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Supporting and Engaging Students who are the First in their Families to Attend University: A Practise Paper*

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Abstract

Globally, first-in-family learners represent a significant proportion of the university student population, yet these high rates of participation are not necessarily matched by equally high success rates. Instead, internationally the research on this group indicates that these learners are at greater risk of departure from university when compared to their second and third generation peers, often as a result of limited exposure to academic culture and expectations. This article provides an overview of current research on first-in-family learners and also, offers some recommendations for supporting and engaging with this cohort within university settings

Keywords: First-in-family, Higher Education, educational equity, retention, student success.

* . URL: [http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/\[289\]](http://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/[289])

1. Introduction

Research emphasises how those who achieve university qualifications enjoy greater wealth, better health and also, have fewer social costs (Cassells, Duncan, Abello, D'Souza, & Nepal, 2012; Marmot, 2004). In recognition of these benefits, higher education systems in many countries are shifting from elite systems to increasingly mass forms of participation. This is particularly the case in Australia, where the research and activities outlined in this practise paper occurred. Since 2009, Australian universities have been working to reach Government university student participation targets which include ensuring 40% of all 25 to 34-year-olds obtain a bachelor level qualification or above by 2025 and increasing the numbers of students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds attending university to 20% by 2020. If achievement of such targets is only measured numerically, then this intervention has been very successful with just over a quarter more students attending university since 2006 (ACER, 2013). Yet, retaining certain student cohorts to the completion of their degree is still problematic. For example, when the national Australian completion rate (73.4%) is compared to the rates of completion for Indigenous students (46.7%) or those from low-SES backgrounds (68.9%) this disparity is clear (Edwards & McMillan, 2015).

One cohort characterised by substantially poorer educational outcomes, both nationally and internationally, are those students who are first in their family to come to university (ABS, 2013; Harrell & Forney, 2003; Lehmann, 2009). Internationally, first-in-family students are reported as being one of the most likely groups to depart higher education early. Departure rates for this cohort are particularly high in countries such as the United States (Chen, 2005; Ishitani, 2006) and also Canada (Lehmann, 2009) where statistics on this student cohort are collected systematically. Within Australia, data on this particular student grouping is currently only collected at an institutionally level, systematic analysis is also hampered by the fact that there is no common definition of what constitutes being 'first-in-family'. This term is loosely applied and usually only in reference to parental educational biography.

This lack of clarity, combined with my personal interest, provided the impetus for the research and practise activities outlined in this article. Having worked as an educator, researcher and support manager in the higher education sector, I have witnessed how many first-in-family students arrive at university with limited knowledge pertaining to institutional and academic expectations. While some unfortunately depart, others manage to overcome these issues and ultimately achieve success. Over the last decade, my research (O'Shea, 2007, 2009, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016) has predominantly sought to gain deeper insight into how those who are first in their family to attend university personally experience this tertiary space and how some manage success. This focus has been prompted by a gap in understanding about the ways in which those students who have no family history of university participation, subjectively experience and navigate these tertiary environments.

This invited article will initially provide a summary overview of literature and theorisation around first-in-family students, which provides context for my own research activities. However, in recognition of the importance of the research/teaching nexus, the application of this research to actual practical strategies in the field forms the focus for the concluding sections. Here recommendations are framed tentatively in recognition that these will need to be contextualised to the reader's particular institutional environment and location.

2. Exploring The First-in-family Learner

First-in-family (FiF) students, also known as First Generation learners, are reported to be a growing university cohort internationally. Within the United States, this student group has been termed the "new majority" (Jehangir, 2010) in higher education with an accompanying "ground swell" of university support strategies targeted at those who identify in this regard (Pappano, 2015). Within Australia, students who are first in their families to attend HE are estimated to comprise over half of the university student population (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013), this is similar to the UK, which is estimated to have 49% of this cohort enrolled in the tertiary sector (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). However, as these authors point out obtaining exact figures on this student population is hampered by the diversity of ways that

students who are the 'first' to come to university are defined. For the purposes of my own research, FiF status refers to those who do not have anyone in their immediate family, which includes siblings, parents, main caregivers, life partners and children, having attended university (O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2015). However, the variance in definitions does mean that the literature and research that follows may include additional indicators related to social, economic and generational issues.

