RITUAL, CAREER AND IDENTITY CHANGE: A STUDY OF THE FIRST SEMESTER OF A TEACHER PREPARATION DEGREE IN ADULT AND VOCATIONAL TEACHING

David Carnell and Robert Funnell

This paper is concerned with the part that the university, as an institution, plays in the transition from worker to student by adults receiving direct entry. The case developed is about a full-time course in the preparation of teachers in adult and vocational education. The period covered is the first semester, with particular attention to the first six weeks. Goffman’s (1961) notion of a moral career is drawn on to structure the analysis, where new students are ‘processed’ and subjected to a series of rites of initiation, much like those experienced by neophytes described by van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969). Having other roles in life a few days earlier, the beginning students are separated from the foundations of their previous existence. Being workers and students the next, they are subjected to new and foreign practices, mostly within a well-defined geographical area. While these students differ from other adults and school leavers who are prepared for university, some generalisations can be made from their experience about the processes through which newcomers become students.

Introduction and a brief history of the case

Two concepts from the 1960s can be drawn upon to explain a more recent phenomenon which is the provision of direct entry to vocational teacher training in university that is based on the applicant’s previous work experience. In his work Asylums, Goffman (1961) has shown that a career is structured in the early phases of induction into an institution and that one’s moral standing depends on a person meeting tests that are part of institutional life. The less the person knows of the rules and expectations, the more traumatic the taking up of a ‘moral career’ is felt as a ‘test of hazard’. Victor Turner (1969) stated that movement from one state of being to another, such as from child to adult, or in this case from worker to university student necessitates some form of ritual process and constitutes a rite of passage as described by van Gennep (1908). Our intention is to show the moral career of direct entry students and how they experience the university as an institutional rite of passage during their first semester of study. A brief history of the course is necessary, however, as a means for orientation.
The material in the paper is based on a study of the first semester of the Bachelor of Adult and Vocational Teaching (BAVT) program at the Mount Gravatt campus of Griffith University in Queensland. The BAVT originated in the early 1970s as a Certificate in Teaching—Technical and Further Education (TAFE) at the then Mount Gravatt College of Education (CAE). The course at Mount Gravatt began as a two year sandwich program in which students spent two semesters practical teaching in a technical college, and two semesters gaining conceptual aspects of teacher training at the Mount Gravatt CAE. This approach to training of technical teachers marked a change within teacher education in that it opened up a small port through which only a select band could pass. These were the candidates whose interests met those of an expanding TAFE system. Their program of study was determined by TAFE as employer and the college of advanced education (CAE) as assessor, they were paid to teach and to study in alternative semesters and they were assured of continuing employment. The small and unique position in teacher education was held open because it best suited the interests of the CAE, the students and TAFE—and the national direction set for TAFE at that time by the federal government as a key source for funding.

By the late 1980s it was no longer in TAFE's interests to act as the gatekeeper for students entering the course and in 1989 the CAE at Mt Gravatt admitted its first 'non-TAFE' student into the course which marked the beginning of the end of TAFE sponsorship of students. As a result the word 'TAFE' was dropped from the teaching qualification in 1990, making it the Diploma of Adult and Vocational Teaching. By 1992 this changed to the present title of Bachelor of Adult and Vocational Teaching. From 1994 all of the course enrolments were privately funded by individual students who, being no longer employed by TAFE, were either employed part-time or reliant upon Austudy benefits. As a result, the students' association with adult and vocational teaching had become more diverse. As TAFE withdrew its commitment, other factors pressed in on the curriculum and types of subjects offered. The logic for curriculum development and subject offerings is now that between a university and a flexible market for the employment of vocational teachers and trainers. The university has had to draw on its own resources to meet these changes. At the Mt Gravatt campus this has been to add 'majors', groups of subjects that can provide second teaching
areas, such as those in human resource development, adult literacy and workplace training. As well, it must provide a flexible infrastructure for practice teaching as well as providing avenues to further studies in other degrees or in its own post graduate courses. All of this seems a 'natural' progression from the perspective of the university, but is extremely complex for the direct entry student of today.

