Mature students' journey into higher education in the UK. An interpretative phenomenological analysis.

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This article reports on issues of diversity in the context of widening participation in global higher education (HE). Mature students represent a third of the HE student population in Australia, Canada, UK and USA. More research is needed to understand factors that can facilitate or hinder access to HE for this group. The aim of this study was to examine factors that a small group of mature students perceived influenced them as they made the decision to take up HE. Six undergraduate students at a British university who were on track to finish their studies took part in semi-structured interviews. All participants were white and from families with no previous experience of HE. Mean age was 42.7 years (range 35 - 51), 50% were female. The interviews were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Through using phenomenological analysis to analyse perceptions of changing motivation and goals during the decision-making process to take up HE, a detailed understanding of the complexity of these change processes was obtained. The analysis offers evidence that mature students experience far-reaching personal and social changes related to their decision to enter HE and adds a novel understanding of these identity-changes. This new insight is of fundamental importance to the field because the novel understanding of mature students' meaning-making could be used to tailor interventions to facilitate access to HE for mature students.

Higher education (HE) has a key role in promoting sustainable and equitable development worldwide. In recent decades, there has been a rapid growth of enrolment in HE in most countries ("The world is going to university", 2015). Nevertheless, although the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the 193 countries in the United Nations General Assembly, the Agenda recognises that the 17 goals, for example 'equitable quality education', should be implemented differently across countries (UNESCO, 2016a). Accordingly, there are striking differences in enrolment rates between different regions (UNESCO, 2016b), even among high income countries. This is particularly true for non-traditional students, defined as mature students (those who are over 21 years of age on 30 September in the year of admission), students from low participation neighbourhoods and from families with no previous higher education experience, students from minority ethnic groups, and those with disabilities. Such differences were reported in a recent study of non-traditional students' university access in four English-speaking countries, where more pronounced socio-economic differences in university access were identified in Canada and UK than in Australia and the United States (Jerrim & Vignoles, 2015).

A worldwide challenge is to promote access to HE for mature students. In many countries, substantial, although many times still under-representative, numbers of people in their late twenties and above participate in HE. For example, in both Australia and UK, 45% of the 25 to 64-year old cohort graduated from HE in 2016, which should be compared to the OECD average of 37 percentage that year. For mature students, the decision to transition into HE is not a straightforward matter, and many are unsettled in their studies (HESA, 2018; Urquhart, & Pooley, 2007). Mature students often have childcare responsibilities, mortgages, and need to earn a living, as opposed to younger students who generally have fewer obligations outside of their academic ones (e.g., Osborne, Broek, & Buiskool, 2013). Furthermore, for potential mature students from minority ethnicity/cultural backgrounds

and/or disadvantaged regions, and/or from families where the parents have low levels of education, participation in HE is less likely (e.g., Abbott-Chapman, Braithwaite, & Godfrey, 2004; James, Bexley, Anderson, Devlin, Garnett et al., 2008). Researchers have identified several discrete motivators for taking up HE in non-traditional students who continue their studies, including obtaining improved job opportunities, knowledge, a new friendship group, and social improvement (e.g., Johnstone & Rivera, 1965; Kasworm, 2003; Marks, Turner, & Osborne, 2003; McGivney, 2004; Micari, 2004). Many have identified significant changes to these adults' experiences, attitudes, and behaviours (e.g., Bamber & Tett, 2000; Bowl, 2001; Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008; Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010; Osborne, Marks, & Turner, 2004; Stein & Wanstreet, 2006) as well as potential support needs (e.g., Archer & Leathwood, 2002; Micari, 2004; Ponton, Derrick, & Carr, 2005) following the transition into university. Fewer have examined the change processes that mature students who are on track to complete their studies perceive were important during the decision-process to take up studies (Fuller, Foskett, Paton, & Maringe, 2008). One exception is Galacher and colleagues (Galacher, Crossan, Field, & Merrill, 2002) who used the concept of 'learning career' to analyse the processes through which people engage and discontinue in Further Education. The aim of this study was to examine how a small group of mature students who were on track to complete their studies made sense of the decision-making process to take up HE. We used a phenomenological approach to examine how participants perceived the relations among self-identified motivators and the decision-making process through pursuing three research questions: (a) What factors do participants perceive to be critical in the decision-making processes when they took up HE? (b) What role do participants perceive that perceived cost had in the decision-making processes? (c) Do participants perceive that different kinds of perceived cost contributed differently in their decision-making?

