

The intersections of family and study for mature-aged distance students starting university

Ella R. Kahu

Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand
e.r.kahu@massey.ac.nz

Student engagement is an important predictor of student achievement and retention. This qualitative project uses Kahu's conceptual framework of student engagement to understand how family influences the student experience in a group of mature-aged distance students. Previous studies have noted that family support is important but few have examined this in depth, and none were found that included family as participants. Nineteen students and their families were interviewed at the start and end of the student's first semester at a New Zealand university. In addition, the students kept weekly video or email diaries. A thematic interpretive approach was taken with the analysis. Three types of support were identified: practical, including financial; academic, helping with study skills and emotional, encouragement. These increased student engagement directly by enabling time and focus on study and the development of skills. Indirectly, engagement was enhanced through the impacts of family on well-being, self-efficacy, and emotions. The findings also highlight important ways that the lack of economic, social and academic capital in lower SES families can lead to less support and therefore inhibit student engagement.

Keywords: Student engagement, mature-aged students, family support

Introduction

Student engagement, a student's emotional, behavioural, and cognitive connection to their study, is central to student achievement and retention (Kahu, 2013). Student engagement (see Figure 1) occurs within an educational interface, a dynamic space influenced by a complex interplay of institutional variables such as teaching and student variables such as their background (Kahu & Nelson, 2016). The framework suggests that these factors have a direct influence on the dimensions of engagement, and an indirect impact via four key psychosocial constructs: self-efficacy, emotion, belonging, and well-being. The current study focusses on an under-researched but important student variable, family, and its influence on the student experience in a cohort of mature-aged distance students.

Approximately a third of bachelor degree students in New Zealand are over the age of 24 (Ministry of Education, 2013). Unfortunately, over 25% of these mature-aged students drop out in their first year (Ministry of Education, 2013). Role conflict, particularly with caregiving roles, is a commonly cited reason for discontinuing (Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009). This can be particularly problematic for women who are often expected to take a greater responsibility for domestic life and who experience guilt for not spending time with their children (Alsop, Gonzalez-Arnal, & Kilkey, 2008; Christie, Munro, & Wager, 2005; White, 2008).

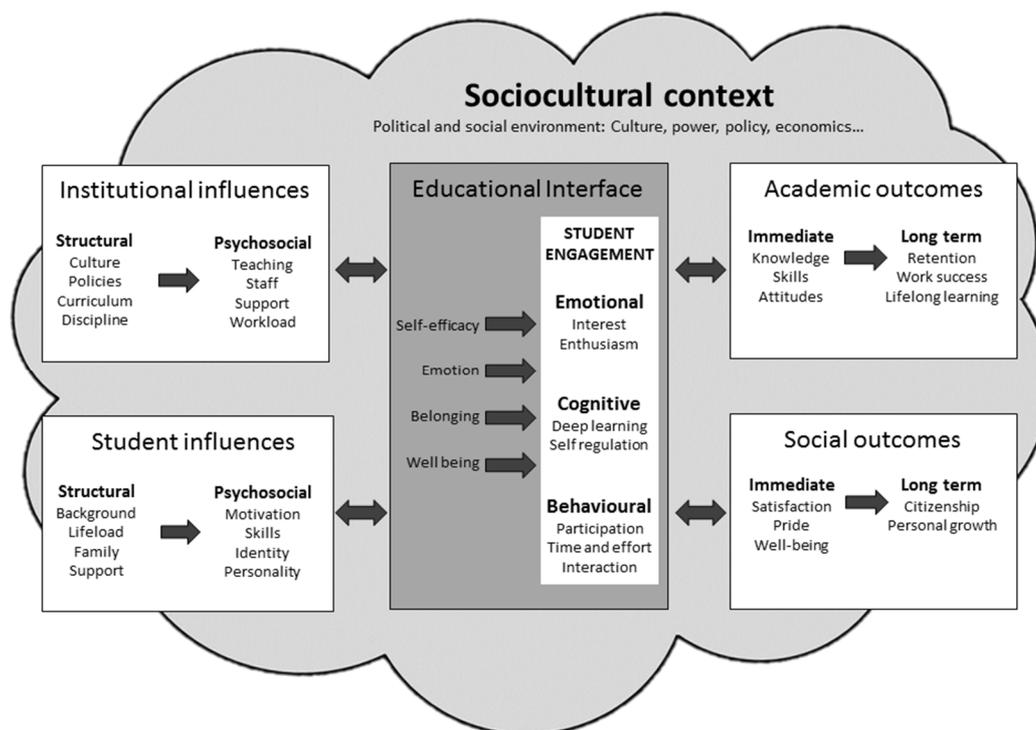


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of student engagement (Kahu & Nelson, 2016)

