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Discourses of betterment and opportunity: Exploring the privileging of university attendance for first-in-family learners

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Abstract

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Keywords

privileging, learners, exploring, first-in-family, opportunity, betterment, discourses, attendance, university

Disciplines

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Discourses of betterment and opportunity: Exploring the privileging of university attendance for first-in-family learners.

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Abstract

Much of the literature on university access and participation positions people from disadvantaged backgrounds as those who have not 'traditionally' attended university. Certain student cohorts are presented as lacking the skills or requisite knowledges to achieve academic success, requiring additional assistance from institutions to address these gaps. Rather than approach such students from a position of 'lack', this article problematises the concept of privilege, particularly as this relates to the perceived benefits of university attendance. Drawing on rich qualitative interviews with first-in-family students, this article discusses the nature of these learners' expectations of university, particularly those related to the promise of a more secure financial future. In unpacking these constructs and interrogating the ways in which higher education sectors are located within discourses of betterment and opportunity, deep insight is offered into the embodied and experiential nature of university for these students and their families.

Keywords: First-in-family learners; university access and participation; qualitative research; cultural capitals; educational equity

Introduction

The benefits of higher education and degree attainment have largely been defined in financial terms: increased fiscal resources and educational achievement are juxtaposed in both research and literature. Within Australia, the links between secure financial futures and higher education participation proliferate in both social media and institutional marketing. Since the 1980s, Australian universities have embraced the tenets of advertising to compete in a shrinking student market (Forsyth, 2014). Currently, this is characterised by slick marketing campaigns exhorting students to 'Think. Change. Do' (UTS), to be 'Unlimited' (UWS) or 'Look Ahead' (UON).³ This embrace of marketing is not only an Australian phenomenon. The UK Guardian University Awards includes the category for best 'Marketing and Comms Campaign' with 2015 winners similarly focussing on students' future successful selves and university attendance (Thomas, 2015).

Perhaps these connections are not surprising given that there appears to be a strong statistical correlation between financial security and higher education qualifications. Cassells, Duncan, Abello, D'Souza & Nepal (2012) report that a person with a bachelor degree will earn almost 1.7 times more than someone whose formal education ended at Year 11 or lower.⁴ For those who undertake postgraduate studies, the approximate lifetime earnings are calculated to be \$(AUD)3.17 million compared with \$1.7 for someone who did not continue education past Year 11 or below (Cassells et al,

³ These acronyms refer to Australian universities, namely UTS: University of Technology, Sydney; UWS: University of Western Sydney; UON: University of Newcastle

⁴ In Australia, students are able to leave school in 'Year 11' if they have secured employment, an apprenticeship or further vocational training but they will not have formal school qualifications

2012). However, calculating lifetime earnings is largely dependent on individual factors including access to a range of capitals that are not only financial in nature.

This article explores the ways in which universities position themselves and are positioned by others within a *discourse of betterment and opportunity*, as reflected by the descriptions of our participants and their significant others. Drawing on interviews with students who identified as being the first in their family to attend university, we demonstrate the ways in which these students perceived university attendance as being a route out of poverty and a guaranteed entry to a better, more secure life. The descriptive stories are multi-layered and reflect not only the learners' perspectives but also include biographies and stories belonging to the participants' significant others. These 'others' include family members of the learners, many of whom constructed university as a 'privileged space' and a means to attain social status, to construct a better future and achieve financial security. This article discusses the ramifications of such positionality for the learners themselves and how this impacts upon their transition into and engagement within this environment.

The section below provides the context for the study, drawing on research and literature related to the university participation of diverse student cohorts. An overview of the research design and methodology follows, detailing the particularities of the approach to data collection and thematic analysis, which is consistent with the narrative approach used. This article explores in depth the ways in which participants reflected upon and narrated their reasons for attending university. As mentioned, these narratives included multiple voices; hence this analysis includes considerations of how the learners' stories echo generational aspirations and goals. Just like London (1989), we were '...struck by the power students attributed to family voices' particularly the '...entreaties, whispers or growls heard at home.' (p. 166)

Literature Review

The literature in the field of higher education participation amongst students from diverse or equity backgrounds is voluminous (Blaxter & Tight, 1995; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, 2003; Reay, Ball & David, 2005; Scheutze & Slowey, 2002; Smith, 1996; amongst others). Much of this research indicates that transition to and engagement within higher education is more complex for certain student cohorts, particularly those who are first in their family to attend university (Mehta et al., 2011; Oldfield, 2012; Rendon, 1995). This review explores the research relating to university participation amongst first-in-family (FiF) students, focusing particularly on understandings of poverty, FiF status and higher education participation. It also reflects upon the nature of the categorisations of poverty and FiF status and the ways in which these intersect.

