

Breaking the Barriers:

Supporting and engaging mature
age first-in-family university
learners and their families

Presentation for Griffith University

August 2015

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 (OLT)



Today's workshop

- Background and context
- Details of research project
- Survey / Interview data overview
- Perceptions and reactions
- Family and university
- Strategies for success
- Focus on online learners

Welcome to the project team

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Why first-in-family/ Why now?

- The first in family cohort cuts across various demographics, is not currently defined as an equity category and within Australia, does not necessarily have targeted support.
- Most recent OECD (2012) figures suggest that approximately half the university student population in Australia (51%) is derived from first in family backgrounds (defined on parental educational levels) which is close to the OECD mean average of 53%...

SO could we argue that we are in the “era” of the first-in-family student?

Why first-in-family? Why now?

- This student cohort reported internationally as not achieving to the same level academically compared to peers
- 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).

Summary Literature review

- Exploring the literature is hampered by a range of factors and there are gaps in understanding .
- Focus on school leavers who come to university directly from school
- The most recent review of literature Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) report that most of the research in this field identify first in family students as simply ‘coping’ and collectively have a lower sense of belonging within the institution

Focus of research

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

no-one in the immediate family of origin including siblings, parents or significant partner 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



Methodology

- Survey and interview methodology
- Three cohort groups – undergrad online learners (OUA), Access program participants (UoN) and on-campus undergrads (UoW)
- All domestic – no international students
- Family and student survey
- Interviews with students (and family members where possible)

Student Data

Interviews

Total females interviewed

Total

103

Total males interviewed

70

33

Surveys (2 incomplete)

Total completions

Total

171

Total females surveyed

169

Total males surveyed

138

33

Family Data

Of the 171 Surveyed, 43% had children.

Family Interviews:

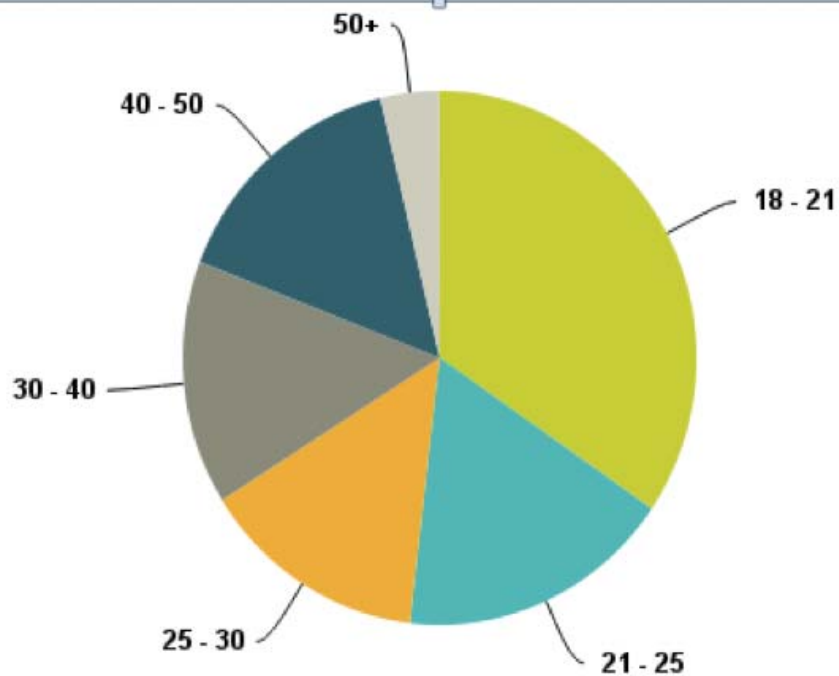
We conducted four interviews with a family member present, this included a parent, a grandparent and two children

Family Surveys:

<i>Total respondents:</i>	40	
Children	9	(The student is my mother)
Parents	18	(The student is my son/daughter)
Partners	7	(The student is my partner)
Siblings	5	(The student is my sister / brother)
Grandparent	1	(The student is my grandchild)

