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Within-generation social mobility in Australia: The effect of returning to education on occupational status and earnings

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Abstract

The link between social origin and education is well established and, despite the expansion of tertiary education, researchers have found little evidence that increasing opportunities for post-school study have been distributed equally among different social strata. Unlike their counterparts in many other advanced economies, Australians have the opportunity to return to education at any time during the life course. The flexibility of the Australian education system and the preparedness of older Australians to return to education provide an opportunity to examine whether returning to education and graduating with a new qualification after the age of 25 is associated with achieving upward social mobility. Using data collected by the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey between 2001 and 2010, this article examines whether mature-age graduates enjoy increased earnings and occupational prestige and achieve within-generation social mobility.

Keywords

adult education, HILDA, social mobility

Introduction

Researchers interested in social mobility generally focus on intergenerational mobility, investigating the link between parents' educational attainment and occupational status and child's educational attainment and occupational status. Breen and Jonsson (2005) conclude that social mobility is reflected in the association between one's social origins

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and current social position and is a measure of a society's openness. In open societies, institutional settings allow young people from less-advantaged backgrounds to gain higher levels of educational attainment and move up through the social hierarchy (Pfeffer, 2008); having higher levels of education, however, does not necessarily translate into higher levels of occupational prestige or higher earnings. As Goldthorpe (1996: 494) notes, it is the level of education that one has relative to one's 'competitors in the labour market' that counts. If the proportion of the workforce with high-level educational qualifications is greater than the proportion of jobs requiring high-level qualifications, then competition between highly educated workers will lead to credential inflation and the devaluation of qualifications (Van de Werfhorst and Andersen, 2005).

The concept of within-generation mobility extends the notion of openness (Breen and Jonsson, 2005), focusing on the effects of completing additional educational qualifications on occupational prestige and earnings during the life course. In an open society, the benefits of completing higher levels of educational qualifications would not be restricted to young people undertaking their initial education, but would be extended to everyone, regardless of age and current social status. An individual would be regarded as having achieved within-generation social mobility if the completion of a new educational qualification enabled them to move up the occupational status hierarchy rather than just maintain their current social standing. This article examines changes in social status within a generation, focusing on whether returning to education and upgrading one's educational qualifications is associated with higher occupational prestige and/or higher earnings. Specifically, the research questions ask: Who gains a new educational qualification after the age of 25 years?; and Does gaining a new educational qualification after the age of 25 years facilitate within-generation social mobility?

Social mobility via education

Social mobility research tends to examine the association between social origin and graduation from university. University qualifications provide access to the professions and, therefore, high levels of occupational prestige and earnings. The link between parents' social status and child's education is well established and researchers have found that, despite the expansion of post-secondary education in advanced economies, this association remains strong (Alon, 2009; Arum et al., 2007; Becker, 2003; Becker and Hecken, 2009; Blanden and Machin, 2004; Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Breen and Jonsson, 2005; Breen et al., 2009; Davies et al., 2002; Goldthorpe, 1996, 2003; Holm and Jaeger, 2008; Jonsson and Erikson, 2007; Pfeffer, 2008; Roska, 2008; Roska and Potter, 2011; van de Werfhorst and Hofstede, 2007). For example, Breen et al. (2009) examined the effects of expansion of education on intergenerational mobility in eight European nations, finding that in regard to transitions into tertiary education, there was no change in inequality in any of the countries they examined. Blanden and Machin (2004) found evidence of increasing educational inequality in the UK between 1981 and 1999, with individuals from service class origins increasingly more likely to graduate from university than individuals from manual class origins. One aspect of the expansion of tertiary education that has received little attention is whether these new opportunities in the expanded tertiary education sector are being accessed by older cohorts.

Investment in education has both direct and indirect (opportunity) costs that individuals need to consider. Direct costs include all of the costs associated with the actual study, including tuition fees, textbooks and other resources, whereas opportunity costs are generally regarded as the alternative investments that the individual could have made (McLean and Rollwagen, 2010). For example, choosing to engage in university study limits the hours of paid work that can be undertaken and therefore reduces current income. It is also possible that investing the money required for university studies elsewhere may provide a higher return than the extra income generated by the higher level of education. There are also social costs to individuals associated with the risk of failure to complete the course in terms of loss of self-esteem and social status. For mature-age students the risks and costs involved in embarking on higher education are magnified. Their opportunity costs will be higher if they withdraw from the workforce to study full time. They are more likely to have families to support and therefore face higher economic and social costs. They also face the prospect of not receiving an adequate return on their investment before retirement age.

Researchers examining the continuing lack of intergenerational mobility within economies with expanded educational opportunities draw on a range of theories to explain why young people choose to enter, or not enter, tertiary education. Some of these theories – in particular: Rational Choice Theory (Breen and Goldthorpe 1997; Breen and Jonsson, 2005); Subjective Expected Utility Theory (Becker, 2003; Becker and Hecken, 2009); and Relative Risk Aversion Theory (Davies et al., 2002; Goldthorpe, 1996; Holm and Jaeger, 2008; Stocke, 2007) – may also shed light on why adults return to education at a later stage in their life course. Rational Choice Theory (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997) argues that although individuals are able to evaluate the costs and benefits of educational options and the probabilities of achieving particular educational outcomes as assumed by Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964), they are nonetheless constrained in their choices due to their class position. Given that the direct costs incurred in undertaking university study are the same for all students, and that the level of economic resources available to students from high socio-economic backgrounds exceeds that of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, social class continues to play a role in determining the uptake of higher education. Furthermore, students from low socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have to consider the opportunity costs of engaging in university study. Faced with the choice between investing in one's human capital via education rather than via work experience, coupled with the choice between working full time and earning a reasonable income and relying on welfare payments supplemented by casual earnings, students from low socio-economic backgrounds have more to consider when deciding whether to continue studying after completing their secondary education. On the other hand, students from high socio-economic backgrounds do not face the same financial constraints and can focus on gaining the educational qualifications required for their careers. Therefore, students from different social backgrounds have different perceptions of the costs of undertaking university education, despite the actual costs being constant (Pfeffer, 2008). For individuals who return to education later in the life course, the evaluation of costs and benefits is an even more complex matter in that returns to investments in education need to be realised in a shorter period of time; opportunity costs may be higher in terms of foregone earnings and time pressures, and there may be an increased risk of failure.

Subjective Expected Utility Theory, a derivative of Rational Choice Theory, argues that inequality in education results from differences in the assessment of the costs and benefits of investing in, and the likelihood of successful completion of, educational qualifications according to social class (Becker, 2003). The subjectively expected costs of education and the subjectively expected success probability vary according to social class, therefore those with access to higher levels of economic resources are more likely to aim for higher-level educational qualifications because they have the resources to maintain their higher levels of social status (Becker and Hecken, 2009). Becker and Hecken (2009: 240) argue that 'the motive of status maintenance has a significant impact on diversion from universities' as students from the working classes are only likely to enrol in higher education if they believe there is a high probability that they will succeed. When mature-age students consider the expected subjective utility of undertaking additional educational qualifications they also have to consider the likelihood of success. Before investing scarce resources of both time and money into gaining an additional qualification, mature-age students would need to be reasonably confident that they are capable of completing the qualification and that their investment would pay off over what remains of their working life. In other words, the older the individual and the more expensive the course, the less likely they will return to education.

Researchers using Relative Risk Aversion Theory suggest that inequalities in educational attainment persist because young people, regardless of socio-economic background, are more concerned with avoiding downward mobility than with achieving upward mobility (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Goldthorpe, 1996, 2007; Goldthorpe and Breen 2007; Holm and Jaeger 2008). Breen and Goldthorpe (1997: 283) argue that parents seek to ensure that their children 'acquire a class position at least as advantageous as that from which they originate', therefore students from low socio-economic status (SES) families have weaker incentives to pursue higher education compared to their peers from high socio-economic backgrounds because a university degree is not necessary for students from low socio-economic backgrounds to maintain their social position (Holm and Jaeger, 2008). For a young person whose parents do not hold a university qualification, the drive to maintain class position (and avoid downward mobility) would be best satisfied by securing paid employment rather than continuing in the education system. Moreover, the perceived risks of aspiring to higher education – in terms of foregone income and the prospects of academic failure – would be magnified for prospective students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Savage, 2011: 53). In contrast, for a young person from a high socio-economic background, pursuing higher education is necessary in order to maintain their social position. The need to avoid downward social mobility may inspire older individuals to return to education. During recent decades, the occupational hierarchy has altered dramatically due to technological innovations and the restructuring of labour markets. Undertaking new educational qualifications may be a necessity for individuals engaged in rapidly changing occupations and for individuals seeking employment after being retrenched or seeking to re-enter the labour force after taking time out for their families.

Returns to higher education for mature-age graduates

Much of the current research on the returns to education for mature-age students comes from the UK, where researchers examining the characteristics of mature-age students

have generally found that mature-age students differ from younger students in several ways. Mature-age students: are less likely to have a university-educated parent; are less likely to have graduated from high school; are less likely to attend prestigious institutions; are more likely to have children; are more likely to be employed and have lower completion rates (Egerton, 2001a; Purcell et al., 2007; Woodfield, 2011; Yorke, 2001). With regard to outcomes, graduates aged over 40 were less likely to be employed and more likely to be unemployed and looking for work three and a half years after graduation compared to their younger counterparts. Of those who were employed, older graduates were more likely to be working on a part-time basis (Woodley and Wilson, 2002). Egerton (2000, 2001b) found that mature-age graduates were less likely to be employed in professional or managerial occupations than younger graduates and Woodfield (2011) found that mature-age graduates who were employed, were more likely to be working for the same employer post-graduation as they were pre-graduation than younger graduates. This finding suggests that mature-age graduates were seeking to formalize their existing skills or to improve their prospects of promotion. UK researchers have also found that age at graduation had an effect of earnings. Egerton (2000, 2001a), Purcell et al. (2007) and Egerton and Parry (2001) found that although older graduates were earning more than younger graduates in their first job after graduation, after eight to ten years in the labour market, young graduates reported higher earnings than older graduates.

Australian research conducted by Chesters and Watson (2013) found that, in the first three years after graduation, age at graduation had no effect on employment status, with older graduates having similar employment outcomes to younger graduates. Furthermore, the earnings of mature-age graduates were higher than those of younger graduates in the first two years after graduation. By the third year after graduation there was no difference in earnings between the two groups, indicating that the effect of age at graduation changed over time. This study extends previous research by examining whether completing a higher-level educational qualification, either academic or vocational, after the age of 25 is associated with upward social mobility. Given the strength of the correlation between education and both occupation and labour force status, and the openness of the Australian education system, returning to education after spending some time in the labour force is a relatively common occurrence in Australia.

In Australia, education has become a life-long endeavour, with a sizeable proportion of adults undertaking tertiary education. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) shows that in 2012, 220,600 individuals aged between 45 and 64 years, 266,700 individuals aged between 35 and 44 years and 490,300 individuals aged between 25 and 34 years were undertaking post-school study in either Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions or universities (ABS, 2012). One of the main drivers of the uptake of adult education is the link between education and labour force participation. As the labour market restructured, service sector jobs replaced manual labour jobs (Watson, 2002) and educational qualifications became increasingly important as workers transitioned from the production sectors to the services sector. As in other advanced economies, educational credentials have almost become a prerequisite for entry in the labour market (Becker, 2003). Full-time permanent jobs typically require higher levels of education and/or skills, and jobs requiring low levels of education and skills are more likely to be part-time, casual jobs. For example, 56% of sales workers and 44% of labourers were employed part time whereas just 12% of managers and 13% of technicians and

trades workers were employed part time in 2010 (DEEWR, 2011). Furthermore, evidence from the ABS (2012) shows a positive correlation between level of education and employment status, with 72% of those with a postgraduate degree and 64% of those with a Bachelor's degree being employed on a full-time basis compared to just 40% of those with low levels of education.

With opportunities to undertake educational qualifications not being restricted to young people, Australia provides an opportunity to test whether, in an open society, individuals can improve their social position regardless of their social origin and initial education. This article examines the returns to adult education in terms of earnings and occupational prestige to provide evidence that within-generation social mobility via education can be achieved.

Method

To examine whether gaining a new educational qualification after the age of 25 years facilitates within-generation social mobility, I conduct analysis using wave one and wave ten of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) data collected in 2001 and 2010. In 2001, a nationally representative sample of Australian households was selected and all individuals aged 15 years or more living within the selected households were surveyed (n = 13,969) (Summerfield et al., 2011). The analytical sample is restricted to respondents aged between 25 and 54 years in 2001 and who participated in both waves (n = 3239). Those aged less than 25 years of age may have been engaged in their initial education in 2001 and those aged more than 54 years in 2001 may be retired or considering retirement from paid work in 2010.

Variables

In the initial phase of the analysis, the key outcome variable signifies the completion of a higher-level educational qualification after the age of 25 years and is coded 1 = higher level of education in 2010 than in 2001. Education and employment status are the main explanatory variables. The analysis is restricted to individuals who can achieve a higher level of education, therefore individuals with a postgraduate degree are dropped from the analytical sample (n = 2909). Consequently, the highest level of education in 2001 variable has five categories: less than Year 12; Year 12; VET Certificate; VET Diploma/Advanced Diploma; Bachelor's/Honours degree. Employment status has three categories: employed full time, employed part time and not in paid employment. The occupation variable is coded according to ANZSCO (Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations, ABS, 2006). Where possible, the previous occupation is included for individuals who were not engaged in paid employment in 2001. Sex, age and occupation in 2001 are included as controls. Age in 2001 has three categories: 25–34 years; 35–44 years; 45–54 years.

In the second phase of the analysis, the outcome variables are difference in occupational prestige between 2001 and 2010 and difference in weekly earnings between 2001 and 2010. The occupational prestige variable is derived from the AUSIE06 index of occupational prestige which ranges from zero (low status) to 100 (high status).

The scores assigned to individual occupations reflect the role of occupation in mediating the effects of educational attainment on earnings (McMillan et al., 2009). For the weekly earnings variable, I use data on the earnings from the main job and adjust the 2001 values to take account of inflation using the consumer price indexes (CPI) published by the ABS (2010). The 2001 value is multiplied by the index for 2010 and then the result is divided by the index for 2001 ([we*172.6]/134.03). The descriptive statistics of the sample are presented in Table A.1 in the Appendix.

Analytical strategy

To answer the first research question – Who gains a new educational qualification after the age of 25 years? – I conduct logistic regression analysis and present the odds-ratios. The odds ratio represents the change in the odds of completing a new qualification relative to not completing a new qualification. An increase in the odds of completing a new qualification is indicated by an odds ratio of greater than 1 whereas a decrease in the likelihood of completing a new qualification is indicated by an odds ratio of less than 1.

To answer the second research question – Does gaining a new educational qualification after the age of 25 years facilitate within-generation social mobility? – I examine differences in employment status, occupational prestige and differences in earnings between 2001 and 2010 using linear regression analysis and present the regression coefficients. Regression coefficients represent the average change in the outcome variable that can be attributed to change in each of the predictor variables, net of the effects of all of the other predictor variables.

Results

To determine the odds of completing a new higher-level educational qualification after the age of 25 years, I construct two models. The first model includes the four explanatory variables and the second model includes interaction terms between sex and education, sex and employment status and sex and age. The results are presented in Table 1. The odds-ratios for Model 1 show that those with a VET qualification were less likely to complete a new higher-level educational qualification after the age of 25 years compared to individuals who had not completed Year 12, net of the effects of sex, age and employment status. There is no effect for employment status or sex. As expected, individuals in the oldest age cohort were less likely to complete a new higher-level qualification than those aged between 25 and 34 years in 2001. When the interaction terms are included in the second model, the odds of completing a new higher-level educational qualification are lower for men holding a VET qualification than for men who had not completed Year 12, net of the effects of the other factors. Men in the older two cohorts were less likely to complete a new higher-level qualification compared to men aged between 25 and 34 years. Men who were not in paid employment in 2001 were more likely to complete a new higher-level qualification compared to men in full-time employment, net of the effects of the other factors. The interaction terms show that women aged between 45 and 54 years were more likely to complete a new qualification than men in that age cohort,

Table 1. Odds of attaining a new qualification by age, education and employment status in 2001.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Odds ratio	Standard error	Odds ratio	Standard error
Male (ref.)				
Female	1.220	0.157	1.209	0.341
Age cohort in 2001				
25–34 (ref.)				
35–44	0.803	0.101	0.665*	0.129
45–54	0.411***	0.063	0.253***	0.065
Education in 2001				
< year12 (ref.)				
Year 12	1.165	0.179	1.199	0.309
Certificate	0.352***	0.065	0.303***	0.081
Diploma/Adv. Dip.	0.324***	0.083	0.507*	0.173
Bachelor/Honours	1.099	0.168	1.155	0.278
Employment status 2001				
Employed full time (ref.)				
Employed part time	1.282	0.197	1.713	0.491
Not in paid employment	1.188	0.176	1.771*	0.441
Interactions				
Female × 35–44			1.379	0.353
Female × 45-54			2.109*	0.684
Female × Year 12			0.960	0.309
Female × Certificate			1.522	0.567
Female × Diploma/Adv. Dip.			0.387	0.205
Female × Bachelor/Honours			0.906	0.284
Female × Employed part time			0.614	0.209
Female × Not in paid employment			0.539*	0.167
Constant	0.217***	0.032	0.229***	0.046
Pseudo R2	0.0589		0.0656	
n	2909		2909	

*$p<0.05$; **$p< 0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.

and women who were not in paid employment in 2001 were less likely than men who were not in paid employment to complete a new higher-level educational qualification.

Given the positive association between level of education and employment status (ABS, 2012), I conducted logistic regression analysis to determine whether gaining a higher-level educational qualification after the age of 25 years was associated with moving into full-time employment. The analysis is restricted to individuals who were not engaged in full-time employment in 2001 ($n = 1261$) and the results of the models are presented in Table 2. The second model includes interaction terms between sex and gaining a new higher-level educational qualification and sex and age. As shown in Model 1,

Table 2. Odds of being employed full time in 2010 if not employed full time in 2001.

	Model 1		**Model 2**	
	Odds ratio	Standard error	Odds ratio	Standard error
New qual.	1.962***	0.322	0.312***	0.091
Sex				
Male (ref.)				
Female	0.495***	0.072	1.810	0.634
Age cohort in 2001				
25–34 (ref.)				
35–44	0.896	0.133	0.658	0.207
45–54	0.399***	0.069	0.202***	0.068
Interactions				
Female × New qual.			1.098	0.436
Female × 35–44			1.463	0.523
Female × 45–54			2.625*	1.028
Constant	0.815	0.134	1.180	0.308
Pseudo R2	0.0487		0.0529	
n	1261		1261	

*$p<0.05$; **$p< 0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.

individuals who completed a new higher-level qualification were twice as likely to move into full-time employment compared to individuals who did not complete a new higher-level qualification, net of the effects of sex and age. Women were less likely to move into full-time employment, net of the effects of the other factors. In Model 2, the interaction term for females aged between 45 and 54 years of 2.6 indicates that, net of the effects of the other factors, it is this group that benefits the most, in terms of employment status, from completing a new higher-level educational qualification.

To determine whether gaining a new higher-level qualification is associated with increased occupational prestige between 2001 and 2010, I drop individuals who were not in the labour force in 2010 ($n = 696$) before conducting linear regression analysis. Two models were constructed and the results are presented in Table 3. The coefficients produced by the first model show that there is a strong positive association between gaining a Bachelor's degree and occupational prestige, net of the effects of sex and age cohort. The completion of a Bachelor's degree is associated with an average increase in occupational prestige of 20 points and the completion of a postgraduate degree is associated with an average increase in occupational status of 7 points. In the second model, I include interaction terms for sex and new qualification and sex and age. Again, the completion of a Bachelor's degree or postgraduate degree has a positive effect on occupational status. The coefficients for the interaction terms are not statistically significant, indicating that this association holds for both men and women. The negative coefficient for those aged between 45 and 54 years indicates that older individuals do not gain as much in terms of occupational prestige as younger graduates.

To examine the association between gaining a new qualification and changes in weekly earnings between 2001 and 2010, I conduct linear regression analysis and present

Table 3. Odds of having higher occupational status with new qualification if employed in 2010.

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Odds ratio	Standard error	Odds ratio	Standard error
Male (ref.)				
Female	0.123	0.763	–1.343	1.375
New qualification				
No new qualification (ref.)				
Yr12/cert./dip.	0.958	1.369	–0.127	2.168
Bachelor's degree/Hons	19.688***	2.329	17.747***	3.457
Postgrad.	7.377***	2.041	7.924**	3.056
Age cohort in 2001				
25–34 (ref.)				
35–44	–0.566	0.880	–1.083	1.194
45–54	–1.689	0.993	–3.059*	1.337
Interactions				
Female × Yr12/cert./dip.			1.775	2.799
Female × Bachelor's degree/Hons			3.718	4.683
Female × Postgrad.			–0.967	4.109
Female × 35–44			1.153	1.771
Female × 45–54			3.064	2.001
Constant	1.337	0.756	1.999*	0.923
Pseudo R2	0.0361		0.0353	
n	2213		2213	

*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.

the results of the two models in Table 4. Recall that weekly earnings in 2001 have been adjusted to 2010 values. The results presented for Model 1 show that completion of a postgraduate qualification was associated with an increase in weekly earnings of $524 per week, net of the effects of sex, age and employment status in 2010. Sex has a positive effect, whereas age and being employed on a part-time basis have a negative effect on the difference in earnings. In the second model, I add in the interaction terms for sex and type of qualification, sex and age and sex and employment status finding that the interaction term for sex and postgraduate degree is negative and statistically significant indicating that women who complete a postgraduate degree to not enjoy the same increase in earnings as men.

Taken together, these results indicate that although the completion of a Bachelor's degree is associated with an increase in occupational prestige, the completion of a postgraduate qualification is required for an increase in earnings. Furthermore, the effects differ somewhat for men and women in that the completion of a postgraduate-level qualification is associated with a larger increase in weekly earnings for men than for women.

Table 4. Linear regression predicting increase in weekly earnings with new qualification if employed in 2010.

	Model 1		**Model 2**	
	Coeff.	Standard error	Coeff.	Standard error
Male (ref.)				
Female	134.17***	35.93	53.03	64.54
New qualification				
No new qualification (ref.)				
Yr12/cert./dip.	46.62	58.99	–11.38	93.11
Bachelor's degree/Hons	171.48	100.42	259.20	148.46
Postgrad.	524.26***	88.02	795.13***	131.22
Age cohort in 2001				
25–34 (ref.)				
35–44	–35.51	37.89	–66.69	51.27
45–54	–210.31***	42.81	–228.69***	58.07
Employment status 2010				
Full time (ref.)				
Part time	–372.36***	39.56	–509.55***	68.43
Interactions				
Female Yr12/cert./dip.			84.91	120.20
Female Bachelor's degree/Hons			–145.49	201.35
Female postgrad.			–482.97**	176.67
Female 35–44			75.38	76.06
Female 45–54			66.90	86.41
Female part time			202.80*	83.98
Constant	314.16***	32.87	341.58***	40.01
Adjusted R2	0.0691		0.0736	
n	2213		2213	

*$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$.

Discussion

Social mobility research generally examines the links between social origin and educational attainment, the persistence of inequality in educational attainment and its consequential effect on preventing intergenerational social mobility. This article set out to explore the possibility of achieving within-generation mobility. Within-generation mobility occurs when individuals return to education after spending some time in the labour force, complete a new educational qualification and move into a more prestigious occupation and/or achieve higher earnings. Australia provides an opportunity to examine the possibility of within-generation mobility because the expansion of tertiary education and the restructuring of the labour market have encouraged a sizeable proportion of the workforce to return to education and upgrade their qualifications.

The results presented here suggest that returning to education and completing a new university-level qualification, particularly an academic qualification, after the age of 25 years is associated with increased occupational prestige and increased earnings. With the Australian labour market transitioning, and jobs in production sectors declining and jobs in service sectors increasing, jobs growth has been concentrated in highly skilled occupations. Therefore, low-skilled men and women seeking to retain full-time employment, and women seeking to return to the labour market are encouraged to return to education and complete higher-level educational qualifications. Of the 520 men who were not employed on a full-time basis in 2001, 9% gained a higher-level qualification by 2010 and of the 1372 women who were not in full-time employment in 2001, 11% gained a higher-level qualification by 2010. These men and women were far more likely to be employed on a full-time basis in 2010 than their counterparts who did not upgrade their level of education.

The results also show that for both men and women, the pathway into higher status occupations was via the completion of a university qualification. On average, women who completed a Bachelor's degree after the age of 25 increased their occupational status by 23 points on the AUSEI-06 occupational prestige scale and men who completed a Bachelor's degree after the age of 25 increased their occupational prestige by 16 points on the AUSEI-06 occupational prestige scale. These large increases in occupational prestige provide evidence that returning to education and completing a university degree after the age of 25 years can facilitate within-generation mobility. On the other indicator of social mobility, earnings, only the completion of a postgraduate qualification was associated with an increase in earnings.

Of the various theories employed by social mobility researchers, Subjective Expected Utility (SEU) theory provides the best explanation of the results presented here. Individuals with high levels of education in 2001 were more likely to invest in a new qualification than those with the lowest level of education. Although individuals with low levels of education were less likely to be employed (ABS, 2012), they were also less likely to complete additional educational qualifications than their more highly educated counterparts. As argued by SEU, individuals assess the costs and benefits of undertaking educational qualifications and factor in the likelihood of successfully completing the qualification. Those with lower levels of education would be more likely to assume that they would have little chance of successfully completing a higher-level qualification, therefore they are less likely to perceive any investment in additional educational qualifications as paying off. Of the 354 men with a Bachelor's degree, 11% gained a postgraduate qualification whereas 3% of the 747 men with a VET certificate level qualification gained a higher-level qualification. Of the 340 women with a Bachelor's degree, 15% gained a postgraduate qualification whereas 7% of the 302 women with a VET certificate level qualification gained a higher-level qualification.

Conclusion

Although adults return to education for a variety of reasons, this article focused on the instrumental value of returning to education to examine whether the flexibility of the Australian education system facilitates within-generation social mobility. The concept of

within-generation mobility provides a different avenue for the examination of the relationship between social origin and educational attainment. Having the opportunity to return to education at any time during the life course allows Australians a second chance of overcoming disadvantage related to family background. Apart from the social benefits associated with higher levels of education, the completion of new qualifications after the age of 25 years is associated with acquiring jobs with higher levels of occupational status and earnings.

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Appendix

Table A.1. Percentages of those who completed a new qualification by selected characteristics.

Variable in 2001	Males = 1464	Females = 1445
	% with new qual.	% with new qual.
Overall	11	16
Education		
<Year12	13	18
Year 12	18	22
Certificate	5	9
Diploma /Adv. diploma	7	4
Bachelor Degree/Hons	16	20
Age cohort		
25–34	16	19
35–44	11	17
45–54	5	11
Employment status		
Employed full time	10	16
Employed part time	17	17
Not in paid employment	13	16
Occupation		
Managers	12	19
Professionals	15	17
Technicians/Trades	6	11
Community/Personal Service	13	21
Clerical/Administrative	16	13
Sales Workers	10	20
Machinery Operators/Drivers	9	8
Labourers	10	17
No job	17	13