First-in-family students, poverty and university participation

Students from financially poorer backgrounds are reported as experiencing multiple educational disadvantage, which impacts upon student choices, decisions and experiences in relation to university attendance (Terenzini, Cabrera & Bernal, 2001). For example, research has shown that these 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 (Rauscher & Elliott III, 2014). Within Australia, concern tends to centre on the costs associated with living expenses and travel (Rasmussen, 2006; Rauscher & Elliott, 2014) whereas in the US and the UK there is more unease

about the impact of tuition fees (Banks-Sontilli, 2014; Jones, 2016). While this difference in emphasis may reflect the variations in student funding arrangements across countries, the commonality of debt-aversion is reported across the international higher education environment. Such aversion may also be shared by those closest to learners, particularly if they have little experience of the higher education environment. Bowen, Cingos and McPherson (2009) sum up the issues and obstacles encountered by students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, stating that this group is expected to move into an environment using ‘effort and ability’ to succeed, but equally are expected to play ‘by rules that favor the wealthy in the first place’ (p. 288).

Once enrolled however, it is parental educational achievement that is most closely correlated with degree completion. Within the US, Bowen, et al. (2009) found that students who had a parent with a degree were six percent more likely to complete a degree within six years compared with those whose parents had no college level education; this was the case even after adjusting for high school results, race, ethnicity, gender, family income and university attended,. Similarly, in the UK, Croll (2004) points out that there are ‘considerable patterns of continuity between the socio-economic situation of parents and their adult children’ (p. 391). Students without a family background of higher education are reported as requiring additional targeted support once enrolled in the institution, yet this is hampered by a number of fundamental obstacles, including accurate identification.

Identifying students who are first in their family to attend university is notoriously difficult due to the various definitions of this cohort that exist globally. For example, within the US, the term ‘first-in-family’ or ‘first generation’ is applied to those learners whose parents have not attended university or obtained a degree but who may have attended college. Within the literature in the UK, Ireland, France and Australia, little research focuses explicitly on this group and instead conflates FiF status and higher education participation with broader issues related to widening participation, such as social class, access and disadvantage. More recently, a small body of research in Australia has emerged that explores the specific character of this group (King, Luzeckyi, McCann & Graham, 2015; O’Shea, 2007, 2014; O’Shea, May, Stone & Delahunty, 2015 amongst others). Drawing on these latter studies, FiF students are defined here as those individuals who are the first in their immediate family, including parents, partners, children and siblings, to attend university.

Economic status and university participation

Levels of educational attainment and income generation are inextricably linked. The OECD (2015) reports that amongst its twenty-two member countries, individuals who have a parent with a tertiary qualification have significantly higher wages than those whose parents do not. This situation arguably limits the intergenerational mobility of significant numbers of global citizens (Redmond, 2015) who may lack the financial and social resources required for tertiary participation. The likelihood that students who are the first in their family to attend university are coming from financially constrained backgrounds is therefore higher, but cannot be assumed. Instead, it is important to note that:

“Poverty” is not a single thing, nor a single concept. On a world scale, distinctly different situations are embraced in the term.

(Connell, 1994, p127)

Whilst low incomes are often used as a measure of poverty, there are significant differences between various forms and types of wages or incomes; for example, the differences between incomes that are consistent and regular, compared with those that are paid irregularly, and perhaps in cash or in-kind. Similarly, some incomes are only needed to support an individual whilst others are needed to support a household, family or community group. Connell (1994) explains that what constitutes poverty is both disputed and fluctuating, as individuals and families transition between definitions of poverty which are income contingent over time. Being poor is not necessarily a static state.

Poverty cannot only be measured via monetary means but also needs to be considered in relation to access to a range of capitals within society. Bourdieu (1986) differentiates between three forms of capital, namely economic, social and cultural capitals, arguing that, while economic capital can be characterised by tangible resources or wealth, cultural and social capital can be characterised, for example, by advantage inherited through parentage or social position. Social capital is generated through individual access to a 'durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition' (Bourdieu, in Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). These networks are both established and privileged, enabling individuals to sustain social position and advantage. Cultural capital is similarly advantageous, existing in a range of states including objects such as books and pictures; also in institutional credentials such as academic awards and additionally in an embodied state which Bourdieu terms as 'habitus'.