In New Zealand over a third of mature-aged students study by distance compared to 6% of those under 19 and 15% of those aged 20-24 (Ministry of Education, 2013). The flexibility distance study offers theoretically alleviates the challenges of juggling family, work, and study. However distance study is not always as convenient as expected (Vryonides, 2008) as the multitasking it enables can be a curse, blurring boundaries between roles. It can be harder too for students with families, especially women, to commit the sustained chunks of time necessary for effective learning (Vryonides, 2008). For mature-aged students then, family can be a hindrance to effective study. However, other findings highlight the positive impact of family.

Social support has a direct positive influence on well-being as well as buffering against the negative effects of stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Older students are less likely to make university based friendships, partly because they feel they do not fit in, and partly because they have less time and desire for university social activities (Christie et al., 2005; Wyatt, 2011). In addition, the transition to university is particularly stressful for mature-aged students returning to education (Tones et al., 2009). Family is therefore an important source of support for this cohort.

Various studies have found a supportive family is valuable to the well-being and success of older students (e.g. Urquhart & Pooley, 2007; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). The exact nature of that support is less well researched however. In one notable exception, Kember (1999) identified three mechanisms which facilitate integration of study into the family environment: support, sacrifice, and negotiation. A supportive family is cohesive, can deal with challenges, and both the student and the family make sacrifices to enable an appropriate balance between study and family. This was more likely if the family perceived the study goals as important. Chu (2010) distinguished between tangible support (information and practical help) and emotional support; the latter was more important, having both a direct and indirect influence on the students' learning.

This literature highlights the importance of family for mature-aged students – as a potential hindrance and support. However, no studies were found that included families as research participants and there is a paucity of research with distance students. Distance students have less interaction with staff and students and potentially more role conflict as discussed. For mature-aged distance students therefore, family may be a more important source of support and a greater barrier to study than is the case for younger campus based students.

Method

Participants

All first year distance students aged over 24 at a New Zealand university were invited to participate. Nineteen of the respondents, aged 25-59, were first time university students and available for an interview. Fifteen identified as New Zealand European, five Māori, two Asian, and one Cook Islander (a number identified as multiple ethnicities). Most were studying part time; four were full time. Twelve students had partners (all heterosexual relationships), four (three males) with no children at home and both adults in full-time work or, in one case, on a benefit. In six families the mother/student was responsible for childcare while the father worked full time. One student was studying full time and in part-time work while the father was on welfare; and one student was a father of three, in full-time work with a partner studying full time. There were four sole mothers: one in part-time paid work, one home-schooling her daughter, and two in full-time paid work with teenaged/adult children at home. Three women had no family in the home.

Data collection

Semi-structured family interviews, including children over age five, were held before the semester, focussing on motivation, expectations, and preparation for study. Throughout the semester, the students completed weekly video diaries; two opted for email instead. Video diaries were selected as they are easier for participants and can capture a more natural and detailed account of experiences (Willig, 2001). Students talked about their engagement and what was influencing it. Follow up interviews were conducted with 13 families at the end of the semester; two were unavailable. Four students withdrew from their courses and were interviewed by phone at the time.

Data analysis

The interviews and diaries were transcribed and returned to participants for approval. The analysis was interpretive and thematic, viewing language as a neutral expression of experience (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The current paper focuses specifically on the influence of family – data were drawn from the students' diaries as well as the views of family members as expressed in the interviews.

Findings

Before the semester started, partners' expectations about study varied from seeing the study as a shared 'journey' to not expecting study to impact the family at all. By the end of the semester, most felt the impact had been considerable.

Lexi: It was such a big step as well. Not just for me but for our not so little family unit. Like it's a complete change, it was a complete change of dynamic.

One exception was Melissa, sole parent of two children; she was determined her study would not affect them.

Melissa: Family life hasn't really changed ... No matter what's happening in my world, um, the stability and consistency for my family comes first. So if anything got in the way of that, including study, I would relook at it.

In most cases, the student aimed to 'balance' the needs of study and family.

