

# Talking career across disciplines: Peer group mentoring for women academics

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## Abstract

This paper presents the lived experiences of eight women academics who were members of a *Women's Group Mentoring Program* during a period of rapid change in a university environment. Using a qualitative approach integrated with a participatory action research method, data was generated through the narratives of the group members. The analysis identified diversity in strategies used by the women to navigate their career pathways. The findings contribute to the dialogue in universities and similar organisations to attract and retain quality staff in an era of skills shortage created by a workforce close to retirement age.

## Key Words

Career pathways, gender, narrative enquiry, peer group mentoring, women academics

## Introduction

Mentoring programs provide not only support but also an opportunity to explore decision making by the participants in regard to their academic career pathways. The perspective of early career academics' views on career progression is emerging in the mentoring literature, complementing the perspectives of academic managers and developers (Koro-Ljunberg & Hayes, 2006). Wasburn (2007) found that early career women academics can feel "isolated and alone" (p. 68) and the scholarly aspects of academic work can be isolating and lead to "departmental silos" (Kezar, 2005, p. 50). Peer mentoring programs are one strategy that can assist women in addressing this isolation and achieve their work aspirations and goals (Woodd, 1997). Through the provision of a supportive network, participants can explore career decision making on both professional and personal levels (Rheineck & Roland, 2008). Peer mentoring is a model of support that usually occurs between two peers who perceive themselves as equals. In the program that is the focus of this paper, peer mentoring, however, occurred within a group of women academics of similar levels of responsibility and employment (peers) within a group environment.

This paper presents the experiences of a group of eight women academics who came together in 2008 through a *Women's Group Mentoring Program* which was based on a peer mentorship model. The paper explores their lived experience in order to identify various strategies used by the women to navigate their career pathways. The findings highlight the importance of collaboration with women peers in the higher

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education sector, and contribute to the growing literature on the usefulness of mentoring in academic contexts (Tynan & Garbett, 2007, p. 411).

Peer mentorship has been found to be beneficial for career outcomes such as tenure and promotion (Wasburn, 2007). In such a model, the 'peer-to-peer' connections are allowed to develop organically through a wide range of learning activities, experimentation, and career development (McCormack & West, 2006). In this particular program this was done through an initial weekend retreat where both personal and group projects were developed. The group project reported in this paper was a study using personal narratives by the group members to explore their career pathways into academia. The group mentoring process is underpinned by a philosophy of sharing, acceptance, openness to diversity and trust between group members to develop reflexive understanding of the influences on their development as academics (Maynard and Furlong, 1993; Wasburn, 2007; Webb, 2001; Woodd, 1997). The four authors of this paper were among the group of eight women academics who were part of the research project. At the time this study took place, they were all employed at the same regional Australian university.

While there are many women employed at Associate Lecturer and Lecturer levels, a sharp decline is evident at higher levels, with very few women visible in senior management and academic positions (McCormack & West, 2006; University of Canberra, 2008). The *Women's Group Mentoring Program* aims to strategically support the development of theoretical and practical knowledge about how the university operates and enhances participants' confidence to participate in formal structures such as university committees. Participants build networks and contacts across the university and career outcomes such as promotion are supported (McCormack & West, 2006). This program is promoted by senior management to female academics in order to achieve a more gender-balanced ratio at senior levels.

The influence of gender on career decision making and progression is largely absent from research on the academic workforce. Coates and Goedegebuure's (2010) analysis of the "shrinking capacity" (p. 1) of the academic workforce in Australia, for example, does not include gender in the proposals for human resource development and more attractive work opportunities to retain staff. A gendered perspective is essential to understand the career pathways of women academics from their perspective, and to make visible the impacts of childcare closing times and after school care on work. Feminist research illuminates and centralises the influence of gender on life experiences and outcomes (Grbich, 2007; McMurray, Pace & Scott, 2004), and therefore provides an appropriate framework for this study. Collaboration and peer relationships, fostered by the *Women's Mentoring Group Programme*, are also congruent with feminist perspectives, which aim to critique and equalise disempowering structures and experiences (McMurray *et al.*, 2004).

In order to address the shrinking capacity of the academic workforce, it is important for employers and government departments to understand the experiences and influences that lead women into the academic fields when formulating policy for higher education. An important source of information about academic career choice is female academics themselves. Their experiences of work can contribute to a fuller understanding of career decision-making and identity in the higher education sector (Kamvounias, McGrath-Champ & Yip, 2008; Walkington, Vanderheide, & Hughes 2008). The interdisciplinary nature of the mentoring group as an enabling environment will be examined in the following section.