FiF students may not readily have access to institutionally valued forms of capital; the social and cultural capital they possess may be determined by a habitus that does not translate easily to higher education. As Pitman (2013) explains:

Success in both attending and succeeding at university rely heavily upon the ability of the individual to convert his or her social, economic and cultural capital into a specific form of cultural capital that resonates in the field of higher education; namely, academic capital. (p. 33)

The possible mismatch between the capitals that FiF learners arrive with and those that are required within higher education institutions seems to be evidenced by the poorer educational outcomes experienced by this group, as outlined in the next section.

First-in-family students and higher education participation

Globally, significant numbers of FiF students are now attending university. Within Australia, where this study took place, the proportion is estimated to be over 50% (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). However, university completion rates for this cohort remain low, with more FiF students considering departure compared with the overall student population. For example, within the US and Canada, where statistics on this cohort are collected systematically, the data indicates that degree attainment is strongly influenced by parental educational levels (Greenwald, 2012; Lehmann, 2009). Despite some limitations of this data, including a lack of detail around residency (on-campus or

not), ethnicity or financial supports, it nevertheless reveals that nearly 90% of first generation students in the US did not obtain degrees within six years at university (Greenwald, 2012). These students were also nearly eight times more likely to drop-out (Ishitani, 2006). Within Australia, higher rates of attrition have been recorded for students whose parents have not completed high school (19%) compared with those who have a parent with a diploma qualification or higher (12%) (McMillan, 2005). The Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) also reports that 26% of FiF students considered leaving university in their first year of university study, while 34% of later year FiF students had also given serious consideration to leaving (Coates & Ransom, 2011).

Based on an analysis of international literature on this cohort across the US, Germany, the UK and Canada, Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) conclude that this is collectively a group 'at-risk' (p. 330). Similarly, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak and Terenzini (2004) have reported that these learners are both more likely to be academically under-prepared to meet university expectations and to experience difficulty in transitioning between school and higher education. These factors and others combine to limit retention amongst this group, as these authors explain:

Not only do first-generation students confront all the anxieties, dislocations and difficulties of any college student, their experiences often involve substantial cultural as well as academic transitions. (Pascarella et al, 2004, p. 250).

When there is no one at a local or familial level to guide or advise these students, they are expected to 'navigate' this tertiary culture in isolation (Harrell & Forney, 2003, p. 155). Undoubtedly a steep 'learning curve' exists, for both learners and family members, when attending university is not the 'norm' in their family or community (Stone & O'Shea, 2012, p. 23).

As outlined above, research findings point to particular transition difficulties for this student cohort and statistics demonstrate lower levels of educational success. Yet understandings about how learners and their families imagine and experience this university space remain limited. The study outlined in this article sought to address this gap, conducting interviews and surveys with both learners and significant others. Adopting a qualitative approach to data collection, the study provides rich descriptive detail of the experiences of FiF learners studying at different institutions and at various stages of degree progression. Details about the context of the study as well as the data collection and analysis are provided in the next section.

Research design and methodology

This study occurred in Australia in 2013-2014 and was funded by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching. The broad aim was to explore how participating in university as a FiF student impacted upon the family and community of the learner. The overarching research question asked about the impact on the family and household when one of their own is the first to enter university studies and begins to build a student identity. With the ongoing requirements for universities to widen participation and include students from a diversity of backgrounds and educational biographies, the

research team recognised that this was a gap in understanding that needed to be addressed. This study therefore explores the transition into university of FiF students and the ways in which this is translated at a familial and community level. This study also provides insight into how this cohort may be better supported and thereby assisted to stay and succeed.

The qualitative data set was derived from both in-depth interviewing as well as open-ended survey questions. This mixed method approach maximised the number of participants in the study. In recognition of the diversity of the student population, the project team chose to focus on three main cohorts of FiF students: 1) enabling program students (in pre-degree entry level programs); 2) undergraduate students, studying primarily in traditional face-to-face, on-campus mode; and 3) undergraduate students studying wholly online. The participants were enrolled in a range of public universities across Australia. While all participants identified as being FiF, there was great diversity amongst each of the cohorts in terms of age, gender, social background and geographical context.