The focus of our study was on the view within the institution of students being allowed direct entry to university. Our intention was to treat the university as a socialising institution and the faculty staff as agents of that institution which, in Goffman’s terms, ‘processes’ incoming neophytes with the intention of persuading them to accept an ‘academic’ view of themselves as students. As such, the methodology involved an examination of the expectations the university placed on the incoming students in terms of reading, writing, attendance, and so on. We then asked how the university itself shapes many of the positive and negative aspects of student experience. The tools used in the study included a survey, interviews and observation during the first semester of the course. In-depth interviews were held with four men and four women who combined full-time study with family responsibilities. Focus groups were held six weeks into and at the end of the first semester. Where the focus groups provided information about how university life and study were experienced, the in-depth interviews provided biographical detail and showed relationships between university, home and other aspects such as work. Though not shown in any detail, a historical analysis was conducted on the course from its initial offering to the present. A descriptive analysis of the first semester of this course is the subject of the next section.

The first semester: Institutional rite and moral career

The assignments should be used as focal points of your study. They should not be your sole preoccupation in the subject—the relative length of each assignment should be taken as a rough guide to the relative amount of time that you may best devote to each, other things being equal. As a general guide, it is expected that a student will spend a total of approximately 140 hours on a ten credit point subject. That expenditure of time, if properly
managed by a student of average ability and background, should gain an average grade.

(Subject profile for a first year subject)

Well you think okay! the first thing that is going to come to your mind is, '1500 words, where am I going to get all those words from?'. I mean you write 500 and you have exhausted everything... I was pretty overwhelmed, I spent the first couple of weeks saying, 'why am I doing this?'

(Student, semester one)

I go to my first class and straight away they're telling me what the assessment procedure is going to be and all the work we have to do, it makes me feel like committing hara-kiri.

(Student, semester one)

The above quotes highlight a mismatch between academic discourse that is meant to provide help and guidance and the manner in which it is received. More formal and esoteric examples could be drawn upon to push this point. In essence the excerpt from the subject profile says something like this: 'Don't be too preoccupied by assignments, we want to know that you understand what you are studying. You can be a little over or under the set number of words. We've taught a lot of people and we think that if you spend around ten hours each week on each subject you should be all right.' A student in their second semester would not respond as did the two students interviewed mid-way through their first semester—who wonder why they are there and make quips about ending it all. All of this could be seen as being part of student development, but in doing this we miss the reasons why people new to university see instructions and offers of help as a test of themselves at one point of time and as not being so at another.

Direct entry students such as the people entering the BAVT are neophytes. They have little, if any understanding of what is expected of them as a student, they are not a part of the cohort of entrants whose academic credentials show that they have the right to, or who 'should' be at university. They are usually equipped with around ten years of schooling, generally from 'non-academic' streams. A study of the content
of each of the first semester foundation subjects shows they are required to complete thirteen pieces of assessment that require over 17 000 words to be written in order to pass the four first semester subjects. The task that this presents a person without a history of reading academic journals and books is seen in the fact that at least 1500 pages are expected to be read across the four subjects. One subject requires students as a part of a group to prepare and present a major seminar piece that will take many nights and weekends to co-ordinate and organise. Reading, writing, public presentation, and above all the submission of assignments, become the major tests of hazard which have to be met for a first time in all subjects by six weeks into the course. This period is a rite of transition that can be explained in following Goffman and paying attention to pre-entry presstudent phases and how newcomers are ‘processed’ by the institution in question.

The setting and daily routine

Having other roles in life a few days earlier, the beginning students are separated from the foundations of their previous existence. They are subjected to new and often strange practices, mostly within a well-defined geographical area. The Mt Gravatt campus of Griffith University is situated ten kilometres south of the Brisbane City centre, in a nature reserve on top of the residential housing suburb of Mt Gravatt. The Faculty of Education is the predominant faculty at the campus and provides mainly for primary and secondary teacher education, justice administration, leisure studies and media studies as well as adult and vocational teacher education. The beginning students attend a separate building at the fringe of the campus called the Industrial and Adult Education Annexe, (called the IAE building) which was funded by Queensland TAFE and opened in March 1980 for their beginning teacher program. The IAE building runs east to west in a reverse ‘J’ shape and has two levels which are divided into three main areas. Computer laboratories made available to all university students take up the bottom level, and industrial arts education and adult and vocational teacher education share the top level. While there might be some similarities between industrial arts and vocational teacher education, there is essentially no interaction between students from each program. The mostly younger, industrial arts students assemble around the workshop
doors at their end of the building and rarely move further than the mid-
building doorway. The adult and vocational education program takes
over the remainder of the building. Most of their classes over the first
semester and the full two years are held in two classrooms. Just off these
rooms is a large lunch room, kitchen, with a fridge, a bench, microwave
cooker, and an eating area with coffee tables, padded lounge type chairs
and some metal lockers for use by the students. This area can be used for
informal discussions, but is mainly a point where coffee and tea are
made, and where lunches are stored.