### **Interdisciplinary Context of the Peer Mentoring Group**

This paper describes the professional journeys of a group of women academics from a variety of disciplines. The group consisted of eight academics from a wide range of backgrounds, faculties and academic experience (see Table 1). Collaborative and interdisciplinary work has the potential to counter the isolating effect of university faculty structures and, to generate new approaches to research problems (Campbell, 2005; Kezar, 2005).

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**Table 1: Characteristics of sample**

Group members	Years in academia	Qualifications	Age	Academic level 2008	Academic level 2010	Faculty	Cultural background
Irina	22	PhD	47	Lecturer Level B	Assistant Professor Level B/C	Education	Russian
Mia	6	Masters	47	Lecturer Level B	Senior Lecturer at another university Level C	Health	Australian
Marion	16	PhD	49	Senior Lecturer Level C	Associate Professor Level D	Education	Australian
Anastasia	3	Masters	35	Lecturer Level B	Assistant Professor Level C	Education	Australian
Vera	18	PhD	46	Lecturer Level B	Senior Lecturer Level C	Communication & International Studies	German
Berkeley	2	Masters	60	Lecturer Level B	Working in public service	Education	Australian
Ann	12	Masters	58	Associate Lecturer Level A	Retired	Learning & Teaching	Australian
Michelle	12	PhD	42	Lecturer Level B	Senior Lecturer Level C	Education	British

The program commenced with a two day beach retreat at the beginning of the year, and included formal presentations on university structures and the strategic plan, team building activities and the development of individual and group goals. Participants brought different professional and theoretical paradigms to the program, and had varying expectations of what they wanted to achieve. Two examples of group members' individual goals were to:

- develop the scholarly aspects of my role through collaborative research and writing opportunities ... this will be accomplished through exposure to academics from other disciplinary backgrounds and paradigmatic influences; and,
- find support from other academic women with similar challenges to work/life balance.

The development and implementation of a collaborative group project of benefit to the university is an expectation structured into the group mentoring program. Peer mentoring partnerships emerged organically within the group as the project developed and these initial partnerships were then employed as new projects arose, such as writing this paper, developing satellite projects, applying for promotion, moving to different institutions or choosing to move out of the academic sector. These partnerships continue to function five years after the completion of this particular *Women's Mentoring Group Program*.

Following the first retreat, the group met every two weeks throughout the year. An almost invisible impact on the group was created by members leaving early to care for children after school, and the attendance of preschool children at the group when the on-campus childcare centre closed. These responsibilities were accepted as a normal part of the participants' lives, and were not discussed or questioned during the meetings, even though not all participants were parents. The gendered nature of work only became visible during the writing up stage of the project. Another informal beach retreat took place later in the year to allow for intensive data analysis and writing. The beach retreat not only provided time away from the university workplace to discuss and write, but also freed participants from their home and family responsibilities for a weekend. This time away created a space to think, develop as a group, and also provided an opportunity to reflect on career progression.

In three phases of data collection undertaken for the group project, members wrote reflective narratives on their (1) pathways to academia, (2) lives and roles as academics, and (3) aspirations for professional futures. Narratives describe events that unfold over time and are told subjectively from the author's experience (Grbich, 2007), are "easily comprehensible, invite deeper audience engagement than abstract ideas, and tend to generate acceptance" (Gergen, 1999, p. 18). The individual writing enabled links to different parts of the participants' individual lives and created coherent meanings about their professional identities as academics. The value of stories in qualitative research for exploring and making sense of the human experience is noted by McCance, McKennar and Boore (2001). The focus of the three narratives was not particular to women academics, however, identifying the strategies the women employed was the point of interest in the study. Future study intends to explore if and how these areas may be different between men and women academics.

Group affiliations strengthened as knowledge and appreciation for each other grew. The rich diversity of academic life became evident as narratives were shared and discussed within the group. Dialogue inclusive of alternative viewpoints and experiences enhanced the exploration of academic identities and the research process as interpretations and linkages developed further. Regular conversations between academics from different disciplines developed new understandings of academic roles and scholarship, and allowed for reflection, change and growth.

Koro-Ljunberg & Hayes (2006) found that mentoring develops professional competence and transforms participants' sense of self. Through the process of reflective writing and group discussion, a transformation in these women's identity as academics became apparent as an unintended outcome of the project. Identity is understood to be constructed "within the context of social institutions and relationships" (Henkel, 2005, p. 156). Facilitative conversations between academics allowed entry into a "defining community" and provided language and concepts to describe work roles, experiences of academic life and enhanced understanding of the university context (Taylor, 1989 as cited in Henkel, 2005, p. 157). This transformation of identity is further discussed in the results section that follows the literature overview and the methodology. The following literature overview presents research on academic identity and decision making to provide the theoretical background for this study.