Participants were recruited by email and could elect either to participate in an interview or to complete an online anonymous survey. A total of 101 students participated in an in-depth interview of between 40-60 minutes, which was conducted via phone or face-to-face. Of the 101 interviews, nine students mentioned that they had a family member who had previously completed university studies (including grandparents, children and a parent), which resulted in these interviews being later removed from analysis. An additional 173 students completed a detailed online survey. Participants were invited to ask a family member to participate in the study. From this, a small number of face-to-face interviews (n=4) included family members (parent, grandparent and children) and 40 surveys were completed by family members, which included siblings, children, partners and parents.

Both surveys and interviews contained similar open-ended questions, broadly themed under the following four categories: 1) university experience; 2) family/friends reactions; 3) family perceptions of university; and 4) student experience. Example questions included: *What events or people brought you to university? What types of expectations did you have before coming? How is university spoken about in your household? How have these conversations changed over time?* Participants were encouraged to engage in deeply descriptive responses, facilitated by the use of open items in the survey and probing questions in the interviews. Given that each researcher was affiliated with the institutions involved, we cannot assume that responses were unbiased. To limit this bias, all researchers endeavoured to remain neutral in tone and responses within interviews, with questions being scrutinised to avoid unintentional 'leading' of the interviewee.

While both surveys and interviews generated deeply descriptive data, this article focuses on the interview data, particularly on the ways in which students described both their own and others' perceptions of university attendance.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were imported into NVivo (10) and initially line-by-line analysis was employed to identify codes and emerging thematic categories. Adopting a constant comparative method of analysis (Charmaz, 2006) allowed a deep exploration of themes and concepts that emerged inductively from the data. Data was interrogated through comparison and questioning with an analytic focus on the data itself rather than preconceived frameworks or models obtained from external sources such as literature, policy or previous studies. This process began with the naming and categorisation of the interview data; the resulting fragmentation of data led to the creation of thematic codes and from these, analytic concepts were derived. Words, phrases and the nuances of meaning were re-visited and explored so that ideas and theories emerged in an interpretative and reflective manner.

In this research study, it is the evaluative nature of occurrences and situations, the meaning associated with these experiences that is explored. It is influenced by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber's (1998) approach to narrative research, which relates to 'any study that uses or analyses narrative materials' (p. 2). The objective is not to describe the stories held by individual students in order to identify similarities between narrative structures but rather to examine respondents' stories to understand how university participation was described and defined. The focus of this analysis is on the content of narratives in order to highlight the sense that the speaker makes of these events.

This study also recognised that student identity intersects with numerous social groupings. Many variables including gender, ethnicity, age and economic status impacted upon the specifics of this higher education experience. We do not propose a one-dimensional analysis of FiF status but instead have explored the complete data set in terms of gender, ethnicity and also maturity. It is the latter focus that this article seeks to examine, specifically the interview narratives of those less than 26 years of age. Whilst the themes of betterment and opportunity featured in the interviews and surveys of all age cohorts, many of the older students were parents, hence their articulation of these themes was significantly defined in terms of children and dependents. The specific nature of this articulation will be dealt with in a separate publication.

Whilst at varying stages of their studies, this younger cohort (18-25 years) not only reflected deeply on the themes of betterment and opportunity but also strongly articulated this via the voices of significant others. During data analysis, the younger participants' narratives were characterised by the echoes of others' voices, predominantly those of parents, grandparents and siblings. The focus on this particular cohort is deliberate in order to explore the intergenerational implications of higher education attendance for these students and their family members.

Thirty-five interviewees were aged between 18 and 25 years. Within the Australian higher education sector, students aged 21 and over are defined in policy and institutional discourse as 'mature age'. However, research has pointed to the need to reconsider this age parameter, suggesting that 25 and over is a more realistic definition of maturity (Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009). For the purposes of this study, those students aged between 18-25 were collectively grouped, recognising that this cohort

had very different life experiences from the older students, many of whom reported living with children and/or dependents. Within this 18-25 group, none had children, they were largely studying full-time and most were still living in the family home. This group included those who had come to university directly from school and those who had experienced a short gap between educational experiences. Table (1) provides key statistics for this cohort. Given the unique biographies of these students, further descriptive detail will be provided in the findings section.

