some reported that their partner had trouble understanding why they wanted to study:

[My] partner sometimes feels neglected ... does not always understand why I would want a change of career at this point. (Female survey participant, 40–50, partnered, Arts, online)

Some male partners were described as feeling 'threatened' by having their partner's attention turned elsewhere. For example, one of the female survey respondents, in the 40–50 age range, with two children, wrote that her husband 'felt a little threatened ... also concerned that I wouldn't have time ... that it would [deprive] us of our time together'. As a result, this student had a very difficult start to her studies:

I took five weeks off work so that I could have a real good start but within the first two weeks my husband complained so much about the time it was taking away from us that I actually withdrew. (Female survey participant, 40–50, partnered, two children, Psychology, online)

There were examples of relationship breakdowns and separations, such as one survey participant who talked about her husband having been

‘unsupportive, criticizing, joking’ which led, in her words, to ‘relationship breakdown’:

One reason was his insecurity and jealousy for what I am doing. My husband has stopped talking to me right from when I undertook the studies. It has been two years now. (Female survey participant, 40–50, partnered, two young children, second year, Psychology, on-campus)

Also Natalie:

One of the reasons I left my husband was he was very unsupportive with everything—this and other stuff. He wasn’t overly supportive because essentially it took my time away from him. (Natalie, 26, single, two children, Business, online)

There were examples of long-held dreams of study being put on hold because of a partner’s opposition:

I’d always thought I would like to be a school teacher but I did not take up the first offer of Education in 1999 as my then husband asked “who is going to look after the children?” I did not have his support. Now that I am on my own, I felt that I had nothing holding me back except myself and that I needed to make the choices and take control. (Female survey participant, single, 40–50, two children, Nursing, on-campus)

The issue of male partners feeling ‘threatened and excluded’ (Wilson, 1997, p. 358) by the woman’s return to study is one that has consistently arisen in research over the past two or more decades into the mature-age female student experience (Edwards, 1993; Leonard, 1994) and also in more recent studies (Quinn, 2005; Reay et al., 2002; Stone & O’Shea, 2022; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003), which explore the ‘change in the power dynamics in the relationship’ (Stone & O’Shea, 2012, p. 79) that can result from a woman’s decision to study, particularly in families where gender roles have previously been quite traditionally defined. Such a dynamic can significantly affect the quality and quantity of support that women receive from male partners whilst studying.

This was also demonstrated in an earlier study of FiF students (Stone, 2008) in which 17 mature-age parent-students, 12 women and 5 men, who were first in their families to go to university, were interviewed about their experiences. All were enrolled in undergraduate degrees on-campus at an Australian regional university, having entered via an enabling programme. The age range of this group was 23–52 and their children ranged in age from infants to adults. Amongst this group, unsurprisingly, a major challenge reported was that of ‘balancing the needs of study with the needs of family, home, partners and children’ (2008, p. 275). What emerged from this study was that, for the fathers, study time was accorded a special status within the family, with the importance of dedicated quiet time for study being recognised and supported by their female partners, who took responsibility for the bulk of child care and domestic duties. In contrast, the female students ‘tailored their study time around responsibilities at home, including their children, partners and other home and family responsibilities’ (2008, p. 279). For these mothers, pursuing education was regarded as ‘secondary’ to other responsibilities such as care-giving or working, often perceived as a ‘leisure activity’ (2008, p. 265) and hence not to be taken too seriously by partners and other family. Similarly, a study by Reay et al. (2002) in which mature-age female students with children were interviewed about their experiences of combining study with family life, revealed ‘a subtext of women as “uncared for carers”’ (cited in Stone, 2008, p. 17).

Certainly, it appeared to be the case in our research for this book that the women with children were, by and large, unquestioningly carrying the lion’s—or lioness’s share perhaps—of caring and domestic responsibilities in conjunction with their studies and often paid work as well. As discussed earlier, several of them described male partners as encouraging and supportive, there was little evidence in their stories that this translated into much regular practical assistance at home for most of the mothers in this study. The responsibility for caring, cooking and housework was largely theirs. What follows is a discussion about the types of support that they received from other people, outside their immediate nuclear family, which helped them to continue their studies despite their other time-consuming responsibilities.

Support from Others

Consistent with the pattern of women as carers, other women emerged as being sources of significant support to the mothers in this study, particularly their own mothers and also their female friends.