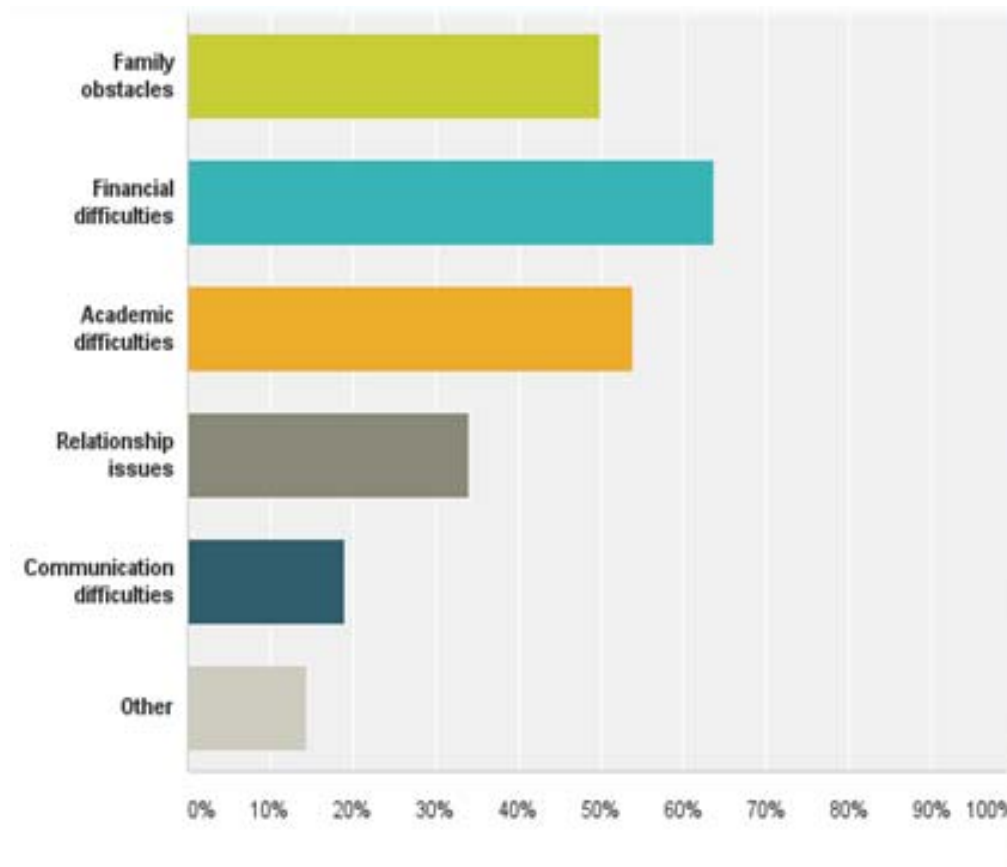
The student survey data:

Age range



Range	%	No.
18 - 21	32.7%	56
21 - 25	16.3%	28
25 - 30	15.7%	27
30 - 40	14.6%	25
40 - 50	15.7%	27
50+	3.5%	6

The student survey data: Hurdles & obstacles



The student survey data: Reasons for starting university

- 1. UNFOCUSED or FRUSTRATED LONGHELD AMBITION or DREAM:** Always intended to attend university, but didn't know what to study or circumstances prevented them from doing so.
- 2. FOCUSED LONGHELD AMBITION or DREAM:** Always intended to become a teacher, nurse, accountant, lawyer and so on, but needed a push
- 3. REACHING FOR BETTER:** Job choice and career opportunities / change of career / job-related study / work-motivated study
- 4. GENERALISED ALTRUISM:** Wanted to do more with my life / help others
- 5. FAMILIAL ALTRUISM:** Be a positive influence on children
- 6. HONOURING THE SELF:** A gift to yourself
- 7. MATURITY:** Realising it's never too late

Always wanted to....