## **Literature Overview**

Pathways into academic careers have featured in the wider literature around vocational choice since the 1950s, which is reflective of the socio-historical contexts of the participants. Emergent theoretical approaches to personality and social learning were predominant between the 1950s and 1970s (Bandura, 1977; Roe, 1956). In the 1970s and 1980s, the literature focused on the underrepresentation of certain groups in academia, consistent with the development of a discourse around human rights. From the late 1980s, an interest in career development and vocational choice emerged. Interest in the inclusion of academics from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds has also been evident (Lindholm, 2004).

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More recently, the staff development of academics (Gosling, McDonald & Stockley, 2008; Taylor, 1999; Toews & Yazedjian, 2007) and human resource development (Dowd & Kaplan, 2005; Mabry, May & Berger, 2004) have gained recognition. Coates and Goedegebuure (2010), Henkel (2005), and Taylor (1999) have addressed the changing workforce roles and future of tertiary education, and the challenges faced by academics. Fewer studies have focused on the unique challenges faced by women in workplaces where most senior management is male (Christman & McClellan, 2008).

Universities' priorities have strengthened in the areas of quality assurance, evaluation of the student experience of teaching and measuring the impacts and outcomes of research. These priorities reflect changes in government funding based on performance (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008; Henkel, 2005) and international developments such as the Bologna process in Europe (The Bologna Declaration, 1999). The evolution of research on academic careers demonstrates its responsiveness to changing political and policy environments.

### ***Pathways into Academia***

Academic capacity is declining, with an ageing workforce and reduced appeal of working in the tertiary sector in comparison to other occupations. Cumming (2010) notes there has never been a greater need for sustained research to provide a strong evidence base, combined with an expansion in tertiary teaching staff needed to serve increasing student numbers. The importance of studying pathways into academia is evident in Australia's current workforce challenges of replacing academic leaders and recruiting new academic staff. Lindholm (2004) studied the influences on career decision making of 36 professors, and found two thirds intentionally chose academic careers. However, one third of participants were "accidental academics" whose search for autonomy and independence in their work led them to careers in the university sector. Mabry *et al.* (2004) similarly found entry into academia could be the result of either falling into a university career or seeing it as a long-term calling. They found many different pathways into academic life. Novice academics undergo a period of transition in which they maintain the roles of both practitioner and academic and experienced pressure to stay current in their field or discipline to maintain their employability (Mabry *et al.*, 2004, p. 400).

Lindholm (2004) concludes that academic careers develop along different disciplinary pathways, although there are commonalities in "career specific choices ... and early developmental influences" (p. 605). Fifty per cent of doctoral graduates view working outside of academia more rewarding due to relative pay and the low availability of positions in academia (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2010; Edwards, Bexley & Richardson, 2011). Support and mentoring provided for doctoral candidates by their supervisors were crucial for building successful careers in academia (Henkel, 2005). Building the capacity of the academic workforce by promoting academia as an attractive career is an increasing challenge for universities.

### ***Life as an Academic***

Taylor (1999, p. 44) describes the traditional roles undertaken by academics as "knower, teacher, and researcher-of-the-discipline, as well as colleague and employee." However, traditional academic roles are changing with the addition of other knowledge professionals in teaching and learning, educational technology and student support to the university workforce (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2010).

Academics report a tension between time spent on teaching and research and the "conflicting" nature of such responsibilities (Toews & Yazedjian, 2007). Mullen and Forbes (2000) found new academics were unaware of how they could productively distribute time effectively among the major assigned duties of teaching, research and service in order to gain tenure and promotion. Women academics were found to have a greater share of child rearing responsibilities, caring roles for family members and other family responsibilities (Gunter & Stambach, 2003; Mullen & Forbes, 2000). Academics in disciplines such as education and nursing are much more likely to be women. Doctoral candidates in education are more

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likely than those in other disciplines to have child-rearing responsibilities and to be caring for elderly parents (Cumming, 2010). As a result, this might lead to candidates taking longer to complete their doctoral degrees, are older on completion and are closer to retirement on entry to academia. Four of the eight women academic in the peer mentoring group came from the fields of education or nursing and had a variety of caring commitments to children, so these issues had relevance within the group.