Parents of Student-Parents

We have previously touched upon the role of parents in students' lives but for those learners with children having this additional family support was very important. For example, a number of the women with children mentioned the support they received from their own parents, particularly their mothers. Their parents were often reported as being supportive and encouraging of the decision to begin studying, one example being that of Talia:

I'm very happy that I've made my parents proud in taking a step further than what they were able to do because, as parents, that's all we ever want is for our children to do better than we did. (Talia, 43, divorced, two children, Legal Studies, online)

Parents could also help in very practical ways. For example, Ally relied on her parents to help with child care: 'my parents take care of my children too so I get a lot of support that way as well' (Ally, 39, single, two children, Legal Studies, on-campus), while Monique found that 'mum was very supportive. If I was swamped with assignments she would cook dinner' (Monique, 49, single, two children, Education, online). Wendy, single with three children, doing Legal Studies online, also valued the 'close family support' that she had and reported receiving 'a lot of encouragement from my mum and dad'. This type of emotional and practical support from parents was highly appreciated, such as by Emma, aged 32, partnered with a 12-year-old and studying Nursing on-campus, who said of her mother, 'I know if I rang her and said "Mum", she'd come in an instant for support so it's really good.' Amongst the fathers in this parent cohort, Benjamin mentioned family support from his parents-in-law,

who had 'fully supported me and have offered me assistance wherever I needed it', but he was the only one of the fathers who referred specifically to help and support from extended family. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the source of family support mentioned by the men was most often their female partners.

Friends

Many of the student-mothers had women friends who helped to make their lives a little bit easier, through looking after children, talking over assessments, or just giving them emotional support by being willing to listen and showing that they cared. Natalie, for instance, had 'very supportive friends' who would help her out by 'watching the kids for a couple of hours while I finish an assignment' and offering 'actual hands-on practical support', while Wendy talked of her online 'study buddy' who was 'doing the same course'. Georgia spoke of 'a couple of friends who I'll call and have a whinge to. They've done post-grad study and they've got a young family as well; so they understand where I'm coming from'.

Having a friend in a similar situation for mutual support was important also to Holly:

I have a good friend who's studying ... and she is a really good support ... we also help each other out with children and household stuff, you know, if I haven't done some cooking or whatever then she'll cook and then I'll do the same for her. (Holly, 43, partnered, three children, Business, online)

Elle, who was studying an enabling course on campus, 'found out a friend of mine who used to live out the back of my parents was here. She was in her second year; she graduates this semester. She helped me out ... we have a couple of the same subjects so she's helped me with that' (Elle, 33, single, three children, Arts, on-campus).

As has been touched upon in Chap. 4, the building of friendships in an on-campus environment has been shown to be positively related to student engagement, student satisfaction and student success (McGivney, 2006; Quinn, 2005; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Many previous studies

have demonstrated that ‘friendships with fellow students play a significant role in persistence and retention’ (Stone & O’Shea, 2012, p. 96). However, as has also been mentioned in Chap. 4, there may be factors that inhibit the development of friendships, such as studying online. For many parents, the sheer difficulty of spending much time on campus can mean that they do not have time to build strong connections with other students. Therefore, recognition needs to be given to the importance of maintaining friendships and connections outside the actual physical environment of the university. It was apparent from the stories of these students that where they looked for support was not necessarily within university, but much closer to home, from within their families and friendship networks. Another source of support that emerged as important, for those who were in employment, was the workplace. Interestingly, while support from friends outside of university did not appear in the fathers’ stories, the workplace as a source of support was mentioned by both mothers and fathers.

Support within the Workplace

More than two-thirds (20) of the 29 interviewees with dependent children were in paid work as well as studying. A number of them described feeling supported in the workplace by managers as well as by colleagues, such as Allana’s description:

I do have a very supportive boss who’ll come out to me and say “Well when’s your assignment due? Why don’t you take half a day and just work on your study?” (Allana, 30s, partnered, two children, Nursing, on-campus)

Similarly, Patricia (40s, single, one child, enabling programme) related that: ‘My boss is fantastic, she’s very family-orientated; any help I need she gives it to me’. Emma reported that she felt supported by ‘all the girls at work’, as well as by her boss, ‘which is great’ (32, partnered, one child, Nursing, on-campus). Even though David (34, partnered, two children, Business, online) was not currently employed, he was encouraged into university when ‘a manager identified some potential and took me into

her section on the condition that I furthered my education'. Richard, working in hospitality, related that in his workplace he had a number of colleagues who were either studying or had recently completed degrees:

There's one particular guy who's in his third year of what I'm doing so he's good to talk to for hints and tricks and advice ... they more understand what I'm going through because they've just finished it themselves. (Richard, partnered, one child, Arts, online)

While there is some evidence, as mentioned in Chap. 6, that online students particularly benefit from having support in the workplace (Park & Choi, 2009), the importance of workplace support for all students who are studying whilst employed needs to be acknowledged, especially for those students who, in addition, are managing family responsibilities. Above all though, the students' own determination and persistence played a key role in keeping them going, despite the many burdens on their time and their multiple responsibilities.

