

# Gender & Education Conference 2014

*Ripples of learning:  
Higher Education participation, familial  
habitus, gender and first in family  
female students*

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# Who are we?

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institutions***

# The presentation

- **Background – slides 4-7**
- **Some of our findings – slides 8-10**
- **Issues and voices from the data – slides 11-17**
  - Time
  - Money
  - Feelings
  - Relationships
- **Habitus, Gender, Space, Place – slides 18-21**
- **Bringing down the Ivory Tower – slide 22**

# Background

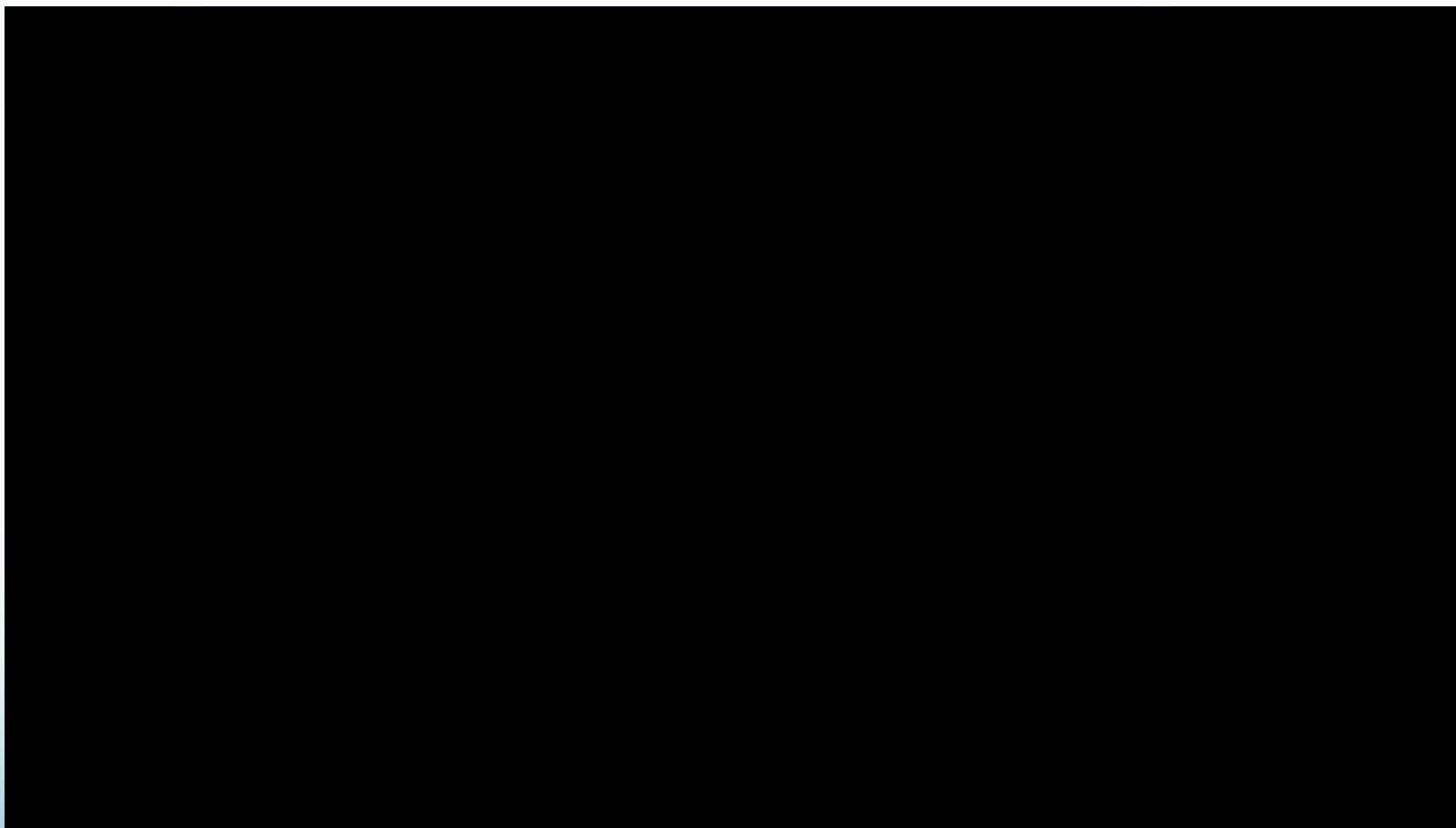
- Significant growth in student numbers in Australia; women comprise 57.2 percent of the total university population (2011).
- Participation benchmarks are in place in Australia: 40% of all 25 to 34-year-olds attaining a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025 but this attainment target is likely to be reached prior to 2025 (Kemp & Norton, 2014).
- Approximately half the university student population in Australia (51%) is derived from first in family backgrounds (OECD, 2012), majority of these are female; twice as many females than males in the age range 35+.

