Supporting the first year students from a diverse range of backgrounds

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**Recommended Citation**

Harwood, Valerie and O’Shea, Sarah Elizabeth, "Supporting the first year students from a diverse range of backgrounds" (2014). *Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers*. 1450.

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Supporting the first year students from a diverse range of backgrounds

Abstract
Presentation made at the Flinders University 2nd First Year Forum for 2014

Keywords
backgrounds, range, diverse, students, supporting, first, year

Disciplines
Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

This conference paper is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/1450
Supporting first year students from a diverse range of backgrounds

A/Prof Valerie Harwood
Dr Sarah O’ Shea
University of Wollongong
Today’s Session

• Reflections from the field (Sarah & Valerie)
• Setting the scene (Sarah)
• Imagining University: Reaching youth disengaged from schooling (Valerie)
• First in family students and the university experience – impacts and challenges (Sarah)
• Reflections from the group
• Questions and Close
Reflections
Setting the scene

• Diverse students = diverse issues

  • Financial issues: “My financial situation is often a source of worry to me”

  • Mobility: “not the place for me”

  • Few “knowledgeable others”

  • Expectations and assumptions
Expectations and Assumptions

They [teachers] said you probably won’t be all that smart cos your parents didn’t go to uni and I use to come home all the time and I remember they said it a few times and I’d say: “Oh Mum, you didn’t go to uni but you are really smart” …[but] I wasn’t as dumb as people thought I was.. (Annie, 18)

…when I was actually growing up, a lot of the – especially kids in my area – it was basically almost taught that university was only for those that were really smart, extremely smart. … I used to live up in XXXX and I thought, you know, “I’ll never be able to go to uni up there” but it was like… mainly because people have actually turned around and some actually said a few years ago “You’ll neve go to university”, same when they even turn around and say “You’ll never own a house”. Sorry, I’m at uni and I own a house. (Michelle, 43)
I had an appointment with the XXX officer at Centrelink just coincidentally to talk about what your plans are and that sort of thing. I was feeling great cos I said “Oh I have applied for uni and this is what I am going to do and de, de, da”. And all he wanted to talk about was if I didn’t get in …I came out of it feeling like I probably won't get in (Catherine, 44)

I might have lost courage cos I had so many XXX advisers tell me not to bother studying until Max was 7 because I could stay at home until he was seven but I was like: No, I wanna do it now if I don’t do it now I’ll never do it. (Nicki, 33)
IMAGINING UNIVERSITY: REACHING YOUTH DISENGAGED FROM SCHOOLING
Interviewer: When was the last time you heard someone chat away about university?

John: I don’t think I have ever had anyone talk about it.

(15 years, FLO, Adelaide)
“We can’t talk to them about university. We don’t want to give them false hopes.”

(Youth Professional, Fieldnotes)
Interviewer  Would you consider going to university?
Clare   Yes.
Interviewer  Yes? You would Clare?
Clare   If I was smart enough for it, yes.
Mazzy   You are smart enough for it.
Clare   No.
Interviewer  Both of you – why would you consider going to university?
Mazzy   Just because university will give you more opportunities in life and to get a better job and I want that.
Interviewer  Okay. Clare, why would you consider going to university?
Clare   It gives you a better life I’m pretty sure.
Mazzy   Yes.
Interviewer  It might give you a better job and maybe a better life, yes.
Mazzy   If we stay here, all they’re going to give you is retail – retail work – and that’s not even worth it.

(Capital City - Outer Metro IUE Interviews, 2013)
“Well the first thing if I shut my eyes and just imagine would be a big building, maybe an old man half bald, glasses standing there speaking to a big room of students…”

“I wouldn’t really say what it looks like because…I haven’t actually really really seen a university or been to one so it would be a bit hard to say what one would really look like.”

(Krissie, 16 years, Adelaide, Australia)
The Project

**Five Australian States:** Tasmania, South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria

n= 250 young people

**Focused on** understanding perspectives on university of young people who live in communities in comparable low SES regions of Australia with low rates of university participation.