Alfie: My family is just as important as my studies, but in saying that, my studies are just as important as well. So I will need to balance the both of them.

Families were a critical influence on students' ability to engage successfully with their study. The impacts are separated here into practical, academic, and emotional; however, there was considerable interaction/overlap between these.

Practical

Families had a very practical and tangible impact on study. Another analysis of this data examined the challenges students faced finding the time and space to study (Kahu, Stephens, Zepke, & Leach, 2014). Practical support from family, redistributing household chores and childcare, was a critical influence on this. The level of support depended on structural factors such as the number of adults and children, and paid work responsibilities. However, as in Kember's (1999) findings, it also depended how much the family valued the study goal. In the most supportive families, partners either noticed when more help was needed or the student could just ask.

Vee: I told my husband about my struggles, and he immediately volunteered to cook dinner so that I can devote more time studying. This kept my momentum.

Partners with experience of higher education study were particularly attuned to the need for practical support and 'just got on with it'.

Lily (Daniel's partner): I remember when I was doing my internship, I was just studying every minute of every day and you know Daniel did all the housework, all the cooking, all the everything for all that time. So you know there were a lot of times when I'd just get on with doing all that because I remember that that's what he did.

While most practical support came from partners, older children sometimes took on more tasks. For example Kaitlyn was a sole parent of two girls and her eldest daughter recognised that helping out would allow her mother to concentrate better. This illustrates how practical support facilitates cognitive as well as behavioural engagement.

Melody: ...help around the house and do little things so she can study more. And concentrate. And keep Rose [sister] occupied.

Students also talked of the importance of families not interrupting their studying. This aligns with White's (2008) research with mothers, which highlighted the value of this less tangible support. As Lexi explains, this was not easy.

Lexi: The husband is getting better at not interrupting me. The kids on the other hand not so much. I was half way through Chapter 5 economics yesterday and Tracey comes in ... I just said to her, 'look when the bedroom door is shut it means I'm studying and you can't come in'. And she just got all unhappy and walked away.

Practical support from adult family members – partners, adult children, and extended family – was not always forthcoming. Family could be a distraction for students, resent the time that study took, and even simply ignore the student's wishes.

Brett (Charlotte's husband): I consider the time together is, we're sitting here talking about something that's going on ... whereas it's usually I'm sitting here and doing that and she's on her lap top or reading a book, and that annoyed me.

Kaitlyn: The demands from my [extended] family, and the expectations from them is unbelievable. I feel pressured by them ... they know my routine and I have made it clear to them that I'm busy and need to be doing what I need to be doing, but it still makes no difference. They keep insisting.

In most families this was the exception. However, for two students (one male and one female), their partners were active disablers, offering no support and resenting the impact on the family's money and time.

Samantha: I think that Scott is starting to struggle with the fact that it's taking time away from him when he gets home from work and um, he sort of had suggested that I was doing a little too much.

Samantha: It's been hard going, trying to come home and study, trying to deal with the kids, trying to go to work and trying to get Scott to see that this is important to me. Then I start to doubt myself ... am I out of my league? Am I doing something that I was never really capable of?

As can be seen, Scott's lack of support influenced Samantha's well-being, emotions, and self-efficacy. At a practical level she was too busy and had little time to study and at an emotional level she was stressed and upset making it hard to motivate herself or to focus on her study.

Children, while sometimes helpful, could also be a barrier particularly when the balance was upset by events such as health or school holidays. This was magnified for sole parents who had no other adult to share the load. Parents tended to fit their study around their children's needs, so when family needs were high, they had less time, they were tired, and their stress levels increased. This made engaging with study more challenging.

Lexi: It's starting to become a bit of a struggle. When the kids were sick and now that it's raining, because Michael can't take Lucy on the farm when it's raining so she's spending more time here and she's becoming more demanding for attention... the whole novelty of 'got to be quiet because Mum's studying' is sort of wearing off.

Other research has also found that children can become more demanding when their mother takes up study (White, 2008). While being torn between parenting and study was common, the

students rarely blamed the children. For example, Toni talks about her teenaged son taking time from her study but explains that she ‘needed to do that for him’.

Toni: My youngest one asked me to do something, and I said oh no I’ve gotta do some study and do my work. And he said oh gee am I taking up your time Mum (laughs). And I said no, it’s okay. And, whereas yes he was taking the time that I was going to use for the study. But for me it was okay. Because, I’m his mother, he’s my son, he needed help with whatever it was. So I needed to do that for him.