Age	Total	Female	Male	Relationship status	Stage of study
18	3	3	0	Single = 3	First year = 3
19	7	4	3	Single = 6/ Partnered = 1	First year = 6 /Second year = 1
20	4	2	2	Single = 3/ Partnered = 1	First year = 4
21	6	4	2	Single = 4/ Partnered = 2	First year = 1 / Fourth year = 2 Final year = 2/ Unknown* = 1
22	7	3	4	Single = 5/ Partnered = 2	Third year = 1 / Fifth year = 2 Final year = 4
23	3	1	2	Single = 2/ Partnered = 1	First year = 2/ Unknown* = 1
24	5	4	1	Single = 3/ Partnered= 2	First year = 3 / Second year = 1 Final year = 1

Table (1): Summary Demographics of Participants

** The students studying wholly online were completing studies in trimesters and so it was difficult to accurately calculate their year of study compared to those studying traditional semesters. Hence, the stage of study has been recorded as unknown*

This study is not without its limitations, not least of which is the small number of participants and the lack of ethnic and cultural diversity in this cohort. The majority of the participants presented as of Anglo-European descent with none self-identifying as Indigenous.⁵ The majority of interviewees (n = 28) had successfully completed high school, obtaining the Higher School Certificate (HSC). A relatively small number had gained entry to university via alternative entry pathways, which further limits the applicability of the data. Within this group there were more females (n=21) and more than half were in their first year of study (n=19).

These limitations, combined with the relatively small-scale nature of the study, means that this data only offers a partial view of this experience, albeit a deeply descriptive one.

Findings

In relation to how learners articulated their and others' understandings of attending university three key themes emerged:

- Discourses of betterment and opportunity
- Realising generational dreams and ambitions
- Disparities between expectations and realities

Each of these themes will be dealt with separately, with discussion and conclusions following the presentation of findings. All participants have been identified by pseudonyms throughout the presentation of findings.

⁵ In order to avoid intrusive interviewing, students were only asked general questions relating to biography rather than expected to respond to direct questions regarding ethnicity or cultural affiliation.

Discourses of betterment and opportunity

The participants in this study largely reflected upon university as an ‘opportunity’ to change the shape of their future selves. Often this was in terms of a clear delineation between a restricted past and a better future. For Abbey, a third year Arts student, university simply offered an escape route from a prior life characterised by alcohol abuse and poverty:

My dad's an alcoholic and doesn't work and my mum had no money bringing my sister and me up and I just want to be able to always support myself and I want to own a house and those kinds of things my parents didn't do. (Abbey, 22, B. Arts, 3rd Year)

Croll (2004) points out that in relation to educational futures, family members can act as both strategists and motivators. This positionality was echoed in this study. Parents, grandparents and significant others both motivated these learners and also strategically positioned university as an opportunity for better future choices. The experiences of Abbey's parents acted as powerful negative exemplars to motivate Abbey to work toward a different, more secure future for herself. On the other hand Aria's parents directly encouraged her attendance at university simply because: *‘they know that you have to go to university in order to end up in a good job’* (Aria, 18, B. Law, 1st Year). In a similar way, Alison explained how: *‘I just wanted a higher education level to get a better job really at the end of the day. I think that's what they [her parents] were looking for too. (Alison, 22, B. Environmental Science, 4th Year)*

Within these interviews, the echoes of other voices are omnipresent; it was often the family members who sought to encourage the learners by placing university as a possible route out of poverty. Achieving university qualifications was also regarded as an important message to all the ‘others’ who may have assumed that higher education participation was not possible for this cohort. There was a clear investment in the success of these students by those closest to them. Anthea, a 21 year old in her first year of a B. Science/B. Arts degree, described how her mother encouraged each of her three daughters to attend university and get *‘that piece of paper’*. These ambitions for her daughters were twofold. As Anthea explained, university not only provided the possibility of *‘getting a job and you do get a bigger pay than someone who's never had that education’* but more importantly, this attendance *‘make[s] the world know you're smart. Even if you know you are, it's what the rest of the world sees at times’*. The university ‘piece of paper’ was constructed in terms of offering not only better employment opportunities, but also increased social standing within the community.

The narratives are replete with assumptions that participants would be able to access better jobs and more secure careers. These assumptions were also strongly voiced by significant others in the family and community:

I think it's kind of a thing where I was brought up thinking like “You know you want a good job with good pay, you want to do something that isn't going to break your back. You need to go to uni”. I think in that sense mum and dad influenced me a lot with that just because that's how I grew up thinking about uni. (Ellen, 19, B. Bio-Science, 1st Year)

... it was just sort of the feel you got from the way people acted about it, like "Hey, you know, go to uni, you can actually get a real job. You don't get stuck in the shitty job that nobody else wanted." (Angela, 20, B. Engineering, 1st Year)