**Young people and ‘precarious schooling’**
Left early or in patterns of disengagement (for some as early as 11 years)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SITES</th>
<th>Tasmania</th>
<th>South Australia</th>
<th>New South Wales</th>
<th>Queensland</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inner metro Hobart</td>
<td>Outer metro</td>
<td>Outer metro</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>Inner metro</td>
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<td>Adelaide (N)</td>
<td>Adelaide (S)</td>
<td>South</td>
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<td>Coast Towns</td>
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<td>Regional</td>
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<td>Queensland</td>
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</table>
Imagining University

• Imagining *having a* university education was problematic for the majority of the young people who lived in communities affected by disadvantage.

• Young people could imagine university - These imaginings in the main pictured people other than themselves.

• Of the young people interviewed almost every young person described imagining university in ways that positioned the university as an outsider institution and those that go to them as ‘others’.
Exceptions were:

- Young people who had directly accessed university connection programs that were *substantial* – in terms of duration, that involved being at the university site over a period of time, and that provided detailed interaction and how to access that was beyond demonstration of university curriculum.

- Young people who knew of someone who went (or was going) to university such as family or friend

- One young man who lived independently of his parents and had decided to self-fund attendance at a private Christian school so that he could get to university
1. What did they imagine?

- A lot of buildings, people and grass;
- Doctor;
- I see a Costco (large warehouse supermarket chain);
- A desk and then obviously the hallway with all the doors;
- Shiny floors and it smells like a hospital;
- Old posh people;
- A place that looks like a court-room inside it for the lecture centre;
- A big long building with lots of people in it;
- Big. Just big and stuff;
BUILDINGS

When Lisa, 14 years, described what she saw when she imagined a university she saw it as:

“A two-storey building with lots of classrooms and different subjects and... and a big oval. It’s huge...” (Lisa, 14, Adelaide)

When Lisa asked ‘who goes to university’ she replied people from:

“Two storey houses with lots of bathrooms” (Lisa, 14 Adelaide).
Above: University building

Right: University Buildings and green space
Left: Detail of House, housing estate opposite university

Right: Panorama of housing estate, looking north toward university
Left: Suburban Housing

Right: Vacant block with shopping trolley
2. Skateboarding the perimeter

Jye: Yeah, I’ve seen the college, oh the university down at town, that’s the university yeah.

Int: So you’ve seen it from the outside or something?

Jye: Oh yeah, and I’ve ridden past it sometimes.

Int: Do you ever go in on the skateboard or anything?

Jye: Oh No. No.
WHY – not enter … ???

“….it’s just kind of, it’s just this place that you don’t go when you’re a kid, it’s like the university you just stay away from it for some reason. I don’t even know how to explain it, it’s just ... It’s just this weird phenomenon that just happens. No kids my age kind of go near the university”

(Jye, metro Hobart, Tasmania)
3. THE PROBLEM WITH IMAGINING IT TO BE LIKE SCHOOL...

‘Students that just hate school wouldn’t go’: Educationally disengaged and disadvantaged young people’s talk about university education  
*Accepted with revisions, British Journal of Sociology of Education*

McMahon, Harwood, Hickey-Moody
T I’d say bigger version of school like, high school.
(Logan, Tammy and Serena, aged 15, remote Queensland)

Just a big school I guess….kind of like this but more coordinated.
(Zane, aged 16, regional Victoria)

N A really, really, really big high school.
I Oh, a big high school?
N Yes. I don’t know, it just looks like a high school with probably an extra floor and more older, mature people…
(Nadine, aged 16, outer city, South Australia).

Scary … A giant school.
(Lucette, aged 14, outer city, South Australia)
I guess I really dislike school. I find it’s just really easy for them to get rid of you…. they don’t really try to keep you in there like they’ll probably just get rid of you as soon as they can. That’s why they pretty much sent me here.

(Megan, 17 years old, regional New South Wales)
Regardless of whether the emotive response to the ‘bigness’ of university was positive or negative, the perception of university as a large-scale school prevailed. This lack of differentiation between schools and universities, we argue, is entirely problematic; it has a confounding effect on these young people’s capacity to imagine and pursue university participation. If schools and universities are one and the same discourse objects, how can young people talk of or imagine universities differently to their experiences of compulsory schooling?
I You got up to Year 11, that's pretty good so what makes you decide to leave?
P The teachers.
(Alex, aged 17, regional New South Wales)

I just left because I got sick of the teachers.
(Bronwyn, aged 15, regional Victoria)

Most people I know they've just left because of the teachers.
(Paul, aged 15, outer city South Australia)
The point to be made here is that, when asked why they left school, their experiences of teachers were often identified by the young people as impacting their reasoning and decision-making.
Expulsion from the possibility of imagining university education is an ethical issue.

