

My children ... think it's cool that Mum is a uni student: Women with caring responsibilities studying online

Cathy Stone

University of Newcastle, Australia

Sarah O'Shea

University of Wollongong, Australia

Much has been written about the growing influence and reach of online learning in higher education, including the opportunities that this can offer for improving student equity and widening participation. One area of student equity in which online learning has an influence is that of gender equity, particularly for mature-age students. This article explicitly explores how the dual identities of student and family carer are managed by women studying online. It highlights the largely invisible yet emotional and time-consuming additional load that many women are carrying and discusses the importance of this being recognised and accommodated at an institutional level. Online study has the potential to facilitate a more manageable and achievable study path for students with caring responsibilities, most of whom are women. Institutional understanding and awareness are required for this potential to be truly realised, thereby reducing educational inequity.

Implications for practice or policy:

- Recognising that older students, particularly women, are often combining study with complex family caring responsibilities, will lead to a more equitable learning environment that better facilitates persistence and success for online students.
- Building flexibility into online course design, keeping content and assessment tasks relevant and focused, enables students to pace their studies within their significant time constraints.
- Regular and meaningful communication between tutors and students sustains engagement, building a culture of caring, encouragement and support.

Keywords: online learning, mature-age students, gender and education, student equity, women as carers

Introduction

The proportion of university students in fully online higher education (HE) has been growing steadily in Australia, from 17% of commencing domestic students in 2010 to approximately 25% in 2018. This is having an impact on student access and participation in HE, with students from historically under-represented groups more strongly represented within the online cohort than in on-campus study (Abbott-Chapman, 2011; Department of Education and Training [DET], 2017b, 2018; Devlin & McKay, 2016; Dodo-Balu, 2018; Stone, 2017). In particular, online study is opening the door to more mature-age students who, through prior socio-economic disadvantage and/or competing responsibilities, may not previously have had the opportunity to attend university. As will be discussed in more detail below, women form the majority of mature-age students in HE and are increasingly choosing distance and part-time study to fit in with the time-consuming nature of their other commitments, including paid work and family (Hewson, 2018; Redmond, Abawi, Brown, Henderson, & Heffernan, 2018; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016).

While there is evidence of lower retention and qualification completion rates in distance education compared with on-campus study (DET, 2017a, 2018; Greenland & Moore, 2014; Stone, 2017), research indicates that online student attrition is connected as much with the nature of the cohort as it is with studying in distance mode. Compared with the more traditional on-campus student cohort, amongst the online student cohort there is a significantly higher proportion of those who are older (25 years plus) and studying part-time, with women more strongly represented than men within this cohort. This is the case not only within Australia (DET, 2017b) but also at universities with substantial numbers of fully online students within New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017), the United Kingdom (The Open University, n.d.) and North America (Athabasca University, 2019). Although the unique challenges of

studying online, such as technology and physical isolation from others, have been shown to be contributing factors, there is evidence that, for the many older, part-time students, it is their home, family and paid work responsibilities that play a significant role in distance student attrition (Moore & Greenland, 2017; Müller, 2008; Park & Choi, 2009; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; Tyler-Smith, 2006; Yoo & Huang, 2013). The higher numbers of women within the online cohort, combined with the gendered expectations of women as primary carers of others within the family (Stone & O'Shea, 2013), mean that women are particularly vulnerable in this context.

Despite many years of gender equity measures at government and industry levels (Australian Government Workplace Gender Equality Agency, 2018; Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2018; University of Melbourne and Centre for Workplace Leadership, 2015), Australian women continue to carry responsibility for caring for others, both within the family context and in the Australian workforce. According to the AHRC (2018), women account for 68% of primary carers, 70% of primary unpaid carers of children and 58% of carers of the elderly and people with disability or long-term health conditions. Women are also doing more of the caring work in the paid workforce, with 2016 census data revealing that industries employing the highest proportion of women are healthcare, social assistance and education, while for men these are construction, mining and machine operating (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2018). When women return to study, they are likely to be doing so within the constraints of their competing responsibilities for households, partners, children and possibly other family members.

