



# 6

## The Online Student Experience: New Challenges for Engagement and Support

### Introduction

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

---

*The authors would like to acknowledge that this chapter is based on an article previously published as:* Stone, C., O'Shea, S., May, J., Delahunty, J., & Partington, Z. (2016). Opportunity through online learning: Experiences of first-in-family students in online open-entry higher education. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 56(2), 146–169.

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

## Review of the Literature

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Who Were the Students?

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

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

## Findings

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

## Demographics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Why Choose Online Studies?

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

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

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

## Opportunity to Transition into University

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

and in relation to *opportunity* presenting itself now:

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

*...the opportunity has come up.* (Wendy, 38, partnered, three children, Legal Studies)

(Authors' emphases added in quotes above).

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

## The Role of Others

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

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

## Others as Inspirers

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

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

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

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

## Others as Critics, Encouragers and Motivators

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## A Transformative Experience

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Catalysts for Online Learning

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusion

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

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

## References

- Attree, K. (2021). On-campus students moving online during COVID-19 university closures: Barriers and enablers. A practice report. *Student Success*. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.1780>
- Australian Government Department of Education. (2017). *Improving retention, completion and success in higher education*. Canberra: Australian Government. <https://docs.education.gov.au/node/44121>
- Australian Government Department of Education. (2022). *Completion rates of higher education students—Cohort analysis, 2005–2020*. <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/resources/completion-rates-higher-education-students-cohort-analysis-20052020>
- Barsegyan, V., & Maas, I. (2022). *First-generation students' educational outcomes: A 9-years panel study on the role of parental educational, cultural, and economic capital*. Utrecht University. <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/wt65s/>

- Britton, C., & Baxter, A. (1999). Becoming a mature student: Gendered narratives of the self. *Gender and Education*, 11(2), 179–193.
- Capannola, A., & Johnson, E. (2022). On being the first: The role of family in the experiences of first-generation college students. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 37(1), 29–58.
- Cullity, M. (2006). Challenges in understanding and assisting mature-age students who participate in alternative entry programs. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 46(2), 175–201.
- Devlin, M., Kift, S., Nelson, K., Smith, L., & McKay, J. (2012). Effective teaching and support of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: Resources for Australian higher education. Final Report. *Australian Office for Learning and Teaching*. <http://www.lowses.edu.au/assets/ALTC%20LSES%20Final%20Report%202012.pdf>
- Groves, O., & O’Shea, S. (2019). Learning to ‘be’ a university student: First in family students negotiating membership of the university community. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 98, 48–54.
- Hewson, E. R. F. (2018). Students’ emotional engagement, motivation and behaviour over the life of an online course: Reflections on two market research case studies. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 1(10), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.5334/jime.472>
- Ilgaz, H., & Gülbahar, Y. (2015). A snapshot of online learners: E-readiness, e-satisfaction and expectations. *International Review in Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 16(2), 171–187.
- James, R., Krause, K.-L., & Jennings, C. (2010). The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from 1994 to 2009. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education.
- James, T., Toth, G., Tomlins, M., Kumar, B., & Bond, K. (2021). Digital disruption in the COVID-19 era: The impact on learning and students’ ability to cope with study in an unknown world. *Student Success*. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.1784>
- Karmel, T., & Woods, D. (2006). Older learners and engagement with the labour market. In J. Chapman, P. Cartwright, & J. E. McGilp (Eds.), *Lifelong learning for all: The challenge to adults and communities*. Springer.
- Knightley, W. M. (2007). Adult learners online: Students’ experiences of online learning. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 47(2), 264–288.
- Lambrinidis, G. (2014). Supporting online, non-traditional students through the introduction of effective e-learning tools in a pre-university tertiary enabling programme. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 36(3), 257–267.

