

## **Reasons people enrol in Tertiary Preparation courses**

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“Why did you enrol in Open Foundation?” This was one of the questions former students were asked as part of my PhD project looking at the impacts of this tertiary preparation program run by the University of Newcastle. The data were sourced from the findings of a survey of 350 students who had undertaken this mature age entry program between 1976 and 2012 and were now reflecting on their experiences before, during and after completing the program. The survey contained both quantitative questions in order to elicit demographic data; and qualitative short answer questions which provided more personalised accounts of these students’ experiences and which formed patterned responses or meanings within the data set (Braun and Clarke 2006). While it might have been expected that responses to this question might relate to educational, economic or career aspirations, given the purpose of universities as part of the social structure, when the data were analysed collectively, issues relating to “self-identity” appeared more frequently. Sometimes they related to confirming through education what students already knew about themselves, while at other times it was to prove to others that they had the capacity to achieve at this level of study. This paper reports on the diverse reasons given for enrolling in the program and looks specifically at identity construction; economic and career incentives; temporal factors; confronting a “disorienting dilemma; and other external factors as broad categories of analysis.

### **Participant demographics**

The survey was completed by 272 females (77.72%) and 78 males (22.28%) of whom over 86% were born in Australia; and the remainder from the United Kingdom; New Zealand; Europe; the Pacific; Asia; and Central America. Almost 12% of respondents reported entering the program with a disability, and 5 (1.42%) identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Some had attempted a couple of different Open Foundation offerings, around 6% had done their course by Distance; a bit over 20% had completed the Intensive course at the main campus at Callaghan which draws mainly from Newcastle and the Hunter Valley; around 45% had studied in the Part time program at Callaghan; while around 9% had undertaken the Intensive course at the regional campus at Ourimbah, which draws largely from the Central Coast region of NSW and from the outskirts of Sydney; and just under 20% had undertaken the Part Time course at the Ourimbah campus (although some took courses at both campuses if the subject they wanted was not offered at their local campus or a combination of Distance and on-campus delivery). This was a pleasing result as enrolments across the campuses each year are roughly 2/3 of the intake at Callaghan and 1/3 at Ourimbah, so the responses roughly represented the usual intake of students at the two campuses. Alternatively, Part Time students were more likely to complete the survey (65%), while 29% of participants were Intensive.

The respondents were asked their age at time of entry into the program. Almost 33% had entered between ages 30-39 years; over 28% had entered aged 40-49 years; around 23% entered aged 20-29 years; over 11.5% entered aged 50-59 years; almost 3% at age 60-69 years; and the remainder or about 1.5% were aged 70-79 years. This indicated a diverse sample of former students and wide range of age groups and stage of life and span of time in which they were enrolled. The University of Newcastle’s preferred method of categorising by age group is indicated in the following table, and demonstrates the significant proportion of student respondents who were aged 30 years and over (76.77%) at the time of entering the program.

**Table 1: Age groupings used in university statistics**

| Age        | 20 & under | 21-24yrs | 25-29yrs | 30-39yrs | 40 & over | Total |
|------------|------------|----------|----------|----------|-----------|-------|
| Number     | 19         | 28       | 35       | 116      | 155       | 353   |
| Percentage | 5.38%      | 7.93%    | 9.92%    | 32.86%   | 43.91%    | 100%  |

\*Note: Some students completed Open Foundation twice.

Also of interest was the prior level of education achieved by these students. Just under 6% had not completed their School Certificate, meaning they had only completed between one and three years of high school tuition. The largest category of respondents, nearly 40%, was people who had completed their School Certificate. These data show that over 45% of respondents had completed four years or less of high school, which also indicates the work that needs to be done by enabling educators to bring their skill base up to a level required for participation in undergraduate studies. Also of note was the number of students who had prior university experience and were, in some instances, retraining in different vocations or whose objective was completing Open Foundation as a leisure activity.