As previously mentioned, when the international literature is examined this cohort is reported to have lower educational outcomes at university and a higher risk of attrition (AIHW, 2014; Harrell & Forney, 2003; HEFCE, 2010; McMillan, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012) There are numerous reasons identified why FiF students are particularly vulnerable to attrition and disengagement from university. For example, one UK study argues that the lack of a higher education imprint within the family impacts the educational preparedness of learners (Ball, Davies, David & Reay, 2002). As a result of this limited exposure to the HE environment, FiF learners may have to complete additional and somewhat invisible work (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). These authors describe how students may have to reassure others in the family that they have made the right choice and that this is a good investment in their future despite the associated temporal and financial implications.

The various issues reported by FiF learners (O'Shea, 2007; 2009; 2014b) are not necessarily unique and may similarly be encountered by many first-year learners, particularly those identified as being from recognised equity backgrounds. In previous research (O'Shea et al., 2015), we found that regardless of mode or level of study, these FiF learners narrated commonalities of experience, which included various obstacles and disadvantage. However, one of the significant aspects of targeting this student cohort is that this categorisation intersects equity groupings. Our research has indicated how the FiF cohort can be conceptualised as a 'supra' or umbrella equity category that works across other equity categorisations within Australia (O'Shea et al, 2015). For example, students who participated in interviews and surveys during this latter study, revealed a diversity of structural and economic stratification including poverty and low prior educational attainment, often combined

with constraints related to gender, geography and ethnicity (O'Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, in-press, 2017)

Yet in interviews (O'Shea et al, 2015), it was frequently the family and community of the learner that provided impetus for this decision to attend university, the voices of family members frequently intruded into these students' narratives of learning. The narratives echoed significant others' encouragements, advice or even rebukes, as this was not always a decision greeted positively. However, what stood out overwhelmingly was that these learners' personal higher education trajectories were often intimately bound up with family biographies, as Allyssa, Angela and Nelson explained:

I think my mum is especially supportive because she... I guess, well she never completed Year 12 and ... she's said I guess that she wishes she could have known a different pathway instead of just kind of like doing it as it comes. So, seeing this experience is kind of like opening a new door as well. She always wants to know what's happening. (Allyssa, 20, Single, B.Arts, Yr1)

... although I'm the first to go to uni, my mum kind of expected me to do everything that she wanted to do when she was a kid and she didn't get to do. (Angela, 20, Single, B.Engineering, Yr 1)

My grandparents and my aunty and my nan, which is my dad's mum and even dad too, because ... I feel like they've always seen me as like having a bright future and they want that for me. They really badly want me to do well and they all would help me whenever they come and they're all like "I want dibs on your graduation. I want to be there". So I think that there's a part of me that does it for them. Yes, sorry it's making me sad. (Nelson, 22, Single, B.Arts / B.Law, Yr 5)

(Quotes derived from O'Shea, May & Stone, 2014)

Whilst only offering a snapshot of lengthy narrative conversations (n=101) undertaken with FiF learners (O'Shea et al., 2015), these statements reveal how this educational participation was embedded within broader familial ambitions. The quotes above are derived from younger participants but older students equally indicated the act of attending university rippled out into the family, potentially impacting on intergenerational futures:

...I'd been through a pretty nasty divorce and I'd always lived in Department of Housing [Social Housing] and I wanted my kids to realise that just because that's where you come from it doesn't mean that it closes off your options. You know, if I can do it, maybe they can do it. (Asha, 34, Single Parent of 3 children, B.Arts, Yr3)

I don't want to be on government payments forever. I want to be able to earn my own way and not rely on a man ever again so yes, that's pretty much it, rely on myself. (Elle, 33, Single Parent of 3 children, B.Arts, Yr2)

(Quotes derived from O'Shea, May & Stone, 2014)

While participants reflected on the pivotal role of family and community in their decision to come to university, they were also “silences” in the home around the actual practicalities of higher education participation (O'Shea, 2014a) and family members similarly described (in surveys and interviews) a lack of knowledge concerning how best to support the higher education participant in the family. Family and community members may not necessarily know or understand the best ways to support learners once they get to university (O'Shea, 2014a, 2014b; Stone & O'Shea, 2012). This movement into higher education has been characterised as a dramatic ‘learning curve’ for both students and significant others (Stone & O'Shea, 2012, p.23).