The attention paid to gender equity in HE in Australia has diminished somewhat over the past 20 years or so, perhaps largely because women are no longer under-represented at university level generally. Areas where women remain under-represented still exist, such as in engineering, while overall, female enrolments in Australian universities now slightly outweigh male enrolments. However, previous studies have shown that, amongst students aged 25 and over in Australia, women remain disadvantaged in their studies by their traditional role of carer (Chesters & Watson, 2014; Mallman & Lee, 2014; Pocock, Skinner, & Ichii, 2009; Stone & O'Shea, 2012, 2013). Interestingly, women with caring responsibilities are now increasingly choosing the flexibility that online study promises, specifically to manage study around other family commitments. While this flexibility potentially benefits both women and men, women are statistically more likely to be the beneficiaries, as they continue to carry the major responsibility for domestic work and caring for others, whether this be caring for children and/or other relatives such as partners and parents.

This article examines the practical and emotional underpinnings of the online student experience from the perspective of women with family caring responsibilities. It addresses gaps in understanding about how women as online learners strive to ensure that their roles of parent, partner, family carer and paid worker co-exist successfully alongside the role of student. From these findings and discussions, recommendations are offered for HE institutions and those who work within them, on ways to better appreciate, acknowledge and support women to succeed in their academic goals.

Literature review

Given the breadth of literature relating to gender equity and education, this literature review adopted a targeted perspective, considering the scholarly material in relation to two overarching themes, namely the emergence of the female mature-age learner in HE and the gendered nature of university participation.

The emergence of the female mature-age learner in HE

Historically, enrolments of students aged 25 years and over at Australian universities have been increasing since the 1970s, when an international agenda of widening university access and participation reached Australia (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007; Karmel & Woods, 2006). This has significantly impacted women's participation in HE, with increasing numbers of women attending university (ABS, 2018; Commonwealth of Australia, 2004; Edwards & van der Brugge, 2012; Stone, 2008). Australian Census Data (ABS, 2018) show that in 2016, women's participation in HE was 37% greater than that of men amongst the 25–65 age group and almost double amongst the 35–55 age group.

The reasons for this growth in female participation in HE are multifold; however, pragmatic and economic reasons are strongly cited as influencing factors (Laming, Martin-Lynch, & Morris, 2016). Perhaps unsurprisingly, many older women view university study as a pathway to better employment or increased

economic potential (O'Shea, 2015; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). However, there is also a recognition that returning to education may address a long-held desire or ambition, even redress a missed opportunity in the past (Stone & O'Shea, 2012). For example, Woodfield's (2012) older female participants did not necessarily have firm vocational goals in mind when they commenced their degrees; instead a strong thematic emerged around intrinsic motivations and specifically a desire to learn; Woodfield argued that this desire was strongly rooted in previous disrupted educational experiences related to "negative educational experiences, low self-expectations and /or caring priorities" (p. 100).

Despite the increasing numbers of older female returners, these students invariably commence learning with complex and significant obstacles to learning, particularly within the on-campus mode of attendance. In Gorard et al.'s (2006) review of widening participation initiatives, it was the older female learners who were identified as being the most "vulnerable" to early departure (p. 11). Many of the obstacles related specifically to the time and costs involved in undertaking further studies (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003), but importantly, a number of studies have indicated that older students, particularly women, may lack confidence, doubt their ability and experience feelings of guilt or selfishness as a result of participating in HE (Agliasi, Howard, Cliff, Dodds, & Field, 2015; Müller, 2008; Stone & O'Shea, 2013).

The gendered nature of university participation

The intersection of maturity and education plays out differently for males and females. Returning to education as an older student is accompanied by additional and somewhat invisible "risks" which can encompass "rupture with existing social and family networks", the need to manage "competing demands" or "identity formation" (O'Shea, 2015, p. 246). Similarly, O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007), while recognising that all students undergo some difficulty in the transition to HE, have argued that this is exacerbated for older students by lengthy absences from formal learning environments and by additional pressures and responsibilities outside university.