Academics working away from their home country are another group which face specific challenges, including transience, risks to their wellbeing from social isolation and impermanence in a changing labour market. Movement across institutions is now expected and is a common strategy used by academics to gain promotion. Careers are more likely to cross international boundaries in a globalised education market. A study by Edwards, Bexley and Richardson (2011) reported 30% of academics who had taken steps to apply for overseas positions and 40.5% of Australian academics who were born overseas. In order to manage their careers, international academics need to proactively use the skills of networking, drawing on personal connections, and self-initiation of opportunities. Proactive career management was found to result in increased flexibility, fresh energy and a sense of adventure and challenge (Richardson & Zikic, 2007). However, in making decisions to work in other countries, personal and family lives were crucial issues affecting career decision-making (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Gunter & Stambach, 2003).

### ***Future of the Higher Education Sector***

Ongoing structural and policy change in contemporary universities, in a context of declining public funding, have contributed to stress, lack of security and shifts in academic roles in Australia, the UK and the US (Martin, 1999; Massy, Graham, & Short, 2007). Managerialism has impacted greatly upon academic disciplines with the development of national and university research targets and priorities that reduce academic autonomy (Henkel, 2005). Universities are managed on a business model of “academic capitalism” rather than seeing themselves as producers of knowledge (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

Power struggles between academics and other interest groups result over who has the right to be classified as research-active (Henkel, 2005, p. 165). Academics who fail to achieve research funding and deliver outputs experience a loss of identity as researchers. Differentials in power and status between research-active and non research-active academics have grown in this competitive environment (Henkel, 2005). Experienced academics undergo stress as a result of these sector changes: “I love teaching. I get a terrific amount of stimulation and satisfaction out of the job but what I want is the job as we used to know it, not as it is now. That’s why I would like to get out” (Trowler, 1998, p. 115). Such stress might lead to these academics leaving the tertiary sector.

In reviewing the literature two possible implications follow: 1) that academics do not all share common goals for working in the higher education sector and, 2) not all academics are committed to staying in the tertiary education setting for the long term. Academic roles are complex and difficult to juggle due to competing time demands, and particularly so for women with family responsibilities. Academics from other countries also face particular pressures in establishing careers in Australia. The research on academics frequently does not analyse the workforce in terms of gender. The inequity in work-life balance and career outcomes for male and female academics is thus hidden.

Universities are a rapidly changing work environment due to globalisation, changes in funding and sector reform, and therefore the academic workforce is in transition and experiencing great pressures. It has become difficult to replace academics, particularly at senior levels, as the workforce reaches retirement age. Casualisation of academic positions and low levels of pay compared to other sectors has reduced the attractiveness of academia as a career pathway.

## Methodology

### *Design*

A qualitative research paradigm was chosen as the most appropriate method to gather rich textual data on the phenomenon of academic identity (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This methodology allows for study of “lived experience ... and insight into lived reality” (Tynan & Garbett, 2007, p. 411) and takes into account contextual influences and changes over time (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Research findings about participants’ experiences are expressed using their own language and descriptions (Stanley & Wise, 1993).

An integration of qualitative methods was used in the study, in which group members were the researchers on their own experience of academic careers. A narrative inquiry approach was used to gather data (McCance *et al.*, 2001): group members wrote three narratives about their pathways into academia, current experience of academia and future career aspirations. Narratives can be understood as representations and interpretations of reality, and as a method for constructing meaning of people’s lives and communicating this meaning to others (Reissman, 1993). However as researchers were also participants, the method also drew on concepts from participatory action research (Robson, 2002), which views participants as co-researchers, and includes a focus on the changes produced by participating in the research. Consistent with this approach, minutes of group meetings and the writing retreat, with a particular focus on the major points of group discussions and decisions were circulated to the group to keep all members inspired and connect absent members to the project. This also assisted in ensuring the actions of writing narratives and searching for relevant literature were completed. The research participants operated as a nominal group as described by Delbecq, van de Ven and Gustafson (1975), in which participants generated further data through group discussion and exploration of experience, both personal and professional.

Narrative data are more frequently generated through individual interviews (McCance *et al.*, 2001); however, in this study, data were collected through group members’ autobiographical writing. Advantages of this method are that the data were already textual and did not need labour-intensive transcription (Silverman, 2000), and group members were in control of the data they contributed. The first topic of pathways into academia was chosen because of one the group’s goal being to inspire other women to consider academic careers. It was identified that pathways into academia for the women academics were varied, and in some cases serendipitous and accidental and not necessarily prescribed series of postgraduate study activities. The second and third topics of current experience of academia and career aspirations followed organically. Changes to research design are possible in qualitative studies, as the methodology allows for flexibility and reflexivity during the research process (Polkinghorne, 1991). These consecutive phases of data collection fostered a process of reflection by group members about their lives as academics and meaningful patterns in their careers.

