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The Experience of Being First in Family at University

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Preface

This book arose as a result of previous research related to the experiences of successful First in Family (FiF) students. Our previous work included two projects funded by the Australian Government. The first surveyed students across the three major institutions in the same state (South Australia) to investigate their expectations and experiences of university study (Brinkworth et al. 2013). Through this research we developed an interest in further exploring the experiences of FiF students because we could see a unique element in their responses.

We wanted to ask FiF students a number of questions. What brought them to university? What kept them there? What were their hopes and aspirations? How did they find the first few weeks? Did they see their experience as being different because they were the first in their family to attend university? What did they see as their role in relation to their family, friends and broader community? What did they understand university to be about? Were they changed by the experience? The second project allowed us to delve more deeply into the lived experience of FiF students and find answers to these questions (King et al. 2014).

This book provides a timely response to current debates about the purposes of higher education in the twenty first century and demonstrates the value of providing opportunities where none had previously existed and allowing students who are labelled as 'disadvantaged' to excel and flourish. The book builds upon and extends the notion of the FiF student as 'higher education pioneer' (McInnis et al. 1995). However, we also reveal the pioneering spirit inherent in FiF students who, as you will see, both transform others and are themselves transformed as a result of their engagement with higher education.

In this book you will meet a range of students with various stories to tell. They have arrived at university from different backgrounds and via different pathways. Some are older and some are younger, some have worked and some have arrived directly from school, some are from the country and some are from the city. All are the first member of their immediate family to attend university and all tell rich, emotionally engaging, life affirming tales. We wish to thank the students who

responded to the survey and more specifically thank the eighteen participants who agreed to share their insights with us. We dedicate this book to them, their families and those who will come next.

Adelaide, Australia

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Ann Luzeckyj
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Contents

Abbreviations and Acronyms Used

ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
ATAR	Australian Tertiary Admission Rank
FiF	First in Family
GPA	Grade Point Average
HECS	Higher Education Contribution Scheme
HELP	Higher Education Loan Program
IR	International Relations
Low SES	Low Socioeconomic Status
NCSEHE	National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PEMC	Physical, Engineering, Mathematical and Computer (sciences)
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TAFE	Technical and Further Education

Chapter 1
The Importance of Considering First in Family Students

Ann Luzeckyj, Sharron King and Ben McCann

1.1 Introduction

The experience of first in family (FiF) students has been of particular interest and relevance to the higher education community for many years. In 1995, McInnis, James and McNaught referred to these students as 'higher education pioneers' (p. 62). FiF students are a diverse cohort, often with little in common except not having a family member who has attended university before them, who might be available to offer support and advice.

The discussion regarding FiF students needs to be framed alongside issues around major changes in participation rates. In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments proposed that by 2020, 40% of Australians aged 25–34 years and 20% of low socioeconomic status students will have achieved a bachelor qualification as a minimum (Bradley et al. 2008). This is not unique to Australia. It aligns with targets set more recently in the USA where it was suggested that 'roughly 60% of Americans will have to earn college degrees and certificates by 2020 to regain [their] international lead' (Duncan 2010). It also coincides with an international focus on expansion known broadly as the 'widening participation agenda' that has been taking place for over two decades. In the UK, this agenda has undergone many changes including a requirement for universities to support students deemed to fit the 'widening participation' category (Hoare and Johnston 2011). While the Australian target supported increased enrolments and changes to student profiles, policy changes since 2008 have resulted in reduced funding to institutions while pressure on institutions has increased, including the imperative for them to ensure students complete their qualifications in a timely manner.

Apprehension concerning retention and completion by senior university staff and government is not new. Concerns regarding retention have been discussed in the

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UK, the USA and Australia for many years, and since well before recent widening participation targets were recommended (Box et al. 2012; De Rome and Lewin 1984; Johnes and McNabb 2004). A number of researchers have indicated that a major difficulty for FiF students is the need to adapt to a new environment as they transition to university (McInnis 2001; Kift 2015; McCarthy and Kuh 2006). Researchers note that effective transition and persistence at university require an ability to adapt to new and often subtly different academic requirements which can have significant ramifications, as well as to teaching and learning arrangements that are unique to specific disciplinary contexts or institutions.

Studies in the USA report rates as high as 43% of the FiF cohort (across all postsecondary education) leaving before graduating (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013), with one study indicating these students are less academically prepared and lacking in confidence in their abilities (Atherton 2014). In the UK, reports identify a strong correlation between parental educational levels and university participation: students whose parents have attended university are more likely to engage in university study than those whose parents have not (Gorard et al. 2006; Hillman 2017). The Hillman study suggests higher education can appear relatively unproblematic to those from advantaged backgrounds, while seeming 'obstacle strewn, long and tortuous—or even entirely blocked—to those with less comfortable backgrounds' (2017, p. 13).

In Australia, statistics held on FiF students is collected in relation to parental education; however, this is not reported as a part of a priority group and sibling or other family member statistics are not recorded. However, one study estimates that over 50% of the student population are the first members of their family to attend university (Spiegler and Bednarek 2013). A significant proportion of these students leave before completing their degrees. In 2011, 26% of Australian students reported they considered leaving university during the first year of studies, a figure that increased to 34% for later years (Coates and Ranson 2011). Focusing on attrition, however, does not provide a solution, nor does it help students. An Australian Government discussion paper on improving university students' outcomes emphasises O'Shea's position that 'first in family status does not have an implicit negative value and could be regarded as a form of celebration with targeted support and outreach framed in a positive sense' (Higher Education Standards Panel 2017, p. 44). The report suggests that recording data (at a national level) regarding the FiF status of students may be warranted.

FiF students do not enjoy the benefits gained from having family members who possess an understanding of university processes, academic practices and a general awareness of the university environment (Bowl 2001; O'Shea and Stone 2014). Many students have indicated a need to supplement their studies with additional and often invisible 'work', such as feeling a need to defend their decision to attend university and/or reassure friends, partners, parents and children by demonstrating that by studying at university they are 'investing wisely' (O'Shea 2015c). The 'invisible work' also involves accessing information about the way in which universities function that may be difficult to find, and higher education institutions do not compensate for this lack of information, leaving FiF students to navigate educational pathways on their own (Bowl 2001). FiF students struggle to feel they belong at university and

more readily self-identify as 'just surviving' (rather than 'thriving' or 'coping okay') when compared with their peers (King et al. 2013). FiF students are also more likely to struggle academically (King et al. 2014).

It is evident that FiF students find university difficult. Adapting to a new environment is harder for FiF students. They are clearly more vulnerable to attrition and disengagement from university as they lack family members who can act as guides and supports as they try to determine what is required of them. However, when given opportunities to participate and the appropriate support to succeed, these students are highly capable (Devlin et al. 2012). In addition, FiF students often act as an 'enabler' for other family members by demonstrating that higher education is a viable option for them (O'Shea 2015c), a phenomenon which one UK researcher has described as having a 'slip-stream' effect, as younger siblings follow in the footsteps of the older ones (Wainwright and Watts 2019). These examples emphasise the role FiF students play as 'pioneers'.

1.1.1 Nomenclature and Equity Status

In Australia, this under-represented cohort of students is usually referred to as 'first in family' or FiF while in the USA they are known as 'first generation'. Although these terms are often used interchangeably they can highlight an important difference. In the USA, 'first generation' refers to students whose parents have not graduated from college with a bachelor's degree, so these students may have siblings who have participated in higher education and can thus provide support and advice on how to navigate complex institutional systems and new ways of learning (Collier and Morgan 2008). The term 'FiF' can similarly refer to students whose parents have never attended university, or it may mean the first person in their immediate family, including both parents (and other primary caregivers) and siblings, to participate in higher education (Luzeckyj et al. 2011). This definitional distinction is important as 'FiF' students are more likely to be left to themselves to make sense of their new environments, while 'first-generation' students may have support from siblings. Both ways of defining FiF students are used in Australia and the UK. For the purposes of this book, the definition of FiF students is: 'students who are the first member of their immediate family, including siblings, to attend university' (Crozier et al. 2008; Luzeckyj et al. 2011). This differs slightly from O'Shea et al.'s (2017) definition where students are considered FiF if they are 'the first out of their immediate family, comprising siblings, parents, main caregivers, life partners and children, to attend university'. We have not included children or life partners as part of our definition as these were not part of the description provided to participants of our original survey (Brinkworth et al. 2013). Students who are not 'first in family' or 'first generation' are discussed as 'intergenerational' students.

The UK higher education system encompasses 'non-traditional' students within a widening participation policy agenda that includes a specific focus on students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Official data is collected on a range of

factors relating to economic status including parental higher education qualifications (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2017), and specific grants to support tuition fees are available to students who are the first member of their family, including siblings, to attend university (Kennard 2018).

In the USA, government policy specifically identifies 'first-generation' university students, recognising them as educationally disadvantaged. Data is collected on this group who are provided with various financial support mechanisms. Community colleges, offering two-year associate degrees, as well as more traditional four-year university degrees, are available in the USA, with many disadvantaged students using the community college as a pathway to university (Irlbeck et al. 2014). Students' experiences at both community college and university are similar, suggesting that gaining insight into both groups is valuable. We therefore use university and higher education to include community college cohorts when discussing the US literature (Aspelmeier et al. 2012).

FiF students are not specifically included within Australian higher education equity policies, and data on them is not currently required by the Australian Government. Australian policies focus on six main equity groups comprising students who: are from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, are Indigenous, are living in regional areas, have disabilities, are from non-English speaking backgrounds, or are women in non-traditional study areas (Department of Education and Training 2018). Many of these groups, however, do include FiF students.

1.1.2 Background to this Book

This collaborative book explores the experiences of successful FiF students across a range of disciplines and institutions. We define success in terms of completing or continuing in an undergraduate qualification beyond first year. It is based on data identified while the authors were engaged in two separate research projects funded by the Australian Government. Material from these projects has allowed the assimilation of both qualitative and quantitative data to develop an understanding of the experience of FiF university students.

Both projects were undertaken in South Australia where the three main universities are both uniquely based in the city of Adelaide (the state's capital) and belong to one of the country's main coalition of institutions. These are the University of Adelaide which is a Group of Eight (Go8) and is the oldest institution (founded in 1870s) and considered by many as the most prestigious university in SA; Flinders University which was the state's second established university which occurred in the 1960s as part of the expansion of tertiary education recommended in the Martin report (Martin 1964) and is one of the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) and the University of South Australia (UniSA) which was established as a university most recently (1990s) and as a result of the Dawkins reforms (Dawkins 1988). UniSA is part of the Australian Technology Network (ATN). While all three institutions service the entire state and have campuses in various locations (both in SA and in other states)

UniSA has a focus on supporting the northern suburbs with high numbers of low-SES families while Flinders University is based slightly closer to the southern region where a similar demographic is found. What is pertinent to note is that within the Australian higher education context, students do not traditionally move to another location to study at university as they do in some other countries. However, students who live in regional and remote areas of Australia may have to move across the country, often relocating thousands of kilometres to attend.

The first project (Brinkworth et al. 2013) involved using surveys to gain insight into the expectations and experiences of students in their first year of study at university across three public South Australian universities. This research took place between 2010 and 2012 when students from the participating universities were invited to respond to surveys designed to determine differences between what they expected and what they actually experienced as first-year university undergraduate students. The analysis and further details of the 16,800 survey responses are included in the next chapter.

This survey research provided extensive data on FiF students' expectations and experiences of university study. Significant experiential differences between students who were the first member in their family to attend university and those with family members who had attended before them were revealed. The FiF students identified as being less familiar with academic practices and having greater uncertainty about what was expected of them by academic staff, in comparison with intergenerational students.

However, we knew little of their lived, day-to-day encounters while participating in university studies and were not aware of their motivations, aspirations, encouragements and benefits, nor of the constraints, incurred costs or compromises these students associated with attending university. We were interested in determining the factors that most significantly impacted on these FiF students during the course of their studies, and discovering their post-graduation aspirations. We were interested in determining whether their self-identity, their extended relationships with family and friends or other aspects of their lives were affected as a result of participating in university study. Finally, we could only speculate on how attending university influenced the lives of these FiF students.

Our desire to know more about the experiences of FiF students prompted the second study (King et al. 2014). This study included three elements. First, an annotated bibliography of 155 Australian and international publications on FiF students' experiences in higher education was developed. We then more closely analysed the survey data from over 5,300 FiF students who had participated in our first study and revisited their expectations and experiences of university study. Finally, we conducted in-depth interviews with 18 FiF students who had completed the surveys from the initial study and had successfully navigated at least three years of university. Further discussion regarding our approach and analysis is also included in Chap. 2.

1.1.3 The Themes We Identified

Four main themes, each with a number of subthemes, were identified as the annotated bibliography was developed (King et al. 2014). The main themes are: individual, student, journey and networks. Each includes a number of subthemes supported by attributes that characterise them as unique within the theme. Determining this classification supported our thinking and consideration of the literature linked to each theme. A more lengthy discussion regarding the themes and their subthemes and attributes is included in Chap. 2; for the purposes of this introduction, a brief overview of each theme follows.

1.1.3.1 The Individual

The 'Individual' reflects personal and singular differences within the FiF student cohort. Each person strives to attend university for their own unique set of reasons and all encounter a variety of experiences as they complete their qualifications. The literature we initially captured within this theme includes discussions around these differences. The key subthemes incorporate the students' individual characteristics such as: determination, motivation and work ethic; their skills and abilities; familial influences and embodied characteristics such as social and cultural capital; and how students understand themselves.

1.1.3.2 The Student

We saw the second theme 'Student' as linked to a person's decision to return to study (either directly from school or after time) which we identify as a significant life changing event for FiF students. The subthemes here—'becoming student', 'enculturation' and 'consolidating identity'—acknowledge that the life changes do not stop once the enrolment process is finalised. What follows is a process of adjustment and tension as the FiF student takes on the 'learner identity' and attempts to master the role of student. The review of literature highlights that, due to them often having commitments unrelated to study, FiF students are less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and campus life, and that the omission of these activities may contribute to a sense of isolation and early attrition.

1.1.3.3 The Journey

The 'Journey' is the third theme, closely linked to the second theme, and each student journey is as different as the students are themselves. The subthemes include: motivation; chasing 'what' and 'where'; and enablers/barriers. For a significant number of FiF students, the necessity to work while at university to help address the costs

related to study is significantly greater than for many intergenerational students. Balancing work and study can, for many, lead to increased stress, poor health and diminished satisfaction with the university experience.

1.1.3.4 The Networks

The final theme, 'Networks', draws attention to the importance of developing strong support networks while studying. These networks are significant in a number of ways. They are useful in helping FiF students determine that tertiary study is a viable option and they are imperative in supporting students to succeed in acquiring their degree qualification. The two subthemes 'who' and 'how' are associated with networks as it is not only *who* provides support but *how* it is given that is important. The support networks used by FiF students exist both externally to and within the university.

1.1.4 Outline of the Chapters

The identification and development of the themes provided the framework to explore further the lives of FiF students. The culmination of all our earlier work also allowed us to identify specific areas of interest to focus on for the writing of this publication. Although we individually authored each chapter, based on our own areas of interest, we collaborated to bring them together and provide a holistic picture (the current chapter was led by Ann and we have indicated who took the lead on each of the others, below). The chapters in this book discuss the following areas: students' motivations and ambitions; how transition to university is managed; costs, constraints and balancing study, including financial and social costs; health and wellbeing, including social and emotional wellbeing; students' experience of the first few weeks of university, as conceptions of identity and other factors shape experience; and the purposes of higher education, as viewed by FiF students.

In Chap. 2 (led by Ann and Sharron), we discuss our research methods and approach. In this chapter, we ensure FiF students are considered from a range of standpoints, focusing on their capabilities, strengths and successes at university (Whitty et al. 2015; O'Shea 2015b, 2016a; O'Shea et al. 2017; Trowler 2015).

In Chap. 3 (led by Ben), we look more closely at three main motivational factors behind the participants' decision to attend university: desire for a better life, an interest in learning and a desire to help people. Motivation is important in determining a learner's commitment and is an important predictor of student achievement and learning outcomes. Following the research of Pan and Gauvain (2012), we observe how university students with strong intrinsic motivation (i.e. attending university as a rewarding and enjoyable experience in itself) have more positive outcomes in their learning, lower stress levels, and a more positive transition to university.

Chapter 4 (led by Ben) takes as its starting point the often tricky transition period when entering university study. Using previous pioneering work by Lowe and Cook

(2003), Nelson et al. (2006), McInnis et al. (2000) and McInnis (2002), we look in more detail at the transition experiences of the FiF students in our study, and reflect on the social, financial and emotional factors that they faced. We also touch on the existing institutional support structures and systems in place at the universities where they study that assist in the transition process for students entering university from diverse backgrounds.

Chapter 5 (led by Ann) discusses considerations of the various costs and constraints of university study, and the capacity to balance study with other aspects of their lives, as indicated by our research with FiF students. In doing so, we demonstrate the pioneering aspects of FiF students as they manage their differing personal circumstances and consider their varying attitudes and approaches to study, debt and potential success (Gist-Mackey et al. 2018; McInnis et al. 1995).

Chapter 6 (led by Sharron) delves into the impact that study has on students' health and wellbeing, not only their physical health but also their social, mental and emotional wellbeing. When FiF students transition into university, they generally exhibit a significant decline in their health and wellbeing (Allom et al. 2016; Czyzewska and McKenzie 2016; Garriott and Nisle 2017). Despite having a comprehensive understanding of what it takes to maintain their health, when study pressures mount, FiF students often adopt behaviours that compromise their wellbeing. We look at ways that teaching staff and institutions can support FiF students to manage a more healthy transition to university.

Chapter 7 (led by Sharron) considers the transformative effect that studying at university has not only on the FiF students themselves but also on their family and friends. The diverse background of the FiF students interviewed in this research illustrates how their previous life experiences influence their expectations and beliefs about their ability to succeed at university. As other researchers have noted (e.g. O'Shea 2015a; Davis 2010), as FiF students move through their degree programs they experience significant transformations to their self-perceptions and identities as learners. They expand their understanding of the world and their ambitions for life after study, and these transformations can have a ripple effect on their relationships with significant others, often raising the ambitions of family and friends to also undertake higher education.

Chapter 8 (led by Ben) looks more closely at the purposes of higher education and analyses core themes relating to the benefit of higher education for the participants: personal growth, social experiences, and transformation of perspectives. The students reflect on their broadening social horizons and academic experiences, and the benefits these changes have brought to themselves and their families. Their observations are then framed within wider contemporary discourses about the purpose and function of higher education in the twenty-first century (Abowitz 2008; Brighouse and McPherson 2015; Dungy 2012; Levine 2014; Manathunga 2017 and Shapiro 2005).

While some aspects of these chapters coincide with work conducted by others, our own research has brought to life the expectations and experiences, the fears and joys of the FiF students demonstrating their capacity to succeed and become role models for those who follow.

1.1.5 Reviewing the Themes Through More Recent Literature

As our earlier work included an annotated bibliography of literature from 2000 to 2014 and covered the seminal literature, works from 2015 to 2018 became the focus of this review (King et al. 2014). We conducted searches for recent literature across Google Scholar and the Flinders University library catalogue; this involved conducting separate searches for 'first in family' and 'first generation', limited to publications during or after 2015. Literature identified in reference lists or bibliographies was also included where it met the search terms. Over 120 titles were found. Where literature relates more specifically to a particular chapter, it is confined to discussion within the chapter. Abstracts, introductions, findings and/or conclusions of articles to were carefully scrutinised to determine they specifically focused on and discussed FiF students and did not cover topics included and discussed within our chapters. These filters reduced the list to 49 articles and books. Other literature, such as reports, was located through searches of websites and via references in the books or articles.

The literature from 2015 to 2018 reflects a range of ideas about FiF students and their efforts in traversing the complex higher education landscape with less guidance than their classmates from family members who have attended university. The topics covered by these authors are wide ranging, often with one study traversing many of the themes we had identified. The review begins by considering parental education and success at university before discussing works related to student help-seeking behaviours and student use of support services. The review then explores literature regarding a focus on FiF student strengths rather than their deficits as an approach to researching FiF students. It then moves onto a discussion about recommended institutional changes and interventions before considering material that looks at demographics (gender, class, ethnicity and culture). The final area explored in the review is research about specific career and discipline areas where research has been related specifically to FiF (education, health, medicine and engineering). The review concludes by discussing how the literature relates to this book.

1.1.5.1 Parental Education and Success

Reports from across the globe discuss higher attrition rates and lower attendance among FiF cohorts. According to an OECD report, 'Parents' educational attainment is a much stronger predictor than age or gender of an individual's educational attainment' (OECD 2017). Two papers by researchers in the Netherlands (Brouwer et al. 2016a, b) identified the peer environment as more influential on student success than parental educational achievement. The first study included an exploration of the contribution of social capital to study success, determining there were no 'significant effects' linked to 'family capital variables' which they defined as the educational level of parents, financial support and moving out of home to attend university (Brouwer et al. 2016a). The authors suggested a potential link between their findings and the

selection processes undertaken across the school years in both the Netherlands and Germany arguing 'when students do not get support from their families, they likely fail to even reach the university level' (p. 115). Given this study did not focus on specifically exploring links between family support and university attendance, the suggestion requires further exploration. In their second paper, Brouwer et al. (2016b) explored factors influencing study success in the first semester at university. The findings reported in this paper coincided with the first, but stated the results were not entirely conclusive as it 'may be the result of the uneven distribution of students with highly educated kin in the representative sample of first-year students' (p. 387). However, both papers suggest that what happens once the students are on campus, particularly in relation to the study habits and peer relations they develop and the support they receive, makes a difference.

1.1.5.2 Student Help-Seeking Behaviours and Use of Support Services

Other studies considered the help-seeking behaviours of FiF students studying across a range of disciplines. Drury and Charles (2016) explore areas FiF and other disadvantaged students struggle with and overcome while at university, highlighting academic skills as one of them. The paper reiterated the importance of explaining and demystifying academic language so that all students can understand both subject content and what is required of them while learning, and suggested that where students did acquire support from discipline teaching staff and central academic support services it was often critical to their success. Soria et al. (2015) reported that FiF students not enrolled in specific on-campus academic support programs that guided them to understand the value of using libraries were less likely to make use of them. The authors argue that both economic and academic benefits may be acquired through making use of libraries. The economic benefits include savings from using library workstations rather than purchasing computers for home, and borrowing rather than purchasing books and journal articles; academic benefits encompass improved information literacy and grades. The authors concluded that despite these manifest benefits, FiF students are simply not aware of the advantages of using libraries.