The first semester lectures are held between 8.30 and 11.30 am, four days
each week. From day one, prior to lectures and during their 20 minute
break, another area for students to congregate is a flight of nine concrete
steps leading into the IAE building. Here they smoke, drink coffee, tea,
and chat with each other about the state of play in the course, and air
their own feelings. It offers a space for what Goffman (1956) terms
‘backstage discussions’, a place where formalities can be dropped, where
expected public expectations are relaxed, and people such as staff, and
what they say and do, can be questioned, scrutinised, and put up for
parody.

The daily pattern for these students differs from that of other students in
that most everyday facilities are in close proximity to the IAE building.
For BAVT student arriving at university, the IAE building is most often
the first port of call, whether one arrives early and manages to park on
the adjacent roadway or has to walk the steps from the lower car park.
As such, on any given day, due to the location of the classrooms, some of
the BAVT students may not go beyond the IAE building. They have only
to retrace these steps when work or other commitments are pressing
their departure. It is in being physically separate from other students and
staff on campus that these individuals begin their institutionalised
passage towards their new role as student.

The pre-entry period

To become an inmate in an asylum, Goffman shows how a person is
made aware that they are transgressing ‘normal behaviour’, and
someone close to them convinces them of a need to seek confirmation of an expert. After one or more consultations to talk things over, the expert, and the person they should be able to depend on, the 'next of relation' reassures the person that it is in their best interest to enter the institution. This done, the prospective prepatient works through a number of 'mediators' who put official processes in place. This done, the prepatient becomes the inpatient. Goffman's description of the processes of mediation is as follows:

Third are the mediators—the sequence of agents or agencies to which the prepatient is referred and through which he is relayed and processed on his way to hospital. Here are included police, clergy, general medical practitioners, office psychiatrists, personnel in public clinics, lawyers, social service workers, schoolteachers and so on. One of these agents will have the mandate to sanction commitment and will exercise it, and so those agents who precede him in the process will be involved in something whose outcome is not yet settled. When the mediators retire from the scene, the prepatient has become an inpatient, and the significant agent has become the hospital administrator.

(Goffman 1961, p.127)

Goffman's prepatient phase probably applies more to this group of students than to those who gain entrance through a score adjudicated by an entrance body external to a university.

The accounts of the period leading to the decision to enter the course often focus on a realisation that a career path is blocked, or closing in, bringing a sense of frustration. The justification of 'going to uni' is usually in terms of personal development and future benefits for family.

As a family I don't think we had a great deal of choice I mean I was pretty discontented with what I was doing, I found myself at job interviews and not performing very well because I knew a hell of a lot more than the people that were interviewing me. The chemical industry in particular, with the company in New Guinea I virtually functioned as a chemist so I think that this thing this—self image came across the table to people and they said, 'hey! this guy's a fucking smart arse!' So I really thought a career change was a smart move and I think it still is.

(Former company director)
The cookery trade's something I've been doing all my life and me being single I've just taken it for granted that this is a normal lifestyle. I met my wife only three years ago and now we're married and I've inherited a young family and now we have got a new baby so my priority is with the family I guess. I was getting a bit stressed out last year through my job and not being home, the kids misbehaving, and Michelle not coping I just said to her one day y'know, 'let's do something about this', and as from that, 'I'm going to university'.

(Former chef)

Whatever the reasons for separation from a former job, the person has now to begin the processes of how to best enter the institution. Once this is done a new career confronts them. The intention here, as Goffman argues, is for the new entrant to become familiar with the institutional requirements of those who have gone before them. When interviewed people would often move from the realisation of facing a cross-road in statements such as, 'so I got my wife to phone up about the course . . . and here I am'. With more probing it becomes clear that the period between realisation, inquiry and entry involves a transition that is different for adults beginning university, than is the case for younger people moving into university from school. School leavers experience an inevitable and expected rite of transition from high school. In van Gennep's terms entering university for these students is a post-liminal rite, one through which they are incorporated into university life as a next stage. Many of the people in this study however, were incorporated into a state in which they feel liminal—'neither here nor there'.