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

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

... but thought I wasn't 'smart' enough

Before I studied at university I felt like I was just living but for not much of a reason. Now I feel like I'm going somewhere and working towards a goal that's always been in the back of my mind.

Always wanted to, 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.

Making a difference...

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

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

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

... wanting to 'do more with my life' [after a trip as volunteer for children with AIDS/HIV]

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



...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 life long 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

... wanting to ... make my family proud

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

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

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

... 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!

Witnesses to Changes

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)

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

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

Positive changes

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

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

She seems happier and motivated
(Brother, 32)

Negative changes

'[She's] more anxious
(Mum, 59)

She became confused with her career choices
(Mum, 66)

The Interview Data

- Interviews enabled ‘close-up’ analysis of this field
- Students have been encouraged to ‘story’ their *perceptions, expectations and motivations* about university.
- Informed by narrative inquiry: Polkinghorne (1995) emphasises how ‘storied memories’ are able to ‘...retain the complexity of the situation in which an action was undertaken and the emotional and motivational meaning connected with it’ (p11)

The interview data: Main Findings

First in Family as Supra Category that shares salient narrative features about the HE journey, among others such as

- Placing a high value on engagement in higher education
- The role of altruism in their stories
- The move into HE viewed as launching the self (and the family) on a positive, albeit challenging, trajectory
- The hesitations and apprehensions around doubting the capacities of self or about how to navigate this new, highly valued context
- The transformations of internal and external contexts as they move through their education.

The interview data: Why enrol?

- Reaching for better
 - career, financial security, self-sufficiency
- Inspired by others
- Personal 'epiphany'
- Life changing event
- A long-held dream

Reaching for better

I'm the only income earner in our family so I thought it'd be good if I did actually earn more money than I do as a chef because it's not exactly a well-paid job. *(Richard, 29, 1 child, online u/g)*

So I can be self-sufficient. I don't want to be on government payments for ever. 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, single parent, 3 children, on-campus u/g)*

I need to find a career path, you know, learn something, get some more skills under my belt.
(Tracey, 35, 2 children, enabling)

Inspired by others:

partners, parents, other family, colleagues, teachers

My parents were both extremely supportive and sort of pro attending university so I'd say that they encouraged me. I have an uncle and a cousin who both did very well at university and I've sort of always looked up to them. *(Ned, 23, on-campus u/g)*

I had a number of teachers in high school that were really encouraging and supportive and made me feel like university would be a really great pathway. *(Gail, 23, online u/g)*

I have a very supportive partner and he said "Just quit work. We don't need you to work. This is what you really want to do so let's focus on doing that". *(Marilyn, 31, enabling)*

My current boss that I've worked for since 2004 had been encouraging me to try and take on some form of study. *(Evie, 43, u/g online)*

Personal 'epiphany' & life-changing events

It was just my own personal epiphany I had, that I realised I'm sure I've got potential to do more. *(Donna, 36, 2 children, online u/g)*

It was kind of just my views started changing and I really wanted to be successful... I was just tired of being the kid that never really cared about school. *(Ahmad, 19, on-campus u/g)*

When [youngest child] came along – and she came when I was 39 – I kind of had this moment of going “What am I going to do? Do I want to go back to what I was doing prior to her arrival or do I want to do something that is a little bit different?” *(Vicki, 3 children, enabling)*

A long held dream

It was something that I always wanted to do. It's not something that anybody in my family has ever done. *(Ally, 39, single parent with 2 children, on-campus u/g)*

I've been wanting to do it for a long time. I enjoyed accounting at high school but once I got married and had kids it was a bit impossible to do it. *(Lance, 46, 2 children, online u/g)*

It's something that I've been wanting to do for quite a few years, for maybe five or six years. I've been craving to really get out there and start learning more. *(Marcus, enabling)*

The interview data: Transformations

- **New sense of self**

I feel like I'm travelling to a foreign country and I'm just able to experience a whole new world. *(Corey, 30, on-campus u/g)*