**Table 2: Previous Educational Qualification**

| Qualification                | Number | Percentage    |
|------------------------------|--------|---------------|
| Year 7                       | 3      | 0.84%         |
| Year 8                       | 4      | 1.12%         |
| Year 9                       | 14     | 3.94%         |
| Year 10 (School Certificate) | 140    | 39.44%        |
|                              |        | <b>45.34%</b> |
| Year 11                      | 25     | 7.04%         |
| Year 12 (HSC)                | 109    | 30.73%        |
| TAFE                         | 49     | 13.80%        |
| University                   | 11     | 3.09%         |
| Total                        | 355    | <b>100%</b>   |

\*Note: Some students indicated a number of prior qualifications.

The majority of these former students, almost 88% went on to tertiary education, although a percentage was either content with attaining an Open Foundation certificate or was unable to proceed to university. In fact, 16.54% (n=58) had gained postgraduate qualifications after completing Open Foundation.

**Table 3: Respondents who proceeded to an undergraduate degree after Open Foundation**

|                |     |        |
|----------------|-----|--------|
| <b>Yes</b>     | 307 | 87.71% |
| <b>No</b>      | 41  | 11.71% |
| <b>Not yet</b> | 2   | 0.58%  |
| <b>Total</b>   | 350 | 100%   |

The literature on reasons people enrol in tertiary preparation courses is often a preamble in relation to broader research on matters such as the status as women entering education or in the context of androgogy relating to "going back" to study. Munday's (2000) edited collection of chapters in a handbook of "back-to-work" strategies for women entitled *This Time is Mine*, for example, provides tips from a diverse group of professionals, including psychologists, on how women can "Take the plunge, give it a whirl, jump off the deep end, spit the dummy or bite the bullet" (2000:4). All these clichés give some indication of the uncertainty and trepidation of mature women embarking on an educational or career path. It carries the story of a retired woman who returned to study via the Open Foundation program at age 67 after a successful career in personnel and who, upon retirement and widowhood, was looking for something to fill her life. She graduated with a BA at age 74. Clayton and Smith's (1987)

study of 100 American women aged 25 years and older returning to study looks for patterns or motives and concludes there are eight motive typologies which, when ranked in order by mean weighted factor score were: vocational; humanitarian; self-actualisation; family; self-improvement; knowledge; social; role. The aim of the study was to assist re-entry women and enhance their return to college while also encouraging colleges and universities “to develop and offer appropriate educational programs and services designed to meet the needs of re-entry women, who represent an increasing percentage of the college population” (1987:103).

Debenham and May’s (2005) reflections on returning to study from the perspective of mature student and teacher indicates that there is often more than one reason: for stimulation; coping; escape from the mundane; feeling unsettled; encouragement from family. Other studies which briefly touch on reasons for returning to study are: Fulmer and Jenkins (1992) who discuss desire for personal enrichment, workplace retraining, and a desire to change life circumstances and develop new interests; Kaziboni’s (2000) research in Zimbabwe found that women returned to study for economic reasons due to family dislocation; Passe (1997) and Reay (2003) reported a desire for women, especially working class women, to act as role models for their children; while Cantwell and Mulhearn (1997) cited self-improvement and identity generation as the main reasons women return to study.

Narrative inquiry was used by Stone and O’Shea (2012) to tell the stories of seven mature women’s experiences of returning to higher education. Despite their unique stories, Stone and O’Shea identify common themes that characterised their experiences as a “second chance”. Their reasons for enrolling were:

- Case 1: need to become the breadwinner for two young children after her husband died.
- Case 2: Marriage breakdown and single mother of one child to support.
- Case 3: Mother of five who wanted “something more” as she had been told that she wasn’t “smart enough” to go to university when at high school.
- Case 4: Was made redundant from work at 49 and found she was bored. Was trying to encourage her son to go to university, when he would not she decided she would instead.
- Case 5: Single mother who took the opportunity to enrol when her son started school on the basis that it was time to do something for herself.
- Case 6: had a calling to the police force or juvenile justice.
- Case 7: had a calling to become a school teacher.