In recognising this limited understanding but equally mindful of the potentially supportive role that family could provide in this higher education journey, I have turned my focus to exploring the ways that higher education institutions might better engage with the family and community of these learners (O'Shea, 2015-2016). The following sections detail the particular approach that I have adopted in pursuing this program of activities.

3. Focussing On Learners And Family

Within Australia, there is currently no systematic or recognised approach to fostering family engagement within the university-learning environment, nor dedicated resources aimed at retaining this first-in-family cohort. Yet, research has pointed to the ways in which first-in-family learners are variously intersected by community, the university and also, family/significant others (O'Shea, May, Stone &

Delahunty, in-press; O'Shea, 2014a, 2015a). The following diagram represents these various intersections:

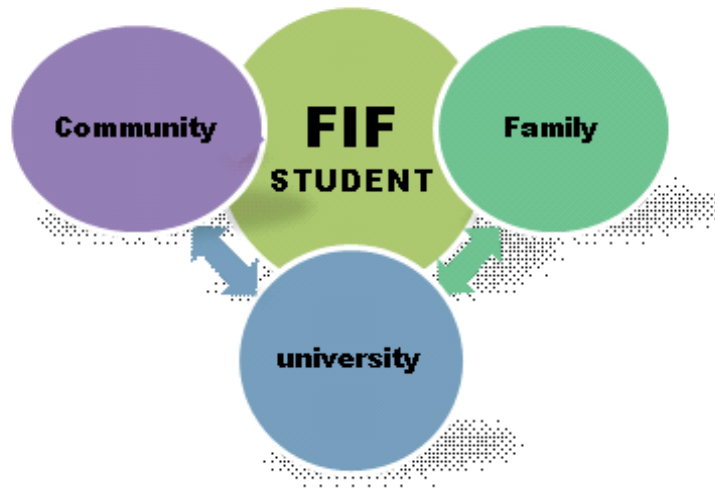


Figure 1: intersections of the First-in-Family

This diagram foregrounds the reciprocal relationships that exist between university, family and community, reflecting the need for universities to engage not only with the learner but also those around this individual. This is not to suggest that all students are not similarly intersected but rather to point out the particular nature of this reciprocity for first-in-family learners. This is a duo-fold relationship that ebbs and flows between the institution, the student and those surrounding. This interaction similarly recognises how first-in-family learners impacts upon the community and family, often acting as a 'cultural change agent' across this social and familial landscape. In recognition of the need to better work with these relational networks, I was provided with an Australian Teaching Fellowship (O'Shea, 2015-2016) to explore how we might systematically interact with both learners and their families, to better engage and retain this cohort.

The fellowship has adopted a multipronged approach that has included working closely with higher education institutions across Australia, providing advice and mentoring, professional development and also articulating a set of national principles to underpin support and outreach activities in this regard. The following sections highlight the various activities that have been enacted under the auspices

of the fellowship.

3.1 *Mentoring and professional development*

A key focus of this fellowship has been disseminating the research findings from previous work (O'Shea, et al., 2014) and also, making 'space' for conversations to occur about this student population. To achieve this, a series of workshops and professional development activities have been offered across Australia over 2015-2016. In total, these sessions have attracted over 300 university staff interested in first in family learners, this figure is set to increase with additional requests for workshops and mentoring received regularly. The feedback on these sessions (O'Shea, 2015-2016) has been overwhelmingly positive with 92% survey evaluations (n=90) reporting that workshops were *outstanding* to *above average*. Comments reflected upon the "solid, meaningful, helpful" research (#58), "networking opportunities" (#3), with practitioners also describing the relevance to "my work with students" (#38, #69) and the resulting insight into the FiF cohort which is "huge ... but not always specifically considered" (#22) or "is outside my experience" (#33).