Family finances were an important facet of practical support. Students whose partner earned a reasonable income could have a lower life-load – no paid work and only part-time study. These were the most successful students. A good income could also buy household support: childcare or a cleaner. In contrast, students with no partner or whose partner had a low income tended to have paid work alongside childcare and study. For instance Alfie, sole income earner in the family and full-time student, needed to take on more shifts at her part-time job. Similarly, Samantha took on a part-time job after pressure from her husband.

Academic

Some partners could also offer academic support, help with writing or study skills. This had multiple benefits: directly influencing engagement through skill development; increasing student self-efficacy; and alleviating the anxiety that often dominates the early experiences of mature-aged students (Stone, 2008).

Daniel: I’ve got four books and I’m like, oh god, do I have to read all of them? And she’s [wife] no no no, no you just read the parts that you really need to focus on. That took the scariness out of it...If I was doing it on my own I’d probably freak out.

At times, it was hard for students to communicate what they needed. For example, Jeremiah wanted feedback from his wife on his poem’s flow but was annoyed when she pointed out spelling errors. Maria’s husband got frustrated when she didn’t seem to want his help.

Maria: He says ‘agggh don’t ask me if you don’t want me to help you’. I haven’t quite explained that the help, that it’s just to sit and listen to me or be a sounding board for me.

In some families, academic support also took the form of listening to the student and showing interest in their courses. This in turn facilitated the student’s own interest and engagement with the course content.

Like practical support, academic support was not always forthcoming. Scott’s wife, an experienced student, helped him a little at the start but this support quickly eroded. The emotional impact of not receiving support is evident.

Scott: The amount of support wasn’t there and it was decreasing... I was getting less and less all the time... So, yeah it made it hard because I got frustrated a lot and got frustrated more and more and more.

A final dimension to the academic impacts between family and study was the link with motivation and inspiration. As in earlier research (Wainwright & Marandet, 2010) the mothers talked about being a role model and inspiring their children. Reay, Ball, and David (2002)

argue that, for parents, the transition to higher education is not an individual process, but rather it is intimately connected to their role as parents. This is exemplified by Toni's experiences: She enjoyed sharing her youngest son's university experiences while her eldest son was inspired to enrol himself in higher education.

Toni: We're on a similar sort of journey me and him. And it's quite neat because what I've learnt so far, through my papers, in regards to academic writing and all that sort of thing, I've been able to help him, which is great.

Moroati (Toni's son): When I came back from Aussie I was pretty much, you know, in limbo I guess and then just seeing Mum and like my brother, go to uni and all that. That's been inspiring for me to get off my ass and do something.

Emotional

Practical and academic support also functioned as emotional support for students as has been discussed, increasing students' sense of well-being. In addition, families offered direct emotional support by offering encouragement and believing in the student. The students experienced a wide range of academic emotions, those linked to learning and achievement, from highs of passionate interest and pride, to lows of anxiety, frustration, and disappointment (Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2014). Family were an important influence on these emotions, which are critical to student engagement. Sharing their experiences and having family encouragement heightened positive emotions such as pride and also lessened negative emotions, such as anxiety and disappointment. This emotional support also increased students' self-efficacy as has been found before (Schunk & Mullen, 2012).

Kaitlyn: When I finally completed my essay the other day, the girls cheered for me! So receiving feedback from my girls was such a bonus :) because it gave me more positivity within myself.

Sarah: I was so nervous with the first exam, the open book one for the psychology, and so I said, you could sit at the foot of the bed and rub my feet while I do the exam online (laughs). And he dutifully did and it helped me not feel too freaked out. Because I didn't feel like I was alone.

However, as has been seen throughout the above analysis, families also negatively impacted on emotions and so hindered engagement. For instance, Samantha, as discussed earlier, experienced frustration, stress, and self-doubt in part because of her husband's attitude and lack of support. Guilt and worry were other negative emotions triggered by family. As with previous research (Alsop et al., 2008; Tones et al., 2009; White, 2008), balancing family and study was challenging and the mothers felt guilty for not spending time with their children.

Samantha: I had him [son] watching TV or whatever, or he was out here by himself and I was on the computer, I felt really guilty. I felt like I was neglecting him, doing that. Felt really bad about that.

This ongoing tension had a negative impact on the students' engagement – limiting the time and quality of their study but also impacting their well-being and emotions. In two cases family/study imbalance led to withdrawal.