# First in family

## What do we know about the first in family cohort?

- Reported as not achieving to the same level academically as non-first in family cohort
- Deficit thinking - a 'group at risk' (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013, p. 329)
- The lack of an educational memory or “transgenerational family scripts” (Ball *et al.*, 2002, p. 57)

# Mandy's Story



# Female mature-age students

## Facing Gendered Challenges

- Family difficulties – resistance from some partners; juggling
- Institutional challenges – enrolment; timetabling
- Financial challenges – loss of income; unexpected costs
- Confidence Levels – easily depleted
- Guilt –children; me-time; household duties
- Technology challenges – level of expectation

(Previous research by O'Shea, 2014, Stone & O'Shea, 2013)

# Current Research

- For the purposes of this study, first in family status has been defined as:

***no-one in the immediate family of origin including siblings or parents having previously attended a higher education institution or having completed a university degree.***

- Mature-age defined as 25+
- Inclusion of family members – looking at this return from the perspective of the student and their family members
- Survey and interview methodology
- Three cohort groups – online learners (OUA), Access program participants (UoN) and domestic on-campus undergrads (UoW)



# Research design

Location	Cohort Group	Numbers
University of Wollongong (UoW)	U/G students Gender mix / FiF	40 students plus 10–15 family members
University of Newcastle (UoN)	Foundation / Access students Gender mix / FiF Over 25	30-35 plus 8-10 family members
Open Universities Australia (OUA)	U/G students in the first year of online studies. Gender mix / FiF Over 25	40 students plus optional survey for family members

# Female mature-age students

**Many of our findings are consistent with previous research:**

Female mature-age students:

- *[are] caught up in a constant balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money (Reay et al. 2002).*
- *Face particular challenges in terms of family and employment pressures and demands which compete with studies (Abbot-Chapman et al. 2004).*
- *Their return to study can be: tentative and fraught with fear of failure (Hinton-Smith, 2009).*

# Gendered concept of time

## **Gendered expectations of men's time vs women's time – long-standing issue:**

- *Gender-laden and time-consumptive nature* (Morrison, 1996) of women's roles.
- *Complex negotiation of time* (Edwards *et al.*, 1996) for women trying to fit in study amongst work, family & domestic responsibilities.
- *Women are expected to give up time for others; men are expected to use their time productively to achieve tangible results* (Hughes, 2002, McNay, 2000)
- *Universities are still based on 'men's time'* (Heenan, 2002)

# Complex negotiation of time

*It's just a juggling act. I listen to my lectures in the car on my way to work and I do my readings in my lunchbreak 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, 1 child, online UG)*

*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, 2 children, on-campus UG)*

*I try to do three hours every day. I get up 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, 3 children, online UG)*

# Making ends meet

Female students are:

- *More likely to financially dependent on someone else... more likely to have a budget deficit, less likely to have savings for an emergency and less likely to have paid HECS or full-fees up front. (James et al. 2007, Universities Australia Report)*
- Governments providing less and less financial support for those who are studying and for single parents – further disadvantages female mature-age students, serving to *reproduce past educational inequalities* (Reay et al., 2002)

# Making ends meet

*I have to be able to twist my boss' arm to giving me weekend shifts so that I've got the penalty rates because I can't physically do enough hours in the week to pay rent, buy food, all of that. (Angela, no children, on-campus, UG)*

*The biggest obstacle is the financial – you have the time and not the money, or the money but not the time, because you're working to get that money. (Natalie, 2 children, online, UG)*

*Financial was the first big burden. Once I got the letter saying that I was accepted I was like "Oh wow, this is really exciting" and then it was just on a complete downward slide, "How am I going to afford to do this? How am I going to justify my time away from the workforce to do something that I want to do?" So, it was a big, and still is, a big struggle every day of my uni life. (Asha, 3 children, on-campus, UG)*

# Family relationships

- *I'm tired more often or I always seem to be tired now. I know that's the complaint I have from my family now that I always seem to be tired. (Gemma, married, 3 teenagers, UG, online)*
- *If I've got an assignment or something due then I don't think he's [son] particularly pleased, and is probably a bit stressed out, because I am. (Georgia, single, one teenager, UG, online)*
- *He's [father] realised now that he can't just shut me down, he can't just insult me. It's not going to change my views and stuff. It's definitely not going to be good for our relationship. So, yeah, it has come to a head a lot. (Ashleigh, single, UG, on-campus)*