- **Seeing new possibilities & opportunities**

I can see this bigger picture like “Wow, once I’m a nurse, I’m going to be doing this and it’s going to be fun. I’m going to like going to work every day”. *(Tash, 24, online u/g)*

The interview data: Transformations

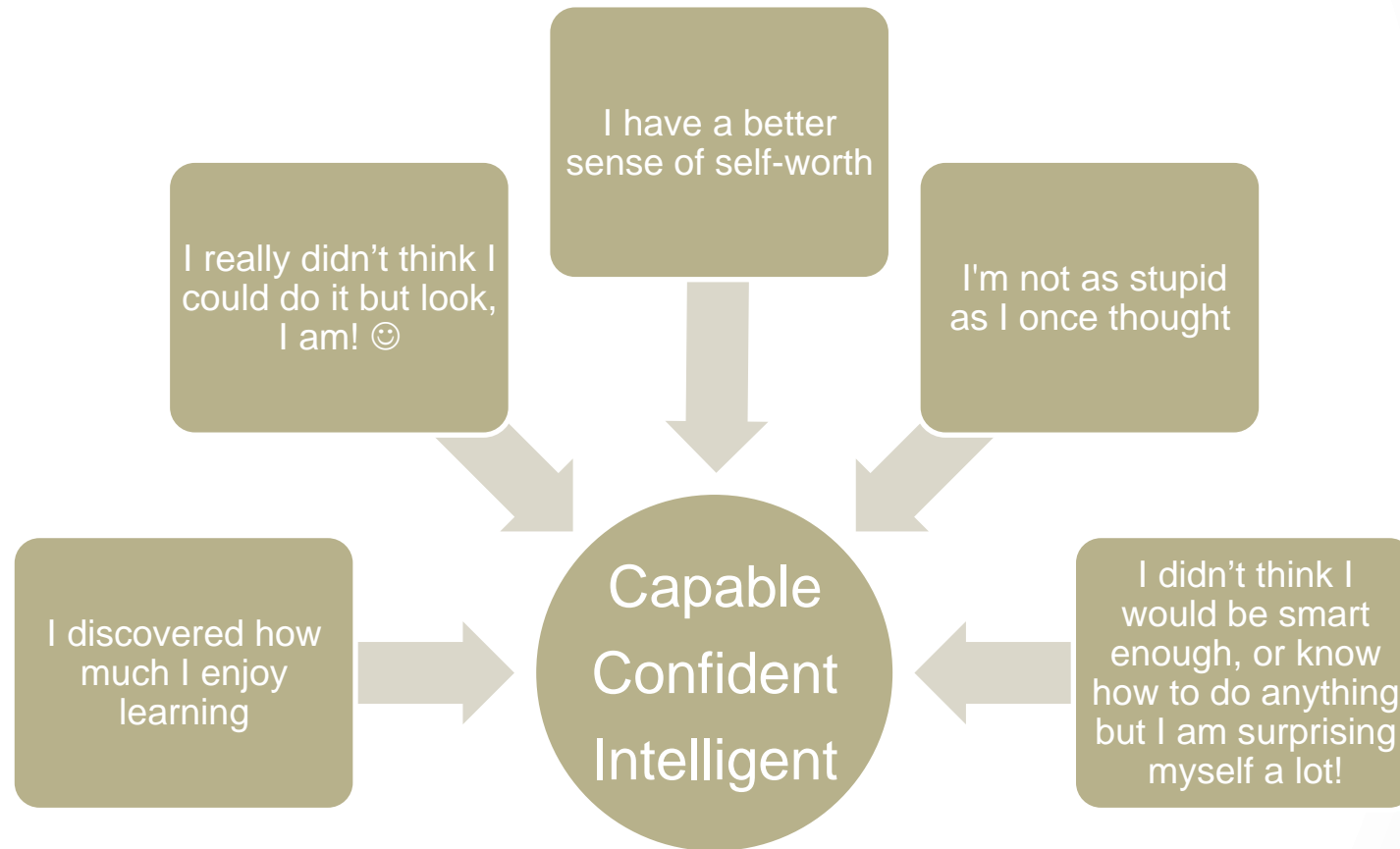
- **Change in relationships with others**