Marie: Unfortunately after some challenging decision making, I have had to withdraw from the study... the people I love and care for and who invest time in me, I also felt were missing out.

Family health also caused worry for students – taking time from their study but also impacting negatively on their well-being and so making engaging with study more challenging. Lexi, whose daughter had ongoing health issues throughout the semester, explains: “It is the time and it’s another distraction and it’s another thing to stress about.”

Discussion

This study endorses earlier findings that family support is important for mature-age students (Urquhart & Pooley, 2007; Wainwright & Marandet, 2010). Adding to this, the findings clarify the dimensions of that support and highlight how families both enhance and inhibit engagement. Practical support directly increases engagement by allowing the student time to concentrate on their study, and indirectly affects it by reducing student stress. Academic support also directly impacts on engagement through giving time and skills, but more importantly it increases student self-efficacy and reduces anxiety. Finally, emotional support enhances or alleviates critical academic emotions such as anxiety, pride, and disappointment. But families can also have negative effects – lack of support and the ongoing tensions between family and study can trigger emotions such as self-doubt, worry, and guilt that increase stress and inhibit student engagement.

The findings also shed light on challenges faced by ‘non-traditional’ students who are lower SES and/or first in their family to attend university. Being lower SES is a significant factor associated with dropping out of university (Quinn, 2013). However, this is not a direct causal relationship. Bourdieu’s (1997) theory of individual habitus, the internalisation of past experiences, is relevant here. Bourdieu highlights that traditional students bring with them not just economic capital but also cultural and social capital and the present study highlights some of the mechanisms by which having, or not having, access to those forms of capital in the family, can enhance, or inhibit student engagement.

This is best illustrated by briefly contrasting two cases from this research: Maria and Samantha, women in their early 30s. At the beginning of the research, both were looking after their children full-time while their husbands worked. Samantha left school young and had her first child at 17. She had since worked part time at jobs such as hairdressing and waitressing, married, and had two more children. She wanted to become a social worker and was taking two papers. Maria also left school young but later completed a polytechnic qualification and worked in outdoor education. Maria was enrolled in two papers towards a science degree, hoping to eventually work in environmental science. Samantha’s husband, Scott, was a full time butcher, while Maria’s husband, John, was a school principal.

Despite their similar situations, the families differed in their capital and therefore in the support available to Maria and Samantha. John’s higher income meant Maria did not need to earn, while Samantha felt pressured to return to work. John was also able to support Maria academically. He had a degree, worked in education, and understood the demands of study. He could help with academic literacy and he had a science background so was interested in the content of her courses. In contrast, Scott had no experience of higher education. He couldn’t help Samantha academically and wasn’t interested in what she was learning. He didn’t value education, nor appreciate the amount of time and energy study required. These differences

flowed into the emotional support available for Maria and Samantha. For instance, at the start of the semester both women talked about being happy to pass but having goals of B grades. Maria's husband's response was that she should have higher goals and strive for A grades, while Samantha's husband said: "I would have thought a pass was good enough". As the semester progressed, John's support, both emotional and practical, increased as Maria did well in her courses. In contrast, Scott quickly started to resent the impact of Samantha studying, withdrew his support, and pressured Samantha into work.

The students' outcomes were almost predictable. Maria passed her papers with good grades and planned to continue her study. Samantha became increasingly stressed through the semester, did not complete later assignments, and failed both papers. She was not planning to try again. There may well have also been differences in the individual academic capital of Samantha and Maria in terms of their abilities, but there is little doubt that the differences in family capital and its impact on practical, academic, and emotional support was an important contributing factor. As Wainwright and Marandet (2010) also found, "students with dependents face a range of structural barriers and whether these can be over-come or worked with can hinge on their individual resource base and social networks" (p. 462).

As with all research, this study has limitations. Qualitative studies such as this aim to bring forth the rich complexity of the lived student experience, but as the conceptual framework of student engagement makes clear, that experience occurs within a particular sociocultural context. The experiences of these students may differ from others. In addition, taking part in the research is likely to have influenced the participants' experiences, a recognised threat to qualitative work (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). This does not negate the findings – the types of support offered and the impacts of receiving or not receiving support are unlikely to have been changed. Finally, further research is needed to more closely study the impacts of demographic factors such as gender, SES, and ethnicity that will influence the impacts of family on study.