However, the various nuances of the older student's life experiences cannot be adequately captured simply by broad references to age or maturity; these belie the unique impacts of factors such as gender, cultural background and ethnic affiliation (Mallman & Lee, 2016). We choose to focus on gender in recognition that this has been highlighted as having a key impact on the nature of educational experience. For example, within the United Kingdom, Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2010) identified how "self-doubt and anxiety around learning was gendered. It was women more than men who felt that they did not really deserve to be in higher education" (pp. 117–118). Similarly, the participants in Hinton-Smith's (2012) study on sole parents highlighted how the "intersection" of gender and class identities served to "inform expectations that HE was not for people like them" (p. 124). We, the authors of this article, have previously found evidence for "the interrupted nature of [women's] study progress and the impossibility of having dedicated, privileged and uninterrupted time for study on a regular basis" (Stone & O'Shea, 2013, p. 111).

Within this article, we are not assuming a gender dichotomy. We recognise that the term *gender* does not simply denote the biology of individuals as male or female, but rather it denotes the traditional and socially constructed identities of femininity and masculinity in which women are overwhelmingly framed as carers and men as breadwinners (Lister, 2000; Orloff, 1996; Weeks, 2000). Despite greatly improved HE access for women over the past 30 years, plus the increase of women in the paid workforce, these identities remain firmly entrenched, with women continuing to carry a higher load than men of caring and domestic work, increasingly in addition to "breadwinner" paid work (ABS, 2018). Hughes (2002, p. 33), in analysing the achievements of feminism since the 1960s, found that "it is women's responsibilities in terms of the family that appear to be the most resistant to change". Similarly, Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2003, p. 13) spoke of "the gendered expectations of family obligations and the ongoing disparity with which women take on the 'second shift' through maintenance of children and home".

Returning to education within this context can present significant barriers for many women. Reay, Ball, and David (2002, p. 10) described how the older women in their study were managing a complex "balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money". This has been echoed by Gouthro (2006, p. 8), who described how the patterns of women's learning were frequently "coordinated around domestic and childrearing responsibilities". More recent studies have highlighted the long-term gendered educational and societal disadvantages that women continue to face and the importance

of equity measures within institutions and education policies to alleviate these (Chawinga & Andrew, 2016; Shah, Goode, West, & Clark, 2014; Stone & O'Shea, 2013).

Despite these noted difficulties, older female learners make up a significant proportion of our wider university population with often positive outcomes reported by the participants themselves. The decision to return to education can be an emotionally laden one, often triggered by an unexpected catalyst stemming from employment or personal situations and leading to repercussions at a deeply personal level, creating an opportunity to adopt alternative identity positions or roles (Gouthro, 2006; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Woodfield, 2012). For example, the women in Woodfield's 2012 study reflected that their experiences of learning had been intrinsically positive, even when the outcomes from study did not immediately translate into more or better employment opportunities. As Gouthro (2006, p. 11) pointed out, many women are seeking a new identity without losing important aspects of the old:

Women often enter into education with the conflicting goals of wanting to attain a sense of independence and develop a sense of identity that is not determined by relationships with others (i.e. as a wife or mother) without rejecting the importance of these roles in their lives.

Wainwright and Marandet (2010, p. 146) found that many women were prompted to return to education by a desire to be an "inspirational figure" to children and, in some cases, to construct a "gender identity that embraced education and choice". Waller, Bovill, and Pitt (2011, p. 518) indicated that the growing confidence displayed by the female students in their research had genuine impacts on their lives more broadly, providing the "self-belief to tackle other problematic areas of their lives".

With increasing numbers of mature-age women choosing to study online, the ways in which complex and demanding responsibilities of home and family are incorporated within this context merit closer attention. The following section outlines recent research into the online student experience from the perspective and experiences of women who are studying while also caring for others and, in many cases, in paid employment.