The people in this study could trace their decision to inquire about starting university to a point where they were dissatisfied with the current state of their lives. This would appear to differ from situations where school leavers choose a course that suits their high school results. Whatever factors are involved, an ambiguity about where the person was, and where they want to be carries into their preparation to enter university, and their experience of the first few weeks there. This first phase of a student career is a form of ritual of separation that parallels the 'prepatient' phase described by Goffman (1961).
The new cohort to the BAVT have different entry requirements to other university students. Unlike students from secondary schools, they are prestudents in that their prior state is not one in which they are being prepared for university life. Most often they have not recently been in an education setting where university is the probable next step. Their family history is not usually one where a relative or associate will have knowledge of universities and how to enter them. Concerns about leaving work to take up study can be made to a friend, workmate or a past or present student in the course. These people become what Goffman terms a ‘next of relation’, someone who will tell them ‘what to do’; who to contact initially and ‘where to go’ for advice. When family survival and tighter finances are to be a problem, the next of relation is most often the spouse/partner who may be a support or someone who may need to be persuaded. In contrast to Goffman’s phase where the next of relation has to convince the person to enter the institution, the situation for these students, then, is often reversed. The person in prestudent phase, realising they do not fit what used to be normal life, has to satisfy others that they should seek a remedy in another institution. Whether they seek information about direct admission to university by phone or through the mail, full-time students will make an appointment with the course co-ordinator whose expertise makes them the key mediator. The co-ordinator explains the entry requirements, reassures about suitability and usually remains the mediator to whom students return for clarification, advice and reassurance. Mediators at the university are associated with the functions needed to become a student and can have the task to enrol, convene, induct, provide rights, i.e. to borrow from a library, park a vehicle, use computers, enter lectures, approach staff with questions and submit assignments. Mediators are confined to their roles and duties as agents and as such they speak for the university and in the language of the university. New students, faced with so many intermediators talking authoritatively about so many things are seeking an interpreter to make sense of the incoming information. They know they are in, but they do not know what they are actually in for.

As mentioned in Goffman’s work Asylums, on the journey between home and the hospital, the pre-patient may experience what he/she terms, ‘a
kind of alienative coalition'; they feel they should not be there, but also
that they should be there. For the student cohort, whatever the mediators
at the university are doing and saying is made more difficult to take in
because the campus and the buildings are not what they have been led to
believe a university should look and feel like. The first week opens up a
mismatch between the ideal of university and the ideal of what being a
university student actually entails for them.

I suppose my perception of the university was as you see it on television—
you go to a big lecture theatre. When I went to Nathan's orientation we went
to a big lecture theatre so when I went to my first class and we go into this
crummy classroom I guess I was a little bit disappointed, I probably expected
to go into a big lecture theatre.

The first lesson was in one of these classrooms [in the IAE building] and I
thought, 'oh!, I thought we would be in one of those huge big lecture theatres'.

Full-time beginning students usually enrol in four, first year subjects
which are shown later in figure 1. The first week is an initiation which
includes an introduction to these subjects and an orientation to activities
required as a student in order function in the university as well as the
formal administration procedures that are required.

The first week as a ritual process

Students are formally introduced to the content of their four foundation
subjects each day from Monday to Thursday. A pattern emerges for each
of the four lectures over the first week—informal discussion groups
before 8.30, class begins with an introduction and review of the study
guide and assessment, a coffee break follows mid-morning with more
informal discussion followed back in the classroom by an introduction to
specialised topics, terms and the first parts of the subject content.
Suggestions at this time are made about how to plan and read for
assessment, after class some brief discussion follows and materials are
sought to begin reading. Most people have left the campus soon after.
Presentation of self plays an important role in the projection of what is
acceptable as a legitimate student persona. As such student interaction in
the periods before during and after classes serve different functions. Before the class, presentation revolves around projecting an image of self and seeking out fellow travellers. This is where various groups exchange personal histories and form into sometimes tight and at other times fluctuating discussion groups. In class the day's topics emerge in the first part of the lecture, where some notes are taken, few students interject as the lecture proceeds, only those who appear to know what they are saying. The mid-lecture breaks are for backstage discussions where tentative cues are continuously made to see who understood what. Here, efforts to hide lack of comprehension relax, as this break remains the litmus test and sounding board for whether one's 'getting the gist of it' or not. More safe in the degree that one's naivety can be publicly displayed, questions can be posed in the second part of the lecture by the prominent question askers and others so that many of the queries of the majority can be aired. Some discussion afterwards may be about finding some reading and some private and public resolutions about what will be done at home that evening.

The breaks, the congregation around the steps, who sits where and with whom in class are all ways for the new student to be more sure of what to do when the next of relation is not with them.