### *Participants*

At the time of the *Women’s Group Mentoring Program*, the eight participants were aged between 35 and 60 years. Each member was at different stages of their careers, level of employment and educational background. The length of time participants worked in academia ranged from two to 22 years. Four had completed PhD qualifications, one was enrolled in a PhD program, and three had completed a Masters by research degree.

Irina, participant one, began her academic career in Russia and, after the birth of her child, continued it after moving to Australia over a decade ago. Mia, participant two, moved from a long and varied career in nursing to academia as her second child was entering their final years of secondary school. Marion, participant three, balanced a career in both academia and industry in the education and counselling sector

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that spanned the childhood of her now adult children. Anastasia, participant four, had only just entered academia after a decade in the education sector in both Australia and the U.K. Vera, participant five, began her career in Germany and had expanded her academic career of 18 years in Language Studies to a large number of countries from her base in Australia. Berkeley, participant six, had also just entered academia from a long career in physical education. Ann, participant seven, had entered academia after her children had entered adulthood and was the only member of the group who worked in an academic support unit. Michelle, participant eight, had spent the majority of her adult career life in academia and gave birth to her first child two years prior to the study.

Participation in the research process was voluntary and all members of the group chose to participate. Pseudonyms have been used to disguise the identity of individual group members. Although the mentoring group members were all female, other power imbalances existed in the group as a result of differences in cultural and linguistic backgrounds, age and stage of career development. However, the structure and purpose of the peer mentoring group and the use of democratic processes such as group discussion and consensus seeking minimised the effects of these imbalances in power.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The research participants generated three individual narratives about how these eight women became academics, their lives as academics and future careers. There were three iterative phases to support the production of individual narratives, with group discussion and interpretation of the data occurring at each stage, leading into the next phase of writing and interpretation.

Thematic analysis, informed by grounded theory, provided an inductive and dynamic process for discussing, coding and interpreting the narratives and organising the codes into hierarchical relationships (Bazeley, 2007). Grounded theory is characterised by an inductive approach to data analysis, which takes place at the same time as data collection, based on coding of themes and writing about the relationships between themes to develop a theory (Boeije, 2010).

For each of the three phases, the narratives were circulated by email. Group members recorded the identification of themes individually in an initial reading stage. Then the mentoring group came together to discuss and qualitatively analyse the data. Common themes and unique experiences were identified as first order codes (Bazeley, 2007) and were recorded along with the discussion in the minutes of the group meetings that were emailed back to the group members. This circular process led to further generation and expansion of the data, and identification of patterns and differences in the data. In the second layer of analysis, the initial codes were then grouped with related codes into higher order concepts, theoretical propositions and categories of experience in academia (Bryman, 2008; Sarantakos, 2005). The next stage in the data analysis was to further code the preliminary results of the data analysis into higher order, more conceptual categories through establishing and reflecting on meaningful links (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), and to develop in-depth understanding of women academics' career development. The involvement of all participants provided multiple coding of the data, which increases the validity and rigor of the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1984). These results are presented in the next section.



## Thematic Results

Six major themes were identified from the analysis: pathways to academia; roles undertaken by female academics; the highlights of being academics; the challenges and limitations of academia; the future and its unknown nature; and the strengthening of academic identity.

### *Pathways into Academia*

#### *Choice or chance*

Participants' pathways into academia were as diverse as their professional backgrounds. For some, becoming an academic was a clear decision. For Michelle, this decision was explicitly made as she watched the academic staff process onto the stage at her graduation ceremony, which felt like becoming part of a community: *"I really felt I had come home."* Even as a child, Michelle wanted to be an art professor. Another participant, Irina, also knew from childhood that she would work in academia. In primary school, she would play school games with her best friend and realised *"when I grew a bit older, I knew I would be teaching languages."* The decision was more unconscious for Marion who reflected: *"while studying for a Graduate Diploma in adult education ... one part of me probably did know that I would end up working in a university."*

For other group members, serendipity was evident in their choices. Their stories included adverse factors such as migration, sickness and a broken leg from a bushwalking accident arising from work as an outdoor educator, which forced Berkeley to look for a sedentary position. For Vera, *"it just happened."* She taught at university during her PhD candidacy, and developed a strong interest in the theoretical side of teaching and learning languages. While Ann was upgrading her teaching qualifications to a Bachelor of Education, she *"was asked to supervise student teachers in schools and tutor in a university preparation program. My late career as an academic began."*

#### *Influence of others*

In the analysis it became clear that other people had exercised a powerful influence on the women's decisions to become academics. Ann wrote about the defining influence of *"two of the most liberated female teachers I've encountered"*; Marion recognised the contribution of her grandmother, who, despite having missed out on completing the leaving certificate at school *"imprinted on me the absolute value of education."* Irina identified the role model provided by her mother, who taught English as a foreign language at a university in Moscow, in directing her towards an academic career. The sub-group of participants who felt they had made decisions to become academics had stronger identities as academics.