The students' narratives characterised universities as being 'better than' other forms of education, particularly vocational systems. For example, Abbey explained how her grandparents 'told me I'm better than TAFE [Technical and Further Education], I'm better than that ...' (Abbey, 22, B. Arts, 3rd Year). Marlee described being held up as a positive role model for both family and community, as someone who had successfully navigated university entry:

There's a high expectation of me because like "You're going to university" – it's not just TAFE or a college; it's university. Because I live in housing commission [social housing] as well and just because I come from a low class, low-income family, the fact that I'm going to uni is like this huge thing. It's huge. It's just "Wow, you're doing something that a lot of people don't do". (Marlee, 19, B. Nursing, 1st Year)

Marlee's quote clearly indicated how attending university could be perceived in a collective sense, a celebration not only for the learners but also for the family and community. The next section explores this theme in more depth, drawing on the 'voices' of others who celebrated this university attendance as the realisation of long-held ambitions.

Realising generational dreams and aspirations

A number of the students referred to other members of the family as having a very personal investment in their university success. Many of these narratives were themed on notions of limited or lost opportunity for family members. For example, Abbey explained how her grandparents believed that university offered opportunities for both herself and her sister, opportunities that had been denied to them in their youth:

I moved in with them [grandparents] when I was in high school and they ... wanted myself and my sister to go to uni because they think that a degree is a really good way for careers and always a good back up and they were always very pushy about us going... I think because they had children young and their kids didn't go and I think they realised ... because they worked really, really hard when they were younger to get where they are. (Abbey, 22, B. Arts, 3rd Year)

Similarly, Ashleigh's parents regarded university as offering an alternative, better future: '... they really just want me to have a better life than what they feel they've had' (Ashleigh, 21, B Arts/Law, 4th Year), while Ned explained how his parents encouraged his attendance because 'they could really see where it [university] would have been beneficial in their life so they didn't want us to miss out on that (Ned, 23, B. Medical Science, 1st Year).

At age 24 and in the final year of a law degree, Lachlan reflected how he was the 'first person I think in my entire bloodline to set foot in a university.' The impetus for

attending university came from both parents but particularly from his father, who had 'a very blue collar upbringing.' Lachlan's own movement into university was tightly bound up with his father's biography:

Dad always tells me the story, back in his day you didn't get to choose, you did what you were told. He never wanted to be an apprentice mechanic; he wanted to be a pilot but only rich people could become pilots and he wasn't rich. He was just an ordinary kid from the suburbs ... So, the way he thinks about it, I think, and from his point of view, university is a good opportunity, it can open a lot of doors and for that reason alone if you're good enough to go to university you should. Desires and that kind of thing go out the window. (Lachlan, 24, B. Law, 4th Year)

The embodied nature of university attendance is frequently overlooked in the literature in this field. In this study, such embodiment was variously described by participants as a recognition of new horizons or opportunities, the development of new identities or 'sense of self', as well as transformations in confidence and happiness. Anthea described how attending university had changed her perception of herself and also her future: 'It's scary but it's thrilling and it's just... everything is different and I love it. I don't ever want to go back to where I was' (Anthea, 21, B. Science/B. Arts, 1st Year). Corey succinctly summed up this embodiment by explaining: 'I feel like I'm travelling to a foreign country and I'm just able to experience a whole new world'. (Corey, 21, B. Comp Science, 1st Year)

This emotionality was not only experienced personally but also ricocheted throughout the household and family. The emotional investment by others was such that it could become quite burdensome for these students as they found themselves not only succeeding for themselves but also for others. As Nelson noted:

My grandparents and my aunty and my nan, which is my dad's mum and even dad too ... They really badly want me to do well ... So I think that there's a part of me that does it for them. Yes, sorry it's making me sad. (Nelson, 22, B. Arts/B. Law, 5th Year)

Elevating or privileging university in this way can place individuals under additional pressure to achieve. For those who may be already lacking in confidence such stress can impact negatively on their learning experiences. The next section explores some of the 'disparities' articulated in relation to attending university, particularly the ways in which FiF students reflected upon their expectations and the realities of attendance.