I've noticed my friends have changed along the way too. I kind of look for conversations where you know, I can discuss something a bit more in-depth not just "Oh my God, the kids are sick last week, how's yours?" *(Yvonne, 38, 2 children, on-campus u/g)*

- **Impact on next generation**

I've noticed that both of them are doing their homework more... and they're taking more pride in their homework; they're not just scribbling it... I sort of get that feeling that I feel like I'm modelling to them which is great. *(Tracey, enabling)*

Transformations: Voices from the survey



Modest hopes; significant outcomes

Across all cohorts, both interviews and surveys, hopes and dreams are quite modest:

- To get a job they like
- To improve their career
- To earn enough to have a home, self-sufficiency
- To encourage their children
- To make a contribution to family/society

Modest hopes; significant outcomes

Yet transformations are highly significant:

- More self-confidence
- Improved sense of self
- Seeing a bigger picture
- New opportunities opening up
- Better career opportunities
- New attitudes to education in the family

Thoughts for Morning Tea

Based on the information presented so far, consider the following question:

How do these preliminary findings reflect your institutional context and the experiences of first-in-family students at this 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?

Perceptions of Family: Literature

The educational aspirations of young people reflect *'...the influence of parents and siblings (cultural capital) and the local environment (social capital) especially in the last two years of primary and the first two years of secondary school'* (Wilks & Wilson, 2012, p83)

There is a reported correlation between low university participation rates and parental educational levels

Internationally

“Measures of the qualification level of adults, especially whether or not they hold a HE qualification, are important predictors of young participation rates for areas”. (HEFCE, 2010, p25)

‘Parental educational attainment has remained a strong and persistent factor relating to post-secondary access’ (Knighton, 2002, p18)

Within Australia, parental educational achievement has had a statistical significant relationship to students’ attrition and completion ratios within Australian higher education systems.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2014).

Why these perceptions?

- Lack of access to an ‘educational memory’ within the family
- No ‘other’ to guide and advise
- Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002) refer to the lack of ‘transgenerational family scripts or “inheritance codes”’ (p57)
- Such gaps in understanding can contribute to individuals having a ‘lack of entitlement to be there, which may have a negative impact on [...] self-confidence’ (Thomas & Quinn, 2007, p77).

Why these perceptions?

First-in-family students are regarded as being required to do additional and often invisible ‘work’, such as the need to:

...perfect themselves as educated and employable; **reassure the family** that they have ‘invested wisely’; **open up the aspirations and horizons of the family and its community**; represent a triumph of social egalitarianism and **‘prove that everyone can make it’** (Thomas & Quinn, 2007. p59 – emphasis added).

The family:

What questions did we explore?

How does undertaking university studies as a first-in-family student impact upon the family and community of the learner?

How does transitioning into this environment and enacting a student role or identity, translate into the household?

How do family members react to students' decisions to begin university?

Reactions... 'proud but worried'

Mixed responses – largely perceived as positive by family members but also concern (“Proud but worried”)

My partner asked me if I was really sure I wanted to do given the length of time that it would take. (*Lance, 46, 2 children, online u/g*)

My parents felt general unease towards University. As they have no prior knowledge of it, they felt that I was setting myself up for failure (financially). They were apprehensive about me leaving our town for something they had no real knowledge of. (*Female Survey Respondent, 18-21, Single, on-campus u/g*)

My family was incredibly supportive, they told me to do what would make me happy and what I thought was right and so I did! (*Female survey respondent, 21-25, online u/g*)

Reactions... some less supportive

She [mother] just can't see any sense of why I'm doing this degree. She said, "You'll be too old." (*Molly, 62, online u/g*)

Unsupportive, criticizing, joking especially from my husband. Others doubted if it was the right decision. (*Female survey respondent, 40-50, partnered, on-campus u/g*)