However, other group members questioned their professional identity and felt ambivalent. Berkeley asked, *"Will I become an academic? ... I certainly do not see myself as an expert in the field that I lecture in."* Similarly, Anastasia wrote: *"I still don't really think of myself as an academic ... I don't feel like I know nearly enough yet to be classed as an academic."* Mia felt *"unsure that I am comfortable with the term academic just yet, but it is growing on me."*

The analysis points to similarities and differences in participants' pathways to academia. Some entered academia almost by accident, while others felt their career decision making was guided and purposeful. Pathways into academia were seen to shape professional identities, as those who chose academia identified more strongly with academic roles than those whose pathways were influenced by chance.

### **Roles Undertaken by Female Academics**

The variety and diversity of academic roles was emphasised and appreciated by all participants, in particular the roles of educator and researcher. However, different group members emphasised different aspects of their work depending on their experience, interests and tasks. Anastasia described the varying nature of her work:

*From the intensity and all consuming nature of a band rehearsal, to the larger than life persona when I am giving a lecture, to the small group and one-on-one interaction with my students in tutorials, to the solo study and exploration of research papers, designing learning resources and writing books.*

The role of educators and teachers was most frequently discussed in the narratives, perhaps because teaching-related tasks form the bulk of the workload at the institution where the participants were working at the time this study took place. Berkeley wrote *“I see myself as a professional educator ... it is the art of teaching that has been my career.”* The *“love of teaching”* is an experience of academic life found in all the narratives.

Teaching is also described as being emotionally challenging. Mia for example wrote about how *“feeling the adrenalin run to my brain can be a bit scary”* and Irina sometimes felt *“tongue-tied.”* All commented on the hard work of preparation for teaching and marking, course and curriculum development. Ann found academic life to be *“challenging, demanding ... and hard work.”*

The tension of balancing teaching and researching was evident in the narratives. Vera experienced teaching as overtaking other areas of her work, particularly research; finding a balance between her role as a teacher and as a researcher was stressful. Despite a high level of satisfaction with academic life, there was frustration evident in having sufficient time to pursue research interests. Irina reported *“I sometimes enjoy putting a piece of writing together, especially when it starts to flow and to make sense; many times before this happens however I feel frustrated that it doesn't!”*

How group members found a balance between teaching and research varied; however, the love of learning was a unifying theme. Berkeley referred to an *“eternal lust for learning”* and valued the *“time to reflect ... and time to learn”*; Marion prized her job because *“academics learn continuously”*; and Michelle described *“feeling my brain expanding.”*

### **Highlights**

A prominent theme of strongly preferring to work independently was evident for all participants. Mia wrote of loving work with a *“high level of autonomy”* rather than *“being directed.”* Vera commented on *“the freedom academics have in terms of organizing their work ... organizing my work myself and choosing when I want to do what (most of the time).”* Anastasia enjoyed the *“freedom in terms of how I use my time”* which also required *“heightened discipline ... to use my time effectively.”*

Opportunities for collaboration and working with others were also valued in academic life. Ann described her fulfillment when *“a particularly elegant solution, answer or idea emerges when talking with colleagues.”* Irina liked *“meeting with my tutors for a ‘cuppa’ and a ‘goss’ about our students.”* Marion valued conferences and presenting papers because of the opportunity for *“liaising with colleagues”*, and Irina emphasised *“fun, mixing with lots of intelligent people, hearing lots of information and ideas.”*

The cultural diversity of university life was strongly valued. Vera wrote, *“I enjoy meeting students and colleagues from all walks of life, different places and cultures; I truly honour the multicultural environment a university offers.”* Marion wrote of the *“fantastic opportunity to train HIV counselors in*

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Papua New Guinea”, while Vera commented how “*the learning and teaching of languages allowed me to work as an academic in universities around the globe.*”

Participants experienced the role of an academic as fulfilling and worthwhile. Michelle was able “*to combine my love of art with my love of teaching*”; Mia treasured “*golden moments where students demonstrate sudden understanding*”; Irina described “*the thrill of preparing my own lectures, deciding on what my students need to know.*” Ann described fulfillment when “*a student says ‘That makes it all clear now! Now I know what to do’, it makes the challenge and hard work of analysing and breaking down other academics’ ideas and assignment tasks worthwhile.*”

