First-in-Family Students, University Experience and Family Life

Motivations, Transitions and Participation

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Second Edition

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This book is dedicated to all the students and their family members who so generously gave their time to be involved in this project. We are grateful for their candor and their willingness to share their stories with us.

Preface

This second edition of *First-in-Family Students, University Experience and Family Life: Motivations, Transitions and Participation* brings further research and analysis to the broad field of first-in-family (FiF) student experience. In the six years since the first edition, the university sector has continued to attract students from a diversity of backgrounds, but access and participation remain differentiated across student cohorts. This disparity in academic outcomes is not restricted to certain settings. Globally, variations in the rates of access to education and progression are pronounced across student cohorts (OECD, 2022). For those learners who are the first in their family or community to come to university, these disparities are particularly noted, with distinctions in educational outcomes recorded internationally (Lehmann, 2009; Morales, 2012; Nuffield Foundation, 2020; Patfield et al., 2021).

Statistically, this group is less likely to attend more elite or prestigious universities (Nuffield Foundation, 2020) and after enrolment, has differentiated educational outcomes when compared to their second- or third-generation peers (Adamecz-Völgyi et al., 2019; Patfield et al., 2021). Within both the United Kingdom (UK) and United States (US), the number of FiF students who leave university prematurely is significantly higher when compared to those who have a generational biography of university attendance (Henderson et al., 2020; Toutkoushian et al., 2019). Recent quantitative research in this field has continued to

evidence how 'having parents with university degrees is a fundamental driver of an individual's HE participation and graduation' (Adamecz-Völgyi et al., 2019, p. 5). Despite such statistical indicators for this student population, the ways in which higher education (HE) is played out within the family and community of FiF students remains somewhat ill-defined. This book is designed to provide insights into this field, drawing upon sustained studies into the university experiences of FiF students that have focused on various key stages of undergraduate studies.

> A first-in-family student is defined as no-one in the immediate family of origin, including siblings or parents, having previously attended a higher education institution or having completed a university degree.

This book explores both the experiences of FiF students and those of their family members and 'significant' others. We know that parental educational background has substantial impact on the educational levels of family and dependents (Gorard et al., 1998; Harrell & Forney, 2003; Thayer, 2000; Tramonte & Willms, 2009; Wilks & Wilson, 2012). However, what is unclear is how attending a university as a first-in-family student not only impacts upon the individual, but also family and community. How does transitioning into this environment and enacting a student role or building a student identity translate into the private domain of the household? With the continuing requirements for HE institutions to increase the participation of students from a diversity of backgrounds and educational biographies, this is a gap in understanding that needs to be addressed. Exploring how this movement into university is translated at an individual, familial and community level can provide insights into how best to support this student cohort and may also therefore affect attrition rates. Such understanding can also better support and facilitate intergenerational educational mobility.

To achieve these objectives, it is first necessary to define exactly what is meant by this term 'First-in-Family'. First-in-family or first-generation status has been variously described, but most definitions refer to parental education levels. Within the US, the dependents of those with a college level education are regarded as being FiF whereas definitions in other

countries assume no post compulsory schooling has occurred. Equally, blended family arrangements also mean that it is difficult to define this term relationally. In this book, FiF has been defined as being the first out of the immediate family, comprising siblings, parents, main caregivers, life partners and children, to attend university.

A strength of this publication is the vast empirical evidence base that is drawn upon that relates to sustained and diverse research studies conducted across Australia. Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 of this publication draw upon two separate but complementary studies; both were qualitative in nature and encouraged students to narrate their stories of coming to university. In these studies, data collection involved in-depth interviewing as well as open-ended survey questions. A number of student cohorts were targeted in recognition of the diversity of the student population, including: (1) enabling programme or pre-entry level students; (2) undergraduate students in their first year of university, studying primarily in traditional face-to-face, on-campus mode; and (3) undergraduate students in the first year of university studying wholly online. All the participants identified as FiF and incorporated great diversity in terms of age, gender, social background and geographical context. In one study (O'Shea, et al., 2014), the family members and significant others were also included as participants in order to provide a holistic understanding of this movement into the HE environment. Including both family members and students as participants also facilitates a unique perspective on this field.

Chapter 10 draws upon a study conducted between 2017 and 2021, which was funded by the Australian Research Council (DP 170100705). This study focused on those FiF students who had successfully persisted through university with all the participants being at the final stages of their undergraduate degrees.

In summary, this book comprehensively considers a variety of stages within the university student life cycle that encompass pre-entry, access, transition and progression, with narrative data embedded in actual student experience.

In total, this book draws upon 653 surveys and 224 interviews gathered from four individual but complementary research projects. The first two projects focused on FiF students and family and were conducted in

Table 0.1 Details of all research participants

Participant type and country	Year(s) of data collection	Surveys	Interviews
FiF students (Australia)	2013–2014	173	124
Family members (Australia)	2013–2014	40	4
FiF latter stage students (Australia)	2017	306	69
FiF latter stage students (Ireland)	2018	21	7
FiF latter stage students (UK)	2018	21	4
FiF latter stage students (Austria)	2018	92	16
Totals		**653**	**224**

Australia (2013–2014). These datasets included 173 surveys and 124 interviews with FiF students who were at all stages of university study, as well as 40 surveys and four interviews with family members (including siblings, children, partners, parents, grandparents). The third project focused on FiF students in the latter year(s) of an undergraduate degree and was predominantly conducted in Australia (2017) and later included FiF participants in Ireland, the UK and Austria (2018). This dataset is composed of 440 surveys and 96 interviews. The distribution of the data collected across all projects is shown in Table 0.1

In each project, data was imported into NVivo, line-by-line analysis was employed to identify initial codes and emerging thematic categories, and a constant comparative method of analysis (Charmaz, 2006) was utilised in order to explore in depth themes and concepts that emerged from data. The foundational themes from the FiF data across the studies can be summarised as follows:

- A strong sense of feeling out of place within the university environment for first-in-family students, which may translate into a sense of being a 'fraud' or 'imposter'.
- A perceived lack of confidence leading to questions about personal skills/abilities meaning that this cohort often requires validation or evidence of belonging much earlier in their studies. Often assessment grades provide the necessary assurance around this choice to come to HE.

- Older students in particular (but not solely) described a deep level of concern over how their decision to return to university may impact on others, particularly financially.
- There was a range of myths that existed in relation to university. Often these were derived from school or Vocational Education and Training (VET) settings. They largely served to increase the anxiety levels of students and were generally based on stereotypical and dated perceptions of the university environment.
- Regardless of age, participants indicated the need for time to 'adjust their mindset' to university participation. This included time to familiarise themselves with the expectations, the language and the institutional structures—all of which were largely foreign to this cohort.
- There was an overall perception of being lucky/expressing gratitude for being allowed to attend university.
- Often university was placed in the discourse of betterment and opportunity, not only for the student but also their families and community. This perception influenced how students engaged in this environment and also managed the highly complex nature of their lives.
- The ways in which persisting at university studies was both enacted and understood by older FiF learners, particularly how understandings of determination and grit need to be challenged and reframed.

The book is divided into two parts: the first part is devoted to situating the concept of FiF learners paying particular attention to the ways in which this cohort is defined collectively within the literature. The second part of the book explores both specific cohorts of FiF learners such as online learners, older learners and those students with children as well as certain stages of academic participation including those in enabling programmes, those progressing through undergraduate studies and near-graduating students. This section particularly draws upon the overarching themes of *motivations*, *transitions* and *participation* in the analysis of FiF students' stories. The overarching objective is to explore students in various contexts. In doing so the book extends our understanding beyond just the individual learner and instead recognises the situatedness of our diverse student populations in relation to biography, family, other relationships and employment.

   The book is written so that readers can read from beginning to end or 'dip into' various chapters as required. Each chapter is written as a discrete unit and authored by one of the writing team with specific expertise in the field of analysis. The writing team includes Professor Sarah O'Shea who led the research featured in the book and who has extensive experience researching HE equity and inclusion; A/Professor Jo May who has over twenty years in the enabling and undergraduate education field, Conjoint A/Professor Cathy Stone who has led university-wide student support initiatives with a specific focus on online education, and Dr Janine Delahunty whose research interests include inclusive pedagogies and how the learning experience in HE can be enhanced, particularly for students from diverse backgrounds. All team members are dedicated to, and passionate about, enhancing equity across the HE sector and facilitating student success regardless of learners' backgrounds or discipline foci.

Additional Note

Since this book was first published in 2017, a world historical event in the form of a global pandemic has ravaged populations and disrupted all systems of governance and service provision in unprecedented ways. Education at all levels globally has likewise suffered profound disruptions and re-orientations. The full implications of the changes wrought by the COVID 19 pandemic for HE have yet to emerge clearly although some discussion has occurred in the Australian context (Lodge et al., 2022; O'Shea et al., 2021). The research upon which this book is based comes from a time before the pandemic, nevertheless we believe it has important messages not only for the HE sector but also future First-in-Family students and their families which, if anything, have become magnified in importance due to these conditions. We offer this revised edition in that spirit and hope.

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Further, this book is based on the cumulative understandings arising from the nearly a decade of concentrated research on the experiences of first-in-family students in HE. A number of article-length studies and other publications by the team members, either singly or together in various combinations, have preceded this book (please see the List of References for more detail). Readers familiar with these publications may recognise some unavoidable repetition, especially of interview data

harnessed for previous and different analytic purposes. In particular, we would like to acknowledge material drawn from the following article, reproduced with the permission of the journal:

As we argue in this book, the division between public and private lives is a mythical construct and academic endeavour does not exist separate from our personal lives but is embedded in kinship and friendship networks. Finally, therefore we gratefully acknowledge our family, friends and colleagues for their unfailing support and confidence in us. Their nurture and forbearance made this work possible.

Contents

List of Abbreviations

ABS   Australian Bureau of Statistics
ARC   Australian Research Council
ATO   Australian Tax Office
CCW   Community Cultural Wealth
FGS   First-Generation Students
FiF   First in Family
HE   Higher Education
HECS   Higher Education Contribution Scheme
HEFCE   Higher Education Funding Council for England
OECD   Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SES   Socio-economic status
TAFE   Technical and Further Education
UK   United Kingdom
US   United States
VET   Vocational Education and Training

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Part I

Surveying the First-in-Family Student Terrain

1

Setting the Scene

Introduction

Despite the best efforts of Higher Education (HE) providers worldwide, first-in-family (FiF) students engaged in university study continue to experience significant and often unique challenges. Indeed, to be first in one's family to attend university is, for most, akin to travelling in uncharted waters. By harnessing their stories, the following chapters aim to provide a more nuanced understanding of how attending university impacts on FiF learners. Moreover, the analysis is underpinned by the further understanding that these FiF students do not travel alone; their families and significant others are intimately impacted by their decision to embrace HE studies, and this in turn deeply influences the experience of the students themselves. This book, in a multifaceted way, explores this largely unmapped realm of the FiF student and student-family experience.

Data from interviews and online surveys with FiF students and their families contributed to our understanding of how participating in HE impacts upon both students *and* family. This first chapter will situate this research within broader political and historical contexts including an

overview of global movements in the HE sector before outlining how the various research projects that underpin this book were undertaken. This description will include the ontological and epistemological understandings that inform the research for this book, the participants who were involved as well as approaches to data collection, analysis and theorisation. It concludes by providing an overview of the book's structure and chapter content. Recognising the intersectionality of learners, this book takes as its starting point that students are complex entities. Hence, as authors we have endeavoured to unpack this complexity by situating the FiF cohort firmly within their particular biographical and cultural contexts.

Background

In order to understand the nature of the FiF student experience it is necessary to explore broader HE environments with particular reference to the notion of widening participation initiatives. In understanding these notions, this book recognises the stratification inherent in educational systems, where those from more affluent or advantaged backgrounds are generally accessing and succeeding within the HE sector at greater rates compared with those defined by disadvantage. When we explore the statistics on the educational achievement, this disparity becomes clear.

Despite considerable numbers of students attending HE, university completion rates for certain cohorts remain low, with significant numbers considering departure. Within the US, the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) reports that FiF students are almost twice as likely to leave university or college within three years (33%) compared to non-FiF cohorts (14%) (Forrest-Cataldi et al., 2018). FiF students are also reported to take longer to achieve their degree, with only 48% of this population preparing to graduate three years after enrolment compared to approximately 66% of learners with a parent (or parents) who had previously achieved a university degree (Forrest-Cataldi et al., 2018). This is an ongoing trend. Previous research (Greenwald, 2012) reported that nearly 90% of FiF students do not obtain a degree within the first six years of university education. In Australia, similar differences in

educational outcomes are noted. For example, an Australian study indicated that 26% of FiF students considered leaving university in the first year and this figure increased to 34% for later year students (Coates & Ransom, 2011). Likewise, the opportunity to attend university is also differentiated, as people with university-educated parents are almost twice as likely to attend university compared to their FiF counterparts (OECD, 2012). Importantly, variances in educational outcomes for different sections of Australian society are not limited to those who are the first in their families to attend university. The most recent Department of Education (2022) data reports that while national 6-year completion rates for the 2015 undergraduate cohort currently sit at just over 63%, this is a significantly higher rate than that experienced by Indigenous students (41.5%) or those from low socio-economic status (low SES) backgrounds (55.7%) (Department of Education, 2022).

There are many reasons for such disparity in relation to who participates in, and successfully completes, university. For students who are older, poorer or simply not from white middle-class backgrounds, there are many 'risks' associated with HE participation. These can include the difficulties of managing various competing demands (Cox & Ebbers, 2010; Stone, 2008; Stone & O'Shea, 2021), emotional and financial challenges (O'Shea, 2022; Rauscher & Elliott III, 2014) as well as risks associated with managing identity formation (O'Shea, 2021; Johnston & Merrill, 2009). In particular, those learners from financially disadvantaged backgrounds experience multiple educational disadvantages that impact both upon choices around and experiences of attending university (Raciti, 2018). This student cohort may be particularly averse to taking on student debt (Raciti, 2018; Rauscher & Elliott III, 2014) or their university choice may be limited by geographical proximity (O'Shea et al., 2019). Bowen et al. (2009) succinctly sum up the issues and obstacles encountered by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds stating that this group is expected to draw upon their internal abilities and determination to succeed within HE but are arguably disadvantaged by systems that 'favor the wealthy in the first place' (p. 288).

Once students are enrolled, the educational levels of parents also strongly correlate with degree completion. This is demonstrated in Australia, with higher rates of attrition recorded for students whose

parents have not completed high school (19%) compared with those who had a parent with a diploma qualification or higher (12%) (McMillan, 2005). In both the United Kingdom (UK) and Australia, this limited educational mobility has led researchers to conclude that the socio-economic status of parents is often replicated across generations (Tomaszewski et al., 2022; Nuffield Foundation, 2020).

To understand the range of issues and obstacles FiF students may encounter during their transition into, and engagement with, university, it is necessary to reflect upon broader political, ideological and historical influences. To do this, this chapter will consider some of these influences in the context of widening participation within the HE sector.

Higher Education and Widening Participation

The term 'widening participation' is commonly used to refer to the expansion of access to HE witnessed across many developed countries. This expansion is not a new phenomenon but has been noted as a significant international educational trend as early as 2012 (OECD, 2012). Within the UK, the term was first noted in the Further Education Funding Council report entitled *Learning Works: Widening Participation in Further Education*, also known as the Kennedy Report (1997). The notion of 'widening participation' developed into a key policy area within the UK (David, 2012), largely as a result of New Labour's goal of 50% participation of all 18–30-year-olds in HE by 2010 (Whitty et al., 2015).

Within Australia, increasing university entry has been a significant component of educational equity and access (Gale & Parker, 2013). The moves to grow opportunities for university participation, started in earnest after the Second World War (May & Bunn, 2015) and received a boost with the eradication of university fees in 1973. The Dawkins reforms followed in the 1980s and 1990s, which initiated the introduction of student loans (HECS) that were both income contingent and interest free. In 2008, the Australian Government of that time commissioned a review of the HE sector led by Denise Bradley. A discussion paper was released in June 2008, which has popularly become known as the Bradley Review (Bradley et al., 2008). The key suggestions from this

review related to increasing the numbers of graduates across university student populations and also, to improving access for students from low SES backgrounds. Based on this review, two key participation targets were established including 40% of all 25–34-year-olds having a bachelor-level qualification or above by 2025 and increasing the numbers of students from low SES backgrounds attending university to 20% by 2020. Equity funding and regular reporting from all public HE providers in Australia were introduced to assist in achieving these targets. The success of the overall participation target is best indicated by the ongoing increases in the share of the population who hold a university degree. This figure has grown from 23% in 2010 to over 50% in 2022 (Statista, 2022). However, this growth in overall numbers is not matched by equity group participation, with only two states (South Australia and Tasmania) reaching the goal of 20% participation of low SES students by 2020 (Koshy, 2020). We know that getting students to 'step into' the university is only the beginning of this journey; however, the retention and success of *all* learners is also somewhat elusive.

Therein lies a criticism of recent efforts to widen participation, as the focus largely remains on getting students to access university with far less resourcing directed to ensure learners succeed or engage in this learning environment. Walker (2008) recognises that widening participation initiatives particularly target those students who are first in their families to come to university but questions how this discourse is situated within an 'economic purposes' rhetoric (p. 267). An observation that is echoed by Stevenson et al. (2010) who describe widening participation as 'contradictory and unstable' (p. 105) due to this uneasy amalgamation of economic and equity imperatives. In short, increasing student numbers is seen to have very clear economic dividends but when this is couched in terms of social justice and equality, then a dichotomy arises.

The Neoliberal University and Student Participation

Within the context of neoliberalism, widening participation has emerged as a means to 'open up' universities in order to create an HE landscape that is available to all sections of society. However, Grant (1997) argues that universities present

a particular construction of studenthood which for some students is almost impossible to become […] it is often easiest for the young, white, middle-class male to be constituted as the good student because the characteristics of this position sit most snugly with his other subject positions. (pp. 102–105).

The idea of what a 'student' comprises, is largely constructed; in the UK context there has been a move from the 'student' to the 'independent learner', the latter defined in terms of being active participants in their learning, or consumers who are serviced by educational products (Danvers & Hinton Smith, 2021). However, such conceptions are largely masculinist in nature, positioning individuals as solely accountable for personal '"choices" and future' (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003, p. 599). This type of rhetoric has deeply personal repercussions for individual students, who are often expected to exude independence early in their studies and proceed consistently and efficiently through their degree programme (Lumb & Bunn, 2021). Expectations that negatively impact on university experiences, particularly for those learners who are deemed to be outside the 'norm', who have perhaps not followed the expected educational trajectory to university or who may have limited familial biography related to the university environment (Brooks & O'Shea, 2021).

Despite this 'vision of limitless potential', which is based upon an assumption that individuals simply need to take up the available educational opportunities, the ideal of the 'normal' student is still apparent juxtaposed as it is against those deemed to be 'non-traditional', who continue to be pathologised and 'othered' within prevalent discourse (Calver & Michael-Fox, 2021; Patfield et al., 2021; Sykes, 2021). Government discourse presents access to university as offering the possibility of greater future financial security and occupational gains; however, this discourse has certain risks associated with it. Quinn (2005) suggests that university entry is now positioned as a 'right of citizenship', which further serves to exclude those who exist outside the university environment or who do not take up this opportunity.

The dominant ideologies around the concept of independent learner are clearly not neutral but instead are both gendered and culturally biased. This positionality is eloquently argued by Leathwood (2006) who points out how this construct remains firmly rooted within 'white', 'western' and

'middle class' discourses (p. 613). This ideal also does not consider how individuals arrive at university with existing biographies, which may not have included preparation for tertiary studies. This identity position is fraught with difficulty for many students within the university domain, including older learners, women, and those whose culture, ethnicity and personal affect do not comply with such expectations.

As Leathwood (2006) argues, the discourses surrounding independence remove learning from the 'embodied' and 'passionate' realms instead engendering a sense of detachment and isolation (p. 629). Read et al. (2003) also point to the almost 'mythic' qualities of the independent learner, suggesting that these reflect the current economic and material requirements of HE. This ideal student proceeds efficiently through a degree programme and characterises Kirkup's (1996) 'turbo student' who finalises their studies in the shortest time with little impact on resources and staff. However, within this diverse HE environment, with students from a range of backgrounds and life stages being encouraged, indeed lured, into the HE environment, this ideal of the independent learner is even further from reality.

Widening Participation and the Individual Learner

To understand the HE participation agenda it is necessary to explore the ramifications of this from the perspective of actual learners. The student population contains those from various walks of life and each individual encounters particular issues and barriers during their learning journey. Moreover, the concept of 'risk' is useful when considering the experiences of various cohorts. Over two decades ago Reay (1998) identified how, for working class women, movements into the HE environment can be construed as 'risky' undertakings where the 'loss could outweigh the gains' (p. 14). This idea of risk or loss for older female returners is similarly echoed by Rendon (1998) and continues to feature as a facet of contemporary older female university experience (O'Shea, 2022; Stone & O'Shea, 2021). However, it is not only older women who may encounter this risk, instead this term is replete in the literature for students from disadvantaged backgrounds and their attendance at university (Archer,

2007; Brine & Waller, 2004; Johnston & Merrill, 2009, Raciti, 2018). This 'risky business' (Reay, 2003) of HE participation is particularly noted in relation to financial concerns as well as the possibility of rupture with previous social networks and also, risks associated with identity formation (O'Shea, 2015). The following sections highlight some of these key areas according to research in this field.

Financial Risk

Undertaking university studies is an expensive business, often commenced on the promise of future financial reward (Cassells et al., 2012). However, for those students who are from financially poorer backgrounds, both learner biography and available resources may multiply this risk. For example, it has been noted that amongst financially disadvantaged students there is often a generational aversion to taking on requisite student debt (Rauscher & Elliott III, 2014). This aversion not only limits the opportunity to attend university but also, importantly, impacts on the choices of these learners and the types of learning experiences they encounter (Montacute, 2018; Terenzini et al., 2001).

Poorer students may choose universities that are both closer to their family homes (to save on costs) and also, opt for degrees that maximise vocational outcomes (Abrahams, 2017; Reay et al., 2001). Yet, there are no guarantees that university will lead to a more secure economic future (Rauscher & Elliott III, 2014). Edel (2012–2013) argues that students need to be better placed to understand the 'opportunity costs' associated with pursuing tertiary studies, suggesting that this understanding needs to include recognition of alternative pathways to careers (p. 1568). Certainly, student debt is at an all-time high. For example, in Australia, the current student fee debt exceeds 74 billion dollars, with the majority of debtors owing between $20,000 and $30,000 (ATO, 2022). This debt does not include the incidental costs of attending university such as the costs of childcare, books, food, travel and accommodation. For many students, the financial investment required as study progresses may prove to be steep, so it is not surprising that thoughts of departure may follow. Yet, despite spiralling costs, both the UK and Australia are tightening up

on the loan monies available to students, with Australia recently intro-ducing legislation that links subject failure rates to loan eligibility (Department of Education, 2020).

Many students are left with significant debt that may take many years to pay back with no absolute guarantee of future employment. Within Australia, while most students defer their university debt through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), 2021 Australian Tax Office (ATO) data estimates that it takes an average of 9.5 years to repay the university debt once students reach the salary threshold (ATO, 2022). While this is an interest-free loan, the debt combined with the rate of return for lower paying degree jobs, led Daly et al. (2015) to argue that in Australia 'many of the lowest paid university graduates would have been better off if they had finished their education at Year 12 and entered full-time employment, assuming, of course that full-time employment was available' (pp.108–109). For students from poorer backgrounds, attending university with its associated economic risks, may then actually contribute to perpetuating cycles of poverty rather than breaking them.

Relational Risks

Moving into university can also impact upon existing family and social relationships, particularly amongst those where attending university devi-ates from generational norms. Many working-class students, male and female, have experienced the 'Educating Rita' phenomenon of alienation from their class (May, 2004). HE is posed as a deeply disturbing social act that challenges entrenched class and gender roles and expectations. Hey (2003, p. 320) talks about a 'coming out' from the working class with its restrictive gender norms and 'a no going back' perspective on this educa-tional choice (cited in Debenham & May, 2005, p. 99).

This situation is perhaps most keenly felt by older female student par-ents; for this cohort in particular, the rigours of managing study with family commitments can be a delicate negotiation (O'Shea, 2015; Stone & O'Shea, 2012, 2021). This balancing act has been referred to as 'guilt' inducing for parents (Stone & O'Shea, 2013). In previous research, FiF female returners reflected upon the difficulties of catering to all facets of

their lives and the ensuing time demands (O'Shea, 2014). Institutional expectations adhere to an implicit assumption that students will 'fit' around academic requirements but this is complicated by the responsibilities outside of this environment. The intention may be to 'widen participation' and enable people to attend but the reality for many older women is that this activity is circumscribed by existing social and gender stratification (O'Shea, 2022).

Moving into the university environment can then lead to changes and ruptures with existing family and friendships (O'Shea, 2015; Wainwright & Watts, 2019). Students have reported how the changes wrought by HE participation impacted upon the types of conversations they had with their friends and family, resulting in fundamental changes to these relationships (O'Shea, 2014; Wainwright & Watts, 2019). Individual learners do not always welcome the possibility of such relational change. Indeed, some learners have reported deliberately adopting multiple identities or fluid positionalities depending on the context they find themselves in (Forsyth et al., 2022). This fluidity is eloquently summed up by two FiF students who participated in focus group interviews from a separate study conducted at a regional campus (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2015). The following excerpt describes the strategies these young men employed to retain connections with both their home and university community:

Mike: Yeah. I've got two personas—Mike home and uni home […]
Evan: […] That's just how I am. Like what you see is what you get.
Mike: Yeah, what you see is what you get, yeah.
Evan: […] If you start talking flash words and stuff, people not gonna' understand unless you're talking to a normal educated man, you know. I speak in a way that people can understand […] that's just me.

(Mike and Evan, Focus Group, 2015)

Both Mike and Evan have very clear perceptions of the disjuncture between their university self and their home self; for these two young men changes are required to maintain affiliations with the home place and avoid the risk of relational rupture.

Identity Risks

As Mike and Evan's experience illustrates, changes in identity positions may also be required for those who may be the first in their family or community to attend university. This is not surprising when we consider how the concept of a singular identity has been disturbed. Johnston and Merrill (2009) explain how the non-linear nature of the learning identity reflects the 'fragmented, risky and sometimes unstable experiences of the life world in postmodernity.' (p. 130).

Just as the postmodern era has destabilised the concepts of class, so too has this disrupted the concept of identity; identity is understood not as singular but rather as 'multifaceted', with people adopting different social selves in response to the social situation in which they find themselves. Baxter and Britton found that, for many mature students, social activities 'involve[d] them in the quite stressful strategy of concealing aspects of their new selves in certain situations' (2001, p. 92). However, for those learners from diverse background who are entering university, the risk of incompatible identity positions can be increased. Ivanič (1998) argues that within HE, the possibility of an identity crisis may be increased for those learners who experience 'a mismatch between the social contexts which have constructed their identities in the past and the new social context which they are entering' (p. 12). Whilst Ivanič was writing over two decades ago, more recent research and analysis has pointed to the complex ways that HE students are constructed, which often reveal 'hidden, political and institutional agendas' (O'Shea & Brooks, 2021, p. 240).

If we reflect on the identity positions discussed previously, particularly the independent learner and the 'turbo' student, then this incongruity becomes more apparent. Obviously, the challenges associated with HE participation include more than the risks we have outlined but what this discussion does is point to the very complex nature of involvement.

Indeed, understanding the deeply personal nature of the HE experience is fundamental to research in this field. Rather than seeking to identify how HE institutions have responded to widening participation, or to explore the policy/political rhetoric in this regard, the studies outlined in

this book sought to examine in depth the actual qualitative nature of this student experience. To this end, this book draws heavily on student voice in order to present the embodied nature of this experience in profoundly descriptive terms. The following sections provide detailed breakdowns of the various methodologies, conceptual underpinnings and research designs for the studies which inform the chapters in this book.

Overview of the Studies

This book draws on research that was collected over a period of five years between 2013 and 2018. The first project was funded by an internal institutional grant; this provided pilot data for a second larger multi-institutional study that was funded by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching (SD13_3196). The third project was funded by the Australian Research Council (DP 170100705) and comprised of national data collection combined with research collected across Ireland, the UK and Austria. Each of the projects drew upon interviews and surveys, and overall includes a diversity of data that encompasses many different learner cohorts at various phases of the student life cycle including the pre-entry/enabling phase; the entering/transition to university phase as well as the persistence and graduation phases. The research design for the studies will be outlined separately in the following sections, with the initial pilot project referred to as Study A, the second project as Study B and the final international project as Study C.

Study A: Research Design

This study recruited 28 participants, male and female, interviewing them in the first year of undergraduate studies. This smaller study occurred at a regional institution, with an on-campus population of 24,000 when this research occurred. This institution has a large proportion of older students, 14% of the whole student population is derived from low SES areas (based on postcode) and the female population exceeds 50% of the total student cohort. The university is also located in a region that is

characterised by educational and economic disadvantage including higher rates of unemployment when compared to state and national levels, 6% for the region compared to 5.4% for the state and 5.2% nationally.

Recruitment for this study occurred in 2013 via email invitation, which was sent to all first year students who had disclosed on their enrolment form that neither parent had attained university level qualifications. A random selection of 800 students was sent this email invitation, which led to 63 responses and a total of 28 interviews. Unfortunately, eight interviews were later eliminated because during conversations participants revealed university attendance amongst other family members (3) and partners (3) or indicated that they were undertaking a second degree (2). There was diversity among the participants in terms of age and gender, but there were also similarities in that all were white, Anglo-Australian, FiF and in the first year of university study. The focus on first year students was deliberate in order to enable comparative reflections on life before university enrolment and during the initial stages of attendance.

The majority of interview participants were women, who numbered 15 and ranged in ages from 17 to 62 years; of the five men, the oldest was 64 years and the youngest was 22 years. Across all the participants, eight were partnered, there were four single parents (all women) and in total, nine participants had children. One interview included a mother and daughter in the first year of their studies. All the participants spoke English as a first language and each was enrolled as a domestic undergraduate student (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Participant details for Study A

Study A	Interviewed student cohorts	Details of interview
2013	• Twenty students • Five males and 15 females • All were FiF • Nine students had children • One mother and daughter	• One interview conducted at the initial stages of the year • Semi-structured interviews

Study A: Data Collection and Analysis

The interviews were all conducted at the completion of the first semester of study (June–July); each lasted between 40–50 minutes and was topic based. The interviews covered four key topics: (i) initial experiences of university; (ii) reactions from family and friends; (iii) family perceptions of university; and (iv) experiences of 'being' a university student. The first topic was designed to encourage the participant to reflect on the beginning stages of study and, as all the interviews occurred just after the first semester, these reflections were not unduly hampered by memory loss. The second and third topics focused on how this decision to come to university was perceived by friends and family, particularly in terms of how attending this institution was translated or discussed within the family and household. The fourth topic explored how students managed university in relation to other life spheres and the 'milestones' they had encountered to date. Whilst the data collected explored a number of facets of FiF student experience, how university attendance was received by significant others as well as the types of conversations this participation engendered within the household, were of particular interest.

The study was informed by a narrative inquiry approach and sought to employ what Polkinghorne (1995) terms as 'narrative analysis', drawing upon the events, actions and happenings described by interviewees as a basis for 'explanatory stories' (p. 5). The focus here is on particularity rather than universality. This is an inductive analytical process that commenced with a question around the range and types of conversations about learning, which participants were encouraged to describe. This then was the 'bounded system' and the stories that emerged enabled data to be understood as a 'composition', a retrospective explanation of 'the happening that is the topic of the inquiry' (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 19).

Each of the interviews was transcribed in full. Each transcript was then imported into the NVivo software program and line-by-line coding was conducted. This analysis was inductively focused, complemented by a constant comparative method of analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Analysis incorporated ongoing reflective writing/memo-ing in order to deeply explore themes and concepts that emerged from data. This cyclic process

required continual 'dipping into' the data followed by reflection and writing. Interviews were read line-by-line and then coded to categories or nodes; these categories were grounded within the narratives of participants in an attempt to develop insights into the social processes that individuals operate within. By continually revisiting the data, reflectively writing and also questioning, the goal was to develop both explanatory and descriptive categories. The data from this study will be presented both thematically and also via a 'vignette' modality, which required the reconstruction of student narrative. One of the initial outputs from the initial theming of the qualitative data was the development of a 'taxonomy' of student type and support as articulated by participants. This taxonomy was used to inform the questions and focus for Study B, which is outlined in Section "Study B: Research Design".

Study B: Research Design

This study involved three different cohorts of students studying across a range of Australian universities, with participants being recruited at various stages of their programmes, studying in both face-to-face and online modes. The aim of this design was to provide a diverse participant mix, ranging from those who were just at the stage of considering university studies (pre-entry) through to those who had significantly progressed in these studies. Given the multiplicity of the student experience, the project team recognised that it was not realistic to refer to one all-encompassing FiF student experience, as this is not a discrete entity but indeed is multilayered. Recruitment across the cohorts occurred via email. Participants were invited to participate either by taking part in a face-to-face/telephone interview or by completing an online survey. Both the interviews and the surveys contained similar questions, with the surveys generating many in-depth and descriptive open-ended responses.

The study encompasses a wide range of ages, with the youngest student interviewee being 18 years and the eldest, 62 years. The following Table 1.2 provides more information about the interviewees, including age range and details.

Table 1.2 Participant details for Study B

Cohorts	Interviewed cohort groups	Details of student cohort groups
(1) On-campus (internal) students at an Australian regional university	TOTAL OF 51 INTERVIEWS (including two with family members—mother and grandmother) Undergraduate students: 45 Postgraduates and students commencing a second degree: 6	Age range: 18 to 62 years Median age: 25.9 years Over 25 years: 23 students Gender ratio: 3:2 (31 female: 20 male) FiF: 47
(2) Pre-entry/Access students undertaking an Enabling Programme at an Australian Regional University as on-campus (internal) students	TOTAL OF 7 INTERVIEWS (including two with family members—children of students, aged 11 and 16) Foundation/Access students	Age range: 21 to 47 Median age: 35.3 Over 25s: 6 Gender mix: 5:2 (5 female: 2 male) FiF: 7
(3) Online (external) students studying in distance mode across a range of Australian metropolitan and regional universities	TOTAL OF 44* INTERVIEWS Students studying online undergraduate subjects, from first year to final year (*one not transcribed due to bad recording quality)	Age range: 21 to 62 Median age: 38.8 Over 25s: 36 students Gender mix: 11:3 (34 female: 9 male) FiF: 36

It should be noted that the participant recruitment emails for cohorts (1) and (3) were sent to those students who identified on enrolment that neither parent had attended university as this was the only data available to the project team. Inevitably, this meant that some students identified in interviews as having siblings or partners who had attended university; these participants formed a subset of the final data set. Interviewees were also invited to disclose whether they had a disability, spoke a language other than English as a primary language and whether they identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. Only two participants chose to disclose their Indigeneity, one disclosed a disability and no one indicated speaking a language other than English as a primary language. Given this low response rate, this study is therefore not able to look specifically or in-depth at the experience of first-in-family students from these backgrounds. It is worth noting, however, that there is considerable evidence to show that Indigenous students in particular have been significantly under-represented in Australian HE over many years (Koshy, 2020). Indeed we feel that the specific contextual circumstances of this cohort requires dedicated and focused studies that are underpinned by cultural sensitivity and depth.

The intent of this project was more broadly defined and designed to identify how institutions can (a) implement targeted support strategies that account for the learning contexts of the wider FiF cohort, (b) respond more effectively to student diversity and (c) explore strategies for connecting with families and communities of FiF learners. In order to deeply explore these themes, this study also included interviewing and surveying family members of existing students. While not many family members could commit to an interview, the numbers who completed the surveys were relatively significant and ranged from children through to grandparents of the FiF university student.

Study B: Data Collection and Analysis

In total, the project team interviewed 101 students; a small number of these (n = 4) included family members (parent, grandparent and children). Additionally, 173 surveys were completed by the students within

the three cohorts and a further 40 surveys were completed by family members. In order to involve family members, a form of snowball sampling was utilised, in which participating students were asked to indicate if a family member would be interested in completing a survey, by including an email for the family member. Table 1.3 provides a breakdown of the various stages of recruitment and the types of data collection conducted across the three student cohorts.

Interviews

There were two interview instruments: one for single student participant interviews and another for combined student-family member interviews. The interviews consisted of semi-structured questions, which were designed to be open-ended and flexible. Questions for student-only interviews were structured under the broad themes of: (a) university experience; (b) family/community perceptions; and (c) experiences of being a university student. Questions for student-family member interviews included perceptions of the university experience from the standpoint of both the student and the family member.

All the interviews were completed by October 2014 and for the students studying in an on-campus mode, these largely occurred at a campus location. For the students studying online via external mode, interviews were conducted via telephone. Table 1.4 provides a breakdown of interviewees' gender, family/parenting status, children and stage of study.

The project interviews employed a narrative biographical approach which involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with the students themselves and where possible, immediate family members. The inclusion of family members represents an innovative approach to studying the HE experience, as it looks beyond the confines of the campus and explores the multiplicity of worlds within which many older/FiF learners may exist. In research terms, an invisible but discernible divide between the public world of the university and the private domain of the family has been erected. Narrative inquiry however enables analysis of the 'different worlds' that exist in educational settings as participants are invited to articulate university on a symbolic and lived level. This is a powerful

Table 1.3 Summary of data collection activities

Cohorts(1), (2) and (3)	Potential participants	Ethics approved	Recruitment Stage 1	Recruitment Stage 2	Survey	Interview F2F	Phone
(1) On-Campus, internal students	3500 first year UG students	HE14/029 6 March 2014 Amendment: 30 May	3,500 emails sent from 1 April 2014	3,500 follow-up email(s) sent May 2014	95	44, 2 with family members	7
(2) Access/ Foundation Students	approx. 1200	H-2014-0085 7 May 2014	Broadcast emails: to all Enabling students at main campus	Broadcast emails: to all Enabling students + classroom visits at satellite campus	32	7, 2 with family members	0
(3) Online, external undergraduate students	15000	HE14/029 6 March 2014 Amendment: 30 May	Emails sent from end-April	Reminder email sent end-May	44	0	43
Family member surveys (cohort not specified)					40		

Table 1.4 Breakdown of study participants

Interviews (n = 102)	Cohort (1)	Cohort (2)	Cohort (3)
Total interviews	51[a] (2 with family members)	7 (2 with family members)	44[b]
Female	31 (plus 2)	5	35
Male	20	2 (plus 2)	9
Undergraduates	46	7	44
Postgraduates	5	0	0
Family status	32 single	4 partnered	13 single
	15 partnered	1 divorced	24 partnered
	1 divorced/ separated	3 did not disclose	2 divorced/ separated
	3 did not disclose		2 widowed
			2 did not disclose
No with child dependents	9	4	18

Due to poor recording quality:
[a]two interviews only partially transcribed
[b]one interview partially transcribed, another not possible

methodology for those individuals who may feel disenfranchised or voiceless, enabling storytellers to move away from traditional perceptions or dominant discourses and instead present a perspective that resonates with personal truth. For those students who are the first in the family to come to university, and who may have had little experience of this environment, this approach offers the possibility to story this experience in personal terms using familiar (and familial) language and metaphors rather than the rhetoric of the institution. The interviews were transcribed in full and then analysed for recurring emergent themes (further detail is provided in the data analysis section).

Surveys

The online survey was designed as an alternative data collection to cater for those students and family members who could not, or preferred not to, attend a face-to-face interview. This was particularly important for participants who were studying online as distance students. The survey

questions were similar to the interview questions. The survey was delivered via Survey Monkey and included a mix of tick-box options and open-ended questions providing a range of qualitative demographic data. Example questions included:

- What types of expectations did you have before starting?
- Looking back over your time so far as a student, what do you feel were the milestones, or high points?
- What motivated you to start higher education study?

The family survey was similarly constructed but asked questions such as:

- Which member of your family is currently undertaking university studies?
- When your family member talked about starting university studies, how did you react or feel about that?
- Before your family member started doing university studies, what did you think about university?

A total of 173* surveys were completed (*two were incomplete), with 12 of these indicating that they were not first in their family to undertake university study (four had children or siblings currently studying; two had partners who had completed; six had children, siblings or a parent who had completed) and three who were unsure; 80.7% of respondents were female (n = 138) and 19.3% were male (n = 33). The following chart gives a breakdown of gender and age ranges of respondents by cohort (Fig. 1.1).

The majority of respondents were in their first year of study (n = 104, 62.7%). There were 22 students in their second year (13.3%), 17 students each in their third and fourth years of study (10.2% each), and six (3.6%) who were in their fifth year or more of study. Of the 166 who answered this question, 106 were studying full-time (63.9%) and 60 (36.1%) were part-time.

A substantial number of respondents indicated they had children (n = 56). Of the 51 who provided ages of their children, 17 had children
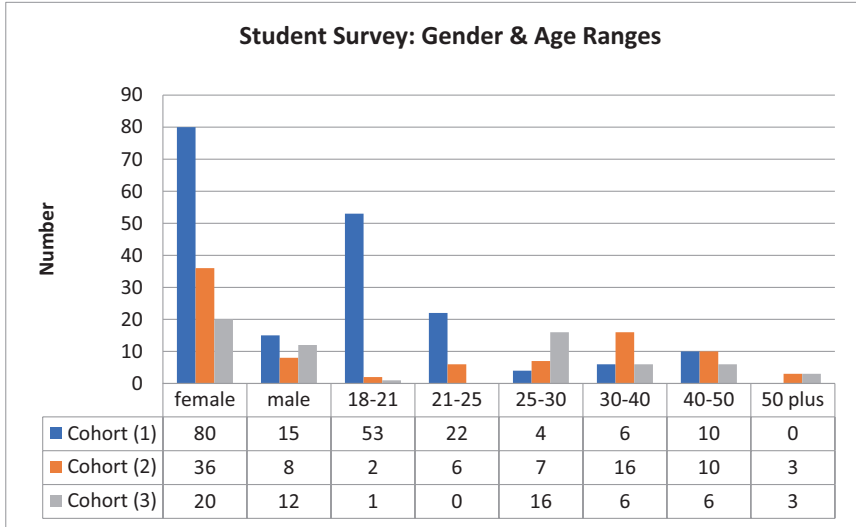
Fig. 1.1 Student survey—gender and age ranges

under five, 12 had children under ten, while 15 had teenage children and seven had adult children in their 20s. Some families had a mix of under-tens, teens and 20s, and two indicated the imminent birth of babies. Fifteen of these families were single parent.

Family members completed a total of 40 surveys. Figure 1.2 indicates how the various respondents were related to the learners in their family. In total, the family members who completed the survey included 26 (65%) who identified as female, and 14 (35%) males. The age range included minors (six respondents were aged between 9 and 17) up to age 69, with the bulk of responses from those aged 40 and upwards.

Data Analysis

Both the interviews and surveys were analysed for emergent themes and in the case of the surveys, the quantitative data was collated for descriptive statistics. Initial analysis was conducted by each of the project team members individually who then met to discuss various emergent themes. Through these collective deliberations, 15 overarching themes were

Q4 Family Relationships

Answered: 40   Skipped: 0

grandchild
2.50% (1)

son
10.00% (4)

partner
17.50% (7)

daughter
37.50% (15)

mother
20.00% (8)

sister
10.00% (4)

brother
2.50% (1)
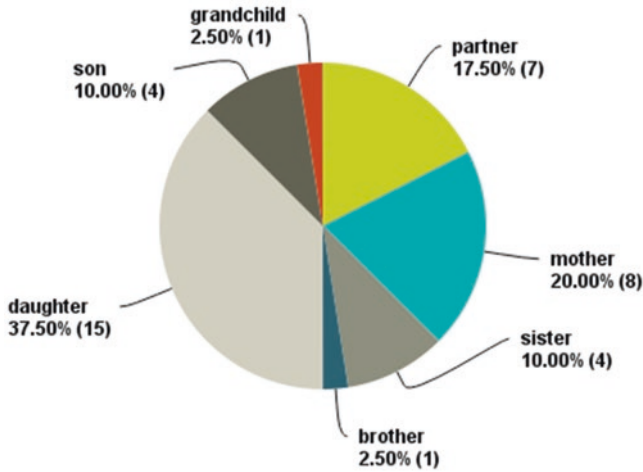
Fig. 1.2   Family relationships between learners and survey respondents

identified in relation to the interviews and a further 12 themes identified in relation to the surveys. However, this analysis was inductive in nature, so as data was interrogated, other themes were identified and included. Analysis was iterative and similar to Study A, was aided by a recursive movement between the data, the project team reflective journaling and also, the literature in the field.

Similar to Study A, analysis was further assisted by the query function in NVivo and the memo-ing functions, which enabled connections to be made between data sets and across categories. Developing codes and categories facilitated exploration of specific areas of interests and this was complemented by adopting a narrative biographical approach. The focus was retained on stories narrated about coming to university and how this experience was translated and understood by both learners and their family members. This method recognised how events are 'enacted in storied moments of time and space' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 25) and

that while these storied vignettes are personal they also reflect wider social conditions and stratification.

All emerging themes were also 'interrogated' by applying a range of conceptual lenses to the data as the project team recognised that the data did not reflect one absolute truth but rather a continually evolving reality. There is no one singular position or reality. Instead, what is presented here is a partial view of experience, which is neither absolute nor complete. As McLeod and Thomson (2009) explain:

> *Participant narratives and memories can be read as time travellers, constructed in the present, evoking and even transforming the past and often told with a view towards the future, towards generational inheritance and a sense of other possibilities.* (p. 53)

Our approach recognises this continual unfolding of stories so true data saturation does not occur. Instead, there is always something additional that can be gleaned from the data, like a diamond refracting many different types of light and shadow. Some of the lenses applied to the data sets included concepts related to: cultural and social capitals; identity and gender roles; social stratification; and transformation. Triangulating data from two different sources combined with the application of different conceptual lenses also provided a means to test the rigour and validity of the findings, but always recognising that this research is limited by its focus on the number of students who participated, as well as historical and cultural specificity.

Study C: Research Design

This study was funded by the Australian Research Council under the Discovery Project Scheme in the 2017 round. The project explored how FiF students who were in the final stages of their degree narrated their persistence through the academy. Data were collected from nine Australian universities as well as universities in Ireland, the United Kingdom and Austria. Internationally, the three universities were all located in metropolitan areas, and each had a high proportion of students who were the first in their families to go to university.

Table 1.5 Data collection breakdown

Australian institutions: Data collection April to September 2017	No. of Surveys	No. of Interviews
Institution 1 (City WA)	76	16
Institution 2 (Regional QLD)	24	3
Institution 3 (Regional NSW)	11	1
Institution 4 (Regional NSW)	63	17
Institution 5 (Regional VIC)	43	6
Institution 6 (Regional QLD)	46	11
Institution 7 (City, SA)	14	3
Institution 8 (Regional NSW)	12	7
Institution 9 (Regional, TAS)	17	6
TOTAL	306	70

Within Australia, data were collected from students at urban and regional universities, but the latter is over-represented in the data sample (see Table 1.5), with 72.9% of interviewees and 70.6% of survey respondents studying at a regional location. The focus on regional institutions was intentional and recognises that in Australia, these universities generally attract a more diverse student population who are studying in a range of modalities and have varying patterns of attendance.

The study adopted a narrative inquiry methodology to ensure that the deeply personal and embodied nature of the nature of university persistence was highlighted. The project adopted an innovative theoretical fusion, informed by both sociological perspectives (Bourdieu, 1986) combined with philosophical understandings of social justice (Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1992), designed to provide perspectives on what it is that individual students 'actually do' (or the capabilities and freedoms they can access) which can facilitate persistence at university. This in-depth understanding underpinned the development of a capabilities–informed framework that can inform approaches to university student retention.

Study C: Data Collection and Analysis

Similar to Study A and B, a combination of surveys and interviews was used in the data collection phase, a methodological approach which had proven successful in the earlier studies. Importantly, this approach

provided the opportunity for students to deeply reflect on their journey through university as well as various strategies they used to enact persistence in what could be a challenging and complex educational environment. There were great geographic distances involved as well so offering a survey provided the means to include more students who might have time constraints and/or live in remote locations. Table 1.5 breaks down the different forms of data collection across the Australian institutions.

Interviews

As previously mentioned, students were recruited from nine Australian universities in 2017, and in 2018 a further three universities in Ireland, the UK and Austria became research sites. Recruitment largely occurred via email with participants invited to either complete an anonymous online survey or participate in an interview. Criteria for involvement were that students be first in their immediate family to attend university, and be in the latter stages of an undergraduate degree (i.e. they must have completed at least two years of full-time study, or equivalent). Both the interview and survey guiding questions were the same, although the semi-structured interview format enabled some aspects of the experience to be explored in more depth. Data collection began with selecting demographic information (such as gender, age, year of study, etc.), followed by questions around three broad areas designed to elicit qualitatively rich responses. These related to self-reflections as a student; reflections on university; and HE participation and support (i.e. from family/community, the institution and others).

In total, 99 students elected to participate in an interview. This included 70 female participants, 25 male and four whose gender was not disclosed. Their ages ranged from 18 to 61 years (Australian interviewees) and 18 to 48 years (European interviewees) with the medium age being 34.5 and 25 years, respectively. Interviews were conducted in a variety of modalities given the distances involved, and included face-to-face, phone and video (e.g. Skype) meetings. In Austria, all interviews were conducted face-to-face as small focus groups due to limitations of time and access. Table 1.6 provides a breakdown of all interviewed participants.

Table 1.6 Participant details for Study C interviewees

Interviews (N = 99)	Australia (7 regional, 2 city universities)	Ireland (city university)	UK (city university)	Austria (city university)
Interviewees by location	70	7	4	18
Female	51	4	3	12
Male	17	3	1	4
Gender not disclosed/other	2			2
Age range	18 to 61 years	18 to 48 years		
Age range most represented[a]	31 to 40 (n = 17)	21 to 25 (n = 11)		
Median age[a]	34.5 years	25 years		
Over 25 years[a]	47 (47.7%)	9 (36%)		

[a]European data combined due to lower interviewee numbers in Ireland and the UK

Surveys

Of the 451 surveys, 306 were returned by Australian students and 145 by respondents from Ireland (n = 24), the UK (n = 25) and Austria (n = 96). In total, there were 353 female respondents, 79 male and 19 who indicated gender as 'other' or who did not disclose. Their ages ranged from 18 to over 51 years. The median age for the Australian participants was 28 years, while the European median age was slightly lower at 24 years. Table 1.7 provides a breakdown of survey participant details.

In Study C, gender and age distribution varied across the locations as well as across the data collection method. The proportional gender and age distribution of the 550 participants from the 12 different locations spanning Australia and Europe is captured in Fig. 1.3.

Equity Categories

All participants were invited to self-select the equity categories that they felt applied to their identity or circumstances. For the Australian participants the choices included identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, with disability, from a rural/isolated location, from backgrounds

Table 1.7 Participant details for Study C survey respondents

| Survey respondents (N = 451)	Australia (7 regional, 2 urban universities)	Ireland (city university)	UK (city university)	Austria (city university)
Survey respondents by location	306	24	25	96
Female	239	21	22	71
Male	50	3	3	23
Gender not disclosed/other	17			2
Age range most represented	21 to 25 (n = 112)	21 to 25 (n = 15)	18 to 20 (n = 12)	21 to 25 (n = 49)
Median age range	28 to 30	21 to 25	21 to 25	26 to 30
Over 25 years	123 (42.5%)	3 (12.5%)	3 (12%)	35 (36.4%)
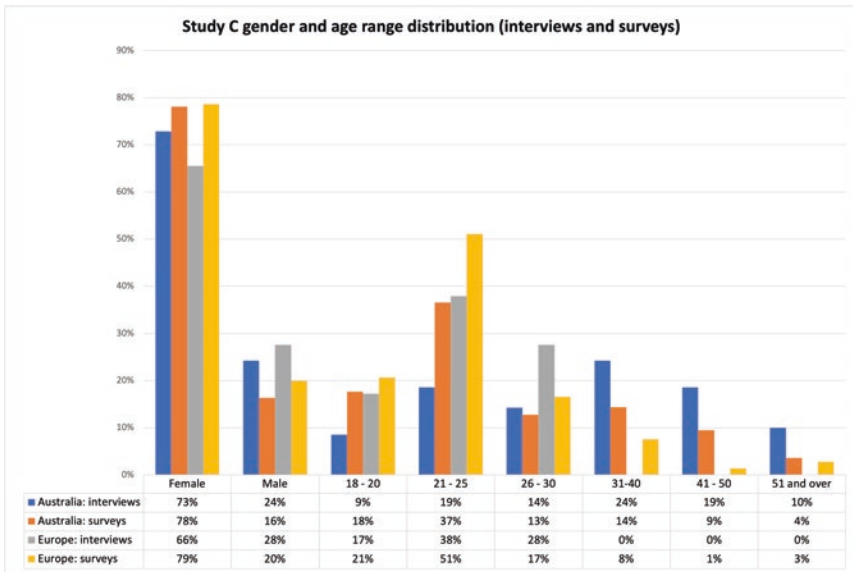
Fig. 1.3 Study C distribution of gender and age ranges across all data

such as low SES, non-English speaking or refugee, as well as the opportunity to select 'other' where they could also provide further clarification. In addition, participants could select a family status such as partnered, single or with children.

Similarly, the European participants were able to choose relevant but slightly different equity categories. As well as the equity categories of student with disability, from low SES or refugee background, coming from working-class background, from a rural location (rather than rural/isolated) and a language background other than the official language were included. In Ireland and the UK, the choice was non-English-speaking background, and in Austria the choice was non-German-speaking background. The opportunity to include qualitative information was provided as well as selection of family status.

The equity characteristics of the Australian group is summarised in Table 1.8 followed by a summary of the European group in Table 1.9. Note: students could select more than one of the categories.

Table 1.8 Equity characteristics of the Australian group

Equity categories	Surveys	Interviews	Category totals
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	13	1	14
Disability	15	14	29
Low SES	83	28	111
Rural/isolated	93	22	115
NESB	20	6	26
Refugee	4	1	5
Other	125	29	154
Total Equity Selections	353	101	

Table 1.9 Equity characteristics of the European group

Equity categories	Surveys	Interviews	Category totals
Working-class background	12	104	116
Disability	1	4	5
Low SES	12	22	34
Rural	12	32	44
NESB	3	1	4
NGSB	2	0	2
Refugee	0	11	11
Other	7	10	17
Total Equity Selections	49	184	

Comments in 'other' often included more information about the category/ies selected or indicated uncertainty about a category, such as being from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander backgrounds, but not identifying as such. Categorising one's situation as low SES was sometimes difficult such as indicated in these comments: "I wouldn't say low-socioeconomic background but we definitely by no means rich" (Survey), or "My parents were [low SES] but I'm not now" (interview). Often 'other' was used to describe situations in more detail such as: being or coming from coming from a single-parent family; divorced family or dysfunctional family; having to leave home to study; leaving home at an early age; being mature aged; being homeschooled; having mental health issues; returning to study after having a child; leaving prison; born, or parents born, elsewhere. Participants who identified as homosexual or LBGQTI indicated this, as did others their religion, such as Muslim.

Comments in 'other' for the European group included being born overseas (e.g. Colombia, former Yugoslavia, South Africa) or more information about their refugee background (e.g. from Russia, Kazakhstan, Croatia). Coming from less advantaged circumstances or situations which were socio-economically difficult was also explained, such as single-parent family, having a parent with disability, the death of a parent leading to premature departure from education, as well as many whose parents were small business owners or farming on small land holdings. Other characteristics included identifying as a gay person, recovering from serious illness, and being homeless.

In terms of information on family status, 172 participants in the Australian group indicated their family status as partnered (143 survey respondents, 36 interviewees). A similar number indicated they were single, totalling 165 (146 survey respondents, 19 interviewees). A total of 101 participants indicated they had children (69 survey respondents, 32 interviewees). In the European group, 63 were partnered (58 survey respondents, 5 interviews) and 72 were single (70 survey respondents, 2 interviewees). It needs to be noted that the question of partner/single status was not consistently asked in the European interviews. In the European group there were only a small number of parents (n = 11 from 9 survey respondents, 2 interviewees) (Table 1.10).

Table 1.10 Family status nominated by students in Study C

Family status	Australian surveys	Australian interviews	European surveys	European interviews
Participants with children	69	32	9	2
Partnered	143	36	58	5
Single	146	19	70	2

Data Analysis

Similar to Projects A and B, all the data (survey and interviews) were imported into the NVivo software package. As the Australian data was collected first, line-by-line coding was conducted on each of the Australian interviews and survey responses (N = 376). Line-by-line coding was deliberately chosen to ensure that theories and framings emerged inductively from the data rather than preconceived perspectives or ideas being applied to the data. The methodological underpinning of this study was similarly informed by constructivist grounded theory, to enable a focus on the 'phenomena' being studied, in this case the act of persisting including the relational and experiential nature of this act.

The main themes that emerged from the line-by-line coding of the interviews (n = 70) and surveys (n = 306) resulted from open-coding; this involved coding based on what 'jumped out' of the data in a more holistic sense, rather than limiting coding to understandings of persistence; this form of open coding is vital in order to thoroughly interrogate the data being examined. The high-level nodes that were inductively derived from the Australian data were populated with relevant content from both survey and interview data. As coding continued, patterns began to emerge and as these emerged, sub-nodes were created. Each node was carefully defined at the onset of coding and these initial definitions were later refined based on the emerging data. Coding continued until all the Australian data was exhausted. Each of the sub-nodes (or child nodes) was then analysed and refined to remove repetitive or limited applications. This was a rigorous process that required a continual dipping into the data, followed by written reflections and critical analysis. The data

from Europe was then coded in a comparative sense to explore where perspectives and framings aligned, but also, importantly where these deviated.

The findings from this project have informed both journal and chapter publications and similar to Project A and B, a number of theoretical lenses informed these outputs. The next section provides an overview of the theoretical underpinnings of each of these studies and how these inform the chapters that follow.

Theoretical Paradigms

This book is essentially 'theoretically promiscuous', a term borrowed from Sue Middleton (2003) to explain the eclectic theoretical lenses employed to frame the data collected. As mentioned, these narratives are framed and explored through a range of theoretical understandings, which largely reflect the authors' multidisciplinary backgrounds. Each chapter provides an overview of the particular theoretical or conceptual underpinnings that have been applied, so the following sections present a broad understanding of the ontological and epistemological foundations that have informed these studies.

Epistemological and Ontological Understandings

Epistemologically, the studies were all informed by social constructivism, which does not subscribe to the view of an objective truth that exists independently 'out there'. Instead, this approach recognises that people do not just happen upon meaning, rather meaning is constructed via reference to social and personal concepts or frameworks gleaned from the experience of life-worlds; interpretations are continually developed, defined and modified by various interactions. Such meaning formation occurs 'against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices, language and so forth' (Schwandt, 1994, p. 197). Individuals form meanings diversely, even when responding to the same factors or environment and

there is no one true and valid meaning or interpretation. However, it is important to note that meanings are not free from social context instead, as Crotty (1998) states, all 'meaningful reality' is 'socially constructed' (p. 9).

Social constructivism not only necessitates deriving meanings from the respondents but also heralds the importance of identifying the researchers' interpretations of reality. The relationship between the researched and the researcher is not one traditionally conceived within a more positivist epistemology, because it is characterised by mutual openness, empathy and personal involvement. In this way, the outcomes derived from this form of research are treated as constructions rather than 'objectified' truths (Charmaz, 2006, p. 528). From such a perspective, interpretivism works within the relativist ontology, which assumes that there are multiple interpretations of reality. While things exist outside of individuals, objects have forms that are independent of humans, but the meanings imparted upon these only emerge upon engagement with humans. Realism is then different to objectivism as the latter perceives meaning as existing within objects, intrinsic to form and independent from human perception (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

The theoretical perspectives favoured in these studies are bounded by qualitative paradigms, which in turn evoke an emic focus that strives to reveal individual points of view. The interpretivist tradition fulfils this objective by encouraging the researcher to take on the role or positioning of the subject and immerse themselves in actors' social realities. Whilst methodologically placed within an interpretivist framework these studies are also sensitised by the researchers' positionings as women as well as individual personal subjectivities. These projects also intentionally blur theoretical and methodological boundaries and in so doing, engender a multiplicity that fits comfortably within the postmodern research agenda.

Postmodernist theory emphasises the meanings that are attached to events through language and discourse (Alvesson, 2002). It argues that reality is socially constructed, that it is similarly assembled via conversation and talking as if it is 'out there' (Rice & Ezzy, 2000, p. 22). Concepts such as truth and reality are represented and indeed determined by the particular political practices within a society. These practices are both

reinforced by 'dominant discourses' (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 152) and the ubiquitous stories or narratives within a particular culture and time, these similarly being a representation of those same social and political practices. Therefore, there is no fixed or absolute truth; instead as Gubrium and Holstein (2003) reflect, 'certainty' must be embraced cautiously or 'rejected outright' (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003, p. 4). This postmodern stance in research has led to a 'new pluralism of research methods' (Keller, 1998, p. 275) where it has become acceptable, indeed perhaps expected, for researchers to borrow elements from different methodologies and disciplines in order to navigate unique research frameworks.

Based on this diversity and plurality, researchers need to adopt the position of bricoleur, which requires the ability to relate to a number of theoretical perspectives and approaches as well as maintain a level of reflexivity and reflection in relation to the study. Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest that the researcher as bricoleur operates on a number of interpretative and political levels, recognising the important role that personal history plays within the research as well as negotiating the socio-political elements of any study. In becoming a bricoleur, a researcher is charged with the responsibility to re-vision what is apparent and instead negotiate a stance that encourages openness in relation to interpretation and negotiation. Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 each focuses on a particular thematic element that has been derived from close analysis of the data and the scholarly literature in the field. To expand and analyse these themes a number of theoretical frames have been applied which broadly include: social theory, gender theory, feminism, postmodernism, postmodern feminism, intersectionality, and capital theory.

In presenting the data from these studies, the intention has been to foreground the stories and words of the student narrators. However, equally we realise that as authors, we are deeply embedded within the text and that the realities presented here are partial and incomplete. As you read through this book, please remain mindful that our intent is not to speak 'for' these students but rather to simply 'clear a space' from where these voices can be heard.

Ethical Considerations

While these studies were conducted at different times and in varying locations, each is complementary in nature, providing the foundations and context for the study that followed, culminating in the four-year study (DP 170100705) on student persistence. While this book is largely based on these studies, where appropriate the authors have drawn on additional interviews or focus groups to more richly define the topics. Where additional inclusion occurs, the studies are identified and acknowledged appropriately. All the research in this book was similarly governed by ethical guidelines associated with the host institutions. This included retaining the confidentiality of the students through the provision of pseudonyms and the de-identification of the research locations.

In order to provide sufficient context for all the quotes and vignettes, we have also included summary biographical details, including the name we are using for each participant, age, relationship status, number of children (where relevant), Degree, year of study and mode of study. The only exception to this is when the name of the degree is so specialised that it was considered possibly identifying; in these cases, the degree name refers to the broad discipline area.

The following chapter (Chap. 2) provides the foundations for the remaining chapters by exploring the various definitions of the term 'FiF' across literature. This will include an in-depth overview of existing research on this cohort with particular reference to deficit framings. Chapter 3 seeks to disrupt this deficit model and explore alternative approaches to conceptualising this cohort, drawing on narrative vignettes to support and extend our understandings of FiF learners. Chapter 4 provides an overview of how attending HE for FiF students can be understood in an embodied sense. Drawing upon quotes from student participants, the chapter foregrounds the changes and transitions that learners reflected upon in interviews. In Part II, each chapter will focus on a specific cohort of FiF learners to explore deeply the particular contexts and considerations upon which these learners reflected. Chapter 5 draws on the stories of enabling education learners, their motivations and how coming to university signaled the enactments of both 'accommodations'

and 'transformations'. Chapter 6 shifts the focus to online learners and the specific challenges that this cohort faces both in terms of academic achievement and support needs. Chapter 7 explores this university journey from the perspective of the family members, particularly how this attendance impacts upon conversations and knowledge discourses within households. Chapter 8 centres on FiF students who are parents and highlights how this group manages the competing demands and conflicts that educational participation may engender. Chapter 9 applies a gender perspective to these learners' narratives of transitioning and engaging within the university environment. Chapter 10 draws upon the framing of 'sisu' to explore how near-graduating female students had enacted persistence during their undergraduate studies. Heeding the call of Whitty et al. (2015) that such research 'should start contributing to solutions' (p. 58), the book then concludes with recommendations for practitioners and policy makers within the tertiary sector.

Conclusion

Overall, the authors believe that this book will offer significant understandings about how FiF learners, in all their diversity, experience and engage with the educational landscape within the HE sector. The research projects that inform this study 'fill a gap' in our current understandings about the FiF cohort. The data generated was both profound and descriptive, revealing the complexities and intricacies of interactions between FiF students, their significant others and the university environment. We are aware that the development of social networks within the university plays a key role in student engagement in this environment (Tinto, 1995, 2002; Wilcox et al., 2005). Yet there is little clarity about how FiF students draw upon networks outside the university or how universities might engage with these wider contexts as resources for student retention. This book seeks to contribute to a better understanding of how existing relationships and identities coexist with variables engendered by university attendance as well as providing practical suggestions for teaching and learning practitioners around how this cohort can be better welcomed and supported within these learning environments.

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2

The Lack of What …?: First-in-Family Learners and Their University Experience

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on the first-in-family (FiF) cohort, how this group is defined globally and also, what research across the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Canada and the United States (US) has reported in relation to this cohort. This chapter and Chap. 3 draw on the work of key theorists in the field in order to explore the ways in which this cohort is theorised and understood in the literature. The focus is how this group is constructed as being 'at-risk', requiring additional support and assistance. Beginning with an overview of research findings in this regard, the discussion moves to a description of how this group is theorised and defined in different geographical and cultural contexts. For example, Spiegler and Bednarek (2013), who have completed one of the most comprehensive reviews of literature and research on FiF students to date, report the various ways that countries define this group, and also how research is conflated by assumptions concerning social status and ethnicity. The chapter draws on international literature to highlight these differentials and to indicate the many deficit framings that implicitly define this student cohort.

Globally, discourse around students who are first in their families to attend university tends to problematise them primarily as a group in need of assistance. Deficit notions draw attention away from the actuality that these students are trailblazers, who in real terms are paving the way for better career opportunities for themselves as well as impacting on others around them as they enter and succeed in higher education (HE). A significant issue which perpetuates deficit constructions is that definitions of this cohort continue to lack clarity (O'Shea et al., 2016; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013; Toutkoushian et al., 2018). Creating the right set of conditions for these students—as an institutional responsibility—thus becomes a more challenging undertaking. Arguably, it is easier to focus and act upon *problematic* issues at an individual student level, rather than traditions and practices deeply embedded in academic culture. The literature demonstrates that even though feelings of lack are not warranted, these feelings nevertheless are often implicitly imposed by university structures and systems. In the next section, we provide an overview of definitions commonly found in the literature, followed by synthesis of some of the main themes.

Defining Students Who Are First-in-Family

In the US, the term 'first generation student' (FGS) is generally used to describe those students entering HE whose parents have not received a college or university degree. However, there are differences in how this term is deployed even at a national level, with Toutkoushian and colleagues identifying eight different definitions in operation across the national university sector (Toutkoushian et al., 2018). However, what most definitions in the US and other countries assume is that no post compulsory schooling has occurred. Attempts at relational definitions can also become difficult with blended family arrangements. This issue of definitional inconsistency across countries is highlighted by Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) with variations presented as 'slightly different segment[s] of the student population' (p. 319). This discrepancy is again highlighted by LeBouef and Dworkin (2021) in an empirical review of FGS in the US, identifying definitional differences relating to whether a parent has

attended a university (but not attained a degree), parents who have never attended university, or even whether the term should be extended beyond the parent to include siblings or kinship networks more broadly. Thus, research drawing on various definitions disrupts precise understandings of what characterises this particular cohort of students. In much of the international literature, conflation of FGS with social class or ethnic groups may partly reflect the lack of clear definition.

In the Australian context, 'first-in-family' has also been variously defined, but most definitions refer to parental education levels. To differentiate from the general term *first generation student*, first-in-family is defined for this study as: *no-one in the immediate family of origin, including siblings or parents, having previously attended a higher education institution or having completed a university degree* (O'Shea et al., 2015, p. 5). Framing FiF within their familial grouping better enables research in this area to understand the impact of 'intergenerational benefits of information' for those who have not yet encountered the university experience (Luzeckyj et al., 2011, p. 92). For clarity we use the term first-in-family (FiF), unless quoting directly from international literature where the term first generation students (FGS) is used.

Issues Arising from Lack of Clarity in Definitions

Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) found a strong focus in the international literature on pre-university characteristics, such as FGS being more likely to come from lower socio-economic circumstances, be older than their second or third generation peers, and 'more likely to belong to an ethnic minority group in the country they live in' (p. 321). As already alluded to, variations in FGS definitions may partly account for the focus on demography as a means of quantifying subgroup within this cohort, and the resulting literature focuses on indicators of social class and ethnicity.

Demographics may be useful for drawing comparative data on academic progression and achievements between the more- and less-privileged social classes or ethnic groups; however, this lens foregrounds deficiency as the starting point. Certainly this has enabled the literature to clearly identify social background as a predictor of achievement in, and

access to, HE. However, such comparisons do not always make clear a point of departure; that historically, students from lower SES groups have lacked the same opportunities for HE that students in a higher social status may assume as their 'rite of passage' (Lehmann, 2009, p. 144). Recent scholarship has explicitly 'called for more focus on the heterogeneity of this group, noting the tendency to collapse first-generation with certain demographic markers such as low-income and racial minoritized identities' (Capannola & Johnson, 2022, p. 51). This chapter draws on a diversity of literature to not only explore how broad societal factors can impede university access for students from materially or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, but also, the many factors which enabled or supported entry to these institutions.

First-in-Family Students and Access to Higher Education

Aside from access to university study traditionally being in the domain of the wealthier classes, Lehmann (2009) describes universities as having long-established traditions which have privileged particular social classes, specifically those in the mobile middle classes. Historically, this has rendered access and opportunity to HE as unequally meted out. Perhaps the greatest impact of mismatched opportunities that typically differentiate the social classes is in access to generational histories and knowledge of university. Students who are first in their families will not have ready access to 'insider' knowledge (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Watson, 2013) about the culture and expectations of university. Without the assumed level of fluency, 'walking the walk' and 'talking the talk' of university can present additional challenges, not least of which is that this knowledge is rarely transparent (O'Shea, 2021). There can be little doubt that FiF students will need to work hard(er) at understanding how to function in a culture outside of their normal familial experience (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). In addition, achieving aspirations may present challenges as FiF step outside family norms, armed with limited resources and understandings of the HE sector. Despite these constraints, FiF learners are entering university in substantial numbers, mainly as a result of collective efforts to increase access to HE.

A Matter of Access: Widening Participation Initiatives

Concerted recent efforts in the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries to widen university options have been and continue to be largely driven by a global need to boost economic and global competitiveness (see Bradley et al., 2008; OECD, 2016). Widening access policy has attracted increasing numbers of non-traditional students, who may be described as changing their familial histories by becoming upwardly mobile. Research in Australia and internationally confirms the anticipated phenomenon of social mobility, in which FiF are often motivated by having a better quality of life, greater career choice or higher income than experienced in their own upbringing or within the family biography (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2021; O'Shea et al., 2015, 2016; Watson, 2013; Lehmann, 2009).

Tinto and Engestrom (2008) point out that merely providing access to university is not enough unless there is also the provision of appropriate support. Furthermore, they contend that success at university study is unlikely for the many students 'who are poor or academically underprepared' (p. 50) unless there is institutional investment and recognition of responsibility to provide appropriate, integrated support, rather than add-ons. Indeed, the construction of the right set of conditions which enables the success of *all* students is an institutional responsibility.

Of consideration also is that the very notion of widening access could itself promulgate perceptions of 'lack' through initiatives such as student stipends or special entry programmes targeting certain student cohorts. While such initiatives increase access to university, they may not necessarily equate to successful outcomes for FiF. A tendency for knee-jerk reactions by institutions to address issues such as attrition rates is often in the form of add-on remedial or needs-based support, rather than integrated evidence-based programmes which are sustainable across increasingly diverse cohorts. Spiegler and Bednarek also make the point that it is 'structural problems inherent in the organization of education [which] are camouflaged as cultural deficits of individuals' (2013, p. 331). This sentiment is echoed by Forsyth et al. (2022) who argue that even when FiF students gain entry to university, there are limits to their 'epistemological access' (p. 308) to the 'hidden' curriculum, which operates at the level of accepted discourses, behaviours and expectations.

The next section seeks to explore how deficit discourses are constructed around the FiF student cohort, by focusing on several interconnected themes. These encompass: preparedness for university and academic culture (often constructed around social class); and consequently feeling like an outsider, which is partly attributable to lack of access to intergenerational knowledge about university that their middle-class peers may have access to. Finally, family aspirations and understandings of the university sector are explored to indicate some of the underlying motivations this cohort identified as prompting their university attendance. Before moving to these themes, we consider broader social and cultural factors that impact on FiF.

A Matter of Access: First in Family Learners

Recent OECD figures confirm year-on increases in global tertiary education participation, where the share of 25–34-year-olds with a tertiary degree increased from 27% in 2000 to 48% in 2021 (OECD, 2022). However, while these increases are indicative of the effectiveness of national policy agendas, they belie the broader implications for students who enter tertiary study as the first in their families. These implications transcend demographic focus on pre-entry access characteristics such as mature-aged, ethnic and minority groups, low socio-economic status or class, or those residing in rural or remote areas. Instead, in order to understand the university environment, it is necessary to unpack some of the hidden forms of stratification that exist in this landscape. To begin to explore such phenomenon we have drawn on the social theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986, 1993).

Essentially, Bourdieu (1993) highlights how HE institutions expect learners to tacitly understand the codes and norms of the institution without explicit identification. The concepts of field, habitus and capital provide a useful framework for understanding the hidden demarcations within this environment. Fields have been identified as social spaces structured by shared rules and relationships. An individual's movement

and successes within these fields are largely governed by the capital that is possessed; Bourdieu recognises capital in a holistic sense encompassing economic, social and cultural referents. Cultural capital is identified as being manifested on symbolic, educational and linguistic levels (Bourdieu, 1986). Individuals have different capital packages and capitals have different values depending on the field in which the individual is operating, with differences in cultural capital marking 'the differences between the classes' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 69). Whilst Bourdieu's work has attracted some criticism, which is considered in Chap. 2, these Bourdieuian concepts provide an alternative perspective on HE participation and engagement, particularly Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus.

Fields are dynamic in nature and summed up by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) as being 'a game devoid of inventor and much more fluid and complex than any game one might ever design' (p. 102). Bourdieu argues that individuals will variously develop what he refers to as 'a feel for the game', which relates to their understanding and knowledge about the field. Participation in the 'game' is also influenced by an individual's habitus, which is an embodied state defined via ways of 'standing, speaking, walking and thereby feeling and thinking' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 70). If we consider university as a field (or a sub-field of education) then for FiF learners, the lack of a knowledgeable other within the family means that they enter the field already disadvantaged; they lack access to those who have already experienced this space and who could offer insight into its workings and norms. In contrast, when an individual's habitus encounters a field with which it is familiar, it is similar to a '"fish in water": it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). Such effortlessness is often attributed to learners' levels of preparedness for university studies, the onus placed on the individual to match the expectations of the institution, without considerations of the wider social and cultural situatedness of the individual. One notable example of such lack of understanding of the situatedness of individuals is that of the under-representation of Indigenous peoples within Australian HE, as discussed in the next section.

Educational Inequities in an Australian Context

Issues of educational inequities in many colonial and postcolonial nations are reflected in the marginalisation of particular social groups, such as Indigenous peoples and other minority groups. For example, in the US, more than twice the number of FiF are from ethnic minority or migration background (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013, p. 322). American history records show that Alexander Lucius Twilight was the first known African American to graduate from a US college, receiving a bachelor's degree from Middlebury College in Vermont in 1823. (JBHE, 2023). While Caleb Cheeshahteaumuck, of the Wampanoag tribe, was the first Native American to graduate from Harvard College in 1665 (Harvard University Gazette, online).

In contrast with this US experience, Barbara Weir was the first Indigenous person enrolled in university in Australia, having commenced an Arts degree in the mid-1950s (Weir, 2014). The earliest graduations of Indigenous students did not occur until 1966: one of the first was Charles Perkins who graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (University of Sydney, 2023). Financial incentives from the Australian Government to improve Indigenous participation in tertiary education were not introduced until 1969, namely the Aboriginal Study Grants Scheme (Abstudy). Even so, this made little impact—by the early 1970s only 18 Aboriginal students were known to be enrolled in tertiary studies (Bin-Sallik, 2003, p. 22). However, this is symptomatic of under-representation which occurred much earlier in education. Bin-Sallik (2003) placed blame squarely on the Australian schooling system, which failed to equip Indigenous students with the HE prerequisites needed for tertiary entry. This resulted in 'poor attempts to educate [Indigenous] children past primary school' and up until the 1960s, they could be refused 'entry into state schools with a majority of White children' (Bin-Sallik, 2003, p. 23).

In 2012, the Behrendt Review (Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People) made over 30 recommendations to bring Indigenous student participation in line with the Indigenous population in Australia of 2.2% (Behrendt et al., 2012). However, significant improvements are yet to be achieved:

in 2013 for example, less than 1% of the HE student population was Indigenous (Pechenkina, 2015). By 2018, some progress had been made: there were 18,062 Indigenous HE students, or 1.8% of the HE student population (https://www.indigenoushpf.gov.au/measures/2-06-educational-participation, accessed 15 February 2023). While targets to 'halve the gap' on Indigenous disadvantage have made some progress in recent years (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, 2016, 2020), remnants of the culture of exclusion still infiltrate and influence educational environments, with Indigenous students continuing to be significantly underrepresented (The Ethics Centre, 2016).

One example of such cultural exclusion relates to the insidious nature of stereotyping. Respect for Indigenous peoples' identities can be hijacked by the existence of stereotyping—an insidious form of racism. Stereotyping behaviours are not restricted to the university environment but are a microcosm of broader societal attitudes which many Indigenous students experience on a daily basis, long before beginning university study (Biddle & Priest, 2015; Yosso, 2005). Rochecouste et al. (2014) have expressed concern that while Indigenous students may be familiar with dealing with 'overt racist behaviours', there was less certainty about how to deal with 'cultural insensitivity at the institutional level' (p. 161), a concern echoed also by Bin-Sallik (2003). However, equally concerning is the reluctance of some academic staff 'to raise their awareness of Aboriginal knowledge and experience' which contributes to 'an ongoing lack of cultural safety provided by ill-informed, culturally incompetent staff' (Rochecouste et al., 2014, p. 161).

The situation for students living in rural or remote regions, or for low SES students in HE in regard to attrition rates, is also of concern. For example, The Grattan Institute confirms that the attrition rate of low SES students is 10% higher than students with high SES status (25% compared to 35% for high SES). However, this same report equally cautions that 'having a low-socioeconomic status does not of itself substantially add to risk, low-socioeconomic students are often over-represented among students with significant risk factors, such as weaker academic preparation or part-time study' (Cherastidtham et al., 2018, p. 39). The complexity of individual learners and their particular circumstances means that focusing on specific equity categories can result in

one-dimensional or oversimplified explanations of student experiences. This study has then chosen to focus on FiF students in response to Oikonomidoy's (2013) observation that:

> *Much of the existing literature in this field of study is framed around the existing sociological forces of social categorization, that is race, ethnicity, social class, gender, … and sometimes on their intersections. … Such overreliance on existing macro-level categories has been critiqued as being prone to a deficit approach.* (Oikonomidoy, 2013, p. 110)

By framing this study around FiF students, the intent is to move away from this type of deficit framing and instead explore the intricacies and realities of the lived experience of the FiF cohort. Chesters and Watson (2013) argue that structural inequalities in society delay the ability of the less privileged to 'undertake a degree and graduate' until later in life (p. 11), with flow-on effects to health, welfare, quality of life and earning capacity over a lifetime. Yet too often it is the notion of learners' preparedness for the academic environment that is examined without recognition of the structural stratification that individuals operate within. The next section explores the notion of 'preparedness' as this relates to the intersectionality of FiF learners.

Preparedness

Preparedness for embarking on university study is often linked to research on social class and motivations for study rather than on the opportunities available (Lehmann, 2009; McMillan, 2014; Watson, 2013), or on the impact that negotiating unfamiliar fields and 'rules of the game' may have on the individual (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In relation to academic preparedness, as newcomers to university culture, FiF students are often reported as being less prepared than their second or third generation peers (Forsyth et al., 2022; Groves & O'Shea, 2019). However, rather than framing this within social theories such as Bourdieu's outlined earlier, academic (under)preparedness is largely influenced by parental history of university attendance and is often explained in terms

of social class which is one of the most frequent categories mentioned in the literature on FiF students. Some of this literature is now presented, in terms of how it constructs notions of preparedness for success at university study. We note that a number of these references foreground social class and while not assuming that all FiF students can be classified in this way, we do note a level of applicability of these experiences across student populations.

Social Class

Historically, access to HE was no more the domain of the working class, than 'being tired, getting dirty, and getting hurt' was the description of the middle-class lifestyle and employment (Lehmann, 2009, p. 141). Privileging particular social classes has resulted in greater opportunity for those in higher socio-economic strata to 'build familiarity with … assumptions, values and expectations over a lifetime' which enables them to feel comfortable at university (Devlin, 2013, p. 940). Such familiarity is rarely the experience of the working class, who are far less likely to assume university study as part of their life's trajectory (Henderson et al., 2019; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Morrison, 2010).

In the US, increasing numbers of students who are first generation are more likely to be from lower-income circumstances, and from an 'ethnic or racial minority' (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021, p. 293). Typically, students in lower socio-groupings have fewer educational or other opportunities for movement beyond their familial 'station in life' (Lehmann, 2009, p. 147). Miller and Schulz (2014) argue that socioeconomic class is a 'formidable barrier to widening participation' (p. 84). Thus, when access to further education is provided—enabling different educational and career trajectories—the disparities constructed by long-held institutional traditions and cultures of class and privilege become more visible. These disparities problematise how outsiders might penetrate unfamiliar, class-constructed culture, and how access to, or lack of access to, such knowledge may impact on overall achievements and retention for FiF newcomers to university.

Preparedness is problematised if HE has not been considered a viable option in family or community thinking (Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). In McMillan's study (2014), she found significant differences in how students from middle and working classes were primed for university study. The author argued that middle-class families used their implicit knowledge of what universities assumed and rewarded to 'explicitly develop' their children as independent learners (2014, p. 1130). Such development directly and indirectly steers these family members towards a university trajectory, providing insights into how university study might be experienced. In contrast, McMillan found that working-class students had no such preparation, neither from their homes nor schools. Lack of opportunities for preparation equated to a reduction in the development of 'required dispositions and skills' that are rewarded by universities (McMillan, 2014, p. 1130). In addition, Talebi et al. (2013) found that when FiF enter university, the non-existence of 'familial socialisation' (p. 48) into university resulted in students being more likely to experience difficulty in understandings about university protocols. This situation was further compounded by unrealistic expectations from family and friends, most of whom had no opportunity to acquire experiential know-how of the challenges presented in this environment. These findings were echoed in a later study conducted by Ivemark and Ambrose (2021) who point to the role of early socialisation in the acquisition of the academic and social capitals underpinning university transitions.

Transitioning

Transitioning into and through university has also been explored in relation to social class, and is closely linked to preparedness. McMillan (2014) found obvious differences in emotional responses to university between middle- and working-class students which affected how university transitions were experienced by these two groups (p. 1134). Students who do not sit comfortably within traditional university culture due to its orientation towards the 'white middle class' population (Watson, 2013, p. 413) are likely to find the experience of transitioning challenging. Additionally, FiF students often take on pressures to succeed (Patfield, 2022), particularly if university study is considered a privilege rather than

a right, which may not be the experience of students from higher social classes. Unfamiliarity with the territory in which they are transitioning may also be exacerbated when their second or third generation peers have an implicit understanding about how things operate, which further limits this cohort's sense of belonging in the university environment (O'Shea, 2021). Social class may provide some ways of understanding difficulties in the experiences of transitioning for FiF but when this is framed within the middle-class orientation of many university cultures, this issue relies more on perceptions of position and privilege (Watson, 2013). As an indicator of transitioning, social status as well as being the FiF, can invoke the propensity for stereotyping those who are likely to be successful, and conversely, those who are likely to find the transition difficult (Eschenbach et al., 2014).

Vocational Focus

Students from working-class backgrounds are reported as having more tendencies towards adopting a vocational perspective on university study, often considering education as a 'means to an end to get a job' (Thering, 2010, p. 7) or as a way to give back to their communities (Lehmann, 2009; McMillan, 2014; Patfield, 2022). However, as working-class skills are not easily transferrable or translatable to the academic environment, the social hierarchy is maintained. This is despite increasing numbers of students from these social groupings hoping to educate their 'way out of their working-class background' towards vocational and financial security (Thering, 2010, p. 4).

Vocational perspectives are often identified as reaffirmations of social background. With career as the focus, university learning can be positioned in terms of value for money and learning applied skills, rather than being a natural extension of their lives (Patfield et al., 2021). As Thering (2010) also explains, working-class status is perpetuated and reinforced in the working-class schooling system, which tends to reproduce parental social status (p. 3). Differences between social classes in values placed on knowledge and thus, choices in major courses of study, can be explained by a greater need to translate practically into employment. In other words, for the working class, the tendency to focus on

theoretical majors is much less, with a greater predisposition to undertake applied studies. In short, those students from more privileged backgrounds seem to be more comfortable taking degrees which are vague and less clearly linked to employability such as 'sociology, history, or biology' (Lehmann, 2009, p. 144). In this regard, Thering (2010) presents a paradox, in that while students gain 'a middle-class understanding' of the value of education, there exists a propensity to 'revert back to the working-class need' for their education to result in a tangible vocation or career (p. 7). Interestingly, Beattie and Thiele (2016) found that FGS in particular, were 'significantly more likely than continuing students to discuss careers with their professors' (p. 351), providing an indication of the substantial investment being made in achieving vocational goals.

Closely linked to vocational focus is social mobility as a driving force. When prioritised, career motivations distinguish working-class from their middle-class peers who are not only less driven by social mobility but possess an 'easy assumption of success' (McMillan, 2014, p. 1131). Not surprisingly, parental discourse around regret for lifestyle disadvantages of working-class employment is influential. Such discourses may also provide a benchmark and motivation for many FiF students to change their family history by taking advantage of opportunities for a more rewarding career trajectory (Groves et al., 2022; O'Shea et al., 2016), even if this means taking a risk in 'turn[ing] their back on their parents and their lifestyle' (Lehmann, 2009, p. 147).

With the differences that preparedness, transitioning difficulties and vocational focus highlight, it is also not surprising that FiF often express feelings of being in a new world, at least until they are successfully enculturated into university ways of doing and knowing.

Sense of Belonging: FiF as Foreigners in a New World

Lack of transparency in the rules of the game for participation can exacerbate feelings of not belonging for students who are first in their families to attend university (Groves & O'Shea, 2019; O'Shea, 2021). Analogies

such as feeling lost, or entering into a new or foreign world, are apt (Groves & O'Shea, 2019). In Oikonomidoy's study (2013) of first generation college students, some working-class participants felt socially marginalised in the middle-class environment. Marginalisation relating to class and ethnicity was expressed as feeling perceived as not 'good enough', as being 'ten steps back' from their more confident peers, and as fear of speaking up in class lest they be exposed as 'probably [not knowing] what I'm talking about' (p. 117). Feelings of inferiority were not abated by suspecting that their confident peers were probably not 'smarter, but they just have … more knowledge' (Oikonomidoy, 2013, p. 118). Insights from Oikonomidoy's study leave us with little doubt that feeling like an 'outsider' can be perpetuated through socially constructed attitudes and practices, which succinctly demarcate social status, as her participants have articulated well. In keeping with the foreigner analogy, physical appearance and linguistic capital can also serve to 'expose' one's outsider-ness.

Outsider-ness Exposed

Challenges of blending into the university environment without drawing attention to one's working-class background encompass aspects of dress or physical appearance as well as linguistic capital, both of which are attached to notions of social class. Again participants in Oikonomidoy's study (2013) capture the visibility rendered by lack through 'socioeconomic disparities' (p. 118). These students perceived that middle-class students tended to show a lack of respect for those in lower social classes who 'don't look like the other people' (p. 119), giving the sense of being looking down upon. Related to this is the visibility rendered by having to think twice about spending money, as these students typically could not be openly frivolous and 'really have to think about money' (p. 119; also Forsyth & Furlong, 2003). Some explanations given were that linguistic prowess and clothing labels betrayed or confirmed social status, which in Oikonomidoy's study, was also related to perceptions of ethnic stereotyping (2013).

As with learning a new language, linguistic capital can pinpoint foreignness, but also highlight what some may see as lack. Foreignness becomes noticeable when students are enculturated into valued communication skills, which are variable and individual processes of acquisition. Miller and Schulz (2014) point out that developing a range of literacies is necessary to 'know how to think, act and communicate in university settings' (p. 79). Issues in the rate of acquiring these skills may be hampered by FiF students having fewer interactions with academic staff, while continuing generation students are reported as being more at ease in speaking to professors and teaching staff about course material (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). When exposure to the requisite linguistic capital has been circumscribed by an individual's social circumstances, this may also 'confound the development of academic capital' (Watson, 2013, p. 421). In fact, Beattie and Thiele found that the 'only significant predictor' of the likelihood of discussion about course materials with staff was in relation to 'pre-college family social capital' (2016, p. 351).

Linguistic fluency in 'academic speak', not surprisingly, is challenging for those students who have had limited exposure to the particular academic conventions in their schooling or work (McMillan, 2014; Oikonomidoy, 2013). The uneven distribution of linguistic capital can not only impact on how FiF present their knowledge and understanding in a form deemed acceptable in academe (Watson, 2013, p. 421), but can also hinder essential interactions with academic staff for developing such fluency (Beattie & Thiele, 2016). While some university staff may view linguistic prowess as an indicator of capabilities, it is more an issue of developing such fluency over time (Oikonomidoy, 2013). In addition, Groves and O'Shea (2019) report how students reflect on misinterpretation related to instructions, marking criteria and advice, which are symptomatic of less exposure to academic linguistic capital and the bewilderment associated with working out the rules of engagement.

Culturally endorsed ways of communicating in academia are not the same as in other fields of experience, and the rules of engagement are not often transparent. Using a trial by error approach developing the required linguistic capital can be particularly challenging for the FiF student to negotiate. The gap in perceptions of the haves and have nots can contribute substantially to feelings of not belonging.

Differences highlighted by social class are problematic, as they belie the complexity and implications of constructing university preparedness and success from the standpoint of assumed norms. This assumption is often implied through comparisons between higher social classes and lower. We now turn to discuss the implications that having a reservoir of cultural and social resources to draw upon in terms of access to intergenerational knowledge about university.

Intergenerational Influences

Apart from a lack of access to intergenerational or insider knowledge, university is often perceived as unreachable for many people. When they are accepted into a university programme they may not have the 'easy assumption of success' that their middle-class peers possess (McMillan, 2014, p. 1131). This can also lead to FiF students taking on familial pressures to succeed (whether real or perceived), particularly if university study is not an assumed trajectory. Unfamiliarity with the territory, exacerbated by lack of access to the implicit knowledge held by their second or third generation peers, may also hinder help-seeking behaviours (Beattie & Thiele, 2016; Talebi et al., 2013), particularly in the transition to study (Watson, 2013). FiF are often regarded as not having access to the reservoir of knowledge subsumed through lived and generational university experience (Groves & O'Shea, 2019).

FiF familial and community imaginings of university can also present as a barrier to succeeding in further education, which can range from 'ivory tower' to 'entrepreneurial' imaginings (May et al., 2016). However, often university is simply considered as being 'so difficult' and the preserve only of the really smart people (McMillan, 2014, p. 1132).

Family Aspirations: 'Do Better than Us'

Perceptions of the influence of families on FiF learners are intertwined with socially constructed attitudes towards socio-economic and occupational status as predictors of success at university (Patfield, 2022).

Dispositions and skills that are learned in particular familial contexts tend to be reproduced through the schooling environment with a world view seen through 'the working-class lens' which greatly influences the processes of 'understand[ing] their surroundings' (Thering, 2010, p. 3; also McMillan, 2014). While 'parental encouragement and involvement is one of the best predictors of postsecondary aspirations, especially when factored in conjunction with the family's financial situation' (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006, p. 536; also Barsegyan & Maas, 2022), there may be many underlying reasons why families are reported as unsupportive. First, if they have not acquired the dispositions themselves, it is difficult to understand how to provide advice on successful negotiation of the university environment. Second, there are often economic concerns or 'debt aversion' (Raciti, 2018) to high university fees, and a disjuncture between still having to work and university study as a means for future better paid employment. In addition, families may be expected to take on additional childcare and household responsibilities as well as other financial and practical assistance.

The narrative of students from disadvantaged circumstances includes parental stories of regret for the 'missed chances and lack of opportunities' leading to 'working-class employment'—or the hard way to earn money (Lehmann, 2009, p. 141). It is hardly surprising then, that these 'missed chances and lack of opportunities' (Lehmann, 2009, p. 141) often translate into parental aspirations for their children to do better. However, an issue raised by Talebi et al. (2013) is that FiF may receive less support from their families because the university student identity is 'less entrenched within their social networks' (p. 48), and therefore not considered a priority. On the other hand, families may have unrealistic expectations about the challenges of university study, leading to lack of understanding that may impact on the FiF experience in many ways (Talebi et al., 2013). In addition, it can become difficult to break the broader social perceptions 'back home' where the community perceives the student in a particular way, such as a low-status worker, and may question the purpose of going to university (O'Shea, 2020; Watson, 2013).

While aspirations for better career and lifestyle opportunities are important, families with no prior university experience are reported as being constrained by this, in terms of the preparation they are able to

provide for their university student (Patfield et al., 2021). An interesting contrast between students from different social classes was noted by Patfield et al. (2021), with those from FiF backgrounds often being constructed as 'too different' to succeed: this 'dominant narrative' was one of deficiency foreclosing educational futures even before compulsory schooling had concluded (p. 599).

We know that parental support is crucial—for first and continuing generation students. LeBouef and Dworkin (2021) note the key role played by the family in this endeavour and argue that: 'Researchers should consider the family as the place to start, focusing on family as a source of resilience and strength' (p. 311). Talebi et al. (2013) also found that even if family members were unable to relate to the experience of their FiF student, that education itself may be seen 'as economically and socially valuable' (2013, p. 56). However, an important aspect of developing a deeper understanding of how academia operates is being able to talk about it. In our research, many FiF students indicated they were selective with whom they discussed their studies and also selective about what they shared with family members (O'Shea et al., 2015). Similarly, in Watson's (2013) study, one participant articulated the difficulty of relating to family members when using 'uni mode' talk, and being aware of not being understandable to them (p. 423). This participant lamented how it was 'damn hard' when there was no-one to bounce ideas off when preparing a task or thinking through an idea (p. 423).

As mentioned in Chap. 1, families may also display aversion to risk or debt, an anxiety that may constrain the support provided. Even if parental or family aspirations are for a better life for the next generation, the reality is that if successful, these FiF learners may need to move outside existing family biographies. On the other hand, those who do not gain the qualifications needed for social mobility and continue in working-class situations may be seen to have squandered their parental investment and 'betray[ed] the sacrifice' made by their parents (Lehmann, 2009, p. 147).

Perceived lack of family support may be attributed to lack of parental involvement and lower levels of value placed on HE, juxtaposed with family members' risk aversion to debt and failure, which in turn may be partly attributable to their own lack of knowledge about the university environment and institutional support available (Ivemark & Ambrose,

2021). While family may have aspirations for education, the reality of day-to-day living, where money and privilege do not come easily, can blur benefits of short-term sacrifice for long-term gain. Regardless, family support is crucial and has been shown to directly impact on attrition rates for FiF regardless of socio-economic circumstances (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006, p. 536).

Conclusion

Much of the literature focuses on individual factors affecting FiF and other non-traditional students, and hence implies responsibility at an individual level for successful navigation of university study. However, along with Watson (2013), we argue that it is an institutional responsibility to reflect on their own practices and assumptions about what is required of students, and in turn to provide effective ways to support development of fluency and the enculturation of requisite academic skills. Those generations that lack implicit knowledge of cultural norms and expectations within the social constructs of the university enter as outsiders. As outsiders, the existing culture renders any lack that this cohort may have as *more* visible—both to themselves and to others (McMillan, 2014). The process of acquiring cultural knowledge can place enormous stress on the FiF learner and their families as they navigate new ground.

In this chapter, we have explored the deficit framing of FiF students as presented in much of the existing international literature which becomes problematic when underpinned by macro-level social categories (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021; Oikonomidoy, 2013; Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Our analysis has shown how this student cohort is predominantly framed as 'lacking'—a lack articulated through reference to cultural, social, familial, academic and economic capitals. We argue that this focus on lack only serves to disenfranchise this cohort, further contributing to a pervasive sense of disenfranchisement within the HE environment. What is more, such notions of lack obscure the very real strengths that such students possess as they pursue a university education as first in their families to do so.

Chapter 3, therefore, seeks to 'disrupt' this deficit framing by drawing on the narratives of FiF students in our research projects. These 'stories of transition' provide alternative ways to conceptualise those learners who are the first in their family to come to university. Adopting a strengths perspective, the chapter draws upon the work of Yosso (2005) and Sen (1992) to propose alternative theorisations, turning to our richly descriptive data to provide depth to this analysis. In doing this we seek to clear a space for the learners to articulate how they themselves perceived the enactment of a successful student self within university settings.

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3

Disrupting the Deficit: Beyond Notions of Lack for First-in-Family Students

Introduction

This chapter revisits our understandings of first-in-family (FiF) students and draws upon cultural and capability theories to shift from conceptualising this cohort as 'lacking' and instead explores how these individuals can be regarded from a position of strength. Building upon the work of Bourdieu, we refer to the work of Tara Yosso (2005) who has developed the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) Framework. This paradigm draws upon an interdisciplinary knowledge base informed by migrant studies, critical race theory, sociology and gender studies. The diffuse nature of this approach responds to the need to adopt diverse theoretical lenses in order to reconceptualise approaches to retaining and supporting students from a diversity of backgrounds. Such multiplicity informs the overall theoretical focus of this book as data has been analysed through a mix of various theoretical and analytical lenses.

Given the intersectionality of FiF participants, who are traversed by demographic and social factors, the focus in this chapter will be on the older student cohort, specifically those who are over 25 years of age. This is not to suggest that the younger cohort did not similarly come to

university with cultural strengths and capabilities but rather that these were different, often grounded in previous educational experiences. This chapter includes three narrative vignettes derived from one man and two women, recognising that higher education (HE) remains a gendered experience, with men and women narrating very different experiences and understandings of this space (see Chaps. 8, 9 and 10 for further discussion). The use of vignettes enables an issue or concept to be presented in an embedded fashion rather than stripped of its context or setting. The rationale for utilising student vignettes in this chapter is explained and the specifics of the approach taken are detailed, in recognition that vignettes can be constructed in a variety of ways (Delahunty & O'Shea, 2021).

In particular, this chapter explores how university attendance for these older students was not a simple linear journey but instead involved detours and changes. The chapter considers the circumstances within which these learners operated and reflects upon how these circumstances manifested within their educational trajectory. These stories are replete with the voices of the students themselves and it is they who define setting and context. The aim of the vignettes is to present a 'portrait' of the lived experience of each of these participants on their journey into HE.

We begin with an explanation of the strengths-based approach to understanding learners and educational experiences. This includes a discussion of the various theoretical framings that inform the analysis of data presented in this chapter, namely cultural and capabilities theory. The chapter then presents the three vignettes from learners, reflecting on their transition into the university environment. While each vignette is unique, the final section of this chapter draws upon the work of Yosso (2005) to propose alternative readings of each student's journey. This discussion concludes with reflections about how HE institutions might productively engage with understandings of capitals and capabilities.

Adopting a Strengths-Based Approach

Education is a powerful asset; not only have higher levels of education been shown to lead to greater wealth, better health and social outcomes but benefits to a person's emotional and intellectual well-being have also

been demonstrated (OECD, 2013). Repeatedly, research has indicated how continuing education and learning in life can result in positive fiscal, health and social benefits (Cassells et al., 2012; Zajacova & Lawrence, 2018). However, as Tinto (2008) so succinctly points out, 'access without effective support is not opportunity' (Para 1). Thus, while universities might profess to have an open-door policy, without adequate support and recognition of the complexities of diverse student cohorts, this access is by definition only partial.

Universities as organisations need to continually foreground the obstacles that students face in their learning journeys and avoid unintentional bias that perceives these challenges as somehow the students' fault. This type of deficit thinking is sometimes so deeply embedded in discourse and policy in this area that it attains a certain 'taken for grantedness' or invisibility. For example, in the last decades there has been an increase in references to 'raising aspirations' amongst young people in Australia in policy discourse, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds (Austin, 2022). However, this emphasis on the need to raise or build aspirations implies that certain groups do not already have such goals, which is an example of embedded deficit thinking.

Appadurai (2004) argues that the capacity to aspire is rooted in culture, with the rich or powerful having greater access to aspiration building because this group is able to draw upon a broader range of resources. Appadurai explains that 'the better off, by definition, have a more complex experience of the relations between a wide range of ends and means, because they have a bigger stock of available experiences of the relationship of aspirations and outcomes' (2004, p. 68). Gale et al. (2010) propose that the concept of 'raising aspirations' is actually a form of pathologising, manifested via discourses or meta-narratives within Australia. One demonstration of this is the substantial investment in programmes designed to raise the educational aspirations of children designated as belonging to a low SES bracket, predominantly at high school but also at the primary level (Gale et al., 2010). Such types of programmes may inadvertently feed into the discourse of the individual, perpetuating a deficit discourse where the focus is on the need to develop the resources of young people rather than recognising the diverse structural parameters within which individuals exist. Similarly, when we consider older

learners, too often the assumption is that institutions need to work 'on' learners or fill them up with the requisite skills to enable success within the HE environment (O'Shea, 2016a; O'Shea et al., 2018).

Aside from health and wealth benefits, education also provides a powerful tool for students to consider their place in the world, a space to question, consider and evaluate life or lived experience. Recognising and celebrating the knowledges and skills that every learner brings to this environment can facilitate this process. Adopting a critically reflexive position for both educators and students can enable exploration of 'the possibilities of what it means to be citizens while expanding and deepening […] participation in the promise of a substantive democracy' (Giroux, 2010, p. 2). The following sections draw upon a range of theorists to explore how we might better conceptualise FiF students as individuals imbued with strengths and capabilities. The validation of students in this way can be a powerful experience for all learners but for those who have experienced inequity or inequality, strengths-based approaches can be transformative on both a personal and public level (O'Shea, 2016a). Such approaches would also lead to a more comprehensive transformation of HE to better address new equity and widening participation agendas.

Theories of Cultural Capitals

Chapter 2 introduced the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1986, 1993) and indicated how Bourdieu's theorisations have been applied to understandings of educational equity and participation. This work has been usefully applied to examining variations in educational outcomes between students, largely by recognising that an individual's entry into and success within a particular field is dependent upon the amount and types of capitals possessed. Educational success is then not simply attributable to innate abilities but rather relates to the capacity to adapt existing capitals to ones that are valued within the institution. Bourdieu and Passeron recognise how this capacity is manifested as an 'affinity between class cultural habits and the demands of the educational system or the criteria which define success within it' (1977, p. 22).

However, Bourdieu's work has drawn some criticism, with the reproductive nature of his theories attracting attention. For example, the concept of habitus has been regarded as too constraining and limiting of people's agency, suggesting that dispositions and beliefs are solely stratified by structural factors related to class, gender and ethnicity. Bourdieu (1990) has clarified that habitus does not necessarily determine individual action but it does limit the types of behaviour that an individual might consider or act upon: '[T]he effect of the habitus is that agents who are equipped with it will behave in a certain way in certain circumstances' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 77). Interestingly, Reay (1998) refers to habitus as 'primarily a dynamic concept, a rich interlacing of past and present, individual and collective interiorized and permeating both body and psyche' (p. 521). Whilst Bourdieu did not regard habitus in quite such fluid terms, in later writings he did describe it as a 'transforming machine' that, while reproducing the dominant social conditions, does this in a 'relatively unpredictable way' (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 87),

Yosso (2005) has similarly expanded upon Bourdieuian theorisations with particular reference to understandings of cultural capital theory, proposing the Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) Framework. This is not a critique of Bourdieu's work but rather suggests that Bourdieuian concepts of cultural capital are too limiting and fail to adequately consider the 'assets and characteristics' of diverse populations (Yosso, 2005, p. 77). According to Yosso (2005), traditional Bourdieuian cultural capital does not distinguish between possible capital resources that students may bring to educational environments and instead relies on limited understandings of 'a very narrow range of personal resources' (p. 75). Yosso refines and expands Bourdieuian notions of cultural capital to propose a strengths-based model (CCW) that does not equate 'disadvantage' with the possession (or not) of customary or accepted 'cultural knowledge and skills' (2005, p. 75).

Yosso (2005) expands the definition of cultural capital to encapsulate the knowledges and cultural wealths of underrepresented and minority groups in education, particularly the perspectives of Hispanic or Chicano(a) learners. The conceptual categories developed by Yosso can be usefully applied to examination of the intersections between student and institutional capital, providing a theoretical means to explore how

learners, like migrants, 'create mechanisms of validation for their cultural capital' (Erel, 2010, p. 642) upon entry into the university landscape. Identifying six forms of capital that include aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant, Yosso (2005) proposes that these are often unrecognised and underestimated within the university landscape, yet arguably provide rich foundations that students can build upon to enact success.

Yosso's capitals variously appreciate the context of the learner as a form of strength rather than a deficit. For example, *aspirational capital* is a form of resistance that recognises how learners who are from marginalised groups are enacting a 'culture of possibility' (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). This activity arguably allows those around them, particularly children, to imagine opportunities that exist outside their current surroundings even when lacking the 'objective means to attain those goals' (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). Similarly, *navigational capital* acknowledges how students from non-traditional backgrounds may have encountered hostile institutions during their journey to HE. Hence, this capital recognises both individual agency as well as the role of community and social networks in enabling individuals to move through intimidating places and spaces. The richness and depth offered by this framework in the exploration of university experiences has been explored in a number of publications (O'Shea, 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2018) and we will return to the work of Yosso (2005) at the end of this chapter when analysing the student vignettes.

Redefining the Capitals of FiF Learners

This book then takes as its starting point the view that we need to recognise what FiF learners arrive with, not in terms of 'lack', but rather as various types of strengths that need to be both acknowledged and built upon. The following section draws on three student vignettes from Study (A) to deeply examine how each learner variously reflected upon their journey to HE. Using a number of vignettes allows a deeper understanding of this field; these should not be regarded as an objective representation but rather as constructed entities (Polkinghorne, 1995). The process

of writing up the vignettes commenced with the question: 'How did individual learners reflect upon their journey to university?' which provided the basis for the stories that follow. Creating the vignettes was a recursive process that involved a circular movement between the interviews and the text, but equally, in creating vignettes, reference to the 'narrative compass' of the author is inevitable (Bresler, 2006, p. 28). Similarly, moving from the oral to the written involves a subtle shift in the textual dynamics of the learners' stories to create, as was mentioned in Chap. 1, a 'composition', essentially a retrospective explanation of occurrences that underpin a subject of inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1995). Such stories offer a fundamental way to enter into the lives of others; as Merrill (2004) explains, such biographies 'frequently reveal the difficulties encountered when participating in learning, as a result of macro and micro factors, and the strategies … engage[d] in to overcome them' (p. 75),

The following vignettes could be construed in deficit terms as 'stories of lack' but by applying the strengths-based thinking via the lens of Yosso's CCW framing, we endeavour to provide an alternative perspective. This is a relational understanding of student experience that takes into consideration the wider dynamics of the realities within which these individuals exist. Given that these students do not necessarily have a generational history of HE attendance, this book recognises that if we are truly wanting to comprehend the ways FiF students engage and succeed in this sector, then we need to listen carefully to the voices of those around them and close to them, as well as to the narratives of the learners themselves. This introduction to these reflective narratives also provides context for Chap. 4, which deeply examines the embodied nature of this HE participation.

The following three vignettes are presented consecutively, according to three common themes that address: (i) the motivation for attending university; (ii) the reactions to this decision and (iii) the realities of attendance. These themes relate to questions asked in each of the interviews and offer a framework for structuring the narrative that can be applied universally. Clearly, each vignette differs in content and so at the end of the section, discussion and conclusions follow.

Rose's Story: 'My Family has Just Never Been, Nobody's Ever Gone—It's Never Been an Expectation'

Rose is married with two young children, aged six and three; she is 28 and works part-time in her husband's family business. Rose is in the first year of a Bachelor of Arts and hopes ultimately to complete a postgraduate teaching qualification in order to attain her goal of becoming a teacher. She studies part-time and admits that her subject choice is largely based upon timetabling. She explained that for this semester: 'I've enrolled in subjects—they're all on a Tuesday, thank God—and I'm just hoping that I can get them close together.'

Why University? Why Now?

Like many older students, attending university was the realisation of a long-term ambition. Rose described how she 'always wanted to go to university; [but] didn't think I could do it straight out of school'. For Rose, her journey to university was littered with interruptions, first of all leaving school in Year 11 due to anxiety issues. While later repeating Years 11 and 12, Rose decided it was not yet time for her to attend university; she explained: 'I don't think I would have been a good student back then. My head space just wasn't right so I did a whole bunch of other stuff.'

When she compared her younger self with 'adult' Rose, she conceded that this was the right time for her to study:

> I think I'm a better student. I enjoy it now whereas school was just a chore and it was just something you had to do. Now I know what I want and, like I said, I've got my family and that's what's pushed me in the direction I'm going. It's made me see I guess—opened up whole other options like I would never have considered being a teacher before I had my two boys; I think it's just helped me to go, "This is what I want."

Reactions

The responses to Rose's decision to come to university were mixed: her mother and mother-in-law provide babysitting and she explained that,

while initially unsupportive, her in-laws have begun to accept that this decision to return to study is a positive one:

> [My in-laws] *believe that working is what will get you far in life; not studying and they think I'm a serial studier so they are not impressed by it I guess. They're like, "Why don't you just keep doing the job you're doing?" They don't understand that I did that because I just didn't think I could do uni at the time and I found myself in a more capable place and a situation that allowed me to be able to do it so I was like, "I want more, I want to achieve more".*

Despite this initial reluctance, Rose admitted that it was her husband's parents that allowed her to work flexibly and contribute to the household income. While her own mother was prepared to 'support me in any way, shape or form.' Rose's siblings are less encouraging: 'They're jealous. It's quite hard … my sister's always … when I told her what I was doing, she was like, 'That's what I've always wanted to do'.

For Rose, it is her husband and children who provide the most concerted and tangible forms of reinforcement. She described her partner as 'amazing. He's just like "Wow, I can't believe you're doing it. You've got the two kids, you've got work and you're still doing it." He'll support me in any way he can; he's just happy that I'm happy.' Similarly, her two young sons are unequivocal in their support:

> *My older one, he is in Year 1 now and he's really cute; he's always saying "I understand mum, you've got to go to uni so you can be a teacher" … he tells everybody under the sun. My youngest, he sits up at the table "I'm doing uni work mum" and things like that; he's happy.*

Realities

Despite feeling that 'It's time for me to do what I want to do now', Rose's initial transition into university was full of uncertainty. She received an offer for the Bachelor of Arts but when she expressed her desire to complete studies in Education was told by a staff member: 'I wouldn't even bother trying to get into Education if I were you. You probably won't even get the marks.' This initial discouragement plagued her early

university experiences and it wasn't until she received a distinction on her first assignment, that she felt that her dream might just be a possibility: 'When I got my marks back I think that's when I was like "Okay, I deserve to be here just like anyone else" and I finally just went, "Okay, you can do this." It's all good.'

Lena's Story: 'I've Really Just Found Uni a Whole, Complete, Unique, Different Experience'

Lena is 43 and, like Rose, is in the first year of her Bachelor of Arts with a goal of undertaking postgraduate teaching qualifications. Attending university was also a long-term ambition but was delayed because, Lena explained, '[I] had kids when I was much younger—in my 20s—I had to put it off. As soon as my eldest son turned 18, it was like "Right, that's it. I'm going".' Lena left school in Year 9 and has undertaken a range of vocational qualifications over the intervening years, including 'accounting, business management, small business management, OH&S … I've done all sorts of different things'.

Why University? Why Now?

Lena explained the catalyst for attendance came from her eldest son turning eighteen. Having been a single parent and surviving on a low income, the decision to attend university was born from a desire to do something for the 'self':

> *for half of my kid's lives I actually raised them on my own … having to be mother, father, care-giver, everything and uni is just me, it's just something else I've actually wanted to achieve.*

University was not an option for Lena when growing up, considered by her community to be 'out-of-reach'. She said: '[W]hen I was younger, a lot of people said "No, you'll never go to uni"—it was their perception of that … it was a little bit of fear in a way.' Lena does not elaborate about

this fear and does not clarify if this was her own fear or the anxiety of others as they witnessed someone moving outside their expected life course.

Reactions

Perhaps not surprisingly, reactions to Lena's university attendance were very mixed and this seems to have been rooted in the educational convictions of those around her. As Lena described: '[I]t was basically almost taught that university was only for those that were really smart, extremely smart … it was just people's perception of actually … someone like me to go to university.'

Despite these perceptions, Lena pursued her ambitions, albeit later in life than she anticipated. Her children regarded her as 'nuts' for enrolling at this stage in her life whilst her friends were initially 'shocked', but Lena also identified how 'they were actually—how should I put it—very proud I'm doing it'. Overall, however, the reactions were surprise and a level of disbelief, as she explained:

> [P]eople have actually turned around and some actually said a few years ago "You'll never go to university", same when they turn around and say "You'll never own a house". Sorry, I'm at uni and I own a house'.

Realities

Lena has not been disappointed by her attendance and described how she was enjoying her studies particularly 'the challenge. I've taken myself out of my comfort zone and doing something completely different'. She has been surprised by the fact that attendance at university has actually brought her closer to her sons:

> From what I've learned and from what I know, especially with the boys with their schooling, what they've been doing … with me being at uni and what I was learning, we're actually sitting down more and talking [about] what I'm learning, what they're learning and all sorts of different things'.

Whilst growing up in a community located only a short distance from the local regional campus, Lena admitted that prior to enrolling she had never entered the university environs. Once enrolled, she was amazed by how 'friendly' staff were, this surprise founded upon her *a priori* expectations:

> [G]rowing up, you were taught that university was for academics and really smart people. One of the actual things I've found with the campus—they're all very friendly down there, easy to talk to and they don't make you scared or worried or anything.

While challenged by the environment, Lena described the changes she was experiencing as unexpected but welcomed: 'Basically it's [university] changing life, changing everything. That's basically what it's gone to. It's hard to explain.' These changes were partially related to her status as a mature age student. Lena indicated that being older meant she had: 'a lot more going on to what a lot of the younger students … we've had to rearrange our lives to fit uni in or rearrange our lives around uni, sort of thing, to what fits in with us'. Despite needing to adapt and change, Lena ends with encouragement to other older learners considering attending university and stated: 'I'd actually say to anyone that was … especially being older, "If you want to go to uni and you think you can't, change your mind because you actually can."'

Tom's Story: 'I've Had a Long and Differing Career You Might Say'

Tom is 62 years old and is in the first year of an Accounting degree, he has no children and is currently living with his partner. Tom had a variety of jobs over the years that included running a business, working in a bank and office cleaning. Tom did start university in his youth but he left after one semester largely because he was trying to juggle so many different responsibilities:

[T]rying to start to study at 6:00 o'clock at night after you've already been up and about for nine, ten hours working … I dropped out—basically [it got] to a point where I couldn't do everything and university got dropped by the wayside.

Why University? Why Now?

Dropping out of university in the 1970s had long-term implications for Tom who admitted: '[T]hat's the reason why I went to TAFE for 30-odd years; as some sort of psychological replacement if you know what I mean.' He expressed some regret at his decision to depart and explained:'[I]f I would have withstood that pressure for those four years, although I turned out okay, I certainly would have been operating at a different level.' Tom reflected that while university was free at the point of his initial entry, 'part-time students were not treated all that well in those days' and attributes this to:

sort of class-conscious situation … the full-time students were coming straight from school … I'm damn sure my parents couldn't afford to pay for uni fees; we were very much blue collar.

Similar to Lena, Tom had undertaken many different TAFE courses and admitted that his attendance at university was galvanised by the fact that he had 'run out of opportunities at the TAFE and one of the Head Teachers said: "Well you've got no choice now; you've just got to bite the bullet and do it".' Despite his lengthy learning career, Tom described how he felt an initial general unease about enrolling in university based upon 'the natural anxieties of whether or not I would be up to the task'.

Reactions

Reactions to Tom's enrolment from friends and family were succinctly described as 'all positive' but reactions from within the university were more varied. Tom explained that being one of the older students in the classroom had some interesting repercussions. For example, he described how:

[T]he university makes some basic assumptions that are not necessarily correct. That is, that you are coming from school, your study habits are mature and it's organised, et cetera—that is not the case—the school students, very much so—that's where they've come from.

For Tom, working alongside a younger generation has been a little daunting, asking himself: '[D]o us oldies really want to go into a classroom with all these bright and sparkly new kids and have to play at their level?'

Realities

Despite having some initial misgivings, Tom indicated that he 'quite enjoy[s] the younger people and to a certain degree I think they quite enjoy … [his] stupid jokes and slant on different parts of history.' While admitting that some might 'wish that beady old bastard up the back of the class would shut up for a change', he also described more nuanced relationships with some of this younger cohort. This depth manifested itself in some students 'drawing on my experience not in an egotistic way … "Mentoring" is too strong a word; it's somewhere between [that and] information transfer'. Tom further concedes that his maturity also informed his own learning as he recognised that being older gave him deeper insight into: 'knowing what you're good at and what you're not good at'.

Cultural Strengths of Older FiF Learners

These older students all reflected upon how their journey to university was characterised by interruptions and was non-linear in nature. This non-linearity may be regarded as a deficit but for these individuals, this interrupted expedition provided invisible assets within the university environment. Such assets will be described in reference to Yosso's capitals but initially we provide a deeper understanding of the types of issues each encountered, particularly in relation to decisions to attend university.

Each of the narrators variously described obstacles to their attendance even when these were not identified as such by the individuals. For example, Rose had to manage her study around work and family commitments, a situation that determined the subjects she could enrol in, limiting choices to those that were timetabled on her available days. While Rose had the 'freedom' to attend university, this should be recognised as a partial freedom that fundamentally impacted on the nature and range of her studies. Rose's is not the only story to reflect controls that operated at an almost invisible level. Similarly, Tom reflected how in his youth he had the opportunity to enrol in university without attracting any fees. However, the combination of competing demands on his time and the ways in which the university structured and regarded part-time study constrained this opportunity, similarly limiting his ability to flourish academically. His family's financial circumstances were such that Tom had to support himself—in the end this proved too difficult. While Tom seemingly had both the choice and the ability (attested to by the lifelong learning activities that followed), he did not have the necessary material support. Ultimately, this gap in resources led to his departure, foreclosing this early attempt to gain a university qualification. Tom described this decision as having long-term implications both personally and financially.

Lena's agency regarding attending university was also constrained; whilst she lived near to the campus the voices of others intruded on her educational ambitions, telling her that people 'like her' did not attend university. Interestingly, Lena's 'resistance capital' (Yosso, 2005) provided a key resource to 'push back' against the limitations placed on her educational future. Resistance capital points to individuals' access to a range of tools and dispositions that form the basis for alternative or unexpected behaviours. This form of capital recognises personal attitudes and actions that ultimately defy a preconceived status quo. In Lena's case she proudly defied the presuppositions of the naysayers in her community by succeeding at university and owning a home. This defiance arguably provided rich motivation for her educational endeavours.

Yosso (2005) also identifies how *familial capital* or culturally informed 'knowledges nurtured among familial (kin)' (p. 79) can be an alternative but intrinsic source of strength and knowledge for students from diverse backgrounds. The importance of family is similarly echoed by Huber

(2009) in her study with Chicana FiF undergraduate students. For this cohort, familial capital provided both inspiration and motivation to continue education. Access to the intergenerational knowledge gained outside the academy is where family or community can play a crucial role in supporting an FiF student. The knowledge gained from life experience warrants greater appreciation in the discussion on the role of the family or community, as it is family who these students turn to most often for support (Capannola & Johnson, 2022; Le Boeuf & Dworkin, 2021; O'Shea et al., 2015; Watson, 2013). For both Lena and Rose, the family, particularly children, was key to their educational endeavours, providing a catalyst (Lena), direction (Rose) and also ongoing motivation (Lena and Rose). For example, whilst initially unsupportive, Lena admits that her sons have unexpectedly contributed to her persistence at university, referring to how new conversations within the household have been a source of both motivation and encouragement.

For the two women, the challenges offered by parenting may also have provided additional skills transferable to the university environment. West (1996) suggests that the various shifts and transformations that parenting women encounter in their lives, such as birthing and mothering, provide rich resources when coping with transition to HE. West further argues that the ambiguity and creativity associated with parenting and responsibilities entailed in holding 'the delicate fabric of families together' (p. 131) better prepared the women in his study for the world of uncertainty that characterises HE. Cox and Ebbers (2010) also reflect upon the support of others such as family and children as a source of encouragement in patterns of persistence at university, echoed by Lovell (2014) who identified how 'academic motivation for female parents seems intertwined between their role of parent and student' (p. 370).

Despite having clear and long-term *aspirational capital*, each of the narrators similarly expressed low levels of confidence, which implicitly informed their sense of belonging on campus. Rose in particular reflected upon initial apprehensions concerning her enrolment and it was not until she achieved good marks in her first set of assignments that she felt somewhat secure in her decisions. Similarly, Tom indicated misgivings about

his abilities to compete with the younger student cohort despite having studied consistently at a vocational level in the preceding years. However, once some insight was gained into the processes and how the system works, these students were surprised that success was within their reach and pass marks or higher were achievable (O'Shea, et al., 2015; Stone & O'Shea, 2021). However, the fact that the strengths that these learners arrived with were not foregrounded and applauded speaks to a gap in the ways institutions engage with certain student cohorts.

Despite hurdles, each managed to navigate the university environment with their reflections indicating how this successful navigation was in part due to drawing on existing capabilities and cultural wealths. Each encountered potentially constraining factors, and while we do not applaud nor accept the 'psychic costs' (Friedman, 2014) such encounters entail, instead recognise the requisite strengths required to navigate these. These potentials need to be acknowledged within HE discourses as another facet to the experience of becoming a student. Such normalisation can both support learners, particularly those who are mature aged, as they make the transition into this environment as well as highlight the complex and individuated nature of transition for students from more diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion

These vignettes highlight just some of the complexities that three older learners were dealing with during their transition to university studies. All three were in the early stages of their degree programmes and so this movement into the HE sector was immediate. However, it is important to remember that this deeply personal perspective only provides a partial snapshot of these events. University study was perceived both as filling an empty space in an experiential or embodied sense (Rose) but also as providing a space to reclaim a sense of self (Lena) or continue an interrupted journey (Tom). Students who do not follow the traditional linear pathways in education are variously constructed as different from school

leavers but often this 'difference' has negative connotations. Moving beyond these deficit perspectives provides an opportunity not to view older learners in terms of 'lack' but instead as people replete with cultural wealth. Drawing upon the work of Yosso (2005) provided a conceptual framework for considering these students' stories as insights into the diversity of wealths they bring to the campus environment. Recognising older learners within a strengths perspective ultimately offers the possibility to better capitalise on these skills and knowledges and embed these within university discourses and policy. Indeed, considering mature learners in terms of the 'experiential capitals' (O'Shea, 2018) they bring to the campus provides a new framing for both supporting and engaging this population. Such experiential capitals can not only be capitalised upon in terms of how this cohort are supported but equally, provide a rich resource for how teaching and learning environments are structured and enacted moving forward.

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4

What Am I Waiting for?

You know what? Life's getting away from all of us, your kids do grow up.
What am I waiting for?
—Belinda*, 31, single, B. Psychology, online*

Introduction

Entering formal university study as the first person in one's immediate family to do so is inevitably a major challenge. The focus of this chapter is on key factors influencing the decision to undertake university study from FiF students who participated in Study B (as discussed in Chap. 1). Once they had made the decision to study, there were other factors to contend with, such as their own and others' reactions, expectations and initial adjustments, as well as the support within and outside their universities, which helped to sustain them through this transition. This chapter examines this process of transition and adjustment, and the ways in which these students and others around them responded. The intent of this chapter is to provide an overview of collective findings, which will be unpacked more deeply in Part II of this book. The themes that follow

provide a 'big picture' perspective on this research, which is defined in a more nuanced way in the subsequent chapters. In the process of becoming a university student and identifying themselves as such, there were significant personal transformations that emerged for these students. These adjustments and transformations are explored within this chapter, as well as the significant part that the institution itself can play in helping the student to transition into this new environment and in continuing to support the student's journey.

Reasons for Coming

Why do FiF students decide to come to university at a particular point in time? For many students in our study, there was a catalyst for action—an event that had occurred which led, directly or indirectly, to the decision to study. This is consistent with other research into the experiences of those coming to university as FiF students (O'Shea, 2014, 2016), particularly those who are mature-age (May et al., 2016; Stone & O'Shea, 2012, 2019). McGivney (2006) talks about catalysts such as 'others in their circle are doing it' or a need 'to deal with an immediate situation in their life (life transitions, illness, redundancy, bereavement, divorce)' (p. 85). Jack Mezirow (1991) famously termed these catalysts 'disorienting dilemmas' (Debenham & May, 2005; Fleming, 2022). Various factors such as these were certainly present for many of the students in our research. The birth of a child, for example, was a major catalyst for Erin who said, 'When I had her [daughter] I just wanted a change of career and it seemed like a good idea' (29, single parent, one child, Information Technology, online). Also for Vicki, who reflected on possible trajectories for her future following the birth of her third child:

> *When [youngest child] came along—and she came when I was 39—I kind of had this moment of going "What am I going to do? Do I want to go back to what I was doing prior to her arrival or do I want to do something that is a little bit different?"* (Vicki, 40s, three children, Enabling Program)

Most commonly, a change at home or at work had led them to review their life and to decide that they wanted to achieve something 'better'.

Seeking a Better Future

I wanted to get a better job and have better prospects long-term. (Stuart, 24, Arts, online)

Seeking a better future, as Stuart was doing, is a common sentiment expressed by FiF students, particularly if this leads to a better quality of life than experienced by their parents (Lehmann, 2009; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018). A key precipitating factor for many in our study was the realisation that they needed qualifications to advance at work, pursue their career goals and improve their income, as the following quotes illustrate:

I think it really came to a head when I applied for a promotion at work and was knocked back because I didn't qualify … It was my boss's job that I applied for and got knocked back. (Gemma, 42, partnered, 3 teenage children, Arts, online)

Probably the biggest thing was career progression. My degree is directly related to the job that I'm in currently and jobs that I wish to pursue in the future. (Barbara, 62, single, 2 adult children, Nursing, on-campus)

The theme of 'betterment'—seeking a better future, financial security, a more meaningful existence, self-sufficiency—was present across all of the students' stories in our research, as expressed by Tracey, 'I need to find a career path, you know, learn something, get some more skills under my belt' (35, partnered, two children, Enabling Program). The idea of needing to provide oneself with a challenge, which by implication would lead to betterment, comes across strongly in the words of Daniel:

Before I came to university I did a trade as a motor mechanic. I started out real young at 14 and by the time I was 24, I'd been there for 10 years in the same workshop and I needed more of a challenge. (30, partnered, no children, Engineering, on-campus)

Seeking betterment through improving income and employability was clearly articulated by Emma:

My husband and I have always been on low incomes together, combined incomes, so I think everybody knows that will ease a lot of stress and just to be able to live and pay the bills. I think everybody knows that university is a great thing for jobs. (Emma, 32, partnered, 1 child, Nursing, on-campus)

The emphasis on education as a path to improving employability and income is consistent with a shift that has been taking place over the past couple of decades. This has arisen from changes in understandings about the purpose of higher education (HE) 'driven largely by the forces of global neoliberalism' (Burke & Crozier, 2014, p. 53) in which the value of HE is seen less in terms of its contribution to society as a whole, and more in terms of its value to the individual's earning capacity and employability (Danvers & Hinton-Smith, 2021). HE has become conflated with a 'relentless promotion of employability' (Williams, 2013, p. 89).

Tied up with the promise of improved employability through HE was a strong desire for financial self-sufficiency, particularly for some of the women in our study. Elle sought a university education:

So I can be self-sufficient. I don't want to be on government payments forever. I want to be able to earn my own way and not rely on a man ever again, so yes, that's pretty much it—rely on myself. (Elle, 33, single parent, three children, Arts, on-campus)

For many, entering university studies was a fulfilment of a long-term dream or ambition. While better employment may also have been a goal, it was the realisation of personal potential that was the driving force. In Ally's words, 'It was something that I always wanted to do. It's not something that anybody in my family has ever done' (39, single parent, two children, Psychology, on-campus). These themes of betterment and opportunity are explored in more depth in the analysis of specific student cohorts featured in the next part of the book. The repetitive nature of this theme indicates the deeply personal and embodied nature of the HE journey.

Prior Barriers

So what had stopped the mature-age students in this cohort from coming to university before now? In their research in Australian rural communities, Chapman et al. (2006) identify certain barriers that impede participation in education for adults. These include personal and societal barriers, financial barriers, geographic barriers, management barriers, and vision, mission and identity barriers. Many stories of participants in this study and in more recent research (Crawford, 2021; Delahunty, 2022) have indicated the presence of societal and identity barriers, particularly in the form of a lack of expectations or encouragement to go to university, and having no-one else in their family with university experience. These students may not have previously viewed university as a possibility for themselves, nor saw themselves as being suitable for university. This perception is summed up in this research by the words of one survey participant, who said that she 'felt as though I was not smart enough to attend University' (18–21, single, no children, Arts, on campus), whilst another explained that he:

> was very hesitant at the start and I think it was partly why I put if off for so many years, because I was worried about not being smart enough and not knowing what to do. (30–40, single, no children, Criminology, online)

Circumstances while growing up also contributed to considering university study as an impossibility, as described by Rochelle:

> I come from a broken family and there was child abuse in the family … I passed Year 10 and then I left and I had to find a job. The story at home was I was just unable to … complete the study so I went to work and now I'm trying to give myself what I wasn't able to give myself when I was young. (Rochelle, 45, single, Arts, online)

A similar sentiment was expressed by a female participant who wrote:

> The reason I didn't attend university straight out of high school was because my father didn't believe in educating a daughter and refused to assist in any way. (40–50, single, three children, Early Childhood Education, online)

Such experiences echo the findings of McLaren (1985) in her research with female mature-age students at a small adult education college in the UK more than four decades ago in the 1970s. At that time, McLaren found that most of the women she interviewed had left school by 16 as a result of parental and societal attitudes about education not being important for girls, where 'most parents expected their daughters to marry young and to find a conventional job' (p. 46). While times have changed significantly since then, many women entering university now in their 40s and beyond, as young women have experienced the type of societal restrictions on their education that McLaren describes (see, e.g., Stone & O'Shea, 2021).

Experiences of school can also make it difficult for some to consider further study in later years. A number of male FiF participants indicated the effect of negative school experiences:

[I] basically dropped out of school. I wasn't actually disciplined or driven to go anywhere, didn't really know my sense of direction … I had a fair few difficult and tumultuous years at school. (Nick, 39, partnered, four children, Education, on-campus)

I was asked to leave … I had sort of a violent past but that wasn't the reason I was asked to leave; it was because I wasn't participating in the work properly. I think they were very nit-picky about it but I chose to agree with them and leave. (Rick, 21, single, no children, Computer Science, on-campus)

There is evidence that women and men face different, gendered challenges within education (McNamara, 2022; Stone, 2013). Indeed, from research with male adult learners, Golding (2006) concludes that 'it is men who have had the least positive formal learning experiences—particularly at school—who are most at risk and are less likely to … embrace any form of institutional, adult and community or formal learning' (p. 176). Tett (2000) in her study of male and female mature-age working-class students at a small university in Scotland, also found interesting

gender differences between the male and female descriptions of their school experiences. The men in her study tended to attribute their negative experiences to the teachers' dislike of them for being too rebellious or argumentative, while the women were more likely to attribute their negative school experiences to pressure at home, through family responsibilities and expectations. Fran, for example, found that pressure from home impacted on her experience of school:

> I wasn't allowed to do art at school … when I spoke to dad about it more recently he said that it was possibly more about the fees at the time but, in my head, … nobody grows up to be an artist. That's the statement I remember someone saying to me. (Fran, 53, single, one child, Fine Arts, online)

The impact of gender on the experiences of both women and men as students is discussed in more depth later in this book. Chapter 8 examines the impact of gender on the experiences of mothers within this student cohort, while Chap. 9 explores the role that gender played in the experiences of the male participants.

Sources of Inspiration and Influence

Our research provided insight into ways in which others were often a source of inspiration for FiF students, implicitly or explicitly influencing them to pursue university study and enabling them to forge different educational trajectories from their family 'norm'. McGivney (2006) describes these 'others' as 'influencers, catalysts or change agents [who] are hugely important in leading others into learning' (p. 87). Within our study, participants named parents, friends, partners, children, teachers, work colleagues and managers as sources of influence and inspiration. Our research affirms the role that people such as these have in constituting the social context within which individuals seek to form and then fulfill their personal academic goals and objectives.

Inspiration from Home

Inspiration from those closest to the students, family members within their own homes, provided invaluable support. For example, partners were rated highly as encouragers:

> *I have a very supportive partner and he said "Just quit work. We don't need you to work. This is what you really want to do so let's focus on doing that".* (Marilyn, 31, Enabling Program)

Within their own families of origin, mothers in particular were frequently named as inspirers, such as by Misti who said, 'My mum was always influential in my life in terms of wanting to progress to the next level and she was always extremely proud' (30, single, Business, online). Also Samir, a 21-year-old in an Enabling Program, said that he was inspired, 'Pretty much [by] my mum because she didn't know much English as well, and all the time she's been going to TAFE and doing TAFE courses and now she's got a diploma in business.' Not surprisingly, the role of inspirational others within the household was a recurrent theme that was highlighted across various cohorts of learners and will be returned to in Part II.

Inspiration from Work or School

Inspirational workplace colleagues such as managers were also a significant source of encouragement. Nicole reported that, 'My old boss, she did [inspire me]… that's pretty much whose direction I followed in' (21, single, no children, Commerce, on-campus). Similar comments were also evident in the surveys such as, 'My manager at the time was studying and working full time and she suggested I do the same' (Female survey participant, 25–30, partnered, no children, Arts, online). Other colleagues at work provided inspiration through mentoring and encouragement, such as in Mandy's experience:

There was actually a lady at work—when I had told her I wanted to be a teacher and that I eventually wanted to go back to uni and I told her that I was going to and I thought I'd have the time then to do it. She was a bit older, she was about 37 and she just went out of her way; she actually was the one who went and found all the online universities available at the time and she just said to me "You're so young, get it done while you're young". (25, partnered, no children, Business, online)

The influence of certain teachers from school days persisted, at times for many years beyond school. Natalia, for example, said, 'My music teachers in high school were always very encouraging and it kind of just inspired me to keep doing what I wanted to do' (27, single, no children, Medicine, on-campus), while Gail reported that she 'had a number of teachers in high school that were really encouraging and supportive and made me feel like university would be a really great pathway' (23, partnered, no children, Midwifery, online).

Some participants had recent experiences of other formal study, which had further developed their interest and confidence in study and/or in a particular subject area, helping them to think about going on to university. For example, Emma commented that because her workplace 'put me in a team leading role, put me through my Certificate IV', this helped her make the decision to begin a degree in Nursing: 'I finally thought, no, I should do this'.

These findings are similar again to those of Tett (2000) who found that all participants in her study were 'able to give positive examples of learning which had taken place at a later point in their lives' (p. 187).

Inspiration from Within

But inspiration also came from within themselves, such as for Ahmad, who described how 'my views started changing and I really wanted to be successful … I was just tired of being the kid that never really cared about school' (19, single, Financial Services, on-campus). At times 'epiphanies' came in the form of questioning long-held beliefs. This was the case with Paul who described a spiritual experience in which he:

started listening to a lot of podcasts and particularly I had a religious faith that was questioning, that so I was listening to a lot of commentators and philosophers on that and eventually left the faith but through that, really started to [become interested in] scientific method and things like that and that kind of really got me interested in further learning. (Paul, 47, partnered, four children, part-time Business, online)

For certain cohorts of learners, such as the female parenting students or those who were disrupting perceived life course, such internal inspiration was vital and will be explored further in following chapters.

Inspired to Make a Difference

Frequently, accompanying such personal epiphanies was a desire to make a difference more broadly (May et al., 2016). For example, a female survey participant describes how her own experiences and personal discoveries led to a desire to help others:

I'd gone through a rather difficult time personally suffering from depression and anxiety … In order to combat this I began exercising and became a personal trainer. This led me to want to be able to help others with these issues, especially in a world where obesity and unhappiness are becoming very common. All of these factors contributed to my decision to firstly commence study, but this program in particular. (40–50, partnered, two adult children, Psychology, online)

Altruistic intentions emerged time and again from the narratives, such as the following examples from the survey:

I want to make a difference in peoples' lives, and I believe that I will. (Female, 40–50, Enabling Program)

I decided to pursue my dreams and gain a career where I could support my children and help other children. (Female, 30–40, Primary Education, online)

I felt that I could do so much more in my life that "meant" something. (Female, 40–50, Nursing, on-campus)

Perhaps understandably, those who had chosen degrees that would lead to work in the 'helping' professions, such as teaching or nursing,

were also more likely to be the ones expressing altruistic views. Such degrees also tend to have an over-representation of women, consistent with gendered views about women being well suited to 'caring' roles, but it was not exclusively women who expressed these ideals. For example, a male survey participant commented: 'I have always been determined to become an educator who could make a difference to children's lives', (18–21, Primary Education, on-campus). Another example was Roger, aged 46, majoring in Community Development (online Bachelor of Arts) who had 'long been interested in psychology and in how the mind works and then helping people'. Roger's full-time job was as a parole officer in prisons, and he wanted to 'pursue something … even when I retire, where I can do a little bit of community work for free … voluntary work then I can give back to the community'. Nor were these altruistic intentions solely confined to the traditional helping professions, with one example being Georgia, 32, majoring in International Aid and Development online, 'In my adult life I've done a lot of travel to developing countries so I wanted to make a difference.'

The desire for FiF students to be positive role models to their children was mentioned by many of the mothers in particular. Voices of student-mothers from the survey included:

> *I wanted to show my girls that they can do anything they want if they try and that it doesn't matter when you do it.* (30–40, partnered, three children, Arts)

> *I want to inspire my son.* (25–30, partnered, one child, Enabling Program)

> *To set an example for my children regarding lifelong learning.* (25–30, two children, partnered, Enabling Program)

Previous research has found that female mature-age students in particular are 'keenly aware of the positive influence that their studies are having upon their children and the likelihood that their children will consider university as an option for their own future' (Stone & O'Shea, 2012, p. 94). Similarly, Reay et al.'s early research (2002) found that women undertaking enabling courses in the UK 'saw themselves as role models for their children' (p. 11). Interestingly, this motivation was also present in a number of the men's stories, as discussed in more detail in Chap. 9.

Making the Transition

The issue of attrition amongst the FiF cohort is a matter of concern (Crozier & Reay, 2008; Henderson et al., 2019; Patfield et al., 2021) particularly as provision of appropriate integrated support alongside the opportunity to study is the responsibility of institutions (Tinto & Engstrom, 2008). In our research with FiF students it was clear for the younger and older students alike, that there were significant challenges in developing a student identity, understanding university expectations and learning to meet the demands of university. Devlin (2013) makes the point that this is particularly difficult for students 'who may not have the relevant cultural capital or familial experience with universities on which to rely to help them decode discourses and respond to implicit expectations within them' (p. 941). Unless students are able to develop a sense of 'fitting in' and feeling that they 'belong' within the institution, engagement with their learning is much more problematic (Kift & Nelson, 2005).

Previous research tells us that support from others, both on and off campus, plays a major role in student persistence and retention (Devlin et al., 2012; Gibbons & Woodside, 2014; Krause, 2005). For example, Skilbeck's (2006b) 'superior conditions of learning' (p. 52) include the importance of learners feeling supported 'by colleagues, family, employers' (p. 52). Also, Coffman and Gilligan's (2002) research found that a high level of satisfaction with supportive networks enabled students to experience 'higher levels of life satisfaction' than those students who were less satisfied with their support networks (p. 152). In fact, according to Skahill (2002/2003) the social support network is 'the most important criterion for staying in college' (p. 39). More recently, Picton and Kahu's research (2021) has uncovered ways in which 'student support services potentially influence belonging, self-efficacy, wellbeing, and emotions as pathways to student engagement, and therefore student success' particularly when there is 'an individualised and integrated approach in partnership with academic staff, support professionals, and students' (p. 11).

So how were these students feeling supported and validated? Their stories revealed a number of sources of assistance: fellow students, lecturers, university support services, and most particularly, family and friends off

campus. The extent to which FiF students in this study relied upon support from friends, family and community is the subject of later chapters, while the following section outlines the value of internal support, both formal and informal, within their institutions.

Lecturers and Tutors

The importance of supportive teaching staff in the success of adult learners has been previously identified. For example, an Australian research project (Chapman et al., 2006) identified exemplars of good practice amongst adult education programs in a rural setting. These researchers found one important and noticeable element that contributed to the success of the programmes was the 'dedication of the teachers and the care they extend to participants' (p. 158). Also important for these adult learners was that they were 'treated with respect and given a voice, which increase[d] their sense of belonging and being a valued member of the group' (p. 158). Similarly, in a major survey into factors influencing student engagement across 25 Australian and New Zealand HE institutions, Coates (2008) found that student engagement with the institution is strongly linked 'to perceptions of academic support' (p. ix). Devlin et al.'s study (2012) involving 17 Australian universities points to the link between 'inclusive learning environments and strategies' and student success, for students from low socio-economic backgrounds, many of whom are FiF students.

Such research findings are borne out by the student stories in our research. The care and support that each had experienced from lecturers or tutors—some to a very significant degree—appear to have been extremely important in their persistence and successful progression through their studies. Mandy's experience highlights the type of support and understanding that was so important to these students:

> *The tutors, they're really good as well with getting back to you with responses… when my grandfather passed away … I emailed my tutor straight away … I just told her the story basically and they were really flexible and really understanding … they were fine for me to just submit my unedited version up front*

and then I had … five days to send them my edited copy. That was great, that really put my mind at ease. (25, partnered, no children, Business, online)

For Marlee, 19 and studying Nursing, the atmosphere of the campus she attended was important to her as it felt 'more community and family-like', due to the fact that 'you run into each other and, you know, I see one of my tutors all the time and I say "hi" to her'. The friendliness and approachability of her tutor outside of class meant that 'even if you just had a question, you feel a bit more open to ask about it.'

Support Services

In addition to the assistance received from academic staff, many of the students had found support services provided by their institution very helpful. Other research stresses the vital role of institutional support services in the success and progression of mature-age students. Skilbeck (2006b), for example, identifies 'a range of support services' as one of the key factors which contribute towards 'good practice' in adult learning (p. 63), Devlin et al. (2012) mention the importance of 'making support services explicit' (p. 49), while Coates (2014) finds that within Australian universities, 'institutions placing a higher priority on provision of student support services have lower levels of attrition' (p. 21).

Amongst the students in our research, specific support services such as personal counselling, disability support and learning support were mentioned as being particularly significant sources of help. Counselling assisted with confidence-building for students who were doubting their abilities, such as Tash, who sought help from the counsellor when distressed that she was falling behind:

So I thought "Okay, I'll try the counsellor" and he was great. He just said, you know, "These things can happen and you can still do this in this time. Don't even think about the last unit. Just make this one better". That's what I did and this last unit I've done I got a HD for it. (Tash, 24, Nursing, online)

Monique, another online student studying Education:

was going through a rough patch, I wasn't sure about my academic writing. He [counsellor] said I needn't worry about my academic writing. He could see from my record that I was getting better and not worse. So it was a period of insecurity I was going through. (49, single parent with two children)

Learning support services provided assistance with improving skills and as well as confidence, as described by Yvonne, a 38-year-old studying an Arts degree on-campus 'really struggled' but when she went to learning development:

[it] just helped me wrap my head around what being a good student was and how to get there, in a less stressful way. Teaching me not to be my own worst enemy really.

Abbey had sought help from both counselling and learning support:

I used to see a counsellor. She was helpful. Well people just tell me I can do and I've got to do it and like, yes, so learning support was always good for getting essays done correctly. (22, Arts, on-campus)

Generic 'first port of call' support services when offered, such as student advisors or student coaches, were also able to help students through some of the early difficulties as they made the transition into the unfamiliar environment of academe. Sharnie, an online Arts student, aged 59, said, 'It would have been the [student] coach that really kept me going. … Having access to that sort of help really is crucial', while Naomi, quoted below, found that speaking with a student advisor helped her access a range of institutional supports:

I came across a student support advisor … she helped me … transfer into a psychology degree and … then I wanted to do some learning development so she helped me. (Naomi, 19, Psychology, on-campus)

Naomi also talked about the importance of being 'steered in the right direction' through being linked up with the right people and services. 'You know, they link you, everyone links you. Even your lecturers or your

tutors, you just ask them a question and they will steer you in the right direction.' Having these linkages provided by all staff with whom she came into contact clearly made a significant and positive difference to Naomi's experience of university.

Disability services were another important source of support. Bethany was experiencing 'severe depression since the passing of my partner' and found 'the help was really good when I needed it … I could email them and tell them and they would be very encouraging' (57, Legal Studies, online). Nicole, suffering from severe repetitive strain injury in her wrists, reported, 'My DLO [Disability Liaison Officer], took the time to get to know me, "Oh what do you do on the weekends? How was your weekend? Oh fab". She took the time to get to know me as a person' (21, Commerce, on-campus).

For online students in particular, proactive support by staff who reached out to them was highly valued as it helped them to feel less isolated and 'alone'. For example, one survey participant wrote that staff were 'sending emails to remind you things and it's just a feeling, know[ing] that someone else has your back' (Female, 18–21). A similar sense of connection was experienced by Donna as a result of proactive, outreach support:

> You know, you get that random phone call just to check in. That's very helpful because sometimes it's nice to hear another human being's voice in the same situation, just to let you know how you're going and you just think, "Wow, how did you know today was the day that I really needed to have someone check in and just say 'Hey is your study like this? Are you coping like that'" and you go "Yes". The reality from that is again, you're not alone. (Donna, 36, partnered, two children, Psychology, online)

Friends

Friends within the institution were frequently mentioned as key sources of support and encouragement. Some friendships developed directly as a result of institutional activities and teaching practices. For Allyssa, it was attending weekly peer-to-peer mentoring sessions. At first:

I was like, "Why do we have to do this for", but I found it really beneficial and it was a good way to meet people as well because you were just chucked in with randoms and yes, all talking and … Some of my really good friends are from peer-to-peer now. (Allyssa, 29, single, no children, Arts, on-campus)

The way in which classes are structured, particularly in first year subjects, can impact on the extent to which friendships can be formed. As reported by one participant, Aria, within her faculty students were placed in groups (called 'pods') and remained in these for the entire first year. This allowed friendships to be fostered and sustained, 'It's definitely been easier to make friends especially I think with the way the law faculty does the pods' (Aria, 18, single, no children, Law, on-campus).

The importance of 'in-class' mechanisms for building social interaction has been demonstrated in previous studies such as that by Coffman and Gilligan (2002) in which they found that 'in the classroom, faculty may further promote social interactions and support among students by designing assignments and class activities that encourage communication, interaction and cooperative learning among students' (p. 63). Quinn's (2005) research with second year female students at two higher educational institutions in the UK revealed that, for these women, connection with other students was of enormous importance to their sense of identity as university students; 'a re-imagining of the self with and through others' (p. 13). Mann (2001) likens the experience of non-traditional students to that of being 'a stranger in a foreign land' (p. 11), while May et al. (2016) tell us that 'the imaginary of the ivory tower can be forbidding: its practices and languages alien and demanding, and its surfaces stone-like' (p. 11). For FiF students, the forging of connections with others on campus is an important part of navigating 'the new land of the academy' (Mann, 2001, p. 12) and establishing their identity as university students is key through, for example, the creation of a community of practice with peers (Groves & O'Shea, 2019). In-class activities are one mechanism which provide social as well as learning opportunities. In a relatively 'safe' environment students are able to collectively navigate the expectations of university study. Indeed, sharing in-class activities may help cement important relationships, as described in the following:

My best friend at uni, we're both doing environmental engineering and we've basically done the whole course together. We met on campus in the bridging course so before we even started and became good friends and then realised that we were doing the same course and we've done everything together and we're pretty similar like we're both not geniuses sort of thing but we both work pretty hard and have similar learning methods and I don't think I would have been able to get through without a person like that supporting me. (Amy, 22, single, no children, Environmental Science, on-campus)

However, for online students, making friends within the university space was considerably more of a challenge, or indeed perhaps considered non-essential to the experience (Delahunty et al., 2014). Very few of the online students in our study mentioned making friends within university, while the majority talked about receiving support from 'friends outside of university' (multiple survey participants). There were occasional exceptions such as one survey participant who said, 'My friends at University, whether they are in the same city/state or not, they encourage me to keep working hard, to keep looking at my goals' (Survey participant, female, 18–21, online). Generally, forming friendships with others appeared to depend on the extent to which they were engaging with online forums and chats. The use of technology to help students connect with each other and their tutors is undoubtedly particularly important for online students. Devlin and McKay (2016) found in their research with students and staff at Australian universities that: 'The capacity of technology to personalise the learning experience was seen by both staff and students alike as potentially beneficial to student success' (p. 99). More recent studies (Hopwood et al., 2021; Muir et al., 2019) have pointed to the importance of the quality of communication between online tutor and students, along with appropriately interactive learning design, in encouraging students to be "more willing to communicate meaningfully with each other, hence furthering their sense of engagement with the online class as a whole" (Stone, 2021, p. 175). Online communications, however, can be problematic (Stone & Springer, 2019). For example, lack of reciprocity may be disappointing for those desiring, but not receiving, the active participation of their peers, and this in turn may diminish their own learning experience, as expressed in the following quote from a survey participant:

The only negative of doing the course online has been the lack of personal inter-action with others. Many choose to use social media rather than the online posts provided as discussion forums which minimizes the opportunities to share and learn from one another. The restrictions of netiquette also tend to dampen ful-some debate and development of ideas as students tend to be very conscious of what they put online in the open forums—which sometimes may spill over into personal criticisms rather than objective critiques. (Female, 40–50, Modern History, online)

For online students in particular, family and friends were often key to the success of their educational endeavours, the experiences of this online student cohort discussed in more depth in Chap. 6.

Transformations

Research evidence points to a clear link between academic achievement and an increase in confidence, particularly amongst mature-age and FiF learners (McGivney, 2006; O'Shea & Stone, 2014). Chapman et al. (2006) identify the ways in which education amongst mature-age learn-ers 'assists in promoting deeper levels of personal wellbeing [and] social connectedness' (p. 163). The development of confidence and social skills is not limited to mature-age students however, but applies to adult learn-ing in general, from school-leavers upwards. The concept of 'well-being' and the effect of education on the well-being of students is mentioned in much of the literature on adult education. For example, Schuller (2006) reflects on how 'education can act to enable people to sustain their well-being, to maintain it … in the face of the strains and stresses of everyday life' (p. 16), while Skilbeck (2006a) also mentions the 'personal wellbe-ing' (p. 126) that results from adult education. The process of learning, is clearly one that is a significant catalyst for personal growth and change (O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018).

For many in this study, a process of self-discovery was taking place, a sense of finding out who they really were and of what they were capable. Many were beginning to define themselves differently as they discovered their own intelligence and competence. With this came a new confidence

in themselves, as expressed by Tamara, an Enabling Program student in her 30s with two young children, when she says, 'I've found that coming, it's really good. Like I feel like I've blossomed as a person if that makes any sense … I feel like, I can do this. I have the ability. I'm not an idiot'.

Another aspect of this shift in identity was the development of a greater sense of personal agency, independent achievement and the possibilities this opened up for further independence. For Rochelle, 'It's a completely new experience for me. New and beautiful. It's a fresh start for my life really. That's the way I feel. It's really encouraging. It's good' (45, single parent, one child, Arts, online).

Tash said, 'I can see this bigger picture like, "Wow, once I'm a nurse, I'm going to be doing this and it's going to be fun. I'm going to like going to work every day"' (24, partnered, no children, Nursing, online). Abbey, at 22, single with no children and studying Arts on campus, felt 'more confident about being challenged … and since then, it's made me want to go overseas'. Corey felt as if she were 'travelling to a foreign country, and I'm just able to experience a whole new world' (30, single, no children, Education, online).

Quinn's (2005) research with women from low socio-economic backgrounds at university talks of 'women carving spaces in order to resist and rebel' (p. 12). For the women in Quinn's study, university represented a place of resistance to the life from which they had come; a life typified by poorly paid and unsatisfying jobs and economic insecurity. For them, university was 'a hard won freedom' and a means of 'resistance to a destiny shaped only by supermarkets, call centres and lonely train stations' (p. 12). Certainly this applied to some of the women in our research, for whom, as outlined earlier in this chapter, study represented the opportunity to gain financial independence, potentially to be liberated from unfulfilling jobs, and to be perceived as having more to offer. Amongst the male participants there were also transformations that related to personal changes within themselves, such as Graeme, who said, 'I'm more acceptable to outside ideas, heaps smarter now, I'm more tolerant' (31, single, no children, Science, on-campus).

Family transformations were also occurring, as Evelyn noticed in her family:

I think that the respect and the understanding for further education has increased to the point where my husband says to my daughter, "You can do anything you want after finishing Year 12 as long as it's university" [laughing], a little bit going too much the other way but I think it's good that my daughter sees me studying. (52, partnered, one child, Librarianship, online)

Hence not only individual transformation but also transformation into the next generation was taking place, with the real possibility of 'lasting change that has an impact, not only on the individual but also on communities in an ongoing basis' (Beck, 2006, p. 107). In the words of one of the male participants:

You want to instill knowledge and instill the best wisdom into your kids so they've got the best tools to survive through life … I guess it's going to be a chain reaction of events I think where hopefully it will benefit them. (Nick, 39, partnered, 4 children, Primary Education, on-campus)

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the key motivations and inspirations for undertaking study that emerged from the stories of the FiF students interviewed and surveyed for Study B, described in Chap. 1. It has also explored aspects of their transition into university studies and the support systems at university that were helpful to them. For FiF students, such systems can be particularly important, as they struggle to understand an environment that is totally unfamiliar to them, without any family members who are able to help them interpret and navigate this foreign landscape. The role of family, of friends outside of university, of workplaces and communities, is also highly significant, as these can all be powerful allies in supporting FiF students. While this chapter has not discussed these other important sources of support, both Chaps. 8 and 9 provide in-depth discussion of the role that these significant others play in the lives of FiF students.

Finally, this chapter has highlighted the ways in which becoming a university student led to personal transformations, which are likely to have ramifications not only for the students' own futures but also for the

future trajectory of others around them, particularly children. In the next part of the book, the focus shifts from a 'wide angle' view to deeper analysis of the experiences of specific student cohorts and those surrounding them. We acknowledge that to a degree these learners experience overlap but our objective is to both highlight the congruity across this cohort whilst simultaneously foregrounding the particular biographical and contextual factors that impacted upon them.

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Part II

Narrating the First-in-Family Student Experience

5

Trailblazing: Motivations and Relationship Impacts for First-in-Family Enabling Students

Introduction

Enabling programmes are Australian university preparation programmes designed to widen tertiary participation for people who, for a variety of reasons, have not matriculated to university. These access schemes have been a feature of the Australian tertiary landscape, especially since the Second World War (May & Bunn, 2015). In 2020, there were 31,292 students commencing in Australian enabling programmes, an increase of 9% on the previous year, while overall commencing domestic students in 2020 numbered almost 450, 000 (Australian Department of Education and Training, 2022a, 2022b). Today enabling programmes attract a high proportion of mature-age people (20+) who are the first in their immediate families to try to access university study. They are often from low socio-economic social strata, as well as from rural and refugee backgrounds (McNamara, 2022). These people are trailblazers and they have an awareness that their participation in the enabling programme will have important consequences not only for themselves in the future but for their familial and social circles. This chapter builds on Chap. 4 by examining the specific motivational and relational factors influencing

this extraordinary group of first-in-family (FiF) enabling students. Of particular interest are the opportunities and risks that these students identified in relation to this form of study. Their stories reveal their willingness to embrace the substantial changes and hard work that enable them to achieve their educational goals.

As described in Chap. 1, this chapter rests primarily on two sets of data generated from Study B: one set from an anonymous survey and another arising from semi-structured interviews, collected from volunteer enabling students for the Breaking the Barriers project (O'Shea et al., 2015). The interviewed group numbered 14 and included four men. All of the male interviewees were single and aged between 20 and 31 years with no children. There were ten female interviewees: three of them was single and seven were partnered. Six of the women had children and three of these women were single parents. All of the interviewees were undertaking study on campus. Seven were interviewed by the author of the chapter and two of these interviews included one child of each of the interviewees. The surveyed group undertook an anonymous survey of 36 questions and attracted 30 responses with 12 of these identified as men; 14 of the Surveyed Group identified as parents, 13 female and one male. Across both groups, the largest age group were those aged between 25 and 30 years (39% or 17/44), with 23% (10/44) aged 30–40; 20% (9/44) aged 40–50, 7% (3/44) aged over 50 and 11% (5/44) under 25 years. In the analysis that follows, the interviewees are identified by a first name pseudonym and the survey group are numbered from 1 to 30, with brief biographical details of each participant also included at the end of each quote. All enabling students attended their enabling programmes on campus.

This chapter utilises biographical method harnessing 'the power of the personal voice' (Pitman, 2013, p. 31) to explore these enabling students' motivations and relationship impacts mainly from their point of view as they underwent their initial tertiary educational journeys. Student motivations to enrol in HE are not uniform across student groups more generally but reflect social differences and inequalities (Boyle & Abdullah, 2015, p. 170). In Australia, this has been construed by equity policymakers as evidence of the existence of aspiration and information 'gaps' (Sellar, 2013, p. 250). However, the motivations to seek higher education

(HE) discussed by participants here are shown to be deeply embedded and complexly formulated within temporal and relational contexts as well as within their broader social, cultural and economic locations. While they show that these FiF learners have understood the current governmental message that they can aspire through their own efforts to HE, they also indicate that they are motivated by the intention to impact positively those around them, especially their children if they have them.

The participants here frame their involvement in a personal politics of hope: whether this constitutes a 'cruel optimism' based on the 'false promises of aspiration' (Sellar, 2013, pp. 251–252) remains to be seen. A basic proposition here would be that it is better to have some hope than none, and that universities worldwide, and those who fund them, should be working to widen the arc of hope and deepen the support to bring that hope to fruition. At this point in writing, research in Australia and countries like it, continue to show a 'continuing lack of intergenerational mobility within economies with expanded educational opportunities' (Chesters, 2015, p. 387). As will be shown later in the chapter, a further proposition is that engagement in HE is a social as much as an individual act having impacts far beyond the transformations that the enabling learner personally undergoes (Fleming, 2022). This goes to their role and value as FiF trailblazers for their families and more broadly for their communities.

Motivations for Returning to Education

The interview and the survey data revealed a range of motivations for those FiF students seeking to gain entry to university via an enabling programme. These motivations reflected a wide array of individual hopes, dreams and fears that were embedded in the complex relational contexts within which they lived. The stories of motivations to enrol were infused with the actions, thoughts, feelings and/or opinions of partners, parents, children, friends, workmates, professionals and workplaces. In terms of life experience of the students, motivations also reflected temporal concerns arising from past experience, stimulated by present conditions, and anticipating the future (Scanlon, 2008). The following student's account

of her motivations are given as an illustration of how these relationships and temporalities structured accounts in demonstrable ways. The quotation, from a female survey participant, was originally one continuous written comment, but it has been broken down to reveal relationship effects (underlined) and temporal orientations (in square brackets):

> [Past] I had been working full time for the past ten years in the security industry before going on <u>maternity leave</u>.
>
> [Present] I did not wish to return to shift work as <u>it is no longer convenient due to the big changes in my life</u>.
>
> [Past] A friend encouraged me to apply for Open Foundation. I had always wanted to go back to study but <u>I found it very hard to break out of the security industry</u>. I felt as though I was trapped there.
>
> [Present] <u>My daughter is my prime motivation</u> for wanting to return to study.
>
> [Future] I want to earn a degree that will enable me to have a career that pays well <u>so I can give my family the best life I can</u>. (Participant #27, female, 30–40, partnered, one child)

This latter quote illustrates both strong agentic and relationship motivations where the focus shifts from desires and ambitions located within the self and those externally arising from others or projected onto close family. Her daughter, aged 23 months, provided a key focus for this student's embrace of significant change. As detailed in Chap. 4, there is an explicit understanding that HE provides access to a better life, found to be a 'key driver' for attendance and success for first generation minority college students (Boyle & Abdullah, 2015, p. 170). Yet the push and pull desires to escape present conditions on the one hand, and improve them on the other, were evident in many of the FiF enabling students' stories. Scanlon (2008, pp. 23–24) found in her study of adult 'motives' for returning to HE, that while there was a range of motives exhibited by adult returners, the majority focused on what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) called 'an imaginative engagement of the future' (cited in Merrill, 2015, p. 1865) and often concerned relationships in some important manner. Both Orth and Robinson (2015) and McNamara (2022) also report similar themes shared by enabling students in their motivations to enrol in an enabling programme, including: the desire to be a role model

for others in their lives; the need to have a career that gave job satisfaction; and concern about the future both emotionally and financially. These findings are supported here.

For enabling students in this study there was a remarkable consistency in some of the responses about motivations. Indeed, the most frequently expressed motivations came as a future-oriented pair: the first, as in the above quote, was a career that led to a 'better life', and the second was that this career would be one about which they were passionate. Isabel (female, 19, partnered, no children) had always wanted to come to university, it was 'a thing' of hers:

> Well it is a dream [but] it's just more the fact that I'd love to get a good career and a good start in life so I can eventually own my own home and have what I want, hopefully. I know that's not what you always get. And, plus just the fact that I want to do what I want to do. I don't want to go into a job that I don't love and, if I can study what I love and become a nurse which is something I want to do, then I'm going to enjoy my job and just generally I guess, have a happier life… I want to go to work because I want to, so applying for university is going to help me do that. Yes, so that's why.

The above resonates with Rick (male, 21, single, no children) who was motivated to get a job in the field he wanted. He explained:

> Well university offers [a] more in-depth and longer course and the choice to specialise in a certain field which can be considered a niche market … or a job that I would enjoy rather than jumping in and out of different jobs that I don't enjoy much.

Anthea commented that 'a lot of things' drove her. The first was her own obvious desire to pursue an interesting career from a very young age. The second was her family's persistent prompting that she could 'do more':

> I think it's just the fact that I've always loved books and I guess my whole family has just always said, you know, "You're a smart person. Don't waste your life not going to uni". … Also my mum has pointed out that with a university education you do have a better chance of getting a job and you do get a bigger pay than someone who's never had that education and she's really pushed all three of

her girls to really consider getting that piece of paper to make the world know you're smart. Even if you know you are, it's what the rest of the world sees at times. (Anthea, female, 21, single, no children)

Another woman reported that her motivation to enrol: 'would be able to gain a worthwhile career that is something I love to do and also to be able provide a better life'. But in the comments that followed this student also revealed the complex temporal and relationship embeddedness of these personal motivations when she wrote of the 'defining experience' that fuelled her motivations:

Well my fiancé and I had been going through some real tough times over a six year span. The situation at times quite unbearable but we have managed to turn our lives around … now I can fulfil my dreams and also to prove to me [that I could do it as] I always thought I never had the brains for uni. (Participant #30, female, 25–30, partnered, no children)

Lurking in this student's educational biography, as in those of many others, were the sources of a negative self-belief, which also formed a background motivation. At some point in her educational past, this woman had learned that she should not think of herself as university material, as not capable and therefore not entitled to consider HE as part of her future. She had constructed herself within a deficit discourse in what Penny-Jane Burke (2012) has called the politics of misrecognition.

For another woman the 'defining moment' occurred around the time she gave birth to her third child in midlife. In the time away from paid work, she wrote that:

I had time to reflect on my life up until that point, and plan what I wanted my future to look like after she wasn't so dependent. I realized that at my age, I wanted a career … I wanted to spend the rest of my working life doing something I was passionate about, and to do that I would need to go to university. (Participant #28, aged 40–50 with three children)

This reflexivity arose from a pivotal time in her life course as she faced the midlife dilemma of how to achieve deep, meaningful engagement in

her future paid working life. The university is signalled as the pathway to materialise this desirable outcome: past, present and future, as well as motivations, means and ends, are intimately entwined.

Motivations and Significant Others

As mentioned in Chap. 4, significant others figured in many stories, this was particularly noted in stories about the motivations to enrol in an enabling programme. For one woman her mother suggested the programme to her (Participant #25, female, 30–40, single, two children); for another it was a friend 'who saw in me things that I didn't see. He encouraged me to study, motivated me and supported me' (Participant #21, female, 40–50, no children reported). Children of all ages figured especially in the women's responses to this question. For Participant #25 again, motivations around children were powerful:

I want to become more self-supporting and show my children that higher education even for a mum is possible. [I] want them to see me as more than just a mum. (Participant #25, female, 30–40, single, two children)

Participant #6 (female, 25–30, partnered, one child) said that she did not want

to be stuck in the rut I am in for my whole life, I want to inspire my son. I have the intelligence but not the confidence and I needed to challenge myself to prove I'm not stupid … I felt it was the right time for me. My son is starting kindergarten this year and he loves that mummy goes to school too. I'm ready to open my mind to new opportunities.

One woman, whose two elder children would soon complete high school, wanted not only to experience what university might have been like had she gone directly from her high school matriculation, but also 'to show them what study was all about' (Participant #13, female, 40–50, partnered, three children). Some children actively suggested university to their mothers, as one woman commented that her adult children:

'encouraged me to do something for myself after a divorce' (Participant #18, female, 50+, single, three children).

Professional people in the students' lives could also prove decisive in motivating the student to enrol. For one woman an Occupational Therapist was 'so inspirational, that I am on my way to become one' (Participant #10, female 25–30, partnered, no children); while for another, who always wanted to enrol in the enabling programme, her psychologist 'thought it would be good for me to gain some knowledge and get out into the world' (Participant #7, female, 40–50, single, three children). Graeme (male, 31, single, no children) was formerly a train shunter in the local Steelworks, when he had a kind of 'epiphany' when he realised that he did not want to be physically worn down by the hard manual labour at the Steelworks. He recounted that, while speaking with a university graduate about his hobbies, he realised what he must do:

> *I was talking to someone about how I couldn't work in the steelworks any longer and they were just asking me questions; they were a university graduate and they were just asking, "What do you like doing, like what else do you do?" And I just talked to them about how I enjoy coaching kids and how … I had this like passion for science whatever and the person was like, "It's staring you right in the face dude, come and be a science teacher." So, I've basically called in sick that day from the steelworks and came to the university administration and basically said, can I please go here and they said ok, there's an entrance exam for the college 'cos you're so far out of school in about a week you can sit that, passed that and then I went to the college.*

While significant others were important for many there was often an underlying intrinsic motivation. For example, while the fact that one woman's partner was already studying 'probably gave me the push I needed', she also enrolled 'because I want to further my skills and do something I have been wanting to get into for a while which is Social Work.' (Participant #9, 25–30, female, partnered, no children). The intrinsic motivation towards a specific career was also evident for a number of these FiF students. One woman was interested in studying law because she had discovered her aptitude for legal thinking and presentation having become a courtroom champion for people dealing with the

Australian social services department, Centrelink. She wrote in her survey response:

> *Over the past 10 yrs [I] helped people through Tribunals with issues related to Centrelink, eg been denied pension … I have also found mistakes within correspondence sent to customers of Centrelink and … I have been to Tribunals equal to Federal Courts and pointed out numerous mistakes made by a Solicitor whom I was up against at the time. I have had the Commonwealth Ombudsman, Magistrates, Solicitors … contact myself in their own personal time asking why I have not studied Law as they were very surprised I was able to understand and comprehend laws which govern Centrelink.* (Participant #22, 50+, female, partnered, four adult children)

Another woman who described herself as a 'stay at home mum' for 15 years, was having trouble re-entering the workforce. She also wanted to 'do something' for herself now that her children were old enough. She decided to undertake a nursing degree because she had always enjoyed doing First Aid. Hannah (female, 33, partnered, five children) from her own 'self-determination', was also motivated by her interest in nursing, especially midwifery. She explained:

> *Well I wanted to do midwifery, nursing and midwifery, and I thought because I have a busy lifestyle I sort of need to be doing work where I've got something to do. I've always just had jobs where it's the same thing day after day you know and I just don't want to do that forever.*

Intrinsic motivations also arose from the desire to pursue a career about which they could be passionate. Previous research into First Year Experience of HE in Australia has indicated that the most important reason to enrol at university was to pursue a particular field of interest, followed by better job prospects. A significant number of younger students also reported that their parental expectations were influential (Baik et al., 2015). FiF enabling students, however, reveal complex motivations, especially around the development of the self. This finding is corroborated by Johns et al. (2014, p. 22) in their study of 56 Tasmanian enabling students, where 23% undertook their enabling programme for

self-development. One man in the current study said that he was pursuing 'self-development':

> *I had been poking it for years and felt that I had to make the step at some point. … It is still very early to comment on this in detail although I feel very determined.* (Participant #19, male, 25–30, single, no children)

Another man (Participant #16, male, 18–21, single, no children) wanted 'to get into University and gain higher learning and extend my knowledge.' One woman, whose eldest son was almost finished high school, wanted to broaden her 'knowledge base' by studying subjects that interested her (Participant #5, female, 40–50, partnered, three children). Another woman, whose children were older, was bored at home and felt that she needed: 'something to motivate and encourage me to do something for myself. Something that only I could benefit from.' (Participant #25, female, 30–40, single, two children). Participant #21 (female, 40–50, single, no children reported) was 'recently single after a 27 year relationship' and she was seeking self-validation: 'I wanted to do something for me, be something more than a wife, mother, office clerk.' Finally, another woman, having lately moved interstate, wanted to do something for herself as well as embarking on a passionate career.

In these stories about what brought them to enrol in a university enabling programme, there is strong evidence of the 'disorienting dilemma triggered by a life crisis or major transition' postulated by Mezirow (1995 cited in Imel, 1998) as a prompt to action by these FiF enabling students. These dilemmas and transitions ranged from a divorce after a long marriage, the birth of a child, the move interstate, children about to become adults, the inability to find a job, and the end of a particularly challenging relationship. What is clear nevertheless is that monocausal reasons for coming to HE do not suffice: adults have a variety of motivations based on both push factors arising out of past and present circumstances, and pull factors based in the future and centred on hope and discourses of betterment and opportunity for themselves and for their families, especially for children (O'Shea et al., 2015). Powerful temporal conditions and relationships forge the springboard for change.

As already mentioned, in analyses of the access and equity policy agenda there has been critique of the 'cruel optimism' and 'false promises' enacted on non-traditional aspirants to HE, such as enabling students, with regard to realisation of human capital accumulation amid 'the falling value of HE as a positional good' (Sellar, 2013, p. 252). This argument, however, seems itself captured by the neoliberal imaginary and configures the aspirant likewise ensnared by an economistic understanding of themselves solely as seekers of competitive advantage in a 'better'/higher paying career. What the above stories demonstrate, however, is that these FiF enabling students also understand that HE can offer a range of other 'dividends' (O'Shea et al., 2018; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018) including a means to be a role model for others, especially for children; a way to achieve a passionate career; as well as the development of the self with a richer inner life of more meaning. Further, the passionate nature of the career aspiration is most often based upon making a contribution to community (May et al., 2016). These dividends, both communitarian and individualistic, sit outside of neoliberal discourses and need to be figured into analyses of aspiration and indeed the notion of 'success' for non-traditional students in HE. Once in their enabling programme, the assemblage of motivations worked to propel and sustain forward momentum for themselves in their courses, but this activity was both affected by and caused effects beyond the educational aims of their courses, into personal relationship realms.

Relationship Impacts

While there is a growing literature on the personal impacts of enabling education in terms of increasing confidence (McNamara, 2022), identity formation (Crawford, 2014; Habel & Whitman, 2016), well-being (O'Shea & Stone, 2011), academic self-efficacy (Habel, 2012) and improvement in employment prospects (Bunn, 2013), the impacts on relationships, especially on *family* in FiF studies, are less well understood. This section examines this aspect to show that the impacts of their choices for FiF enabling students went well beyond the self. Mostly their involvement in HE was reason for celebration, pride and support of their family

and friends; but at the same time, ambivalence or outright negativity was experienced. Waller et al. (2011) discussing these 'hidden costs' of non-traditional adult students undertaking HE in the UK, suggested that these costs were 'tension, fracture and reconfiguration', commenting that:

> *Returning to learn threatens relationships and positioning within the wider community for those from backgrounds where few—if any—people attend university. Such costs are borne jointly by learners personally and by those closest to them: their parents, partners and peers.* (p. 511)

Children should also be added to this list of bearers of the costs of adult educational return; nor should the 'costs' be classed as 'hidden' so much as (sometimes) unanticipated. Further 'benefits' should be added to this analysis of impacts. Indeed, changes in relationships, costs *and* benefits, were very quickly disclosed to the FiF enabling students in this study by the litmus test of their HE participation.

Across the survey and interview groups, the majority reported how their families and friends provided a source of support and encouragement, and that these supportive relationship frameworks facilitated in multiple ways their quest to access HE. However, there were also strong, if less persistent, indications of the disruptive impacts that were both envisioned and enacted in some participants' lives. Other research has reported this type of 'disbenefit' of adult education for the learner and their relationships: for example, Field (2011, p. 287) commented that 'although learning helps to extend some social networks, it can disrupt others'. Equally, Capannola and Johnson (2022) report on a range of research that indicates the impacts that returning to study can have on family relationships, both positive and negative. Age and gender were often the differentiating factors in these students' stories of impacts on their circles of relationships.

Relationship Impacts on Younger Students

Younger FiF enabling students in the study, 21 years and under, were more likely than older students to mention their parents as pivotal in their stories about the impacts of their enabling educational experience

on their relationships. For example, interviewees Isabel, Anthea, and Samir mentioned the positive support that flowed from their mothers as especially noteworthy. In Isabel's case, even though in undertaking university-level studies, there had 'been no role model that's come before' her, most of the people in her life were 'supportive of me going into university and I guess fulfilling my dream'. However, her mother 'adored' the idea of university, had desired it for herself, and provided a solid foundation of support:

[It was] more my mum, she's my rock. She said, you know, "It's taken me so long to get where I am but if you can do it earlier then that's better". The reason she's so supportive is because she wants me to succeed in life and she wants me to have a happy life where I enjoy what I do. She loves what she does but, like I said, it's taken her so long to get to where she is … so the relationships haven't changed; I'm still close with my family and obviously my partner but yes, it's just more that what we talk about now I guess has changed a bit. (Isabel, female, 19, partnered, no children)

Other members of Isabel's family were more equivocal, for example Isabel's grandfather had 'been brought up with, you know, "You work. As soon as you're able to work, you work"'. This stance required Isabel to convince her grandfather that her decision was sound. She explained:

He does support me but it's taken a bit of explaining to him that for me to work and to have a good job, I need to get this degree and I need to stay in school. My mum, as I said, is supportive, always supportive; my dad's pretty supportive of me, my brother just doesn't really care, my boyfriend's very supportive. My boyfriend's mum doesn't understand why I'm doing school for so long; as soon as she could get out of school she went and worked and then she became a mum and she's never had to work pretty much since then.

Likewise, Anthea's mother's experience had a decisive impact on Anthea's educational choices as an object lesson:

My mum, she graduated high school but when she was my age, 21, she fell pregnant with her first child and got married and settled down and because she was married, the government wouldn't support her like they support students

now with HECS and things like that so she just couldn't afford to go to uni…. It's sort of affected her entire life. (Anthea, female, 21, partnered, no children)

Anthea also commented that her father, who dropped out of high school three days into Year 11, and whom she regards as 'such an intelligent person': 'even he has sort of suffered because of not being able to go to uni and things like that'. Interestingly, Anthea was discouraged at home from talking about her university experience, which was what her father called 'big school': 'At home people don't like me being overly smart; they encourage me to be smart but they don't like me being smart in the same sense.' This goes to the reciprocal anxiety that some members of their families and enabling students experience within their home environments, in response to this unprecedented involvement in HE (Waller et al., 2011, p. 513). Samir, 20, from a recently settled refugee background, also singled out his mother and the 'ripple effect' on his brothers when talking about the positive impacts of his study on his relationships:

My mum's really proud that I've actually decided to go to uni rather than TAFE and pretty much a lot of my [five] brothers and stuff are looking up to me now and they all plan to go to uni … My mum thinks it's a really good opportunity for like basically to open up the world for you and … no-one really has ever had that much opportunity in my family. (Samir, male, 20, single, no children)

While some of his friends were already at university and helped him 'a lot', other friends were not going to university and his relationship with them had changed 'because I don't hang out with them as much as I did before'. For Rick (21, single, no children), who once believed he could 'never do university, like I sucked at school. I could never do it', going to university is now normal—'kind of just another day sort of thing'—and dissonance regarding his choice is minimal because his family all support him and all of his friends attend university too. The only survey participant in this age group, #16 (male, 18–21, single, no children), believed that he had 'gained a bit more respect' as an enabling student. His family was proud of him and they saw 'university as a path way to a better future' for him. Nevertheless, he also wrote that he had had family obstacles in that he had to 'convince my family that I could do it'.

Relationship Impacts on Older Students

For older students, while parents still featured in their stories, especially in single and childless partnered people's accounts, a different constellation of relationships made up of partners, ex-partners and children, impacted on their participation in HE. Most participants over 21 years in both interview and survey groups reported that their families and friends were supportive of their efforts. Yve, for example, had not experienced any negativity at all in her educational return. Her family were all supportive and her relationship with her mother had actually improved because Yve was now on a path her mother had recommended for some time:

> *I've probably gotten a better bond with my mum just because ever since I left school she was like "Become a teacher. You're an idiot if you don't become a teacher". Because I kind of went on the music path because my dad's a musician, she was just like "You'll regret it. You'll end up wanting to come back". We've always had arguments about my job and study and all that so that's kind of brought mum and I together a bit.* (Yve, female, 26, partnered, no children)

When Yve told her friends that she was going to university, a few of her mates commented: '"Oh my God, you're going to uni" as if they would never have expected it with me because I was so career-based in my retail job'. Because she was now away from home studying, Yve was finding this 'a strain on my friends' but monthly dinners provided a partial solution to this. Another woman experienced the same difficulty around not having as much time for her family and friends, some of whom did not understand her need to study. She wrote:

> *They were all happy for me. My friends and family know I want to be happy with my work beforehand [so] I don't get as much time to spend with friends. Some don't understand that uni work is another priority for me. … I study on weekends and sometimes miss out on doing things as a family. I try to study at night but like spending quality time with my husband while he is home.* (Participant #1, female, 30–40, two children)

Graeme (male, 31, single, no children) who successfully completed his enabling programme and was in a teaching degree, also had mixed reactions to his initial decision to enrol in his pre-university course. Reactions were 'about 50/50' positive and negative in his words, as his decision involved a 'direct opportunity cost' (Chesters, 2015, p. 387) that he incurred as an adult returner, who had given up a lucrative position at the Steelworks in order to study to become a teacher. However, while friends closer to him were supportive of this move as a positive one for him, his parents were initially opposed. He recalled:

> So my parents were really like "What are you doing? Do not do this. What can we do, like, to change your mind? Can't you study part-time?" and all those kind of things but obviously now that, like I'm here and I've got another job and stuff like that, they love that I'm at university. It's the first thing they mention whenever I go somewhere. "Oh Graeme's gonna' be a science teacher. He's in university now. He's in his 4th year." They just love it.

For Patricia, a 45-year-old single woman with one child of five, her parents' support was practical as well as emotional. They were not only 'so proud' of her as she excelled in her studies, they were also helping her financially as well as reading and commenting on her essays. As with parents, partnered enabling students generally reported that their partners were supportive not only in an emotional way, but also provided practical help. One woman wrote of her partner:

> As I spend my face to face university time over two nights per week, and do a lot of my study and assignments in the evening, my husband has been amazing at taking care of the children through doing homework with the older ones, cooking dinner and doing the bathing and bedtime routine with the youngest child when I am unable to. (Participant #28, female, 40–50, partnered, three children)

For other older people, however the impact of their decision to seek HE provoked negative commentary. Tamara (female, 34, single, two children) reported that, while her mother and step-father were supportive, her natural father, her brother and ex-husband were negative because

they all held 'the ridiculous idea that uni is for bludgers'.[1] Her ex-husband has been particularly critical, but Tamara, who has a 60:40 custody arrangement with him for their two girls aged nine and eleven, suspects it is because her study has had practical consequences regarding the children:

> My ex-husband, he's a whole other kettle of fish. … [I]t comes back to having to pay child support, "Well why can't you just go and get a job?" because the more I earn, the less he has to pay so whilst ever I'm not working, he thinks that he has to pay more child support which isn't the case, you know, and he thinks because I start Mondays and Fridays … at 9:00 and our girls don't start school until 9:30, I was dropping them off at his house early in the morning and his girlfriend wasn't liking that because there was a perception that he was helping me. Heaven forbid he should help me out with his children for an extra hour of a morning, like they were dressed, they had breakfast, [and] they had their lunches packed.

Tamara quickly found a solution to this before-school care issue to lessen her ex-husband's critique which she believed was upsetting their girls:

> I know the kids have come home from their dad and said, "Oh dad thinks you're just wasting your time at uni" and they get a bit upset when he says that because I can see that they're proud of me and that they're like, this is something that they're interested in, like we can all engage in what I'm doing … "Well I told dad that you're learning lots and you're doing really good and your colouring in is wonderful" (laughing). (Tamara, female, 34, single, two children)

While for one woman, her family and children were supportive, if doubtful of her ability to succeed, she suspected others thought she was too old. She also believed that a romantic relationship would not be possible 'if I continue with my studies' and a sense of social risk and alienation pervades her comment:

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[1] 'Bludger' is a derogatory colloquial term in Australia for one who lives off the efforts/earnings of others.

Some of the men I have dated have seen it as a big negative … that you can't commit to a relationship when you are focused on your study. Perhaps I get the vibe that they feel threatened by it. … I think some people find it hard to acknowledge someone who is trying to better themselves. Perhaps they feel like they will be left behind. … I do believe that it will be difficult for me to enter into a relationship. (Participant #21, female, 40–50, single, with unspecified number of children)

As an older person, another woman felt derided and isolated by her decision. She said that:

Most laughed at me going at my age, some felt I should have given the space to someone younger who could have used it … They are not interested. … I feel like they don't really want to discuss any of it with me. It's just something I do and they are not really interested. (Participant #7, female, 40–50, single, three children)

In general, the motivation by enabling students to be a role model for their children was demonstrated in their discussion about the impacts of their study. While parents strove to minimise the effects of their study on their children by working when the children were away at school or when asleep, children were reported as mainly happy to have a student parent. Parents reported that some children chose to 'do their homework' alongside them as they studied for their courses. For example, one woman said: 'My kids actually study around the table with me' (#5) and another commented:

My youngest daughter is twelve, and at this age, she is quite happy for me to study, or read a textbook alongside her on the lounge. I don't think it has impacted her greatly: I do a lot of my study on the weekends when she is with her dad. (#21, female, 40–50, single, with unspecified number of children)

In her interview, Patricia, 45, spoke about her little boy of five, observing that she 'couldn't ask for a better kid':

He's in pre-school three days a week … he does his 'homework' with me. So he has his homework. Like my girlfriend Nic came over yesterday afternoon and

we had a study session yesterday afternoon for Earth Science so we had all our stuff on the table and Sam goes "I'm just going to go and get my homework". So he goes and gets his piece of paper and his pens out of his room and he comes and sits down with us and he's writing his letters and doing his drawings …and he loves it. I've brought him here, he's seen where mummy goes to uni. (Patricia, female, 45, single, one child)

Tamara's two girls show a keen interest in her work, especially in her Visual Art course. She described their desire to be keenly involved:

"Oh what's mum doing? Oh, can we have a look through your art diary mum? Oh I really like this. I really like that". I've noticed that both of them are doing their homework more if that makes any sense. … And they're taking more pride in their homework; they're not just scribbling it. (Tamara, female, 34, single, two children)

But some impacts on children were challenging. One young mother said that her 23-month-old daughter had become 'more clingy' (#27, female, 30–40, partnered, one child), supposing that this was because she was not home as much as she used to be and that the child was missing her mother. Another mother of three observed that while her eldest son 'sits at the table and studies more—but not enough', the other two only 'pretend to be interested' (#13, female, 40–50, partnered, three children).

For Vicki's 16-year-old son, Christopher, who came to the interview with her, his mother's example was more sobering. He was very happy for his mother when she enrolled in HE: 'I was just happy for her. It was like something different for her to do. Yes, I was happy for her.' He believed that she had become more 'dedicated, like she's more keen to do things' and he saw a correspondence between his own life as a high school student and his mother's as a university student. He said: 'Maybe when I'm studying and trying to figure something out and hating life because of it, she's doing the same.' He also noted in the interview when asked about the impact of her study on their home life that:

Usually when you walk in from school you see her in the TV room like on the computer or talking to someone but you don't see her anymore when you walk in the house. You know what I mean? [My sisters] I think they're sort of the same

as me, like they don't really see her much and yes, I think my other sisters find mum a bit stressed sometimes and a bit angry because she's so worried about uni work. So yes, I guess that's it. (Christopher, male, 16, son of Vicki)

Vicki agreed with this assessment as accurate observing that this is 'what it takes'. While Christopher was definitely thinking about going to university 'down the track' his mother's example was a caution about the amount of work involved:

It seems like a lot of hard work, watching my mum study a lot. … Like I didn't think it would be that hard when she wanted to do it but as I've seen her, [and] all the hard work and the dedication she's put into university, I'm like "Oh man, you do have to work hard." (Christopher, male, 16, son of Vicki)

As with Vicki and Christopher, Noelene and her 11-year-old son, Nathaniel, attended the interview together. Like many other of the mothers in this project, Noelene was determined that disruption to her children would be minimal and that her two school-age boys would not feel like they had been neglected because of her educational participation. She said:

I still volunteer at the two schools because I want to be involved in their education as well. I really try to have a unified sense of "We're all in it together". There are definitely weekends where they get the hand, you know…"Talk to the hand" because I just can't, I just can't but they're both very independent, self-reliant children as well so they're able to just get on with it without me being around.

Meanwhile Nathaniel was in his own words 'actually quite pleased for her' when his mother enrolled, although initially cautious as he thought that university would be like an American college requiring her to go away to study and that there 'would be some changes around the house and everything'. When his mother reassured him that she would still be coming home, he recalled thinking: "Oh thank God!" He was also concerned that the 'the projects or whatever' would be too hard for her and that she would be seeking his advice 'a lot'! Basically, Nathaniel thought that the university experience was mainly positive for his mother,

notwithstanding her frustration over her assignments at times. He considered that she was undergoing a similar transition to himself in his new school:

> *University [is] a bit of like I'm doing, it's sort of like a challenge at my school because I'm meeting new people sort of like mum; like she's meeting new people, trying new things and stuff like that, like trying to start a project and everything.*

Nathaniel also observed that his mother has been 'very, very, more happy and more excited about her studies and learning lots and lots and lots of more information about all different characters and everything'.

Conclusion

Johns et al. (2014, 2016) recently reported in their longitudinal study of the outcomes for students of one enabling programme in Tasmania that enabling students who successfully completed their programme were well aware that they were not only transforming their own lives, but also that they were influencing their family and community expectations with regard to HE by virtue of their efforts. From the accounts of their motivations to access HE, the FiF enabling students discussed here revealed a similar awareness. Their personal politics of hope was predicated on the understanding that HE has the power to confer both direct and indirect benefits such as a greater sense of self-worth, more personal fulfilment and a passionate career. However, these participants also sought, in direct and palpable ways, to transform the lives of their families, such as through attaining a more secure financial future and acting as a role model, especially for children. These transformations are not limited to only enabling students but reverberate throughout all the narratives in this research. These FiF women and men are trailblazers who, through energetic intervention in their own lives and determination, sought to forge a pathway through what was for them and their immediate family, uncharted educational terrain.

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6

The Online Student Experience: New Challenges for Engagement and Support

Introduction

There is increasing evidence that the availability of online learning is helping to widen access to higher education (HE), making it possible for more students from diverse backgrounds to study for a university degree, including those who are first in their families to do so (Ilgaz & Gülbahar, 2015; Stone et al., 2016; Stone, 2019). The flexibility offered by online learning enables students to combine study with paid work, family and other responsibilities, while the increasing availability of open-entry and alternative-entry pathways into online university studies provides opportunities for those who might not otherwise gain entry (Shah et al., 2014; Stone, 2021; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Additionally, online learning has become much more of a mainstream activity since 2020, due to Covid-19 pandemic restrictions on face-to-face interactions. While on-campus

study has gradually been resuming across most institutions globally from 2022 onwards, online delivery has become somewhat normalised, being offered more routinely than ever before (Stone, 2023). This chapter examines the experiences of a cohort of students studying in open-entry online undergraduate units, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, at a range of Australian universities, who identified as being first in their immediate family to undertake university studies.

Review of the Literature

Research into the experiences of online learners indicates that there can be both positives and negatives associated with this mode of study. The positives mainly centre on improved access to HE and the opportunity to balance study with other demands and responsibilities. For example, more than 15 years ago, Knightley (2007) found in her study conducted in the UK at the Open University UK, that, for the students she surveyed and interviewed, online learning 'transcended geographical, physical, visual and temporal barriers to accessing education, and reduced socio-physical discrimination' (2007, p. 281).

Other research suggested that having to leave home or change location, or incur significant travel costs to go to university were significant deterrents for those from families where university education is not the norm and where the time and expense involved was an extra burden on those least able to afford it (Michael, 2012; Park & Choi, 2009; Shah et al., 2014). In particular, Park and Choi's study (2009) conducted in the US found that 'Distance learning allows adult learners who have employment, family and/or other responsibilities, to update knowledge and skills … by saving travel costs and allowing a flexible schedule' (2009, p. 207). Similarly, Michael's study (2012) conducted with first-in-family (FiF) online students in Australia found that online study offered these students 'an opportunity to study and work while still enjoying somewhat of a balanced lifestyle' (2012, p. 158).

Further research up to the present time has continued to reinforce these earlier findings, demonstrating that students who choose online study are more likely to be older, with family, caring and paid work

responsibilities. They are also more likely to come from backgrounds and circumstances historically under-represented in HE, and additionally are more likely to be female (Hewson, 2018; Ilgaz & Gülbahar, 2015; Moore & Greenland, 2017; Ragusa & Crampton, 2018; Stone, 2019, 2023). Research conducted with online students post-2020 clearly shows that even students who did not choose online study but found themselves unable to study any other way during Covid-19 restrictions, appreciated the greater flexibility associated with it (Attree, 2021; James et al., 2021; Marković et al., 2021; Martin, 2020). This was particularly the case amongst students who were older, with family, caring and paid work responsibilities (James et al., Marković et al., 2021).

Additionally, an open-entry pathway into online HE provides the opportunity to enter HE for those who do not meet traditional entry requirements. An open-entry pathway 'attracts adults from various social and educational backgrounds who frequently do not have the qualifications necessary to gain a place at a conventional university' (Knightley, 2007, p. 269). Shah et al.'s research (2014) with students undertaking an online, open-entry enabling programme to gain entry to an undergraduate degree finds that 'the delivery of enabling programs online provide access and opportunity for many disadvantaged students' (2014, p. 49).

However, online study has its own particular challenges in terms of student engagement, persistence and success with online students 2.5 times more likely to withdraw from their degree without a qualification (Australian Government Department of Education, 2017).

The most recent completion rates from the Australian Government Department of Education (2022), show that of those students who enrolled in 2012, just 48.5% of fully external students (online) had completed degree programmes by 2020, compared with a completion rate for on-campus students over the same time period of 75.2%. The completion rate was higher for multi-modal, or hybrid study, at 71.6%, which could be interpreted as meaning that the lack of any face-to-face contact with the institution is particularly challenging. However, more recent thinking argues that perhaps the mode of study is not the key issue, but instead these lower completion rates reflect the fact that online students are more likely to be studying part-time with significant other responsibilities and commitments in addition to their studies (Hewson, 2018;

Stone, 2023). Indeed, it has been argued that 'these students have busy, complex lives in which their student 'identity' has to take second, third or even fourth place to other non-negotiable identities such as those of parent, paid worker and/or family carer' (Stone et al., 2021, p. 164). Interestingly, part-time student completion rates are similarly compromised, at 47.9% compared with the full-time student completion rate of 76.4%, measured over the same 9-year period of 2012–2020 (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022).

Much of the earlier literature indicated that the twofold challenges of understanding e-learning technology, along with a sense of isolation, were key issues for online students. For example, Yoo and Huang's US study (2013) found that the technology associated with online learning could be overwhelming for 'novice adult learners' (2013, p. 160). This finding was supported by Ilgaz and Gülbahar's Turkish study (2015), which concluded that the convenience factor of studying online is diminished by negative factors such as technical problems, lack of interaction with tutors and other students, problems with instructional materials and students' own difficulties with time management. Lambrinidis' (2014) research at Charles Darwin University, Australia, found that the use of online learning tools to assist students to better understand the technology and to connect with other students and tutors more easily, increased student satisfaction with online learning. He comments that '[f]or students from non-traditional backgrounds, social presence in particular is vital to creating a learning environment conducive to students feeling connected to each other and their respective tutors' (2014, p. 257).

While these factors undoubtedly continue to be significant challenges for online students, more recent evidence has emerged that the diversity of the online student cohort, including the often part-time and understandably fractured nature of their studies as they fit them in around other crucial demands, needs to be better recognised, understood, and valued by institutions (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). A contemporary argument is that, instead of expecting this cohort to be largely the same as the full-time on-campus cohort (Hewson, 2018), an institutional acknowledgement and understanding of the "important fundamental differences

between on-campus and online learners" (Moore & Greenland, 2017, p. 57) that includes more flexible learning and teaching policies and processes (Stone et al., 2019) are needed to ensure an equitable experience for online students.

Who Were the Students?

This chapter looks at the experiences of 87 fully online undergraduate students who were interviewed or surveyed as part of Study B, the details of which is outlined in Chap. 1. As with the students in the other studies (A and C), the online students self-selected to participate by responding to an email invitation. The invitation for online students was sent to a cohort studying fully online undergraduate subjects at a range of Australian universities. All the students had entered their undergraduate studies by an open-entry pathway offered by the university. The students who were invited had indicated on enrolment that neither parent had studied at university level. The invitation email asked them if they were the first amongst their immediate family (parents, siblings, partners and children) to study at university level and if they would be willing to be interviewed by phone, or complete a detailed online survey, about their experiences of their studies so far. A total of 43 students agreed to be interviewed with a further 44 completing the survey.

The same narrative approach using a semi-structured interview process, with the same open-ended questions, was used as with the other students in Study B, except that interviews were conducted by phone instead of face-to-face. One difference in the interview process was that they were also encouraged to discuss their reasons for choosing online studies, how they were experiencing this particular mode of study, including how they managed their time and any particular strategies they used. Any support that they received from family, friends and institutions was also explored. As with the whole Study B survey cohort, the surveys were completed online.

Findings

The names of all 43 interviewees have been changed for the purposes of anonymity. The 44 survey participants were already anonymous but for the purposes of this chapter, each has been given a number (e.g. participant #1) to distinguish them when reporting on findings.

Demographics

The survey asked participants to nominate their age group. The largest number was aged 30–40 (16 students), 15 students were 18–30 and 13 students were aged 40–50 and over. The interviewees gave their exact ages, which ranged from 21 to 62, with a median age of 38. The highest number of interviewees was in the 41–50 age range (12 students) while 22 students were aged 21–40 and nine students were over 40.

Only two students, both survey participants, identified as being 18–21, therefore at least 85 of the 87 participants can be classified as mature-age students. This is consistent with other research into mature-age university students in general, with women being 'more likely to enter university later in life' (Stone & O'Shea, 2012, p. 4) and particularly into open-entry pathways (Cullity, 2006). Females were even more highly over-represented in both the survey and the interview groups, with 34 of the 43 interviewees (79%) and 36 of the 44 survey participants (82%) being women.

Amongst the 43 people who were interviewed, 26 (60%) indicated that they had a partner and 23 (53.5%) had children, ranging in age from one year old, through to adult children. Eight were single parents. Amongst the 44 survey participants, 28 (63.6%) were partnered and 22 (50%) indicated they had children. Ages of children were not requested in the survey.

The majority of participants was doing paid work in addition to their studies. More than two-thirds of the survey participants (68%) were in paid work, either full-time or part-time. Twice as many worked full-time (20) than part-time (10). Amongst the interviewees, 65% were in paid work, with 25 (58%) working full-time and three (7%) working

part-time. Indeed, employment overall proved to be an important motivator for participants to engage in their studies. The following short vignette highlights the complexity of this reasoning:

> *I have always wanted to be a primary school teacher, since my first day of kindergarten. I sold myself short through high school, not thinking I was 'smart' enough to ever get into university; however the thought never left my mind to undergo further studies. Straight after school, I moved out of home… which in turn forced me into full time work straight away. The dreams of uni faded… I went through job after job after job. It did not matter how great the pay was, how 'good' I was at the role I was in—I was not happy with whatever I went into and was getting increasingly frustrated in not being where I needed to be in life. After 6 solid years of working job to job full time, I had my first born and it finally dawned on me… I can give it a shot, whilst I am at home with my little baby. I am surely not that stupid. I tried a unit, and to my own shock, I got a credit!* (Participant #18, female, 21–25, partnered, one child, Education)

This story demonstrates the empowerment that studying online while at home can engender: university came to this participant as she cared for her new baby and managed her home. Each one of the participants had their own particular reasons for choosing to study online.

Why Choose Online Studies?

Overwhelmingly, online study had been chosen for the flexibility that it offered, making it possible for the participants to continue going to work, to care for children and meet other responsibilities. For Glenda, aged 36, single with one teenager and doing Legal Studies, 'It's just perfect because I can study at my own pace and my job gives me the freedom to study when I want' while Evan (29, partnered, no children, Arts) found that he could 'structure the study—to suit my sort of lifestyle instead of having to make any dramatic changes to study on campus'. Talia (43, single, two teenagers, Legal Studies) had health problems which made studying on-campus a daunting prospect: 'I suffer from depression and anxiety… and I also have scoliosis so I have issues with … standing or sitting for too long.'

Open-entry undergraduate studies made it possible for those without university-entry qualifications to begin university and progress towards their chosen degree:

> *I initially applied to [another] University as an external student but was turned down. That made me even more determined to find another way.* (Participant #26, female, 50+, partnered, two adult children, International Development)

Opportunity to Transition into University

Providing an open-entry pathway into HE means that students who have previously been educationally disadvantaged, can nevertheless have the opportunity to enter HE. For example, participant #44 (female, 30–40, single, no children, Community Development) 'looked into online courses and found it easy to access University via [open-entry units]'. This student previously thought that she would not be able to manage university:

> *… it seemed too difficult with the thought of exams, workload, assignments, research. It was quite overwhelming the thought of it, particularly as I have to continue to work full time.*

Her parents did not encourage her education, nor did they give her support in her studies:

> *… my father, who claims that going to uni puts you in a higher class than others, and felt I was 'up myself' for wanting to better my life… [and] in all honesty, I'm not even sure she [mother] knows what I'm studying.*

Yet now, this student finds that 'It's made my self-confidence sky rocket and truly believe I am cut out for University, even though I come from a family who have barely completed high school'.

This story is one of many that emerged from the interviews and surveys, in which participants described a previous lack of opportunity for university study. Open-entry, online study provided that opportunity for

them, which they were able to embrace, despite this being an unusual decision within their families. Perhaps not surprisingly, the word *opportunity* crops up again and again, both in relation to the lack of *opportunity* in the past:

> *There's never the <u>opportunity</u> and, you know, when I was single and I had a mortgage there was no way I could have done anything else; I was barely keeping my head above water then, you know, so <u>opportunity</u> plays a big part.* (Hailey, 41, partnered, no children, Arts)

> *I have always wanted a degree, though never had the <u>opportunity</u>.* (Participant #33, female, 40–50, single, three children, Education)

and in relation to *<u>opportunity</u>* presenting itself now:

> *…a great <u>opportunity</u> and I'm really enjoying it….* (Holly, 43, partnered, three children, Business)

> *…the <u>opportunity</u> has come up.* (Wendy, 38, partnered, three children, Legal Studies)

(Authors' emphases added in quotes above).

What role do others play in the process of transition into university studies? The evidence shows that the decision to engage in university study takes place within a social milieu that sometimes positively and sometimes negatively influences the student's experience.

The Role of Others

As also discussed in Chap. 4, there is a wealth of literature demonstrating the importance of student engagement and support from fellow students and staff for successful transition and participation, particularly for those from backgrounds which have been historically under-represented at university (Devlin et al., 2012; Groves & O'Shea, 2019; James et al., 2010; Tinto, 2009). However, much of this is based on traditional on-campus environments. There is less data on the types of support that are important for online students, who are limited to 'virtual' contact with other

students and staff. The stories of these FiF students indicate that support from family, friends and colleagues outside the institution is just as important as institutional support in making a successful transition into being a university student, if not more so. Families in particular played a significant role, beginning with their inspiration and encouragement to start the journey.

Others as Inspirers

As briefly mentioned in Chap. 4, partners, parents and adult children all played their part in inspiring these FiF learners to begin. For example, Phil (29, partnered, no children, Arts) explained how his partner 'really got me on there, got me to have a look at the website and see what I could do', while participant #8 (female, 25–30, partnered, expecting first child, Accounting) described how 'encouragement and support from my husband helped with the decision to go back and do a degree'. Misti (30, single, no children, Business) credited her mother with being 'always influential in my life in terms of wanting to progress to the next level' and participant #29 (female, 40–50, single, one child, Ancient History) described how her son 'inspired me to go on to university' through his own achievement of winning a scholarship to a private school and going on to university himself.

Managers at work and previous teachers were also influential, for example Evie (34, partnered, no children, Arts) whose boss 'had been encouraging me to try and take on some form of study' and Gail (23, partnered, no children, Nursing) who 'had a number of teachers in high school that were really encouraging and supportive and made me feel like university would be a really great pathway'. The survey participants had similar stories such as that of participant #5 (female, 25–30, partnered, no children, Ancient History) whose manager 'was studying and working full time and she suggested I do the same' and participant #3 (female, 30–40, partnered, no children, Fine Art) whose teacher 'knew so much about artists, styles of painting and design, and this inspired me to aim higher for a degree in what I loved'. Sometimes it was a friend who was a particular role model:

I just have a friend a while ago do a university degree and I was sort of proud of her for doing that and thought it would be something I'd like to do in the future. (Erin, 29, single, one child, Information Technology)

I was inspired by another mum from school who studies… and she encouraged me and guided me through the jargon. (Participant #2, female, 30–40, partnered, two children, Arts)

Others as Critics, Encouragers and Motivators

Responses from family members to the decision to undertake university studies varied, yet overall, there were more positive than negative responses. Some positive reactions were tempered by worry or concern, as illustrated by Lance (46, partnered, two children, Business) who reports that 'My partner asked me if I was really sure I wanted to do it, given the length of time that it would take'.

Approximately half the participants experienced unconditionally positive responses from everyone amongst their family and friends, whilst the other half experienced a mixture of responses, some positive, some negative and some a combination of both. Belinda (31, single, no children, Arts) reported a very positive reaction from her family, with her brother saying to her 'It's about bloody time' while participant #17 (female, 40–50, single, one child, Communications) experienced negative reactions:

My parents have always felt it was a waste of time, ever since I left school in the top 3 per cent. … They are self-made people and think that one doesn't need to further education when one can be successful without.

Mostly, there were at least some family members or friends who reacted positively, even if others were negative:

Everybody else has been very supportive and has considered it a good idea. … A couple of people thought that I was too old to bother with it and it was a waste of my time kind of thing but that was only a couple out of a lot of people. (Roger, 56, partnered, two children, Arts)

Once the transition into university had been made, maintaining the motivation to continue to participate was also influenced both positively and negatively by others around them. For example, parents were described by some participants as not really understanding about university and why the decision to study had been taken, yet were proud of their daughter or son for being a university student:

> *[T]heir opinion was why when you already have a good paying job and haven't you left it a bit late and why spend all that money you'd be better off putting it into your mortgage. … Now my mum is extremely proud of what I am doing she tells everyone she can and my dad I think is impressed with my determination.* (Participant #22, female, 25–30, partnered, no children, Accounting)

This inevitably impacted upon the type of conversations held at home. Some participants felt limited in what they could, or wanted, to say at home about university:

> *I discuss my grades but never the content of the units as not only am I the first in my immediate family to receive a higher education I am also the first to have obtained their HSC, most of the content can be too complex or they do not find it interesting enough to discuss.* (Participant #23, female, 21–25, single, no children, Arts)

> *[T]hey're not into university so it gets difficult to talk about it. They just say "Oh yes, you know, you're just going to be above us" sort of thing and it's not like that at all; I'm trying to achieve a goal.* (Sharnie, 57, widowed, no children, Behavioural Studies)

However, in other families, participants welcomed the opportunity to have conversations with family members, often their children, to build their knowledge of education and of university:

> *My son was unsure as to what uni life was all about and we were able to give him a lot of clarity. This is important for all kids today, as uni is a must, not a possibility, for ALL.* (Participant #14, male, 40–50, partnered, 3 children, Applied Sciences)

Family members could also be a strong source of encouragement to continue with studies:

Even though family members haven't studied at university, they do encourage me to keep going, to keep moving forward. (Participant #35, female, 18–21, single, no children, Psychology)

Natalie (26, single, two children, Business) was one of a number of women who spoke particularly positively about their mothers, saying, 'Mum's really, really helpful, like mum proofreads my essays for me … and makes sure my grammar's correct and stuff'.

Partners were another source of encouragement for many, such as described by one of the survey participants, who said, "My husband—if it wasn't for him I would not have started or quit shortly after" (Participant #22, female, 25–30, partnered, no children, Accounting).

Adult children and teenage children who understood the rigours of study and the technology were also a great help:

My daughter … She's wonderful… She's the techno-head so … Yes, so if there's something that I'm not sure of she'll come and deal with it …. (Nadia, 62, adult children, Arts)

Last, but not least, support from the workplace was frequently mentioned:

[T]he team that I'm in, they've been just as supportive and encouraging which is great from a work perspective that they allow me to have that time and that encouragement. (Barbara, 21, single, no children)

A recent study into online student engagement at a large Australian regional university (Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2019) looked at factors influencing online students' engagement and persistence with their studies. The findings of this study echo those of Park and Choi's seminal research (2009) which concluded that '[a]dult learners are more likely to drop out of online courses when they do not receive support from their family and/or organisation while taking online courses, regardless of

learners' academic preparation and aspiration' (2009, p. 215). Certainly for the FiF students being discussed within these chapters, having an external network of support was clearly very important in maintaining motivation and continuing their participation as students:

> *Family and friends support, push and motivate me to continue going ahead with it.* (Participant #40, male, 30–40, single, no children, Criminology)

For these online students, being offered and receiving institutional help and support was of great importance. An understanding and motivating approach from tutors was particularly appreciated as well as proactive 'outreach' support checking how they were going, and reaching out to them to offer academic assistance and other support:

> *Individual tutors have been amazingly supportive and encouraging when I was struggling with new concepts and skills.* (Participant #9, female, 30–40, partnered with children, Arts)

> *I got an email … telling me that they were here to help … uni is hard so give us a call if you ever want a chat … and then a couple of days later I thought I'm going to call these guys. It was really helpful. I had a chat to a woman over the phone who was really great.* (Corey, 30, single, no children, Education)

A Transformative Experience

Reay et al. (2002), in their study of mature-age students on university access courses in the United Kingdom (UK), talk about 'the almost magical transformative powers of education' (2002, p. 402). The transformative power of education has been well-demonstrated in many other studies in the UK, Europe, the US and Australia over at least two decades (McGivney, 2006; Quinn, 2005; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018; Stone & O'Shea, 2012; Tett, 2000).

This is also the case for the participants in this study, despite the fact that they are 'attending university' in a virtual sense. Similar to other

studies which have shown that women in particular develop a new sense of themselves through their university journey (Britton & Baxter, 1999; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006), it was the women amongst these online students who most eloquently described the ways in which they were seeing themselves differently. One example is Donna, who at age 36, partnered with two children, is experiencing a new sense of herself as a psychology student, instead of 'just' a mother and 'just' a cleaning lady:

> And, it's very strange for me because … during the day, I'm just a mother and I'm just a cleaning lady so, you know what I mean, like in the world of the work chain, I'm down the bottom… and then here I am, at night, studying psychology. So, I have a lot of moments where I'm like "Wow, hey, no-one would pick that".

The male students more often expressed this sense of transformation in terms of employment, career and future, such as Paul (47, partnered, four children, Business) who says that he will 'stay in the workforce a bit longer and … pick up management positions that I'm interested in as a result of that and my experience'. This is consistent with other research, such as that by Karmel and Woods (2006) who found in their research with older learners that 'for men, it is more about a strategy for maintaining engagement with the labour market' (p. 146). The constraints imposed by the traditional social roles of 'male breadwinner' and 'female carer' play their part in this difference (Stone & O'Shea, 2013, 2021), as further discussed in Chaps. 8 and 9.

However, career and employment were not unimportant to the women, who also had definite plans to use their qualifications to help them in the workforce. Susanna (43, partnered, three children, Arts) for instance, expressed an explicit goal of improving her career prospects. 'The more that I go on with it, the more value I see in it … with a definite plan that in three years that means I've finished a degree and I'm actually going to enter the workforce as a graduate'.

Catalysts for Online Learning

Online education, particularly when combined with an open-entry pathway, is providing the opportunity to make the transition into HE for cohorts of students for whom university has previously been very difficult to access (Knightley, 2007; Shah et al., 2014; Stone, 2021). International research suggests that students who do not have an immediate family member who has been to university are less likely attend university and also less likely to perform well academically once they are there (Marginson, 2015; Nuffield Foundation, 2020; Patfield et al., 2021). In analysing the experiences of this group of FiF students, undertaking open-entry undergraduate studies online, there are a number of observations that can be made.

Nearly all these students were mature-age students (over 21) with the majority aged over 30. For various reasons, the opportunity to previously attend university in the traditional on-campus mode was either not available or this path was not chosen, whether due to family norms, distance, finances, poor entry scores or other circumstances. In being able to access online education, particularly open-entry, an opportunity had arisen for them to change their lives in significant ways. The desire to 'better their lives' and the lives of their children and partners was a strong motivator for this particular group to take on the challenge of online studies. External events, life changes, financial and work pressures had all played a part in their decision, and many had been inspired by others to begin this journey. As described, other research indicates that these motivations and influences are similar to the motivations of mature-age students generally. However, the difference is that, without the opportunity to study online, many of these students indicated that they would not be studying at all—it was only due to the availability and flexibility of online study that they felt able to embark upon this journey.

An initial lack of knowledge about university, combined with uncertainty about their abilities could make for a challenging transition to becoming a student—'I have thought on occasions that I wasn't smart enough for study at a university level' (participant #43, male, 30–40, single, no children, Accounting). Particularly in the transition phase,

support that reached out to them was deeply valued, rather than the expectation they sought it out individually and in isolation. A sense of gratitude for being at university also came across strongly, in words such as:

> *This is one of the greatest experiences of my life and I'm so grateful to be a student at University. It's been my dream for so many years and it's finally coming true every day. I love being able to study at home so I can be with my children and I'm so grateful that the government supports me to study so that I can support my children and myself for the rest of my life.* (Participant #7, female, 30–40, single with children, Education)

Being 'grateful' may also inhibit students from being too demanding of support and assistance, which further highlights the importance of proactive support and assistance from both teaching and support staff.

These students were all clearly appreciative of family support and interest when this was forthcoming, but sharing information or having full conversations about their experiences of university could be limited by the family's lack of experience and knowledge. There is increasing evidence of the importance of both family and other external encouragement and support for FiF student persistence and retention (Barsegyan & Maas, 2022; Capannola & Johnson, 2022).) For online learners, Stone and O'Shea (2019, p, 61) talk of the need for universities 'to involve families and communities' in orientation and outreach activities, recognising them as 'important sources of support and motivation' who therefore need to know more about 'what is involved in undertaking further studies' in order to be able to better support their family member who is studying.

What was also interesting and very positive was the growth in confidence and self-esteem evidenced as the students successfully transitioned into the student role and fully participated in their studies. For participant #40 (male, 30–40, single, no children, Criminology) his first unit 'helped me prepare and develop my skills … It made me realise that I am smarter than I had always thought, helped settle the self-doubt about whether or not I was doing the right thing and was a great starting point for the rest of my studies'.

Conclusion

FiF students represent a little over half of all HE students across the Australian education sector (OECD, 2012, p. 5). Online studies offer many of these students, particularly those who are older with responsibilities of family and work, the opportunity they need to be able to study towards a university degree. Institutions that also offer an online open-entry pathway provide additional opportunities for those FiF students who do not otherwise meet entry requirements.

However, widening access is only one part of the story. The findings from this student cohort have implications for the ways in which institutions acknowledge and support them, in order to extend the initial opportunity of transitioning into online study into ongoing, successful participation and completion for many more students. The concluding chapter of this book offers some specific recommendations for institutions about ways to more effectively harness the positive contribution of families and communities, which play such a significant role in supporting and encouraging FiF online learners.

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7

'So How Was Big School Today?' Family Perceptions of HE Participation

Introduction

This book recognises that if we wish to deeply understand the motivations and experiences of the first-in-family (FiF) cohort, then it is necessary to listen carefully to *both* the students themselves *and* the voices of those in proximity to them. This chapter foregrounds the words and stories of the family members of participants in this research, drawing upon both interview and survey material. The inclusion of family members in the study of higher education (HE) participation is not a common feature of research in this field (Barsegyan & Maas, 2022; Heath et al., 2011) yet those closest to the student may play a key role in this undertaking (Gofen, 2009). Much of what we know about education and the family relates to the influence of parents and parental educational levels on the academic outcomes of their child dependents. There remains very little understanding about not only how the internal dynamics of the household impact upon students but also how these dynamics are affected when someone attends university, particularly when this attendance can be regarded as a 'non normative transition' (Mercer, 2007, p. 30). This has prompted researchers in the field to call for scholarly work on the

educational outcomes of FiF students that firmly places 'family at the center of analysis' (LeBouef & Dworkin, 2021, p. 294)

This chapter seeks to explore the relational repercussions of having 'significant others' present within the university environment, on those closest to them. Extending the lens of investigation to include those in proximity to the student, both relationally and geographically, may assist in understanding the impacts upon family and community members' considerations and imaginings of educational futures, when one of their own goes to university. Equally, it is important to understand how these others, located in familial networks and communities around the student, may facilitate this access to HE, even when this facilitation may not be in ways customarily understood as supporting university participation.

The chapter begins with a summary outline of the literature and research relating to parental and/or familial influences on educational participation. This is followed by an exploration of the concept of family capital, which extends theorisations around social capital to consider the ways family members may both influence, and be affected by, the university attendance of their student member. To generate deeper understanding of these effects, the chapter will draw upon the voices and words of significant others derived from both Study A and Study B in order to examine how the decision to come to university reverberated throughout the household. The chapter then concludes with discussion about why it might be important for HE institutions to engage with those closest to the student and the possible benefits such interactions could have for individuals and those around them.

Family and Educational Participation

Research has indicated that levels of parents' education are strong indicators of an individual's academic achievement and also aspirations for continuing education (Johnston et al., 2014; Marginson, 2015). Indeed, across a number of countries the education of parents is statistically correlated to the likelihood of university attendance for the young person in the family, indicating the disparity in HE participation:

In Australia, young adults who have at least one university educated parent are 4.3 times more likely to attend university compared to young people whose parents have less education, and in England the likelihood is 6.3 times and the United States 6.8 times higher. (Pires & Chapin, 2022, p. 3222)

However, we cannot assume that educational levels remain static across generations. Wainwright and Marandet (2010) argue that when learning is brought into a household, there is potential to alter the 'tactile fabric' of this environment (p. 461). These authors identify that one of the repercussions resulting from such an introduction is change to parents' aspirations for children's educational futures. However, these authors contend that research conducted with and alongside parents and carers is required in order to create spaces for 'the voices of parents to reflect on the perceived impact their learning has on themselves and their families' (p. 452), a *gap* echoed by Feinstein et al. (2008).

Researching 'Family' within First-in-family Student University Experience

Pascarella et al. (2004) in their foundational review of research on FiF learners highlight three main categories of investigation related to this cohort. The first body of literature largely compares the characteristics of this cohort to their second and third generation peers. This comparative analysis indicates that this cohort can generally be regarded as disadvantaged, or in deficit, with this disadvantage manifested via assumed knowledges, poor finances and false expectations of the degree programme. The second body of literature explores the nature of transition for this cohort, particularly between school and university, which is also identified as being more problematic for FiF. The third focus is on attrition and postgraduation opportunities. Again the authors conclude that FiF students have increased chances of leaving the institution and often have poorer outcomes after completion of their degree.

While this review was conducted nearly two decades ago, the research in this field has continued to focus largely on the student as an individual with little consistent attention on those closest to students. This emphasis

on the individual mirrors the approach taken by many education institutions, whereby students are decontextualised and treated as isolated units or individuals devoid of context. While some universities offer outreach and support strategies that may include the parent and the teacher in activities, the emphasis continues to largely remain on the individual student rather than incorporating the family or community more broadly. Yet research shows that 'parents have a substantial influence on children's education pathway choice' (Kilpatrick et al., 2020, p. 22), illustrated by findings such as those from a recent Australian study in which 'parents/guardians, other adult role models and teachers were rated by the students as having considerably higher impact on their post-school intentions'; in fact the impact of parents/guardians was 'nearly twice as strong' as that of university staff (Stone et al., 2022, p. 80). These findings are supported by other studies (see, e.g., Austin et al., 2020; Gore et al., 2019; Katersky Barnes et al., 2019), with all concluding that families and communities are intrinsic to the delivery of effective university outreach programmes.

The research that does include the family of students reveals a somewhat contested field. How schools, family and communities contribute to building educational capability and the requisite capitals for further education remains unclear (Capannola & Johnson, 2022; Johnston et al., 2014). For example, utilising a theoretical framework inspired by Bourdieu, Wilks and Wilson (2012) argue that young people's educational aspirations reflect 'the influence of parents and siblings (cultural capital) and the local environment (social capital) especially in the last two years of primary and the first two years of secondary school' (p. 83). Similarly, Wainwright and Marandet (2010) suggest that parents' involvement in HE can assist in reducing a 'poverty of ambition'. Yet Dyke (2011) argues that when there is a lack of access to an educational memory within the household, there is every chance that young people may not conceive of university as a possibility. As Dyke (2011) explains:

> [E]conomic and cultural factors may limit the boundaries of what individuals consider possible for themselves in such a way that a decision is never taken and the agenda need never be set … university [is] simply not within the bounds of possibility, either culturally or economically. (p. 106)

The concept of 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) indicates some of the additional barriers that students who are the first in their family to attend university may encounter when considering HE participation. Ball and Vincent (1998) highlight how hot or 'grapevine' knowledge is often a more trusted source of information for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Whereas more formal or 'cold knowledge' sources, often in the form of official publications, is favoured by those from wealthier or more advantaged backgrounds. This situation is not in itself disadvantageous but when a student does not have access to a knowledgeable other within the family, the concern is that the hot knowledge may actually be based upon myth or rumour. In the FiF context, there is often 'the absence of other, more reliable sources of information … a way of filling in the missing information' (Ball & Vincent, 1998, p. 380). Without this necessary 'insider' information, FiF students may rely solely on 'hot knowledge' that offers only a partial and somewhat uninformed perspective on this educational undertaking.

However, importantly, just as we have argued that FiF students should not be assumed to be deficit or lacking, the same can be argued for the family and the community of the student. Following on from Gofen (2009), we propose that the family of students should not simply be considered as a 'constraint' but rather recognised as a 'key resource' (p. 114) for these students in their HE trajectory. Gofen's work points to family members' capacity to enable educational success through the 'investment of non-material resources' (p. 104). Such non-material resources include the 'families' habits, priorities, belief systems and values' (p. 106), which act as galvanising forces in the pursuit and achievement of education. In adopting a family resilience model, the family unit is regarded not as a limiting factor but rather recognised as a powerful buffer that enables individuals to 'withstand and rebound from adversity' (p. 106).

Clearly, this is a complex and contested field, prompting LeBouef and Dworkin (2021) to recently advocate that when it comes to researching the educational attainment of FiF students: 'Researchers should consider the family as the place to start, focusing on family as a source of resilience and strength' (p. 294).

The concept of social capital is one framing that can be usefully applied to understanding the diverse range of roles that family and community

adopt in relation to university participation and success. The next section revisits social capital, which was initially introduced in Chap. 3. Building upon Bourdieu's theorisation, the following also draws on the work of Putnam (2000) and Croll (2004) to further develop the concept of social capital with particular reference to the family and kin of the student.

Social Capital Theory

Chapter 3 introduced the concept of social capital through reference to the work of Bourdieu (1986); according to Bennett and Silva (2011) theories of capitals combined with the concepts of field and habitus form the 'conceptual cornerstones' of Bourdieu's theories (p. 429). These capitals can be both economic and non-economic in nature and in combination can sustain existing social status and order (Bourdieu, 1986). Capital operates on both a monetary and symbolic level, with social capital broadly referring to the networks of affiliations that people have access to and the resulting privileges such contact enables. This connectedness can actually reproduce social stratification or hierarchies of power, and retains a certain level of taken-for-grantedness within society.

According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is not distributed evenly across society, with those in more elite or powerful classes having greater access to the social capitals that matter. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) explain:

> *Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.* (p. 119)

While Bourdieu's theories of social capital have provided some insight into the ways that capital operates at a symbolic level, the definition of what it comprises is not fixed. For example, rather than focus on power differentials, Putnam (2000) considers the potential for social capital to increase civil engagement and social well-being. Whilst Bourdieu's social capital is largely reproductive, a networking that serves to legitimise the positioning of the powerful and dominant classes, Putnam (2000) views

this concept in a more collective sense. In this way, social capital can be regarded as a mutually supportive network for maintaining democracy. Putnam's theorisations focus broadly on the wider community, and he does caution that this social capital effect is in decline due to less connection between individuals, as well as less trust and reciprocity.

Undoubtedly, social capital is also operationalised within the family but defining this effectively can be somewhat 'elusive' (Croll, 2004, p. 401) largely due to the debates and differentials in the field. Therefore, building upon the work of Gofen (2009) and Yosso (2005), this chapter explicitly draws upon the concept of 'family capital' in the sections that follow. This is a form of social capital but focuses on the ways that families mobilise existing resources to positively influence and support members' hopes and ambitions. These resources include relational links, values or beliefs as well as less tangible capitals derived from biography, community status and emotional assets (Gofen, 2009). Yosso (2005) similarly reflects upon familial capital and extends this to include much broader family networks that include people both present and past as well as extended kinship networks, which are not necessarily biological in nature. Yosso and Garcia (2007) explain how it is this 'familia' that 'model lessons of caring, coping, and providing, which helps us develop our emotional, moral, educational, and occupational consciousness' (p. 165). This is a powerful resource that can be a rich source of support and encouragement in educational endeavours (O'Shea, 2015).

The following section examines the perspectives of the extended family in order to unpack the types of support and encouragement that were derived from this source. Of similar interest is how this 'family capital' was potentially developed and further resourced by this return to education, particularly the flow of capitals between university and the home place.

Survey and Interview Data

The following data is drawn from the interviews and surveys only conducted with family members of the students, a perspective, as discussed above, that is not commonly reported in the literature on this area. This

is a gap that needs to be filled to better understand the role of family in the HE journey. Adopting an embodied methodology such as narrative inquiry enables entry into the lived experience of participants and is also powerful in its ability to evoke deeply personal responses from readers. As an 'ontological condition of social life' (Somers, 1994, p. 614), telling stories, both written and verbal, negotiates human action and identity as well as providing the means to make sense of life occurrences. The stories have been derived from two sources: interviews conducted with family members and current students (n = 5: including one interview from Study A) and surveys completed by family members (n = 40). The following section outlines the survey structure and provides an overview of the respondents.

Survey Respondents

Survey methodology was introduced to Study B when it became difficult to encourage family members to come to campus or commit to an interview; this is perhaps not surprising when the majority of students interviewed indicated that their family members had rarely, or never, been on-campus. The surveys were distributed to family respondents by way of snowball sampling where student participants nominated an email address for a family member whom they considered would be willing to provide insight into their HE trajectory. The survey proved to be very popular and generated a very rich source of qualitative data due to the open nature of the questions and the clear engagement that respondents identified in relation to the project. Similar to the interviews, and as outlined in Chap. 1, the open-ended survey responses were analysed for emergent themes in NVivo and the quantitative data was collated for descriptive statistics.

The survey participants were derived from various generations, having a range of relationships with the student. For example, family members whose daughters were studying numbered 15 (37.5%), while those with sons were less represented (n=4, 10%). Family members whose mother was studying were eight (20%), with a similar number for partners (n=7, 17.5%). Sisters, brothers and grandchildren accounted for the remaining

15% of responses (n=4, 1, 1, respectively). Interestingly, no family members of fathers returning to education completed the survey. Family members reported that their highest educational qualification was a high school leaving certificate, known in New South Wales as the Higher School Certificate (HSC) (n=12), a TAFE certificate or equivalent (n=12) and a trade or workplace qualification (n=8). Eight family members indicated that there were others in their family considering university, 15 indicated none, while six were unsure.

Interview Respondents

The number of interviews that included family members was quite small in both studies; in Study A only one interview included a family member (mother) who had commenced studying at the same time as her daughter. In Study B, a total of four interviews were conducted, two included children, one included a grandparent, and another involved a mother. Given these very small numbers, a summary biography for each of the participants de-identified using pseudonyms is provided below.

The Study A interviewees were Linda and her mother Natalie. Linda, aged 20, attended an interview with Natalie (43). Both women were in their first semester of university but were studying different degrees. Natalie explained how Linda had dropped out of high school at an early age but had gained entry into an Arts Degree via an alternative pathway; Natalie's entry to a Bachelor of Commerce had been based on her prior work experience and vocational qualifications. They resided together in social housing and described significant poverty in the home, and both had recently received a scholarship, which Natalie described as 'like winning Lotto'. While neither was employed, Natalie was considering reducing her study load and seeking employment to enable Linda to continue her studies full-time.

Two relatives interviewed in Study B were Naomi, aged 19, who was doing a Bachelor of Science (Psychology). Naomi lived with her grandmother, Nonna, who was 67 years old. Coming to university was something that Naomi had always dreamed about but she admitted to being too frightened to come on-campus even when her class participated in a

campus tour, and she stated: 'it's a big campus—it can be scary'. When she was offered her place at university she described how she 'broke down on the floor, crying'. Nonna was an Italian migrant who only attended school until Year 2; she instilled the importance of education into Naomi from an early age and expressed great personal satisfaction that Naomi had gained entry.

Elle attended her interview with her mother, Yvonne. Elle was a 33-year-old single parent with three children aged 11, 9 and 5 years at the time of the interview. Elle was living in social housing and regarded university as an opportunity to show her children how 'they'll be able to go to uni and get a good job themselves'. Yvonne described Elle as a role model for the other nephews and nieces in the family, explaining how her attendance is 'good because it's encouraging them to get off their bottoms and do something with their lives'.

We were initially introduced to Vicki (41) and her son Christopher (16) in Chap. 5, Christopher was the eldest of three children, the youngest being just two years old. Upon completion of the enabling programme, Vicki hoped to enter a Nursing degree and eventually qualify to become a midwife. Christopher was attending school but had ambitions to attend university at some point. Christopher had witnessed his mother undertaking her studies and this had led him to realise that university 'seems like a lot of hard work'.

Finally, Noeleen, aged 47, attended the interview with her 11-year-old son Nathaniel, both of whom also featured in Chap. 5. She reflected that the main reason for enrolling in an enabling programme related to being at a 'crossroads' in her life. Noeleen was married with two children and she described her husband as being very supportive of her decision, initially encouraging her to enrol: 'my husband said "You've always wanted to go to university. Now's the time. Just do it"'. At 11, Nathaniel was still undecided about a future in university, at the point of the interview it was a 'maybe yes, maybe no sort of thing'.

Despite the different data collection methods (interview and survey), there was a high level of congruence in the themes that emerged. The next section explores this data drawing on the following areas:

- Perceptions or beliefs about university
- Reactions from the family
- Public and private changes

Each of the quotes is identified according to its source, either survey or interview; for survey respondents, details of the relationship to the student are provided as well as highest educational qualification level, while as already mentioned, interview participants are identified by the pseudonyms already provided.

Perceptions or Beliefs about University

In the survey, participants were asked: *Before your family member started doing university studies, what did you think about university?* Overwhelmingly the answers spoke to a recognition that while university was a 'positive' ambition it was perceived as something characterised by potential difficulties or obstacles. As one parent explained '[I] thought it was fairly daunting' (Participant #33, Mother of student daughter, 38, Year 11). By far the most common hurdle identified related to the financial implications:

> *My husband and I have successfully raised four children however due to the costs of University we could never afford to send our children … I appreciate what Uni can do in furthering the knowledge of our children but it has always seemed only for the wealthy.* (Participant #37, Mother of student daughter, 46, HSC)

> *That it* [university] *was for people that were able to afford to study.* (Participant #16, Mother of student daughter, 55, HSC)

However, just over 41% of the survey respondents indicated that their opinion of university attendance had changed since their family member had commenced. The optional qualitative comments (n=13) that followed this question indicated changes in perceptions of educational quality, value for money, levels of difficulty, and emerging ambitions to attend. Interestingly, in both interviews and surveys, the children of students

indicated a new appreciation of the level of difficulty of university and in one case this led to reconsideration of future attendance:

> *I see how much work it is for my mum and wonder if I really want to do this anymore.* (Participant #11, Daughter of student mother, 15, High School student)

> *I didn't know people could study online. I didn't think it would be so stressful.* (Participant #23, Son of student mother, 14, High School student)

Most of the family interviewees had never been to the campus before and so knowledge about the university was quite limited, as Nonna pointed out: 'Well I didn't know what the uni life was like because I've never been here or known anybody that was coming'. This suggests that the 'hot knowledge' (Ball & Vincent, 1998) that these students and their families had access to may have had little application to the actual reality of the HE environment.

Overall, it was the environment and size of the campuses that came as quite a shock to the family members who attended an interview. Christopher described how the university 'was cool, really big. I didn't expect it to be so large. It looks expensive', while Elle's mother thought:

> *"Wow, this is really big and nice" and that and I thought "Oh". I was just looking around taking it all in and I thought "Wow. You'd get lost in this place if you didn't know where you were going".*

While Nonna summed up her impressions of this scale by simply stating 'It's like a little city isn't it?'

Reactions from the Family

The support and pride of family members for these students was palpable in both surveys and interviews. Overwhelmingly, going to university was viewed as a great opportunity, albeit risky, for students, with possible wider benefits for other family members:

I was and am very proud of my daughter studying at university. I have always known that she can achieve anything so to see her completing this makes me the happiest mother. (Participant #15, Mother of daughter student, 43, HSC)

I felt proud that a family member was getting to University and it made me want to follow in her footsteps. (Participant#14, Sister of student, 21, HSC)

I was all for it. I encouraged her and told her "Yeah, that's a good choice". No, she's done well, made us proud. (Nonna, 67 interviewed with granddaughter)

Whilst individuals regarded this move into university as largely a positive one, this was often mixed with fears. The concerns expressed included the ability of the students to cope with the demands of study. As mentioned, this included the financial implications but equally there were reservations expressed about the academic demands in relation to health or well-being concerns.

I am proud that she is trying to further her education, however I do worry about her supporting herself while studying. (Participant #22, Mother of daughter student, 54, TAFE Certificate)

I was aware of the pressure she would be under trying to complete a degree and working at the same time. She always had and always will have, my total support. We spoke at length about the need for her to have work/life/study balance and she's shown that she can juggle all three effectively. (Participant #34, Mother of daughter student, 46, TAFE Certificate)

These excerpts are significant as often the family is portrayed as a constraining factor for FiF students (Gofen, 2009), but our research clearly indicates that for the most part, these respondents were 'facilitators' in this academic undertaking (Gofen, 2009, p. 104). However, it is important to note that those family members who elected to respond to the survey (or attend an interview) may have been more positively biased. As detailed in the next chapter, students' own narratives presented the diversity in levels and types of support proffered by family members.

Overall, high levels of support were also reflected in both the student and the family interviews, the former describing positive reactions from various kinship sources. One example of this affirmation was the family

interview with Elle and her mother; Elle described how her decision to come to university was derived from recognising that she 'deserved better than being a single mum, wanting more for myself and growing up in housing commission and seeing how some kids can go so I thought … I [will] set the path for my kids'. Yvonne, her mother, concurred and explained how both herself and Elle's father were 'very proud of her, very proud and give her all the support she needs and yes, just very proud of her'. Yvonne admitted that while she had never been to university, Elle often asked her for advice and so she would

> sit there and listen to her, what she has to tell me on the phone all the time, "Oh mum I had to study this today" and … she asked me, you know, some advice about some subject or something like that that maybe I might know something about, you know, so … I'll tell her I don't know about it and tell her what I've experienced in that subject or whatever she's learning.

Yvonne also described assisting Elle practically by providing babysitting or assistance with money where possible, her pride in Elle's achievements is clear as the following interchange indicated:

Yvonne	*She's been doing very well and yes, she's just been doing great. I've noticed that she's, you know, she keeps telling me "I've got so many passes or so many points" and there are times she said she's gets a distinction, "Oh congratulations" and everything. Well, first time she said "distinction" I went "What's that?" I didn't know.*
Elle	*I got one.*
Yvonne	*Well at least you got one and I know that's important.*

(Yvonne, 56, Interviewed with daughter, Elle, 33)

However, it was not only the adult members of the family who provided encouragement; parenting students also described children as being strong motivators for their academic pursuits. Participants in the family interviews similarly expressed this support as being both practical and forthright. For example, Vicki described how her nine-year-old daughter is 'amazing' in the ways she provided care for the youngest child aged

two: '[S]he'll get Emma up out of bed and give her breakfast and all of that kind of stuff. I mean that type of thing in some ways gives children responsibility and ownership.' Eleven-year-old Nathaniel provided advice to his Mum about starting assignments and explained:

> I just say "Use a simple word and just write it all the time", like I think it was five days ago, pretty sure, I said "If you can't write anything just write 500 words of blah, blah, blah".

While the child respondents in the family survey did not speak explicitly to the support they provided, other participants provided details of how they assisted the student in the family. For example, one husband described how he is more involved with babysitting, finding 'activities outside the house especially during school holidays. I have to take time off work to mind our youngest during exams' (Participant #6, Husband of female student, Trade Qualification). Whilst another father explained how he was supporting his daughter 'more financially and … by driving her to uni to avoid paying for parking' (Participant #4, Father of daughter student, Primary School). Again these types of support may not be those foregrounded as important within the university environment but this type of foundational help may have assisted these students to persist at their studies. While the family of these students did not necessarily have much 'insider knowledge' of this environment, there was still opportunity to make valid contributions to this educational journey. This new educational venture did not only result in relational assistance but also led to broader transformations within the household. The final section will identify some of these changes.

Public and Private Changes

Linda and her mother, Natalie commenced university together and are both in the first year of their respective degrees. Each admitted that this decision has resulted in fundamental shifts in the ways that others perceived them as well as in their own self-perception. Linda and Natalie explained that coming from a very disadvantaged area and being in receipt of welfare payments meant that others 'constantly put us down into a

category and boxed us into this little thing that we fit into because housing, Centrelink [Government Welfare Department] and you hear those words and it's immediately judgement' (Natalie, 43, interviewed with daughter, Linda, 20). However, such attitudes did not deter them; instead Natalie explained how such 'judgements' had increased their desire to continue: 'So that's a motivation too—"Stuff you all"'. Both referred to transformations they had undergone personally, Linda explained how six months ago 'all I wanted was a job at Myer [Department store]' whereas 'Now I'm thinking about it, I can be an intern' (Linda, 20, interviewed with mother). While Linda and Natalie spoke to their own personal and public shifts in perspectives, in other interviews family members described witnessing changes within the household and within the student.

While Nathaniel described his mother as being both happy and excited about university, this positive change was, however, tinged with some negativity. He admitted that his Mum was now very busy resulting in a level of preoccupation, or as Nathaniel explained 'she's been like…"Talk to the hand" sometimes because she's working really hard'. Family members in both surveys and interviews regularly commented on the repercussions of hectic schedules, this was particularly the case for the younger respondents. Christopher explained how 'mum's not as involved as she used to be. Because she's so focused on uni work, she doesn't have enough time to spend with us kids'. He continued by describing how 'you don't see her as much because she's always in her office typing and we're like "Where's mum gone?"' These underlying changes in the household routine were similarly revealed in the surveys:

> *Mum is on the laptop a lot. The routine changed a bit. Mum asks me to be quiet a lot.* (Participant #4, Son of mother student, 14, High School)

> *My mother is incredibly busy with her studies and commits a lot of her time to completing the amount of work required. My father is a lot more involved with us children and is also really involved with the domestic aspects of life.* (Participant #3, Daughter of mother student, 17, High School)

However, with changes to the household routine also came new conversations in the household and different perceptions of educational futures. For example, one brother explained that prior to his sister

attending university, he 'didn't think it [university] was a possibility or even consider it an option'; however, witnessing his sister 'has made me and my brother consider higher education.' Similarly, a husband described how he now regards his wife as 'a role model to our children and also to other family members'. Becoming an exemplar for others in the extended family was also reflected on by Elle's mother Yvonne, who described how Elle had 'started a trend … you know, it's very encouraging for the up and coming nieces and nephews that she's got—"Not only Elle can do it, you know, we can do it too" type thing'. This movement into HE had evoked a new phase in this family's educational aspirations. In observing one member of the family achieving at this educational level, others were encouraged to consider this as a possibility.

While it could be argued that the family members who participated in interviews and surveys were likely those who were the most supportive, these findings were similarly echoed in the surveys and interviews conducted with students, as outlined elsewhere in this book. Repeatedly, student participants referred to the key role played by family and community in their HE journeys. While this was not always positively perceived or enacted, the overriding theme was one of assistance and support. This is perhaps best indicated by the question on the student survey that asked: *At crisis points, what or who has assisted you to keep going with your studies?* In response to this question, just over 71% of the student respondents (n=101) indicated that it was the family that they turned to in these times of difficulty, this was second only to 'self' as a source of support (n=103). The following comments from student surveys indicating the wealth and depth of this support:

> *Even though family members haven't studied at university, they do encourage me to keep going, to keep moving forward.* (Female Student Survey Participant #30, 18–21, B Psychology, 2nd year, Online)

> *I am reminded by the supportive members of family and friends that the opinions of those who are not supportive simply don't count, which is true, their opinions don't matter because I am doing this for me, to be satisfied with my life and career and achievements. Financially, my mother's support has been vital in my choice to continue studying. My grandmother has also been very supportive and treats me to something nice where she can, which I am very appreciative of.* (Female Student Survey Participant #3, 21–25, B Arts, 1st Year, Online)

Conclusion

Predominantly, the stories told by both the students and their family members were those of affirmation and encouragement. This is important to note as often the lack of a HE 'memory' or biography within the household is regarded as negatively impacting on students' experiences. However, what this chapter has highlighted is that family and familial networks provide other, more subtle but equally fundamental forms of assistance. These might be words of encouragement, a sympathetic ear, or a lift to university to save parking fees, but collectively such actions can be regarded as forms of family capital significant to these students. Equally, this return to university also provided new resources within the household, sometimes this was simply initiating new conversations of learning and in some cases new possibilities for the future. The survey and interview data point to shifts in perceptions of academic futures combined with a more nuanced 'hot knowledge' that would inform future educational endeavours.

The students in these studies may not have had ready access to the various capitals defined by Bourdieu but this did not automatically equate to lack on their part. Instead, the capitals these students drew upon were derived from 'broader relational wealth that can provide both inspiration and support for first-in-family students' (O'Shea, 2014, p. 13). This is a source of capital that is often disregarded in the HE environment, yet our research indicates how this can be not only a source of motivation, but can also provide the necessary 'non-material resources' (Gofen, 2009) to aid success. In order to better leverage these resources, institutions need to reconsider the false separation between home and the institution. Rather than treat students simply as individuals, a more holistic approach to student engagement that is inclusive of their significant others is required. Removing the boundaries or demarcations between the family and the institution also has the potential to engage and support future generations of students. When someone in the family commences university, household dynamics change, new conversations are held, and educational horizons may be broadened. However, if the family is not included in this transition then arguably they are only offered a partial

view of this undertaking. The implications of this are perhaps most clearly seen in the quotes from the young people, some of whom were reconsidering their own university attendance after witnessing first-hand the demands of this undertaking.

The concept of 'family capital' has been used in this chapter to acknowledge the powerful role played by both family members and the family unit in the enactment of educational aspirations. This has foregrounded how the 'cultural and familial 'baggage' that first-in-family students arrive with is not necessarily a deficit but also an asset (O'Shea, 2015, p. 236). Family and extended kinship networks are strategically positioned to assist FiF students persist in these learning endeavours. Yet these networks remain under-utilised and largely ignored by HE institutions. This is a vital resource that we suggest can underpin this educational journey.

Chapter 8 focuses on the narratives of the parent students to provide a deeper understanding of how the FiF student experience was enacted within households that included children. This material provides insights and a richly descriptive understanding of the complexities of this FiF student experience, particularly for those older students with parental responsibilities.

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8

Parents Managing University and Family Life

Introduction

Many first-in-family (FiF) students begin their university journey not as traditional school leavers, but as mature-age students who have busy family lives, often with young children, as well as working lives to manage. Those who are the first in their family to begin university means there may be no-one in their home, or even in their close community, who has any previous experience or knowledge of university to share with them. Indeed, there can often be a misalignment of family assumptions and expectations with the reality of a student's actual experience of university. While families can be powerful sources of inspiration, support and encouragement, as has been shown in Chap. 7, their demands and expectations can also be problematic and stressful, at times needing careful negotiation. This chapter explores the role that family played in the lives of the mature-age students with children, who formed a significant part of the cohort in Study B. It also draws upon findings from previous studies with mature-age FiF students (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Hook, 2015; Longhurst et al., 2012; Marandet & Wainwright, 2010; Reay et al., 2002; Stone, 2008; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Both the positive contribution of

family, as well as the complications arising from family needs and demands, are examined, in relation to the lives of these parents as students. This cohort of students demands more attention from researchers, universities and policymakers as they are now a significant feature of higher education (HE) participation in Australia.

Growth in Mature-Age University Students in Australia

The number of mature-age students at Australian universities has been increasing steadily since the 1970s. The most recent figures (2020) identify how 25% of all commencing undergraduate students are aged 25 years or over; a figure which has grown from an average of 22% since 2012 (Universities Australia, 2022). The trend towards more mature-age students entering HE internationally dates from as early as the Second World War, when legislation to re-establish service men and women into civilian life allowed them to apply for degree programmes (May & Bunn, 2015, p. 133). This trend was given further impetus through the 1960s, when UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) proposed the concepts of 'lifelong education' (Bagnall, 2006, p.25), and the 'the learning society' (May, 2005), followed by the development of an international agenda, from the 1970s onwards, of Lifelong Learning (Clancy & Goastellec, 2007). This agenda rapidly gathered pace in Australia, advocating the need to encourage and widen access to post-compulsory education (Longworth, 2004, p. 7). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the Australian HE equity agenda placed increasing emphasis on reducing barriers to HE, including the barrier of age. Two international reports in 1996, the UNESCO report "Learning: The Treasure Within" (Delors, 1996) and the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) report 'Lifelong Learning for All' (OECD, 1996) further accelerated the international movement towards 'mass and universal participation' (Skilbeck, 2006, p. 117), including participation by older students. Subsequent Australian Government policy initiatives, including reviews such as what is known as the 'Bradley Review' of Higher Education (Bradley et al.,

2008), have continued to ensure that university is not just the province of the young school leaver. The Bradley Review recommended that targets be set to increase the proportion of 25- to 34-year-olds with undergraduate degrees, from 29% to 40% by 2020, as well as increasing the proportion of low socio-economic status (low SES) students to 20%. While subsequent Australian governments have moved away from setting targets, the equity agenda has remained strong, with universities being rewarded financially for increasing their enrolments of students from certain groups, including those from low SES backgrounds. In the years immediately following the Bradley Review, universities focused on recruiting low SES students, amongst whom a high proportion are mature-aged, and provided them with alternative pathways into university, such as through enabling programmes. Many enabling programmes are aimed specifically at mature-age students who did not have the opportunity to enter university straight from school (May & Bunn, 2015).

Even though Australian universities currently define a mature-age student, for the purposes of mature-age entry programmes, as any student aged 21 or over, much of the discussion about mature-age students refers to those who are at least 25 and over and who have had a number of years out of school, in the workforce and/or with other adult responsibilities such as raising families. This means that they are likely to be at a very different life-stage than the more traditional school-leaver student.

In this chapter, we will be looking at those mature-age FiF students who have children, and who are therefore in a very different position from younger students who have recently left school. How these parent-students manage the competing demands of university study along with home and family responsibilities is a subject of much interest and relevance to those responsible for educating and supporting these students on their learning journey.

Who Are the Parent-Students?

Amongst the 274 FiF students surveyed and interviewed for Study B, 29 interviewees and 49 survey respondents reported having dependent children. The 29 interviewees ranged in ages from 29 to 52 and their children

were aged from one-year-old to late-teens. Five were men and 24 were women. Three had pre-school children, while all the others had at least one child at school, mostly a mixture of primary and secondary school. Six had high-school-aged children only. Thirteen of the women were lone parents and the other 16 parents reported that they lived with their partner. Eight of the women and one of the men were not in paid employment, while the other 20 parents were working full- or part-time.

Amongst the 49 survey respondents, 44 provided their children's ages. Seventeen had children under five; 12 had children under ten; while 15 had teenage children. Some families had a mix of under-tens, teens and 20-year-olds, and two indicated the imminent birth of babies. Fifteen of these families were lone parent families. The majority of the parents surveyed was aged between 25 and 50, with only two being younger—one in the 18–21 range and another in the 21–25 group. The analysis now turns to a discussion of the ways in which parenting impacted upon the lives of these women and men as they performed their student role.

Impact of Children on the Lives of Parent-Students

Children as Motivators

While the presence of children can undoubtedly complicate the lives of students, their presence can also be a positive motivating force to begin, as well as to persist with study, as touched upon in Chaps. 4, 7, 9 and 10. Wanting to improve opportunities for their children, to set a good example for them and to provide them with a better life were key motivations expressed by the participants in this study. Examples include one of the enabling students who wrote in her survey response, 'My two older children will be completing high school this year and next year. I wanted to show them what study was all about' (female, 40–50, partnered, three teenagers, enabling programme). A desire to demonstrate to her daughter that it was possible to be 'something else' had motivated another of the survey respondents:

I used to hear people ask my daughter what her mum did, and she would reply, "she is just my mum". As much as I love being their mum I also want to be something else for them. To show them that if you put your mind to something then you can do it. (Female, 25–30, partnered, three children, Nursing, on-campus)

Wainwright and Marandet (2010) in their UK research with student-parents, found that parents were strongly motivated to study as a means of achieving social mobility for themselves and their children, by building 'a financially sound familial future' (p. 456), in particular lone parents. In our research, we found similarly that a number of the lone parents strongly articulated a wish to provide children with more options in life; one such example was Talia, single, aged 43, with two teenagers and doing Legal Studies online. Her motivation to embark on a university degree was 'to make a decent amount of money to be able to support myself and put my kids through college if that's what they want'. Giving children more opportunities in life was also important to Asha, aged 34, divorced with three children and studying Arts on-campus. Having lived in public housing all her life, she 'wanted my kids to realise that just because that's where you come from, it doesn't mean that it closes off your options'. Asha also wanted to demonstrate to them that 'if I can do it, maybe they can do it'. Similarly, Ally, aged 39, single with two children and studying Sociology on-campus, wanted more for her children than she had in her own life growing up. Her own background had been quite troubled, and she had battled a drinking problem when younger, yet studying for a university degree was part of providing her children with a different example in life. In her words, 'I don't want my children to go down the path that I went down.'

Fathers were equally committed to the idea that, through their studies, they could be a positive example to their children, a point returned to in Chap. 9. Nick, for instance, aged 39, partnered with four children and studying Education on-campus, felt that his own experience of being a student enabled him to 'teach them and pass on to them … to provide a lot of that information and knowledge'. Nick also commented that, 'as a parent … you want to instil knowledge and instil the best wisdom into your kids so they've got the best tools to survive through life', and through

his studies he felt in a better position to do this 'the diplomatic way'. Others mentioned that already they were seeing their children wanting to emulate them with regard to their studies. For example, Paul (47, partnered, four children, Business, online) described the attitude now amongst his children of 'Oh well, if dad's doing it, I can go and do it', while Lance (46, partnered, two children, Business, online) reported 'my son's started at university since I have'. Richard was very clear that he wanted his daughter to have more choices than he had:

> *I didn't really know what I wanted to do but there was no encouragement to even make a choice. My daughter, I'll certainly be encouraging to help her to make a choice.* (Richard, 29, partnered, one child, Information Technology, online)

Reactions from Children

Many of the participants commented on the supportiveness and positive attitude of their children when they decided to return to study, across all ages. Glenda, single, aged 46, with a teenage son and doing Legal Studies online, reported, 'He's really happy with it. He's a studying kind of person himself so it interests him.' Others reported that their children, although supportive overall, were initially wary about the changed state of affairs. Georgia, for example, said of her 14-year-old son: 'My son was a bit nervous but he was also very supportive' (Georgia, 32, single, one child, Arts, online).

There were a number of examples of parents and children being able to help each other, such as Susanna's experience:

> *Actually it's been very interesting how it's impacted on the kids. After I'd only done one or two units, my daughter, Naomi, she told me how pleased she was that I was studying because I was actually understanding her school work better.* (Susanna, 43, partnered, three children, Arts, online)

Similarly, Allana found that her son was particularly helpful with technology:

[W]hen I do homework, for example essays and assignments, he [son] will be there with me. We help each other because he's very good with computers. I don't know anything about computers so he just comes, click this, click that, everything is good. (Allana, 30, partnered, two children, Nursing, on-campus)

This also was apparent amongst the survey respondents, such as one of the women who wrote, 'My daughter has helped me with questions I have had about certain things' (Female survey participant, 50+, partnered, two children, Science, online). At times an element of guilt about their studies taking time away from their children, as well as perceived disapproval from others, was expressed, such as in Gemma's comment below:

I'm starting getting the complaints, particularly from my partner, that I'm not available, that I am always tired and it's probably from the kids that I don't spend as much time with them. (Gemma, 42, partnered, three children, Arts, online)

Receiving positive responses from children was very important to these students in that it helped to validate their decision to return to study. Guilt can easily stem from 'the gendered expectation that women will carry the primary caring role in the family' (Stone & O'Shea, 2013, p. 110), whereas affirmation from children can help mature-age students to feel more confident in their decision and their ability to take on this new challenge (O'Shea, 2022). Gaining this confidence is particularly important for FiF students, who do not have access to the role models and the experience to help them feel comfortable and confident about undertaking university study. In the words of Reay and colleagues: '[I]t is the newly arrived working-class, minority and female cohorts who blame their own personal and educational inadequacies for their inability to make the transition to HE.' (2002, pp. 14–15)

Longhurst et al. (2012) in their New Zealand research with lone mothers in HE, found a mixture of guilt and pride amongst the mothers they interviewed—guilt for 'taking time away from one's children' yet pride for 'doing something to resolve dependency by participating in education' (p. 296). Our argument throughout this book is that, instead of

employing a deficit discourse to understand the predicament of FiF students, thereby reinforcing their feelings of inadequacy, universities need to acknowledge and build on the considerable strengths of these students. In so doing, pride, rather than guilt, can be reinforced. As the stories below demonstrate, these parent-students are managing complex situations, around family responsibilities, in addition to the responsibilities of being a university student.

Managing Children's Demands and Needs in Conjunction with Study

It was clear from the stories of these students that the gendered role of women as primary carer of children resulted in significant challenges for the mature-age women with children. Previous research has identified a range of challenges for students who are also parents, particularly for mothers (Reay et al., 2002; Stone & O'Shea, 2013; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003) and lone parents (Hinton-Smith, 2012; Hook, 2015). These include: organising and prioritising; dealing with changes in relationships with partners and children; balancing the needs of study with the needs of others; and, in general, not having enough hours in the day to do all that needed to be done. Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2003) talk about the 'gendered expectations of family obligations and the ongoing disparity with which women take on the "second shift" through maintenance of children and home' (2003, p. 113). Hinton-Smith (2012) comments on the particular challenges for lone parents who are not only responsible for 'meeting both the material and emotional needs of children' but are also the 'sole breadwinners' (p. 44); while Hook (2015) in her Australian research with lone postgraduate students, reports a sense of 'alienation and anxiety' amongst the parents she interviewed, who feared 'that their sole parenting commitments would be viewed negatively in the university context' (p. 116). Perhaps it is not surprising that parents can feel alienated and unsupported by the institution when, as Marandet and Wainwright (2010) point out, university breaks often do not coincide with school holidays, 'making it difficult for students with primary school

children to attend lectures' (p. 796). In their research they also found instances of 'coursework deadlines set during school holidays', 'deadlines given at short notice' and 'for insurance reasons, students … not allowed to bring children on campus without prior written permission, making any adjustments extremely complex and potentially costly' (p. 796). Close to a decade or more on from this earlier research, Stone and O'Shea (2022) argue that women with caring responsibilities continue to remain significantly disadvantaged within the HE system, due to the often invisible nature of caring work, and the apparent reluctance of universities to understand and acknowledge the additional load that women with children are generally carrying. They argue that 'until this additional load and its consequences are recognised and better accommodated within institutional practices, women in HE with caring responsibilities will remain significantly disadvantaged' (pp. 87–88).

The stories of the FiF students in our research revealed similar challenges in the process of combining their new lives as students with their existing responsibilities as parents, within a family context where university was an unfamiliar concept. Meeting these challenges often required considerable amounts of personal and financial sacrifice.

'Making' Time

Mature-age students who are juggling a range of other responsibilities are inevitably 'time poor' (Reay et al., 2002, p. 9). Fitting study in amongst work, child care, domestic responsibilities and any possible social life, requires a 'complex negotiation of time' (Edwards et al., 1996, p. 213). Marandet and Wainwright (2010) found that 84.5% of the student-parents they interviewed and surveyed (two-thirds of these were women) 'found it difficult to balance studying and their domestic responsibilities' (p. 794). Parents in paid employment, in addition to studying, were under the most stress in terms of managing their time.

A number of feminist writers have contended that a different value is placed upon 'men's time' and 'women's time'; with men's time being seen as more valuable and productive while women's time is time given up to the demands and needs of others (Hughes, 2002; McNay, 2000).

Similarly, Morrison (1996) talked about the 'gender-laden and time-consumptive nature' (p. 214) of a woman's role, in which time is '"collective" time which others, for example, their families, have a right to lay claim to' (p. 14). This is illustrated in Susanna's words:

> *And then while the children are not here, that's when I study and everything else has to be done. The children cope better with me doing housework and jobs and other things while they're around; they don't cope with me saying "I need you to be quiet. I'm thinking."* (Susanna, 43, partnered, 3 children, Arts, online)

Another example is Wendy who, as a lone parent with three children aged 19, 16 and 8, was working night shifts between 10.30 pm and 6.30 am, five days a week. Wendy had set herself a very strict timetable in order to fit in time for children around study and paid work:

> *I try to do three hours [study] every day. I get up [from sleeping after night shift] and go and get the kids at 2:00 o'clock—they finish at 3:00 and then I study until dinner time, till 6:00, and then I cook dinner and then it's my children's time and then … as long as I'm not tired, I'll hit the books rather than try and make it up on the weekend; that is my time with the kids, I will try and make it up during the week.* (Wendy, three children, single, Legal Studies, online)

Such stories resonate with the words of Reay et al. (2002) who talk about female mature-age students as being 'caught up in a constant balancing act between wanting to study, meeting domestic responsibilities and needing to earn money' (2002, p. 10), and, more recently, the work of Stone and O'Shea (2022) who reflect on women expending 'vast amounts of time and energy in planning, time management, multi-tasking and, in many cases, also dealing with family resistance in order to persist' (p. 87).

The interviews and survey data gathered from these students reinforce the view that within the mature-age women's familial habitus (Bourdieu, 1990; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014), their main practical challenge was finding the *time* to accommodate their various habitual roles with their

new role as student. Previous research refers to the 'juggling act' (Stone, 2008, p. 278) described by female mature-age students. This term was similarly used by women within this cohort of FiF students, such as Georgia, who talked about it being 'just a juggling act'. She described the ways in which she managed this juggling:

> I listen to my lectures in the car on my way to work and I do my readings in my lunch-break; and the weekend when my son is at his father's house I spend at the library. I don't have a social life any more but it's worth it I think. (Georgia, 32, single, one child, Arts, online)

Similarly, Allana found it hard to imagine how she got so much done in so little time:

> At the end of the day I just sit there and just thinking 'How did I get through with all this'—kids dropped to school in the morning and go to work four days a week and three days at uni; there's no time off. (Allana, 30, partnered, two children, Nursing, on-campus)

In seeking to 'make' time, these women were attempting to re-organise the spaces and places within their lives in order to include their university studies; and in doing so they were broadening their own and others' perceptions of educational possibilities and opportunities. It is hardly surprising that this could also be an exhausting responsibility:

> I'm tired more often or I always seem to be tired now. I know that's the complaint from my family now that I always seem to be tired. (Gemma, 42, partnered, three children, Arts, online)

As previous research has demonstrated, inevitably what is sacrificed is personal time. 'Women's personal time for leisure and friends is sacrificed in order to facilitate the time required for university activities … putting family and domestic responsibilities first, study second and themselves last' (Stone & O'Shea, 2012, p. 76). Asha's words reflect the level of sacrifice that is required to be able to continue with her studies:

I don't have a social life. Everything's got to be planned, you know, six months in advance because I'm "No, I've got an essay due here, I can't do that". You know, sacrifice is the biggest time management. … Pretty much in every aspect of time it's had a big impact. The easy alternative for me is not to stay studying and I have thought that many times; it is the easy way out but I make it work somehow. I don't know how. I just run on adrenalin. (Asha, single, three children, Arts, on-campus)

Amongst the male interviewees with young children, David was the only one who was the primary carer, in that his wife went to work while he studied full-time online from home. Caring for two children aged one and four, he too found creative ways to 'make' time, studying 'during the middle of the day when my youngest one is asleep' or 'I would have to put my four-year-old in front of the TV or something where he would get out of my hair and I would use those couple of hours during the day to study.' Once David's wife was at home however, she would 'take the boys and do the dinner, bathing and putting to bed while I would study'.

For the women who were lone parents, this type of help at the end of the day was clearly not an option, nor was it necessarily available to the mothers who did have partners. For example:

For me it's about time. Sometimes family responsibilities infringe on my study time and I find myself getting quite frustrated. My husband also requires a lot of time from me … and that puts pressure on me too … [He] frequently travels interstate for business so I have done everything with my children single-handedly … [he is] concerned that studying [takes] me away from my role as wife, mother and employee. (Female survey participant 30–40, two young children, Psychology, online)

The attitudes and reactions of partners in relation to the student-parents' university studies played a significant role in determining how much (or little) support these parents received. Here too gender shapes the expectations of both the students and their partners, depending on which is male and which is female.

Reactions and Attitudes of Partners

Female partners of the student-fathers were generally described as having been supportive and encouraging of the decision to begin university studies, with such examples as David, mentioned above, who described his wife as having 'been a rock through all of my university'. Similarly, Benjamin said of his wife,

> *We made the decision ourselves together and from that my wife was very supportive because she was very understanding.* (Benjamin, 47, partnered, three children, Science, online)

Nick also talked of his wife's encouragement and support in the most positive terms:

> *She supports me in every way. Like when I said I was going to university and basically leaving a secure job and what I know best and a reasonable income, you know, she's just fully supported; she's never stood in my way or defied me or made me try and doubt it or deter me in any way, shape or form, which is a good thing.* (Nick, 39, partnered, three children, Education, on-campus)

Amongst the mothers, there were also a number of examples of male partners' encouragement, with comments from the survey such as: 'My partner is very supportive and often mentions how proud he is that I am doing well with my studies' (Female survey participant, 25–30, two children, second year, Business, online); and 'My husband is proud of my achievements and also completely supportive' (Female survey participant, 40–50, two children, third year, full-time Nursing, on campus).

There were also occasional references to male partners helping out with domestic duties such as:

> *When I have essays due and my partner is home from work he takes over the cooking and looking after the kids so that I can focus.* (Female survey participant, 25–30, three children, Human Resources, online)

Other examples of practical support by male partners came from Hannah, whose husband 'changed shifts at work for one of the weeks to help out' (Hannah, 33, five children, Nursing, on-campus) and also from Emma:

He's just supportive in everything that I do that's good or positive. Yes … he drives me to uni of a morning and even then just 'Do you want me to pick you up, sweetie' and cooks dinner while I'm studying which he's always done but doing more and yes, he just wants me to succeed and to help out as much as he can. (Emma, 32, partnered, one child, Nursing, on-campus)

As encouraging as these examples are, unfortunately they stood out as unusual within this cohort. More commonly the student-mothers reported that their male partners were at best ambivalent about their studies and at worst actively unsupportive or critical. Some reported that their partner had trouble understanding why they wanted to study:

[My] partner sometimes feels neglected … does not always understand why I would want a change of career at this point. (Female survey participant, 40–50, partnered, Arts, online)

Some male partners were described as feeling 'threatened' by having their partner's attention turned elsewhere. For example, one of the female survey respondents, in the 40–50 age range, with two children, wrote that her husband 'felt a little threatened … also concerned that I wouldn't have time … that it would [deprive] us of our time together'. As a result, this student had a very difficult start to her studies:

I took five weeks off work so that I could have a real good start but within the first two weeks my husband complained so much about the time it was taking away from us that I actually withdrew. (Female survey participant, 40–50, partnered, two children, Psychology, online)

There were examples of relationship breakdowns and separations, such as one survey participant who talked about her husband having been

'unsupportive, criticizing, joking' which led, in her words, to 'relation-ship breakdown':

> *One reason was his insecurity and jealousy for what I am doing. My husband has stopped talking to me right from when I undertook the studies. It has been two years now.* (Female survey participant, 40–50, partnered, two young children, second year, Psychology, on-campus)

Also Natalie:

> *One of the reasons I left my husband was he was very unsupportive with every-thing—this and other stuff. He wasn't overly supportive because essentially it took my time away from him.* (Natalie, 26, single, two children, Business, online)

There were examples of long-held dreams of study being put on hold because of a partner's opposition:

> *I'd always thought I would like to be a school teacher but I did not take up the first offer of Education in 1999 as my then husband asked "who is going to look after the children?" I did not have his support. Now that I am on my own, I felt that I had nothing holding me back except myself and that I needed to make the choices and take control.* (Female survey participant, single, 40–50, two children, Nursing, on-campus)

The issue of male partners feeling 'threatened and excluded' (Wilson, 1997, p. 358) by the woman's return to study is one that has consistently arisen in research over the past two or more decades into the mature-age female student experience (Edwards, 1993; Leonard, 1994) and also in more recent studies (Quinn, 2005; Reay et al., 2002; Stone & O'Shea, 2022; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2003), which explore the 'change in the power dynamics in the relationship' (Stone & O'Shea, 2012, p. 79) that can result from a woman's decision to study, particularly in families where gender roles have previously been quite traditionally defined. Such a dynamic can significantly affect the quality and quantity of support that women receive from male partners whilst studying.

This was also demonstrated in an earlier study of FiF students (Stone, 2008) in which 17 mature-age parent-students, 12 women and 5 men, who were first in their families to go to university, were interviewed about their experiences. All were enrolled in undergraduate degrees on-campus at an Australian regional university, having entered via an enabling programme. The age range of this group was 23–52 and their children ranged in age from infants to adults. Amongst this group, unsurprisingly, a major challenge reported was that of 'balancing the needs of study with the needs of family, home, partners and children' (2008, p. 275). What emerged from this study was that, for the fathers, study time was accorded a special status within the family, with the importance of dedicated quiet time for study being recognised and supported by their female partners, who took responsibility for the bulk of child care and domestic duties. In contrast, the female students 'tailored their study time around responsibilities at home, including their children, partners and other home and family responsibilities' (2008, p. 279). For these mothers, pursuing education was regarded as 'secondary' to other responsibilities such as caregiving or working, often perceived as a 'leisure activity' (2008, p. 265) and hence not to be taken too seriously by partners and other family. Similarly, a study by Reay et al. (2002) in which mature-age female students with children were interviewed about their experiences of combining study with family life, revealed 'a subtext of women as "uncared for carers"' (cited in Stone, 2008, p. 17).

Certainly, it appeared to be the case in our research for this book that the women with children were, by and large, unquestioningly carrying the lion's—or lioness's share perhaps—of caring and domestic responsibilities in conjunction with their studies and often paid work as well. As discussed earlier, several of them described male partners as encouraging and supportive, there was little evidence in their stories that this translated into much regular practical assistance at home for most of the mothers in this study. The responsibility for caring, cooking and housework was largely theirs. What follows is a discussion about the types of support that they received from other people, outside their immediate nuclear family, which helped them to continue their studies despite their other time-consuming responsibilities.

Support from Others

Consistent with the pattern of women as carers, other women emerged as being sources of significant support to the mothers in this study, particularly their own mothers and also their female friends.

Parents of Student-Parents

We have previously touched upon the role of parents in students' lives but for those learners with children having this additional family support was very important. For example, a number of the women with children mentioned the support they received from their own parents, particularly their mothers. Their parents were often reported as being supportive and encouraging of the decision to begin studying, one example being that of Talia:

> *I'm very happy that I've made my parents proud in taking a step further than what they were able to do because, as parents, that's all we ever want is for our children to do better than we did.* (Talia, 43, divorced, two children, Legal Studies, online)

Parents could also help in very practical ways. For example, Ally relied on her parents to help with child care: 'my parents take care of my children too so I get a lot of support that way as well' (Ally, 39, single, two children, Legal Studies, on-campus), while Monique found that 'mum was very supportive. If I was swamped with assignments she would cook dinner' (Monique, 49, single, two children, Education, online). Wendy, single with three children, doing Legal Studies online, also valued the 'close family support' that she had and reported receiving 'a lot of encouragement from my mum and dad'. This type of emotional and practical support from parents was highly appreciated, such as by Emma, aged 32, partnered with a 12-year-old and studying Nursing on-campus, who said of her mother, 'I know if I rang her and said "Mum", she'd come in an instant for support so it's really good.' Amongst the fathers in this parent cohort, Benjamin mentioned family support from his parents-in-law,

who had 'fully supported me and have offered me assistance wherever I needed it', but he was the only one of the fathers who referred specifically to help and support from extended family. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the source of family support mentioned by the men was most often their female partners.

Friends

Many of the student-mothers had women friends who helped to make their lives a little bit easier, through looking after children, talking over assessments, or just giving them emotional support by being willing to listen and showing that they cared. Natalie, for instance, had 'very supportive friends' who would help her out by 'watching the kids for a couple of hours while I finish an assignment' and offering 'actual hands-on practical support', while Wendy talked of her online 'study buddy' who was 'doing the same course'. Georgia spoke of 'a couple of friends who I'll call and have a whinge to. They've done post-grad study and they've got a young family as well; so they understand where I'm coming from'.

Having a friend in a similar situation for mutual support was important also to Holly:

> *I have a good friend who's studying … and she is a really good support … we also help each other out with children and household stuff, you know, if I haven't done some cooking or whatever then she'll cook and then I'll do the same for her.* (Holly, 43, partnered, three children, Business, online)

Elle, who was studying an enabling course on campus, 'found out a friend of mine who used to live out the back of my parents was here. She was in her second year; she graduates this semester. She helped me out … we have a couple of the same subjects so she's helped me with that' (Elle, 33, single, three children, Arts, on-campus).

As has been touched upon in Chap. 4, the building of friendships in an on-campus environment has been shown to be positively related to student engagement, student satisfaction and student success (McGivney, 2006; Quinn, 2005; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Many previous studies

have demonstrated that 'friendships with fellow students play a significant role in persistence and retention' (Stone & O'Shea, 2012, p. 96). However, as has also been mentioned in Chap. 4, there may be factors that inhibit the development of friendships, such as studying online. For many parents, the sheer difficulty of spending much time on campus can mean that they do not have time to build strong connections with other students. Therefore, recognition needs to be given to the importance of maintaining friendships and connections outside the actual physical environment of the university. It was apparent from the stories of these students that where they looked for support was not necessarily within university, but much closer to home, from within their families and friendship networks. Another source of support that emerged as important, for those who were in employment, was the workplace. Interestingly, while support from friends outside of university did not appear in the fathers' stories, the workplace as a source of support was mentioned by both mothers and fathers.

Support within the Workplace

More than two-thirds (20) of the 29 interviewees with dependent children were in paid work as well as studying. A number of them described feeling supported in the workplace by managers as well as by colleagues, such as Allana's description:

> *I do have a very supportive boss who'll come out to me and say "Well when's your assignment due? Why don't you take half a day and just work on your study?"* (Allana, 30s, partnered, two children, Nursing, on-campus)

Similarly, Patricia (40s, single, one child, enabling programme) related that: 'My boss is fantastic, she's very family-orientated; any help I need she gives it to me'. Emma reported that she felt supported by 'all the girls at work', as well as by her boss, 'which is great' (32, partnered, one child, Nursing, on-campus). Even though David (34, partnered, two children, Business, online) was not currently employed, he was encouraged into university when 'a manager identified some potential and took me into

her section on the condition that I furthered my education'. Richard, working in hospitality, related that in his workplace he had a number of colleagues who were either studying or had recently completed degrees:

> There's one particular guy who's in his third year of what I'm doing so he's good to talk to for hints and tricks and advice … they more understand what I'm going through because they've just finished it themselves. (Richard, partnered, one child, Arts, online)

While there is some evidence, as mentioned in Chap. 6, that online students particularly benefit from having support in the workplace (Park & Choi, 2009), the importance of workplace support for all students who are studying whilst employed needs to be acknowledged, especially for those students who, in addition, are managing family responsibilities. Above all though, the students' own determination and persistence played a key role in keeping them going, despite the many burdens on their time and their multiple responsibilities.

Finding Strength within Themselves

Without exception, at some point in their narratives, parents interviewed or surveyed for this research, mentioned ways in which they summoned up their own determination, motivation and inner strength to help them to keep going, despite the many challenges they faced. Some described this process in detail, such as Holly's words below:

> I think it was my head that helped me through. I'm a fairly level-headed person so even though I was really quite stressed … that was just adding to how I was feeling and in the end, I thought "No, I can do this. It's really not that hard. If I just put in a little bit more extra time". So yes, I think just my determination and not wanting to fail, not wanting to give up was something that really kept me going. I didn't want to go "Oh no, well I've actually thrown away my studies." (Holly, 43, partnered, three children, Business, online)

Hannah reported that it was 'just my own self-determination' that got her through difficult times. She explained that she had seen a number of her fellow-students drop out and was determined not to become one of them:

We've had seven people drop out already. There are some in there that are like, "I don't even know why I'm here. Why am I doing this to myself", sort of thing. I guess it depends on how determined you are and how badly you really want to do it because if it's not what you really want to do then no, you don't want to put yourself through it. (Hannah, 33, partnered, five children, Nursing, on-campus)

A desire to manage on their own and not ask for help in their personal lives came across quite strongly, as expressed by Patricia in saying, 'I don't like asking for help'. Nick also was very explicit about wanting to manage without help from family, even though they offered support:

[M]y wife's family, when I told them that I'm going to be a teacher, you know, they've offered support and everything but again, I don't really take that support. I try and do a lot of it for myself. (Nick, 39, partnered, 3 children, Education, on-campus)

Many had learnt to develop their own personal strategies for managing their study load combined with the other demands in their lives, such as Yvonne, 38, single with two children, who said, 'as long as you keep consistently tugging away at it, it's not that hard. … I've learned not to get worried about all the little things'. Gemma had also found her own approach to keeping on going:

[I]t's a means to an end here for me so I've got a definite difficult period here where I need to be really organised and sort things out but it's very short term for long-term gain. (Gemma, 42, partnered, 3 children, Arts, online)

David talked about it being 'a challenge studying online' and that 'in terms of time you have to be very motivated', while Richard revealed that

'Coming up to my first assignment, I was considering pulling out just because I was afraid I was going to fail'; however, he learnt to adopt a different attitude:

> [I]f times are tough, I can just get by; just pass. I'd like to get through it as quickly as possible but it's a matter of, you know, I've got to balance life, work and study so I've got to make sure I have an even balance of all. (Richard, 29, partnered, one child, Arts, online)

Conclusion

Previous research has described the journey of the mature-age woman in HE as being akin to a 'hero's journey' (O'Shea & Stone, 2014) in that it emulates the stages of the classic mythical hero's journey of embarking upon a tour through foreign or unfamiliar lands; meeting many trials but also finding helpers and allies; undergoing a series of tests to strengthen their character; achieving new wisdom and knowledge along the way; and returning home as a changed or transformed character. The FiF parents in our study could also be said to be undertaking this classic hero's journey, as demonstrated by the challenges and trials of managing family, paid work and study, as they negotiated through the foreign land of university. They also encountered tests of their motivation and determination, from which they learnt strategies and approaches to avoid falling into the pit of despair and to keep to their path. Helpers and allies along this journey included, in varying ways, partners, children, parents, institutional help and their own inner strength.

Undeniably, their journeys were impacted upon by gender, in that by and large it was the mothers who were carrying the primary responsibility for the additional load of caring for children and home. The one obvious exception to this was in the case of David, who, like all the student-mothers in this cohort, was the primary caregiver to his two young children. David's journey however was made easier by his wife's active involvement in child care and domestic responsibilities when she was not at work. There were also some examples of male partners of student-mothers taking an active role in child care and domestic duties; whenever

this occurred, the women's journeys were less stressful and demanding. However, the lone mothers and the women whose partners were less involved in practical home and family tasks, were carrying a significantly higher load along their journeys. For some, their own parents, particularly mothers, were helping to share this load; also women friends in similar circumstances were highly valued, not only for their friendship but also for the practical help they offered, such as occasional child care.

Overall, families and friends offered a great deal of inspiration and support to these FiF parent-students; however, the challenges they faced were ones which they themselves had to find creative ways to manage if they were going to be able to continue to study successfully. What also emerged in some cases was a reluctance to seek outside help, but instead to seek to manage their personal and study lives without revealing their difficulties and challenges to others, particularly outside the family. This can be problematic, particularly when the demands and expectations of HE conflict explicitly with parenting responsibilities, as other research with parent-students has highlighted. For example, Hook (2015) found that 'university timetabling was often in conflict with childcare responsibilities' (p. 129), while Hinton-Smith (2012) found that interviewees reported 'overtly negative attitudes' from the institution towards lone parents, as well as 'no special interest or treatment to lone parents' (p. 154).

The imperative for institutions and HE practices, to better understand and accommodate the particular needs of parent-students, will be further discussed in the concluding chapter of this book. Meanwhile, Chap. 9 focuses specifically on the experiences of male FiF students. It looks at the role that gender plays in shaping their experiences as they make the transition into HE and establish their identities as university students.

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9

Motivated Men: First-in-Family Male Students

Introduction

Although some commentators have asserted that the upending of traditional gender relations caused by second wave feminism has produced 'a world split open', gender inequalities 'stubbornly persist across multiple arenas' (Orloff & Shiff, 2016, p. 110). These 'persistent and stark' inequalities among women and men occur along multiple axes such as class, race, ethnicity and age, to which list can be added access to and successful engagement in Higher Education (HE). This gender disparity is noticeable across most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Van Damme, 2016). In the UK, research conducted by Hillman and Robinson (2016) asserted that the gender gap is greatest 'among the poorest, and young white males from disadvantaged families [who] are performing worst' (O'Malley, 2016, online). In 2016, Hillman and Robinson reported that 'women outperforming men is a worldwide trend' (p. 11), and this trend has continued with the most recent OECD report highlighting a 'gender gap in educational attainment' amongst the 25–34 age cohort (Encinas-Martín & Cherian, 2023). In this age group, an average of 57% of graduates are

women across OECD member countries, whereas in the 55–64 age group the genders are more equally balanced.

In Australia, females have outnumbered males undertaking HE since 1987—three years after legislation was passed allowing nursing to move from hospital-based to university-based training in Australia in 1984 and the same year that NSW, the largest Australian state, achieved that transfer. In 2021, despite some dramatic gendered asymmetries within courses, out of 1.4 million domestic students, just over 57.6% of students were female (Australian Department of Education, 2023a) while females make up just over 50% of the population at large. This difference in HE participations amongst males and females has attracted some alarm that such disparities suggest a 'problem' for males (O'Malley, 2016). Ramsey (2015), however, has commented that the raw figures have to be examined in a more nuanced manner before conclusions can be drawn. She made the point that focusing on 'total numbers of male and female students overlooks the differences in socioeconomic, disciplinary and institutional patterns, with large numbers of males more privileged on each of these dimensions'. Ramsey also noted, however, that there *were* some men missing from Australian HE and they were men who were Indigenous, from low socio-economic backgrounds and from regional and remote locations (Ramsey, 2015). Furthermore, females and males with these characteristics continue to be under-represented (Australian Department of Education, 2023b) and are most often first-in-family (FiF).

Since the turn of this century, a growing body of literature has examined women's differential experience of attending HE (e.g. Stone & O'Shea, 2022; O'Shea & Stone, 2014). However, until recently, there has been relatively little attention paid to FiF males and their experience of HE in Australia. This chapter explores this terrain by presenting an account of the motivations, transitions and participations of 29 FiF male students as they intersect with the lived experience of gender and age, although other intersections and relational realities may be referred to as they potentiate or minimise gendered effects.

The Interview Group

All men in the study have been assigned pseudonyms and all were involved in Study B. The youngest man was 19 and the oldest was 56. All except five men (Ahmad, Sam, Nadir, Nick and Samir) were of Anglo-Celtic background. In terms of relationship status, while sexual orientation was not discussed, 15 or 52% of the men were partnered while 14 or 48& were single. None of the men were single parents and seven out of the 15 partnered men had a total of 18 children: two men had four children; one had three children; three had two children; one had one child. The fathers in the group were in the older age groups, aged between 29 and 56. The oldest six men in the group—David (34), Nick (39), Lance (46), Benjamin (47), Paul (47) and Roger (56)—had 17 out of the 18 children between them. The children's ages ranged from Richard's one-year-old to Roger's 'adults' (ages not given). Lance's two children live with their mother while he lives with his current partner.

   In terms of secondary schooling, 18 or 62% of the men attained their high school leaving qualifications (including Stephen who matriculated from high school in the United Kingdom). Four of these men had already completed undergraduate degrees and were attempting other degrees in medicine (Ned and Neil), nursing (Stephen) and law (Lachlan). Five of the men reported leaving school before the matriculation year, one as early as Year 9 (Daniel). Seven of the men did not give details of their high schooling, four of them speaking about their trade certificate studies in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) certificate programmes. With regard to their current enrolment, and despite the variation in focus of their degree, the most numerous degree was Bachelor of Engineering with six of the men enrolled. These six men were all under 30 years. The majority of the men studying online were older, 29 and over, with only one man out of the 18 men under 25 an online student.

Gender and the Men

Gender is here understood as 'structure and discourse, materiality and performance' and that it is messy and complex in lived experience (Phipps, 2016, pp. 2–3), intersecting with other aspects of lived experience. It is agreed that:

Frames of gender and sexuality should be complicated with an intersectional appreciation of how they interpellate and affect different men and groups of men in different ways. (Phipps, 2016, p. 3)

In the stories of the FiF men's HE participation analysed here, age aspects were found to be especially important intersecting factors with gender. It should be noted that this chapter is not arguing against the view that that there are significant gender inequalities with regard to women in HE, but along with Hillman and Robinson (2016, p. 12), it argues that attention to men's inequalities should take place alongside those disparities that women continue to face.

Further, while much recent research on men and gender in the HE setting, takes a 'masculinity in crisis' approach (Roberts, 2014) and problematises 'masculinity/ies', especially 'laddish' masculinities (Phipps, 2016), this chapter regards the flexibilities of masculine gender performances in these men's educational stories as a strength, as they responded to the changing educational, employment and interpersonal fields of post-industrial society. This strength allowed them in varying degrees to reach beyond the outworn gender and class, if not age, frameworks within which they were previously enculturated to find new futures for themselves and their families through HE participation.

In the following analysis, the FiF men's stories are read through the intersections of gender and age, especially privileging the idea of situated and relational masculinities (Hopkins & Noble, 2009, p. 815). The importance of age in their stories was that it structured their embodied life course; advanced the adoption of different masculine performances at various ages; and is, along with gender, one of the principal organising structures of the education sector and the labour market. Three main age and relational masculine performances emerged from these FiF men's

stories. The first was exhibited by the Fathers, men who, surrounded by their families, had been or were responsible as primary breadwinners for their family's economic well-being; the second was related by the Self-Starters, men who had left their families of origin, sometimes living with a partner, sometimes not, and who were acting autonomously to pursue their interests; and the third was exhibited by the Sons, very young men whose motivations were supported by and often flowed out of their families of origin. The following analysis deals with each of these three groups through the lens of their motivations, their experiences as FiF and the outcomes of their efforts.

To begin, the Fathers related tales of how their fathering in one way or another inspired them to imagine different futures for themselves and their families through HE, and to risk the FiF journey into the relative unknown of HE. Their efforts to break out of previous gendered ways of being, grounded especially in age and the male life course, are palpable in their motivations to enter HE studies.

Motivations

Fathers

The fathers were driven by considerations arising out of their familial role and their stage of life. The oldest of the men, Roger, aged 56, with a wife and two (now adult) daughters, had been a postman, a prison officer and was currently working as a parole officer. Roger observed that it took him a few years to decide on undertaking degree studies; however, in looking toward the end of his paid working life, he felt he could now contemplate pursuing his interest in psychology. He said:

> *I've long been interested in psychology and in how the mind works and then helping people. … At this point in my life, I guess that, because I've probably only got about ten years left in the workforce …—maybe a bit more—I just wanted to spend the last few years of my working life doing something I enjoyed more than just for the money.* (Roger, 56, married with two children, Arts, online)

Breadwinner masculinity is a historically powerful performative norm for married men with children in Australian culture and society (Lake, 1986). It is also a form of masculinity paradoxically taken up by the state in the past to both enshrine men's power as well as to imprison them within its disciplinary structure. The historical patriarchy, still strong despite gender and labour market transformations, has demanded that 'good' fathers in Australia work hard and provide for their families. Male-breadwinner culture is much stronger in Australia than in most other OECD countries (Baxter & Hewitt, 2013, p. 48). Roger's commentary here shows that his primary concern in the workforce was as breadwinner to make money for his family. Freed somewhat from this burden in his later years, with his children having left home, he could begin to think about his personal ambitions. His trajectory supports the view put by Reay (2002) that: 'If class is a "fixing mechanism" for masculinities then age and experience can be thought of "loosening mechanisms" for gender performance' (p. 224). Lance, 46, also exemplified this phenomenon. He observed ruefully that he was combining his 'midlife crisis' with his HE study and that:

I've been wanting to do it [university] for a long time. I enjoyed accounting at high school but once I got married and had kids it was a bit impossible to do it. Once the kids finished school I just thought it was time to take the time and have a go at it, [attempt a] change of career and get some qualifications. (Lance, 46, married with two children, Accounting, online)

As in Lance's comments above, the FiF fathers' stories also showed that the advancing credentialism in the Australian labour market arising from mass HE had bitten deeply into men's lives. The fathers often felt driven by circumstance to improve their breadwinning ability by gaining a university degree, thus improving their marketability to employers. Paul, 47, father of four children ranging in ages from 19 to four years, resigned from his position in the Federal Police to look after his wife, also a Police Officer, who was invalided out of her position. On seeking other work, however, he found immediately that, though he 'had a lot of street credibility and street smarts and a lot of investigations experience', he had 'basically been beaten by people with virtually no experience but with a

degree'. David, 34, married with two pre-school-aged boys for whom he is the full-time carer, had come to the realisation that 'to get anywhere and to have a decent job I think you need tertiary education'.

Men who were tradesmen were aware not only of credentialism, but also that their bodies were under pressure in their physically demanding work. Benjamin, 47, married with three teenage children, left school in Year 10 and became a plumber. He wanted to move into work that was not so hard on his body, and he realised that in order to be 'recognised as a professional', he would need a tertiary qualification in the changing labour market. He commented that his entry into HE was 'forced' on him 'by necessity':

> *Human Resources, as they are, ticking the boxes, if you don't have that tertiary qualification, bang, you're off [the list]; you're not even in that next part of the consideration. The first box they tick these days is tertiary qualifications. It made it almost impossible to find a new role. … It's a big decision … but when you have to do it, you have to do it, and there's no gain without pain.* (Benjamin, 47, married with three children, Applied Sciences, online)

Richard, 29, married with one child of six, was undertaking a Bachelor of Information Technology because as a chef, the work was 'quite hard on the body'. Richard also wanted to escape the boredom he was beginning to feel as a chef; pursue his old interest in computers; and was seeking to create a 'better future' for his family. He also had wider aspirations. Richard wanted to 'live' as he put it: 'I'd like to get around and travel and see new things, do new things.'

Nick (39, married with four children, Education, on-campus) was concerned about his ability to sustain his physically demanding work as a carpenter as well as expressing other motivations. Like many FiF parents who attempt university, he wanted to be a role model for his daughters as well as be able to generate more income to cope with the inevitable increases in expense they would need as they aged: 'by taking the direction I'm in now, I might be able to assist them, provide for them and that's part of the reasons too is, yes, to set them an example. As well as having been told that he was 'reasonably good with kids' and not wanting to work with adults anymore 'because they're more childish than the

kids', he pragmatically chose a Bachelor of Education because he believed that there was a demand for male teachers and that there would be 'higher prospects of me getting a job at my age in the education area than probably in a lot of other areas.' There was the added inspiration from his wife's family who 'were all school teachers'. Having been adopted as a baby from Vietnam, Nick had a dysfunctional childhood whereas he commented: 'My wife and her family, they're all functional, loving, close knit clan and they sort of inspired me as well to go in this direction as well.' The findings here for the FiF fathers' motivations to go to university resonate with Stahl and Loeser's intersectional study of FiF man, Deo, a tradesman, whose motivation to achieve a university degree was encapsulated by his statement: 'I'm here for myself and my family' (2018, p. 612). Further, this support of their created families was remarked on by the fathers as they negotiated their experiences of being FiF at university, a theme which is explored later in this chapter. However, those men who were younger (20s and 30s) and without dependents, called here the Self-Starters, were not so motivated relational factors but instead narrated more intrinsic and self-propelling reasons for desiring a university degree.

The Self-Starters

The motivations of the seven FiF self-starters show how a growing maturity in their 20s and early 30s led these men to experience some kind of 'epiphany' as Graeme, aged 31, put it (see also Chaps. 4 and 5), or realisation, in order not only to fulfil their own potential but also to explore their interests toward a more satisfying career. In striving for a better life, their stories underscore self-determination as the deciding factor in taking up university studies. Their narratives are thus less complicated by external relationships than the fathers but are characterised by an awareness of labour market segmentation, especially along the manual/intellectual axis; class factors relating to habitus; and some gender awareness around previous 'blokey' masculine performances. For example, when asked about his motivations, Daniel (30, partnered, Engineering, on-campus), a former motor mechanic of divorced parents, said that 'pretty much my own reasoning brought me here'. Phil, 29, 'always felt like I had

to do something. I suppose it was really motivated out of wanting to reach my own potential. I knew I could; I knew I was capable of it really.' He wanted to pursue his long-standing interest in psychology, and he was encouraged to do so by his partner. For Stephen, 31, 'it's just realising that I could … you have a chance to do something completely different, what is it that you'd like to do, so I chose health'.

Credentialism was also factor for the self-starters as it was for the fathers and, as will be shown, was for the sons. While Marcus (27, single, Enabling Programme, on-campus) had been in the workforce as a plumber for over a decade and had decided by himself to start university because he had been craving to 'really get out there and start learning more' and to fight injustice. He was also aware that 'academic qualifications' were necessary if he was going to 'advance himself'. For 29-year-old Evan (partnered, no children, Arts, online), it was a case of career development. He said that it was 'something I've thought about for a long time and I've just been unsure of but just had a little bit of encouragement from some people in my current job'. Stuart (24, partnered, no children, Behavioural Studies, online) also wanted 'to get a better job and have better prospects long-term'.

On taking this step into the relatively unknown world of university study at a slightly later age to the traditional student, many of the FiF self-starters showed an awareness of age as part of their decision-making with ramifications for their relationships. Daniel, for example, knew that his decision to study at university meant that he would have to postpone important milestones in an adult man's life. In 'a parallel universe', Daniel said that he would have stayed on at school and come to university much younger:

> You know, I'm 30 years old now. It's tough because you can't work full-time and … like I did my trade when my mates did trades and we all finished our apprenticeships together and now, they've been in there for so long now and you see the fact that you get stuck behind in the sense because you can't work full-time so you can't have the assets, you can't buy a house, you've got to wait to have kids and stuff like. So, if I was in a parallel universe now and I could have changed something I would have done my degree earlier and I would have been graduated by now and settled into a job so I could have these asset things at my age. (Daniel, 30, Engineering, on-campus)

His age also made it more difficult for him to make friends at university because a lot of his fellow engineering students came out of school together and were in the age group 18–21. At 26 when he started university, Daniel found he just had different interests.

The Sons

The 15 FiF sons, aged 19–25, constitute the largest group of men. Unlike the fathers and the self-starters who were enrolled in a wider diversity of degrees, most of the sons had chosen to study degrees traditionally associated with masculine gender performance: four took Engineering degrees, two were studying Medicine, two in Business and Finance degrees, three in IT and Communications, one was in an entry-level enabling programme and one each in Law and Science. All of the sons were studying in face-to-face mode on campus. As their stories demonstrate the sons were concerned with their emergence from their families of origin into the greater freedom and responsibilities of young male adulthood.

There were four main motivations for the sons in applying for university: direct guidance from their parents; personal ambitions; direct school-based encouragement; and to a lesser extent, the influence of friends. By far the most numerous motivators were the parents, especially mothers. The parents' educational biographies sometimes acted as both stated and implied factors in their son's decision: and their fathers' working lives were sometimes viewed as object lessons for achieving a different, less physically onerous, better remunerated form of occupation. The sons were aware of credentialism in the labour market, especially through high school careers counsellors.

Individual men's striving for respectability through HE has been noted by Burke (2009), but such striving could also be a family, and even a community, project (O'Shea et al., 2016). For example, the oldest of the sons, Nadir, 25, said his mother had forcefully put the case for his university education as part of his family's ambition, and his responsibility, to achieve and maintain respect within their community:

Well she's always told me that you have to finish your HSC, you have to go to uni, you have to get a degree, then you get a good job, you have to be respected in the community, family and [your] culture: if you get a good name, the family gets a good name and everyone will look up to us or you won't bring down their [good name] or anything like that. (Nadir, 25, single, Information Technology, on-campus)

At first, Nadir took the degree his parents wanted him to take, Accounting and Business, but after six months he moved into the degree he was interested in, Information Technology. To a lesser extent, Nadir had a few friends from high school who were influential in his decision to go to university. Ned's parents 'sort of not pushed' him but were 'extremely supportive' of him to consider university. After some work experience in rehabilitation, Ned discovered he 'really liked helping people' so he decided on Medicine. For Ray (22, single, Engineering, on-campus), having been woken up early in his school career by a primary school teacher who 'got the best' out of him, it was basically his mother and father who supported him toward his goal. When it came time to choose his degree path, Ray's mother's influence about Engineering Studies was decisive. Sean's father, a Civil Engineer, had been badly burned in the Global Financial Crisis and his mother persuaded him to think of Medicine in Year 11 rather than following in his father's footsteps as he originally intended, saying: 'Don't go in for what your Dad does, it's very dependent on the economy' (Sean, 19, single, Health Sciences, on-campus).

In Lachlan's case, parental desires for their son's university education overruled his own wishes. Lachlan had never really imagined going to university and was very keen to join the army to be a 'foot soldier'. As he explained, this ambition was met with 'outrage' from his mother and his teachers. He eventually conceded to their wishes saying: 'That's what you do. Everyone else is doing it and mum and dad and the teachers think I should do it so I'll do it. That's how it came about' (Lachlan, 24, single, Law, on-campus). While his mother's main motivation was to keep her son 'out of a war zone', Lachlan's father's experience, expressed as a class issue, was important in the family's support for HE:

Dad always tells me the story [that] back in his day you didn't get to choose, you did what you were told. He never wanted to be an apprentice mechanic; he wanted to be a pilot but only rich people could become pilots and he wasn't rich. He was just an ordinary kid from the suburbs. … So, the way he thinks about it … university is a good opportunity, it can open a lot of doors and for that reason alone if you're good enough to go to university you should; desires and that kind of thing kind of go out the window. (Lachlan, 24, single, Law, on-campus)

Eric's parents, his school teachers, and others hammered home the value of university. While he made the final decision himself, he acknowledged that it was the result of a combination of factors including his parents' educational biography:

You hear it from a lot of people … if you want a higher level job then university is pretty much the prerequisite for that at the moment. That impression comes from family, friends, career advisers, parents—that just was the general consensus at the time but also I think my parents … because they only did Year 10 in high school—and they said, "Things have changed now and it's better if you can got to university". (Eric, 22, single, Engineering, on-campus)

A few of the sons echoed the experience of the self-starters in that they were propelled to university studies by their own initiative although their context was, unlike the self-starters, intra-familial. Like Lachlan, Liam had really wanted to go into the army but was ruled unfit. He had been self-reliant from an early age due to his brother and sister's serious health issues. At that time, Liam recalled his father saying that he was going to have to grow up and look after himself: 'so from about Year 4 onwards, I've been doing my own thing, being more and more independent each year.' He explained that by the time he had finished his Higher School Certificate (HSC) he 'was leaning towards university but that he 'had no idea what course I wanted to do'. Since he had a love of cars and all sorts of machinery, he used this to guide his choice and eventually settled on Engineering because 'I want something that challenges me, I want something I can build and design and just have fun with'. The example of his father's working life had been a very powerful object lesson in this choice. Liam had watched his father struggle:

I've seen dad struggle like when he was in the trucks, that impacted me. … He was just trying to keep food on the table … and he'd come home tired and grumpy and have to go back to work the next day. So, I've watched him do that [and] it's always a job that's been beneath him in terms of creativity and ability. (Liam, 20, single, Engineering, on-campus)

Ahmad also brought himself to university. In Year 10 he realised he was 'tired of being the kid that never really cared about school … people could call it "maturing" maybe. I don't know … it just hit me that I should probably go good at school, try and go to uni, try and get a degree' (Ahmad, 19, single, Business, on-campus). Neil (23, single, Medicine, on-campus) who had always enjoyed science, focused on Medicine from about Year 10. For Seth, school led him to understand that university was 'just expected': 'It was definitely school that pushed me towards uni as opposed to any other sources' (Seth, 21, partnered, Science, on-campus).

Being First-in-Family at University

Fathers

Without exception, the FiF fathers experienced positive support from their immediate nuclear families, although there was dissension at the start from others. For some, ageism was a factor. The oldest father, Roger, 56, was supported in his studies by his wife and daughters so that he could work in a role that he enjoyed for the remainder of his working life even if it attracted a lower salary. However, while most of his friends understood that 'it's good to study; you're using your mind more and developing new skills and things which even late in life could lead you somewhere else', a couple of people thought that he was 'too old to bother with it and it was a waste of my time'. Benjamin's teenage children found his decision to take up university study difficult to understand at the start because: 'It was an unheard of, [an] unknown concept for a parent to be going to university', but over time they have come to accept it. If anything, Benjamin thought, it had brought them closer together as a family.

For other men there was full support, especially and crucially from wives. Lance's partner had been his 'rock' while his children and friends were supportive. This was also Nick's experience, especially of his wife who supported him 'in every way'. Richard's wife was 'very happy' for him. While David's wife and her family had also been his 'rock', she had supported the family financially and had been 'looking forward to the end of my studies for quite a while' because of the disruption it caused to family life.

Families of origin, however, could be indifferent or even negative to the FiF fathers. David's family of origin didn't really care about education and had not asked him about it nor expressed their view about it one way or the other. Because he had moved around a lot, he didn't have a lot of contact with his friends who likewise had not expressed any interest. Richard said his family of origin were all tradesmen and they didn't 'put a premium on education because all they care about is existing, so to speak, rather than living which is what I want to do'. He commented of them:

> They don't really have much of an opinion of uni per se. They just find it strange that someone would want to work full-time as well as study. They don't see the outside life of what I do at home; they know me as a family man who's studying and working. They think that my plate's too full and they think that I can't do it all whereas they don't realise that because the study is only part-time I can squeeze it into my breaks for the most part. They think I'm a bit of a workaholic. (Richard, 29, married with one child, Information Technology, online)

Richard said that he felt they were happier when he told them about taking up his training as a chef than they were when he said he was going to take a degree in IT. He felt that they were perhaps threatened by his studies and that he was getting above himself. Likewise, his workmates thought that: 'it's weird. They go: "Why would you want to get out of hospitality?"' As a FiF student, Richard said that he 'had no idea what I was getting myself into' when he took up his university studies.

The fathers discussed this 'unknowingness' about the university context for the FiF student. Paul, 47, explained that going to university in his family of origin would have been like asking 'Do you want to go and fly

to space?' Even enrolling in university was a journey into the unknown: 'And it was so difficult, like having absolutely no university experience at all, it was really difficult to try and find my way.' He explained the foreign nature of university to the FiF student like him in gendered terms:

> *I started life as a mechanic and it would almost be like … if I worked on a vehicle at home and my wife goes to an auto parts place [for me and] because she doesn't talk the language, she struggles [to make herself understood].* (Paul, 47, married with four children, Business, online)

Lance, 46, thought university would be hard and that it would take him out of his 'comfort zone'. The hardest part for him had been that it was nearly 30 years between high school and his university studies. He explained:

> *I'd never set foot on a university campus. My mum didn't finish high school and neither did I and dad sort of left high school and went straight to the army and Vietnam not long after.* (Lance, 46, married with two children, Arts, online)

The norms and practices of academic writing were particularly an unknown area. Roger said that in his degree so far, he didn't learn anything new about human nature but:

> *[I]it has taught me how to research properly and how to reference and some of the terms that they use in uni of course I'd never heard of them a year ago like "peer reviews", I wouldn't have had a clue what that meant.* (Roger, 56, married with two children, Arts, online)

Benjamin (47, married with three children, Architecture, online) said that 'academic writing was just inconceivable' for him while for Richard, the experience of learning to write in an academic manner was frightening at first. Coming up to his first assignment, he considered pulling out of his course because he was afraid he was going to fail. He took some extra tutorials and discovered that: 'It wasn't as scary as I thought it was going to be' (Richard, 29, married with one child, Information Technology, online). Nick found mastering the new online technologies

the 'most daunting' challenge, especially 'knowing that primary school teachers [need to be] fully integrated with ICT [Information and Communications Technology] and everything now, [so] I know I've got to embrace it.'

The stories of all these FiF fathers show that their immediate families, that is, their partners and children, were central to their aspirations and experience of HE. David, challenging Australian breadwinner masculinity as full-time carer at home, explained the impact of his studies on his ability to parent his children, especially during assessment periods:

> *During assessment period, essays particularly, not so much exams, there's a lot more stress in the house because I'm worried [about] having the time to get things in. With kids it's unpredictable; I might plan for two to three hours in the day but I might get 30 minutes. Also I think the biggest factor is recently I haven't been able to really enjoy the time with my kids. I'm looking at ways to manage them and get them out of my hair when I need to study instead of being able to sit down and spend time with them and watch their development.* (David, 34, married with two children, Business, online)

Benjamin also showed how central his family was to his experience of being a FiF student and father of three, especially on his role as provider. Having been previously on a 'six figure salary package', he found it 'very very humbling' to come back to being on government assistance (called AUSTUDY) to study full-time. He explained how his studies impacted his family's lifestyle and that financially it had been 'a negative for all of us' (Benjamin, 47, married with three children, Architecture, online). Finally, Nick quantified how he managed to balance family, work, and study: 'the way I looked at it, like, I put 30 per cent into work, 30 per cent into my study and 40 per cent into my family and that's how I maintain a balance' (Nick, 39, married with four children, Education, on-campus). Through saving, he planned to stop working so that he could give more time to both family and study as the latter became more demanding.

The Self-Starters

For the self-starters, awareness of their need to acquire the academic knowledge to embark on their university career was central to their experience as being the first in their family to do so. Before he came to the university, Stuart (24, partnered, no children, Behavioural Studies, online) said he knew 'nothing' about it. He continued: 'No, I didn't know the difference between a bachelor degree and a diploma (laughing). I really had no idea. That was all a foreign language to me.' He explained that before he came to the university, he had been engaged in a lot of regional labouring work where no-one was qualified. In this world 'university is for city people, not for us. … So people that I used to know … [had] no interest in higher education whatsoever.' Even when he was trying to decide in which university to enrol, Marcus (27, single, Enabling Programme, on-campus) found that the academic language of how courses work was 'actually its own language' and he was starting to 'get the hang of it a little bit'. Daniel, who did a lot of research before he started, explained the predicament of the FiF well when he outlined what he didn't know upon starting university:

> *I didn't even know what a PhD was when I started here; I didn't know what a Masters [was]; I didn't know what an Honours was; I didn't know anything. To be honest I didn't even know how the whole scheme worked, how the university life [went], I knew nothing about university … like I've had no-one in university in my family, friends, I've never spoken to anyone about it. You're running blind when you come here.* (Daniel, 30, Engineering, on-campus)

Phil (29, partnered, Behavioural Studies, online) eloquently explained that he had come to see that there was 'a whole academic world that you don't really know is kind of happening behind the normal world'. In terms of his family, Phil thought that they didn't really understand what he was doing: 'They pretty much say that they're proud of what I'm doing and that's pretty much as far as it goes really.' He believed that his own motivation was the biggest factor in his perseverance through the stressful times in his studies. Indeed, for Phil, the biggest hurdle at university was

the stress of studying that he experienced as the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life.

Like Phil, many of these self-starters mentioned that they had experienced stress in their studies, but also demonstrated great determination and resilience. Graeme commented that he was very glad he had taken an enabling programme before he went into his studies because it would have been 'more stressful' without it as university study 'very quickly ramps up'. When he experienced stress in his studies, even in his final year, he explained that he could not go to his parents:

> *I can't ask them anything to do with university 'cos they've got absolutely no experience. They're not unintelligent people but … yeah, I don't want them to know that I'm stressed either. As far as they're concerned university is a giant goal for me and I'm just walking through it. I've got a couple of friends that I text when I'm stressed and the idea of them being happy with my graduation gets me through.* (Graeme, 31, single, Education, on campus)

Stephen, 31, thought that though 'it might get stressful and things', he always gets there in the end. Being FiF for the self-starters was about launching into the unknown with all of the stress that this entails.

The Sons

All 15 of the FiF sons had the support of their parents for their university studies. Almost without exception, it was unqualified support and parents thought of university as the way for their sons to achieve a better life as well as provide necessary credentials in the labour market. Most parents tried to help with limited economic resources, and their sons in turn tried not to ask for this support if they could help it. However, the support of parents who have not studied at university, while important to the success and perhaps well-being of their sons, has its limits as they do not possess the academic capital that can only come through university study. As Ahmad conveyed of his Middle Eastern parents, while they were 'all very proud':

It's just hard because they don't understand at all obviously because they've never been through uni or anything like that, but yes, they're proud of me, you know "Good on you"—they're happy for me. … [But] if your parents don't understand there's no support for that. You know, you're on your own really. (Ahmad, 19, single, Business, on-campus)

Liam noted how some students from families with tertiary backgrounds had their parents work out their university timetable for them as well as paying all of their bills. This was not available to him: 'My parents help me where they can or if they can. It's more a case of if they can, not when they can.' They paid for Liam's first session and then he was on his own.

At the start, some of the FiF sons relished the idea of the freedom they would have from the restrictions of living at home and the social opportunities they would encounter. Nadir chose his university because it was far enough away from his parents to loosen the surveillance they exerted over his activities. He said that he and his friends 'matured on our own a bit, through our own freedom' (Nadir, 25, single, Information Technology, on-campus). Ahmad guessed that 'it was going to be hard, a new world [but] I thought it would be very fun'. On a University Open Day high-school visit, Eric had formed an iconic image of university life when he had seen a student working on his computer in the university bar with a beer in front of him. Eric recalled thinking: 'Oh that's so cool. I can't wait to go to uni. What a cool life.' Although excited 'by the freedom of it all', some things came as a 'surprise', such as 'the size of lecture theatres and how quickly some of the professors will go through stuff and you're not able to interact directly with them which I sort of knew but it just threw me off a bit'. He decided to 'see how it went' and enjoy himself:

I just think it's going to sound like I'm an alcoholic and just a party animal which I'm not now but I just really wanted to have an awesome time with meeting new people and stuff … I pushed myself maybe a little bit too hard to relish the first years of university. (Eric, 22, single, Engineering, on-campus)

However, Lachlan, 'the first person I think in my entire bloodline to set foot in a university', said that he found that 'a lot of people look at uni

and say "It's a big social, fun time" when really, I don't think it is'. Kaleb, who did not like to drink 'that much' and is 'not a huge party person', agreed. Indeed he was annoyed by what he called the 'stigma thing' that university was not a serious occupation, and that all that students do is drink and party, held by his father and his co-workers. Ahmad (19, single, Business, on-campus) from within a different cultural framework also articulated this problem when he said that his parents 'don't think studying is hard … like, you know, stereotypical old Middle Eastern man would think kind of thing, like uni's easy … It's the people that are breaking their back like bricklayers [that] it's hard for'. The absence of knowledge about university at home, the manual/intellectual fault-line in masculine performance, as well as the anti-intellectualism of conventional larrikin masculinity in Australia combined to make it difficult for some of the sons to have their academic efforts and achievements understood and taken seriously by their families.

Outcomes

Fathers

Despite the pressures on their roles while they studied, the fathers were convinced of the positive impacts of their HE participation on their families, especially on their children. Richard, 29, said that he would certainly be encouraging his daughter, for whom they had provided private schooling, to make a wise choice when she finished school unlike himself at that time who was not encouraged to think of university, but to 'just wing it'. Paul, 47, said that 'I think I'm happier which is good. It's always good to have a happy father and I think also that it is some positive feedback to our kids'. He and his wife had raised their four children to expect that they would go to university. He wished he'd known that the idea that 'to go to university you have to be smart and maybe upper-middle class' was not true. Benjamin, who successfully encouraged his wife to take up university study, underscored the positive impacts for FiF parents who would be able to mentor their children through university 'and give them

ideas of study streams and what's involved and what to expect'. Richard summed up the centrality of the family to his engagement in university studies and to the other fathers in this study:

Just the knowledge that there's a goal at the end, knowing that I'm actually working towards a goal which is both having a degree in the end of it as well as providing more for my family. My family is probably my biggest motivator because I come from a not well-off family and to be able to provide more for my own family will be fantastic. (Richard, 29, married with one child, Information Technology, online)

The stories of these FiF fathers show that they are undertaking HE studies as a response to the creeping credentialism of the Australian labour market. Not only are they seeking to improve their competitive advantage and employability, however, they are also seeking work that has a higher remuneration and status, is more enjoyable, less physically demanding and capable of securing their families' futures. The support of their wives was always present and gratefully acknowledged. While gender was not consciously a factor in the articulation of their stories, their masculine roles as breadwinners and fathers were crucial. Age was also clearly a factor for some of them in how their studies were viewed by their relationship circles. Being FiF meant that on enrolment they were facing alien territory equipped only with their powerful family-centred motivations and their nuclear support network to assist them as they faced the unknown. For the next group of FiF men, the self-starters, a different set of gendered concerns centred on their own self-actualisations led to their risky entry into HE.

The Self-Starters

The self-starter men outlined how their lives had changed through their engagement in HE mainly for the better. Other changes, particularly loss of contact with people, were construed as the unavoidable cost of improving their lives through HE. Class consciousness was a notable feature of these men's accounts. Daniel, one of the most forthcoming of the male

interviewees, discussed how different his life was now from the absence of expectations about university during his high school years in the public housing area where he grew up:

> *I went to [School], let's just say I could only picture a handful of people who went to university from that [school]. It was a housing commission-based suburb and, you know, a lot of welfare and all that … I don't even think I heard of university at high school, no-one spoke about university. If you got an apprenticeship you were doing well so, you know, university was just something that we never really educated about I guess, especially with me and my friends and stuff.* (Daniel, 30, Engineering, Final Year, on-campus)

Daniel had also experienced great changes in his relationships as a result of his studies, not only with people he used to know but also in his family of origin. He explained how these relationships had 'fallen apart':

> *I had a fall out with my father that was due to the whole me coming to university [thing]… I was close to my sisters then and then as time's gone by, I haven't contacted them and yes, due to university and working … you know, they've obviously got frustrated with me and we have fallen apart, we hardly see each other, we hardly talk to each other. Friends is the same thing … that's changed a lot but you've got to prioritise and, you know, that's what you've got to sacrifice I guess to actually do a degree.* (Daniel, 30, Engineering, Final Year, on-campus)

This exilic effect of HE on working-class students from their class origins and culture has been noted in the literature (Hughes, 2002). But Daniel also believed that his maturity had been part of this change, especially his departure from previous masculine norms, and had helped him in his university studies. He had left behind the 'blokey' (laddish) masculine performance associated 'naturally' with youthful partying and drinking alcohol, to be able to prioritise his studies. At the end of his studies with his graduation in sight, he could say: 'Yes, it's been a good experience; never forget it.' He hoped that when he had children 'they can continue on the trend and come to university'.

The ripple effect that flowed from FiF men to others in their circle, hoped for by Daniel, had already happened in Phil's experience. His

employer had told Phil that he had inspired him to undertake HE studies online. Phil had also experienced the loss of contact with this family, especially with his father. He used to dine with him every Sunday night but over time, as Phil made time for his study, it was 'just assumed' that he was not coming. Phil's life after going to university is very different from before because his direction has changed:

> *This stage of my life is much different to any other time I guess … it's chalk and cheese really. If I'd never studied, I'd still be working those back-breaking labouring jobs and just scraping by. Now I'm making good money, I'm not breaking my back. You know, this is something that I can do for the rest of my life so it's totally changed my whole future.* (Phil, 29, partnered, Behavioural Studies, online)

Stuart, 24, has 'never been quite so hopeful ever before'. Prior to working in the community welfare sector, he was a member of the labouring class, as with Phil, breaking his 'back every day to make somebody else lots of money'. Now his life had 'changed completely'. Graeme, about to graduate as a high school science teacher, said 'This is the happiest I've ever been' and he charted the re-contouring and opening up of his internal reality created by his university education:

> *I'm happier at university than I was in high school. [I] was heaps more highly strung four years ago. Like, definitely more closed minded and I'm definitely, like, anything's possible now. … I'm more acceptable to outside ideas, heaps smarter now, I'm more tolerant, poorer (both laugh).* (Graeme, 31, single, Education, on-campus)

As with Daniel, alcohol had been a big part of Graeme's life but he 'hardly' drinks 'at all now for some reason'. He said: 'I can't even remember the past when I'd get black out drunk. That would happen every weekend before that at least. Yeah, [it was a part of] work culture plus football culture.' The university experience was important to Graeme on many levels, 'not just for the bit of paper'. His relationships had changed, and as Daniel had noted previously, he had lost ground compared to his friends who had established families of their own. For Stephen (31,

partnered, Nursing, on-campus) coming to Australia from England, marrying his Australian wife, had given him the opportunity to put the past behind him, including the commencement of a first degree that he regretted. He also mentioned letting go of drinking as part of his transformation. Stephen's nursing studies have given him a sustainable pathway around helping people. He concluded that he now had 'real direction and who knows where I'll end up. You know, now I'm thinking about being a doctor. It's immense, like huge, really.'

The Sons

Once at the university, some of the sons settled down to their new freer lives and made new friends. Sean (19, single, Medical and Health Science, on-campus), who achieved a place in a prestigious programme and came with firm ambitions, never felt alone from his first day because he had friends there with him. At the same time he recalled that he found the teaching style 'very challenging' because it was so different from his high school experience. Ray, having finished his degree, felt that 'second year was when I sort of really started going to uni.' Before that he was 'still living a life of being back in [his home town] because I was coming up the weekends; I didn't experience the proper move and then sort of gave uni a proper go wholeheartedly and that's when I got all the benefits from it and put more into it and got more out.' He'd really 'come out of his shell' (Ray, aged 22, single, Engineering, on-campus).

Others experienced bumpy transitions into the new way of life offered on campus. While they had anticipated freedom, these sons found that they needed to be more disciplined if they were to succeed in their studies. Because they had no previous frame of reference, they also could experience 'shock', starting with the large size of university campuses as disorienting. Seth said that for him starting university was 'a bit of a shock': he felt great 'foreboding' and when he first arrived 'it was a massive campus'. Nevertheless, he expected university 'to be quite easy' but it turned out to be 'very different'. University required him to be more independent: 'you have to just work it all out yourself' (Seth, 21, partnered, Science, on-campus).

For Lachlan, first year was the 'biggest crisis point only because I just couldn't cope—the sheer workload was a shock'. His crisis wasn't helped by the fact that his friends who went into the army, as he had wanted to, were going overseas and writing to him 'wish you were here, you'd love this' (Lachlan, 24, single, Law, on-campus). Sam also explained that university was a 'shock to his system' and he suffered acutely, experiencing anxiety, depression and thoughts of suicide. Coming from a close Greek community, he had told only his mother, no-one else, that he would be deferring his studies for a short time as 'the community will not understand why' (Sam, 19, single, Finance, on-campus). Neil said entering into his new degree was 'all very foreign … foreign university, foreign degree, foreign friends—just a whole big new world, focusing on end-game but trying to experience everything around me because it's new' (Neil, 23, single, Medicine, on-campus). The maturation challenge for these FiF young men, away from their families, could be exacting as they worked to find their feet in the new independence of campus life.

Conclusion

In this chapter, stories of university participation given in the stories of a group of 29 FiF men were explored using a narrative gender framework. It was argued that such a framework in this instance could best be explicated through three age categories based on distinctive masculine performances across the male adult life course. The three groups that emerged from the stories were the fathers, the self-starters, and the sons, each having a differently situated relational gendered performance.

The masculinities exhibited by the FiF fathers demonstrated that their reproductive family was central to their entry and experiences in HE. The fathers construed their studies within the domestic fathering framework around their role as breadwinners. They were also aware of, and seeking to respond to, the advancing credentialism of the labour market. For some of the tradesmen-fathers, concerns about bodily competence into the future led them to seek work that would not be so physically onerous

as well as be better paid and more interesting, a finding echoed in a recent Australian study on male students transitioning from enabling education into university degree programmes (McNamara, 2021). For the older fathers there is evidence that advancing age acted as a loosening mechanism for gender performance where they are able to consider pursuing their ambitions and interests surrendered earlier to the fathering project.

The self-starters were positioned at a time of their lives when personal autonomy was most apparent, and they made the decision to go to university on their own. Families were peripheral to their narratives although partners, where they were present, were important supports. Some of these men had experienced rupture in their previous family and friendship networks. They also charted significant behavioural change, such as moderating their alcohol consumption, in response to the needs of studying at university. Many of these self-starters mentioned also that they had experienced stress in their studies, no doubt a component of which was caused by the universities' assumption that its students are in possession of the requisite knowledge and language to negotiate the systems, processes and content of academic life. This stress was shared by the FiF sons.

While the FiF fathers and the self-starters had some difficulties in their transitions to university life, their more established identities as men appeared to make their experience more manageable. The presence of partners where they existed also acted to support and stabilise them. The FiF sons, however, at the start of the identity journey away from their family of origin reported greater dislocations and stresses. They often experienced shock at the university workload, and they took some time to adjust to the need for greater self-discipline in their studies.

Nevertheless, there were common factors, often expressed through the language of metaphor, across the stories related by three groups of men around their FiF experience in HE. Each was aware that they did not possess at the start of their studies the requisite academic capital and that they had to work hard to learn the 'new language' of the 'foreign land' they were entering. Each was aware that to have a more satisfying, better paid and less physically demanding work they needed to acquire a university credential. Each was prepared to make the heavy financial, personal,

and social sacrifices that such study entails. In addition, the men, with the exceptions of some of the sons, were transformed by their studies for the better, made more hopeful and optimistic about their futures. Further, there is evidence in the FiF men's stories that, just as the extension of mass secondary schooling opened up a 'generation gap' at an earlier time, for some FiF students, a new generation gap appears to be opening up between men's families of origin and themselves around the extension of mass HE and the widening participation agenda. Finally, there was no evidence of a 'crisis in masculinity' nor a radical transformation in men's gender performances (Ingram & Waller, 2014) demonstrated in these stories. Old patterns of being, and becoming, breadwinners were evident, softened by these FiF men's demonstrated willingness to challenge themselves within the new and strange university environments.

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10

'Hey you! You've Got this and You ARE Smart': Motivated Women Drawing on 'Sisu' to Persist and Succeed at University

Introduction

This chapter builds upon previous chapters to focus on the culmination of the university journey, the stage at which students are approaching graduation. Applying the concept of 'sisu',[1] this chapter seeks to deeply understand persistence and success in higher education (HE), in particular how sisu is enacted by mature first-in-family (FiF) women. Sisu is a recently theorised Finnish term with no exact English equivalent. In this chapter, we consider the notion of sisu to explore the inner fortitude that enables individuals to push through adversity, defying the odds to accomplish life goals (Lahti, 2019, 2022). As the previous chapters have noted, FiF students encounter a range of obstacles and diversions in their HE journey, and sisu has provided an innovative framing to consider the nuanced interplay of such motivation.

Sisu is described poetically by Lahti as 'run[ning] deeper than perseverance … the depth more like a canon of fortitude with a multitude of tunes … played through the instrument of our effort' (2022, p. 55). As a concept, sisu holds promise for exploring and understanding persistence

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[1] Sisu: pronounced 'SEE-soo' or 'SIH-soo'

through its capacity to capture a multiplicity of inner strengths and capabilities which were evident in the narratives of the mature women in our study. The chapter draws on data from Study C (see Chap. 1) gathered from FiF students in Australia and Europe (Ireland, UK, Austria) through interviews and surveys conducted between 2017 and 2018. We argue that sisu provides insight into the deeply personal, collective and complex nature of persistence behaviours. Despite differences in geographical and educational contexts, there were similarities across these older FiF women, including the embodied nature of pursuing university study and the drive to persist regardless of obstacles enroute to achieving their goals.

Background

The research in this chapter was designed to provide in-depth understanding of how FiF students persist at university in order to provide targeted support for those considering departure, particularly students from educationally disadvantaged or 'equity'[2] groups. The study built upon prior research that considered how FiF students utilise existing cultural, familial and knowledge capitals during their transition into, and engagement with, university (e.g. O'Shea, 2016, 2018; O'Shea et al., 2017, 2018) as well as related studies on the experiences of HE participation for Indigenous students (Harwood et al., 2014–2018) and rural/remote students (Delahunty, 2022; Delahunty and Hellwig, 2022; O'Shea et al., 2019).

Turning Attention from Student Retention to the Nature of Persistence

Retaining students in HE is a key policy initiative within Australia. The previous Australian government committed to a performance funding framework linked to student satisfaction and graduate employment from

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[2] There are currently six targeted equity groups in Australia, including people from (1) low socioeconomic backgrounds, (2) rural and isolated areas, (3) non-English-speaking backgrounds, (4) women in non-traditional areas of study, (5) Indigenous peoples and (6) students with disability.

2020 (Tehan, 2019), with policies undergoing further reform in 2022–2023 under the newly elected Labor government (https://minis-ters.education.gov.au/clare). While retention rates vary across universities and student populations, there has been continuing disparity in degree attainment for under-represented groups. For example, the proportion of regionally located Australians with a degree qualification is consistently half that of their urban counterparts and lower still for those from remote/very remote areas (ABS, 2021). Across the sector, attrition rates have been in excess of 25% for the entire first year population of half of all registered university providers, with an average departure rate of 20% recorded (TEQSA, 2017). However, focus on attrition should not only be in the first year of study as thoughts of departure shadow many students throughout their university careers, and particularly students belonging to multiple equity categories (Henderson et al., 2020). In the 2020 Student Experience Survey (Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching [QILT], 2021) 20% of all undergraduate students indicated they had considered leaving during that year (similar to 2019 and 2018 results). Around 22% of the FiF subgroup (comprising 42.7% of all commencing students), indicated intentions of early departure (QILT, 2021). While this signifies some overall improvement since Coates and Ransom (2011) reported more than a quarter of FiF students had considered leaving in the first year of study and over a third in later years, thoughts of leaving for FiF are still higher than for all other students (19%) in Australia (QILT, 2021), a pattern similarly identified in the UK (Henderson et al., 2020).

Globally, research in the field of university retention has largely focused on the complexities of attrition rather than on the nature of persistence. Aljohani's (2016) review of literature across Australia, UK, US, Europe and Arabia found that most early research was mainly concerned with identifying predictability factors of attrition based on common student characteristics. These foci have shifted to include broader sociological, educational and organisational factors that may impact on decisions to depart early. However, much research retains focus on the 'why' of departure rather than exploring the reasons or rationales that students have for staying. In shifting attention to those students who may have been considered 'at-risk' of early departure and exploring how they have

successfully managed to reach graduation, this chapter arguably makes a significant contribution to the field. Turning attention to persistence rather than retention, will enable a better understanding of the nature of persistence. This aligns to Tinto's (2016) challenge to institutions to find out what *they* could do better to improve the student experience, which may mean adopting more of the student perspective.

The perspectives of FiF older women at university are both complex and varied (O'Shea & Stone, 2014; Stone & O'Shea, 2012) as these students typically encounter multiple external, and at times, internal challenges (such as self-confidence), which can place inordinate strain on their emotional, mental, social and physical resources and energies. However, because of these complexities and life experience, mature-age women nearing completion of a university degree are well-equipped to provide deep insight into the nature of persistence. As in previous chapters, this discussion is framed by a strengths-based perspective that focuses on how a geographically dispersed group of mature female participants narrated their stories of persistence. This is analysed through what Lahti refers to as an *action mindset*, described as

> *[a] consistent courageous approach towards challenges … to lean into the unknown and even seek out situations that are likely to test the individual.* (Lahti, 2019, p. 66)

As outlined in Chap. 1, we initially explored the nature of persistence by drawing on narrative inquiry, informed by sociological (Bourdieu, 1986) and philosophical understandings of social justice (Nussbaum, 2006; Sen, 1992) to explore how FiF participants enacted persistence through their university studies. The application of sisu to the narratives of older female students, further extends the range of theoretical frameworks we have used to analyse the nature of persistence (see Delahunty & O'Shea, 2019, 2021; O'Shea & Delahunty, 2018, 2022).

Before describing sisu and the potential it holds for understanding the complexities of persistence, we first discuss the notion of grit, which has become influential in contemporary educational policy across the world. In the next section, we critically engage with the concept of 'grit' because

this term continues to permeate discourse and attitudes towards persistence, particularly in the neoliberalist Western world.

Grit

Grit comes from the field of psychology as a way of explaining why some individuals succeed, whilst others do not. The notion was developed from the data of highly successful individuals in their field who, in rising to the top, demonstrated a combination of perseverance, passion and exertion of effort, considered the three essential qualities of grit (Duckworth, 2016). Those who succeed are described as 'gritty' while individuals who fail are considered 'not [at all] gritty', and by implication do not possess the requisite qualities. This understanding of achievement was driven in part by questioning how something as 'intangible' as grit could be measured (Duckworth, 2016, p. 8), and was subsequently demonstrated formulaically as a two-stage process: 'talent x effort = skill; skill x effort = achievement' (Duckworth, 2016, p. 44). However, applying such formulation to the multifaceted processes of learning and achievement has been criticised for being too simplistic (Tewell, 2020; Bonfiglio, 2017; Golden, 2017; Saltman 2016). Saltman (2016) argues that grit 'relies on a few key assumptions and fallacies about learning, knowledge and intelligence' (p. 44) with one of these being that complex, contextualised and dynamic processes of skills mastery can 'be boiled down to [simply] putting enough hours … [into] deliberate practice' (p. 44).

Ironically, oversimplification, as Saltman (2016) pointed out, contributes to the intrinsic appeal of grit, as does 'its professed ability to be measured with relative ease' (Tewell, 2020, p. 142) through the grit scale (Duckworth, 2016) which has also been challenged. Credé et al. (2017) question the validity of this measurement 'as a predictor of performance and success and as a focus of interventions' (p. 492). Tewell (2020) argues that the influence of grit on performance has been overstated, which may feed into the fallacy that 'overcom[ing] inequalities' (p. 141) is simply a matter of students working harder. This places the onus on the individual for their own success, with little regard for broader systemic, social and

policy failure that continues to disadvantage students from equity backgrounds.

More broadly then, grit feeds into a deficit model of education, which raises issues when 'offered as a way to solve underachievement and dissatisfaction in schools, the workplace and interpersonal relationships' (Tewell, 2020, p. 137). Of most concern is the subtlety with which grit has become accepted into educational and societal discourse and practice, particularly as these relate to the notion of student persistence. Part of the appeal may be that it aligns with populist beliefs about learning and effort, in particular the idea that 'hard work pays off and achievement is strictly a matter of applying oneself' (Tewell, 2020, p. 138). This perspective reinforces the dominant (Western) values of individualism, self-reliance and persistence, and the 'myth of meritocracy', that is, of achievement being individually and unproblematically created and sustained (Tewell, 2020, p. 149).

Sisu

As an alternative to understandings of persistence informed by grit, we have adopted the concept of sisu. This is derived from the Finnish 'sisus', with a literal meaning of 'internal organs' or 'guts'. Over time, sisu has evolved to reflect a more abstract meaning of inner fortitude which is activated in moments of hardship especially when we feel there is nothing more 'left in the tank', likened also to our 'second wind' which enables us to move forward in spite of the odds (Lahti, 2019). Sisu is often illustrated through the winter war of 1939—an against-all-odds war in which the Finnish nation successfully defended themselves against the much more powerful Russian forces. Their success was attributed to possessing sisu, a collective inner determination to not be overcome and manifested in a concerted, united and joint responsibility for action.

However, sisu has only recently been theorised by Lahti (2019, 2022, 2023), whose exploration was informed by over 1200 qualitative survey responses from mostly Finnish participants (95%) with cultural and generational understandings of the term. Lahti concluded that sisu is in fact, universal, 'exist[ing] within everyone and … usually stumbled upon

when one faces insurmountable adversity' (2023, p. 74). Lahti identified six main themes (and 46 subthemes), spanning positive aspects of sisu as well as the harms of possessing too much sisu (see Lahti, 2019, pp. 70–71). The three overarching themes and descriptors relevant to our data are:

- *Extraordinary perseverance*: To endure and remain resolute amidst significant adversities, surpass one's preconceived mental or physical capacities and hold oneself accountable for high standards
- *Action mindset*: A consistent, courageous approach towards challenges, taking action against slim odds and not be bound by the observed limitations of the present moment
- *Latent power*: An inner power potential that exists in every human being and can be accessed when we have consumed our preconceived mental or physical capacities. (Lahti, 2019, pp. 66–68)

These themes represent positive qualities, each offering 'a different angle' from which to consider the nature of sisu. Lahti points out that what unites them all is the 'overarching sense of moving forward no matter what' (2023, p. 73).

While Lahti acknowledges that grit, resilience, and perseverance are part of sisu's DNA, sisu is much more nuanced and holds potential as a meaningful lens through which to better understand different facets of persistence. Our data comprised the persistence narratives of FiF students and the descriptors of Lahti's main themes provided a generative analytical frame for considering the stories of mature female learners in the final stages of study.

In this chapter, we focus on the nature of action mindset within the act of sisu, particularly the ways in which this quality underpinned forward-motion, or as Lahti explains,

> [the] inner inclination and unstated conviction that leans [them] into the headwind with faith and curiosity instead of turn[ing] away. (2022, p. 45)

We have also begun to explore how sisu contributes to this body of work through examining how extraordinary perseverance is enacted through biographies of hardship (Delahunty & O'Shea, Forthcoming),

with additional action mindset subthemes (such as standing up, boldness, facing one's fears) and latent power also forthcoming.

Who Are These Motivated Women?

The women featured in this chapter participated in Study C (see Chap. 1). The data from female participants over the age of 25 years were then extracted from the main dataset (n = 162), and are summarised in the Table 10.1.

As with the majority of FiF students throughout this book, these women were intersected by multiple equity factors in addition to being the first in their family to attend university. Research has indicated how the compounding disadvantage of multiple equity factors adds difficulty to pursuing and achieving an HE degree (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). In addition to being first and without a family biography to tap into when navigating the university experience, over 70% of these women identified two or more additional equity factors (i.e. 162 participants selected 359 equity factors), summarised in Table 10.2.

Additional equity factors offered for selection were:

- Disability, low SES, refugee background, rural (all participants)
- Non-English-speaking background (Australia, Ireland, UK)
- Non-German-speaking background (Austria)
- Working-class background (Europe)
- Identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, isolated location (Australia)

Questions were replicated across both surveys and interviews, and were designed to examine how individuals defined and reflected upon the

Table 10.1 Summary of data subset: Female first-in-family students aged over 25

Female participants over 25 years (Total 162)	Australia	Ireland	UK	Austria
Interviews (n 42)	36	4	0	2
Surveys (n 120)	94	1	2	23

Table 10.2 Summary showing multiple equity factors (359 factors selected by 162 participants)

No. of equity factors in addition to FiF	No. of participants having additional equity factors	%
FiF plus 1 other factor	47	29%
FiF plus 2 other factors	61	38%
FiF plus 3 other factors	30	19%
Fif plus 4 other factors	20	12%
FiF plus 5 other factors	4	2%
Total	162	100%

enactment of persistence within university and the strategies employed. The consistency across the qualitatively rich data enabled persistence to be explored through the lens of sisu, with specific attention to how action mindset was revealed by this particular group of learners, guided by Lahti's descriptions (2019, 2022). The overarching question guiding our inquiry was: *How was action mindset revealed in the persistence narratives of mature first-in-family female students?*

Action Mindset

Action mindset describes an approach towards challenges that foregrounds how individuals are inspired to take action, even against the odds, and despite limitations of the present moment (Lahti, 2019). Action mindset is the capacity to view a journey as possible, even with an awareness that the 'action' may test the limit of our capabilities (Lahti, 2022, 2023). Lahti further describes action mindset as an orientation 'toward the future [through] an active, courageous approach to challenges that seem greater than our reserves, opportunities and capacities' (2023, p. 77). Iterative and detailed analysis of the qualititative data, themed broadly as action mindset, enabled us to identify a number of subthemes, two of which will be explored in the findings.

Findings

The findings focus on two interwining subthemes of action mindset: (1) to believe in oneself, and (2) to have guts (Lahti, 2019, 2022). These two aspects of action mindset provided insights into the approaches that these mature women took to keep moving forward especially when challenges posed a threat to this (Lahti, 2019).

To Believe in Oneself

To believe in oneself describes an approach towards challenges which is 'consistent, courageous … taking action against slim odds and not be[ing] bound by the observed limitations of the present moment' (Lahti, 2019, p. 67). In this study, self-belief echoed across the participant narratives and, while described in various ways, seemed critical to their persistence through the challenges that arose to completing university study.

Belief in oneself was at times spoken about with a level of incredulity with regard to the capacity to take on university studies. Some of the women had not envisaged the extent of their own potential in terms of achievement. For example, one participant confessed that she was 'by no means tooting my own horn, *but*' she never imagined sitting 'on a really high GPA' (Danielle, Australia). Similarly, another participant 'was surprised' at some of the things she had achieved and 'surprised at the amount of positive feedback' received. These positive experiences boosted her self-belief by confirming 'that actually I am quite good at this stuff' (Baillie, Australia). Many participants thought that university would be too difficult or they believed, or were led to believe, that they were not smart enough for university. One learner was buoyed after undertaking TAFE study (Technical and Further Education) in which she discovered, 'I was not as limited intellectually as my family would have liked me to believe.' This newfound confidence enabled her to move onto university study which had cumulative benefits to 'the belief in myself' which 'develop[ed] with each success' (Survey #A36, Australia).

Working around complex life circumstances, sometimes tinged with guilt as many balanced university study around the dynamics of family

and work (see also Chap. 8), could be precarious for self-belief, with self-doubt quite easily triggered by a negative comment or attitude. This is exemplified in Aleisha's story, whose life and study necessarily revolved around her son's illness. She became quite adept at tackling assignments at her son's hospital bedside. While her son's 'illness and the feasibility of being able to physically get there and do uni' were the main hurdles, she reflected that the 'only other real hurdle' was 'probably just that little bit of self-doubt when things aren't going perfectly'. This referred to a comment made by her usually supportive father, who questioned the wisdom of continuing her study during one of these hospitalisations, which clouded her educational endeavours with self-doubt (Aleisha, Australia).

Overcoming self-doubt provides another insight into challenges for mature learners and into the emotionality of fostering self-belief in their capabilities. For many mature FiF women, self-doubt begins many years prior to the decision to study, as Danielle articulates:

> I didn't think that I was smart enough or that I could do it … you know, just a lot of negative self-talk mostly. It was mostly how I perceived myself that I think held me back (Danielle, Australia).

Finding something within oneself was key to overcoming this sense of not being 'good enough'. Such inner catalysts could transform self-doubt into self-belief:

> I finally figured out what I wanted to do … I was at the point of soul numbing dissatisfaction with my work … I realised that I needed to push myself out of my self-doubt and give myself the opportunity to succeed with studies. Best decision of my life (Survey #A66, Australia).

Belief in Self Boosted by Others

The socioemotional support from others was important for these mature women and contributed to boosting self-belief. Support came variously from a different sources that included encouragement, practical, financial support or from respected others who perceived something within the

individual learner that perhaps they could not initially see for themselves. Immediate family members were predominantly mentioned but mothers especially so, as well as fathers, grandparents, aunties, children and partners (see also Chaps. 5, 7, 8, and 9). Encouragement also came from university staff, colleagues as well as friends. Some students were fortunate to have a variety of such 'champions' to draw upon such as the next participant who provides a succinct description of a 'village' approach to support, and the complementary role that each played:

> [M]y parents supported me and believed in me—that helped a lot when I thought I am too dumb to make it. Teachers who had interest in me and my thoughts and encouraged me that my thoughts are important too. My friends who made it fun for me to be there and also sometimes supported me with infrastructure, like technical support. (Survey #07, Austria)

The support of tutors was also mentioned, especially when they 'really made me feel like I was worthy of something' (Survey #B08, Australia). Some were pivotal in boosting self-belief, such as Josie's experience in Australia. She recollected that she will 'never forget my [TAFE] tutor sitting me down … and [saying], "It would be a travesty if you didn't do your RN"'.[3] Whilst a relatively short comment, these words were powerful, prompting her to reflect 'You know what, I think I could!' (Josie, Australia). Other participants mentioned the influence and support of colleagues. One learner described how her work colleagues encouraged her to attend university 'because they thought I would find [university] not such a challenge as I perceived'. After the first unit, she 'realised that university study was not out of reach at all' (Survey #C02, Australia). Similarly, friends were important sources of encouragement. One participant who had believed she was 'not smart enough' also tried one unit and 'enjoyed it so much' she took 'another unit, then another', acknowledging the support of a friend 'who encouraged me to continue at the times I thought I could not' (Survey #A36, Australia). Recognition from external organisations was also extremely validating for some learners. One participant described the 'boost in confidence in my ability to be a

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[3] RN = Registered Nurse training.

successful student' that came with an offer to join the Golden Key Honour Society[4] in recognition of her academic achievement. She recalled this as 'incredible and I can't describe the sense of pride I felt … when my certificate arrived in the mail, I cried. I really did'. She continued,

> *We all need to feel as though we can do what we set out to do and there will be things along the way that test us. But when you get something that basically says: Hey you! You're doing an amazing job. You've got this and you ARE smart', then you feel like you can take on the world. It is amazing the confidence that being acknowledged can bring (Survey #E09, Australia).*

Receiving various kinds of acknowledgement and support from others built a self-belief that FiF students frequently commented as both appreciated and significant in finding the courage to persist through challenges (see Chaps. 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9). However, there were also some instances where self-belief arose in spite of (or despite) others.

Belief in Self in Spite of Others

Some participants experienced overt, covert, and sometimes long-term, discouragement from others, which became a counter-process to building self-belief. An extremely challenging situation was narrated by one participant, who was married for over 20 years to a man who had an 'unfortunate condition' where 'they tend to devalue … they have to put you down to feel better about themselves … there's a lot of gas-lighting'. However, she described herself as 'a very, very strong person'. What 'absolutely pushed' her was a need to prove to herself to 'everyone' that she was capable of studying a degree, but 'especially [prove to] my husband, that I'm not this silly, dumb person that can't put one foot in front of the other' (Heather, Australia). Similarly, Ruth grew up with a lot of discouragement from her mother who was 'a very negative person'. She recalled how,

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[4] Golden Key International Honour Society is the world's largest collegiate honour society for graduate and undergraduate students who are in the top 15% of their class.

any time I had an idea that I wanted to do something, it would be "Oh, that's a good idea but…" and the 'but' would always be "[but] you're too short, you're too tall, you have to get up at… you're not going to…" There was always a 'but' so I always walked away really deflated. I knew that I was smart. I was always smart. I never had any doubt about that. I did really well in primary school … but there was never any suggestion of me going to university. That was for other people (Ruth, Australia).

Whilst Ruth experienced blatant discouragement, on other occasions family members could inadvertently be discouraging, often simply through not understanding the nature of academic study. Questions from family were sometimes perceived as cloaked expectations, especially around paid employment, and particularly if study was not considered 'work'. For example, two Austrian women spoke at length about the frustrations this caused. Lena said that in Austria 'titles are important' and while her family knew that, it still took 'a lot of effort to convince them' that gaining Bachelor *and* Masters degrees is 'what I need to do it in order to achieve the goals I would like to'. Whilst recognising that her family members 'don't mean any harm', at the same time she described having to constantly justify study which generated 'a tough feeling because it feels like I need to defend my decisions all the time' (Lena, Austria). While Phoebe's parents also understood that she needed postgraduate qualifications to achieve her employment goal, she found the barrage of questions from other family members to be challenging:

"Are you still studying a bachelor? Are you not planning to work one day? When are trying to work? Don't you want to get money? When are you having a full-time job?" And I'm like, "But I am working!" (Phoebe, Austria).

Phoebe expressed some frustration at having to justify her academic study as 'work' which did not align to the family view of work as paid employment and revealed a level of confusion about what university study involved.

Other sources of discouragement came from university staff. One participant experienced anxiety about entering the employment market as a mature-age graduate, which arose when one of her lecturers announced

that 'some mature age students just go back to doing what they were doing because they can't get a job'. This made her question the time and effort she had invested, which was in tandem with caring for two children with special needs. She recalled thinking,

> *Well, if I can't get a job, what kind of success am I? I've done all this and put the kids through me trying to meet deadlines and stuff for nothing because I'm going to go back to being a teller. So that as a big thing. I didn't want to go back to being a teller (Bernadette, Australia).*

At the time of the interview Bernadette had in fact defied the (lecturer's) odds and secured a position as a speech pathologist. However, comments like these, especially coming from a lecturer, can cause unnecessary and excessive anxiety. Another participant from the UK was discouraged by the 'middle class environment' of the university, which was 'quite alien' to her. She experienced little understanding from university staff of how her personal circumstances impacted on her studies. She felt 'shunned as a lazy non-attendee' when having to miss lectures due to the need to work to pay rent and bills, although this 'was far from the case' (Survey #X01, UK).

To Have Guts

Intertwined with believing in oneself and withstanding the possible criticism of others, is the theme 'to have guts', which also came through clearly in the narratives. Many of these women were thriving as learners but had significant hurdles to overcome before realising that university study, actually, was not out of reach (O'Shea, 2020; Stone & O'Shea, 2013). For instance, one learner had gone through her entire schooling and into adulthood as illiterate. The process of becoming literate enough to not only gain entry to university, but to also succeed there, was simply a courageous act. The ongoing support of her partner and in-laws, combined with a three-year numeracy and literacy course and a university bridging course, provided the necessary foundations for her to pursue a degree. For this student, initial motivation to go to university was 'to

show people that I can' but she soon realised that this became more 'a way for me to build self-confidence and self-worth'. To achieve this goal required guts, characterised by her 'unwillingness to give up and … not [being] prepared to hear that I can't do something', combined with an inner fortitude derived from 'overcom[ing] so much in my life' (Survey #E02, Australia).

For other participants to have guts was demonstrated through an ability to re-vision earlier 'failure', with the effect of restoring self-belief. Fractured and meandering pathways through study were not uncommon. One mature learner described being 'devastated' after her 'first two failed attempts at university', one as a school leaver and the second when her 'first child was a baby', realising that juggling study as a new parent was simply too difficult (Survey #F23, Australia). However, despite these experiences she decided to 'give university one last try' to 'prove to myself that I am worthy and capable'. Such capacity to keep moving forward imbued with an inner strength underpins persistence behaviour, which Lahti describes as having 'guts'.

The shame of failing a subject twice was felt by another participant, who then had to 'rethink what it was that I was going to do'. At particular moments of frustration she recalled thinking 'No!' to the option of giving up. Her story is a familiar one for mothers, of 'keeping up and then one thing would happen with the kids and then that time I was meant to study, I couldn't [and] I fell behind' (Christina, Australia). In Christina's case, she displayed guts by pushing through seemingly insurmountable challenges, and also in defying the odds of the compounding challenges that came with her own incomplete schooling, low SES circumstances and being a single mother of three young children. Similarly, other women narrated biographies of hardship which required guts to change their trajectory and often that of their family. For example, Eleanor's hardship stemmed from a particularly difficult childhood of abuse, domestic violence and homelessness. From a young age university had been her 'sole focus … the one goal through all the struggles I've been through'. She described how attending university was ultimately a 'lifeline that provides me with direction and something to work towards'. While the struggle with her past is ongoing, she believes that attending

university has fostered 'resilience and fan[s] the flames of my passion for what I believe in and what I want in my life' (Eleanor, Australia).

To have guts to pursue university study sometimes meant having to forego stable work and risk financial instability. For women with family and financial commitments, this was often daunting. One single mother of two teenage children had a secure government job, but 'started the degree just out of passion' and admits that it was 'a massive risk to walk away from that security into something I hadn't done before'. She grew up in low SES circumstances where 'uni was not even a possibility for our family' and admits to 'juggl[ing] a lot of the guilt for a while' because the degree was 'something for me' but also ultimately 'for us as a family' (Molly, Australia). In other cases, to have guts was in stepping up to pursue something that was entirely of personal value. This was epitomised by one participant who began considering study when reflecting on the post-natal depression she suffered after both her births. University provided another avenue for her to contribute in a way that was true to herself, 'this is about me, this really is about me and that's me, that's my selfish, you know … this is about me feeling like I'm important in the world and making a mark and leaving something behind' (Zahlia, Australia). Zahlia articulates clearly the inner strength and fortitude required to enact persistence as an older woman who was deviating from an expected trajectory. Such deviation requires qualities that terms like 'determination' or 'resilience' simply do not capture adequately. By drawing on the framing of sisu we hope to do justice to the actions of these women with the next section providing an overview of implications of this approach.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings both overlap and complement those of previous chapters. However, this chapter is differentiated by the application of the theoretical lens of sisu to focus on persistence, specifically through having an action mindset. We offer sisu as an alternative framing for understanding persistence amongst those learners who may have multiple disadvantaging factors to contend with during their studies. Such alternative, and

we argue, more expansive understanding, is needed if we are truly to understand the capacity of our learners to enact successful student selves. By providing a realist perspective on social justice, our focus remains on the ways that people actually action and achieve justice within different contexts. The deeply intersected nature of this female student cohort also provides greater insight into how persisting at university is negotiated by those who do not always fit neatly into pre-defined categories. Intersectionality is key to understanding how multiple indicators impact on the persistence of university students as Hankivsky (2014) explains,

> [I]nequities are never the result of single, distinct factors. Rather they are the outcome of intersections of different social locations, power relations and experiences (p. 3)

The chapter also outlined that accepted discourses around persistence in university are somewhat deficit in nature and that sisu provides an alternative to understanding what compelled these older, female students to continue in their studies. Examples of the ways in which these women enacted Lahti's action mindset have been presented, and while we have only offered a summary selection of quotes to demonstrate this, it is important to note that across interviews and surveys commonalities of experience were evident. These motivated women, each had life circumstances imbued with difficulties and hardships, which could have become insurmountable barriers to completing their studies, yet each refused to 'give up'.

These women, all in the latter stages of a degree were quite literally, to paraphrase Lahti, leaning into the headwind of university study with a level of fearlessness. That each had 'made it' thus far suggests they had not become paralysed by the effort required of them to negotiate a range of obstacles (Lahti, 2022, p. 45). As the narratives attest, this was not a linear journey into and through university, but one which was both disjointed and complex (O'Shea, 2020, 2021; O'Shea & Stone, 2013). These stories offer a counter-narrative to that of the 'turbo' student who proceeds swiftly through a degree with fortitude of purpose. This chapter presents an alternative perspective to that epitomised by the discourse of

the neoliberal 'gritty' learner or 'the lone individual as economic actor, worker, and consumer' (Saltman, 2016, p. 50).

Instead, through the lens of sisu a more embodied and relational understanding of what persistence requires is presented. In the stories of these women, we see how an action mindset was not the work of an individual but was inherently bound up in the community and family in which each of these women were situated. Many reflected on how their persistence was negotiated around life responsibilities that could not simply be put on hold whilst studying, including a range of family, work and/or community obligations (Stone & O'Shea, 2012). These reflections indicate that sisu can be conceived of as a resource to be tapped into at critical moments, defined by self-belief and having the guts to defy odds in some personally meaningful way. Such understanding provides a necessary framing from which an explanation of persistence behaviours becomes possible for the ubiquitous 'triumph[] against slim odds and overcoming adversity … in the collective narratives of human endurance' (Lahti, 2023, p. 76).

The stories and reflections of these women point to an inner capacity to move through momentary, out-of-the-ordinary challenges, likened to a 'spare tank of fuel' available when needed (Lahti, 2019). Indeed, we argue that it is the hope-inducing nature of action mindset that makes it such a powerful force, rendering it possible to maintain forward-movement, a perspective which enabled these learners to not fixate on the challenge, but rather focus on making it through (Lahti, 2023, p. 79). This is summed up succinctly by Lahti and is also reflective of the ways in which the older females in this study managed to persist in what were often difficult and challenging circumstances:

> *When we perceive that a current challenge is greater than our known resources it's rational to back down—at least from the vantage point of survival. In moments like these, it's easier to be held back by our past experiences than be drawn forward by potential futures. Action mindset refers to orienting ourselves toward the future. It's an active, courageous approach to challenges that seem greater than our reserves, opportunities and capacities.* (Lahti, 2023, p. 77)

This is a fitting concluding chapter to this book as it undoubtedly resonates with earlier chapters and foregrounds the inner strength of not only learners but also the ways in which their community and family networks are integrated with their university studies. Considering how sisu informed and underpinned these women's journey sheds a bright and enduring light on how humans manage to overcome adversity across the educational life cycle.

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Concluding Thoughts

Introduction

It is widely recognised that access to higher education (HE) has become necessary for fuller, healthier and more satisfying participation in post-industrial society, as well as for the attainment and maintenance of national prosperity (UNESCO, 2009, p. 5). As a result of this understanding, universities have been strongly encouraged by governments across the globe to widen participation to sectors of society which traditionally did not participate in HE. At the time of writing, cohorts of students who are the first in their families to access university are enrolling in unprecedented numbers, and in some cases, make up over 50% of university populations (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). While the metaphorical door of the tertiary sector has been opened more widely to these students however, the welcome mat can be difficult to locate. Indeed these students have for too long been regarded as ill-equipped guests to the HE party.

In this book, utilising Australian data as a basis for our theorisations, we have sought to recast the debate around first-in-family (FiF) students who have either directly or indirectly been framed by researchers and HE

institutions within deficit discourses. This deficit argument goes that it is they, the FiF university aspirants, who lack the requisite cultural, academic and other capitals to flourish in HE studies. Therefore, the argument continues, universities must 'support' FiF in their lack by providing remedial skills workshops and counselling services for the stresses that will inevitably afflict them as they seek to overcome *their* social and personal (mal)adjustments to HE. However, since we propose a radically different view of FiF students as *equipped* with inherent strengths, capacities and capabilities for success, we argue that universities are the ones in deficit. In this framework, universities can be insufficiently aware of the tacit cultural assumptions that underpin every aspect of their processes from enrolment to graduation, and are often blind to their students' strengths and those of their families.

In arguing this way, we have sought to let the FiF students speak to their own experiences, telling us what university has been like for them. In this final chapter, our main task is to build on the insights into their educational journeys that these FiF students have generously offered, in order to recommend strategies to universities to better enfranchise FiF students to believe that they are *not* in deficit: that they are smart enough to undertake HE; that they do not have to 'work harder' than more 'traditional' students to achieve the same outcomes; that they are already in possession of multiple motivations, life skills and familial supports to achieve their goals; that they are in fact already equipped to belong.

Drawing on the work of a diverse range of theorists, the argument has been based on three main premises. The first is that FiF students have been mistakenly regarded through the prism of the solo neoliberal subject who accesses university. We argue that such an approach fails to take into account that students are embedded in a range of familial, occupational and community relationship networks which, in an organic way, both profoundly influence and are deeply influenced by their student-member's unprecedented university participation. The second premise is that FiF students come to the university with a range of capitals—including aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant (Yosso, 2005). These capitals equip them to be educational trailblazers and

aspirational agents in their families and communities. Rather than attempt to 'raise their aspirations' in 'outreach' programmes, or provide them with often scant 'support' to address their 'lack' of academic cultural norms, we urge universities to adopt a strengths-based approach in their dealings with all of their students, including FiF. This approach recognises that FiF students come with capacities and capabilities that can be harnessed for success. The third and final premise is that the best experts and guides about ways to enact this approach are the FiF students themselves. Their remarkable stories guide our understanding and inspire our efforts to advocate for their participation in HE.

In Part I of *First-in-Family Students, University Experience and Family*, consisting of the first four chapters, we set out to map the terrain in FiF research. In the first two chapters, we provided an overview of the theoretical frameworks currently formulated in the international literature on HE access and participation (Chap. 1) as well as exploring how FiF have been defined and theorised (Chap. 2). We found that overall there is a lack of clarity in setting the definition of FiF internationally and in response, we argued that such students should be regarded as those who were the first in their *immediate* family to access HE. We also understand that all students, and especially those FiF who volunteered for our research projects, are complex entities, intersected by various demographic and social factors. We then showed how FiF have been collectively framed as 'lacking' largely through a Bourdieuian understanding, with this lack articulated variously by references to deficits in cultural, social, familial, academic and economic capitals. In Chap. 3, a strengths-based approach was mapped and illustrated in vignettes about mature age FiF. We showed how these students and their families were able to draw upon deeply achieved skills around navigating complexity with regard to time, emotional landscapes and responsibilities. Chapter 4 concluded Part I of this book and provided a broad perspective of the range of FiF motivations and transformations that informed this HE journey.

In Part II, consisting of six chapters, we explored the FiF data utilising narrative techniques from a variety of perspectives including age, gender and family background as well as levels and modes of study and qualities

that impacted on persistence. In each of these data chapters, three main conceptual domains in the FiF student experience of HE, namely motivations, transitions and participation, were canvassed. We found that the motivations of FiF students were many and varied, with each FiF student having a personal suite of goals and ambitions reflecting their particular individual and relational experiences as well as intersectional factors around their gender, age, family background and relationship status. These reported motivations ranged from the pragmatic to the altruistic; from the personal to the familial; from the individual to the communitarian. Furthermore FiF students' stories of transitions to the various stages of the HE experience show how previous ways of being in the world at every level were challenged—and changed—by their educational journeys. While transitions could be profoundly de-stabilising for themselves and for their families, younger FiF were especially in danger of not achieving their goals because university systems, processes and demands were not sufficiently well explained or coherent, nor responsive to the varied life circumstances of these students. In terms of their HE participations, one of the main issues for FiF was fitting study in around other parts of their lives. How could one be a 'good' mother or father or daughter or son or employee or friend while trying to radically change one's life and by extension, the lives of one's entire relational network? Equally, the ways in which participation was enacted was considered, particularly the qualities and life experiences that students drew upon to ensure they persisted through their studies. Below we outline the main arguments that have emerged from the data collected for this study and analyse this with reference to the motivations, transitions and participations of FiF students. We should note here, as we did at the start of this book, that there are obvious and major limitations to our study, especially around race and ethnicity as variables in the FiF experience. More work is urgently needed in order to examine such variables in relation to the FiF experience. However, we hope that the strategies we suggest would meld effectively with any strategies specifically aimed at promoting inclusiveness and safety for FiF students whose HE participations are influenced by race and ethnicity.

Enacting a Strengths-Based Approach

Chapter 3 outlined the ways in which a strengths-based approach towards the conceptualisation of FiF students has the potential to open a new window on the equity agenda in HE. Yosso's model (2005) which advocates for the recognition and celebration of the various strengths that students from historically under-represented backgrounds bring to the university environment has the capacity to change the ways in which institutions think about and relate to FiF students. Through conceptualising these students as possessing experiences and knowledges which are valuable to the academy and others within it, they are positioned not as potentially problematic members of the university community, but instead as welcome members who have a significant contribution to make.

Adopting a strengths-based perspective is not new, nor is its applicability confined to the HE sector. With its initial roots in Psychology literature (Clifton & Nelson, 1992), the idea that focusing on individuals' strengths, rather than perceived deficits or weaknesses, leads to improved outcomes has been widely promulgated in management and leadership literature (see for example, Rath & Conchie, 2008) as well as in the helping professions (Brun & Rapp, 1999; Graybeal, 2001) and in criminology studies (Maruna & LeBel, 2003). Yet the 'deficit discourse' (Smit, 2012) has permeated the HE sector in relation to students who are perceived as lacking the requisite capitals required for successful study, such as FiF, despite the fact that they are entering HE in unprecedented numbers and are clearly here to stay. This deficit discourse remains pervasive. A relatively recent study by O'Shea et al. (2016a) which interviewed and surveyed academic staff at a large Australian regional university, finding that 'a framework of deficit thinking appears to inform practice regarding the integration of non-traditional students into mainstream university study' (p. 331). They conclude that 'it is of particular importance … that these students feel valued and welcomed rather than "othered", an effect that occurs if blame and deficit discourses remain unchallenged and invisible' (p. 332). Similarly, McKay and Devlin (2016) argue that 'the deficit conceptualisation makes these students victims of discrimination that can impede their progression and success' (p. 349). Such conclusions resonate strongly with our own findings in our research with FiF students.

Validating and Normalising FiF Motivations

A strengths-based approach recognises that FiF have strong suites of motivations to attend university. The data revealed, for example, how many FiF possessed a long-held dream to attend university and that sometimes this dream was a generational one powerfully existing within families. If they had children, FiF students wanted to be inspirational models for them, opening up their children's lives to the possibilities of HE. FiF students imagined more satisfying employment in careers that were meaningful and enjoyable, with better remuneration. However, these strongly motivated potential students also often feel like impostors who regard university study as a high stakes game where they do not know the rules. They feel at once too bold and very uncertain about the university enterprise. They worry about their fitness and how their families and employers will accommodate their desires to obtain a degree. Many FiF are also being pushed towards degree studies through the creeping credentialism in the labour market where tertiary qualifications are increasingly demanded for many positions. At the same time, FiF recognise that university credentials have the huge capacity to improve their lives and those of their loved ones, Thus, in thinking about going to university, they make provisional 'deals' with themselves and some build exit plans even before they have begun.

Universities need to build on this strong aspirational capital held by FiF. Potential FiF students thus do not need to have their aspirations 'raised', but they do need to have their desires to attend university *validated* and *normalised* as their right. The data has clearly shown how their aspirations are already there, waiting to be harnessed and honed. In response, the outward 'faces' of universities, including all advertising, documentation and websites, can do much more to recognise FiF students directly as a rightful constituency with the unique issues that their engagement might entail. For example, universities could do more work on the demystification of academic studies by shifting into their communities, having shopfronts and other public presences where FiF can interact, ask questions and learn more about what happens inside universities. This interaction needs to occur before they commit themselves and their families and other relationships to the radical growth and change

pathway that degree studies will mean for them. Furthermore, while at present universities are becoming very strong on Work Integrated Learning and on advertising the occupational outcomes that certain (but not all) degrees achieve, they are not so strong on the personal strengths that such degrees might draw upon or build, nor indeed are they explicit about the community benefits such degrees might engender. Many FiF students aim for degrees with *demonstrable* occupational and altruistic outcomes that they know from their own life experience make a difference to the lives of people such as nursing and teaching. As we have shown, some FiF also think that so-called 'elite' degrees may be unachievable for them. This latter understanding needs to be challenged by universities from the start.

Informed Transitions for Everyone

One of the most reported-on features across the FiF data from young and old, female and male, partnered or single, on campus or online, was that entering university was like visiting a foreign land with its own language and behaviours. Encountering the unique cultural and linguistic capitals of academia is potentially the end of the road for some FiF who have to overcome the culture shock and alienation they feel at the start of their HE journeys. Why has this situation been allowed to exist for so long? Universities need to do a great deal more to examine their processes and communication styles for their ease, clarity and readiness to encounter *all* students. A great deal of work has been achieved on First Year Student Experience in this regard in the last decade or so, but the spectre of the traditional student straight from school bedevils faster progress. A start would be to make sure that enrolment procedures, almost all now conducted online, are rational, easy and clear to navigate for everyone and available at times that can be utilised by those in employment and/or have partners, caring responsibilities and other aspects of full lives. Another useful approach would be to provide opt-in academic success courses and workshops at the start of each session online and on-campus that unpack the often opaque languages and historically driven nomenclatures of university life.

This research, however, did not just report on the students themselves but also on their relational networks. The data from the FiF students demonstrated how deeply they are embedded in these networks: how much strength and practical, moral and emotional support, that they usually afforded. Our findings also strongly indicate that university participation not only impacted on students in an embodied emotional and potentially transformative sense but also on those closest to them. Very rarely, however, do universities engage in any thoroughgoing way with these broader and vitally supportive constituencies.

Participations: An Inclusivity Paradigm

As discussed in Chap. 2, access to university has been more comfortably negotiated by society's privileged. The following section makes specific recommendations, based on findings from the data, for ways in which HE institutions can work towards inclusivity for all students, including the now considerable number who are first in their families to enter university. This process needs to begin by recognising and explicitly valuing the particular knowledges, experiences and responsibilities with which FiF students arrive at university; at the same time, acknowledging these 'capitals' as strengths. In so doing, institutions can minimise the experiential riskiness that our data showed was experienced by the FiF cohort, thereby enabling and encouraging them to further develop their strengths, to successfully manage their responsibilities within the context of studying, to acquire new knowledges and to achieve their desired outcomes in an inclusive environment that is intellectually challenging, yet supportive.

Academic Inclusivity

Our findings call for an 'academic inclusivity' paradigm for all students, including FiF, where courses of study are inclusively framed, clearly conceptualised and administered according to respectful and culturally appropriate policies, procedures and practices. One of the consistent messages from the FiF students who participated in our research, was that

the language used to explain the most basic functions at the university seemed initially impenetrable. How many uncertain students have been dismayed by, or even discouraged from, attending a 'tutorial' because they did not know what that meant? Academic inclusivity therefore includes *linguistic inclusivity*, that is, the careful unpacking of academic languages and codes so that all who engage with academic matters are enfranchised at the fundamental level of language. Academic inclusivity would be further enhanced by the provision of dedicated officers of the university who are approachable and knowledgeable to talk with students about their university experience in general and their degree studies in particular. Departmental organisations inside universities could benefit from having dedicated Communications Officers and groups of Senior Student Mentors in degrees.

Academic inclusivity also develops when teaching and administrative staff understand the diverse nature of today's student cohort, without viewing this as problematic. For example, in thinking about the many FiF students who have parenting responsibilities, it needs to be recognised and acknowledged, without censure, that students who are parents of dependent children are juggling multiple tasks. Many mothers in particular may, at best, be receiving little practical help at home or, at worst, facing active resistance For many women, 'complex multi-tasking was required' as 'once at university their 'student' identity took second or third place to the more pressing identities of parent, carer, and paid employee' (Stone & O'Shea, 2022, p. 86). Academic inclusivity would mean that such students can approach teaching and administrative staff to discuss issues about their studies without fear of disapproval or criticism; also that a proactive approach is used to reach out to those students who will not necessarily put their hand up for help if they are struggling, but run the risk of quietly drowning. There were indications from this study that FiF parent-students are only likely to use institutional support services if they know about them and can easily access them. Similarly, online students appreciated and benefited from services that reached out to them, rather than waiting for them to make the approach. This is important information for institutions, which need to ensure that such services are targeted, promoted, appropriate and easily available to the many students who may lack the time, the confidence and the sense of

entitlement to ask for support. The phenomenon of 'gratitude' for being 'allowed' to be at university amongst many FiF students, as discussed in previous chapters, can inhibit help-seeking behavior. Academic inclusivity would also entail a broader understanding of 'success' at university, beyond good grades and academic prize winning. All students, including FiF, need to be encouraged to recognise their persistence, their discovery and enjoyment of learning, as well as their academic achievements, as success.

Financial Inclusivity

Our research findings indicate that FiF students are seeking 'betterment' in their lives, including financial betterment when they make the decision to undertake university study. Considerable evidence indicates that HE qualifications lead to a significantly improved financial situation over a person's lifetime (Cassells et al., 2012). Indeed, the FiF students interviewed and surveyed for this research viewed 'university attendance as being a route out of poverty and a guaranteed entry to a better, more secure life' (O'Shea et al., 2016, p. 2). There were many stories within this cohort of FiF students which reflected the added complications in undertaking university study that arise when the student is also from a background where financial resources are quite limited and may not be sufficient to allow them to study without also doing considerable hours of paid work. While Australian Government loans' schemes ensure that no student who is an Australian citizen needs to pay their tuition fees 'up front', there are other significant costs associated with study such as travel, textbooks, child care and, above all, loss of income when paid work hours are sacrificed to allow time to attend lectures. Even for online students, many of whom are making the choice to study online so that they can continue with paid work, the double burden of working to support themselves and their families, as well as finding time to study, takes a significant toll. There is also evidence to suggest that, for students from families where money is scarce, there is more likely to be an aversion to taking on student debt (O'Shea et al., 2016b; Raciti, 2018) thus influencing both the student and their family in relation to decisions about study.

These findings have implications not only for institutions, but also for governments, in terms of how university study is funded, and how clearly the funding arrangements are explained to prospective students. If students and their families are provided with a clear and accurate understanding of the real costs of university, the ways in which Government student loans operate, including how and when they need to be repaid, as well as any other sources of financial assistance, both Government and Institutional, they are in a better position to make realistic decisions and allay any doubts about whether they can afford to study. Governments also need to consider ways in which HE policies, including policies about fees, repayments and other financial support for students, can more fairly and equitably address the needs of those students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Familial Inclusivity

Families, workplaces and communities of FiF students emerged from this research as being vital resources that, in many cases, contributed to the students' commitment to and persistence in their studies. Each student comes to university from a context in which significant others are part of their lives. The difference for FiF students is that their immediate families are not at all familiar with the university environment and therefore not likely to be able to offer much in the way of practical advice and support in relation to university processes, procedures and expectations. Nevertheless, we found in the stories of the FiF students we interviewed and surveyed much evidence that these students still liked to turn to their families for support in a myriad of other ways. However, conversations in the home about university were inevitably limited by the lack of family understanding about what it entailed; it was clear that support to FiF students from their families would be considerably enhanced if there were more opportunities for families to find out about, understand and feel more involved in what went on at university.

As discussed in Chap. 7, it is equally important that a strengths-based view of families and communities of FiF students is applied, rather than regarding these families as also being in deficit. Families emerged in our

research overwhelmingly as sources of inspiration, encouragement, pride and affirmation and, as such, need to be recognised by institutions as part of the important capital that FiF students bring with them to university. A number of the students had friends and work colleagues who were more familiar with university and who were important sources of support and advice. Chapters 8 and 9 provide many examples of FiF students who were strongly supported by partners, parents, children, friends and colleagues and managers at work. However, too often the FiF student is regarded in isolation by HE institutions, without recognition of the potential for support and encouragement that these significant others represent. Those involved in educating and supporting this cohort at HE institutions can therefore make a positive difference to the FiF student's sense of "Familial Inclusivity" by: acknowledging that family members, friends and colleagues, play a crucial role in providing these students with inspiration, encouragement and ongoing support; and by seeking and developing strategies to better inform, educate and involve families and communities in the learning journeys of these students, to ensure their role is sufficiently utilised and valued. For example, targeted open days and nights for student families could be implemented with picnics and games for children as well as a range of workshops and online resources to assist family to understand the likely implications for all concerned by their loved one undertaking university studies.

Familial inclusivity should also include greater efforts by universities to offer flexible childcare options for FiF parents who are undertaking degrees. Capacity for long-term child care on campus should be increased in recognition of the growing cohorts of students who are parents or primary carers of young children. These people often have to rely on retired parents or friends and neighbours for child care to engage in HE. Universities that adopt a familial inclusivity paradigm would also provide greater short-term and emergency child care to alleviate the practical difficulties of finding such child care at critical points in these students' studies when other arrangement fail. Such provision would enhance the sense of family being included and may stave off such FiF students leaving their courses because in the end their responsibility towards their families is more important than continuing in their studies. Similarly,

exposing young children to the university campus can further embed this environment within the household as the norm rather than an exception.

Finally, Chapter 10 thoughtfully considered what assisted students to persist at university, drawing attention to the qualities that older female learners themselves considered to be key to their completion. Drawing on the innovative framing of 'sisu' the chapter considers how older women reflected on their persistence and success at university. Focusing on those students at the end of their degree, provided a retrospective view of how persistence is actually enacted and the chapter challenges dominant thinking about this behaviour.

Final Thoughts: Minimising Risk by Generating the Inclusive University Framework

In Chap. 1, we outlined the main risks FiF students encounter in their engagement with HE. These were identity risks, relational risks and financial risks. The strengths-based approach recommended here, premised on the construction of an 'inclusive university framework', consisting of measures across all university platforms and operations to address and ameliorate these risks. This framework would first and foremost recognise and celebrate the various 'capitals' that FiF bring with them to their studies. It would include the widespread implementation of the principles and practices that minimise feelings of cultural alienation, shame, fraudulence and identity crisis reported by FiF and other 'non-traditional' students. The application of an inclusive academic approach would entail the reflexive demystification of the languages and unique practices of university life and academic work. Universities and governments also need to do more to offset the often crippling financial burdens for people seeking to gain university qualifications on meagre financial resources. Finally, the inclusion of families would follow from the active recognition by universities that FiF students *have* families oftentimes as both responsibilities and as supportive resources. In this process, all students would benefit as universities move from being 'foreign' lands to being inclusive, welcoming and integral parts of the communities which they serve.

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