1.1.5.3 Focusing on Strengths Rather than Deficits as the Approach to Research

A number of authors discuss the importance of how the literature presents and frames FiF and other students from diverse backgrounds. The Australian researcher Sarah O'Shea challenges the inappropriate portrayal of FiF students as 'deficit' (O'Shea 2015b, 2016a; O'Shea et al. 2016). She argues that the strengths these students bring with them include their 'ambitions and desires for the future', which act as motivation where 'having well-articulated aspirations provides not only an impetus to enrol but also a source of strength whilst persisting' (O'Shea 2016a). Indeed, in our own paper

which explored metaphor and motivation, we determined how FiF students often used metaphor to articulate their strengths and motivations (Luzeckyj et al. 2017).

Representing FiF students as deficit is also prevalent in the USA, as discussed by Tate et al. (2015), who state 'the preponderance of the research on [FiF] focuses on their deficits' (p. 305). In the UK, Whitty et al. (2015) discuss government policy and performance in relation to the widening participation agenda, reflecting that its basis lies in 'addressing the perceived "deficits" of individuals and communities' which often creates a barrier to fair access and participation (p. 41).

Trowler (2015) explores the consideration of FiF student 'deficit' further by discussing the way institutional and individual perspectives of 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students differ. She explores the way institutions describe students who possess (so-called) traditional characteristics as those who are not included in any equity group and who have transitioned 'from public or "decent" state schools, with the requisite numbers and grades … and without dependants or family responsibilities, studying full-time …' (p. 299), and how non-traditional students are framed as 'deficit' because they possess characteristics most likely to include them in an equity group. Trowler (2015) argues that the range of characteristics the students (individuals) believe they possess are quite different from those often imposed. She suggests institutional contexts may lead a student who appears to possess these 'traditional' characteristics to feel 'non-traditional'. Examples of differences given by students include having a regional accent that differs from the local one or having political views that are averse to those held by their peers. The same scenario may occur in relation to students who the institution considers as non-traditional but who see themselves as having much in common with traditional students. Trowler suggests that by defining students in these oppositional ways 'others' those who do not necessarily fit institutional norms and engenders feelings of marginalisation and/or disadvantage. In their study of Australian regional students, Stirling and Rossetto (2015) discuss the 'complexities attendant to transition into higher education for many equity students', and suggest (citing Gale and Parker 2014) that it is imperative to change the nature of the conversation around transition for these students.

Bell and Santamaria (2018) provide a collection of international studies which argue for transformation in higher education to better meet the needs of FiF students. Their book provides insights from researchers who have engaged in a range of studies with FiF students from Indigenous and culturally diverse backgrounds in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, South Africa, the UK and the USA. The researchers used a range of methods and tools to ensure students openly and comfortably revealed their experiences, including focus group, a range of narrative approaches and photovoice. As with studies discussed earlier, Bell and Santamaria's (2018) collection reveals the need for systemic change to ensure widening participation agendas do not continue to perpetuate disadvantage by failing to recognise and embrace diversity respectfully and in ways that allow marginalised students (especially those who are first in family or first generation) to flourish. Their recommendations include: working with marginalised groups (students, families, communities); enabling curriculum that supports the unique situations and highlights the experiences of these

groups to develop; blurring 'traditional roles of faculty, staff and students' so institutions 'work "with" rather than "on" their [FiF] students' (Bell and Santamaria 2018, p. 204). They also suggest supporting staff and students to develop skills related to intercultural communication and social justice; and cultivating environments where peer support and friendships can develop.

1.1.5.4 Recommended Institutional Changes and Interventions

In 2017, Sarah O'Shea visited eight institutions across the UK, USA and Canada and explored the various interventions and best practice related to engaging and supporting students who were the first members of their family to attend university. Her report provides findings from each institution and identifies thirteen recommendations which cover a range of areas such as the importance of considering nomenclature, inclusion, humanity, institutional discourse and funding (O'Shea 2018).

In an Australian study which explores diversity more broadly but includes a focus on FiF, Scevak et al. (2015) suggest many students' may require targeted support in how to learn at university because their previous experience of learning may influence how they engage with university study. The authors provide a list of recommendations to staff and institutions, arguing that 'FiF students are much more reliant on their lecturers and tutors, and need more detailed information, particularly regarding assignments, than do other more traditional students' (p. 4). These recommendations support activating the learners' prior knowledge, engaging them in identifying solutions to real-world problems and integration of new knowledge into their own lives through a range of practices including 'reflection, small-group discussion or demonstration' (p. 8). However, Scevak et al. (2015) 'other' the students by referring to them as 'non-traditional' and the solutions they provide are more in line with working 'on' rather than 'with' students, and do not recognise the unique capabilities and knowledge the FiF students may bring to the institution.

The study of financial knowledge and behaviours undertaken by Kabaci and Cude (2015) also 'others' FiF students. It explores the insights gained from those who have worked with or researched the financial issues faced by these students. It recommends, 'policymakers and administrators at the high school level' consider incorporating 'personal finance concepts and/or competencies' into their curricula so they may better prepare students for budgeting and managing finances while at university (p. 251).

Anders and Micklewright (2015) also identified a need for change across the schooling years. Using data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) to determine differences in expectations of teenagers in England to attend university, they suggest schools play a greater role in encouraging and supporting students' aspirations. Their paper explored 'how young people's expectations about application to university vary with family socioeconomic background and their own prior attainment' with a specific focus on the changes that occur for teenagers (p. 281). They identified large discrepancies between students whose parents hold a degree and those who have no school qualifications beyond age 16. They also

found where children achieved good grades at the end of primary school they were more likely to aspire to attend university, despite parental education. Unfortunately, despite their higher aspirations the study found these students rarely end up applying for university, a finding which coincides with Brouwer et al. (2016a), who suggest students may not reach university without family support. Anders and Micklewright (2015) recommend an approach whereby schools track 'pupils' educational expectations over time' so they can 'play a role in maintaining and raising expectations' (p. 303). This recommendation may be seen as aligning with Bell and Santamaria's (2018) idea that institutions work with marginalised groups.

A US study undertaken by Stephens et al. (2015) discusses the longer term advantages experienced by students who have taken part in various 'brief interventions' such as 'self-affirmation exercises' or 'framing university assessment practices as a tool for learning, rather than selection', and how these can improve outcomes for students 'disadvantaged by mainstream educational settings' (p. 1556). Stephens et al. (2015) discovered that students who had participated in an intervention learned how their backgrounds, though often perceived by many as obstacles, could become strengths to be drawn on for support through college. Senior students told the FiF students stories about 'how students' diverse social-class backgrounds can shape their experiences and challenges in college, as well as the strengths and strategies that students need to be successful' (p. 1557). Another US study by Castillo-Montoya (2017) challenges the use of standardised tests to determine student suitability for university and advocates for improving the outcomes and experiences for FiF students by incorporating their prior knowledge. He recommends moving beyond just considering what they know but helping them to make sense of how they have come to understand what they know and incorporating it into their learning. It is possible to attribute these understandings to various sources including prior education, life experience and the students' socioeconomic backgrounds.

1.1.5.5 Demographic Factors

In addition to contributing to the discussion to frame FiF students in relation to their strengths, O'Shea has participated in research related to the experiences of FiF students who participated in enabling programs in order to gain entry to university (May et al. 2016) as well as those who are studying online (Stone et al. 2016). Enabling programs are courses which are specifically designed to support potential students to develop the skills and confidence to succeed at university. O'Shea's work traverses a range of topics including explorations of FiF women and familial relations. She considers gender an important component when looking at FiF issues (2015a) and explores the unique experiences of FiF women and specifically FiF mature age women as they return to study (2015c). Much of her focus has involved gaining insight into family relationships, where FiF students succeed in enrolling in higher education (O'Shea 2015b, 2016b; O'Shea et al. 2014, 2017). O'Shea uses the voices of students to explore how they manage transition into university alongside family life and both paid and unpaid works.

In the USA, gender is considered alongside race and social class (Gibbons et al. 2019; Heredia et al. 2016; Schwartz et al. 2018; Allan et al. 2016; Raque-Bogdan and Lucas 2016). In the UK, gender is also considered alongside other factors, as indicated by Whitty et al. (2015), UK admissions data demonstrates that decisions to attend university continue 'to be heavily influenced by a number of factors, including social background, gender and ethnicity, as well as where they [students] live' (p. 57).

Two US studies which include discussions of social class are Rice et al. (2017) and Hinz (2016). Rice et al. concur with other work indicating that FiF students struggle with adapting to the college environment and identifying with others, often leaving them with a sense of being the only student unable to manage and believing they are not working hard enough. These students cannot discuss their difficulties with or seek help from their families, as there is no familial experience of higher education. Rice et al. (2017) suggest counselling services have a role to play in better supporting FiF students to adapt to university life. Hinz (2016), on the other hand, focuses on class identity among first-generation college students enrolled in an elite institution. Acknowledging that these students less often enrol in elite institutions, Hinz explains that they, like other students from diverse backgrounds, are also heterogeneous. The study explores the varying attitudes and 'reactions to class tensions and transitions' of first-generation students. Many of her participants were fortunate to study social class as part of their degree which supported their appreciation of 'social reproduction' so they were less likely to have 'adopted classist attitudes toward the working class' (p. 297). These insights provided those students who acquired socially mobile dispositions with an insight into their backgrounds, allowing them to maintain relations with their families. Students who experienced a more positive class transition gained assistance from role models and student organisations as well as their course work.

The research undertaken by Covarrubias et al. (2015) is less positive. Their work does not discuss attitudes to class but focuses on the guilt (referred to as 'family achievement guilt') felt by first-generation students (especially students from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds) when they succeed at university and are able to take advantage of greater opportunities than their non-college educated family members. The authors determined that family achievement guilt decreased when the students were encouraged to reflect on ways they had aided their family members and lessened their struggles. These insights further demonstrate the value of working 'with' rather than 'on' students and demonstrate the value of enabling curricula (Bell and Santamaria 2018) in addition to supporting the pioneering role undertaken by FiF students.

Other authors who focused primarily on ethnicity include Burgos-Cienfuegos et al. (2015) who consider the 'cross-cultural value conflicts' that may arise between Latino students' strong sense of collectivism within Latino families and the US culture of individualism (p. 366). In Australia, Kearney and Glen (2017) identified a cultural orientation towards collectivism as a potential restriction to opportunities as part of their exploration of the effects of different citizenship status (New Zealand and Australian) among Pacific students studying at an Australian university. Kearney and Glen concluded that the low socioeconomic status (SES) and FiF status added

to the responsibilities linked to their 'collectivist cultural orientation are likely to act as a de-motivating influence' on Pacific young people's aspirations to participate in higher education (p. 287). Other studies that considered the citizenship status of FiF students were conducted in the USA. Williams and Ferrari (2015) explored its relation to sense of community, and O'Neal et al. (2016) explored the grit, depression and grade point average of undocumented Latino college students and the difficulties they faced when attempting to acquire higher education qualifications. Many of these studies argue that the students persist because they want to improve both their own and their families' career and life prospects.

1.1.5.6 Career Choice and Areas of Study

A longitudinal study conducted across ten years in Australia found FiF students were more often enrolled in health or education fields and were often more likely to have lower entry scores (Baik et al. 2015). In the USA, Tate et al. (2015) conducted a study of the career development processes of FiF students confirming that for these students their families and other social networks guided their considerations in relation to study and career. The study linked these connections to the student's self-concept and beliefs while suggesting 'participants' experiences of their parents' career/financial struggles were connected to their motivation to succeed in college and beyond' (p. 304). A number of the participants also considered themselves role models for younger family members. While these FiF students did not have the same career or professional networks as their intergenerational peers rather than being discouraged, they considered it required them to work harder to establish the networks, reflecting their resilience and strength.

A range of studies related to FiF medical students discuss student growth in resilience and confidence, while some struggle to develop a sense of belonging or feeling they fit into the profession (Southgate et al. 2015, 2017; Brosnan et al. 2016; Wilkinson 2016). These papers, plus one from Mann (2016), recommend a change in practice at medical schools to better support diverse student populations and encourage their participation in these degrees. The authors suggest that doing so may result in improved satisfaction for students and, given the diversity of the student groups (including but not limited to FiF students), outcomes may be improved for the broader patient population as students from a range of backgrounds are more likely to better relate, communicate and understand them.

A number of studies considered students enrolled in a variety of engineering related degrees. Garriott et al. (2017) explored students enrolled in engineering, while Dika and D'Amico (2016) considered those enrolled in physical sciences, engineering, mathematics and computer sciences (PEMC-STEM). In both cases, their studies focused on student persistence. A study of design and engineering students examined students' decision to attend university and their level of attainment (Hunt et al. 2018). In contrast to Tate et al.'s (2015) study discussed earlier, Hunt et al. (2018) found no difference in the influence to attend university by families or social networks across their FiF and intergenerational participants. This study

also determined their FiF students had 'performed slightly better than their second-generation counterparts in terms of degree classification outcome', and suggested this result may have been due to a number of factors, including improved support of these students by the institution (p. 40).

1.1.6 How the Literature Relates to this Book

Interest in FiF students has grown in the past decade as more researchers determine how to understand and work with these students to increase their opportunities to graduate from university. As demonstrated in this review of recent literature, the ground covered by these authors is diverse, as are the students. The range of literature explored here presents one clear and resounding message: FiF students, like other students who are in a position of disadvantage, are strong and have much to celebrate. As demonstrated in both the international literature reviewed here and the chapters of this book, FiF students work hard to acquire a place in our institutions and many work significantly harder than those students they study alongside who do have family support to help them understand the language of universities and how to make the most of how they operate. The following chapters which specifically focus on the stories of students based at three institutions in one state in Australia will show how these students are pioneers, paving the way for others like them, both within their own families and outside of them.

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Chapter 2
Research Methods and Approach to Analysis Within Chapters

Ann Luzeckyj, Sharron King and Ben McCann

2.1 Background Studies and Approaches

The book is primarily based on two separate research projects, both funded by the Australian Government. These projects provide both qualitative and quantitative data acquired through surveys and interviews with FiF students that helped gain insight into their experience of attending university. They comprised of four components:

- Project 1 involved a large study, where students across the three main South Australian universities were surveyed to ascertain their varying expectations of university study (see Sect. 2.2).
- Project 2 involved three separate parts
  - Part 1 analysed the responses from FiF survey respondents from Project 1 (see Sect. 2.3)
  - Part 2 produced an annotated bibliography based on previous publications related to FiF students and supported the development of themes (see Sect. 2.4)
  - Part 3 included interviews with 18 FiF students identified via the surveys (see Sect. 2.5).

This chapter discusses these various components in greater detail.

2.2 Project 1

The first project (Brinkworth et al. 2013) involved administering surveys to students across the three main South Australian universities within a three-year period (2010–2012). These institutions represent a broad cross section of universities as they include both historically elite and more inclusive establishments. Two 76—question surveys containing Likert-style questions, ranking questions and open-ended questions were administered to students across the three institutions. The initial cross-sectional survey, designed to measure student expectations, was administered to first

S. King et al., *The Experience of Being First in Family at University*,
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year commencing students at the beginning of the academic year. The second survey, of equal length and similar construction, was administered to all continuing students in the latter half of the academic year. Over 16,800 students responded to the surveys, indicating a response rate of 25% of the total students invited to participate, with 5,301 of these respondents indicating they were the first member of their family to attend university.

Having close to one-third (32%) of the respondents who identified as FiF students allowed us to gain some insight into their unique experiences at university (Brinkworth et al. 2013). However, given the initial study did not focus on this cohort, we undertook a second, separate project to gain greater understanding of their experiences (King et al. 2014). The second project involved a closer examination of the FiF survey data extracted from the first study, the development of an annotated bibliography and in-depth interviews with 18 FiF students who had completed the surveys from the first study and successfully navigated at least three years of university.

2.3 Project 2 Part 1

The survey responses we used in the second project were subjected to a number of statistical tests (including chi-square, ANOVA, Stuart–Maxwell test and Mann–Whitney test, according to the nature of the data and for verification of results). The resulting data provided insight into a range of significant demographic differences between FiF and intergenerational students. As indicated in Table 2.1, identified differences between these two cohorts related to student commencing age, geographical location, living arrangements and type of school attended. FiF students also had a 5% lower university entrance (ATAR) score. The higher number of FiF students who are required to address a range of equity as well as social and cultural barriers is arguably a reflection of their resilience and capacity to 'pave the way' for others (as discussed in more detail below).

Not all disparities between FiF and intergenerational students were demographic. FiF students tended to enrol in courses requiring a lower entrance score, such as education, nursing, arts and humanities rather than the traditionally more prestigious areas of engineering, law, medicine and health science which have been shown to lead to both greater job security and higher incomes (Simmons 2013). There were

Table 2.1 Demographic differences: FiF and intergenerational

Point of difference	FiF (%)	Intergenerational (%)
Mature age	19	12
Rural background	30	22
Living with parents	48	59
Attended public school (rather than Independent or Catholic)	59	49

also differences in the way expectations of university were shaped, with higher numbers of FiF students indicating their expectations were based on advice from school counsellors and teachers, media and university recruiting materials, while intergenerational students' expectations were most often informed by guidance from parents and siblings.

Typically, commencing FiF students expected to undertake more independent study than intergenerational students. This trend persisted even when the data was broken down by age with the greatest proportion of survey respondents expecting to study more than 20 h per week being the mature age FiF cohort. Similarly, FiF students expected their performance at university to be better than in high school, and this was borne out in their actual experience.

Students generally expected to be able to successfully combine study with paid work; however, all groups, including FiF students, found this balance hard to maintain, with significant numbers of students in the second survey finding that external commitments negatively impacted on their study.

Fewer FiF students had friends attending the same university than the intergenerational cohort, a finding which emphasises the importance of providing opportunities for all students to make friends and build peer relationships within orientation programs and the first year curriculum.

These findings are not isolated to the experiences of the surveyed South Australian students but are supported by the findings from other national and international research (i.e. Anders and Micklewright 2015; Collier and Morgan 2008; Crozier et al. 2008; Lehmann 2009; Moschetti and Hudley 2008) and as determined through our development of an annotated bibliography.

2.4 Project 2 Part 2

Preparing the annotated bibliography on FiF students' experiences in higher education formed the second part of our second research project. Australian and international publications predominantly from Australia, the USA, the UK, New Zealand and Canada and published from 2000 to 2014 were explored to ascertain the extent of published knowledge and/or research related to the FiF student experience in higher education from both an Australian but also a broader global perspective. Research organisations, government websites and published documents from higher education conferences were all explored to identify relevant policy documents, working papers and other literature. In order to ensure only the most appropriate literature pertaining to FiF student experiences was included, publications discussing specific programs or intervention strategies to improve transition and academic success for FiF students and research focusing on aspirations and experiences prior to commencing university (such as those of high school students) were considered outside the scope of, and therefore excluded from, the bibliography.

This careful focus uncovered 155 publications identifying what was being said about students beginning university who do not have siblings or parents who have participated in higher education before them (King et al. 2014). The document includes a range of books, reports and articles published from 2000 to 2014, predominantly from Australia, the UK and the USA. In developing the bibliography, we became aware of the varying nomenclature and university systems across these three locations. The most prominent difference related to the terms 'FiF' and 'first generation', which are often used interchangeably within the literature. The meaning of these terms, however, does differ as one (FiF) may include siblings while the other (first generation) does not. The definition used in this study, as discussed in detail in the Introduction chapter, focuses on those students who were the first members of their immediate family (including both parents and siblings) to attend university.

Developing the annotated bibliography allowed us to identify how other authors and researchers discussed FiF students and explored their experiences. Our evaluation of the literature uncovered four key themes: individual, student, journey and networks. As indicated in Fig. 2.1, each theme includes a number of subthemes regarding how the FiF student experience is presented in the literature (King et al. 2014).

In order to build our understanding and develop the conceptual framework, we took the breakdown of these themes and subthemes a step further and identified individual attributes to associate with each subtheme and provided a more Australian

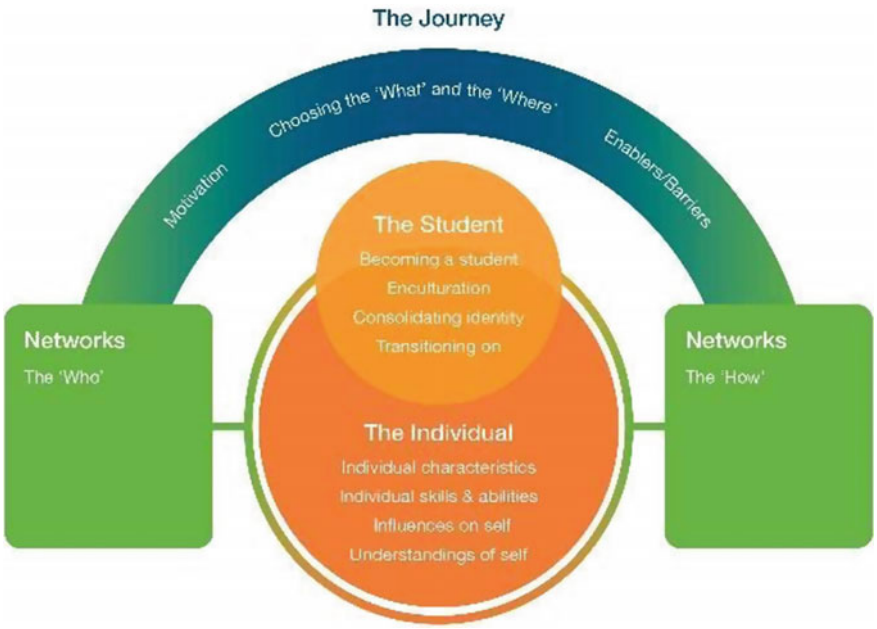

Fig. 2.1 Conceptual framework of the four key themes

Table 2.2 Subthemes and attributes of the individual

Individual characteristics	Skills and abilities	Influences on self	Understanding of self
Determination Independence Motivation Perseverance Work ethic Resilience Self-doubt Sense of stigmatisation	Academic skills Coping strategies Higher order skills Intellectual ability Support-seeking behaviour Time management	Habitus Cultural context Social and cultural capital Financial capital	Locus of control Self efficacy Self identity Agency

context so these could be more easily applied to the students we surveyed and intended interviewing.

2.4.1 The Individual

We conceptualised the theme 'the individual' through a lens of how each student develops as they encounter the joys and misgivings related to deciding to attend university. Doing so allowed both the subthemes and the linked attributes to be identified. These are shown in Table 2.2.

2.4.2 The Student

We saw the theme of 'the student' as relating to a person's decision to participate in higher education, which is life changing and for many involves re-evaluating their core understandings and beliefs about themselves and the world as they take on a new identity as a student. Three subthemes of 'student', and their attributes, are shown in Table 2.3 (the fourth subtheme, 'Transitioning on' was included in Fig. 2.1 but not here, as it was added as we conceived the interview questions and further developed the conceptual framework, but was missing from the initial conceptualising we did as we developed the annotated bibliography).