My parents have always felt it was a waste of time, ever since I left school in the top 3% of Qld. They are self made people and think that one doesn't need to further education when one can be successful without. (*Female survey respondent, 40-50, online u/g*)

Reactions of family members: Interview data

	Mixed reactions	Negative Reactions	Positive reactions
1 : Children	8	1	15
2 : Father	25	11	54
3 : Grandfather	2	4	12
4 : Grandmother	1	4	18
5 : Mother	36	7	65
6 : Partner	5	1	15
7 : Siblings	15	7	32

Reactions and resilience

Even those who are less supportive can **provide motivation**, providing a **necessary catalyst for individuals** to prove them wrong or providing a basis for **the resilience needed to continue**.

- *[Dad is] a man of few words but again, as much as I enjoy other people's praises or their support and good luck and good luck to your endeavours and whatnot else, you know, it's what I want to do and I don't need their appraisal to get me through it sort of thing. (Nick, 39, partnered with 2 children, on-campus u/g)*

Family and university

Family members may provide key elements of support

BUT

There exists a disconnect between the home and the university, resulting in:

- *Lack of shared understandings about university and what it entails*
- *Impacts upon family conversations*

Conversations in the home

- **Strategic**

I don't discuss uni much with my family because they do not understand what I say. Sometimes we will be watching the news and I will comment on the state of health policy for example and often they just stare at me. *(Female survey respondent, 30-40, partnered, on campus u/g)*

- **Self-censorship**

Not a lot because they [family] don't have the same understanding. You know, like they're not into university so it gets difficult to talk about it. They just say "Oh yes, you know, you're just going to be above us" sort of thing and it's not like that at all; I'm trying to achieve a goal. *(Sharnie, 57, online u/g)*

Conversations in the home

- **A means to teach others**

It's exciting to have conversations about my study with my family - because I'm learning things that they really don't understand, I have to go straight to the basics and talk to them from the ground up. This is exciting because not only are they learning something new about my life and what I do, I'm also learning more about what I'm doing as talking to other people about it helps reinforce it in my mind.

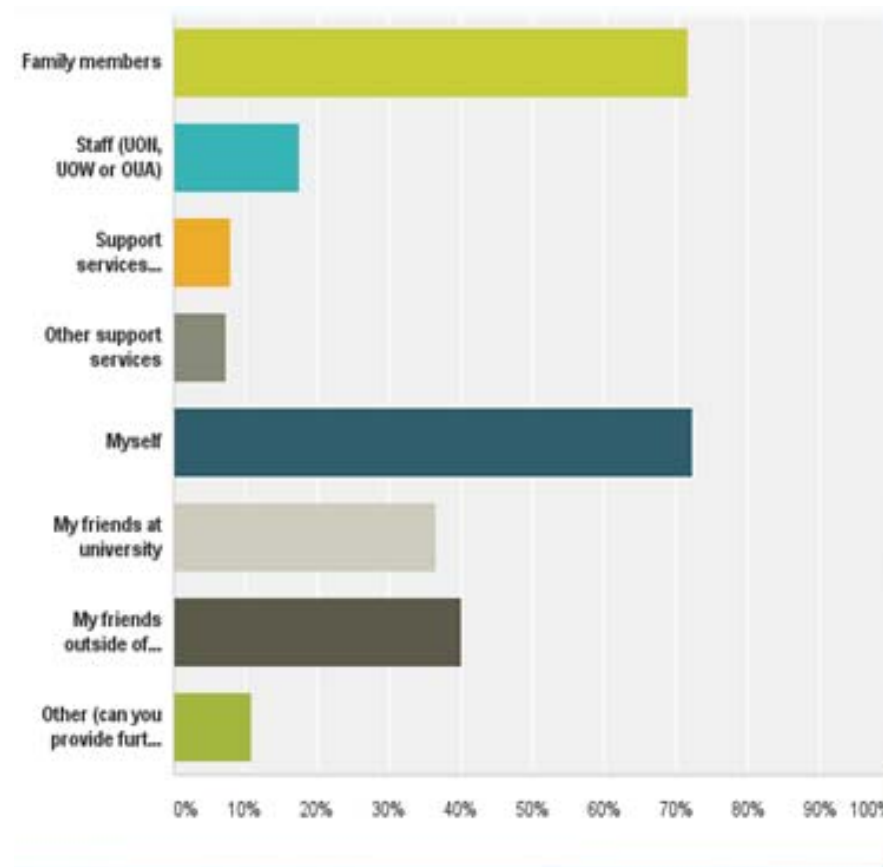
(Female Survey, 21-25, on campus u/g)