## But plenty of support

- *when 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.. (Alanna, 2 children, UG, on-campus)*
- *he [husband] tries to do a little bit of extra housework when he knows I've got an assignment or something like that on. (Taylor, no children, UG, on-campus)*
- *He's [husband] changed shifts at work for one of the weeks to help out so everybody sort of has to do a little bit for me to be able to do it. (Hannah, 5 children, UG, on-campus)*
- *He's great [husband]. I don't let him cook because he's terrible at it. I still come home and I cook and all the rest and he just cleans up after me which is great. (Hailey, no children, UG, on-campus)*



# Transforming Family Habitus

These women were expected to move in an effective and efficient manner between the *field* of the university and their respective personal and family *habitus*es sometimes with a stock of cultural, social and economic capital incongruent with those that promote success in that field.

Yet habitus ‘as the product of social conditionings, and thus of history [...] is endlessly transformed, whether in a direction that reinforces it [...] or in a direction that transforms it’. (Bourdieu, 1990, p116)

‘[H]abitus is in fact adaptive and incrementally modifiable in the face of variant circumstances’ (Edgerton and Roberts, 2014, p. 199). It is a ‘transforming machine’ (Bourdieu, 1990, p87).

In this study, we witness how older women with children are actively shifting the nuances of their own and their family habituses, renegotiating these to broaden their own and others’ perceptions of educational possibilities and opportunities.

# Transforming Habitus: Gender, Time and Space

- Gendered Habitus: our interviews and survey data reinforce the view that women's familial habituses have a range of affective and practical responsibilities and expectations (from themselves and others), that are different to those of men.
- In seeking to force adaptations in their gendered familial habituses, their main practical challenge was finding the *time* to accommodate their various habitual roles with their new role as student.
- We understand that *space* is the unspoken coefficient of *time* in these stories. (that is: 'the constitutive role of space-time in making the world around us' re Hubbard and Kitchin, 2011, p.3) .
- In seeking to make time, these women perforce must renegotiate the **spaces/places** of their lives as they include their university studies in their life maps.

# Examples of re-calibrating the habitus in space-time

While time seems to be an abstract concept - an invisible quantity - if we consider it as a coefficient of space (and 'space' can be in both notional and actual places), then time pressure can be understood **as an embodied experience**.

From the interviews and the surveys:

- The car becomes a study site;
- The wee small hours of the morning are spent in other areas of the house to study;
- Child-free weekends are spent at the library;
- Other places are neglected - for example, venues for social life are excised from their personal timetables.

Higher Education for First in Family women students leads to the spatial re-orderings of lives that is both liberating and problematic for them.

# FiF Women – University Space and Place

- **No Previous Contact** - Most of the first in family women had never encountered the university as either notional space or an actual place before they enrolled;
- **Another Country** - Many experienced both the HE space and place as ‘another country’ with an alien ‘language’ and sets of expectations
- **Their Strategies to ‘marry the spaces’** – bringing children and others to University; including their children and family members in ‘their study work’; underlining the benefits of spending time inhabiting the new space and place to their families (and themselves).

# FiF Women – University Space and Place

*It's very much like moving to a foreign country where you don't speak the language.*

*(Marilyn, no children, Enabling Program, UON)*

*My very first university paper; you know, you're not used to the academic world and you're not used to the academic way of writing...I read academic documents before and some of the language, you just go "What are these people talking about"*

*(Evie, no children, Online, UOW)*

*[My kids] try, especially when you're writing academic essays and you can't work out how to do the referencing. So, they've certainly been very very supportive in that area where they've actually both proof read my assignments and tried to help me with referencing and helped me with formatting and stuff that I didn't know a lot about. (Adele, 2 children, UG, UOW)*

# Bringing down the Ivory Tower

- So far Universities, which constitute a cultural field of Higher Education structured by and enacting ruling class male gender norms and practices, have done very little to make both the notional space of Higher Education or the physical places of campuses welcome environments to First in Family often working class, women and their families.
- It has been left to the women to make the myriad accommodations required within their habitus and changes/challenges to their cultural capital to allow them to acquire the knowledge, skills and attitudes to prosper.
- Women need child care, online free 24/7 study skills courses, places to bring their children and their relatives where they are welcome and can begin to be acquainted with the HE space.
- Our Higher Education sector needs re-conceptualising from the metaphorical narrow, vertical, vertigo-inducing Ivory Tower to a wide, horizontal, capacious space that belongs to everyone, especially to first in family women who have such transformative potential for society.

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