Hearing from the students

Presented here are findings from interviews and surveys with mature-age, online female students, conducted as part of two wider studies. Within this article, we use the term *online student* to refer to those whose study is conducted in distance or external mode, with the course content delivered fully or almost completely online. Allen, Seaman, Poulin, and Straut (2016, p. 7) defined an online course "as one in which at least 80% of the course content is delivered online". Hence, all participants discussed here were enrolled in distance mode, receiving all learning materials and experiences online, with very occasional, if any, face-to-face connection with their educators. The focus of this article is also on women aged 25 and over, consistent with the ABS' (2010, 2016) use of the age category of 25 and over to measure the engagement of older learners and employees.

The data is derived from two studies exploring how students who were the first in their family (FiF) to attend university managed their transition into further study and negotiated this participation around other competing demands of life. Although neither study specifically focused on older women nor was limited only to wholly online students, both projects attracted percentages of both cohorts. Table 1 indicates the total numbers, the proportion of older females within this total as well as of those studying in a distance mode:

Table 1
Number of participants by age, gender and online mode

Studies	All participants	Participants aged 25+	Wholly* online students	Women aged 25+ & online
Study 1 (2015)	Total = 274 Women = 208	Total = 147 Women = 111	Total = 88 Women = 70	59
Study 2 (2016–2019)	Total = 375 Women = 288	Total = 173 Women = 105	Total = 28 Women = 20	18

* As per the definition provided above.

Study 1 (O’Shea, May, & Stone, 2015) was funded by the Australian Government and gathered data from three distinct groups of undergraduate FiF students: those studying on-campus at an Australian regional university; those studying on-campus in university preparation programs at another Australian regional university; and those studying wholly online at various HE institutions across the Australian sector. The study explored three key areas: their personal motivations for enrolling in university; how this decision had been received by those closest to them; and how they managed the complexities of their life with the demands of study.

Study 2 (O’Shea, 2016–2019) was funded by the Australian Research Council and focused on students who were in the penultimate year of their undergraduate study. The overarching aim of this research was to consider how FiF students understood themselves as being *persisting learners* and the capabilities or capitals that assisted them to enact this persistence through university. While the two projects were separate, both had a level of complementarity, particularly in relation to exploring the lived experience of university at a very personal and embodied level. Participants were diverse in terms of biography, location and motivations, with a significant cohort of older female online students.

Both projects used a combination of interview and survey methodology, employing open questions to encourage depth of response. Given the distances involved, all interviews were conducted by telephone and employed a narrative biographical approach. Semi-structured questionnaires were used, with open-ended questions leading to additional prompting questions to delve more deeply into the experience of participants. This approach encouraged students to reflect at length about their motivations for starting at university, their experience arriving at university as well as strategies used to manage their studies. Once transcribed, interviews were imported into NVivo for coding, an inductive process conducted on a line-by-line basis. An iterative approach was taken (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009, p. 77), in which emerging themes are continually checked against the data, which in turn reveals further themes. The NVivo functions also enabled the data to be compared across cohort groups, gender and age to reveal the intricacies of this experience. Pseudonyms were assigned to interviewees and numbers to survey respondents for the anonymous reporting of findings. These same pseudonyms and numbers, followed by each participant’s age, are used within this article to distinguish participant quotes derived from interviews and surveys respectively; each is also identified as being from Study 1 (S1) or Study 2 (S2).

Findings

As outlined above, the data informing this article has been derived from interviews and surveys conducted with a total of 77 women – 59 from S1 and 18 from S2 – who were aged 25 and over, studying wholly in an online mode. The following sections outline and discuss the four dominant themes that emerged via the above-mentioned manual and NVivo analysis of data:

- Reasons for enrolling in online HE and why now?
- Becoming a student
- Multiple roles and responsibilities
- What helped and what hindered transition and persistence.

Why online HE and why now?

Amongst the women’s reasons for choosing to study, to study online and to do so at this point in time, the influence and impact of family and relationships were recurring themes within each of the women’s stories.