Interviews with 6 participants were undertaken to elicit their sensemaking of the decision-making process. We selected the interview-format since one-to-one conversations were deemed appropriate to allow participants to share their personal recollections. The interviews were semi-structured, using an interview-guide with key questions and probes about the various aspects of the decision-making process and conducted in a way to allow the participants to tell their story in as unforced a way as possible. We chose to analyse the interviews using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as this approach combines a descriptive phenomenological element with an interpretative element (IPA, Smith, Flowers, & Osborn, 1997). With the phenomenological element IPA accords with Giorgi (1985) in the endeavour to elicit rich data about individuals' lived experiences. But, instead of studying individuals' lived experiences as variations of the essence of the phenomena, IPA adopts "a more microscopic lens (where focus is on the) unique individual lives" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 182). With the interpretative element, IPA acknowledges that the interaction between the researcher and participant inevitably is influenced by the researcher. The researchers' attempts to put themselves in the participant's lifeworld necessarily builds on their own experiences. Therefore, the sense-making process is "a two-stage interpretation process, or a double hermeneutic, where the participants are trying to make sense of their world; whilst the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 53). IPA's combination of the phenomenological and interpretative dimensions was deemed valuable for this study, which aimed to understand personal and social change processes which participants' may only be partly aware of. Of importance to this study is that IPA also draws on symbolic interactionism, by emphasising that the individual's meaning-making is shaped by interactions between a social and a personal world (Smith & Osborn, 2003), and that the individual's lifeworld tends to undergo changes over time (Habermas, 1987). Finally, IPA builds on Bruner's premise that "life is not

'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (1987, p. 32), which emphasises that humans are story-tellers. Accordingly, our analysis is phenomenon-driven rather than theory-driven, and the emergent themes are discussed in relation to the extant literature and theoretical relationships are established when the analysis is presented.

Materials and method

Design

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 1997) was chosen to examine participants' perception of their motivations and goals related to the decision-process to take up HE. We used semi-structured interviews to allow individuals to speak freely about their perceptions instead of rating researcher-specified phenomena according to predefined questions.

Sampling procedure

Interviews were conducted with individuals from the target population, mature students, who were undertaking undergraduate studies at a British university. Consistent with IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003), we used a homogeneous subsample of mature students who were middle-aged (over 35 years) when admitted to university studies and were committed to completing their studies. Whilst mature students who interrupted their studies, were under 34 years, and/or were international or postgraduate students were excluded. In accordance with IPA, we used a small sample to obtain a detailed understanding of perceptions. We used purposive, snowball sampling which targets information-rich cases that promises to add in-depth understanding (Smith et al., 1997).

We used van Rijnsoever's (2017) guidelines to determine the sample size required to reach the point where all potentially relevant themes (i.e., patterns of meaning) were observed in the sample. Firstly, participants were recruited among mature students who were staying

on to finish their degree from each of the three years of study. Secondly, before recruiting participants, we arranged informal conversations with three mature students who stayed on to finish their studies to hear about their perceptions of connections between experiences that had been important during the decision-making process to enrol at university. The informal conversations helped us to estimate the number of cases needed to allow for a detailed and rich analysis but did not participate further in the study. Thirdly, we used a 'minimal information sampling scenario' where we made an informed decision about which cases to include, based on the initial, informal conversations. Fourthly, since the purpose of the study was to gain in-depth understanding of the chosen issue, our strategy was to pick a small, relatively homogenous sample (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

Participants

Initially, we intended to sample 7 cases; three students in the first year of studies and 2 students in the second and third year, respectively. When 6 cases were sampled, the data indicated that we had obtained enough information to allow rich analysis. Therefore, the sample includes 3 students in year 1, 2 students in year 2 and 1 student in year 3. Three participants were male, three were female. All participants were white, between 35 and 51 years (mean age 42.7). Three participants were British, one participant was 1st generation immigrant and two were 2nd generation immigrants. No participant had previous experience of higher education in the family. See Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic variables.