Finding Strength within Themselves

Without exception, at some point in their narratives, parents interviewed or surveyed for this research, mentioned ways in which they summoned up their own determination, motivation and inner strength to help them to keep going, despite the many challenges they faced. Some described this process in detail, such as Holly's words below:

I think it was my head that helped me through. I'm a fairly level-headed person so even though I was really quite stressed ... that was just adding to how I was feeling and in the end, I thought "No, I can do this. It's really not that hard. If I just put in a little bit more extra time". So yes, I think just my determination and not wanting to fail, not wanting to give up was something that really kept me going. I didn't want to go "Oh no, well I've actually thrown away my studies." (Holly, 43, partnered, three children, Business, online)

Hannah reported that it was ‘just my own self-determination’ that got her through difficult times. She explained that she had seen a number of her fellow-students drop out and was determined not to become one of them:

We’ve had seven people drop out already. There are some in there that are like, “I don’t even know why I’m here. Why am I doing this to myself”, sort of thing. I guess it depends on how determined you are and how badly you really want to do it because if it’s not what you really want to do then no, you don’t want to put yourself through it. (Hannah, 33, partnered, five children, Nursing, on-campus)

A desire to manage on their own and not ask for help in their personal lives came across quite strongly, as expressed by Patricia in saying, ‘I don’t like asking for help’. Nick also was very explicit about wanting to manage without help from family, even though they offered support:

[M]y wife’s family, when I told them that I’m going to be a teacher, you know, they’ve offered support and everything but again, I don’t really take that support. I try and do a lot of it for myself. (Nick, 39, partnered, 3 children, Education, on-campus)

Many had learnt to develop their own personal strategies for managing their study load combined with the other demands in their lives, such as Yvonne, 38, single with two children, who said, ‘as long as you keep consistently tugging away at it, it’s not that hard. ... I’ve learned not to get worried about all the little things’. Gemma had also found her own approach to keeping on going:

[I]t’s a means to an end here for me so I’ve got a definite difficult period here where I need to be really organised and sort things out but it’s very short term for long-term gain. (Gemma, 42, partnered, 3 children, Arts, online)

David talked about it being ‘a challenge studying online’ and that ‘in terms of time you have to be very motivated’, while Richard revealed that

'Coming up to my first assignment, I was considering pulling out just because I was afraid I was going to fail'; however, he learnt to adopt a different attitude:

[I]f times are tough, I can just get by; just pass. I'd like to get through it as quickly as possible but it's a matter of, you know, I've got to balance life, work and study so I've got to make sure I have an even balance of all. (Richard, 29, partnered, one child, Arts, online)

Conclusion

Previous research has described the journey of the mature-age woman in HE as being akin to a 'hero's journey' (O'Shea & Stone, 2014) in that it emulates the stages of the classic mythical hero's journey of embarking upon a tour through foreign or unfamiliar lands; meeting many trials but also finding helpers and allies; undergoing a series of tests to strengthen their character; achieving new wisdom and knowledge along the way; and returning home as a changed or transformed character. The FiF parents in our study could also be said to be undertaking this classic hero's journey, as demonstrated by the challenges and trials of managing family, paid work and study, as they negotiated through the foreign land of university. They also encountered tests of their motivation and determination, from which they learnt strategies and approaches to avoid falling into the pit of despair and to keep to their path. Helpers and allies along this journey included, in varying ways, partners, children, parents, institutional help and their own inner strength.

Undeniably, their journeys were impacted upon by gender, in that by and large it was the mothers who were carrying the primary responsibility for the additional load of caring for children and home. The one obvious exception to this was in the case of David, who, like all the student-mothers in this cohort, was the primary caregiver to his two young children. David's journey however was made easier by his wife's active involvement in child care and domestic responsibilities when she was not at work. There were also some examples of male partners of student-mothers taking an active role in child care and domestic duties; whenever

this occurred, the women's journeys were less stressful and demanding. However, the lone mothers and the women whose partners were less involved in practical home and family tasks, were carrying a significantly higher load along their journeys. For some, their own parents, particularly mothers, were helping to share this load; also women friends in similar circumstances were highly valued, not only for their friendship but also for the practical help they offered, such as occasional child care.

Overall, families and friends offered a great deal of inspiration and support to these FiF parent-students; however, the challenges they faced were ones which they themselves had to find creative ways to manage if they were going to be able to continue to study successfully. What also emerged in some cases was a reluctance to seek outside help, but instead to seek to manage their personal and study lives without revealing their difficulties and challenges to others, particularly outside the family. This can be problematic, particularly when the demands and expectations of HE conflict explicitly with parenting responsibilities, as other research with parent-students has highlighted. For example, Hook (2015) found that 'university timetabling was often in conflict with childcare responsibilities' (p. 129), while Hinton-Smith (2012) found that interviewees reported 'overtly negative attitudes' from the institution towards lone parents, as well as 'no special interest or treatment to lone parents' (p. 154).

The imperative for institutions and HE practices, to better understand and accommodate the particular needs of parent-students, will be further discussed in the concluding chapter of this book. Meanwhile, Chap. 9 focuses specifically on the experiences of male FiF students. It looks at the role that gender plays in shaping their experiences as they make the transition into HE and establish their identities as university students.

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