Well I was pretty overwhelmed for the first couple of weeks and I think the best thing for me was to sit next to people who were new like me. I was a mid-year student intake, and so as the new people, we sat together and we sort of shared some things, we actually got together after each class and had a bit of a talk about, 'what do you think that meant?' . . . after the first couple of weeks we made friends with a few of the older students and they helped us to understand how things worked . . . they just sort'a reduced our fear a lot and it is not as frightening as we thought it was.

(Female student)

It was very very different and everything was new . . . I had to find someone whom I could maybe identify with a bit in class, I felt a lot of pressure, it looked like everybody else got it except me. But I spoke to some of the classmates, I told them, 'it looks like I am the only one who is stupid in this class', and they said, 'we are all the same'.

(Male student)
Processing, then, brings with it a lowering of the ideal of what a university is and it leads to a common feeling that 'we are all in this together', that Turner (1969) calls 'communitas'. Such common feelings are naturally based on what should and does appear to be 'common sense' views on what learning to be a teacher should be about—which again makes for dissonance between common sense and the academic point of view to which processing has been (helpfully) directing the prestudent.

The purposes of processing its reception and result—'neither here nor there', 'am I really a university student?'

Handing out of readings, urgings for students to buy guides on how to write assignments, going over study guides are the traditional forms of information sessions that experienced students adapt to quite easily. They are about what has to be done to make one's way through a subject. The newcomer, with no pre-knowledge of this game, has few clues of how to read it their way. Just as the mediators in a mental asylum attempt to place the prepatient's view of themselves within a psychiatric model, so too do the mediators within the university seek to convince new recruits to take up the logic of the 'academic point of view'. This is part of grasping how to read, and prepare for and organise in order to produce acceptable written assignments and seminar presentations. The mediators of the initiation period have all withdrawn by the end of the first week of semester. Some have re-emerged as lecturers, others as a possible reference point for possible advice and consultations. Lecturers are the ones who have the mandate to sanction commitment and exercise it through the fact that they hold the information about assessment that is passed on in classes and in other forms of interaction.

During the first week the person feels betrayed by their own self-expectation of becoming a university student and a seemingly false expectation of those in control who expect academic rather than practical tasks of being a teacher. 'What has this got to do with being a teacher?' and 'I didn't think that this would be in a teaching degree!' The result is that the academy and the mediators for it, the lecturers, are for a time negatively
contrasted with practical ideals of simplicity, clarity and common sense. This builds on what is already a state of liminality and as such increases frustration such as contained in the words of two students.

Most of the time I was trying to work out whatever the lecturers were saying. You learn to write fast, I do a lot of writing from everybody's lectures I try and jot down words that you have never ever heard before, spell them phonetically on paper and then you make a point of asking your lecturer or look it up in the dictionary and you go and practice it for a week and then you are an authority on that word. I have increased my vocabulary, there are all these big words at university.

... they [lecturers] use large words so I've got to sit there and write down all these words that they use during the lecture ... and then they just use the word in their explanation of the word so I write down all these words and when I get home I look in the dictionary and try and look up what they are and half of them I think they've made up as they go along because they're not in there y'know ...

A closer look at the four subjects shows some causes for this effect. These subjects constitute the 'foundations' of teacher education and other social science programs with introductions to sociology, communications, psychology and philosophy. Although they are meant to be the contexts through which the theories of learning and education systems can be conceptualised by lecturers, they are a puzzle for the students. A world of new terms and ideas opens up, but entry is blocked by ideas and terminology that are all but impenetrable.

To summarise this far, while it is not intended by the lecturers and other staff, the first week becomes a form of what Goffman calls 'processing'. Here experts seek to convince newcomers to an institution that they should view their condition in the jargon and concepts of the theories of their guiding disciplines. In each subject then, major theories, concepts and developments are posed as the right lens for making sense of teaching in general, and for adult and vocational education in particular. The lens of each subject is sharpened by the first assignment in which understanding is meant to be demonstrated. Showing that one can provide an understanding of education and training, and of one's
knowledge of it through use of social science concepts, becomes the grounds on which one is tested in participation in lectures, and more and more in interaction with other students. The culmination of this process is the writing and presentation of the first round of assignments. The assignments constitute what Goffman terms 'test of hazard', a set of tasks where success and failure establish publicly one's moral standing. It is through an understanding of how the first round of assignments are met in the first six weeks that we can see how the moral careers of each individual in the course are a crucial point of transition.