Disparities between expectations and realities

For these FiF students the sources of information about university were largely ad-hoc and ill informed. Not having ready access to someone who had previously attended university meant that they variously relied upon friends, work colleagues or popular culture. As Ellen explained: 'it was a bit of a heavier workload than I thought because, you know, you see movies and uni's just like partying' (Ellen, 19, B. Bio-Science, 1st year). Similarly, Nicole described:

I thought it was going to be like what you see on the movies like frat parties every night and just like party central and then maybe go to

class but I was really scared because a few people, like some of my old babysitters and a few people that I live around, they all said that, you know, "You think the HSC [Higher School Certificate] is hard; wait till you get to uni. You'd have to do that whole two years in 12 weeks." (Nicole, 19, B. Bio Science, 1st Year)

For Lachlan, his parents' views about 'university as the ticket to a successful life' were regarded with a little scepticism. He commented:

Now, I'm not sure whether that view is totally true or not. In fact, I'd probably say it's too much of a generalisation But yes, coming from a family where no-one had gone to university, perhaps their understanding of what university is about, what university could lead to would be perhaps different to say my understanding now where I kind of realise that you don't have to be a university graduate to be successful, if that makes sense. But obviously, being parents, they wanted what was best for me and in their view, the best thing for me was a university education. (Lachlan, 24, B. Law, 4th Year)

Not surprisingly, these students were largely unprepared for both the financial and time implications of university studies. Like others, Abbey lamented the high costs of her studies, stating: *'money's always an issue. I live with my boyfriend so it's hard. I guess money's the big issue'* (Abbey, 22, B. Arts, 3rd Year). Both Liam and Lachlan mentioned similar constraints:

I need to work three jobs. It's not as if I cannot do one of those things; I've got to work one job as a requirement for my degree and the two others pay the bills. (Lachlan, 24, B. Law, 4th Year)

I don't have time to do anything but study. I'm missing sleep; I'm missing food just so I can get assignments done. (Liam, 20, B. Engineering, 1st Year)

The stress of study was frequently remarked upon as something that was unexpected. For some, this culminated in health issues. Six students indicated that the unexpected levels of stress affected them both physically and mentally. Ashleigh described how existing health issues were exacerbated by her university attendance: *'I also have depression as well and anxiety so... I was definitely going really bad in uni kind of thing and I felt helpless...'* (Ashleigh, 21, B. Arts/ B. Law, 4th Year). For Sam, his response to university had been so extreme he had decided to take a short break from his studies: *'[University has] brought on, for me ... some anxiety, depression, suicide – these type of things.'* (Sam, 19, B. Banking, 1st Year). During the interview, he admitted that his extended family did not know about this leave, only his mother was aware of his decision.

Sam was not the only participant to have taken leave from university, but reducing study load could also be complex for these students. Barbara explained how the stress of juggling university with other aspects of her life became too much, so she decided to drop a subject. This eventually led her to withdraw completely for the semester and she explained: *'it was a huge weight off my shoulders when eventually I just sat down and went "You know what? I can't do this" ... I was so stressed about it and really panicking and just not having any faith in myself to get it done'* (Barbara, 21, B. Arts,

Online). However, having withdrawn, she then had to reassure her family members that this was acceptable: *'it did take me a while to sort of explain, "No, mum, I haven't failed at university. I'm just dropping some stuff so that I can pick it back up later"'*.

The previous sections have presented detailed description about the lived experiences of university attendance for one group of FiF learners, focusing on how university was both regarded and experienced by self and others. The next section will explore the ramifications of this positionality with particular reference to the overarching discourses of betterment and opportunity.

Discussion

The expectations of FiF learners and their families need to be both better understood and better managed within the higher education context. On the one hand, family members and close others regard university participation as more than simply a move into a new educational domain; it signifies a chance for a 'new' or 'better life' - in some cases, a guaranteed route out of poverty. On the other hand, while learners express gratitude for this educational opportunity, the narratives of these 18-25 year old students reveal ruptures between expectations and realities of this experience. For some, the duality of the student role combined with the family pressure to achieve and succeed in life can result in significant stress.

Connell (1994) describes how there is a 'deeply ambivalent relationship' between educational institutions and those from financially poorer backgrounds (p. 134). This is manifested in perceptions of educational institutions as powerful state agents over which financially disadvantaged individuals have little power, yet these institutions are equally regarded as the 'hope for a better future' (p. 134). Education is regarded as a means of advancement, yet individuals do not necessarily have the 'resources' or 'techniques' required to enter and succeed in formal education. Even though Connell (1994) is specifically referring to schools, these resources and techniques, which include 'adequate food, physical security, attention from helpful adults, books in the home, scholastic know-how in the family' (p. 134) apply equally to higher education. While the learners in this study were largely supported and encouraged by family, there were also limited resources for them to draw upon, particularly the academic capitals required at university. Instead, some of the participants articulated a struggle between reassuring their families that 'everything was okay' whilst simultaneously navigating academic expectations and achieving success.