The findings from this study confirm the importance of family for mature-aged distance students. Family support – practical, academic, and emotional – can make the difference between success and failure in the first semester at university. As is shown in the conceptual framework of student engagement (Figure 1), families influence engagement directly, by enabling (or not) time and space, by increasing academic skills, and by fostering emotional engagement. Families also indirectly influence engagement through the impact on students' self-efficacy, well-being, and emotions as shown in the educational interface.

References

- Alsop, R., Gonzalez-Arnal, S., & Kilkey, M. (2008). The widening participation agenda: The marginal place of care. *Gender and Education*, 20, 623-637. doi: 10.1080/09540250802215235
- Bourdieu, P. (1997). The forms of capital. In A. H. Halsey, H. Laudner, P. Brown & A. Stuart Wells (Eds.), *Education: Culture, economy, and society* (pp. 46-58). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Christie, H., Munro, M., & Wager, F. (2005). 'Day students' in higher education: Widening access students and successful transitions to university life. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 15(1), 3-30. doi: 10.1080/09620210500200129
- Chu, R. J. (2010). How family support and Internet self-efficacy influence the effects of e-learning among higher aged adults: Analyses of gender and age differences. *Computers & Education*, 55(1), 255-264. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2010.01.011>

- Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 98, 310-357.
- Kahu, E. R. (2013). Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(5), 758-773. doi: 10.1080/03075079.2011.598505
- Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2016). Moving beyond transition: Student engagement in the educational interface. *Manuscript in preparation*.
- Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C. V., Leach, L., & Zepke, N. (2014). Linking academic emotions and student engagement: Mature-aged distance students' transition to university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 39(4), 481-497. doi: 10.1080/0309877X.2014.895305
- Kahu, E. R., Stephens, C. V., Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2014). Space and time to engage: Mature-aged distance students learn to fit study into their lives. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 33(4), 523-540. doi: 10.1080/02601370.2014.884177
- Kember, D. (1999). Integrating part-time study with family, work and social obligations. *Studies in Higher Education*, 24(1), 109-124. doi: 10.1080/03075079912331380178
- Ministry of Education. (2013). *Education counts*. Retrieved December 10, 2014, from http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/statistics/tertiary_education
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Leech, N. L. (2007). Validity and qualitative research: An oxymoron? *Quality and Quantity*, 41, 233-249. doi: 10.1007/s11135-006-9000-3
- Quinn, J. (2013). *Drop-out and completion in higher education in Europe among students from under-represented groups*. European Commission. Retrieved November 10, 2015, from <http://www.nesetweb.eu/sites/default/files/HE%20Drop%20out%20AR%20Final.pdf>
- Reay, D., Ball, S., & David, M. (2002). "It's taking me a long time but I'll get there in the end": Mature students on access courses and higher education choice. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(1), 5-19. doi: 10.1080/01411920120109711
- Schunk, D. H., & Mullen, C. A. (2012). Self-efficacy as an engaged learner. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 219-235). New York, NY: Springer.
- Stone, C. (2008). Listening to individual voices and stories: The mature-age student experience. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 48(2), 264-290.
- Tones, M., Fraser, J., Elder, R., & White, K. (2009). Supporting mature-aged students from a low socioeconomic background. *Higher Education*, 58(4), 505-529. doi: 10.1007/s10734-009-9208-y
- Urquhart, B., & Pooley, J. (2007). The transition experience of Australian students to university: The importance of social support. *The Australian Community Psychologist*, 19(2), 78-91.
- Vryonides, M. (2008). A sociological inquiry into time management in postgraduate studies by e-learning in Greece. *Electronic Journal of e-Learning*, 6(1), 67-76.
- Wainwright, E., & Marandet, E. (2010). Parents in higher education: Impacts of university learning on the self and the family. *Educational Review*, 62(4), 449-465.
- White, S. (2008). Mothers who are student teachers: Navigating their dual roles in pre-service teacher education. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 30(2), 159-172. doi: 10.1080/01580370802102064
- Willig, C. (2001). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method*. Buckingham, United Kingdom: Open University Press.
- Wyatt, L. G. (2011). Nontraditional student engagement: Increasing adult student success and retention. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 59(1), 10-20. doi: 10.1080/07377363.2011.544977

Copyright © 2016 Ella R Kahu. The author assigns to HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive license to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author also grants a non-exclusive license to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime site and mirrors) and within the portable electronic format HERDSA 2016 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author.