Tests for transition: From week one until mid-semester

While the first semester covers 14 weeks, the period from the first week until the first four assignments are submitted, graded and returned, is a distinct phase of transition. The chart in figure 1 shows the 14 weeks of the first semester and includes the assignments for each of the four subjects which, including the seminar, are the 13 tests of hazard students must pass. As shown, week four is the period when the first two assignments are due.

Figure 1: The 14 week semester and assignment due dates for the subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend

■ TA12201 Communities Cultures and Institutions
○ TA12202 Communications in Adult and Vocational Education
● TA12203 Learning in Adult and Vocational Education
◆ TA12205 Values and Ethics in Adult and Vocational Education
★ Seminar for TA12205 to be performed at a pre-arranged time during the semester

Finding a path through these subjects is difficult, given the effects of processing and the ways that academic discourse bites against common sense for the students. On this count, the notion is that most of the first
four weeks is a general test of hazard, the first batch of assignments loom suddenly as a four-pronged challenge, the answer to which leaves only one avenue open. People work at one assignment until that is done, move onto the next, and so on. The suggestion made in the opening quote for this section—that: 'The assignments should be used as focal points of your study'; and, that life can be broken up into approximately ten hours per subject per week for 14 weeks—has no logic at all. With rudimentary study and writing skills and little understanding of the subject and its specialised jargon, much of the cohort are disordered and channelled into the next test of hazard, 'the next assignment'.

For the first half of the semester I was totally lost, I didn't know what was going on or how to go about doing assignments . . . I ended up in a real mess with four assignments due and only one week to do them.

I tried to make it that when I had finished each lecture I would go to the library and do a bit on that day's work but really I suppose I sat down and tried to get the first one [assignment] done . . . I concentrated on the first one a lot more.

I didn't do any reading for the other three assignments . . . I did mostly the readings for the first one.

For these students, it is 'learning how to learn' and how to accomplish assessment items effectively and on time that is the main concern. For some students, other responsibilities or continuing in employment provide problems with fitting the time to do it all. However, as these people have had very little or no experience as a student, there is an area of hidden curriculum involved which needs to be grasped in order to function as one. For Print (1993, p.xix) the hidden curriculum is described as learnings 'not intended by curriculum developers' or 'not recognised by the school personnel'. For these students, the hidden curriculum includes such things as, knowing how to search for literature, how to read for specific purposes, what information to gather during lectures, understanding the language, how to draw concepts from this, how to arrange the concepts on paper, how to develop an argument and how to format the written assignments. Once this is grasped, then the task of what is involved in being a student becomes
clearer. On this point, much of this hidden curriculum is informally learnt on the concrete steps outside the IAE building:

*I think we get a lot of learning done out here in our coffee break, we all get out there and y'know get each other's ideas and views on different things. 'Could you understand that?' 'Am I right in thinking that what they said was this?' 'No I didn't get that idea.' 'So are you going about your assignment this way?', all that sort of thing.*

The second part of the semester: A door opens

*Actually the first four weeks were a waste of time really, I didn't know what I was doing or where I was going and what am I doing here

Till Easter we had a lot due. That is when I really learnt because they were due in that week and it was a real freaking out. I hadn't put enough time into it, I know I hadn't been. I hadn't read enough and then it hit me that this is for real, this is what you have got to do. So the second half of the first semester I was a lot more organised.*

The first four assignments constitute a door which van Gennep (1960, pp.154-159) calls a 'portal', an opening through which persons made liminal can pass to join those 'on the other side', once proof is shown of being worthy to do so. As a girl passing puberty will join others as a woman, a prepatient becomes an inpatient, and in the case at hand, a new student may pass through and across a threshold on their way to becoming a fully fledged university student, once these first assignments are passed. The person, with these initial tests of hazard as an orientation and touchstone, now takes on the project of sustaining an identity of themselves as a university student. With this as a goal, they can make demands on significant others on the basis of this student status. As methods for study improve, so too does the students' organisation and planning. With this, their home changes to accommodate study as a public and serious thing. While many of the students had bought new computers and other equipment, few had arranged adequate conditions or areas in which to study. The extent to which the university requirements begin to impose themselves in the home, and change
taken-for-granted personal space and territory of others is described by two students.

The first day I had my computer in the lounge room and I found that I had to be constantly tidying up my books and the mess was terrible . . . I have changed the bedrooms, the boys don't have their own rooms any more they're in together and the other room is the computer room, 'yes they're together whether they like it or not'.