The narratives similarly point to an expectation of greater financial security stemming from a university education, yet recent research indicates that university graduates are not automatically better off financially than their peers who did not pursue tertiary qualifications (Daly, Lewis, Corliss & Heaslip, 2015). While some studies suggest that graduate incomes are generally higher than those who do not attend university (Cassells et al, 2012), Daly et al.'s Australian study reports that graduates in certain fields earn less than those who entered full-time employment after school. The guaranteed economic return of university studies is not necessarily a reality for all graduates. This situation is exacerbated by fluctuating fee structures, resulting in students in many countries leaving university with substantial debt. Edel (2012-2013) argues that in the US the long-term impacts of this debt have led to social unrest and

deep dissatisfaction with income opportunities after graduation. Between 2006 and 2012, Australia recorded a 30% increase in student debt (Bexley, Daroesman, Arkoudis, & James, 2013); student national debt currently exceeds 40 billion dollars (AUD) and is forecast to increase to 70 billion by 2017 (Hare, 2015). As a result, many students are left with a debt that may take many years to pay back with no guarantee of secure and stable future employment.

The continued emphasis on the financial benefits of this educational endeavour reflects the neo-liberal agenda within higher education sectors, where students are defined as 'consumer-investors' (Marginson, 1997, p. 64). This agenda emphasises the individual as central to educational activity (Leathwood, 2006), arguably positioning the personal financial benefits of higher education as more significant than public benefits. Consistent with this, the financial responsibility of attending university has also shifted, positioning the learner as the main benefactor and thereby responsible for all associated costs. Undoubtedly, this is burdensome for all students regardless of their background, but for those who are FiF such positionality results in additional pressures, not only financial but also intergenerational. If these learners do not succeed, there may be diminished support and opportunities for others in the family to try, resulting in university no longer being a possible route out of poverty but actually perpetuating a continuing cycle of exclusion.

Many students remain unaware of the numerous 'opportunity costs' associated with attending university and the long-term implications of this pathway (Edel, 2012-2013). The continued emphasis on the private financial benefits of attending university often masks the very significant personal sacrifices this attendance requires and also disregards the wider social benefits. Hunter (2013) contends that university institutions have to be considered as providing tangible fiscal benefit in order to legitimise their positionality and also to ensure that universities as institutions exist in 'a self-regulating market ... so government intervention is almost always undesirable'. (Hunter, 2013, p. 709)

Conclusion

Young FiF students and their families share discourses of betterment and opportunity in relation to university education. However, these discourses often focus narrowly on the ability to acquire financial capital through successful tertiary study, failing to explicitly recognise and acknowledge other empowering types of social and cultural capital which higher education can confer. There is a need to recognise these other, more experiential transformations that the university experience can engender, instead of solely emphasising the financial benefits that may be acquired upon completion. While the emphasis remains on vocational outputs, other consequences stemming from attending university can go unnoticed and uncelebrated. Other positive outcomes include improvements in confidence levels, self-efficacy and/or greater social and cultural facility and engagement. These benefits are not limited to learners; the narratives presented in this article point to a broader advantage for both students and family members, with attendance at university frequently being the realisation of a collective ambition.

For those who are first in their family, attending university can be the culmination of a dream not only for the learner but also intergenerationally for parents, grandparents and significant others. Reasons for attending university may be firmly rooted in family and personal biographies, but are strongly characterised by an expectation of better futures and opportunities for participants. These are fragile dreams which, given the realities of the costs of attending higher education and the employment prospects thereafter, can easily be shattered. The insights offered by these narratives suggest that our understanding and representations of higher education need to move away from neo-liberal individualism and shift to a more holistic and embodied appreciation of this endeavor; one that recognises and celebrates the socially embedded nature of the learner.

The acknowledgement of both individual and collective benefits of university participation needs to feature in educational policy as well as in publicity and marketing campaigns. University marketing campaigns that showcase the experiential nature of this undertaking, as well as recognising the collective investment in learners' educational futures, can help to provide a more realistic appreciation of this opportunity for learners and their families. An important first step would be to minimise slogans based on future financial success and income security and, instead, actively celebrate the stages of this learning journey. These types of changes would help to reframe learners' and their families' expectations of this undertaking, hopefully initiating a more realistic appreciation of the actual opportunity and betterment afforded by higher education participation.

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