### **Challenges**

A major theme was the varied and lengthy path of gaining the necessary qualifications for an academic career. There was a strong feeling of accomplishment about completing research degrees, but the need for persistence was emphasised. Marion described “*a twelve year marathon of postgraduate study*”, while Irina wrote that “*the writing part of the thesis was a bit more challenging ... Writing was interesting as well, but it took lots of time.*”

The issue of work/life integration was another common theme. Negotiating shifts within that balance, as personal areas of interests changed or university structures altered, presented unique challenges. Although academic positions were important in the participants’ lives, they were only one part. Personal commitment to family and friends featured strongly. Marion recalled that in the early stages of her career “*I was a single parent of two school aged boys and renovating a ... house.*” Mia found “*this is a job where the clock never stops and making time for important relationships in your life is imperative.*”

Managing time was a related theme. Many participants highlighted the sense of not having enough time: Marion reported on the pressures of “*lots of deadlines*” leading to “*creative chaos*”; Irina used descriptions such as “*busyness*”, “*too much of everything*” and “*too many papers to mark.*” An additional element was working in an environment that was not always resourced sufficiently, both in terms of physical facilities and appropriate tutors.

The challenges of working as female academics are the reverse aspects of the highlights, the yin and yang of the profession. The biggest stretch in participants’ current experience is allocating time to both research and teaching. A common theme in current experience of academia is a love of learning and professional development. These experiences are strong motivators for continuing in academic careers. The highlights and challenges directly influenced the participants’ sense of their futures as academics.

### **Future**

The central theme in the third phase of writing was the unknown future. Vera, currently half way through a three-year contract, wrote, “*Who knows? I didn’t really expect myself to be here ... 10 years ago, so who knows where I might be in 10 years from now?*” Anastasia saw “*so many opportunities for my future that I have been unsure about which pathway to take up until now.*” Michelle wrote about being at “*a crossroads ... submerged in a great fog ... I am very confused about my future.*”

The themes of promotion and accepting the limitations of academia were evident in most of the narratives. “I am going for promotion so that I have more time for research and a little more freedom to instigate innovative programs” reported Ann. Irina described how “*academia feels like a long term friend or partner ... you understand their limitations as well as the limitations they impose on you, but you choose to stay with them.*”

### **Academic Identity**

The theme of strengthening one's academic identity also emerged. The role of researcher was more prominent in the third round of narratives. Vera concluded, "I want to stay ... at [this] uni. I am an academic and love both research and teaching, and I want to continue doing this for a while." Similarly, Mia wrote: "by beginning my PhD I had made the decision. Why would I do the apprenticeship if I did not want to use the skills that I will be equipped with when I complete my thesis?" Enrolling in a PhD was one outcome of her involvement in the mentoring group and indicated the strengthening of her professional identity.

Mia described how "the process of writing these narratives and sharing our stories with other women in my mentoring group has also contributed to a confirmation of my place in the academic world"; Berkeley decided that "I would love to write an academic paper ... research ... [that] would be my first idea for the future." Anastasia commented:

*"A surprising thing has become clear to me - the path I don't want to take ... a career path ... higher in the academic structure ... quite alluring in terms of pay and status. But it is not the path for me ... I want to branch outward, not upward."*

The influence of the mentoring group on the consolidation of academic identities is apparent in a developing interest in research for the early career academics. Support provided by the mentoring group and participation in a group research project were key in this consolidating process.

### **Discussion**

This study adds to the body of studies written from the point of female academics (Tynan & Garbett, 2007) and early career academics (Kamvounias *et al.*, 2008). The importance of understanding why people choose to enter academia is confirmed in this study, which expands on earlier research (Lindholm, 2004). The data revealed both accidental and planned entry into academia, which supports the findings of Mabry *et al.* (2004). These two entry paths can be seen as two poles on a continuum. At the one end, there is serendipity, such as Berkeley's bush walking accident, which was a trigger for becoming an academic; while at the other there is firm conviction and determination, as experienced by Michelle at her graduation ceremony. The peer group mentoring experience in this program was the catalyst for many decisions and progressions made by the women academics involved. Due to significant changes made to employment conditions, funding and focus made in the tertiary education sector in Australia in the three years after the program (Bradley *et al.*, 2008), it is difficult to compare if the peer group mentoring experiences increased the rate and level of promotion or the women academics. However, it was evident that the peer group mentoring experience embued the women academics with greater confidence and skills to navigate the uncertain times that occurred directly after the program in the field of academia in Australia.