When responses were analysed thematically, four key themes emerged around the 'take home messages' that practitioners had acquired which included a deeper understandings about:

- i) the role of family in the first-in-family students educational trajectory;
- ii) the need for a strengths based focus (as opposed to deficit thinking);
- iii) the difficulties in accurately defining attrition and retention rates for this cohort and
- iv) the need to contextualize the data to specific locations and institutions.

For example, in relation to the role of family, one respondent explained:

I hadn't thought about the role of the family in a deep way until now. Intuitively we have known the importance of family. The workshop has provided some concrete information, which I'll have to follow up (#15)

Similarly, another reflected upon the *'importance of offering specific FiF support. Considering this cohort as their own equity group... [the] importance of engaging families so they can then support the student adequately. (#31)*

The fellowship is following an action research model cycle; this cyclic process allows for planning, acting, observing and reflecting and has been complemented by extensive empirically based knowledge of this field (O'Shea, 2007, 2009, 2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2016; O'Shea et al., 2015). Given the unique contextual nature of university outreach, action research provides a framework to initiate change in a measured and critically reflective way and for this change to be contextually embedded. A number of case study sites have been identified and working with the staff in these sites enables a more nuanced approach to the types of outreach and support strategies that will both engage and retain this first-in-family cohort. Based on interviews and surveys conducted with staff and family members at various sites, a series of suggested strategies have been proposed that reflect what significant others may require assistance with when a member of their family attends university. This empirically based list provides suggested content and also, particular foci based on the feedback received. Details of these techniques can be accessed from: <http://www.firstinfamily.com.au/OLT-3-1.php>

Finally, to further facilitate the creation of dialogue amongst practitioners, workshop and professional development activities have included an opportunity for individuals (in small groups) to contribute to the development of overarching principles for supporting this first-in-family cohort. The development process that underpins these draft principles forms the focus of the next section of this review.

3.2 Principles for supporting and engaging first-in-family learners and family members

The articulation of the proposed national principles has involved collaboration with a diverse range of stakeholders who are interested, indeed passionate, about supporting first-in-family learners and their significant others. This process commenced in February 2015 when participants (n= 113) in a National Forum on first-in-family learners were asked to develop one over-riding principle that could be applied to the support of first-in-family learners. These participants were derived

from nineteen higher education providers across seven states of Australia, with representation from other government and non-government organisations. Out of this activity, nine draft principles were developed. Feedback and further contribution was then invited from stakeholders across Australia throughout 2015 and into early 2016, with high levels of response.

This collaborative input was so descriptive and insightful that it became clear that it could be used to both inform the principles and also, underpin strategies for enactment. The final iteration of the Principles / Strategies is then based upon feedback derived from workshops conducted nationally between August 2015 and April 2016. These workshops provided a forum for over 300 participants to both contribute ideas and perspectives to the evolving list. At the end of each workshop, this input was entered into a data management system, which enabled analysis and consolidation of common themes. After refinement these overarching principles and strategies were placed on the website for further dissemination and feedback, and are available from <http://www.firstinfamily.com.au/OLT-1.php>

In summary, the principles are designed to articulate ways that both learners and their families can be supported in this university journey. The next phase of their implementation will involve working closely with a small number of institutions to explore approaches to enacting these principles. However, this is an evolving process so this list should not be perceived as a static inventory but rather a fluid and emerging interactive map, that charts relatively unknown territory.

4. Conclusions

The most recent report on the Australian First Year Experience (2015) indicates that with increasingly diverse student populations "...it will be essential for institutions to monitor routinely the experience of distinctive student subgroups. Early identification and intervention of 'at risk' students can contribute significantly to improving retention." (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis, 2015, p.6) The meaningful inclusion of parents, caregivers or significant others within the university environment can only assist this process, providing an opportunity for future learners to position themselves within higher education and thereby enact a

successful student identity. Additionally, this proactive involvement has the potential to impact upon the “tactile fabric” of the home (Wainwright & Marandet, 2010, p461) and may lead to more global and far-reaching changes in family and community aspirations for educational futures.

The activities outlined in this practise piece are grounded in actual student and family experiences of higher education but only provide some initial perspectives about how this engagement might occur. While these suggestions may be limited by contextual or geographic factors, the intent of this piece is to generate productive conversations around connecting and supporting this first-in-family cohort.

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