WE NEED TO

• Enhance the possibilities for higher education involve more than visits to universities
• This requires imagination as well as has affective challenges
• Need for awareness of those young people in ‘precarious’ relationships with schooling and education
FIRST IN FAMILY STUDENTS AND THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE – IMPACTS AND CHALLENGES

Dr. Sarah O’ Shea
Who are first in family students?

1. The ‘slippery nature’ of definitions
2. This student cohort reported as not achieving to the same level academically compared to peers
3. Within Australia 26% of first in family students are reported as considering leaving university in the first year of university study, a figure that increases to 34% for later year students (Coates & Ransom, 2011).
4. Deficit thinking - a ‘group at risk’ (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013, p329)
Summary Literature review

• We live in the era of the neo-liberal learner where everyone is ‘unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self doubt’ (Leathwood, 2006, p615).

• Literature tends to portray this student cohort in deficit terms using words such as ‘challenges’, ‘difficulties’ and ‘help’ (Thayer, 2000; Brachman, 2012; Gardner, 1996).

• The ‘lack’ of access to an ‘educational memory’ within the family, the role played by ‘transgenerational family scripts or “inheritance codes”’ in educational choices. (Ball, Davies, David & Reay, 2002, p57)
Research Studies (UOW / OLT)

• For the purposes of this research, first in family status has been defined as:

  no-one in the immediate family of origin including siblings or parents having previously attended a higher education institution or having completed a university degree.

• Inclusion of family members – looking at this return from the perspective of the student and their family members
Research Study (UOW)

• Focus on the cultural wealth of participants rather than deficits
• Interviews with undergraduate students

Research Study (OLT)

- Survey and interview methodology

- Three cohort groups – online learners (OUA), Access program participants (UoN) and domestic on-campus undergrads (UoW)

- Family and student survey / interviews with family members where possible

Support for this activity has been provided by the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching. The views expressed in this publication/activity do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Government Office for Learning and Teaching.
Student Survey …so far

*Survey analysis – 171 returned (but 2 incomplete):

- **Participants**: 80% female; 77% studying full-time and 60% in the first year of study
- **Financial Support**: 42% receive some government support; 58% work part-time or full time; 38% supported by a partner or family

*with thanks to Janine Delahunty for the information contained in the following slides*
Student Demographics

Age range of all student survey participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 - 21</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 - 25</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 - 30</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 - 40</td>
<td>14.6%</td>
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<td>40 - 50</td>
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</tr>
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<td>50+</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
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## Demographics

### Course load

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<tr>
<td>Full time</td>
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<td>103</td>
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<tr>
<td>Part time</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>61</td>
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</table>

### Stage of study

<table>
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<tr>
<td>second year of study</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>third year of study</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fourth year of study</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more than five years</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Hurdles and Obstacles

- Family obstacles
- Financial difficulties
- Academic difficulties
- Relationship issues
- Communication difficulties
- Other
Sources of Support

- Family members
- Staff (UOW, UOW or UOA)
- Support services...
- Other support services
- Myself
- My friends at university
- My friends outside of...
- Other (can you provide further...?)
Motivations for attending university

In addition to career/vocational opportunities the following are emerging as strong themes:

• “Always wanted to…”

• “I want to make a difference…”

• “…so I can be a positive role model for others”

• “I want to prove / give something to myself…”
Always wanted to….

… ever since I could remember all I ever wanted to do was go to University

… it was just a matter of when circumstances allowed

… but our family was poor

… do something for myself. I have always regretted not having the chance to go to Uni after high school

… but could never decide just what it was that I wanted to be "when I grow up!"

… I come from a town of low socio-economic status, and I didn't want to be stuck there all my life, I want to get out and explore the world.

… when I felt that it would fit in with my family. Now is that time

… but thought I wasn't 'smart' enough
Making a difference...

My mother had cancer when I was younger and I had to care for her, which sparked my desire to be a nurse.

I want to become an educator who could make a difference to children's lives.

After I left my abusive husband, I decided to pursue my dreams and gain a career where I could support my children and help other children.