Their choices were determined to a large extent by their family and caring responsibilities, as well as by the level of encouragement and support they received from family and close friends. One key reason for studying, voiced many times, was to gain or improve employment to increase their income, to support themselves and their children. For example, “to be able to support myself and put my kids through college if that’s what they want” (Tahlia, 43, S1); and “I’m determined to finish uni and secure the job that I want so that my children have a really good life” (Dyahn, 25, S2). Family and relationships also influenced the timing of this decision, with major family events such as having a child, or children leaving school, being significant catalysts. “When I had her [daughter] I just wanted a change of career and it seemed like a good idea” (Erin, 29, S1). For Natalie (26, S1), the timing was determined by her children’s ages: “my youngest is one, so my goal is to be finished by the time he starts school and then I’ll be able to go into the workforce once they’re both in school”; while Susanna (43, S1) talked about making a “thought-out and joint decision between my husband and myself as to whether or not this was something we could cope with”.

Family members were at times sources of inspiration and encouragement in making the decision, as voiced by Misti (30, S1) in saying, “My mum was always influential in my life in terms of wanting to progress to the next level and she was always extremely proud”. Nadia (62, S1) named her key influence as “my daughter, because she’s studying; I could see it was interesting”, while Rochelle (45, S1) talked of her son, who “inspired me, absolutely. I was a single mum [and] through very difficult circumstances, with not much money, I did what I could to encourage him and now, because he’s gone on to university, it’s my turn to give to myself what I was never able to”. Others made similar comments about their children, such as “My son was extremely helpful and encouraging because he thinks that studying is extremely important for me to do” (#29, 40–50, S1). Helen (45, S2) reported that her children were “100% supportive; when they were in high school, we used to sit down at the kitchen table, we’d be doing our assignments together”.

Studying online rather than on-campus was seen as essential to fit study in around family and paid work responsibilities. Comments included “I couldn’t not work. I couldn’t afford to not work so I had to be able to study and still work” (Gemma, 42, S1); and “so that I could work full-time because I couldn’t afford to work part-time or casually” (Jennifer, 28, S2). Bethany (59, S1) had “family members with serious illness and dementia” for whom she was caring, while for Ruth (53, S2), “last year my mum went into care and that was a nightmare; I had no help at all”. The option to enrol in an online mode made it possible for these women to study at university: “With online university; I really think that’s just changed the whole ball game of going to university for a lot of people, especially people with children and just people that need to work” (Mandy, 25, S1).

While improving employment opportunities was by far the most common motivation for study, for some it was also the fulfillment of a long-deferred dream. Molly (62, S1) had “always wanted to go to university even when I was a kid. I was always very bright at school and I knew that our circumstances would never permit that”; while for Helen (45, S2) “being a teacher is something that I’ve always wanted to do; it’s taken me a long time – 20 years after graduation – to actually enrol in my course”. Past barriers had prevented these and other women from considering university sooner, such as “life itself – marriage, kids, you name it, working – there was no time” (Bethany, 59, S1).

Family and financial circumstances were frequently cited as previous barriers. “My family did not fully understand the financial help available to university students and I was always discouraged to attend university” (#65, 26–30, S2); and “I couldn’t afford to take myself to uni” (Helen, 45, S2). For Philippa (53, S1), studying while her children were young was not an option: “I would have been too distracted and too overwhelmed” but now, “my kids aren’t here anymore”, the time seemed right. Early motherhood prevented Dyahn (25, S2) from going to university sooner – “my daughter, I had her very, very young”. However, as voiced eloquently below by Talia (43, S1), putting study and career on hold to care for children and family can have serious financial consequences for women later in life:

Well, he [husband] didn’t want me working because he wanted me at home to be the at-home parent for the kids, and I understood that and I agreed with it, but as a consequence, I’ve had 17 years of being at home looking after kids and I have no super[annuation], I have no financial backing or anything like that, so if shit come to shove, I’d be standing knee-deep in it. As far as I’m concerned, I need to do something to be able to get some sort of financial backing towards my retirement.