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Previous occupation	Year of study

Anne	44	1st generation immigrant, Australian/ Jamaican	Cleaner	1
Holly	35	English	Mother	1
James	51	English	Compliance manager	1
Joyce	46	2nd generation immigrant, German	Retail manager	2
Martin	43	2nd generation immigrant, Greek	Youth worker	2
Darren	37	English	Self-employed	3

Ethics

The study received approval from the university's ethics committee. Participants were recruited from an online support forum for mature students. Before the interview, participants signed a consent form that disclosed the research aim and that participants were free to deny answering any question without giving an explanation. Interviews were transcribed by the first author, with all names mentioned being anonymised. All data were stored safely. All interviews finished with a debriefing, the opportunity to ask questions, and provision of contact details to help-lines for mature students.

Data-collection

The semi-structured interview asked participants to talk freely and in detail about experiences that they perceived influenced their decision to take up university studies. For example, 'Tell me about how you reached the decision to start university studies?' All interviews were conducted and audio-recorded by the first author and transcribed verbatim. The interviewer endeavoured to establish rapport involving trust and respect for the participant and the information s/he shared. The interviews ranged 39-67 minutes.

Analytic procedure

A textual analysis was performed of the transcribed interviews with the purpose to create themes which bring together similar ideas and concepts in participants' responses (Silverman, 2006). The analysis used Smith and Osborn's four-stage approach (2003): 1) both researchers repeatedly read the interview with one of the participants, Martin, and jotted down initial notes about the transcript in the left-hand margin; 2) the initial notes were translated into emergent themes that were recorded in the right-hand margin. When similar themes emerged, the same theme title was used; 3) the list of emergent themes was examined to find how the themes were connected. Some of the themes clustered together whilst others emerged as superordinate themes; 4) each researcher independently created a list of themes for all transcripts. Joint discussions to select a final list of superordinate themes used the tools presented by Smith and colleagues (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009): *abstraction* (grouping based on similar themes, e.g., unmet aspirations, overcoming hardships); *polarisation* (grouping opposing but related themes, e.g., situational factors, internal struggles); *contextualisation* (taking into account narrative and temporal aspects of the emergent themes, e.g., because the fees were going up the next year…so it was then, or not at all really); *function* (taking into account the function of the emergent themes within interviews,

e.g., presenting oneself as a role-model); and *prevalence* (selecting only themes that occurred in at least half of the transcripts). Seven super-ordinate themes met the criteria: 'motivations and preparedness for university studies'; 'aspirations, challenges and achievements'; 'age constraints'; 'a balancing act'; 'transitional issues'; 'catering for individuals'; and 'the origins of maturity'.

Results

Here we report on one of the superordinate themes that were derived from the analysis, "Motivations and preparedness for university studies". We examine three different explanations that participants discussed: 'internal struggles and changes', 'benefiting others', and 'changes in the social domain'. Second, we demonstrate how the separate explanations were interlinked, and rarely threatened participants' meaning-making.

Internal struggles and changes

When participants were asked to explain how they had reached the decision to enrol at university, all of them explained that their decision was linked to specific life-events that were characterised by high levels of change and upheaval. Some participants' narratives show that they began considering taking up HE in parallel with acknowledging the need for a reinterpretation of past experiences. For others, the experiences that were perceived critical to the decision to go to university had occurred closer in time. A common denominator was the perception that changes to participants' views of themselves, other people and the future lay the ground for their decision to apply to university.

In her interview, Holly looks back on some challenging experiences as a young adult, more than 10 years prior to the interview. The first extract below represents her attempt to make sense of her life in an abusive relationship.

In my early 20's, I experienced some crazy stuff…when I met (my daughter) Jade's father…We hadn't even known each other that long when I got pregnant, and we decided to stay together. It turned out to be awful because he was so violent and so manipulative and so emotionally abusive. It was really, really bad. (Holly)

In this extract, Holly revisits her life as a young woman who engaged in risk-taking behaviours ("experienced crazy stuff") and was unable to protect herself from abuse. Her interview shows that she finally had left her abuser.

Initially I was just a shell of my [former] self. I wouldn't speak to anyone, I wouldn't go out, and it was really…it had a big effect on me, [on] my confidence… It took a long time to even go out the house without my mum, and things like that. It was really bad…But then I got in touch with one of my old friends…she gave me this book by an expert on domestic violence, *Why does he do that?*…And it was so therapeutic…it was like someone put a hand on my shoulder and said 'You're not mad. It wasn't you.' It was just such a blessing. And then after that, I just started reading more books and just kind of got into it. (Holly)

The extract shows how Holly found a way of restoring her "former self" through a lengthy process of re-evaluating herself, fuelled by her reading support from people who were close to her. When she discusses her experiences, some appear less integrated in her current view of herself: On the one hand, Holly "always enjoyed it [her past life]. On the other, she emphasises that taking drugs and going to crazy parties "were bad decisions" and "That door is definitely shut now!" We might even consider her description of the role she

had as a young woman and her present role as a mother as mutually exclusive. Her attempt to manage these different self-images is currently to tease out what she feels were good experiences from the adversities she experienced as a young woman.