Help and support

- Partners
- Parents
- Children
- Friends (at uni and external)
- Institutional support:
 - Staff
 - Support Services
- External professionals

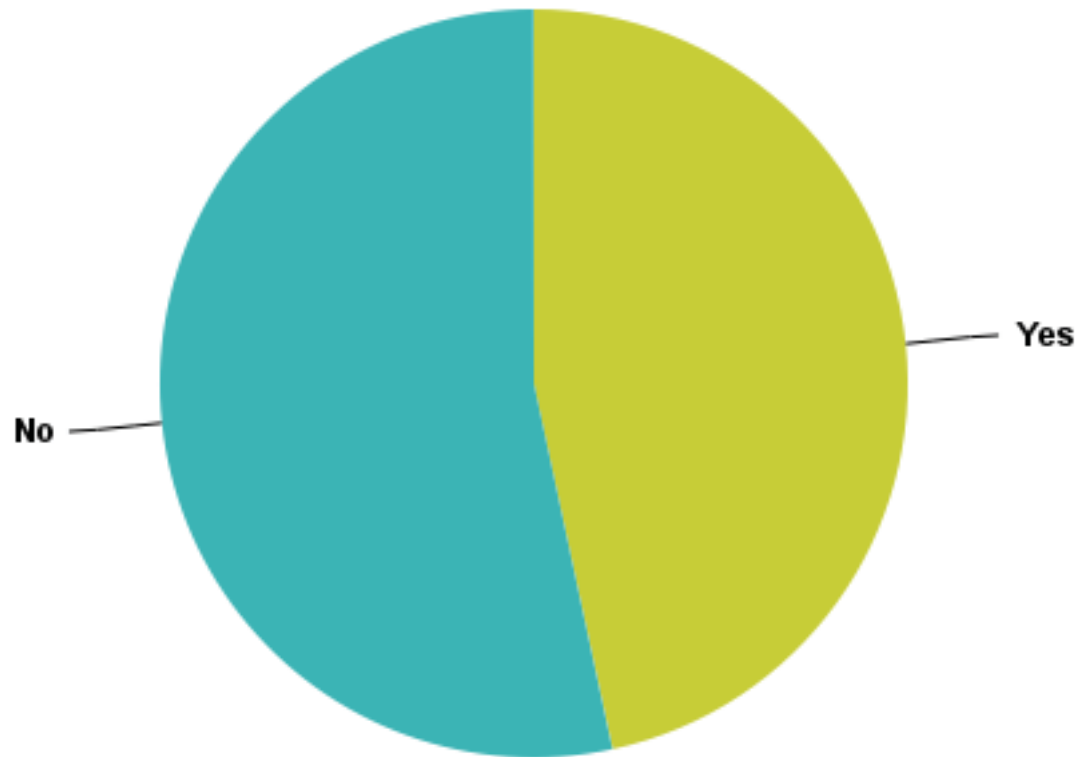
Survey data:

At moments of crisis: who/what helps? (n=171)



Q28 Have you ever considered giving up your studies?

Answered: 148 Skipped: 24



Interview data:

Who is “doing the supporting” ? (external to the university)

Who?	References in the interviews
Aunt	6
Children	17
Father	69
Friends	66
Grandfather	11
Grandmother	24
Mother	110
Partner	76
Siblings	24
Uncle	5
Work colleagues	13

We know that strong social network within the university are needed for success (Tinto, 1995, 2002; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) but how do the social and familial networks that exist outside the higher education environment assist first in family students?