I want to be able to help others with these issues, especially in a world where obesity and unhappiness are becoming very common.

I felt that I could do so much more in my life that "meant" something more than sales.

... I admired the doctors and health professionals whom looked after me.

... wanting to 'do more with my life' [after a trip as volunteer for children with AIDS/HIV].
…so I can be a positive role model for others

I wanted to show my girls that they can do anything they want if they try and that it doesn't matter when you do it.

I also want to set an example for my children regarding lifelong learning.

I want to inspire my son.

I wanted to be a good role model for my children.

My two older children will completing high school this year and next year. I want to show them what study was all about.

I used to hear people ask my daughter what her mum did, and she would reply, she is just my mum. As much as I love being their mum I also want to be something else for them. To show them that if you put your mind to something then you can do it.
“I want to prove / give something to myself…”

I felt that I had nothing holding me back except myself.

Education is the greatest gift you can give to yourself.

I had regretted not staying in school and going to uni and he said it's not too late and said he believed I could do anything I want to do.

I sold myself short through high school, not thinking I was 'smart' enough to ever get into university…

I love the idea of being at University, I love learning, I love that I can do anything.

I have the intelligence but not the confidence and I needed to challenge myself to prove I'm not stupid.

I just wanted to do something more with my life. Be something more.

I also want to be the first in my family to have gained a higher degree.

I also wanted to do something for myself. I … wanted to prove to myself that I could do it.

… it finally dawned on me! I can give it a shot … I am surely not that stupid. I tried a unit, and to my own shock, I got a credit!
I discovered how much I enjoy learning

I really didn’t think I could do it but look, I am! 😊

I didn’t think I would be smart enough, or know how to do anything but I am surprising myself a lot!

I have a better sense of self-worth

I'm not as stupid as I once thought
Self-discovery

I feel as though I have lived most of my life with blinkers on and suddenly the whole world has been opened up to me ...

... the words I use to describe myself have changed. I rather like who I am.

I wish I'd met me earlier!
### Family Survey

**Total Responses**
- 40
- Range in age from 9 to 69
- 26 female / 14 male

<table>
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<tr>
<th>The student is my:</th>
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<th>Age range of FM</th>
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<td>mother</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9 to 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>daughter</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>43 to 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>son</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>46 to 58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brother</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sister</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16 to 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grandchild</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>partner</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29 to 51</td>
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</table>
**Positive:**

I felt fine when mum decided to start university (14 y/o)

I thought it was good ... I thought that she was going to be very busy (15 y/o)

I have always known that she can achieve anything so to see her completing this makes me the happiest mother

Ecstatic! That would be an awesome job to have, I thought, I wish I had it!

**Mixed reactions:**

A little sad to have her move away ... but happy that she was doing something she wanted to do (sister)

I am proud that she is trying to further her education, however I do worry about her supporting herself

**Influential:**

it made me want to follow in her footsteps (sister)

it made me consider furthering my education (sister)
Different conversations

Mum is very busy and stressed. Mum talks about her studies a lot, and it gives me a good insight into what I should look forward to when I go to university. (Son, 14 y/o)

She tries to talk me into doing more homework and study (Daughter, 15 y/o)

her views on everything have developed … She has even started challenging common or normal aspects of life. (Mum, 55yo)

Positive changes

She seems happier and motivated (Brother, 32 yo)

She's more willing to make friends and is more sociable (Sister, 16yo)

Already she is starting to discuss very in-depth global topics and starting to observe the way people behave around her (Husband 48yo)

negative:

more anxious (Mum, 59yo)

She became confused with her career choices (Mum, 66yo)
Interview findings so far...