This text concentrated on the journey these women had undertaken focussing on their transformations and self-discoveries as well as providing practical tips for those embarking on similar journeys.

Beaty, Gibbs and Morgan (2005) take a more theoretical approach by discussing four learning orientations that directly imply a student’s reason for enrolling. The first is vocational where they have a direct interest in obtaining a qualification; the second is academic where their motivation is learning in and of itself; the third is personal and can relate to identity; and the fourth is social, where they are seeking companionship and social interaction. More recently, Benson et al (2010, 2014) reported on pathways into higher education for a group of students from diverse backgrounds including low socio-economic status; non-English speaking and migrant backgrounds; regional and remote areas; those with medical conditions and first in family university entrants. Using narrative inquiry, these researchers concluded that students’ decisions to enrol were often influenced by family members, personal characteristics such as self-concept or external influences including the impact of a serendipitous event or life crises such as relationship breakdowns.

By allowing the categories I have developed to emerge from the data, following the grounded theory approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967), and described by Charmaz (2009) as a way

of thinking about data with the intent to conceptualize it, I relied on the linguistic expressions of respondents and then looked for patterns and continuities. Using NVivo10 research software, I systematically combed the data and placed in “nodes” all responses to the question “Why did you enrol in Open Foundation?” Table 4 provides all reasons provided by respondents for enrolling in this tertiary preparation course, ranging from most to least cited. Table 5 provides the main concepts or frameworks generated from the responses, a result of the “broadening power” Glaser describes as possible to elicit from comprehensive analysis. While this may not be the only way to categorize the data, and bearing in mind Foucault’s (1975) view that categorisation is in itself an exercise of power, it should be noted that the categorisations were not based on prejudging the data or forcing any predetermined explanations of it (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). While there are similarities to parts of other explanatory frameworks included in the literature review above, Table 5 is also representative of the number of times particular reasons were cited and suggests the extent to which recurring themes dominated people’s lived experiences.

**Table 4: Most to least cited reasons people enrolled in Open Foundation**

| Reason                               | Times cited |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|
| Right time in life                   | 112         |
| Career change                        | 97          |
| Career skills                        | 69          |
| Gain knowledge/education             | 61          |
| ATAR                                 | 39          |
| Had dream or aspiration              | 35          |
| Relationship breakdown               | 34          |
| Regret                               | 28          |
| Job loss                             | 27          |
| Needed “ME” time                     | 25          |
| To find purpose or unclear direction | 24          |
| To “Prove” they could do it          | 23          |
| To gain a qualification              | 23          |
| To “test” their ability              | 23          |
| Family reasons                       | 21          |
| Influence of others                  | 19          |
| Wanted a challenge                   | 19          |
| Wanted a life change                 | 19          |
| Had an interest                      | 15          |
| For self-improvement                 | 13          |
| Death of loved one                   | 11          |
| Injury, illness or disability        | 11          |
| Saw as opportunity                   | 10          |
| As companion to someone else         | 8           |
| To fill a void                       | 7           |
| As tertiary preparation              | 7           |
| For mental stimulation               | 6           |
| Felt calling to a particular career  | 5           |
| To improve financial situation       | 5           |
| No fees attached                     | 4           |
| Flexible class times                 | 4           |
| For a stable future or job security  | 4           |
| Local course                         | 3           |
| To help others                       | 3           |
| An adventure                         | 2           |
| As therapy                           | 2           |

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| Lure of advertising of course "Change life" | 2          |
| Bored                                       | 2          |
| Future options or life choices              | 2          |
| Curiosity                                   | 1          |
| To join friends                             | 1          |
| Government obligation                       | 1          |
| To learn to organise thoughts               | 1          |
| Had financial support                       | 1          |
| To give back to community                   | 1          |
| To maintain momentum (after TAFE study)     | 1          |
| Isolation                                   | 1          |
| Self-discovery                              | 1          |
| Divine intervention (A "God" incidence)     | 1          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                                | <b>834</b> |

\*Note: students often provided several reasons

While the most frequently cited reason (n=112) comprising 13.3% was that it was the "right time" in their lives to take up study, when examined collectively, issues relating to "self-identity" (almost 40%) were the most frequently cited category for enrolling.