2.4.3 The Journey

The metaphorical concept of 'the journey' fitted how we identified the experience undertaken by 'the student'. These two themes are closely linked; however, the theme of the 'journey' relates more to the external aspects of their personal experiences

Table 2.3 Subthemes and attributes of the student

Becoming student	Enculturation	Consolidating identity
Decision to enrol	Adjustment	Achievement
Newness	Developing student identity	Attrition
Navigating physical space	Extracurricular activities	GPA
Preparedness	Identity tension	Mastering role of student
Academic culture	Isolation	Transformation
Academic discourse	Sense of belonging	
Engagement	Sociocultural incongruity	
Institutional habitus	Campus life	
University expectations	University experience	

Table 2.4 Subthemes and attributes of the journey

Motivation	Chasing 'what' and 'where'	Enablers/barriers
Aspirations	Access	Financial support
Career	Campus location	Work/family/study balance
Financial freedom	Course choice	Costs
Job prospects	Distance education	Perceived benefits
Life catalyst	Higher Education	External commitments
Pathways—Australian	Contribution Scheme (HECS)	Previous attitude to education
Tertiary Admission Ranking	debt	
(ATAR)	University choice	
Specific job skills		
Social mobility		

while overarching both the student and the individual. The attributes provide insight to three of the 'journey' subthemes, as shown in Table 2.4.

The ATAR is a ranking between 0 and 99.95 that indicates a student's entry, relative to others within their state and age group into university (https://www.tutoringforexcellence.com.au/blog/what-is-an-atar-a-simple-explanation-for-parents-students-and-teachers/). It is used as the main form of entry into university in all Australian states except Queensland which will introduce the ATAR in 2020.

2.4.4 The Networks

The 'networks' theme developed as we perceived the added importance of the contacts and supports developed by students who did not have the advantage of guidance from family members or caregivers who had attended university. This theme bookends the others and brings them together. It includes several attributes within its two subthemes, as shown in Table 2.5.

Table 2.5 Subthemes and attributes of the networks

The 'who'	The 'how'
Family support (or lack thereof)	Family expectations
Friends	Institutional support
Influencers	Lack of guidance
Learning support	Support
Peers	
Role models	
Support from teaching staff	

We used the same themes, subthemes and attributes to guide our development of the interview questions. They also supported our initial thematic analysis of the interview transcripts produced during the third phase of the second research project.

2.5 Project 2 Part 3

The third phase of our second research project involved semi-structured interviews with FiF students. The three authors conducted this research. Six FiF students from each of their corresponding institutions, the University of South Australia (UniSA), the University of Adelaide and Flinders University were recruited, based on having identified as FiF students when participating in the first project (discussed above). All interview participants had attended university for three or four years and while some had completed their original degree and had gone on to enrol in further study, a number were continuing study as part-time students or were in the final year of a double degree. We deliberately selected students from a wide range of disciplines such as arts, engineering, speech pathology and graphic design in order to understand a broader range of student perspectives. Our interest in talking to students who continued at university (rather than those who had prematurely left) was based on wishing to identify the factors that had enabled and encouraged FiF students to continue with their studies. Table 2.6 shows detailed demographics of the interview participants (using their pseudonyms and an age range for each, so participants cannot be easily identified).

Of the 18 FiF students interviewed, 44% were male, 50% were school leavers, with a wide range of disciplines covered; 28% were studying degrees in the arts, 33% health science related degrees, 17% business degrees and 17% science-based degrees.

The interviews provided an opportunity to develop an understanding of the FiF experience and give insight into how FiF students successfully negotiate university life.

We used in-depth conversational interviews (Riessman 2008) as these provided opportunities to collect 'deep and rich levels of narrative description' and gain insight into the students' outlook on their personal experiences (O'Shea 2015, p. 500). The

Table 2.6 Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Discipline area Degree completion	Full-time Part-time	Pathway to university	Living arrange-ments while studying
Gail	F	<25	Animal Sciences Graduated from honours	FT	School leaver	Lived at home with parents
Denise	F	36–45	Psychology	FT	Mature age entry	Lives alone in a one-bedroom unit
Brian	M	<25	Mathematics, now Master of Mathematics	FT	School leaver	Lives in university college; relocated from rural area
Cory	M	<25	Engineering	FT	School leaver	Living with parents
Rowan	M	26–35	Psychology	PT	Mature age entry	Lives alone
Jen	F	26–35	Arts	FT	Mature age entry	Lives with husband
Pete	M	>46	Arts	PT	Mature age entry	Lives with wife
Sue	F	<25	Tourism, now Master of Teaching	FT	School leaver	Lives in house share with friends; relocated from interstate rural area
Nina	F	26–35	Midwifery	PT	Mature age entry	Lives with husband and 6 children—youngest approx. 6 month
Marg	F	36–45	Politics	PT	Mature age entry	Lives with two sons—eldest finishing school

(continued)

Table 2.6 (continued)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Discipline area Degree completion	Full-time Part-time	Pathway to university	Living arrange-ments while studying
Roxie	F	26–35	Speech Pathology, now Honours	FT	Mature age entry	Lives with partner
Carol	F	<25	Audiology, now Master of Audiology	FT	International, fee paying	Lives with other international students—off campus
Carl	M	<25	Podiatry	FT	School leaver, gap year	Lives in share house with friend relocated from rural area
Todd	M	<25	Double degree Journalism and International Relations (IR), now completing Honours in IR	FT	School leaver	Lives with parents and younger siblings
Kerry	F	>46	Commerce	PT	Mature age entry	Lives with husband and two primary school-age children
Brendon	M	<25	Double degree in Law Man-agement Completing third year of 5-year degree	FT	School leaver	Lives with parents and younger sister

(continued)

Table 2.6 (continued)

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Discipline area Degree completion	Full-time Part-time	Pathway to university	Living arrange-ments while studying
Travis	M	<25	Media Arts	FT	School leaver, two gap years	Caring for father with disability
Alison	F	<25	Graphic Design	FT	School leaver	Lives in share house with partner; relocated from rural area

questions used to guide the semi-structured interviews were developed following the analysis of the literature collected and collated for the annotated bibliography. Questions were based on the themes we derived as the literature was explored (see Fig. 2.1 above). Students were emailed a copy of the potential questions a few days before the recorded interview so they had an opportunity to think about how they might respond to the questions (e.g. how they felt during orientation week and their initial coping mechanisms).

The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner to allow participants to lead as much as possible and direct what they wanted to say, rather than being strictly focused on the questions. We attempted to allow students to have agency over the conversations by giving up our control of them. A process which allowed students' stories to more naturally unfold (Barbour and Schostak 2005; Riessman 2008). We saw the interviews as a process of 'active asking and listening' where both interviewer and participant supported the making of meaning (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011, p. 94). We deliberately encouraged participants to reveal their experiences using their own words and in their own time, providing space for discussions to unfold organically as the participants chose how the 'story' developed. No two interviews followed the same path as some students chose not to answer particular questions, admitted that they did not have anything to say in relation to some questions or, because their responses dealt with multiple aspects of their transition experience, other questions were pre-empted. In some cases long, detailed responses were given to one or two questions, while little else was discussed.

The interviews were all recorded and transcribed. The interviewer checked each transcript for accuracy before sending it to the participant who was asked to confirm their agreement with its contents. Participants were de-identified and an alias assigned to each transcript. Using the thematic framework as a basis (see Fig. 2.1, above), each transcript was coded by the researcher who conducted it and at least one other. Given the same framework was used to determine the interview questions, other themes that emerged as a result of the interviews and their analysis were added to

the framework for further exploration and consideration as transcripts were revisited (e.g. transitioning on).

The interviews provided an opportunity to develop an understanding of the FiF experience and give insight into how FiF students successfully negotiate university life. Through interviewing FiF students, we were also able to acknowledge their different lifestyles, backgrounds and prior knowledge and discuss how these influenced their impressions and productivity at university. We have uncovered some of the constraints these students face and the various living and personal costs associated with attending university. Furthermore, we have begun to discover how their aspirations to attend university are shaped and the factors that influence them most significantly while at university. Our interviews provided a compelling collection of stories, which reflect the cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional nature of the FiF student experience, they helped reveal how university life has influenced FiF students' self-identity and their extended relationships with family and friends.

The analysis process allowed new themes and subthemes to emerge as interviews were revisited. As new subthemes and attributes were considered and added to the framework a greater understanding of how FiF students succeed at university developed. As our appreciation of the FiF experience progressed, we realised the initial themes provided a useful overarching insight into FiF student experience but as discussed in the Introduction and literature review chapter these themes were too easily applied to all students who are new to university. Therefore, rather than focusing on the initial themes and subthemes, we developed the chapters for this manuscript on broader aspects of the student experience.

2.6 Presenting the FiF Experience

Each chapter discusses a broader aspect of the student experience from the various perspectives derived as a result of the analysis of the quantitative data and from the qualitative responses from the surveys and from the interviews. In writing the chapters, we considered what students said about the topic and identified specific quotes which best captured their collective ideas. Our aim was to provide a representation of students which is both honest and positive. We have presented their stories, as told by them, discussing how, despite having various obstructions placed in their way, the students (often due to their own sheer determination) have succeeded.

FiF students are often represented as problematised or deficit and in need of additional support. For example, as outlined by O'Shea et al. (2017, p. 35), using demographic data as a basis of discussion 'foregrounds deficiency as the starting point'. As these authors point out demographic detail has its uses in specific contexts, which includes providing a point for comparison, however, researchers of the FiF student experience also need to be aware of the historic conditions surrounding students who encompass these demographics. For example, universities traditionally embrace and perpetuate cultural and class bias, privileging white, middle or upper-class and (in

Australia, the UK and the USA) western backgrounds, and these characteristics subtly presented as both aspirational and more worthy (Hinz 2016; O'Shea et al. 2017). The information provided by the FiF students we surveyed and interviewed demonstrates their resilience and truly reflects their position as both pioneers (Gist-Mackey et al. 2017; Greenwald 2012; McInnis et al. 1995) and trailblazers (O'Shea et al. 2017).

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Chapter 3
Motivations and Ambitions

Ben McCann, Ann Luzeckyj and Sharron King

It's not just the reserve of the elite. (Marg)
Yes, I can do uni, I should do uni, I will do uni. (Travis)

3.1 Introduction

The motivational factors behind undergraduate and postgraduate student enrolment at tertiary institutions are as many and varied as the pathways into tertiary institutions, and this is especially true of FiF students. As Maehr and Meyer (1997) and Rothes et al. (2017) remind us, motivation is important in determining an adult learner's commitment and is an important predictor of student achievement and learning outcomes. In 2017, the QS Enrolment Solutions International Student Survey (QS Enrolment Solutions 2017) noted that high-quality teaching and the availability of scholarships were two of the most important factors that students looked at when choosing a university. For Swain and Hammond (2011, p. 599), motivation is inextricably linked to student identity—'who they think they are and who they think they may become'. Research has highlighted a number of important initial motivators for students to attend university: encouragement from one's family and/or high school (Woosley and Shepler 2011); exposure to role models who have earned university degrees and who can impart 'university-related knowledge' to facilitate the transition from the post-high school experience (York-Anderson and Bowman 1991). Students might wish to enrol at university for instrumental reasons (Brown and Scase 1994; Payne 2001; Saiti and Prokopiadou 2008; Townsend 2003), others might get motivated for personal intrinsic reasons (i.e. enjoyment of the subject) (Collier et al. 2003; Pasternak 2005). Other students might want to attend university for more simple reasons such as wanting to be with friends (Antonio 2004; Mullen 2009). Pan and Gauvain (2012) have found that university students with stronger intrinsic motivation (i.e., attending university is in and of itself rewarding and enjoyable) have more

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positive outcomes in their learning, lower stress levels and a more positive transition to university.

Sansone and Harackiewicz (2000) define motivation as a behaviour directed by the need or desire to achieve particular outcomes: 'motivation energises and guides one's behaviour towards reaching a particular goal in life' (p. 2). Often taking as their starting point Maslow's 'theory of human motivation' (Maslow 1943, 1954), numerous studies (Deci and Ryan 1985; Eccles and Wigfield 2002; Reeve 2005; Schunk and Pajares 2002; Zeldin and Pajares 2000) contend that behaviour is influenced by personal factors (motivation or internal factors) and by environmental factors (external factors or outside influences).

3.2 FiF Motivations: The Same or Different?

Through the lens of motivation and ambition, our prime concern was to examine whether or not these aforementioned factors also influence FiF students' decisions to attend and continue at university. In other words, was their decision to enrol at university the logical realisation of the same initial aspirations and ambitions as their intergenerational peers? To what extent were the common motivational factors of what we might call a 'traditional' student different from or similar to those of the FiF cohort we interviewed? The interviews with 18 FiF students contained a range of open-ended questions and sub questions, broadly themed under motivations and ambitions (see King et al. 2014).

In no particular order, the following areas emerged across all the interviews in response to questions about motivations and ambitions: personal aspirations, career advancement, financial freedom, job prospects, life catalyst, specific job skills, social mobility and access, campus location, course choice, university choice, family support, friends, peers and role models, family expectations, and social and cultural capital. These recurring foci confirm that the experiences of FiF students in beginning their 'journey' at university are not significantly different from the experiences of intergenerational students.

3.3 General Observations

At a pragmatic level, in Australia the proximity of the university campus to the student's home remains a common reason provided by FiF students when explaining why they apply to specific universities (Engle 2007; Gorard 2006; Alloway and Dalley-Trim 2009). In O'Shea (2007), female FiF students attending a regional Australian university campus explained that the close proximity of campus provided a familiar environment, and therefore offered an additional incentive to participate in higher education. In our interviews, only a few FiF students stressed the importance of attending what they believed was a more reputable institution; the more common

perspective was for FiF students to choose a university that was a 'good fit for them'. Examples of this include:

> I really enjoy studying psychology … and felt university was the best option to take to continue my studies. I also felt that the uni lifestyle would be fun and full of great experiences and rewards. (18-year-old male, commencing survey)
>
> University has always given me the impression that it is a place where everyone goes for the simple pursuit of knowledge … Hopefully I will be surrounded by like-minded people who will learn with me and inspire me and motivate me to be the best I can be. (18-year-old female, commencing survey)

Brendon, an interviewee, rejected one university because of its distance from his home and another because the course offered was too theoretical for his chosen career path, Brian chose Adelaide over Melbourne because of its more relaxed, 'country town' feel and Denise chose her particular university because 'architecturally it's beautiful and I thought if I ever went to uni I'd really like to go here because … as a teenager [I] had a love for this place'.

The majority of the participants indicated internal qualities that contributed towards significant academic achievements, often describing themselves as 'hard working', 'determined' and 'driven': 'I am 45, definitely a mature aged student, study at university is giving me confidence, and the chance for a new career' (45-year-old female, commencing survey).

In our study, many of the FiF students displayed remarkably high levels of motivation that were often drawn from prior challenging circumstances and life experiences. Examples include:

> I come from a rural background and watch my parents struggle, being agricultural by trade and having little education or energy for future education; to give them the options of a healthier happier life. (19-year-old female, commencing survey)
>
> I left home at 16 in 1957 from an alcoholic, adoptive and divorced family … I always wanted to go to university and now want to satisfy that desire. (68-year-old male, commencing survey)

Kerry, an interviewee, also reflected what many of the other participants said when she noted that her experiences at university helped to consolidate rather than transform her values and beliefs. Many of those values, such as a strong work ethic, were instilled in her as a child:

> I've always had the belief of the value that … if you start something you finish it, and if you're going to do it you do it well basically—you don't 'half arse' anything, as my father would say.

This emotional and academic resilience assists them in thriving at university. Benson et al. (2012) and Devlin and O'Shea (2011) affirm that while FiF students may have deficits in some areas of academic literacies and skills, many possess strong personal characteristics such as motivation, perseverance and determination that have been harnessed to contribute to their academic success. In their study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, DiGregorio et al. (2000) define this mixture of positive personal attributes and low self-efficacy displayed through self-doubt as

'vulnerable determination', a quality consisting of a determination to succeed that is easily frustrated due to an awareness of gaps in academic skills that lead to self-doubt. In analysing the traits of 'non-traditional' students who persisted with higher education, Fleming and Finnegan (2011) identified resilience as a personal attribute that contributed towards FiF student academic success. One student responded that the reason she wanted to attend university was 'to prove to myself that just because I don't have parents who attended university and didn't have a private education that I could still achieve' (20-year-old female, continuing survey); another said she was 'determined to complete this degree for personal reasons—my ex told me I couldn't do it' (47-year-old female, continuing survey). FiF students frequently use comments such as 'I am going to do what it takes': this is a key indication of their motivations and ambitions. Often, the motivational pull-factors and subsequent decision to stay enrolled at university are expressed by FiF students in colourful, often dramatic language, such as 'sticking it out', 'staying the course' and 'it has its ups and downs' (Luzeckyj et al. 2017).

As shown in our initial project (Brinkworth et al. 2013) and other research, the early expectation of attending university by FiF students is generally lower than their intergenerational peers, with Engle (2007) claiming that only 68% of FiF students planned to continue to study after high school in comparison to 91% of intergenerational students. Two recent Australian studies found that for FiF students who do not enrol immediately after high school, a life crisis, external influences or change of personal circumstance often led them to pursue higher education (Benson et al. 2010; O'Shea et al. 2014).

Motivations indicated by participants in our research study included: wanting a better-paid job or financial security; an interest in learning or passion for the subject area; a desire to help people; enjoyment and self-improvement. Others perceived the need for more abstract changes to take place in their lives—in this sense, university can be seen as a life catalyst, providing an opportunity for the individual to achieve something that was previously denied them by other competing circumstances (family, money, illness, caring responsibilities, etc.). This comment, from a 68-year-old female student (commencing survey), is particularly representative of the diverse motivations within the FiF cohort:

> I recently took an extended camping trip as a precursor to touring around the country. I met many 'grey nomads' on this trip and came to the conclusion that they all had the same 'story' as myself. Continually socialising with my demographic was stifling and I found that I was looking at a mirror image of myself. That carried the risk of becoming tiresome. There is only so much one can repetitively discuss about children and grandchildren. I find learning stimulating and exciting.

In this chapter, we look at several motivational factors and ambitions: wanting a better life; fulfilling parental ambitions; heeding the advice of others; an interest in learning and a desire to help people.

3.4 Wanting a Better Life

A recurring motivational factor for the students we interviewed was that they all wanted a better life for themselves. O'Shea et al. (2016) use the term 'discourses of betterment and opportunity' to describe those opportunities that may involve career betterment or advancement, financial freedom from parental or other income sources and the gaining of autonomous financial capital, or the improvement of post-graduation job prospects. Jen answered as follows when asked why she was attending university:

> I use the idea of it being career advancement to justify going to university … but going to uni is just the emotional driver. I love to learn … it's like nirvana.

Her response best captures all of the overlapping and interweaving motivational components of the FiF students and reinforces the sense that for many, universities are transformative, catalysing agents of change in their lives.

The promise of financial enhancement also emerged as a key driver for FiF students. Roxie reported that seeing her mother struggle after the loss of her father motivated her to complete her studies and help support her mother:

> My aspirations and ambition for studying include financial stability. Being able to get a job that paid my superannuation, that paid my tax for me, as a current sub-contracted person you're responsible for all of that stuff yourself and it's exhausting. I also wanted stability and security and to be able to help my mum.

This focus on using university as a means to an improved financial end is a common theme in our interviews and across the literature. Bui's (2002) analysis of the background characteristics and reasons that influenced the decisions of FiF students to attend a US university and the subsequent extrapolations—the need to gain respect, help family and community, and improve personal circumstances and future opportunities—are all replicated in our own findings. The transformative process of 'becoming a student' was an intentional and positive motivation for many of the participants in our research. The female students in particular often articulated their long-held, but often unsatisfied passion for academic study. For them, enrolling at university was the opportunity to make up for lost time. Nina had not been happy in a previous career:

> I had an office job. So I was home on maternity leave and wasn't happy doing that. [So I had] three kids and my passion became babies and birthing and all that kind of stuff, so it led me to midwifery.

Other participants responded similarly:

> I'm determined to better myself and what I am able to achieve. I am bored with life and want to feel like I am contributing something important and useful to society. (25-year-old female, commencing survey)
>
> All the shit jobs are those that don't require qualifications—I don't want to work a shit job any more, working a shit job makes me sad. (28-year-old male, continuing survey)

Later on in the interview, Marg admitted that she had already secured two promotions at her work because of the skills she had developed while at university. This motivation to achieve a better life was also striking among mature age students. In keeping with Fleming and Finnegan (2011) and Chapman (2013), who note that many mature age FiF students voluntarily leave the workforce to return to university as they were unable to progress their career without possessing formal qualifications, the participants reiterated the importance of attending university to improve their current financial situation and provide greater opportunities for the future.

3.5 Fulfilling Parental Ambitions

The majority of the younger participants (those under 25) indicated that their parent/s played a significant role in encouraging their entry to higher education. Several indicated that university offers opportunities to fulfil lifelong ambitions and simultaneously reinforces positive attitudinal factors inculcated by parents or caregivers: 'I wanted to continue study because I was making my family proud' (19-year-old female, commencing survey).

Cory reiterated this common theme in the literature when it comes to motivations for attending:

> We've always had [that] in our family, that you have to work for what you want. [If] I want to be an engineer I'm going to have to work for it and study for it and that sort of stuff. And so just having that goal and knowing that I have to work to get to that goal.

Gail also confirmed that her parents—who had not been to university—had frequently impressed upon her the importance of study. It was an 'unsaid' expectation that she would go to university. A subsection of this betterment discourse was the recognition by several participants that their decision to attend university was motivated by a desire to fulfil family aspirations. Brian was also one of a number of participants who talked about how the deferred or unrequited ambitions of their parents played a key role in their decision to go to university:

> I think the main reason I wanted to come to university is because my dad always talked about the fact that he missed the opportunity to come to university and he always talked about regretting it … So from an early age I had this idea that university is not the same as school, it opens up opportunities.

3.6 Heeding the Advice of Others

This drive for self-improvement, or 'redemption', in Denise's word, was frequently enabled by work bosses and friends. In our initial project (Brinkworth et al. 2013), analysis showed that both school leaver and mature age FiF students reported

their expectations of university being less influenced by family and older siblings than intergenerational students (35% vs. 65%). Mature age FiF students' expectations were more likely to be influenced by friends and university websites or recruiting information, while school leaver FiF students' expectations also included schoolteachers as a primary influence. The encouragement of non-family members was critical in helping FiF students decide to attend university. Jen admitted that while she was initially reluctant, it was her boss who inspired her to attend:

> I bombed at the end of high school … So I shied away from going into university, climbed the ladder as much as I could through going into admin … and my boss at the time said to me have you thought about going to university? And of course I always had because I've always loved learning but it just never felt like much of an option.

This is a common theme across many of the interviews. Students who initially felt that they did not belong at university or felt that it was a place they were unable to access were often given the impetus to apply to university from work colleagues or bosses who had spotted their potential and encouraged them to embrace their intellectual curiosity. Rowan (interviewee) remarked that the support of friends buoyed him:

> I had friends who said 'Look you're smart enough, you should go to uni, you're actually a really smart guy, you should just go on and do whatever you want to do'.