- Marginson, S. (2015). The landscape of higher education research 1965–2015: Equality of opportunity: The first fifty years. SRHE 50th Anniversary Colloquium, Valuing Research into Higher Education. [https://srhe.ac.uk/downloads/public/event-presentations/182\\_SimonMarginsonKeynote.pdf](https://srhe.ac.uk/downloads/public/event-presentations/182_SimonMarginsonKeynote.pdf)
- Marković, M., Pavlović, D., & Mamutović, A. (2021). Students' experiences and acceptance of emergency online learning due to COVID-19. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 37(5), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.7138>
- Martin, L. (2020). *Foundations for good practice: The student experience of online learning in Australian higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic*. TEQSA, Australian Government. <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/foundations-good-practice-student-experience-online-learning-australian>
- McGivney, V. (2006). Attracting new groups into learning: Lessons from research in England. In J. Chapman, P. Cartwright, & J. E. McGilp (Eds.), *Lifelong learning, participation and equity* (pp. 79–91). Springer.
- Michael, K. (2012). Virtual classroom: Reflections of online learning. *Campus-Wide Information Systems*, 29(3), 156–165.
- Moore, C., & Greenland, S. (2017). Employment-driven online student attrition and the assessment policy divide: An Australian open-access higher education perspective. *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning*, 21(1), 52–62. <http://www.jofdl.nz/index.php/JOFDL/article/view/286/217>
- Muir, T., Milthorpe, N., Stone, C., Dymont, J., Freeman, E., & Hopwood, B. (2019). Chronicling engagement: Students' experience of online learning over time. *Distance Education*, 40(2), 262–277.
- Nuffield Foundation. (2020). First in family students are more likely to drop out of university. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/first-in-family-university-students-need-more-guidance-navigating-education-system>
- O'Shea, S., & Delahunty, J. (2018). Getting through the day and still having a smile on my face! How do students define success in the university learning environment? *Higher Education Research and Development*, 37(5), 1062–1075.
- OECD. (2012). Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators 2012 Australia. <http://www.oecd.org/australia/EAG2012%20-%20Country%20note%20-%20Australia.pdf>
- Park, J., & Choi, H. (2009). Factors influencing adult learners' decision to drop out or persist in online learning. *Educational Technology and Society*, 12(4), 207–217.
- Patfield, S., Gore, J., & Fray, L. (2021). Reframing first-generation entry: How the familial habitus shapes aspirations for higher education among prospec-

- tive first-generation students. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 40(3), 599–612. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2020.1773766>
- Quinn, J. (2005). Belonging in a learning community: The re-imagined university and imagined social capital. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 37(1), 4–17.
- Ragusa, A. T., & Crampton, A. (2018). Sense of connection, identity and academic success in distance education: Sociologically exploring online learning environments. *Rural Society*, 27(2), 125–142. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10371656.2018.1472914>
- Reay, D., Ball, S., & David, M. (2002). “It’s taking me a long time but I’ll get there in the end”: Mature students on access courses and higher education choice. *British Educational Research Journal*, 28(1), 5–19.
- Shah, M., Goode, E., West, S., & Clark, H. (2014). Widening student participation in higher education through online enabling education. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 16(3), 36–57.
- Stone, C. (2019). Online learning in Australian higher education: Opportunities, challenges and transformations. *Student Success*, 10(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ssj.v10i2.1299>
- Stone, C. (2021). Improving student engagement, retention and success in online learning. In M. Shah, S. Kift, & L. Thomas (Eds.), *Student retention and success in higher education* (pp. 167–189). Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Stone, C. (2023). From the margins to the mainstream: The online learning rethink and its implications for enhancing student equity. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 38(6), 139–149. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.8136>
- Stone, C., Downing, J., & Dymont, J. (2021). Improving student retention and success within the context of complex lives and diverse circumstances. In Fawns, T., Aitken, G., & Jones, D. (Eds.), *Beyond Technology: Online Postgraduate Education in a Postdigital World*. Springer, UK. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-77673-2>
- Stone, C., Freeman, E., Dymont, J., Muir, T., & Milthorpe, N. (2019). Equal or equitable? The role of flexibility within online education. *Australian and International Journal of Rural Education*, 29(2), 78–92. <https://journal.spera.asn.au/index.php/AIJRE/article/view/221>
- Stone, C., & O’Shea, S. (2012). *Transformations and self-discovery: Stories of women returning to education*. Common Ground Publishing LLC.
- Stone, C., & O’Shea, S. (2013). Time, money, leisure and guilt—The gendered challenges of higher education for mature-age students. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 53(1), 95–116.

- Stone, C., & O'Shea, S. (2019). 'My children... think it's cool that Mum is a uni student': Women with caring responsibilities studying online. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 35(6), 97–110.
- Stone, C & O'Shea, S. (2021). Women with caring responsibilities – is there a genuine place for them at university? In Nicola Simmons, & Julie Szpara, (Eds.), *Adults in the Academy* (pp. 83–91). Brill Publishing, Netherlands.
- Stone, C., O'Shea, S., May, J., Delahunty, J., & Partington, Z. (2016). Opportunity through online learning: Experiences of first-in-family students in online open-entry higher education. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 56(2), 146–169.
- Tett, L. (2000). "I'm working class and proud of it": Gendered experiences of non-traditional participants in higher education. *Gender and Education*, 12(2), 183–194.
- Tinto, V. (2009). Taking student retention seriously: Rethinking the first year of university. Presented at the *FYE curriculum design symposium 2009*, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.
- Wolf-Wendel, L., & Ward, K. (2006). Academic life and motherhood: Variations by institutional type. *Higher Education*, 52, 487–521.
- Yoo, S. J., & Huang, D. (2013). Engaging online adult learners in higher education: Motivational factors impacted by gender, age and prior experiences. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 61, 151–164.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