**Table 5: Categorisations of reasons people enrolled in Open Foundation**

| Reason for enrolling                | Explanations   | Times cited | %          |
|-------------------------------------|--|-------------|------------|
| Self-identity                       | Needed "Me" time; regret hadn't studied earlier; to prove they could do it; to test their ability; fulfilling a dream or an aspiration; a challenge; a life change; interest; self-improvement; to find a purpose or clear direction in life; to fill a void; felt a calling to a career; for mental stimulation; an opportunity; an adventure; as therapy; bored; curiosity; to organise thoughts; isolation; self-discovery; to help others; to give back to community; self-improvement through education | <b>325</b>  | 38.9       |
| Seeking Career & Economic stability | Career change; career skills; to get an ATAR; to gain qualifications; as tertiary preparation; to improve finances; for future career options or life choices; to create a stable future or job security;  | <b>239</b>  | 28.7       |
| Right time in lives                 | Children in care or more independent; stage of life; retirement; lesser work commitments; financial support; moving back to area; overcoming illness; time to seek education; time to seek better life;  | <b>122</b>  | 14.6       |
| Disorienting dilemma                | Relationship breakdown; Death of someone close caused re-evaluation; diagnosis of illness or disability; job loss  | <b>83</b>   | 10         |
| External factors                    | Family reasons; influence of others; as a companion; no fees; flexible class times; local course; advertising influential; to join friends already there; to fulfil Government obligation; had financial support; Divine intervention!   | <b>65</b>   | 7.8        |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                        |  | <b>834</b>  | <b>100</b> |

For most respondents there was not a single reason for enrolling, but an interconnected bundle of circumstances and emotions; social structural factors and human agency; and rational and "extrarational" (Boyd and Myers 1988) explanations. In Blair, McPake and Munn's (2006) Scottish study of adults returning to education they remark that a new conceptualisation of adult participation in education is required because "existing

explanations proved ill-equipped to reflect the complex and diverse data gathered” about reasons for returning to education.

### **Self-identity**

“Children growing up, looking for adventure” (047: Female) was the brief response of one student, but typical of the centrality of motherhood to many respondents who saw it as their primary role. Outside that space, however, this student was looking for something more in her life, something to stimulate and interest her. She was seeking an identity beyond that which society had decreed. Letherby comments on the social attitudes which encourage women to “measure their own self-worth in terms of the capacity/desire to other” (1994:526), so placing their children’s needs before their own until they felt they could claim time for something for themselves, often expressed as the need for “Me” time.

Some students had been constrained by circumstances but looked forward to a time when they could fulfil their potential:

I had been made to leave school by my family when I had wanted to continue, so I guess I just saw it as a chance to fulfil my dreams” (048: Female)

Or sometimes the reason to enrol involved challenging the attitudes and stereotypes of people close to them:

My father thought higher education was wasted on a girl (1956) and sent me to secretarial college. In 2000, even though he had been dead for several years, I decided to show him what I could do! (164: Female)

In some cases determination and goal setting were evident:

Had a child, single parent, decided to raise him and expand my employment opportunities. I believed if I could have a child and raise him on my own from birth, then I could achieve almost anything. So I set the goal of finishing OFP then became a lawyer (229: Female)

While for other students, dreams and aspirations were important determinants: “Wanted to fulfil a lifelong dream now that my time was my own!” (083: Female)

Always wanted to go to university. After my divorce and children left home I needed to reconstruct my life. I didn't want a meaningless job til I retired. I had questions I wanted to ask about why power was distributed the way it was. After a trip to Central Australia I wanted to know the truth about a lot that happened to our Indigenous Australians (085: Female)

Self-identity was a compelling reason for enrolling in Open Foundation and shows that a major expectation of these students was to “re-make” the self and prove to others that they were resilient and capable.