> Looking back, I got Jade, and she is amazing. I've been really lucky I think...I'm not gonna sit and dwell on it [the past]. It might still open another door for you. And, I never thought I'd be in uni at 35. Stuff happens and you shouldn't ever beat yourself up over it…Sometimes they're good and sometimes they aren't, but you learn things from them. (Holly)

The extract shows that Holly now views the challenging life-events in her past life as learning experiences that she can build on. This approach to herself is reap with self-acceptance as opposed to her past view of herself as weak and vulnerable. Her reinterpretation provides her opportunity to gain a sense of self-worth, which she built on when she started considering university studies. At that point, she had developed new views of herself and the future; "I had an epiphany really".

Other participants identify a specific event that they perceive had encouraged them to take up HE. In the extract below, James describes how he had an unusual experience as he was taking a stroll in familiar surroundings.

> I was walking along the moors one day…it was a nice day. It was the moors I used to ride across. I stopped and thought 'Why can't this be my office?' And literally, 10-15 minutes later, I came back home and ordered a prospectus. …that was it. Within four weeks, it was done and dusted. (James)

James' extract portrays how he had suddenly put all his hopes and dreams about the future on the table as he was taking a walk. When he explained to himself "This can be my office", he seems to invite himself to accept himself in a way that had not been possible for him previously. "Looking back, I've always been aware of doing the right thing for others." James even perceives this moment as a time when he was offered guidance. Building on the changes to his view of himself that surfaced following his pleasurable experience, James moved on to conceptualise himself as an active agent: "After 30 years in a particular industry where you are measured by your sales…I said 'Nah, sorry. I've had enough'".

Benefitting others

All participants explain that an important driver of their decision to go to university was a wish to better our world. James' interview demonstrates how he had been consumed by a clash between his personal values and the code of conduct at his workplace. In the extract below, James describes how the juggling of roles as a boss and subordinate had put increasingly more stress and strain on him.

> [I worked for a company and] the job was great. [But then] there was a buyout, a contract negotiation…I knew that [lots of] people would suffer financially…I finally said to my boss 'sorry mate, I'm not going to let you or the director down, [but] I can't genuinely stand in front of people who've trusted and supported me, and tell them, you're going to lose 25% of your salary. I've had enough. I want to do something else'. (James)

James tries to make sense of how his attempts to find a way forward from his situation at work were linked to his decision to enter HE. He explains that he had reached a point

where he felt that leaving his job was to honour his personal values. Similarly, "[I took up university] to try and give something back. We've got to protect things". Anne also explains that she "wants to help people that like me are confused and, at times, quite angry. And that haven't got any help out there". To do this, she will make use of the knowledge university studies will give her. At the same time, Anne is adamant in pointing out that "Without the experiential base, "it's like a midwife that's not had children. How can you understand what someone is going through in childbirth, if you've never experienced it?" This double sentiment is echoed by Joyce; the decision to enter HE was a manifestation of the shift in her feelings of self-worth, at the same as she wants "to give something back - that's my 'society thing'". Joyce, together with all other participants, express the sentiment that taking personal agency is connected to responsibility for society and wellbeing of others.

All participants describe how they had become aware that their decision to take up HE had involved many and profound changes in their relationships with other people. Holly's interview is representative for all participants; she explains that she used to put other people's wishes and needs before her own, [but] "not anymore". She illustrates her thesis with a comparison of how she in her earlier life had married a man, despite having a strong feeling that she was making a mistake, with her present life-situation where she chooses to live on her own as it allows her to "study every night and read".

Changes in the social domain

All participants describe that a trigger for taking up HE involved changes in their social domain. For three participants, a couple of narratives described how they initially had perceived that the step to enrol at university had been forced upon them by external parameters. Darren and Martin had felt helpless about their job insecurity as they perceived there was "a lack of choice" (Darren) and "decisions were made for me" (Martin). Both

describe how they gradually had moved on to a new position which involved looking ahead on future possibilities instead of being overwhelmed by the present uncertainties. That is when Darren decided to submit his application to university. Martin's interview includes many illustrations of the slow and complex change-process from perceiving he was constrained by his present situation to taking control of his own choices; the route from "mindlessly follow order" to consider "what really makes me happy and what I really want, really want to do".