The important role of *Family Capital*

Bourdieu refers to the fundamental role of social and cultural capital in the enactment of educational success, the interviews with students undertaken in this study point to the important role of **family capital** in this endeavour.

The term family capital is being used to refer to the networks of social capital that exist both within the internal dynamics of the household and also, in relation to family structure

The important role of *Family Capital*

A need to recognise that:

Family members can be a great source of both emotional and also, embodied support - a rich source of capital, often overlooked.

First-in-family students are possible “cultural change agents” within the household, actively creating the space for alternative perspectives on educational participation.

BUT ALSO...

Remain mindful of the invisible constraints and structures that these individuals also operate within.

Strategies for Success

- **Organisation**

So I learned the hard way I guess and I've just tried to be really organised from there; I try to start everything really early, I take the leave if I need to. ... It's just about being disciplined and making sure I know I have to do it and just sitting down and getting it done because there's no other choice really. *(Grace, 24, u/g online)*

- **Being proactive / asking questions**

If you've got a question and you can't find it, you just go ask someone. I'm sure there's someone who can answer that question for you." *(Daniel, 30, on campus u/g)*

Strategies for Success

- **Persistence**

And as long as you keep consistently tugging away at it, it's not that hard. ... I've have learned not to get worried about all the little things. *(Yvonne, 38, 2 children, on campus u/g)*

- **Containment : finding space/time for studies**

And then while the children are not here, that's when I study and everything else has to be done. *(Susanna, 43, 3 children, u/g online)*

Were online students different?

Online students tended to be:

- Older
- More likely to be working part-time or full-time
- More likely to be studying part-time
- More likely to indicate the need to remain at home/at work and unable to take the time and/or travel the distance to study on-campus

However....

The underlying reasons, hopes, dreams, changes, transformations and discoveries were just the same as the on-campus students.

Why choose online?

I love how I can study at home in my spare time. Due to the odd hours I work, travelling to and from a university is difficult. I love that I can study in the comfort of my own home, and I think this has aided my studies. Because I'm so comfortable at home, I'm more relaxed and enjoy my studies a lot more. *(Survey respondent, female, 21-25)*

I couldn't not work. I couldn't afford to not work so I had to be able to study and still work as well and the online component suits me. *(Gemma, 42, 3 children)*

The flexibility it offers you... which also can allow you to do part-time work more effectively. It gives you that flexibility to say I can take on a fair bit of full time work or a good chunk of part-time work to make some money to lead a better lifestyle. *(Benjamin, 47, 3 children)*

Need to know they are not alone

[Importance of] sending emails to remind you things and it's just a feeling, know that someone else has your back. *(Survey respondent, female, 18-21)*

You know, you get that random phone call just to check in. That's very helpful because sometimes it's nice to hear another human being's voice in the same situation, just to let you know how you're going and you just think "Wow, how did you know today was the day that I really needed to have someone check in and just say 'Hey is your study like this? Are you coping like that'" and you go "Yes". The reality from that is again, you're not alone. *(Donna, 36, 2 children)*

Key Findings from the research

FiF Students are:

- Seeking to 'better their lives' and that of their families (children/partners)
- Likely to feel 'out of place' at first - 'imposter'. Lack confidence. Feel lucky and grateful to be 'allowed' to be at university
- Concerned about impact on family, particularly finances and time
- Unfamiliar with university – myths and stereotypes. Need time to adjust and understand expectations, language, systems
- Needing and valuing support that reaches out to them – less likely to seek it by themselves due to lack of confidence and of knowledge
- Appreciative of family support and interest; but sharing about uni is limited by family's lack of experience

Gratitude for 'dream-come-true'

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



Introducing the First in Family Website



firstinfamily.com.au



Paired/ Group Discussion

How might institutions better engage with the families and communities of students disengaged from schooling and /or first-in-family students?

What three things will you take from this workshop and put into practice?

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