We have an L shaped lounge and dining room and a family room which is separate from each other and so my short part of the L for the lounge and dining room is now my office and it is partitioned off with a nice cane thing and it looks good, I can look out the window and have fresh air and the fan and the heater and everything.

(Emphasis added)

As such, once the person makes it through the portal that is the threshold to student life marked by the first round of assignments, much of the energy that was dissipated in the first four to six weeks, can then be better directed to the passing of the remaining tests of hazard. Still, however, study takes up waking as well as sleeping hours, sometimes constructively and other times raising fears that they may be falling backwards, or are destined to resubmit poor work.

I wake up with words and phrases . . . I have a pen and a little pad beside the bed and I have to write it down. And sometimes when I don't write it down I am kicking myself in the morning because I remembered that I had a good phrase or something and I can't bring it from memory.

I have had lots of dreams lately about getting our marks back and whether I have actually passed or whether I have to resubmit. Yes there is one (dream) that really bothers me and I dreamt that I got the marks back and it was just no good and you know, 'what are you going to do about this? you have got to make this better' and I woke up. Really! I didn't want to come and pick it up because I was so nervous about seeing what the mark was.

For these mixture of reasons the careers of BAVT students in the university ritual can be compared with a traditional rite of passage
between one status and another. However, they do differ in that they have to seek release from the university ritual to meet outside responsibilities. Unlike Goffman's 'inmates' each of these students has to step outside the university as an institution to meet the requirements of other roles, to meet the expectations of 'normal life'. Most have a high investment in continuing responsibilities and commitments, a job, a mortgage, a family, a relationship, making money to survive. As the requirements of each impinge on the other, cuts are made between each so that a new course of life is formed; one in which the student careers become the central concern.

Summary and conclusions

A case has been made about a particular population of students in teacher education at the Mount Gravatt campus of Griffith University. Designing the study by working from a pre-set definition of 'mature age students' would have been misleading because it is not their maturity or age that defines this cohort within the university, but their mode of entry. As direct admission students, these people are exempt from the usual competitive ranking schemes through which other adults are usually offered a place. What is more, they differ from the mature-age person who, on gaining admission on the weight of previous life experiences, then becomes part of a cohort with others who have not been given this concession. All members of the BAVT are there because of a particular direct entry clause. This clause requires each prospective student to have gained certification and workplace experience in a trade or occupation that can be taught in vocational education and training institutions. It is this particular direct entry clause, struck 20 years earlier, that is the point at which the analysis of this cohort should start, not their age or factors related to it though these are important conditions. Direct entry with some advanced standing is the factor that brought TAFE into teacher education and the initial cohort into the course in 1975. It also provided a narrow port of entry that remains open due to prior events, which could only have been found by historical analysis of the entry of TAFE into preparation of technical teachers and their push for entry into teacher education in Queensland. This analysis of the BAVT course within teacher education has provided the space to show that the program under study is one upon which a case can be built to generalise to the
conditions of other direct and non-direct entry adults in university courses. At the same time, it should be held in mind that the conditions differ from one period to another. There is a requirement that some historical dimension be provided to show variation across time. This dimension is seldom evident in the literature. Nor is there evidence of an examination of the institutional processes by which adults become students. The significance of the processes is now discussed.

A ritual process

In the foreword to his 1908 book on The rites of passage, van Gennep proposed a theory of why rites and ceremonies of transition are performed in a specific order. He further invited readers to check the adequacy of his conceptual scheme by applying it to data in their own realm of study. Two influential applications are those by Goffman (1961) and Turner (1969) whose own concepts have guided the analysis of the careers of students and supplied reasons for arguing why the first semester can and should be conceived as a complete ritual in its own right. The case at Mt Gravatt Campus is one that fits well into such models. Phases of a rite of passage include a separation from a previous state (a job, a role), a period of transition where the person stands, first, at the threshold of study (the period before starting and the first week of university), and, second, becomes liminal, neither what they were before nor what they seek to become (student and then teacher). The rite of passage concludes when, and if, all pieces of assessment are completed, official grades are recorded and the student can progress to the second semester of study.