Discussion

This study examined mature students' perception of the decision-making process that lead to enrolling at university by interviewing a small group who were on track to finish their studies. All participants created narratives to explicate what they felt were extensive changes to their identity, or views of themselves, their relations to other people and the future, and how these changes had framed the decision-making. Here we discuss our findings that participants' changes to their identity facilitated the decision-making within a relevant theoretical framework, including 'creating narratives', 'turning points', and 'identity and identity change'.

Creating narratives

In their interviews, participants created narratives that made sense of experiences that they felt had enabled them to prioritise their personal goals and aspirations. The interviews show that all participants perceived that, in past years, their mindset had been programmed to focus on barriers to change rather than on goals and aspirations, and to view other people's objectives as more important than their own. The participants' narratives comprise the four characteristics that Baumeister and Newman (1994) identified; the narratives (1) reflect

participants' goals; (2) depict their actions as valuable and justifiable; (3) confirm some level of self-control; and (4) confirm a sense of self-worth. Through telling their narrative and thus re-authoring their experiences, new meanings were triggered; the narratives therefore reflect the ways in which the participants began to take back their right to define the world and to reclaim their life (Freire, 1998).

Through narratives, often but not always construed as linear with a start and end, we make our life sensible. This is because in the process of story-telling, we get access to our, sometimes conflicting, memories and motivations (Hammack, 2008). Thus, our stories matter to us. In addition, theoreticians assume that through communicating ourselves via our stories we establish ties to others (McLean & Pasupathi, 2011). Of particular interest for this study is Sarbin's (1986, p. 8) observation that we "make choices according to narrative structures". At times, creating a story with multiple separate chapters instead of a "single identity story can ground people's understanding of…consistency and coherence of their actions" (Striano, 2012, p. 156). An example of this variation of narrative structure was present in our interviews, where all participants presented three different motives to go to university, and where they felt the three motives joined together to form a cohesive whole.

Turning points

A common denominator for our participants was that they perceived a specific event had been pivotal. Whilst Martin perceived that a single event had given him clear directions on how he could navigate in a tricky life-situation, others, like Joyce, had worked hard for years on re-interpreting events that had happened a long time ago; the turning point for her was when she changed her view of herself and others, which she felt had opened the door for her to consider HE. The interviews demonstrate that ordinary life events can become turning points because of "the way we look at a situation: a critical incident is an interpretation of the

significance of an event" (Tripp, 1993, p. 8). Therefore, an incident's degree of criticality

depends on the meaning the individual gives to it. James describes how the experience he had

during a walk outside had been life-changing as he suddenly felt able to listen to himself and

recognise his personal needs, and, in consequence, he made the decision to apply to

university. Rutter (1996, pp. 613-614. Italics in original) defined the concept of turning point

as "experiences likely to involve some form of marked environmental or organismic

discontinuity or changing quality *and* the direction of change must be of a type that is likely

to influence development in a direction that is different from that before the turning point.

Secondly, the experience should be of a kind that carry the potential for persistence of effects

over time". Turning points signal meaningful changes within an individual's view of his or

her identity, which includes learning who one is and learning who one no longer is (McLean

& Pratt, 2006). Therefore life-events may serve as catalysts to change because they initiate a

process that leads to a re-shaping of identity (Charmaz, 1991).

Identity and identity change

Many theoreticians of narrative psychology emphasise that not only are humans' storytellers

by nature, it is through narratives that we can access understanding of ourselves (e.g.,

McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Therefore, storytelling forms a key aspect of people's

identities and identity-change; However, to facilitate our understanding of our selves to grasp

what we can learn about our selves and our explaining our selves to others, our narratives

need to go beyond our perception of the event, (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Pasupathi,

Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). In this view, "identity is the storied self - the self as it is made

into a story by the person whose self it is" (McAdams, 1995, p. 385). Evidence confirms that

the experience of sharing stories about our selves with others is an important element in the

development of identity and identity-change (for a review, see McLean, Pasupathi, Greenhoot, & Fivush, 2017).