A broader perspective should be taken in universities as to who might be interested in and suitable for an academic career, especially given an aging workforce mostly aged between 45 to 60 years, competition from other sectors and fewer younger women entering academia (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2010; Lindholm, 2004). Recruitment, induction and staff development programs need to accommodate and support changed workforce requirements and avoid perpetuating outdated academic prototypes of elite experts in both research and teaching (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2010). Coates and Goedegebuure, for example, document the emergence of a larger group of "knowledge workers" in universities made up of course developers, learning and teaching staff, and learning management system staff (2010, p. 12). Academics are now only one part of a larger knowledge workforce in universities.

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The current study found an experience of pressure around the twin themes of balancing work and life commitments, and balancing the academic activities of teaching and research. Toews and Yazedjian (2007) encourage academics to “maintain a life outside academia” (p. 120-121). Achieving work and life balance was seen as challenging by female participants; a finding also reported on in Acker and Armenti’s (2004) study of women academics. Gunter and Stambach (2003) highlight gender differences in academics’ perception of the promotion process, and note female academics’ “perception of time constraints and feelings of tension between obligations at work and at home” (p. 26). Sharing these experiences through peer group mentoring is a strategy to assist in addressing this “balancing act”.

The current study found that participants’ experienced a strong sense of pressure in allocating time to research rather than teaching. This was particularly acute in the area of doctoral study, where participants either took an extended period to complete their doctorate or were struggling to begin the doctoral process due to a lack of appropriate time and balance between their other work and personal commitments. Teaching takes up an increasing amount of academic workload, as the ratio of students to full time academic staff in Australia has risen (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2010). The relationship between teaching and research in universities has become more complex, with an increasing and overlapping range of teaching and research activities (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997).

The challenge for academics working away from their own country is another important finding, similar to Richardson and Zikic’s (2007) conclusions that international careers result in transience and risk for expatriates and their families. Vera, for example, employed on a three-year contract, felt her academic career was precarious and insecure. Risks to wellbeing through lack of job security and loss of previous status can result where academics’ previous experience in overseas universities is not recognised, particularly in the early stages of academic careers. Deans, faculty managers and human resource departments should be mindful of the unique needs of international staff.

Concerns about work life balance and working in a new country were mitigated by an appreciation for working in and contributing to the diverse academic environment. A finding of the current study was that appreciation of cultural diversity arises from the culturally and linguistically diverse workforce in universities. The advantages of academic life were its autonomy and independence, which contributed to participants’ happiness, wellbeing and love of their work. Kogan, Bauer, Bleiklie and Henkel (2006), in a large comparative study of the tertiary sector in UK, Sweden and Norway, found academic autonomy to be a stable value that survives institutional and sector change. In the current study, the peer group mentoring experience assisted the women academics to identify the benefits of this autonomy, rather than dwell on the pressures of being consistently proactive in order to manage and enhance their careers. This experience has furthered many of the women academic s careers, including successful promotions, increased international collaborations and leadership in faculty and research projects.

Participation in the project facilitated a growth in self-confidence and greater awareness of their goals for the future. For three group members who were novice academics and who had not previously published, the collaboration was a step towards their identity as researchers. The overall success of the peer mentoring group in assisting the career aspirations of participants is shown in the comparison between academic levels in 2008 and 2010 displayed in Table 1. All group members who have continued to work in the tertiary sector have gained higher-level academic positions. For these women peer group mentoring turned out to be an effective model in assisting them to reach their career aspirations

This study drew on a small sample size to explore women academics’ career decision making and experience of their work. As a qualitative method was used that drew on participants’ unique experiences and reflections on academic life, the findings may not be generalisable to other women academics. However, the narratives provide a rich source of the lived experiences of the women involved and may provide some understandings into academic career progression for women. There is a need for further,

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larger scale studies of the academic workforce at a time of major changes in the sector, with particular emphasis on women's career decision-making processes and outcomes.

## Conclusion

The mentoring group was a safe place, separate from the responsibilities of work and family life, to reflect on these women's academic identities and hopes for the future. The methodology of repeated phases of writing and analysing narratives as a group had a transformative quality for participants through its reflexive nature.

This paper was written at a time of major change in quality assurance practices around teaching, driven at the institutional level. Industrial change within the university and assessment of the impact and quality of research at a national level were also taking place. Such shifts in policy and practice mirror changes that have taken place in universities internationally (Kogan *et al.*, 2006). Writing the paper was a unifying, reflective experience about our professional lives and values that consolidated our identity as academics. This paper has contributed a snapshot, based on lived experience; of academic life in a time of workforce restructure from the perspective of women academics.

## Authors' Endnote

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