### **Career & economic advancement**

Some respondents felt stagnated:

Stage of life. Had recently moved back to Maitland from Sydney with a wife and 2 children. No qualifications. Disliked my previous employment (postman). Tried bar work and bus driving. Hated both. Realised I needed some higher qualifications. Friend convinced me to enrol in OFP. Changed my life” (042: Male)

While others were motivated to move into a career that increased their self-esteem and would make their family proud of them:

I decided being a Call Centre worker was not what I wanted to be and neither was any role at the level I had access to. I had just had a child and I wanted work that I could be proud of and that my children would not be ashamed of, or disadvantaged by. So I sold our house and investment property and pursued education.(057: Male)

In a similar vein, the following student who was completing a PhD in Architecture at the time of survey offered this reason for enrolling:

The arrival of my son. I was motivated to change my current employment as I did not want my son to see me doing the job I was doing. I decided to go to University and set the best example I could. By starting with something I enjoyed, I believed I could set two important examples:

1. You can do something you enjoy
2. Nothing is out of reach (250: Male)

Pursuit of a satisfying career and that one that would bring economic stability to her family was the aim of one single mother:

With two young children (aged 1 and 4) I had just separated from their father after our turbulent 7 year relationship. I felt as if I had lost the advantage of youth in the employment market and wanted to pursue a challenging and meaningful career path that would lead to a better life for my children and myself (025: Female)

While another:

Needed to create capacity for employment options as I had significant family difficulties. I went to do a free course and I realised that my life would be doomed to menial low paying employment if I did not get a good education that would increase my employability (254: Female)

Placing themselves in a financially secure situation was the major goal of many respondents: I was broke and going nowhere. I had always wanted a better education so I just decided to go for it (223: Male)

My children are grown to independence and for financial reasons I need a job.

My qualifications are out of date and not possible to requalify easily

Still have 30 years left to work so I needed job skills - need HSC to get into most courses and didn't have, so went to OFP to obtain. Originally going to do teaching but speech pathology was the winner in the end (143: Female)

And:

Wanted to get a good job with good pay. Realised I needed that elusive "piece of paper" or degree, to obtain my career goals. A friend had been to Uni and she encouraged me to go. I didn't really know about TAFE courses I could have done, but in hindsight Uni was certainly the best choice by far. I thought only "smart" people could go to University. Having come from a very small farming community and small school (3 students in my class), I didn't think I would cope with University life or the level of study required. I did, and I loved it, and I was a HD student offered Honours programme (217: Female)

### **The "right time"**

78 respondents, 77 of them female, referred to the independence of children as allowing them the time to engage in an activity outside catering to their children's needs. Interestingly, for some it was because the children were now old enough to attend pre-school, but for others, they could not allow themselves the luxury of study until their children had either left home or gone to university themselves. Others indicated that now being financially secure provided the opportunity to enrol, while for others, moving into part time work left a gap that could be filled with study. For some it was only upon retirement that the time was right to pursue an interest outside workplace duties:

Being born into a "blue collar" family I was expected to leave school at about 14 years, get a job and contribute to the household income. I always regretted I had to forego the opportunity of attending University and attaining a degree. So, after retiring after a successful career in primary Industry I decided to challenge myself to see whether I would have had the ability to succeed at University if I had been allowed to stay at school [and go to Uni]. OFP was the vehicle I chose to do the "testing" (063: Male)

Recovery from illness or trauma was another theme that emerged from the data which made it the right time to enrol, but also provided a therapeutic environment for that recovery to take place:

Due to life circumstances I was unable to complete a basic education but have always been interested in further education. After being crippled by agoraphobia for more than 30 years and just able to leave my home with the help of a mental health professional, I enrolled (056: Female)

And:

I was medically retired with PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) from NSW Fire Brigade. I was looking for a new direction or challenge. I had previously thought of university but did not have the confidence. The OFP helped me gain this confidence and was great therapy for my PTSD (097: Male)

### **A “disorienting dilemma”**

Mezirow (1978) theorized that transformational change among students begins with a “disorienting dilemma” and although he later revised this position (Mezirow, 2000) to acknowledge that it could be a gradual, cumulative process, nevertheless, he saw some event as the catalyst for changing the way people see things and how they redefine meanings (Cranton 2002:64). Whether sudden or gradual, Taylor (2007) points to the deep shift that occurs in some people’s lives which sometimes may only become clear to them when it is over. Benson et al (2010:30) report that health crises resulted in several of their research respondents reconceptualising their futures; while a desire to break free of family violence was the primary reason another sought university qualifications and hence independence. Disorienting dilemmas were the experience of 10% of my survey respondents and included death of loved ones; illness or disability; relationship breakdown; or job loss.

Some students had a number of dilemmas to confront:

End of long term relationship, messy and nasty settlement. Job loss (029: Female)

Another commented:

Shitty relationship ended, I had two very young babies – one with multiple disabilities, and I had always wanted to study psychology and was able to take an opportunity. I needed to do and be more to myself and my boys than a single parent with little future prospects” (127: Female)

Despite her disorienting dilemma self-belief triumphed over what might seem insurmountable obstacles for the following student:

I had goals of improving my level of education as I was unsuccessful in gaining entry back in 2004. I since then had suffered a mental illness and consequently sustained an acquired brain injury. During rehabilitation I had Doctor and close family members telling me that I would not be able to complete academic studies. I completed OFP and finally gained entry still without (sic) no support from anyone” (043: Female)

### **External factors**

According to McGivney (2006) serendipitous events influence pathways to education. One student commented:

The ad said ‘Want to change your life?’ and that was exactly what I wanted to do (317: Female)

Another responded:

Hard question! Not really sure. Didn't plan to study. Just got chatting to a friend who was enrolled and I tagged along! I believe a "God incidence (139: Female)

Either accompanying someone who wanted to do the course or joining friends who were already there was a significant reason to give the program a try:

My daughter, then aged 21 years and in full time employment, asked me to join her in the OFP. Although I was employed as a dance teacher I always wanted to pursue



further academic study. The OFP suited me in that I could attend either morning or evening tutorials/lectures without negatively impacting on work or family commitments. Unfortunately my daughter was unable to complete OFP due to work commitments - However, I did!

(034: Female)

And:

My sister decided to study Psychology at University but she needed to do Open Foundation to gain entry. So, because OF was free, I decided to do it with her for support (123: Female)

Others found the convenience of access to the campus or to Distance Education and the flexibility of timetabling attractive reasons to enrol. Some were bound by government obligations to situate themselves in study or saw the fact that the course was free (due to Federal funding) as sufficient reason to see whether they had the capacity to succeed. Role modelling featured in a number of responses:

To encourage my grandchildren to attend Uni (it did not happen)" (131: Female)  
as did the desire to gain skills to assist children with their own studies:

I wanted to study maths to help my children with high school maths. Then I realised I had to do 2 subjects and chose Australian History as well as maths (030: Female).

## **Conclusion**

Tedder (2007:26) states that "understanding an individual's learning career depends crucially on understanding the wider biography within which it is located". In examining the reasons our students come to us in the first place allows educators to realise that it may not be only for educative purposes or to pursue a vocation. It may also be because they have had some disorienting dilemma and need to make a new life, or because external factors such as family needs impact their circumstances. For others it may simply be the "right time" in their life, or it could be because they wish to "re-make" or confirm an identity, which may bear more heavily on their motivation to succeed than other reasons. My research allows us, through their explanations, to hear the voices of these students and to gain insights into their lives. Bland (2003) advocates understanding who students are and what needs they have in order to provide a learning environment that genuinely encapsulates a student's personal growth and development. Examining the reasons they enrol in our courses is a huge step in that direction.

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