Similarly, symbolic interactionism conceptualises the human self as an object that is constructed and reconstructed in our social interactions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000); therefore, self-hood is unthinkable outside a social context (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Yet how individuals perceive themselves do not result merely from the social conditions in which they live; individuals have minds and can reinterpret their experiences (Blumer, 1969; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Mead pointed out that "The past which we construct from the standpoint of the new problem of today is based upon continuities which we discover in that which has arisen, and it serves us until the rising novelty of tomorrow necessitates a new history which interprets the new future" (1929, p. 241). In Holly's interview, we learned that she had changed her view of herself through reinterpreting past events in light of new experiences (social interactions and reading). Her interview does not tell us what made it possible for Holly to reinterpret her past experiences. To understand her identity-change we can turn to Charmaz' emphasis on "elusive experiences that accrue over time hold significance for the shaping of self (2002, p. 345). Whilst the reinterpretations our participants discuss at times seem to reflect conscious thought-processes (Lutz,1988), at other times, they seem shaped by strong inner, extra-rational dynamics (Chodorow, 1999). For example, James' experience during a stroll outside was very different from his previous attempts to compile and weigh information about his job situation. Chodorow (1999, p. 14) observed that humans at times "interpret external experiences in ways that resonate with internal experiences", which in turn reflect emotions. Emotion theory offers understanding of what happened to the participants when they moved on from being stuck to a turning point moment. Emotion theory explains how negative emotions are linked to thoughts that confine the individual to the task at hand whilst other needs and goals are overshadowed (Frijda,

1987). Our data illustrate how anger had consumed some participants whilst having little hope steered others away from actions that matched their goals. In contrast, positive emotions broaden people's thought-action repertoires and, over time, build lasting resources (Fredrickson, 1998). For example, Fredrickson (p. 306) contends that joy "not only broadens an individual's momentary thought-action repertoire…but can have the incidental effect of building an individual's physical, intellectual, and social skills".

Previous research

Research has demonstrated that when non-traditional students have started their university studies, they "critically examine and change some of the underlying assumptions on which their lives have been built" (Bamber & Tett, 2000, p. 59). Such identity-changes in adults who have enrolled at university have been investigated thoroughly (e.g., Bowl, 2001; Christie et al., 2008; Ecclestone et al., 2010; Osborne et al., 2004; Stein & Wanstreet, 2006). Although there are similarities, our analysis, however, focused on identity-changes that forego and act as a motivator rather than follow from beginning at university. Surprisingly there is little published research to corroborate our observations (but see Gallacher et al., 2002).

Empirical studies have highlighted the need of support provision to mature students who have started their studies (e.g., Archer & Leathwood, 2002; Micari, 2004; Ponton *et al*, 2005), for supporting the development of an "HE learner identity" (Darlaston-Jones, Pike, Cohen, Drew, Young et al., 2003; MacFarlane, 2018). Although our participants perceived that they had managed well in the decision-making process to take up HE, despite receiving limited support from their university, some evidence suggest that preparing the transition into an unknown territory was stressful. Provision of information as well as guidance and

preparation to potential mature students during the decision-making phase will likely enable students to experience a smooth transition to study (Bird & Morgan, 2003).

Limitations and strengths

The results of this study illustrate the complexity of the decision-making process when enrolling to university for a small sample of purposively selected mature students. The analysis showed that participants identified identity-changes as part of the decision-making and demonstrated that the interconnected change processes that emerged as participants went through the decision-making process were consistent across the group. Other aspects of participants' lifeworld however remain to some extent uncertain because they were not addressed in this analysis; this includes, for example, gender differences. Future research could investigate the concept of gender as well as other residual uncertainties. The small homogeneous sample that we used represents an attempt to achieve theoretical generalisability, thus inviting "readers to make links between the findings of the study, their own personal and professional experience, and the claims in the extant literature" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 56). However, the small sample and lack of diversity also result in limited applicability to other groups. Future research could examine if the role of identity-change is similar in mature students with other backgrounds.

Conclusion

To conclude, this report presented an in-depth analysis of mature students' meaning-making of the complex factors associated with the decision to start HE. The analysis demonstrated that participants' decision-making process involved changes in several interconnected facets of their lives, kept together in an overarching change to their identity. This new insight is of importance to the field because it demonstrates the critical relevance of identity exploration

and change in potential mature students who consider taking up HE. The novel understanding could be used to tailor support interventions to facilitate access to HE for mature students.

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