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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

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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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