Interviews:

- Students have been encouraged to ‘story’ their perceptions, expectations and motivations about university
- 101 interviews conducted so far – we are currently analysing the data
- Recurrent themes in the interview data – echoes the survey

<table>
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<th>101 Interviews</th>
<th>UOW</th>
<th>OUA</th>
<th>UON</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total interviewed</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
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</table>
Of particular interest

- Changes in perceptions of self and others
- Ripples of learning that ebbed between the university and the home place
- Conversations about learning that occur amongst family members
- The powerful nature of family social capital

Interview with Elle (39) and Elle’s Mum (56):

…so she’s (Elle) kind of started it off. I don't know whether Nick (cousin) or Belinda (niece) were going to go to uni to start off with but, you know, they…so she’s kind of started a… I don't know whether she’s actually started a trend or what she has but, you know, it’s very encouraging for the up and coming nieces and nephews that she’s got: “Not only Elle can do it, you know, we can do it too” type thing.
Nonna (67) and Naomi (18)

Naomi:  *Well we think of university very highly.*

Nonna:  *Well education is power. That’s what I always say.*

Nonna explained how Naomi’s mother had got pregnant at 18 and how she did not want that to happen to Naomi

Nonna:  *Because the cycle… sometimes it goes around doesn’t it? She broke it… but it’s a good life going to uni isn’t it?*
The “ripple” effect

We are often unaware of the ripples of learning that flow both from and between the university and the home.

A number of the students in this study indicated that their attendance at university provided a new capital within the home; new discourses around learning emerged and the intergenerational impacts of these conversations herald benefits for all.

The cultural baggage that first in family students arrive with is not necessarily a deficit but also an asset.
Other key findings

The need to recognise that the transition process for older students or those who have been out of education is very different to that experienced by younger school leaver age groups. This is characterised by:

• Feeling out of place (fraud or imposter)
• Lacking confidence in abilities (need for validation / evidence or proof of belonging (often provided by assessment grades)
• Concern over impacts on others
• Myths about university
• Time to “adjust their mindset”
• Avoid assumptions that older students know why they are there or where they are going – some of these students reflected upon their bewilderment about the future
• Perception of being lucky / expressing gratitude for being allowed to attend university
Yvonne* – one story

Yvonne is 45 and is studying a B (Arts) – when this interview occurred she was in the first year of her study. Yvonne has two children (10 &12) and is a single parent.

Growing up: ‘…growing up in the family that I grew up – we were very working-class. All my dad’s family bar his eldest brother, they all had trades. Trades were the best thing; that’s what you had to do in life…’.

Reactions to her decision: “My mum, she can’t understand why I want to be upwardly mobile and moving out of just work and going back to study – “Why do you have to put yourself through all the stress and the anxiety and everything that you put yourself through to do what you want to do?”

Prior to starting: She had never attended a university campus but had completed some TAFE studies.

* Yvonne is the pseudonym of one of the participants from Stage (1) of this study.
Yvonne: Well it's the passing and the failing, I'm a fraud – I should not be here…

Int: The belief that you are?

Yvonne: No, it's just that I'm fraudulent so if I'm a fraud how can I possibly be here?

Int: Okay.

Yvonne: …goes along with it. Just “I'm not good enough to be here. I don't have the brains to be here”.

Int: So all of those kinds of things.

Yvonne: All of those types of things.

Int: Yes.

Yvonne: I don't deserve to be here. I haven't worked hard enough to be here.

Int: Yes, that kind of… Has that changed at all over the session? Do you still feel…?

Yvonne: I still do have that… I suppose it’s always in the back of my head – those things and I have to try and push them aside and say “Well, you know, you can actually do this. You've proved that you can do this and you do deserve to be here”. I have worked hard enough to be here. They wouldn't have let me in if I hadn't.
Yvonne (contd)

Expectations: “I didn’t think that it was going to be quite like it is. I think I thought that it was going to be a little easier – the transition would be easier but it’s quite different. It feels like I’m in an institution that has a whole different language”

Differences to other educational experiences: In TAFE “there are not so many middle-class… there’s not a lot of middle-class students; they’re more working class poor students as well, I think that that’s…”

Conversations in the home: “Since I’ve started to re-educate myself and tried to encourage my children to just not be in that mindset that they can’t do that, it’s absolutely out of their depth to be able to do it but they can actually do it”. Yvonne told her children about university as she felt “there are just some skills that you need to have to be here or a language that you need to have”.
Paired/Group Discussion

• How do these preliminary findings reflect your institutional context and the experiences of students at your university?

• What might it be like from the family’s perspective when no-one has been to university before, and then a close family member starts?
  ➢ What issues might this raise? What conversations might take place? What impact might this have on family relationships?

• How might institutions better engage with the families and communities of students disengaged from schooling and/or first-in-family students?
Thank you for your attention!

QUESTIONS
REFERENCES