Roxie told a compelling story. She indicated:

> I'd never been a good student in high school because I was otherwise concerned with other things … I was no longer willing to be told what to do by anyone, that then just got worse and worse and worse throughout high school.

Attending university seemed unlikely. It was only after a conversation with her boss that things began to change. The boss wanted to promote her but the prerequisite for promotion was working towards a relevant university qualification. Roxie (who identified as an ex-drug addict) also recounted how her father had died six months before the conversation with her boss and he had always wanted his daughter to go to university. She recalls the boss's words: Your father wanted you to go to university, how about you just get on with it. And I went, 'fine' and I did. The impact of career advice from non-family members as the impetus for FiF students to attend university is outside the scope of our book, but it is worth mentioning in this chapter on motivation, aspiration and ambition that there were often multiple voices encouraging the students to either return to university after a long hiatus, or take the plunge and fulfil potential that was clearly in evidence from the students' business, professional or social interactions with those around them.

3.7 Making a Point to Others and to Themselves

Some of the participants indicated that a strong motivational factor was the desire to prove people wrong and demonstrate to them that they were worthy of a place at a tertiary institution. One fitting example was:

> I want to one day cross the stage and get a parchment, make my family proud, show my two children what you can do if you put your mind to it. (32-year-old female, continuing survey)

The decision to attend university for FiF students is often compelling, emotionally cathartic and based on wanting a better future for themselves and those closest to them. Marg spoke at great length about this:

> There were a few doubters (including mum) and I've kind of gone well actually there you go … I wanted to prove to my mum that I could but I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it as well and that I had the intellectual capacity to do something completely different to anything else I'd ever attempted.

For Denise, going to university had not been an option earlier in her life. She had felt compelled by family expectations to follow a particular path, and after a while she realised that she was dissatisfied and wanted to go to university to push her:

> I just wanted to get out in the wide world, I got a job on my 15th birthday and just worked, and I was in the world and getting married and all that sort of stuff. Then all of a sudden, everything just changed … it was like this is not for me, you know it's, there's more to life than marriage and babies.

3.8 Interest in Learning

Student engagement is linked to motivation and creativity (Collins and Amabile 1999; Dolezal et al. 2003). Motivated students are 'associated with high levels of interest, enjoyment, and curiosity' (Beghetto 2005, p. 258). Many participants conveyed a strong drive and enthusiasm for being a student and increasing their knowledge of a particular subject. Some admitted that while they had failed at high school and disengaged academically at that stage of their lives, they had always enjoyed studying and writing assignments. Their motivation for being at university stemmed from a long-standing passion either for a particular subject or for the idea of higher learning per se. Marg, like others, regarded university as a place to satisfy intellectual curiosity:

> I wanted to just increase my knowledge … get a better foundation for my career and I hoped that it would lead to some different work [and] lead to some really quite interesting career progression.

Another student summed up the importance of learning for learning's sake that was threaded through a number of responses:

> University is perfect for me; I excel and always have excelled academically because I derive pleasure from learning. Simply put, uni makes me happy, why would I leave? (20-year-old male, commencing survey)

3.9 Desire to Help People

Some participants were motivated to become role models to their children and siblings and the wider community and take on 'pioneering' roles for those from similar backgrounds unsure about their potential at university. Nina was highly ambitious and saw university as a way of being able:

> to do more for my kids … by having a career and hopefully good job prospects at the end of it, financially I'll have some stability for my family, and also have a job—a career that I'm passionate about as well. So feeling like I help people.

Other participants responded similarly:

> It's an important stepping stone to prepare myself for the society. It prepares me to be an independent world citizen and gives me a chance to contribute back to the society and my family. I would love to be financially independent and have the financial and mental ability to take care of people that are important to me. (20-year-old female, continuing survey)

> I would do anything to save a child's life, four years at university is worth the struggle if a life is saved … so by going to university it is a win-win situation. (27-year-old female, continuing survey)

3.10 Conclusion

Overall, as we can see from the discussions and comments above, the motivations to attend university for the FiF participants were diverse and wide-ranging—from a better-paid job to more job security, from an interest in learning or passion for the subject area to a desire to help people. It is worth acknowledging here the similarities between the motivations and ambitions of the FiF students in our study and other studies of the motivations of mature age students. These themes a better life, fulfilling ambitions, advice/support from others, love of learning and altruism have been reported a number of times in other research, both in Australian and UK research (Wilson 1997; Scott et al. 1999; Leder and Forgasz 2004). While this overlap between these two groups is not our primary concern in this book, we note in passing the remarkable similarities as far as the motivations to attend tertiary institutions are concerned between FiF and mature age students. These interlinked aspirations may well be explained by the fact that many FiF students are mature age as well. Thus, it is not just financial betterment or material improvement that motivates students (although that is a key factor); rather, issues of altruism, personal development and a deep love of learning for learning's sake (that has often had to be concealed, marginalised, side lined or ignored altogether due to other external factors) are key drivers for FiF attendance at university. It is worth dwelling on this comment:

> I always wanted to study law but never had much support to do so. Still, my ambition never went away and I have made the effort to return to study Year 12 again and am now at uni. Yay. (35-year-old female, commencing survey)

If we unpack it, we can see first-hand the myriad reasons behind a decision to attend university: a love of a particular field of study; the initial lack of support (presumably from family); the undimming of ambition; and the 'stickability' and persistence. This storey is retold, slightly differently, multiple times in our study and demonstrates that for many of the FiF students, the joy at finally fulfilling an often-lifelong aspiration can be shared with family members and modelled for others as a ground-breaking, pioneering pathway into tertiary education.

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Chapter 4
Managing Transition

Ben McCann, Sharron King and Ann Luzeckyj

After that first semester I learnt all the things I needed to know and then after that it's been relatively easy. (Travis)
[At the start] I'd wondered what I'd walked into, and wondered how I was ever going to do it … But then I just went through it and soldiered through it, and here I am. (Nina)

4.1 Introduction

Transition can be defined as the process or a period of transformation from one state or condition to another. Often, in the case of arrival at university, the transformation may be unfamiliar, different or new. Students undergo feelings similar to those in other 'life events' such as starting a new job, moving from one country to another or losing a family member (Schaetti 1996). Although students experience the transition into higher education in different ways, the change from a familiar environment into an unfamiliar one represents a period of disequilibrium (Jackson 2010). As Kift (2015) notes, 'making a successful transition to university is never a given. While many students adjust relatively easily, thrive and survive—many do not and consider leaving' (p. 52).

Entering university is a time of great stress for students. They are at risk of disengaging from university study, especially early on, for a number of reasons. They may experience financial hardship, did not begin tertiary study directly after finishing high school, struggle to make a connection to the university community—and do not engage with the resources made available to them by the university—or do not possess the necessary skills to become independent learners and the means of acquiring these skills (Lowe and Cook 2003; Cook and Leckey 1999; Kift and Nelson 2005; Menzies and Nelson 2012; Morrison and Brown 2006; Nelson et al. 2006; O'Brien et al. 2012). In terms of our study, a crucial factor that makes these students

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particularly vulnerable to either not succeeding academically or disengaging entirely with their studies is their status as a FiF student. A number of studies have discussed the ways in which FiF students manage their transitions into and across university (Ballantyne et al. 2009; Henderson et al. 2009; James et al. 2010; Johnston et al. 2013; O'Shea 2013). O'Shea (2015) observes how FiF students undertake 'often invisible "work" in relation to university attendance', such as reassuring parents, partners and children that they have made the right decision in attending university.

Australian rural and non-rural students' experiences at university are also different as a result of moving (or not) to a new location (Henderson et al. 2009; James et al. 2010; Meuleman et al. 2014). These studies identify demographic differences across the cohorts of FiF students and consider how these differences impact on the student experience. We know from our previous research (Brinkworth et al. 2013) that university retention and progression rates often suffer when the reality of the student experience cannot be aligned with prior expectations and perceptions and that a diverse student cohort manages points of transition in multiple ways.

In this chapter, we look in more detail at the often tricky transition experiences of FiF students and reflect on the social, financial and emotional factors that they faced. We also touch upon the existing institutional support structures and mechanisms in place at our universities that assist in the transition process for the university entrance of diverse student cohorts. All students are different. It follows that the factors that impact their transition and their experience of transitioning to university will vary, and the diversity of these student cohorts needs to be acknowledged and accommodated (Nelson et al. 2011). Research in both an Australian context (McInnis et al. 2000) and an international one (Bridges 2000; Tinto 1994, 1998) suggests that many first year university students, especially those entering straight from secondary schools, find the transition into academic life hard, often feeling a lack of connection to the university context. Successfully, empowering students to quickly develop a sense of 'belonging' and connection to the university and their peers is vital—a 'successful' transition is linked to academic success, higher engagement in the chosen course of study and a more rounded healthier university experience. Moreover, successful transition is linked not only to success in assessment, but also to student demographic and psychological characteristics, student prior performance and social and institutional factors (Kift 2015; Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice 2008).

4.2 FiF Transition Experiences: The Same or Different?

A long-standing problem with the transition to university education is that students have unrealistic expectations about university life (Compas et al. 1986; Macdonald 2000; Pancer et al. 2000). They 'imagine either that it will be just like school, or that it will be a harsh, uncaring place where they will be left to sink or swim on their own' (Hagan and Macdonald 2000, p. 62). Transition to, and retention within, the university environment not only requires strong support from educational institutions, but also asks commencing university students to be able to adapt quickly to new

pedagogical and academic requirements. Curriculum requires students to adjust to avoid the often-serious mismatch between their existing learning behaviours and the new student behaviours that are expected of students at university (McCarthy and Kuh 2006). Against this backdrop, where the mismatches between expectations and lack of preparation mean that many prospective 'traditional' students find the transition from secondary education to tertiary education problematic, research shows that FiF students experience an even more significant educational disadvantage. FiF students do not possess the requisite cultural and social capital required to navigate their way through higher education institutions (Luzeckyj et al. 2011). If students have little or no family history of university attendance or come from a community where attending university is not the norm transition problems are exacerbated.

Our research illustrates the diversity that exists within the FiF cohort. It is clear from the interviews we conducted that life experience has influenced the way in which FiF students manage their transition to university. In the case of Carl, it was not Carl's parents but his school counsellor (also his teacher) who encouraged him to fulfil his academic capabilities and attend university. Carl had intended taking a technical route through school but his counsellor intervened by calling on Carl's parents so they too realised he was capable of much more. However, despite being academically capable, Carl told us he struggled with independent learning as he transitioned from the school environment. His memories around trying to find resources in the library provide one example of his difficulties in transitioning to university:

> Instead of giving people the things they need—they say 'here's the library—it's in there—go and find it'. It's still a big torment for today—having to go sit in a library and jump on the internet and spend hours finding nothing and then somebody else jumps on for five minutes and finds exactly what you need … I think the biggest thing for a lot of students, is that transition.

Devlin and O'Shea (2011), Leese (2010) and Askham (2008) all note that students from low SES areas regard tertiary education as an alien environment. Sue, who relocated seven hundred kilometres to Adelaide from country Victoria, indeed used this term in her interview with us to describe the experience of moving away to attend university: 'We're kind of like aliens who … go and create our own life'. FiF students may also perceive university as 'foreign', as they do not have older family members to discuss or share university practicalities with, or experienced support networks to help them prepare for the transition to this often radically different learning and teaching environment. One comment encapsulated this idea:

> There was a little too much uni jargon that I had to have a friend translate for me—most of it was understandable but some things were a little overwhelming. (23-year-old female, continuing survey)

Our interviews suggest that FiF students' experience of transition to university differs depending on a variety of demographic factors. These include whether they came from a rural or a metropolitan location and/or being non-school leavers. It is not one single factor but a combination that has a bearing on the way in which the participants felt they could manage their transition to university. Here are some responses to the question of whether anything was missing for preparations for university:

> The high school I went to should have been more geared towards the idea that at least some of its students would go to uni. (37-year-old male, continuing survey)
>
> Going to a secondary school that took university seriously, and not expected its graduates to simply become blue collar workers. (38-year-old male, continuing survey)
>
> I think that during Year 12, there should have been a progress from the teaching as is, to a more independent type of learning, with a harsher marking system. Being in Year 12 compared to university is still like being spoon fed which makes the first year at uni more challenging that it really needs to be. (18-year-old female, continuing survey)

These comments are significant because they demonstrate the difficulty of not always being able to rely on high school knowledge or experience to assist in the transition to university.

4.3 Transitioning from High School

As all students are different so too are the factors that influence and inform them, including the individuals they might look to as mentors and role models. There were some common elements across student cohorts in relation to the pathway that they took to enter university. A range of people influenced students who transferred directly from high school as they made the decision to transition to university. Gail and Brendon both discussed the influence their parents had on their decision to attend university from an early age:

> Since I was little I had always thought I would go to university … although they [Gail's parents] haven't been to university I guess they knew the importance of it. (Gail)
>
> Even like when I was 12, or 13 I always knew I wanted to go to uni, part of it was a bit of influence from parents and part was just I guess determination just to go on and I guess have a successful career. So I think it was a couple of factors but I think because I come from a background where no one has been to university before, I think, my parents thought it would be a good change. (Brendon)

Despite wishing to attend university from a young age, Brendon suggested that he had not worked hard enough at school to get into the course he now enjoys. His transition into university involved a realisation that he needed to work harder to fulfil his academic and professional capabilities:

> I probably didn't put as much effort [into school] as I would have liked to, and I think going through uni and doing the hard work to get into law after management I realise maybe that's something that's changed dramatically because I should have hopefully been in law in the first place.

For Gail, her concerns were that she had not gained the right experiences at high school:

> I was a bit worried because I thought well there's so many people here and they've all been to better schools and yeah, it was just intimidating because I thought well, I'm just going to be the dumbest person here and I'm not going to know much at all.

Transition into university proved to be more challenging than Brendon anticipated, with first year proving to be one of the 'hardest years of my life'. As a student commencing in a large cohort undergraduate degree in management, Brendon vividly recalls feeling like 'a fish out of water':

> It can be isolating, because I do think I'm a bit foreign to it all and if I'm not in classes I'm just sitting there on my own or studying on my own. I see the cliques and I often feel like maybe I'm not suited to the environment. Sometimes I struggle and sometimes it gets you down a little but I don't let it affect me too much.

It was Brendon's self-determination and ability to adapt that enabled him to overcome feeling daunted by the increased size of his classes and the perceived cliques:

> I think because your average class in lecture rooms would be about 300 students sometimes, so [it was] a little bit daunting but I guess I've always been a bit of a, not confident person as such, but I guess I've always just been pretty down to earth, determined kind of thing. So whatever I have to do, I'll do it, so if it means going to a big lecture theatre, then so be it, I'll adapt I suppose.

Our interviews with Gail and Brendon demonstrate how, despite the support of their families and/or teachers, their common desire to attend university from a young age and the advantage of having recent experience of studying at high school, their transitions were difficult.

4.4 Transitioning from a Rural/Interstate Location

Our students who moved to Adelaide to attend university expressed additional complications of needing to find somewhere to live and dealing with often prolonged feelings of loneliness and isolation. The three students we interviewed who had relocated from a rural or interstate setting to attend university were all entering as school leavers, although two had taken advantage of a gap year before commencing their studies.

Brian can be described as a high achiever, a trait evident in both his high school results and current achievements in his university studies. Yet this highly successful student reveals a transition period into university as a more difficult process than his academic achievements might suggest, describing the first month as 'hell':

> On the first night I got here I was crying in my room because I was just so scared and worried … if you're feeling upset on your first night, or if you're feeling overwhelmed, it's really easy to forget the fact that most people go through that … when a friend of mine came to Adelaide the following year, she was also crying a lot in her first week because she was just completely overwhelmed and I said to her 'Don't feel bad, I did the same thing'; sometimes it's good to just know that someone else understands it's a difficult experience to go through.

Brian attributes what he describes as a 'massive transition' to university, as partly being a result of the requirement to relocate from a small rural town to a major capital city and partly due to being a FiF student. Two support factors that Brian identified

as assisting him to navigate the transition are: living at the university residential college which provided valuable peer support and involvement in a program targeted at first year students to assist them to navigate university life. He acknowledges that if he had been able to talk with someone who had recently experienced university transition, this would have provided invaluable support:

> Because from where I sit now everything I went through was all relatively easy, it was relatively simple, but at the time it can be completely overwhelming. You've got to apply, you've got to be accepted, you've got to move and it just seems like there is so much to do, but looking back it was all relatively easy.

Conversely, Sue's initial experience was different. She had initially intended studying nearer her home in country Victoria, but after her gap year, which was spent travelling, she decided to move to the same university in Adelaide as a close friend. Sue said that she found transitioning interstate and to university easy because she had a friend to show her around and help her with accommodation:

> It was just my easy option, I'll just move straight in with her, it's simple; I won't have to apply for accommodation and all that sort of thing. So I always had that sort of support and she was at [names university] so she showed me around a little bit, and I kind of just slipped in and it was just easy.

Alison initially struggled with her transition to university. She does not regret her choice to attend university because of 'the people I've met, what I've learnt and even just moving out of home and growing up'. Alison's comment of 'growing up' relates to not only commencing university but predominantly the process of relocating from her rural home town and living independently, an experience that she describes as 'scary':

> Especially coming from the country and having to move out, it might be uncomfortable at first but it's going to help you in the long run as you learn so many life skills such as budgeting, and cooking for yourself. The little things that you take for granted at home are suddenly huge once you move out.

Academically, Alison felt prepared and considered that her creative skills and knowledge provided her with the basic principles for her course. Yet she found it difficult to make friends during her first year of study, particularly due to the absence of her partner, her high school friends and her support network. Alison admitted that she only really began to feel comfortable and part of the university community midway through her first year. She briefly considered leaving university at that point, but her experiences improved and she began to strengthen her university social networks during second year. Making friends and being part of a small and supportive cohort clearly assisted Alison's transition. As a FiF student from a rural high school, transitioning to university involved a number of significant life changes.

4.5 The Mature Age Perspective

Our mature age students tended to reflect on the type of student they had been at high school by way of comparison to the type of student they felt they were at university. They indicate that they had not been 'good students' at school and were concerned that their school experiences and behaviours might hinder their success at university. Another complication some of the mature age students faced was the feeling that they were not supported by family or work colleagues who were initially sceptical about their desire to attend university. Trying to manage the negativity and lack of support from others added to the strain of transitioning into the strange new world of university. For some, concerns of being a 'bad student' assisted their transition as they were keen on showing that they were more capable than they had appeared while at school. Denise suggested that university was a way of compensating a difficult experience at high school: 'I felt dumb at high school but now I feel like a smart adult'. Pete, who started university after retiring from 40 years of working, had not had the opportunity to complete his secondary education, while Kerry had always been a good student but did not always apply herself:

> I have always liked study. I wasted high school, honestly. I really didn't knuckle down like I should have at high school so then I was one of that lucky generation that when you left school there was a job for you so it didn't really matter.

Like the other students we interviewed, the mature age participants described the emotions felt transitioning into university in quite negative terms. Marg and Roxie admitted as much:

> I was very nervous and quite apprehensive … I hadn't written an essay since I was in high school, which was a long time ago. (Marg)

> I was terrified, I left high school in Year 10 and there was an 18 year gap between leaving high school and starting university. So it was a very, very long time between educational drinks. (Roxie)

The smoothness of transition to university was complicated by a sense that they had not been good students at school, so needed to develop ways of addressing bad study habits and concerns regarding their ability to study independently and under pressure.

However, a number of mature age students found transitioning easier. Pete was pragmatic about entering university, suggesting that if he treated it like moving to a new job, the 'shift' would not be as hard. Jen took a slightly different pragmatic approach, suggesting that it was ensuring she had done her research and asking many questions that helped her transition successfully:

> The thing that helped me the most throughout all that was me mulling it through because I asked questions. I'm that annoying mature aged student that speaks in class.

For all, the transition into university was a nervous and apprehensive period, primarily due to the overwhelming nature of 'the unknown'. Marg's concluding comments about the help and support provided by two university lecturers are indicative

as to how often, for mature age students, existing university networks are critical in the smooth transition into tertiary education life:

> Both lecturers [would] offer huge amounts of encouragement. They were really good to bounce ideas off and talk to them about my academic career and what's going to get me to where I wanted to be … helping me to filter out what I do and don't need.

4.6 Managing Transition: The First Few Weeks

The FiF students who reported difficulties in transitioning admitted that the first few weeks were the most trying. They used different explanations for these difficulties. For some, finding their way around a new environment was challenging. Cory remembered 'spending a lot of time trying to work out where buildings were' and dealing with the differences from school:

> It was just a little bit of a shock how different things were at uni; it was very like everyone's just doing their own thing. It's not like you're with the same people all the time.

Another student made similar comments:

> In Semester One, my first week or two was dedicated to making friends instead of studying because I didn't know many people. I wish I had attended some of the activities that were provided in orientation week, so I could have got on top of my studies earlier in the semester instead of always feeling that little bit behind. (19-year-old female, continuing survey)

Others struggled with the university requirements and/or felt socially isolated. Marg said she was 'a little overwhelmed' because 'reading academic literature is quite different from reading anything else'. Indeed, many students commented on the 'gap' between university academic literacies and the knowledge students were familiar with from high school:

> At first I was scared to approach lecturers in fear of sounding 'dumb' for not understanding, but after some time I learnt that they're all really friendly and happy to help. (19-year-old female, continuing survey)
>
> I was quite shocked at how many university students there were at lectures, and that lecturers wouldn't know who we were. I felt like a number and not important. (23-year-old female, continuing survey)
>
> The jump from high school to university is too large. We should be better prepared right from the beginning of high school. (18-year-old male, continuing survey)
>
> The information I got from the internet and from teachers at the adult re-entry high school where I completed year 12 was accurate, but I wish more information had been made available to me when I was first in high school, so that the prospect of going to university then might have been less alien and intimidating. (28-year-old female, continuing survey)

Carl struggled with the transition for the first few weeks but once he came to get more involved in his degree, it became easier for him: 'I think the transition in—for the first couple of weeks, is the hardest … it becomes easier when your degree becomes more specific'. Roxie, though, thought it took about a semester to transition: 'I'd say 12 weeks in I was feeling fantastic and I was doing really well'.

4.7 Transition Support Strategies

A number of writers have discussed the importance of developing strategies to support student transition (Benson et al 2012; Devlin et al. 2012; Kift et al. 2010). McInnis (2002) suggests that there are a number of enablers that assist with transition to university in the first year, including: the availability of student support services; accessibility to information technological services; the usefulness of the resources; the relevance of study material and study skills support. McInnis (2002) also highlights the need to focus on improving student life by creating a strong campus culture and atmosphere, while encouraging peer and academic learning communities to assist with transition.