The ritual process is shown in figure 2, where the various phases are highlighted. Attention here is given to week six which constitutes a threshold through which those successful with their assignments will pass. For the first part of the semester, people are liminal, 'part of the way—but to where?' The completed assignments at the end of week six take the neophyte across the threshold. They move through a door where more purpose can be attached to study and being in class and more of a claim to rights as a student on the outside world. Some of the significance of the change in the sense of self can be explained in terms
of the ritual and the person's reasons for starting university. The person entering university usually does so to 'go up' in the world. The liminal phase of the ritual process of the first half of semester, in contrast, requires the person to go down in status. As Turner (1969, pp.166-172) explains, 'the liminality of those going up usually involves a putting down or humbling of the novice as its principle cultural constituent'. That such a thing occurs can be found mainly from in-depth interviews and not from observation from classes where interaction is free and open. From the following example it can be proposed that status reversal may be a factor in the socialisation of adults to study.

...essentially I'm from a sales background. In selling you do the talking, lessons are listening ... I've found in this one I've got to do more of the listening and less of the talking. Before I was the expert in all of the things I did and the person I spoke to was the novice. Well this is all reversed and I found it very different to be on the other end of the stick and I've learnt a few lessons about myself in that period (the first few weeks) ...

*What sort of lessons?*

Well I guess I was fairly dogmatic, fairly forceful, fairly abrupt ... probably inconsiderate with a lot of things I used to say to people ... it was just dealing with other people I tend to look down on them a lot, where these days I seem to take people more for what they are ...

There is, as Turner contends, a humility in the liminality of status elevation. The case of a man formerly holding a high position in sales depicts one extreme, but some form of humbling occurs whether one was a foreman, hairdresser or owner of a salon, a head chef or a single
parent. The first six weeks is a period where status is reversed. To various degrees one is more the listener than the speaker, the instructed than the instructor, the seeker than the giver of permission and the unknowing, not the all-knowing. All of this occurs in public and those who transgress can be reprimanded. A group still talking after ‘attention’ is called after group work in the classroom will receive a friendly reprimand from the lecturer and ‘looks’ from others kept waiting. The person who publicly challenges the views of the lecturer knows this is a risk of a different order to asking a polite question after the class. The same person may advance a similar opinion in later semesters and find the point generates ‘heaps of discussion’.

A humble state goes with the students in the first phase of the first semester because they are separate from their place in a former hierarchy and have no place within the new one. An emerging view of one’s self as a student, with the rights that go with this begins when the doorway of the first batch of assignments is crossed. From this point the neophyte is progressively aggregated into the student body of their course and of the university. The more a person can claim that student status holds the promise of future status elevation, the more this can be used to make bargains and act on one’s status outside of the university. It is also tied to the rights and duties of the person once they are processed and identified as being ‘in’ the institution and justified in following a student career.

The moral career

The university is the site in which all aspects of rites of transition occur, and where the moral career of new students is formed and experienced. Institutions, through their entry procedures, ways of processing newcomers and setting tests, shape behaviour and coerce people into becoming willing agents. Goffman (1961) has shown this to be the case for mental institutions, and this can also be said to be the case for families, schools, and other institutions such as universities. If the period from weeks one to six is a high-intensity phase in a rite of passage, then the student’s moral career through this phase constitutes what Bourdieu (1982, p.58) terms ‘a rite of institution’. By this, it is meant that institutional processes lay down arbitrary lines between what one was
and what one must do to have a successful career and to fit the moral order in the institution. A moral career then has to be understood from the vantage point of the institution and what it does to shape new entrants to it. This can be seen in new terminology students are faced with, in the numbers of words and pages expected to be written by each student and the rules and processes put in place to ensure that they comply. It is here again that the period from week six is important: students come to be agents, in other words, they take on the rules and requirements of the university as their own responsibility. Used in this manner, the concepts of rite of passage, moral career and rite of institution offer a starting point for the sociological study of direct entry into university for adults and the basis for generalisation to other conditions in which adults are faced with unfamiliar educational conditions.

Finally there is a tendency in the literature to treat the experiences of adult students as subjective manifestations of individuals. The contention in our study is that the rituals and student moral orders are a strong structural force in influencing and directing these experiences. Further, it has been established that direct entry students in the BAVT have to make great efforts to overcome feelings that one should not be at university in the first six weeks. The difficulty of overcoming them is most often surmounted through interaction, watching and learning from others before and during classes, and in informal breaks. It is here that a ‘next of relation’ can regularly be found to provide support in some form. It is in moves, such as those to ‘flexible’ delivery, that the impact of the rituals and the tests of hazard to be faced in the first half of a semester need to be carefully considered.

References

Print, M 1993, *Curriculum development*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW.