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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

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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 introducing 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 deviates 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 educational choice (cited in Debenham & May, 2005, p. 99).

This situation is perhaps most keenly felt by older female student parents; 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* INTERVIEWSStudents studying online undergraduate subjects, from first year to final year (**one not transcribed due to bad recording quality*)	Age range: 21 to 62Median age: 38.8Over 25s: 36 studentsGender 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)	44b
Female	31 (plus 2)	5	35
Male	20	2 (plus 2)	9
Undergraduates	46	7	44
Postgraduates	5	0	0
Family status	32 single 15 partnered 1 divorced/ separated 3 did not disclose	4 partnered 1 divorced 3 did not disclose	13 single 24 partnered 2 divorced/ separated 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?

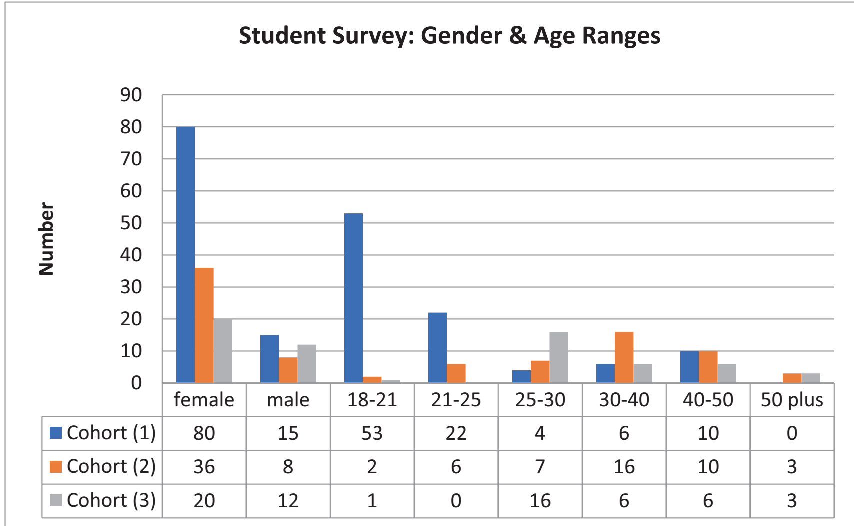
The family survey was similarly constructed but asked questions such as:

- 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



	female	male	18-21	21-25	25-30	30-40	40-50	50 plus
Cohort (1)	80	15	53	22	4	6	10	0
Cohort (2)	36	8	2	6	7	16	10	3
Cohort (3)	20	12	1	0	16	6	6	3

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

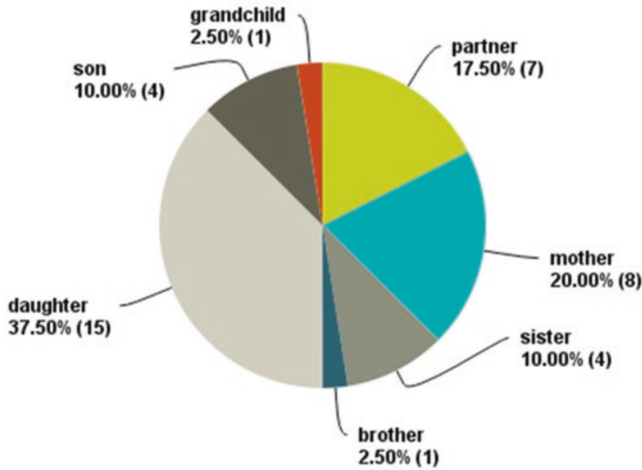


Fig. 1.2 Family relationships between learners and survey respondents

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%)

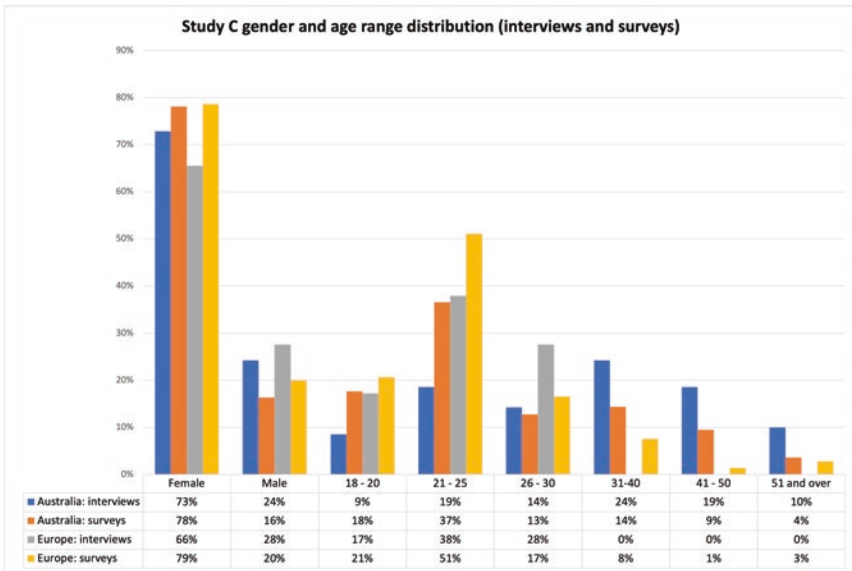


Fig. 1.3 Study C distribution of gender and age ranges across all data

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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