Universities encourage students to participate in activities relating to orientation. However, as argued by Kift et al. (2010), supporting students goes beyond these initial add-on activities and requires a shift in pedagogical approach to ensure students learn the skills to learn at university seamlessly and painlessly. Students also need to have a sense of agency in supporting their own transition to university and need to identify ways in which they can help themselves in making the transition as easy as possible. Gail talked about the importance of quickly getting help as a result of attending transition days and, through her peer mentor, the help offered by the university:

> There was also the peer networking program that helped a lot as well but apart from that if I didn't find people quite quickly through those then I think I would've struggled a bit more.

Rowan said that while he found the 'knowledge side' easy to manage, it took him some time to understand that it was possible to ask for help from university counsellors and other staff when it was needed. He said:

> The biggest challenge for me was understanding how uni works … so if you need help you just say 'I need an extension' and you can apply for one and you can go and talk to the counsellors and you can say 'Look this is what's going on'.

Following on from this, Jen suggested that students need to actually experience what is required of them in order to understand it:

> You don't know what you don't know … it's not so much just seeking the information but it's you don't know that you need those tools to write, to research, until it's put right in front of you and you actually get to experience it.

This comment is also insightful:

> [Uni is] different from high school, but it's meant to be. You're meant to be treated as an adult, told that you have to manage your assignments in your own time and not have teachers peering over your shoulder all the time to help—but these are the things I like most about uni, and I think a lot of people would agree, once they got used to it. (19-year-old female, continuing survey)

It demonstrates that once the FiF students gain confidence in how to navigate their university environments and understand what is expected of them, the transition becomes manageable.

4.8 Conclusion

For many of these students, staying the course despite the academic, social and emotional hurdles has been immensely empowering. Their broadly successful collective transition into university—both in academic and personal development terms—has allowed the FiF students to feel they could complete the degree and be part of university culture. This final point is important: attending university—let alone thriving once there—was often framed in their responses as something that for a long time was considered outside of their scope because other family members had not previously attended. By studying at university, these students have developed a robust belief in their abilities, and through their successful transition into university, they have gained greater confidence and a willingness to mentor students from similar backgrounds to navigate the often treacherous terrain of transition.

There are numerous elements to the transition process which require managing by universities and there are others that the students themselves need to address. Both our previous and current research show that managing student expectations by providing clear and consistent messages about what to expect and what is required to succeed will help all students to transition into and across their university studies. Orientation for commencing students has been shown to be most effective when conducted over an extended period of time, of up to a full year, rather than as a short one-off at the very start of a student's academic studies (Larmar and Ingamells 2010; Padgett et al. 2013). Equally, orientation and transition initiatives have been shown to be most effective when embedded into students' experience of engagement within the curriculum as part of their discipline or program of study, and when designed expressly to foster students' sense of belonging to their discipline-based academic community.

The diverse factors impacting transition suggest that university staff need to realise how different students are and, as discussed by Brook and Michell (2014), that staff spend time getting to know their students. Marg eloquently reflected on the importance of appreciating that all students are different when responding to a question about the advice she would give to university managers and policymakers:

> Be flexible and consider the needs of students. Appreciate how complicated life is and that it may not be possible to go to university and not work as well. Understand that everyone has a storey—and a complex set of reasons for being at university.

Many of the interviewed FiF students could arguably be seen as missing out on the knowledge of university life that is generally acquired through social networks, in this case, parents or older siblings (Smith 2011; Simmons 2013). To assist in their transition, students relied on sources of information such as previous learning contexts, university websites and recruiting information, which did not always explicitly explain 'what university is really like'. They lacked information on how to navigate various university systems and procedures (Simmons 2013) and were often unaware of support services available to them. There was little induction or guidance on how

to manage their time or adjust to the new learning environment and participants commented that they were 'thrown in the deep end and expected to swim' which led to feelings of being overwhelmed in the first weeks of study:

> When I first started, I certainly felt like I was out of my depth, I did feel like I didn't belong here. Because to be honest, I've never really seen myself as a uni student. (Travis)

This experience is consistent with other studies which have also shown that in most institutions, the expectation is placed on the new student to 'adjust' to university and 'take responsibility' for their own learning rather than on the institution to provide guidance and support (Scanlon et al. 2007; Van der Meer et al. 2010; Leese 2010). What is needed is greater recognition of what students have to say, particularly cohorts like FiF students who have heretofore been largely excluded and marginalised. Valuing their perspectives and standpoints helps to challenge entrenched institutional practices and leads to more inclusive practices for other underrepresented groups in higher education (McLeod 2011).

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Chapter 5
Costs and Constraints

Ann Luzeckyj, Sharron King and Ben McCann

> *… I have no friends at uni, I sit in the front row of the lecture theatre and if I'm not there I'm in the library and that's it. I have a few people I say hello to that I've met in tutes, but that's about it*. (Denise)

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we focus on the costs and constraints around university study as discussed by the students across the two previous projects (Brinkworth et al. 2013; King et al. 2014). Southgate et al. (2017) suggest there are often close links around costs and constraints, making it difficult to identify the differences between them, stating: 'Financial hardship could affect social opportunities and feelings of belonging and sometimes created a stressful, even demeaning, university experience' (p. 251). In this chapter, we perpetuate the notion of linked elements around costs and constraints but where constraints or costs may be identified as discrete elements we discuss them separately.

Both costs and constraints may be considered as problems or barriers. As argued by a range of authors (Gorard et al. 2006; Meuleman et al. 2014; O'Shea 2016; O'Shea et al. 2017; Oikonomidoy 2015), students who are considered 'non-traditional' (including those who are the first members of their family to attend university) are often portrayed in language that implies deficiencies on their part. These authors suggest the language used often presents these students as needy, challenged in some way and/or having difficulties, rather than portraying them as resourceful and resilient.

FiF students have a unique experience of university and although they share common ground with other equity groups, their defining difference may be regarded as the constraint of having no familial role models to provide advice or guidance to them. In addition, they have no family members who appreciate what they are experiencing

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as they navigate the unfamiliar space of university nor, as discussed by O'Shea et al. (2016) do they have the requisite social or cultural capital to ease their way as they transition through their studies. However, as will be demonstrated in this chapter, these students are pioneers. They play an essential role in leading the way to and through university for both family and peers (Gist-Mackey et al. 2017; Greenwald 2012; McInnis et al. 1995). Rather than considering the participants as problematised and having difficulties, we reveal their resilience, strength and capacity to manage and, in many cases, thrive despite the costs and constraints they encounter.

5.2 Personal Circumstances

By linking the range of costs (financial and personal) related to attending university with their associated constraints, we can more easily begin to appreciate how FiF students' personal circumstances and demographic factors influence the way they prioritise and balance university with other aspects of their lives. Gale and Tranter (2011), James et al. (2008) and Stone and O'Shea (2013) discuss a range of examples where demographic factors and personal situations influence student choices, behaviours and activities. These include students from rural Australia who relocate to attend university, students who are mature age with family and household responsibilities, and students with a low socioeconomic background who have limited resources to draw on. Those who relocate may incur financial costs related to moving house, in addition to needing to identify sources of income to support their weekly living expenses. On top of this, they have to deal with the emotional strain associated with relocating.

Older students may feel constrained by the costs associated with balancing their carer and other home-based priorities with the requirements of attending university. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to struggle to purchase the texts and equipment required for study. These costs may seem oppressive, and constrain the individual's capacity to participate in many of the opportunities avilable to them while at university. The participants in our study, however, demonstrated a capacity to effectively overcome constraints and manage costs, so they can persevere with their studies.

5.3 What the Participants Told Us

The excitement at attending university was evident among both survey respondents and interview participants. Although many participants discussed the range of benefits (beyond improved job prospects) that higher education provides, they also acknowledged there were numerous personal costs and constraints resulting from their attendance at university.

One interview participant, Roxie, listed the areas in her life she believed her studies had affected, stating: 'Time, attention, mental health, relationships have all suffered over the last four years quite significantly.' By using the term 'suffered' with the phrase 'quite significantly' she suggests all of these factors had high costs associated with them. She attended the interview after submitting her honours thesis, so despite finding university difficult in so many ways, Roxie persevered and successfully completed both undergraduate and honours degrees. The following sections outline the variety of costs and constraints experienced by our participants and discuss links between students' FiF status and the strategies they use to succeed at university.

5.3.1 Lack of Knowledge and Feeling Unprepared

In the surveys, we asked participants to respond to a question regarding their preparation for university. A number of their responses reflected the students' sense of having been constrained by a lack of preparation. The following student discusses her problems with understanding university requirements and language used by academics:

> Knowing how to reference, and being taught to in Year 10–12, properly at uni level. The first year of uni is too big a jump from Year 12, the language used is confusing, making the lectures slower, covering less at one time would make it easier. (18-year-old female, continuing survey)

The student clearly felt she had not been adequately prepared for the university environment by her high school. The sense of feeling ill-prepared was discussed by another participant in terms of a lack of information and support from the institution regarding what the experience of attending university would be like:

> I think a better, more detailed information pack about each course available on the uni websites would be better, just so each student knows exactly what their course will be like and if it's the outcome they are after. (23-year-old female, continuing survey)

Other survey responses reflect students' frustration and sense of constraint at not knowing what would be required of them when they started university:

> Having the required text lists earlier would have made a huge difference to stress levels in the first week of semester. (24-year-old male, commencing survey)

> I was not told that I need certain equipment such as a lab coat, for practical work until a couple of days before commencing university. I think knowing about this earlier would have made me more organised in starting. (18-year-old female, commencing survey)

These responses reflect the subtle differences in how constraints can manifest. While the first respondent expresses his stress at not knowing what texts were required, the second expresses her concern about not being organised due to her lack of awareness of the equipment required. For those students with family members who had previously attended university, there would very probably be someone for them to ask what to expect, how to prepare, what resources were needed and so on.

One mature age survey participant reflects McMillan's (2014) observation that 'access to university for the working-class students was an active and hard-won choice' (p. 1129) as she discusses her experience of not being encouraged to attend university when at school. She deferred attending until she was older because when younger she felt university was not for her:

> As I went to a public southern school, we were never told of university, or counselled about it when we were in senior years. … Speakers from universities never took our school seriously and as such did not come and speak to us about what our future could hold. (32-year-old female, commencing survey)

Her comments reflect the constraint she experienced as someone living in a poorer area (denoted by 'southern', as in South Australia many of the suburbs to the north and south of Adelaide (the state's capital) are low SES) which she believes was disregarded as a catchment for universities. She claims she was not provided with the requisite information by 'speakers from universities' and infers there were no other role models or family to provide the information or guide her to engage in further education.

5.3.2 Rural Students' Costs and Constraints Linked to Relocating

Students who relocate to the city to attend university experience the constraints linked to feelings of under-preparedness and lack of knowledge more acutely. Numerous studies (such as Elliott 2018; Hossain et al. 2012) discuss the range of costs and constraints rural students must face and overcome to succeed at university. Studies also discuss constraints linked to loneliness (Gist-Mackey et al. 2017; Maeorg 2014), lack of knowledge relating to subtle cultural differences associated with being at university or living in the city (Andres and Looker 2001; IU (IntoUniversity) 2016) and feelings of not belonging (Meuleman et al. 2014) as well as managing financial costs (Cardak et al. 2017; Nelson et al. 2017).

Although the rural students in our study discussed similar costs and constraints as other FiF students, those who relocated experienced some constraints more keenly. For example, survey responses to the question, 'What do you think will be/What was important for making your university experience successful?' show a quarter of the FiF participants from a rural location saw having friends as important, while only 7% of the total FiF students surveyed discussed friends in their response. This suggests the rural participants saw their transition and preparations as influenced by their background. In deliberately positioning themselves as rural, they appear to draw strength from it. Maeorg (2014) suggests, too, that students from non-urban locations see themselves as better able to make connections with a wide range of people. The participants reflected their need to draw on this strength, with many seeing the lack of an established set of friends as a constraint; as one student put it, 'Coming from a rural school, it was important for me to make new friends within my course' (19-year-old female, Continuing survey). Another said:

> Having friends / making friends who you can go to have a break or if stuck with a course. Adapting to moving away from home and all my close friends and family. (20-year-old female, continuing survey)

In both cases, the responses suggest that if the participants did not make friends while studying it might constrain their capacity to succeed at university. A tension therefore exists between the importance of making friends and, as indicated elsewhere in this book, the difficulty of maintaining and nurturing friendships due to time constraints.

One survey respondent discussed how ill-prepared she was for the number of students in her lectures when transitioning from a rural school to university:

> I went to a small, rural school, with 24 full-time Year 12s. So walking into a lecture theatre at 400 other students was quite a change. (18-year-old female, commencing survey)

These remarks reflect her sense of feeling constrained by lack of knowledge and understanding of the university system. A UK report exploring lower rates of participation in higher education among non-urban communities in England and Wales found 'Fears and lack of knowledge about university appear to be more acute for rural school pupils than for their urban counterparts' (IU [IntoUniversity] 2016, p. 34). Our findings suggest these experiences are exacerbated by FiF students who have no one in their primary support network who can empathise with their experiences. Identifying these fears and concerns as constraints does not necessarily position rural students within a 'deficit model', though; rather it demonstrates their capacity to identify and address potential adversity and draw strength from their home environments (Maeorg 2014). The interview discussions provide further insight into the agency and self-reliance embodied in the rural 'pioneers' who participated in our research.

Of four students we interviewed who relocated from a rural setting, three commented on finding the first few weeks difficult because they struggled with adjusting to not having family and friends nearby. However, one student felt herself to be more independent as she had travelled overseas during her gap year:

> I haven't been home for nearly nine months now, so yeah it does, I don't think family wise it doesn't affect me too much and I'm just lucky that I had good support networks here so I haven't been as homesick, and I guess I spent a lot of time overseas, so that also helps with dealing with those problems. (Sue)

Sue discusses how easy it was for her, as she was lucky to have support and didn't have to deal with the same problems as some of her peers. However, another participant who relocated discussed a subtle shift in relationships as he became more 'knowing' than his parents:

> It's kind of the first time when you can't rely on your parents, because they've also got no idea, they're kind of relying on you to know things, know how things work. (Brian)

Brian's comment reflects the difficulty of sensing the changing equilibrium in the relationship, where his parents expect him to know and understand how university works. It also reflects a sense of his parents' pride in their son, as they trust him to develop the knowledge required to succeed both at university and away from home.

5.3.3 Constraints Imposed by Family

Many of the FiF students had parents who were proud of them and saw their attendance at university as an expectation set by parents who had not had the same opportunity. Todd, an 18-year-old high school entrant, said:

> It was never explicitly talked about but it was always implicitly understood that we would go on to further study. Neither of my parents did further study, my mum finished at Year 11, it was, so it wasn't something in the family, I think it's more a cultural thing that we just would do it. And of course going to a private school also pushed that I feel.

However, that was not the case for all; for Rowan, it was his family's religion that constrained his ability to attend university:

> [I] left high school, worked pretty much in a variety of different jobs … and I'm an outlier in this particular sense in that my parents were part of a group that didn't allow group members to go to university, so until I left that church group I wasn't going to be going to university, so this is a very interesting sort of decision.

Rowan appreciates he has given up a great deal to attend university, as in leaving the church he also severed ties with his family and community. Another mature age student, Marg, discussed the way her mother's attitudes towards university attendance deterred her. She eventually did attend university, with support from her employers, while working full time. Marg reflects on how, despite having had a number of opportunities to enrol in university when younger, her mother encouraged her to go to work because she did not see the point of education:

> Initially when I was at school none of our family had ever attended university so my mum was of that old school, she had sort of left school when she was 14 and thought well what's the point, it's just deferring the point when you start working and earning money. She couldn't understand why I would want to do that, so that was why I put it off at that point. And I think, when I eventually was accepted and enrolled and went through that whole process she was still a little sceptical thinking well, you're at quite a late stage in your career, what's it going to give you at this point in your life, so she was a bit reserved at that point. She's changed now; she thinks it's quite good really.

Pete was also discouraged by familial experience. He and his stepbrother had found life at school hard, but Pete had enjoyed certain aspects of it and always wanted to attend university. Unfortunately, he was unable to do so when younger because, as he says, 'I didn't get on with home because, I was adopted and I left at 15 and had to be self-sufficient from that point on.'

During his last two years in the workforce, Pete studied part-time and after retiring continued to attend university. On discussing his family's attitudes about his attendance, he said his immediate family (wife and children) were supportive, but 'my stepbrother says it's all a load of bullshit going to uni. I'll never change that opinion and none of his children went to uni.'

While it is evident his stepbrother's opinion is not a constraint for him, there is an implication it has influenced the stepbrother's children. Reflecting on his own childhood, Pete discusses working-class dispositions and cultural capital:

> My early family background—that enculturation that teaches you what religion you are supposed to believe in or how you behave and what table manners you have—that's what we all go through—working class Sydney; sly grog dealers; SP book makers … Realistic about life.

These comments bear out O'Shea et al.'s (2017) conclusions regarding familial attitudes as constraints: 'FiF students' familial and community imaginings of university can also present as a barrier to succeeding in further education' (p. 47). For Rowan, it was the church community that formed the barrier; for Pete, it was his upbringing; and for Marg, it was her mother. All three of them managed to overcome these constraints and eventually attended university.

5.3.4 Household Responsibilities

In addition to discussing the various constraints they dealt with, the participants were also asked to identify ways they addressed the financial costs associated with attending university. For many, these were incurred in addition to the money paid in tuition fees, requiring a balancing of household needs against costs at university (O'Shea et al. 2017; Stone and O'Shea 2013). Roxie provided an explicit outline of the range of financial problems she dealt with as she completed her studies:

> I have to borrow bus fare to get to university; it's killing me, driving me nuts. I had to get food vouchers yesterday from the financial advisory office … I can't pay our bills, phone's cut off, electricity hasn't been paid, internet is about to get cut off and my car might get repossessed in a couple of weeks. (Roxie)

Roxie is clearly struggling financially as she completes her honours. Although her situation is not as difficult as Roxie's, Marg's household resources are also affected:

> I guess I'm in quite a good situation because I've got quite a good paying job, so I don't actually have a HECS debt, and my work have supported me in study leave time. But I've had to pay for my own fees, so I mean it's impacted on our household available resources but not to the point where we're eating baked beans every night. It has but I don't think it's been overly negative.

Marg suggests that while her family needed to make allowances because she paid her university fees up front rather than accruing a Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) debt (HECS is explained below), they coped with their change in financial circumstances and continued to eat well. Rowan identified a different approach to managing his financial restraints while at university. He purchased less expensive products or attempted to maintain rather than upgrade them:

> I suppose the only cost I would say is that it's the, things just don't get upgraded, that's how I view it. At the moment I'm sort of struggling with the phone that I've got and it's one that I bought for 80 dollars and I'm thinking well I'll just go and find another 80 dollar one somewhere.

As the conversation progressed, Rowan began to identify further costs including feeling limited in what he could do: 'I also am very aware of the cost of not going out and perhaps pursuing something else.' He also relates his feelings about wanting to spend more time with his daughter, who he did not look after full time, so he chose to study on certain days and work on others. Arranging his time in this way was resulting in his studies taking a long time, or as he put it: 'the cost is that it's also going to take me forever to finish the degree'. So while he initially saw the only cost as having older and dated or cheaper appliances (such as his mobile phone), he went on to identify many other costs including limited time and opportunities to pursue activities outside those of work, time spent with his daughter and university.

5.3.5 HECS Debts

In Australia, the private cost of higher education is double the cost in most OECD countries (O'Connell 2017). These costs, though, are widely dispersed, as '59% of Australian undergraduate students receive some combination of public loans and scholarships or grants, and just 12% receive neither' (OECD 2017, p. 2). The main form of public loans for tertiary education is the interest-free, income-contingent tuition fee known as the Higher Education Contribution Scheme-Higher Education Loan Program (HECS-HELP). Although it has undergone several changes since its introduction in 1989, the fee's basic principles have remained the same. Provided students meet residence or citizenship requirements and are enrolled in an appropriate university qualification they may apply for a HECS-HELP loan to pay their university fees. Other government assistance schemes (with varying eligibility requirements) are available to cover textbooks or living costs. Despite the financial assistance available to them, as indicated by O'Shea et al. (2016): FiF 'students are not only disadvantaged in terms of unequal access to financial resources but also they may be particularly averse to taking on student debt' (p. 2).

The participants in our study were studying at university and had therefore taken on the debt. In discussing financial costs and constraints, they associated these with both study and living expenses. Study expenses explicitly refer to the cost of the university fees and the HECS debt as well as the cost of buying books, equipment and other resources.

A number of participants were keenly aware they would not be able to attend university if they could not take advantage of the HECS. Brendon (a 17-year-old male, entered from high school) suggests that as a FiF student HECS is vital. He indicates he has deferred paying off the loan and will repay it once he has graduated:

> It's all on HECS so, so how do you mean by deferring HECS? … [I'll pay] when I graduate through HECS we just don't have the finances early and I think most first in family students would probably be in a similar boat.

Brendon draws attention to his status as a FiF student and suggests HECS provides the opportunity for this group to attend university. He further explains his appreciation of HECS as providing equal opportunities for all:

> I think the HECS thing it's very helpful because everyone should be entitled to have a chance for an education I think and that's a very good.

Brendon's response suggests he could not have considered university if he was not able to defer the debt, implying that both the cost of the degree and his position as a FiF student would have constrained his attendance. Comments from other participants support his declaration that most FiF students would be in a similar position and would need to defer the HECS repayment.

Travis, a 20-year-old, male who attended university following two gap years and false starts at completing various Technical and Further Education (TAFE) qualifications, had a pragmatic view regarding the importance of further education:

> … living in the north, where the youth unemployment rate is at 53%, it's like 'well not everyone can afford to go to TAFE or uni even if there is HECS' … [University is] important because society tells us it's important. If I could go out of high school and get a well-paying job and get a career out of it, I would have. But I realised at a young age that's not going to happen.

Travis is also reflecting on his experience as influenced by his low SES (depicted by his reference to 'the north'). For him, attending university and gaining a qualification confront the constraints of his background, increasing his opportunities to escape unemployment and acquire a rewarding career.

An original aim of introducing HECS related to 'expanding the capacity and effectiveness of the higher education sector' (Jackson 2000). A number of authors have discussed difficulties with HECs (Larkins and Marshman 2017; Marks 2009; Rea 2016), and Birch and Miller (2008) suggest 'the scheme has done little to improve the proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds actually attending university' (p. 35). However, as discussed above, many of the students in our study would not have attended university had they not been able to acquire a government loan to do so. While they believed attending university would benefit them (including financially), they were also mindful of the expenses associated with attending and that HECS was not the only financial cost they would incur.

5.3.6 Costs Associated with Purchasing Curricula Requirements

Other financial costs discussed by participants included those associated with purchasing texts, printing, equipment and stationery. While a number of participants identified concerns regarding the costs of textbooks, many found ways of reducing those costs. Brian, for instance, considered himself lucky because he uses the library and borrows what he needs from there rather than purchasing textbooks:

> They don't want you to just to buy one it's a lot of them, but luckily I find myself in the library a bit, it sort of helps out, and you don't always have to buy them if you see that you can get other resources elsewhere, but generally it does cost a bit to buy the textbooks.

In saying he is lucky to use the library, Brian implies he discovered it by accident. Cory was not as fortunate, but at the end of his first year, he realised he did not need to purchase all of the texts:

> I pay for all of my textbooks … in first year it seemed like you had to buy all the books, but now I realise most of the time you don't have to. And you can always not buy it at first and then see if you need it later on in the semester and then buy it. So yeah it was a pretty expensive first year I think.

Like many of their FiF counterparts, neither of these students had family members to recommend they use the library or purchase texts on an 'as needed' basis. They both relied on acquiring this knowledge through their own experience, either of 'luck' or of spending money on texts which remained unread.

5.4 Conclusion

It is evident from the discussions presented here that those students who are the first member of their family to attend university face a range of costs and constraints as they enter and traverse their years of university study. While many of their experiences may be similar to students from other equity groups, the students themselves identify many of the constraints and costs as a corollary of their status as FiF students. They do not see that status in itself as a barrier, but at times they reflect on it as an additional characteristic of their personal circumstances, and as something that influences who they are and how they see themselves in the world. Many of these students persisted and succeeded in finding ways to address the costs and constraints they had initially faced and went on to complete their studies, demonstrating their resilience.

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Chapter 6
Health and Wellbeing

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Balancing the pressures of work, study, family life, socialising and other factors. Also, ensuring good health and sleeping patterns will be important for me to be successful. (18-year-old male, commencing survey)
I think physically, I haven't been doing as much exercise as I'd like in the year, but I think I kept managing my mental wellbeing … Just maintaining some social relationships has helped me maintain happiness and those sorts of things. (Brendon)

6.1 Introduction

One of the key factors of interest in the research culminating in this book was the impact studying at university has on FiF students' health and wellbeing. Our understandings of health and wellbeing used within our projects incorporated not only physical and mental health but also the social and emotional dimensions of wellbeing. Based on the World Health Organisation (2011) definition, health and wellbeing is taken to mean more than just the mere absence of disease and infirmity, rather it refers to a state of physical, mental and social wellbeing that enables each individual to realise their full potential, to cope with the normal stresses of life, to be able to work productively and fruitfully, and finally, to be able to make a contribution to their community. As FiF students enter university and develop their identity as learners and future professionals, they do so within the context of the convoluted, and often difficult to interpret, sociocultural relationships and practices that are embedded within the university environment (Thomas 2002).

The multidimensional contextual changes they need to navigate disrupt their normal routines and habitual practices, often resulting in reduced physical activity (Allom et al. 2016). As noted in Chap. 1, many FiF students lack the social and cultural supports and advice that intergenerational students' gain from family

S. King et al., *The Experience of Being First in Family at University*,
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members and they are effectively left to negotiate their new environment in isolation (Davis 2010; Brouwer et al. 2016). Therefore, it is important to recognise that the new university learning context may also have a significant impact on FiF students' broader sociocultural identity, health and wellbeing (Davis 2010; Allom et al. 2016; Bray and Born 2004).

The growing concern around increasing rates of mental health issues among university students (Baik et al. 2015; Eisenberg et al. 2009; Stallman 2010; Stallman et al. 2019; Twenge et al. 2010) has necessitated changes to the way that support is provided. There is an increasing focus on research outputs dedicated to providing strategies and advice to enhance student health and wellbeing (e.g. the Orygen Report on the Mental Health of Australian University Students (2017) and the 'International Association for University Health and Wellbeing' and 'Enhancing Student Wellbeing' (Baik and Larcombe (2016) websites). Furthermore, there is a clear mandate from the Australian Higher Education Standards Panel that all higher education providers have a mental health strategy and implementation plan in place, reinforcing the notion that mental health is everyone's responsibility and needs to be embedded within the core business of higher education delivery (Orygen 2017).

6.2 What We Know from Previous Research

Previous research has shown that university students commonly experience a decline in their overall health and wellbeing during their time at university. When compared to their age-matched peers in the workforce, university students report decreases in physical activity, increases in recreational drug use and poor dietary practices (Allom et al. 2016; Czyzewska and McKenzie 2016; Guiney and Machado 2013; Hallett et al. 2012; Kypri et al. 2005; Leslie et al. 1999). In addition, students also experience higher levels of psychological distress compared to their non-university peers (Bewick et al. 2010; Stallman 2010). Students with diverse backgrounds, such as FiF students, those from low SES areas and mature age or relocating students, are more at risk of experiencing these negative health outcomes (see Bitsika et al. 2010; Czyzewska and McKenzie 2016; Garriott and Nisle 2017; Lewis et al. 2007; Von et al. 2004), particularly in their first year of transitioning to university study (Bray and Born 2004).

This chapter explores both the survey and interview data to uncover the factors that FiF students perceived as having the greatest impact on their health and mental wellbeing. What was apparent in these data sets was that the first year of transition was often felt to be the hardest, with many of the FiF students commenting that they felt unprepared for university study, that they felt nervous or worried about the standards of work or what to expect. Comments such as 'I am very nervous and anxious about what lies ahead' (17-year-old female); and 'I am worried about the workload and difficulty' (18-year-old male) were frequent in the FiF commencing students' survey responses.

The school leaver FiF students, in particular, were worried about how they would manage the transition from a structured school learning environment to the more self-directed learning environment common in universities.

> I am not sure how to be independent; schools are very structured and non-flexible. This from what I hear is completely different from university study. I'm worried that I may just miss an assignment; which at school wouldn't happen when you have teachers almost 'holding your hand' the whole way, with second chances and such. (18-year-old male, commencing survey)

> As is expected many students are nervous about starting university and want all the information they can get about their classes etc. In high school we, as the students, are taken care of in every aspect of our learning and always informed about everything to do with our school life. Where as in university we are thrown in the deep end and in many cases have to find out information ourselves. (18-year-old female, commencing survey)

It is interesting to note the metaphors used by these students to describe their transition experiences: phrases such as no longer having someone to 'hold their hand' and being 'thrown in the deep end' demonstrate notions of being vulnerable and needing to fend for oneself to either sink or swim (Luzeckyj et al. 2017). As has been long argued by McInnis et al. (1995), this shift to personal responsibility for learning is one of the major transition hurdles for first year students.

Stone and O'Shea (2012) also found that students from diverse backgrounds struggle and feel an overwhelming sense of personal responsibility to manage their transition to higher education, tending to blame themselves if they are not able to cope, thus adding pressure to an already stressful situation. Rather than the onus being solely on the student to manage this transition process, institutions, teaching staff and peer mentors can help by providing connecting links to resources and support, thereby helping students to build their sense of belonging during this critical transition period (Davis 2010; Kift et al. 2010). As other researchers have proposed, working 'with' rather than 'on' FiF students, breaking down some of the traditional hierarchical barriers between teaching staff and students, and building peer supports, can enable FiF students to better integrate and flourish at university (Bell and Santamaria 2018; O'Shea 2016).

6.3 Managing Time Is Complex

Another factor frequently cited by students as negatively impacting on their health and wellbeing was trying to balance the competing demands of study, work and personal commitments. The additional hours allocated to study in their already busy lives often meant that time previously allocated to sport and exercise was jeopardised (Leslie et al. 1999).

> Initially I struggled because I couldn't find a 'healthy' balance between my employment, spending time with friends, eating healthy, study and exercise. After the first term I started to learn you have to say 'no' at times and remember your priorities. (19-year-old female, continuing survey)

Certain aspects of students' lives are not readily 'modifiable' in terms of time, for example, students have little choice about the length of their commute time to university.

> It hasn't been all that brilliant thus far. I live nearly 60 kms away from uni and work 25+ hours per week. Thought I was Superman and could manage everything. Found out I wasn't. Needed to change the balance between work/uni/social life, however this is much easier said than done. (24-year-old male, continuing survey)

Many FiF students, like this mature age student, work to support themselves through university and therefore have reduced flexibility in regard to managing their timetable and commitments. One of the FiF interviewees, Denise, spoke at length as to how inflexible some academic staff were in accommodating these needs, penalising the students when they could not attend class despite the student completing the work and managing the coursework:

> I get offended when I'm marked or punished for non-tutorial attendance. Like, I'm committed. I'm here. The fact that I'm here every day shows that I'm committed, that I come to your lecture and know about a tute. But just sometimes life gets in the way, and then I'm penalised points for not coming to a tute. So even though there's an array of five days in the week, you just can't get there sometimes. I'm a mature aged student, that's commitment enough. I'm here four years on and I am looking at another four years, so that to me is commitment, surely that should count somewhere rather than deducting points?

This performative measurement of attendance at class, used as a proxy measure of commitment, reduces Denise's evident long-term and ongoing dedication to her education as mere tokenistic attendance. Institutions need to be wary of acceding to the growing performative culture that pervades the modern university in this neoliberal era (Blackmore 2009). Without meaning to, educators can too easily devalue the learners' experience as a result of being unaware of their lives and lived experiences, thereby disillusioning FiF students and sending them down the path to disengagement and withdrawal.

6.4 Maintaining Health and Wellbeing

When asked directly what it takes to maintain their health and wellbeing, the FiF students in this study were remarkably well informed. They understood the need for balance across not only their physical health but also their mental wellbeing and social and emotional relationships with friends and family. When asked within the commencing survey what was required to be successful at university, FiF students frequently highlighted the need for time management and balancing competing demands in order to maintain their health and wellbeing.

> Putting my education first before other commitments while maintaining a healthy amount of social/relaxation time. (23-year-old female, commencing survey)

> Maintaining a healthy balance between study, work, sport and exercise, nutrition and social life. Also motivation. I need to maintain a set of goals that are achievable (with rewards!) so that I continue to work hard. (17-year-old female, commencing survey)

> Well-structured weeks. Correct preparation, and maintaining exercise. (21-year-old male, commencing survey)

As can be seen by these responses, students were quite conversant as to what is required to sustain their health and wellbeing: staying fit, eating well, taking time out to relax and maintaining adequate sleep. However, when these concepts were explored in more detail in the interviews with the continuing FiF students, it was very apparent that when study pressures mount, the behavioural responses most frequently applied were the very ones that would harm their health. In these circumstances, students prioritised their study over eating well, sleeping and keeping up their physical activity.

> I probably don't exercise as much as I used to. (Marg)
>
> I really loved squash when I was in [country town] and unfortunately the pressures of uni meant that in my first year I couldn't get back into it because there was just not enough time and obviously I didn't know many other people who played squash here. (Brian)

6.5 Health and Wellbeing not the Highest Priority

A central theme throughout both the survey and interview data was that the one aspect of their lives that FiF students commonly neglect is their health and wellbeing. Attending classes and self-directed study meant that the time that had been previously allocated to playing sport or attending the gym was reallocated.

> In early high school I was playing soccer and I was just keeping fit in general. And then after that I was still just going for runs to keep fit, but at uni it's sort of very on and off. I'll get into a good routine and then we have heaps of assignments due and then I'll just stop and I struggle to get back into the routine again. (Cory)

For those FiF students who were also doing paid work, there was the additional stress of trying to find time to sustain relationships with family and friends. This further reduced the time available to preserve health and wellbeing.

> My one cost that I regret is my fitness. Before I started uni I went to the gym about three to five times a week, I had personal training, I ate really well. The first two years of uni was really trying to understand what to do and I've finally gotten to that point where I go 'yeah, I just know what to expect'. But being so frantic to understand meant that I was either working or I was studying and there was a lot more studying than what I'm doing now. So, it was either work or study or it was what time I could give to friends, family, partner. That didn't leave a lot of room for cleaning the house, for going to the gym, for cooking healthy meals, for going to the shops. I went to the deli a lot to get my lunches so I could then rush back and do what I need to do. I've gone from a size ten to a size 14, so it really has been a cost to my fitness and it's so annoying because it's harder to work back. (Jen)

As Jen describes, the problems she had managing study alongside household chores and maintaining relationships meant that she had to sacrifice time spent on exercise in order to juggle health, work, study and wellbeing. Others struggled to

strike the balance between their various commitments, with adequate sleep being one of the first factors to suffer.

> [the thing I struggle with the most] is definitely time management, study and sleep management. Some lab reports have taken me around six hours to complete, so it is difficult to get them completed by the day after the lab with such a heavy workload and get sufficient sleep. (23-year-old female, continuing survey)

Managing time for adequate sleep was a particular issue for students who needed to work in order to pay the rent and support themselves. As Denise notes below, the only way she could manage the workload was to get up early before work to do her study:

> I started temp work selling insurance … like full-time work. But then I would find it hard to come home and study, but I had to make the temp job work. So I might do four or five weeks of full-time work and admin and I'd get up between 4 and 7 am and study and do my assignments, and then go to work.

Insufficient or irregular sleep patterns can have detrimental effects on students' cognition and learning (Curcio et al. 2006; Trockel et al. 2000) as well as on their physical and psychological health (Lund et al. 2010). Research has confirmed that sleep problems in students have been linked with increases in symptoms of anxiety and depression (Alfano et al. 2009). Maintaining adequate sleep patterns, therefore, is a significant protective behaviour for not only sustaining students' health and wellbeing but also supporting their academic success.

6.6 Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Students' social and emotional wellbeing is also a meaningful factor in maintaining their overall health and wellbeing, and this was often the most cited stressor in both survey and interview data. Many of the FiF students commented that the first year of transition to university was compounded with feelings of anxiety and distress with students commenting that they felt overwhelmed when trying to find a balance between their study, work and social lives. Interview participants reflecting on their first year spoke of feeling socially isolated, uncertain and even physically displaced in this new environment:

> The transition was hard. I knew how to make friends, but it was just harder to make friends that, you know were obviously not in the same group as you, like breaking into a new group or something like that. In my first few weeks I was focused on finding where all the toilets were in all the buildings and stuff, and the coffee shop. I did a library tour and for the rest of my orientation I just wandered, did a big wander around. It took me a few days to circumnavigate the whole place, to get my bearings. I walked around with a map for at least three weeks, but I did a lot of it on my own. (Denise)

Feelings of isolation and dislocation were often exacerbated for the FiF students who had to relocate from the country to the city to attend university, as they had the additional stress of leaving family, friends and their community support structures:

> It was a massive first year really. And it was quite scary too because I moved three hours away from home to come [to uni] and my partner was away in the defence force and I had no friends and it was a big year. The first few weeks were difficult, I was living with another friend, but she wasn't like a 'best friend' or anything. So just in that first year I didn't have that kind of support network behind me. But then second year came round and I made more friends at uni. It probably was only halfway through first year that I felt really part of uni and really comfortable. (Alison)

The FiF students interviewed in this study had all transitioned through this difficult first year and subsequently completed a minimum of three years' study. We were not able to explore the experiences of those students who were not able to survive this transition period other than where they made reference to their personal story in the anonymous survey questions. One such story was that of the following FiF student who left her country home to attend university but found the transition experience to be so overwhelming that she made the decision to leave and defer her university study for a further year:

> I made a last-minute decision to start university straight out of school in 2010 and only lasted two weeks before becoming completely scared and not being able to cope, resulting in deferring. I believe this is because High School does not prepare you for university very well at all. I was under the impression that uni was not going to be as difficult as it was when I first arrived as it is perceived in the wrong way by the general public. As we get a nice range of holidays throughout the year (which are much needed), university is stereotypically known as being somewhat easy although this definitely was not the case, especially in a highly demanding course (physiotherapy).

Like many other students in our initial first year expectations and experiences project (Brinkworth et al. 2013), this student felt that high school had not adequately prepared her for university study. As she continued in her survey response, she found the changes in class size and online learning tasks to be daunting, challenging her belief that university would be easy:

> After being taught face to face throughout my schooling life and having relationships with teachers in classes with 30 students on average and then arriving to a class with 600+ students, learning over the internet as there were not many contact hours, not knowing many people, the teachers or campus was extremely daunting, not to mention moving 400 km away from my family. Country, interstate and international students are far more disadvantaged in my opinion (to begin with during the adaption stage) which should be taken into consideration. In hindsight it's not as bad as it seems at the time but from experience, the adaption period is extremely difficult and hard to get through. Perhaps having a thorough tour of the campus would help and also allowing students to familiarise themselves with the [uni] website rather than stacking up a heap of work and scaring them off. (19-year-old female, continuing survey)

The sense of dislocation experienced by relocating students reinforces the notion that adapting to the new university environment is very complex and can initiate fear of the unknown to such a degree that FiF students retreat to the safety of the known. The risk of not succeeding or being able to cope is so overwhelming that it can lead to these students leaving the institution. As Wood et al. (2018) suggest, universities should be proactive in preparing future students for their studies, providing them with realistic information about what university study will be like and connecting commencing students with the services they need to succeed.

Some of the prevailing structures and social conditions inherent in our university learning environments impose ongoing risks to students' health and wellbeing. Many students choose not to disclose mental health issues, afraid of the perceived stigma associated with mental ill-health. The rates of mental health issues continue to rise, and university counselling services report an increase in both the complexity and severity of presenting cases (Orygen 2017; Stallman 2010; Twenge et al. 2010). Further compounding this problem is a lack of understanding about the seriousness of these conditions and limited funding and training for key staff to respond effectively (Orygen 2017). There is a need for coordinated and evidence-based policies and strategies to be embedded across higher education institutions so that student health and wellbeing is both monitored and effectively supported.

6.7 The Significance of Friends

Before embarking on our initial study on first year students' expectations and experiences (Brinkworth et al. 2013), we had not realised that friendship would become such a dominant theme. Further examination of this survey data revealed that many students considered having a network of good friends to be critical to their success at university. Statements such as 'It's important to form friendships in the first year and gain a friendship group' and 'Close buddies really helped, I don't know what I would have done without them' permeated the survey responses. We therefore explored this notion further in the interviews with the FiF students who had successfully completed a minimum of three years' study. It was encouraging to note that while these students often started university with few friends, their initial feelings of disconnection and loneliness were relatively short-lived. Many commented that they eventually developed friendships and connections with the new student community which sustained them throughout their ongoing study:

> In first year I didn't really make many new friends as I didn't have any friends that were doing my degree. But then second year onwards, I made lots of friends after that. (Cory)

A number of the interviewees spoke at length about how difficult the first few weeks were, but they also commented that establishing a broader network of friends sustained them. Alison, like the survey student mentioned above, having relocated from the country to attend university, found the first few difficult weeks so difficult that she seriously considered leaving. The main reason that she stayed was that some of her friends also stayed on:

> [I considered leaving] midway through first year just because I didn't enjoy first year. Purely the social side … and I thought 'oh this isn't going to get any better'. Like, first year was pretty rough and so I considered [leaving] then. But then all my friends stayed, so I thought I might as well give it a crack and second year was just so much easier.

Building positive social relationships has been shown to be a strong predictor of psychological wellbeing (Baik et al. 2015; Chow 2007) and where rates of mental

health issues are increasing in our student population (Kitzrow 2003; Orygen 2017) it is vital to develop programs that encourage and support student's social integration into the academic community (Davis 2010; Tucker 1999). As Shushok (2008) suggests, 'the more students find friendship, the more likely they are to learn' (p. 20).

When Alison reflected on those first few weeks at university after moving down from the country to study in the city, she commented that if she could give her younger self any advice it would have been:

> I would tell myself just to 'hang in there, hang in there and it will get so much better, it gets so much easier. Eat properly'. I didn't eat well most of that first year. I'd just say 'yeah it's going to be scary but it will benefit you in so many ways' like I said. You learn so much knowledge at uni and it will supply you with the skills you need for life, those other life skills that you don't get unless you move out of home. I think it is just so important.

In order to reduce attrition and thus improve retention, it is essential that students are supported through these early stages of acculturation into their new learning environment. Creating and sustaining effective connections with their peers has been shown to significantly improve the transition experience for first year students (Tinto 1997; Thomas 2002; Corwin and Cintrón 2011). Setting up structures within the first year curriculum can help students to build the social networks and establish the friendships with their peers they need to survive and flourish (Scanlon et al. 2007; Davis 2010).

Social support not only influences students' social and emotional wellbeing but may also be a critical factor in facilitating FiF students' continuation of physical activity. The multidimensional contextual changes that FiF students undergo when commencing university disrupts their contextually situated habitual behaviours; these behaviours then become subject to more conscious rational thought as they are integrated into their everyday routines (Verplanken and Melkevik 2008). As shown by the FiF students in this study, when time pressures mount and stress increases, the effort to re-establish these normal patterns of healthy behaviour becomes insurmountable and the consequence is a reduction in physical activity, healthy sleep patterns and good eating habits, with the corresponding negative impact on health and wellbeing. (Bray and Born 2004; Lund et al. 2010; Von et al. 2004).

6.8 Conclusion

The factors affecting health and wellbeing are complex and multifactorial. When students commence university, they disrupt their previous everyday habits and associations with community, family and friends. Indeed, it has been argued that the very nature of the university experience increases the risk of psychological distress (Orygen 2017). Students often experience financial stress, social isolation from moving away from family and friends, poor diet and reduction in physical activity and pressure to balance the competing demands of work and study responsibilities. Feelings of loneliness, alienation, anxiety and distress are frequently reported (King et al.

2011; Palmer and Puri 2006) with students believing they are individually responsible for managing this transition and maintaining their health and wellbeing.

Successful transition and retention, particularly for FiF students, are best enabled through 'whole-of-institution' approaches, wherein academic and professional staff collaborate to design and deliver wellbeing strategies. Many universities are now implementing mental health and wellbeing programs, but they are often included as extracurricular activities. Normalising and promoting support structures within the curriculum is the best way to ensure that all students are aware of these supports (Kift et al. 2010; Wood et al. 2018). Strategies such as providing funding to deliver training and support to the tutors and administrative staff who frequently interact with students can help to identify issues early and improve the overall effectiveness of mental health support programs (Orygen 2017). Other strategies include embedding easy access to evidence-based online interventions within student portals, for example, web-based tools for developing coping skills which have been shown to be effective in minimising distress and improving learning outcomes (Stallman et al. 2019).

So whilst it is generally accepted that university provides students with pathways for future employment and personal development, it is also important to understand that being at university places students under significant stress which has the potential to seriously impair their health and wellbeing and hamper their success (Bray and Born 2004; Eisenberg et al. 2009; Guiney and Machado 2013; Meuleman et al. 2014). Maintaining silence on these issues costs students, institutions and society more broadly with failure, attrition and loss of future potential through course non-completion. Recognising that universities can be key settings for early intervention and prevention of health and wellbeing issues opens up opportunities to embed strategies that enables all students, including FiF students, to thrive and succeed now and into the future.

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Chapter 7
Forming and Transforming Identity

Sharron King, Ben McCann and Ann Luzeckyj

I do probably have a different perspective on uni life I suppose, and what it's like to be a uni student … I'm proud to be able to say 'I'm 44 years old and I'm a uni student'. (Kerry)
I would say I'm a dedicated student in so far as that I don't just want to get a degree, I want to be able develop skills along the way … I want to develop as a person, I want to read more, and educate myself. (Brian)

7.1 Introduction

FiF students are diverse not only in terms of age and previous life experiences but also in terms of how these factors shape their personal expectations and belief in their ability to achieve at university. This chapter explores the ways in which FiF students' self-image or identity is transformed as a result of their attendance at university and how the multidimensional and interconnected nature of such an experience shapes the students' self-perceptions and their day-to-day lives as well as their relationships with significant others.

For the FiF students in this study, the notion of 'becoming a student' was a profound change from their traditional family experience. By starting university, they were not only heralding a new pathway in their familial culture, pioneering new opportunities and future professional prospects but also challenging previous expectations and ways of being. Ways knowing shape student interactions and experience, and where higher education has not been a part of a student's habitus, they may feel unable to fit in at university (Jehangir 2010; Thomas 2002). Most of the FiF students in this study felt that university was not a place where they would readily belong.

This sense of 'not belonging' was expressed in different ways. Echoing the findings of recent research on the influence of class on the FiF student experience

S. King et al., *The Experience of Being First in Family at University*,
SpringerBriefs in Education,https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0921-6_7

(Hinz et al. 2016; Rice et al. 2017; Southgate et al. 2017), Marg felt university was 'not a place for blue collar families':

> Growing up I didn't even really know what university was, and then when I wanted to go, my mum was saying 'You should really go and get a job and start earning and buy a house …' Our family saw university as being for rich people, not for us. We were not in that kind of class.

For others, their sense of 'not belonging' was not explicitly linked to class and manifested as self-doubt:

> I didn't ever necessarily think I would ever go to uni. I really didn't think I was honestly capable of doing that. (Kerry)
>
> I've always wondered, like I never really applied myself at school and there was always that notion of 'what if I did actually try, like am I really smart? Am I smart enough to go to university?' Not achieving a great deal in Year 12 didn't make me feel very smart for a lot of years, so it's kind of like a 'redemption' for me. (Denise)

7.2 The Influence of Others

Students also recounted interactions with 'significant others', such as family members, close friends, employers or colleagues, who challenged their entitlement to belong at university. In some cases, this was through the explicit questioning of either their ability or the actual worth of attending university. Sometimes, the challenge was implicit in the relationship between parties. For instance, Roxie's manager jibed, 'You'll never get in' implying that there was no chance that Roxie would be accepted into university, and Marg's mother asked, 'What's the point? … Is this going to give you more money?'

Pitman (2013, p. 36) observes that an autobiographical research methodology provides participants with an opportunity to 'foreground their own agency' in the changes that occur in their lives. In this study, the FiF students' accounts implicitly highlighted their agency in terms of their control or their choices. In response to her boss's remarks, Roxie describes how she changed her university application preferences to increase her chances of acceptance while both Marg and Denise articulated their decisions in terms of stepping outside of their 'mould' and proving their intellectual capability to their families as well as to themselves.

Most of the FiF students, however, were influenced by a significant other in their life who believed in their ability to succeed at university. Frequently, these 'others' were people who had previous tertiary experience and therefore had the appropriate 'kudos' in the student's eyes to make a credible judgment as to their chance of success. For Jen, her readiness to consider university was due to a culmination of factors at the time, including the encouragement of her boss, believing in herself and having performed well under particular stresses in her job. Jen expressed great respect for her boss, who had worked at a high level in government before becoming

a consultant, adding 'I think at the time my feeling was, if someone like her thought I could do well, then maybe it was worth doing it.'

Likewise, Rowan, who was strongly encouraged to enrol at university by his aunt, explained his receptiveness to her in terms of her educational attainment: '(She's) done a psychology degree at ANU [Australian National University], and she did her MBA … she's always encouraged me to just keep working at it.'

The absence of an 'educational memory' within immediate family, however, should not necessarily be understood as signifying that the desire to participate in education is extraneous to an individual's self-conception or representation. O'Shea (2016, p. 71) argues that FiF students (and their families) have 'aspirational capital' that 'provides the basis for a culture of possibility'. That is, dreams of possibilities may materialise as encouragement and support, from family members, to seriously consider attending university. This was true for Gail, whose parents advocated the importance of a university education, and also for Carl, a rural student who relocated to attend university. Carl's ambition to start university was fostered by his mother who always believed that he and his brothers could do well: 'My mum is always going on about how smart us boys are'. And although Kerry carried great self-doubt about her ability to succeed at university, the value her mother placed on education encouraged her:

> My mum was absolutely rapt when I got into uni. I didn't realise at the time. She was a very intelligent woman—she was actually dux of her form during her schooling in Victoria. She wanted to go to university and her family didn't want her to go. She didn't tell me this until I pretty much started at university. She basically, as we were growing up, said that she had left school and she just went and got a job. But her dream had always been to go to university, so when I told her that I was enrolled and been accepted, she was just over the moon because it's what she had always wanted to do.

As discussed in the introduction to this book, FiF students have been referred to as 'higher education pioneers' (Greenwald 2012; McInnis et al. 1995), often demonstrating a stronger sense of purpose and greater academic application than their intergenerational peers who have had the benefits of their parents' insight and experience of tertiary education systems. The FiF students in this study unconsciously aligned themselves with this pioneering spirit. They recognised that academic success could not be taken for granted, describing themselves as 'self-disciplined' and 'hard workers'.

> I'm a hard worker definitely, much more than like—I don't like to say it, but there are a lot of people who just kind of fly through and don't do much, and if I'm there, I might as well be doing my job properly. And when I know I've got stuff to be done, I will sit down and knuckle down and get it done. (Carl)

> My biggest strength is self-discipline. If I've got a job to do, I know what I've got to do, and I don't need to be told what to do. I guess it's just been in my nature, it's always been like that. And I've got a good work ethic, I like to work hard because I only feel satisfied when I know that I've had to work for something, because that's where I draw my pleasure from essentially, my satisfaction. (Todd)

'Doing my job properly' was important to many of the students like Carl and Todd, for whom applying their work ethic to their studies was satisfying, a reflection of

their personal standards or experiences that preceded their university experience. By drawing on this familial and experiential capital, the agency of these FiF students was realised in their emerging student-learner identities in terms of fulfilling long-held personal aspirations, of being inspired by significant others, or of active or passive resistance to views held by significant others.

7.3 Multiple Identities/Multifaceted Lives

Many of the FiF students identified as having dual or multiple identities. They did not feel that being a student was a singular role—rather it was another part of their life and, sometimes, secondary to their other identity, such as being a parent, a worker or a rural person. The individual's perception of what it meant to be a student influenced the extent that they privileged or prioritised their student identity compared to the others. Some were proud of their student identity and used it to add value to their conception of self. Alison and Travis, younger school leaver FiF students, readily used this descriptor:

> When they ask me what I do, I tell them 'I'm a student', just because I don't really have a great job, I guess. I'm proud of the fact that I'm a student. I think a lot of people don't take the opportunity, and I'm glad I did. (Alison)

> If I'm talking to someone professionally, yes. If I'm meeting someone for the first time … eventually the topic would come out, 'Oh, what do you do in your spare time?' and I'll say, 'Oh, I go to uni' kind of thing. I see it as a very important part of my life. If it's someone I get to know, they should be aware that I go to uni. (Travis)

Some perceived that identifying as a student may occasion negative social consequences, and a number of the students in this study preferred not to use the term 'student' as their primary identifier. For example, Todd, who initially did not feel a sense of belonging at university, gave no priority to his student identity over other identities such as volunteer, family member, sales assistant and marathon runner:

> I just find saying 'I'm a student' gives these impressions of just this 'la-di-da life' and it's all very easy, and that kind of stuff, and I don't like having that perception because I think it takes away from the effort you do put into things. (Todd)

For Jen, who frequently 'forgot to mention' the fact that she was studying when out on social occasions, it was about not wanting to be equated with younger, less experienced students:

> I think of university students as 18 to 23 year-olds. I'm not 18 to 23 years old … I'm a mature age student, so there's a separate classification, so I just tend to more think about work, my role, when I'm speaking to people. (Jen)

The multiple contexts in which individuals must engage, means identity is situated and individuals consider themselves as having many different selves (Scanlon et al. 2007). Some, like Denise and Jen described themselves as having 'multiple

personalities', explaining how they could 'switch off and switch on' between them. Jen described having four 'sides' to her identity that she dissociates from each other:

> When I'm at work I'm in that space of, I'm very lucky, it's very good work … but for those eight hours I am doing what needs to be done, I'm not thinking about that other side. When I'm at uni, it's uni stuff. So there's probably about four sides, uni, work, friends and family in one group, and then my partner gets just a blend of the other lot.

Though they described themselves as having dual or multiple identities, the students' accounts suggest some consistent agentic responses across identities, suggesting control and/or choice. For example, Denise observed that while she is 'like the life of the party and the attention seeker' with her group of friends outside of university, she is shy when it comes to group work and establishing friendships at university. That said, she overcame her shyness at university to be able to have rigorous discussions on her subject of interest, psychology, with fellow students. While Jen views the different sides of her life as being discrete roles, she admitted infusing an intellectual curiosity across all:

> But yes, I'm … how to describe it? There's still an aspect of me always asking questions, so whether that's in a tute or at work or with a friend to try and understand more, so there's a running thread.

Being able to define the boundaries between identities is not always straightforward and choice, or control, is sacrificed to some extent in the face of stressful 'contests' between a student's aspirations, values, resources and experiences. For example, Kerry experienced conflict between her different identities as a FiF student, mother and worker. She had found it frustrating to have given up a well-paying job when she had children, and she was relishing the notion that she was developing other skills at university. Study added complexity to her life and, as a consequence, she was very busy but proud to tell people that she was a university student:

> I think, also, at the end of next year when I finish my study, I'm going to miss saying to people 'Oh yeah, and I'm at uni'. I'm actually proud of that. I'm proud to be able to say 'I'm 44 years old and I'm a uni student'. I actually like that; it's nice not to just be known just as—and I know it sounds dreadful because I do love my children terribly—but it's nice to be known as something other than just a mum who works.

Women students in higher education often experience positive and negative impacts of family commitments (Leppel 2002), and this is particularly so for women who are the first member of their family to attend university. Typically, taking time out from the family to study frequently causes anxiety and guilt for mothers, notwithstanding that they often take little or no time for their own leisure (Stone and O'Shea 2012; O'Shea 2015). While Kerry '[loved] being a mum', motherhood was not her whole identity, and the binary of these two significant identities, student and mother, caused conflict for her when she considered the impact on her children.

> I'm thinking, 'Have I actually decided to study right in the best years of their life and maybe given too much of my time to study rather than to them?' And I don't know—I'm still actually grappling with that thought myself … Am I going to look back and go 'Oh, I really should have …'—we didn't have the overseas holidays and things that we were going to do

> in the school holidays because I had assignments to do and those sorts of things, but then I look on the other hand that I'm probably instilling them with some really good values. (Kerry)

She went on to explain that in order to spend time with her children she sacrificed other aspects of her life:

> It's not like I'm not there—it's not like I'm working two jobs, studying and then I'm out with my friends, and I'm never home with them. I will forego going out with those other people because I want to be home with the kids and things. So we still, as a family, we spend a lot of time together.

With no higher education experiential capital to draw on, these FiF students create space for a student identity alongside their various other identities: parent, friend, colleague or other. By describing their student identity as something additional to their other identity, or identities, the emergent nature of identity is highlighted. Managing and defining boundaries of their multifaceted selves is a dialectic of 'becoming', reflecting individual choice and control to negotiate different contexts. However, this is influenced by what they believe that identity incorporates.

7.4 (Pre-)Conceptions of Student Identity, Experience and Belonging

Prior to participating at university, students form their understandings of university and what it is to be a student based on past experiences, but for FiF students these conceptions are not verified through direct familial experience of university. Their knowledge is 'decontextualised' and 'naïve', making their transition into university problematic (Scanlon et al. 2007). A number of the FiF students spoke of not feeling like a 'real' university student, contrasting their experience to a perceived or imagined reality of what student life is like. Sue, for example, spoke of not being a 'proper university student' as she did not experience living in residence, going to parties or being financially restricted. Similarly, for Kerry the university campus was not how she had imagined it would be, nor was student life as frequently portrayed in the media, with students meeting to socialise on lawns outside old buildings or in a student bar. Even though Todd rejected the 'student' label, this opposition was based on a view very much modelled in media portrayals:

> I don't know why that is though, I just feel like when I see someone and their title is 'student', it kind of makes you think of the uni ads where it's all just lying around on the lawns, and then 'Oh, I'll roll over and write my essay now'. (Todd)

Students who were highly invested in other aspects of their formed identities did not consider this unfulfilled idealised or imagined view of what university would be like as a concern for them. Kerry, who had many competing priorities as student, worker and mother, felt that the city-based campus, where people mainly come in for part-time study after work, satisfied her needs, as she 'wanted a uni to just walk

in and walk out of and not have to worry about all the other stuff'. Marg, who had three years of study behind her, said, 'I consider myself as studying … but I don't see myself as a student'. For Marg, university was 'purely business'.

As noted in Chap. 6, some of the FiF students reported that they at first felt unsure in their new environment and spoke about wanting to leave university at various times in their early weeks but the establishment of friendship networks at university helped many stay the course. Raffo and Reeves (2000) observe that when young people establish friendships it gives them a sense of control; they feel less anonymous and other students become sources of information about institutional norms (p. 163).

As noted in many of the survey responses from FiF students, they believed that friends were a critical element of their success as a student:

> I found that if I had friends in the course I was able to work with them and it would motivate me to go to uni more often. (19-year-old female, continuing survey)
>
> Friends who encourage you to get work done and are committed to doing so as well has been vital in maintaining a great university experience. A close community of friends who are willing to study as well as support and encourage one another to continue doing likewise. (20-year-old male, continuing survey)
>
> [to be successful] I rely on the motivation of having a close group of friends to help when struggling with work or for support. (18-year-old female, continuing survey)

In contrast some of the older students we interviewed, such as Denise, the mature age student who described herself as socially isolated at university, felt that friends could be a distraction when engaging as a learner in this new learning context:

> It's kind of sad in a way, but I can't break into the clique. But I'm kind of grateful for not having a distraction. Like, I had a lot of friends and distractions at high school and now I'm fully focused, I'm not here for the social aspect I'm just here for the degree basically, I'm here for me. (Denise)

This raises an important element in understanding older students' responses to the university environment, which is that their needs and priorities are likely to be different from those of school leavers. Scanlon et al. (2007) make the point that mature age students do not suffer the same social displacement as younger learners but are more focused on finishing their degree in order to meet their personal or career goals. Their research suggests that mature age students were more experienced in making transitions, and they exhibit 'characteristics of student identity valued by the university, such as seriousness and participation' (p. 236). Though relatively unperturbed by her different social identity at university, Denise spoke with resolve about her academic identity. When speaking of how she negotiated resubmissions of her essays and getting academic assistance, she said:

> Well no one else is going to get this degree other than me, like my mum and dad's not going to get it, my sister's not going to get it, my girlfriends are not going to get it for me, so I'm wholly and solely responsible, financially and academically responsible, for my future; so it's on me.

The mature age FiF students also frequently spoke of a sense of 'social incongruity' (Devlin et al. 2012) when describing their initial experience of attending

university, commenting on age differences between students as an obvious key point of divergence in their student experiences. Roxie related how until she found her own 'type of people', she felt out of place. Pete noted in his interview that he was not just 'mature age' but was, in fact, 'quite old' and he was frequently mistaken for one of the teaching staff by other students. Both he and Kerry found that the school leaver students in their classes expected them to take on a leadership or mentoring role in group activities. As Pete says, 'If you walk into a tutorial for the first time they think you're the tutor immediately.'

The feeling of not belonging is very common among new students of all ages, and the accounts above illustrate the complexity of understanding experience in relation to emerging student identities and perceptions around 'belonging'. The multiplicity of factors mediating students' sense of belonging means there is no 'one size fits all' approach to facilitating positive and productive student identities, but sensitivity by academic staff is a starting point for enhancing it.

> Everyone has a story, and that's evident here when you look around. And sometimes, you know, being the ponderer that I am, you think, 'What happened on your way here today? Like, what happened before you sat down here and spoke to me this morning; or what's your life story?' and that sort of thing. So I think maybe some of the lecturers can be a bit more mindful of that, you know, whether you're first-in-family or whether you have a disability or anything like that. (Denise)

7.5 Transformation: Moving Away from Family Culture

Within the setting of family and friends, the experience of (transformed) identity can be difficult for students to negotiate (O'Shea et al. 2017). Rowan and Travis, for example, sought affirmation from family members but were met with silent resistance or rejection:

> The interesting thing is, because I didn't have a lot of contact with family when that decision [to come to uni] was made, there was probably not much of a reaction from their side. But I told my dad last semester that I got an '80' and he … it was an interesting reaction from him. There was not much comment, and what I suppose I was looking for was 'Well done'. (Rowan)

> My family are very poverty stricken, well not poverty stricken, but close to. And the one person who actually does have money, [my uncle], as far as he's concerned, I'm wasting my time going to uni, because he is a carpenter and he believes tradies are more important than the arts. Because at one point I wanted to be a teacher, and I told him that, and he said 'Well don't be a teacher, you need life experience before you can even begin to teach, it's stupid to go to uni and not live your life beforehand'. And it's just like, well not everyone has the luxury to go out and find a job, and have real-world experience. (Travis)

For some FiF students the very act of enrolling into university challenged their family's cultural norms and they felt the need to justify these choices. Their families often did not place value on their academic success and were challenged by the

changes they saw taking place in their values and beliefs. Others like Denise found that their new academic identity and new ways of thinking meant that they no longer valued the same things as their family and they experienced a marked 'growing away from' their family:

> I'm just spending six hours with my head in the textbook, and I've got to go and talk to family members that I haven't seen for ages … and talk about babies and children and stuff like that. Not conversations I want. I feel like I've moved on so much but they're back here. They're still stuck in their old ways; they're still third, second and third generation Centrelink recipients, and I know that sounds horrible, but it's just, that's the mentality that I don't really have any more; that's the mentality I had in my family.

The difficulty resulting from not wanting or not being able to break easily from their past values and beliefs can leave students trying to bridge two worlds, leaving them with a sense they that they no longer fit in either (London 1992; Thomas 2002; Murray and Kennedy-Lightsey 2013).

7.6 Transformation of Self and Opening Up Horizons

Despite these feelings of disjunction and disruption, for the majority of the FiF students their reflections of the university experience were pervaded with a sense of achievement and resilience. They acknowledged that what they had learned was not limited to gains in academic knowledge and skills but, more significantly, their own personal transformation:

> I think I'm a more disciplined person; I'm a more confident person. I kind of feel smart. I feel like I've, and I've said this before, but it's the high school redemption. I felt dumb at high school, but now I feel like a smart adult. (Denise)

> Studying at university enables me to achieve the graduate qualities that I find interesting and would adapt in the future. I want to gain an education which is useful for my everyday needs and further develop my understanding to achieve my best. (19-year-old male, continuing survey)

There are strong parallels with Stone and O'Shea's study (2012), where the students expressed profound shifts in their confidence and ambitions for life, having new skills and abilities to 'transform their lives more broadly'. Roxie described herself as having been very laid back and confident before going to university but now saw herself as even more confident, with a lot more ambition and 'ready to take on the world.' Rowan saw university as having made him 'a more well-rounded adult', while Todd also saw himself as more assured, feeling capable of thinking and talking at a much deeper level than when he was in high school. Todd also saw his drive to be independent as having developed immensely throughout his time at university, recounting that he was becoming his 'own person' as he neared the end of his honours degree.

Roxie, like many of the other FiF students, became a great believer in the transformative powers of a university education. Previously mistrustful of educational institutions, she probably had the greatest personal transformation of all those interviewed:

> I was a real tearaway, I had serious drug problems when I was a young woman, and I didn't recover from that until I was about 25. So, to go from repeated drug overdoses and nearly dying to finishing university, with a really, really good GPA, [and I have now] finished honours. (Roxie)

Perception of self, however transformed, is an aspect of identity but not the whole story regarding how experience is shaped. Wenger (1998) describes experience as 'identity in practice'; a way of being in the world, where we encounter our effects on the world and develop our relations with others. This proposes a mutually impacting interaction between individual agency and the social environment that reifies identity. Roxie's comment, 'My friends are astonished; they're really proud of me' is suggestive of her experience of the world beginning to shift with the social reification of her emerging identity. Gail recounted that as her marks improved at university, she became increasingly competitive and assertive in her academic application:

> As my marks got better throughout my degree I thought 'yeah, I want to get that dux sort of thing' and I was kind of aggressively trying to get those results, so I'm pretty happy that I got it. (Gail)

This change in personal belief and ambition enabled Gail to achieve a number of scholarships and prizes and after completing her degree she was employed as a research assistant at the university. From there she actively sought and won another challenging research position indicating external recognition of her skills and abilities. Though Gail ascribes getting these employment contracts to 'luck', the reality of her winning these prizes and positions demonstrates a subconscious but active personal and social reification of identity:

> I know that other people in my degree who have really struggled to find work, so I think I'm one of the lucky ones. I just tend to think I'm lucky most of the time. As far as the achievements go as in during my studies that's more reliant on the work that gets put in but in just getting employment, I think that was a lot of luck. I mean some people would say 'right person for the right job' but I don't feel like at the start I was very well suited to it, but I was given a chance, so I guess that was luck.

Many of the FiF students we interviewed attributed their success to external factors rather than their own capacity, drive and abilities. The experience of actively engaging in tertiary education transformed their view of what is now possible, reshaping their understanding of self in the context of new opportunities. Some students were just beginning to anticipate how finishing university might open new horizons for them. Alison, for example, who previously thought she would live in her hometown forever, was now planning to live and work overseas: 'I just want to do so much more than I ever wanted to do'; and Travis and Todd spoke of their improved abilities to understand and converse with other people from a wide range of backgrounds, to articulate their opinions and no longer be afraid to challenge others ideas:

> That's generally one of the main things that I've gained out of university, to actually be able to view something, and go, 'yes something's not quite right here'. It's made me more vocal in my opinions because earlier in life I would express my opinion and someone would say something else, and then I would just shut up because I don't want to provoke a fight or anything like that. But now, if I can actually broaden someone else's horizon without treading on their own opinions, I do. (Travis)

Though Todd stated he had not changed his perspective of where he wanted to go, his relationships with colleagues strongly demonstrate how his transformed self was informing his social being. Todd had assumed the role of mentor to his casually employed work colleagues at the bakery and lamented that he had not had that sort of support when he started university:

> A lot of people at work are going through that stage now where they're going to the open days for uni and, I guess, when you work with them, you talk about it. I've also encouraged people to go to uni, and to stick with it, because people have wanted to drop out before … you say 'Well you're at the end of it, you've come this far, you might be better off doing it because you do feel immense satisfaction when it's finished.' I only give advice to those who want it (laughing). It is never uninvited. And I have, I don't know, this is a little bit weird, but I still feel like a bit of a mentor to some of them. Because, I sort of feel like I wish I had someone a little further on in their life, someone who had just a couple more years of experience, just that little bit of advice would have been good. So I sort of take on that role I feel [for work colleagues] and I love it, it's great and they appreciate it.

7.7 Transformation: Opening Horizons for Others

The effects of the FiF students on others' ambitions were equally reifying the students' transformed identities. A number of the students in the study spoke of how their experience of attending university had raised aspirations for others, demonstrating their role as pioneers and mentors and opening up new horizons. For example, participants who had children spoke of raising their aspirations to attend university. Marg's success at university inspired her own children, reinforcing a generational shift in what had previously not been considered for their 'sort of people':

Brendon's experience of going to university impacted on his younger siblings and extended family members, as did Alison's experience:

> My brother wants to get into human movement or PE [physical education] teaching or that kind of thing. I think he's just seeing that he can move out and learn so much. And it's the same with my partner; his younger sister is now kind of doing exactly what he's done.

Participating in university is a significant transformation not only for the individual student themselves but also their family networks, having a transformative ripple effect on siblings, children and extended family. This transformative experience extends beyond the walls of the university, impacting FiF students' future aspirations and their broader societal perspectives.

7.8 Conclusion

As we see from these students' stories, the formation of student identity is a multifaceted process where individuals mediate a number of selves in order to succeed. It is also an iterative process whereby an individual reflexively responds to both extrinsic and intrinsic factors to shape and reshape their understanding of self in relation to their social circumstances (Chickering and Reisser 1993; Wenger 1998; Kaufman 2014; Turner and Tobbell 2018). At university, the student constructs the foundation for various areas of life, such as work, family, and other human relations, in addition to an academic identity and a professional identity related to the future transition to working life (Lairio et al. 2013).

As agents in their own identity formation, and in order to develop strong working relationships and practices, students develop an understanding of who they are as individuals in relation to their social environment (Daniels and Brooker 2014). As they navigate their way through their university degree, they deepen their understanding of who they are and how they can shape their own futures and those of others. As Brendon elaborates the benefits of participating in higher education are not limited merely to personal gains but have a ripple effect through broader social connections and aspirations for the future:

> Oh, it's definitely been better for me as a person, in just further developing the values I already had and just trying to further my social relationships too, I think has been good. So, it's benefited me with that. And I think too, having the degree, I hope would benefit others in my future work and life. That's how I hope my degree would benefit society as a whole, and the people around me too … I've got a big focus on the greater good. And I hope, I guess I hope, I can contribute to that? That's my lifetime goal. (Brendon)

From these FiF student experiences we can see that a university education has a far more wide-ranging impact than just developing skills, confidence and capabilities. As reflected in these stories there are multiple changes taking place: shifts in personal values and beliefs, the development of multifaceted identities and the transforming of aspirations and goals not only for those closest to the students but also of society, more broadly.

The research this book is based on (King et al. 2014) provides recommendations to universities. This book further develops that work and adds to the opportunity for institutions to draw upon these stories to gain insight into how we can make university processes more inclusive. How these FiF students transformed their sense of self within this new environment from initial dissonance and social incongruity to a 'tactical refinement' of their identity (Southgate et al. 2017, p. 255) that incorporates previous values and cultural identities with new aspirations and hopes for a more positive future, provides us with an in-depth understanding to the experience of diverse students. Using this knowledge to identify where supports can be added and processes refined will not only benefit FiF students, but all students, thus helping to redistribute the benefits of higher education more equitably across our society.

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Chapter 8
Conclusion: The Purposes of Higher Education for the FiF Student

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For me, uni is almost entirely about self-development—to push myself to become the best I can. (24-year-old male, commencing survey)
This is what I've learnt. How can I contribute? (Brendon)

8.1 Introduction

In concluding the book, we considered what we had learnt about FiF students and their experience of attending university. While doing so we realised how resilient, strong and brave the pioneers who participated in our study are and had our assertions about the purposes of higher education both assured and broadened. We therefore felt it appropriate to end by considering the responses to a range of questions. What is university for? Is it to acquire new knowledge and prepare students for the workforce? Is the aim more entrepreneurial—to create individuals who can make purposeful contributions to society? Must it show a contribution to economic growth? Is it a space to create lifelong friendships, challenge prejudices and nurture an altruistic spirit? Such questions dominate the discourse around the public purpose and function of higher education in the twenty-first century (Abowitz 2008; Brighouse and McPherson 2015; Dungy 2012; Levine 2014; Shapiro 2005). For Manathunga (2017), the twenty-first-century university has become a captive site of global capitalism, whose purpose within the neoliberal knowledge system is to produce consumable, saleable knowledge—students are perceived as learners who consume degrees in order to become credentialed 'knowledge workers'. Employability and portfolio building are increasingly considered the fundamental processes and products of learning in higher education (Aamodt and Havnes 2008). Others see personal and social growth as the key by-products of university attendance; here, the purpose is to foster civic engagement based on addressing pressing real-world problems and cultivate fully rounded, intellectually sophisticated and caring individuals (Saltmarsh and Hartley 2012; Thompson 2014).

S. King et al., *The Experience of Being First in Family at University*,
SpringerBriefs in Education,https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-0921-6_8

Closer to home, in Australia, there is currently much debate about the need for a unified tertiary system to better serve learners. Suggested paradigm-shifting changes include an end to Vocational Education and Training (VET) and higher education variations of the same qualification and an enhanced Australian Qualifications Framework. Glyn Davis's book *The Australian Idea of a University* (2017) proposes a number of policy approaches for the university system of the twenty-first century, including removing the legal requirement that all universities undertake research, in turn facilitating the development of teaching- and engagement-focused institutions. Zepke (2018) notes how facilitating 'active citizenship' for students in higher education will foster 'flexibility, resilience, openness to change and diversity'. Another area of discussion is the precarity of the Industry 4.0 workforce and the technological disruptions of the imminent 'fourth industrial revolution'. While our book only tangentially engages with these complex, multifaceted debates, we are mindful that our work on the FiF student should be contextualised within a local and national tertiary landscape that is in a state of formidable flux.

In a 2017 article in *The Conversation* entitled 'We are losing sight of higher education's true purpose', Forstenzer concluded:

> To my mind, universities exist, at least partially, to serve as a place where a society comes face-to-face with itself … Now, perhaps more than ever, we need universities to find ways to enrich our understandings of ourselves and others.

Forstenzer's comments here strike us as particularly pertinent both in terms of the broader discussion about the role, value and utility of higher education in the twenty-first century and the findings of our own study into the experiences of FiF students. In this final chapter, we will delve into three particular core areas which relate to the purposes and benefits of higher education for the FiF students involved in this project, their families and friends and their broader community: personal growth; a role model for others; and transformation of perspectives.

One important purpose of the interviews with the FiF students was to ascertain their ideas, conceptions and beliefs about the purposes of higher education. What emerges from our interviews is a clear sense that attending university has been a key driver in social mobility which has allowed FiF students to subtly, almost imperceptibly, transform their lives. Many of their stories speak of a commitment to learning and the achieving of career ambitions that have led, or will lead, to multiple rewarding outcomes. This is made explicit by Alison, who compares her current situation—enrolled at university—to those of her peers who remained in the country town where they all grew up together:

> I feel like a lot of my friends who went straight out of high school into jobs … are a bit stuck there almost and they don't love it but they can't afford or have the time to study or do anything else now … I'm lucky that I've done what I've done.

As an example of a 'pioneer student' using the limitations of a previous existence as a motivation to work towards a different life, Alison articulates the importance of the idea of value—how students perceive the benefit of university—in terms that move beyond the narrow frame of academic achievement. Over the course of our

research, we observed that as FiF students reflected on their time at university, they considered that they had attained a broad range of benefits, such as: becoming more articulate and confident; conversing with different people; setting a trend within the family (e.g. as an older sibling influencing younger siblings); remaining 'true' to initial values and beliefs; and strengthening inner personal qualities such as independence, resilience and 'stickability'. Nina sums up a lot of these ideas when she stated that 'from that side of things you get pushed out of your comfort zone so you are probably more confident now than I was five years ago'; this view is echoed by Marg, who confessed that the most important factor behind attending university was:

> … to build capacity and to put a value on your own knowledge so that you appreciate not the pain but the process that you go through to actually get your degree.

Such a strong sense of agency is a recurring theme in the interviews.

Attending university serves a purpose far beyond getting a job. For some students, it also provided an opportunity to demonstrate to themselves that they possess the drive and intellectual capacity to thrive at university. Others recognised significant personal growth, including the ability to use language that they did not previously possess and the ability to see the world differently. Some referred to a sheer love of learning that has led them to avail themselves of all the diverse learning opportunities that university has offered:

> Uni has given me a purpose in life and a reason to get up in the morning. I am able to push myself as hard as I can in an academic environment to achieve personal goals. (21-year-old male, continuing survey)

> I love to learn and high school just did not feel like enough. I have had my heart set on university ever since I knew what it was. (17-year-old female, commencing survey)

Jen loved nothing more than reading and editing her draft essays, improving them bit by bit:

> I just happen to really enjoy editing to an extreme degree, it's ridiculous; I love flipping through my books of grammar and … engaging with a text … and being able to sharpen it.

A key benefit of attending university identified by the majority of participants was the broadening of social horizons and the making of new friends with similar interests. Gail was the only one from her high school friendship group to continue on to tertiary study. On reflecting on how university had changed her, she identified the establishment of different social circles as a result of her studies:

> I did keep in contact with my high school friends in the first year and part of the second year and quite regularly we'd catch up and that sort of thing. But then I guess as the degree progressed I became closer to people in the degree that had similar interests and just a bit more in common.

Nina, a mother of seven who was constantly juggling family and study commitments, found that her major support network came from her friendship groups developed at university:

> The girls that I initially started my studies with—they've finished now, they're working, so I kind of go to them sometimes if I need help or support with anything, seeing they've been there, done it, and got through it—they work on anything that they can to pull me through.

The benefit of broadening social and academic experiences was not only recognised as beneficial to participants themselves but also identified as being beneficial to other members of their immediate family. Both Rowan and Nina expressed aspirations for their children to do what interests them, with university being a recommended pathway:

> I'd ask the question 'What are you interested in, what pathway will get you to there, whatever that is? What is it that you want in life'. (Rowan)

As FiF students, these views indicate the development and transmission of a different form of cultural capital, one not previously present within their families.

8.2 Personal Growth

In various typologies of student motivation for going to university (Côté and Levine 1997; Phinney et al. 2006), personal growth is a key driver. Irrespective of age, the FiF participants we interviewed identified the transition into university as a process of entering into an unknown arena. That transition triggered a range of emotional responses—Brendon was not alone when he succinctly and honestly described himself as being 'scared, worried and completely overwhelmed' in the first few weeks at university. Despite these initial difficulties (which most participants noted dissipated either halfway through or towards the end of their first year), the FiF students all successfully integrated into the university environment and recognised their associated personal growth, with many admitting to becoming more open and confident individuals. For Alison, leaving home and relocating to Adelaide to attend university had a significant impact. She associates the move out of home with 'growing up':

> I think especially coming from the country just that experience, not even university, but just moving out and you might be uncomfortable at first but it's going to help you in the long run … so many life skills and budgeting and all that kind of stuff, cooking for yourself and the little things that you take for granted at home, but once you move out are huge, I think.

Even for participants who did not leave home, the realisation of the obligation to become independent from their families played a significant role in their personal growth. Brian noted that:

> I don't think it hits you until perhaps after exams that now I have to be independent, I have to be doing this stuff myself, I can't just rely on my parents.

Cory also admitted that:

> It was a little bit hard, but I just sort of thought 'if everyone else can do it, I can do it as well'. I realised that this is just going to be what life is going to be like, having to be independent and make your own choices on the spot.

On reflecting whether they thought that university had changed them, a number of participants identified personal attributes, such as confidence, resilience and an ability to 'stick it out', that had been positively shaped by their university experiences. Brian recognised that being forced to establish new peer networks contributed to his development:

> You come out of your shell a little bit more; [it] helps you to be a little bit more confident, a little bit more outgoing, so it definitely helps a lot.

8.3 A Role Model for Others

Much work has been done on the reciprocal influences between siblings' educational attainments and the predominant influence of older on younger siblings (Hauser and Wong 1989; Boyle et al. 2007; Fagan and Najman 2003; Brody 2004; Whiteman et al. 2007). Role modelling has also been associated with sibling relationships (Steelman and Powell 1985; Azmitia and Hesser 1993; Teachman 1996; Bankstone 1998). The positive role of siblings as agents of change for other family members can be seen in our study. The value of broadening social horizons and academic experiences was not only recognised as beneficial to participants themselves, but was also acknowledged as playing an affirmative role on other members of their immediate family. For example, Cory took great pride in being able to advise his younger brother about attending university:

> [It's] strange because that's not what anyone else has done in the family I guess, it's not that usual. And also for the school that we went to as well, I don't think anyone's gone straight from the school that we went to, to do medicine.

Brendon was also delighted that members of his own family were now treading the same path that he pioneered:

> I've got a couple of cousins that will now be going onto uni and hopefully my sister. I guess I've been able to help them with the experience as well.

For the FiF cohort, tertiary education now becomes a viable and valuable option for siblings, parents and children within the same family. The value Marg now places on education is reflected in her influence as a mother on her own children's choices to continue with further study:

> From a personal sense I think I've actually kind of forged a bit of a path for my kids that they might not have considered. So I've changed our families' attitude for my kids that university is not just reserved for the elite … My oldest son has now decided to go to university which wasn't something that he was ever really going to do, it wasn't a part of his idea of where he would be going, so I think my studying has influenced him.

Marg's comments demonstrate that her experience of higher education has transformed not only her life, but those of her children.

But it does not stop there. This 'pioneering' role frequently comes into play with FiF students looking to reciprocate and share their own experiences (financial, demographic and familial) to other students in similar situations. For example, Brian took great pride in being able to play the mentor role to younger students in his residential college:

> It was a rewarding experience for me to be able to give them the advice that I wish I had had at the time and I think they appreciated that a lot and there was definitely, yeah, some friendships started there.

This suggests that FiF students take seriously their roles in empowering and educating peers and families when it comes to demystifying the university experience and encouraging access for others.

8.4 Transformation of Perspectives

Alongside the acquisition of knowledge relevant to their discipline, the FiF students also identified an additional key benefit: the ability to see other people's perspectives. Many referred to the opening up of viewpoints that had previously been closed off to them and agreed that the purpose of higher education is to expand one's horizons and gain skills and abilities to critically analyse perspectives and generate informed opinions. Pete, a retiree who chose to attend university in order to fulfil a lifelong ambition, recognised that although he already possessed the skills to see others' points of view, university had provided him with the skills to be able to better articulate his thoughts:

> [I'm] better equipped to argue what I believed in before I came to university … and I'm more competent in expressing an opinion about—well whatever it may be.

Others also talked about the value of higher education as providing them with the ability to see other people's perspectives. Roxie states that while she was always confident, since attending university she has also become more ambitious: '[I have] more confidence in myself … I'm ready to go and take on the world now'.

Todd discussed being able to think more deeply and feel more independent as a result of attending university:

> I don't know, my brain has developed, I can talk and think to a lot deeper level than what I could back in high school. I've changed, so confidence one thing, certainly changed … my worldliness, in my view, has also changed. Understanding of people, socially, has developed immensely, that would be probably the biggest thing … I guess, certainly my independence as well, my driven-ness to be independent. I was pretty happy to let things be looked after, but now I want to be my own person … That's developed hugely over the last couple of years.

Other participants also indicated that they had changed. Travis believed being at university had 'definitely broadened my view of things', while Brendon indicated that he had developed critical life skills:

> Handling of pressure, managing social relationships, uni relationships and workloads and things like that … have really dramatically changed my life.

Carl talked about now wanting to 'help others in the community more broadly' and 'learn and develop skills that will be of benefit to others'. This evidence of an increased understanding of broader society also appeared to influence student motivation beyond the confines of university. Alison and Brendon described how university had changed them in profound ways:

> I think it's benefited me in the fact that just the amount of knowledge that I have now for the field is just so much more than it was before. I think it is an important field in society [visual arts and graphic design] because you know things have got to look good. (Alison)
>
> [I]t's interesting coming from a very working class background and a lot of my friends being from the same background when you see the way their life is, and then going to university when you're going to a completely different career, you get the really good aspect and you learn a lot. (Brendon)

Both Alison and Brendon are here hinting at some deep reflective changes that have taken place over their time at university. The graduate attributes of each of our three partner institutions state that a key 'end result' of a university degree is a renewed or heightened sense of global citizenry, ethical behaviour and understanding and intercultural competence. Unconsciously or not, the FiF students often alluded to these aspects of their university education and were sometimes explicit in stating that these attributes were now an important part of their worldview. Todd's words are worth quoting at length:

> An educated society probably is good, it's better than having people who know nothing at all about anything. I think in Australia we need to encourage innovation a bit more, we need to encourage business to become competitive in the world stage. And I think, we kind of expect that we're going to maintain a quality of life with this standard … [Having an educated population] does benefit society because maybe democracy probably works better because people are more 'well read', they understand what's going on a lot more, they've got stronger views. People who go to uni have got much stronger views than those who don't, I've found … they're much more engaged in issues.

Todd is articulating here not just a benefit of going to university for him as an individual; he also recognises the importance of a tertiary-educated population who can gain a greater understanding of how Australian society will function in the years ahead and be both supportive and potentially critical of the ways in which that society works. Clearly, students are suggesting that university is about more than acquiring a degree. As also discussed in Chap. 7, it has helped them develop skills and build confidence. It is helpful to think that providing support for FiF students is also about helping them develop skills and building their confidence and self-efficacy.

Several FiF students admitted that they were playing the role of pioneers to friends, family and future generations of students. Todd, for instance, acts as an informal mentor for some of his work colleagues at a local bakery who are contemplating

university study. He admitted that he has been able to offer advice as to what they should consider for their future careers—the advice that Todd gives is quite reflective of his values that having a meaningful job is more important than making money:

> I can give them a few hard truths I guess. I say 'You've got to look at things really rationally, don't get swayed by the flashy open day and that stuff', yeah you've got to realise, 'is this going to align with what you want in your life' rather than what you want from a job. And probably the way I see that is that some, the advice which I, probably some of the worst advice I've heard is, to 'do what you love in a job', because I don't think that's quite right … don't do what makes you happy because happiness is only relative to sadness I think. (Todd)

Despite the educational disadvantage that FiF students may experience in comparison with their intergenerational peers, the students we have surveyed and interviewed have been able to successfully navigate the complexities of higher education when provided with the appropriate support and opportunities. While a primary aim of our book has been to offer further evidence of the transformative possibilities of entering higher education for FiF students, we have also sought to underline the 'pioneering' status of the participants, who are not only paving the way for family and friends, but also radically transforming their own lives, 'border crossing' (Greenwald 2012) from marginalised and disadvantaged individuals to confident, eloquent, savvy graduates. This transcending of sociocultural status and unshackling of prejudice and family expectation remains the most powerful undercurrent to our work. It is also underpinned in some of the students' own words, such as when Todd stated that 'as a first child, you see yourself, in the image of being a bit of a pioneer in the family'.

Via our in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of FiF university students, we also highlight both key similarities and key differences between FiF and intergenerational students. Specifically, we propose that FiF students' motivations and ambitions to study at university are similar to those of intergenerational students, with the chief desire being 'a better life'. Where FiF students differ from their intergenerational peers is through the additional challenges that arise by dint of the very nature of being the first person in their family to attend university, and therefore lacking pertinent 'insider' knowledge and understanding and the requisite cultural capital.

Similarly, although FiF students incur the same costs and constraints encountered by their fellow peers, the increased proportion of FiF students from a low SES background or from rural locations increases the financial burden. This often results in FiF students being required to direct a significant amount of time towards paid employment, critical time that detracts from being able to focus their energy on learning the 'foreign' system of higher education. Feelings of being unprepared for university and not knowing what to expect was found to have a negative impact on FiF students' health and wellbeing. As a result of this perceived unpreparedness, FiF students tend to focus more on 'learning the system' and consequently neglect factors such as building support networks and looking after their health; ironically, the very factors that provide a buffer to the stress experienced by all commencing students.

Providing better information and support is where the university can step in and improve, or finesse, pre-existing support mechanisms to assist in smoothing the

transition for FiF students. The implications for institutional practice and wider recommendations to university policymakers have been proposed in more detail in our previous work (King et al. 2014), and we draw the attention of readers to them. Some recommendations at an institutional level worth highlighting include better outreach activities to target potential FiF students, designated online resources for FiF students and greater financial support, via scholarships or relocation grants, to assist in FiF transition. University professional and academic staff also need to use accessible language, promote health and wellbeing and make expectations clear and reasonable. We recognise that in this case, we are following a number of recommendations that stem from what others have said in relation to addressing the needs of other diverse student groups (Kift 2008; Devlin et al. 2012), but we also acknowledge that if, broadly speaking, many FiF students thrive and survive in spite of, rather than because of, institutional structures that are often rigid or lack agility, then more should be done to attract, support and empathise with FiF cohorts. The stories throughout this book all offer implicit and explicit tips, suggestions and future directions, so we now need to pay attention.

8.5 Conclusion

The first year of university is well documented as being a pivotal time period during which students either successfully engage in their new environment or struggle to adapt to their new role as a university student. This crucial transition period was found to differ among the FiF participants, with the duration of this challenging period varying from three weeks to a full year. While they failed to identify explicit support strategies provided by university that addressed their FiF status needs, it was clear from the successful FiF students we spoke to that many of them created their own informal support structures within the university environment, whether that was with individual academics, tutors, professional staff or peers. These informal support structures provided critical assistance in either identifying opportunities within the university systems or overcoming impediments which had the potential to derail the FiF students' participation in higher education.

Unquestionably, the recurring idea in this book has been the 'pioneer' status of the FiF student, and the positive social, financial, academic and emotional changes that attending university has wrought. But we should not forget either the way, in our experience, the FiF student has now become a powerful advocate for the transformative, life changing possibilities of higher education study. The students' siblings, children, co-workers and colleagues may now also benefit from a university experience by reflecting on the successes and 'stickability' of the FiF students whose candid stories so enrich this book.

In recognising and exploring the specific challenges that FiF students are required to overcome in addition to the normal adjustments associated with commencing university study, we hope that this book will provide further support to the ongoing

discussions around a need for robust advocacy for, and increased emphasis on, establishing strategies to support and cultivate FiF students. With that in mind, let us leave the last word to Brendon:

> We're not all just a big farm full of uni students that just come and learn a degree and you're done … we're not all the same … we come in with different values, different backgrounds.

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