Becoming a student

Hewson (2018) highlights that the *student identity*, for those who are mature-aged, is likely to take second, third or even fourth place to other more pressing identities – such as those of parent, carer, financial supporter and paid employee. Developing a student identity must occur alongside these other key identities. Support and encouragement from at least some family members and friends made it easier for a number of the women to begin to view themselves proudly as students. Some were experiencing a broad range of support, for example: “I have support from family members and friends [and] my workplace is supportive of my studies and have allowed time off for exams and placement” (#43, 31–40, S2), while for others, support was present in some areas but not others: “Friends are super-encouraging and proud of me [but] one of my sisters just can’t understand why I would want to go to uni ... other family members a bit perplexed” (#11, 41–50, S2). At times, support increased once others could see that they were not neglecting their caring responsibilities, such as the example below:

I have had a mixture of people make comments to me in disagreement. Partly because of my age in starting at 35. And the fact that I have three young children and when I signed up my youngest had only just turned 3. But as time has passed and they have witnessed me manage kinder [kindergarten] attendance, school starting with my kids and I have done this without relying on too much formal day care, I think they are more accepting. My mum has been hot and cold towards my university attendance. However, towards the end she is finally starting to state she is proud I am pursuing it (#28, 31–40, S2)

Some talked of supportive partners: “My partner has been incredibly supportive and helped provide support, both emotional as well as practical in my first year while I found my feet” (#65, 26–30 S2), while others had a very different experience: “When I have an assessment due, my husband gets stressed out and often causes a fight. I have become better at noticing and diffusing this, but it is still a huge impediment” (#25, 31–40, S2). Others reported partners feeling “neglected ... not always understand[ing] why I would want a change of career” (#9, 40–50, S1); at times questioning their decision to study, “Where are you going to have the time to do that?” (#41, 30–40, S1); or being “threatened ... concerned that I wouldn’t have time ... that it would interfere with our time together” (#25, 40–50, S1).

The level of support from partners could vary depending on how much the women’s studies impinged upon time with partners and/or children. One survey respondent reported that on the one hand, “My husband definitely is my number one supporter” yet on the other hand, “we have had our occasional argument about my time spent studying” (#28, 31–40, S2). This same student also talked about “a friend who has children the same age as me ... a stay at home mum” who “has dreams and aspirations to do something too but her husband works away, and it would not work in her position at present”. It was clear that this friend, due to her primary caring responsibilities with young children, would only be able to consider studying “when things change with her husband’s work”.

Multiple roles and responsibilities

Competing responsibilities frequently needed to take priority over study. Multitasking was commonplace, such as “I’ll put on a load of washing while I’m reading or set the dishwasher off” (Talia, 43, S1). Managing the entire family’s responsibilities in addition to their own studies was regarded as quite normal:

Every month, I organise everything that I have to do for that month; when assignments are due, when my kids have appointments or my husband has appointments, all that kind of stuff, and then just work my schedule around that. (Dyahn, 25, S2)

Wendy (38, S1), working night shifts in a factory, described in detail how she managed the complexity of combining her studies with her primary responsibilities as both parent and breadwinner:

I try to do a couple of hours [study] every day. I get up [from sleeping after working night shifts] at 2:00 o’clock and go and get the kids [from school] 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 ... if I get up early, say at lunch time rather than 2:00 o’clock, I’ve got two extra hours. As long as I’m not too tired, I’ll hit the books for that two hours, rather than try and make it up on the weekend,

as that is my time with the kids. [On weekends] I might get up at 8:00 o'clock on a Saturday morning and I might study just till lunch time and then that's it; the rest of the day is for the kids. Then I might do the same the next day.

Many others spoke of feeling torn about study taking time away from family. In the words of one participant, "I find it very difficult to balance study with my work and family commitments; I get stressed and begin to doubt the wisdom of studying" (#33, 40–50, S1). Others spoke regretfully of the loss of family time, such as "My children and husband see less of me on the weekends ... I don't get to go out with them to events and things where we would prefer to go as a family; my husband and children have to go without me" (#39, 30–40, S1) and "missing out on time with my children or events for them because I had to study or work on assignments" (#59, 31–40, S2).

Trying to find times for quiet study and reflection was particularly challenging for women with younger children. Susanna (43, S1), with three children at primary school, would try to maximise her study time "while the children are not here, that's when I study and everything else has to be done". Jennifer (28, S2) talked of the difficulty of studying from home, explaining that "sometimes you need to get out of the house because it's full of distractions and you just want to focus". Compromises had to be constantly made, including compromising their own expectations of their performance – "if the kids are sick and stuff like that, I have to not beat myself up for not achieving the mark I was aiming for" (Natalie, 26, S1).

Family problems were reported, such as "I'm getting the complaints, particularly from my partner, that I'm not available, that I am always tired, and ... from the kids, that I don't spend as much time with them" (Gemma, 42, S1). For those without children, studying could still lead to friction with other family members:

My mother, who I share a house with, seems to get angry at me because of the time I spend studying. Other relatives who previously expected me to be available at their beck and call to help them are now finding that I am saying that I'm not available to assist them. (#34, 30–40, S1)

Ruth (53, S2) voiced how difficult it can be for women to actively resist such gendered expectations, yet how vital this is, if they are to pursue their education goals:

For online students like myself, I think that life will interfere if you let it. It's hard because there's been a lot of times I've felt – and here's this gender thing – I don't know, you really have to put your foot down and say "No, it's about me right now and I've got assignments due. I'm sorry, everybody just has to fend for themselves"; and some people can't do that, some people feel that sense of responsibility for all the other things that they do and that's often the case. What happens is the outside responsibilities end up taking priority and the study gets pushed to the side.

What helped and what hindered

Family members could support their studies in practical ways, such as "a husband who helps out with dinner on assignment due nights, so I can keep studying" (#59, 31–40, S2). Others were less supportive, making study more difficult: "It's hard to study in a home with those that don't understand and make noise" (#10, 26–30, S2). Support and understanding from friends were also highly valued:

Meeting someone [near home] who is also doing a degree with [same university] online. We met by random and have been a support, friend, ally and confidante since then. Just having someone who understands the frustration you can feel sometimes is wonderful. (#9, 41–50, S2)

Institutional barriers were also mentioned, such as "examination timetables always were always on public holiday. As a parent with children ... trying to get a babysitter on these days were costly" (#28, 31–40, S2).

The process of online study itself could also be problematic, such as "not having easy access to some resources close to home" and "poor Internet connection at times and a slow internet speed" (#59, 31–40,

S2). Others commented on feeling isolated: “studying online makes you feel like you are just another number” (#65, 26-30, S2); also “it’s difficult online to feel like a real person sometimes. There are huge numbers of faceless students that have to be taught, and it must be very hard to differentiate” (#25, 31–40, S2). Difficulties could be alleviated by “helpful university tutors and staff” (#1, 30–40, S1), with some participants describing particularly positive university experiences, such as “I love my tutors, they are amazing; the online world is supportive, there is so much assistance for online learning – discussion boards, essay help, fee help” (#2, 30–40, S1). Communication and contact with other students in similar situations helped to reduce isolation: “participate in Facebook groups set up by other students in my unit so that we can all share information and help each other so that we don’t feel isolated as online students” (#4, 25–30, S1). Such comments indicate that, even though many of the pressures on women may be external to the institution, there is much that can be done within institutions to ease the path of these students, to support and encourage their persistence and success. This will be further explored in the Discussion.

Discussion

Mallman and Lee (2016, p. 2) argued that older students remain “insufficiently understood” and are not catered for effectively in either education policy or institutional cultures. They further argued that “there is incomplete knowledge regarding how mature-age students negotiate the learning community of students with regard to particular academic and social practices”. Our findings indicate that this is particularly true for mature-age female students, whose caregiving responsibilities are largely invisible to others yet impact significantly upon their ability to participate in HE. As the women’s quotes illustrate, online study makes it possible for them to participate in HE while at the same time meeting their caring responsibilities and commitments; however, this does not mean it is easy. A great deal of planning, good time management, multitasking and dealing with family resistance is required for them to be able to persist.

Recent research into online student persistence and retention points to the importance of institutional knowledge and understanding of the particular needs of the online cohort, combined with strategies such as engaging and interactive learning design; regular and meaningful tutor-student contact; support from other students or “study-buddies”; relevant and authentic learning activities and assessment tasks; and flexibility of delivery, in which students can pace themselves, by moving ahead or catching up, with less rigid timelines (Hewson, 2018; O’Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018; Stone, 2017; Stone & Springer, 2019). In Muir et al.’s (2019) case study of “Angela”, a mature-age student with family and paid work responsibilities, key factors sustaining her engagement with her studies included supportive teachers, a supportive friend, interactivity within the learning tasks and “asynchronous flexibility ... the freedom to move at her own pace: to ‘zoom ahead’ ... or to take a break” (p. 10), illustrating that “without sufficient flexibility, the position of online students can be rendered inequitable” (Stone, Freeman, Dymont, Muir, & Milthorpe, 2019, p. 89).

Such strategies are crucial for online mature-age students, whose time and energy are inevitably split amongst many competing demands and whose study time may be actively contested by others within their family environment. Laming et al.’s (2016, p. 41) call for HE cultures that “genuinely and actively [value] the contribution that mature-age students make to the institution” resonates here. While it is collectively acknowledged that most online learners have competing demands in their lives, our findings illustrate that, within a society that still largely subscribes to traditional gendered role-divisions, women are likely to be carrying an additional caring load, which by necessity, is time and energy consuming and frequently needs to be prioritised over study.

Conclusion and recommendations

Gendered roles within Australian society, in which women perform the bulk of childcare, domestic work and other unpaid caring duties, currently place many women at a disadvantage when it comes to finding the time, energy and finances to be a successful HE student. The opportunity to undertake HE online has undoubtedly impacted positively on student equity, potentially making it more manageable to combine study with this often-hidden load of caring for others. However, the path to greater equity will be smoother within an institutional culture that seeks to build on this potential, recognising and alleviating some of the challenges involved. We conclude with seven recommendations for institutions on how they may begin to build such a culture:

- (1) Provide information to teachers and coordinators on student demographics within online courses and programs, importantly including age and gender mix.
- (2) Recognise that older students – particularly women – are likely to be combining study with family caring responsibilities, and perhaps family resistance.
- (3) Ensure regular and meaningful communication between tutors and students, to sustain engagement and facilitate a culture of caring, in which these students, who do so much caring for others in their personal lives, feel that they too are cared for and cared about, by the institution. Building a culture of caring will also encourage students to reach out for help and support.
- (4) Build flexibility into course design, enabling students to pace their studies within their time constraints.
- (5) Keep course content and assessment tasks relevant and focussed, recognising the genuine difficulties for these students in finding time for more than the essentials.
- (6) Provide opportunities for students to connect positively with each other.
- (7) Ensure there are appropriate support services for online students, well promoted and easily accessed.

A simple recognition of the gendered expectations impacting on women, along with strategies such as the ones recommended above, can start to build a more equitable learning environment, in which women with caring responsibilities, studying online, are in a stronger position to persist and succeed.

Acknowledgements

The two studies upon which this article is based were funded by the Australian Government, under the Office for Learning and Teaching, and the Australian Research Council respectively.

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Corresponding author: Cathy Stone, cathy.stone@newcastle.edu.au

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Please cite as: Stone, C., & O’Shea, S. (2019). *My children ... think it’s cool that Mum is a uni student: Women with caring responsibilities studying online.* *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 35(6), 97–110. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.5504>