

# Eight tips for engaging and supporting family members of first-in-family learners

Increasingly the importance of family members<sup>1</sup> in the university journey is being recognised – studying at university can be tough and so individuals need to have their cheerleaders on the sidelines! For first-in-family students this support is particularly significant but family members may not feel ‘qualified’ to provide advice or support, as they have not attended university.

However, our research indicated that family members are **key** to student success. The following eight tips **are suggestions for practitioners** who may be involved in engaging and supporting family members. The suggestions are based upon surveys and interviews conducted with various family members and first-in-family university students (O’Shea, May & Stone, 2015; O’Shea, 2016), including:

- Surveys with family members of first-in-family students currently undertaking university studies (n=40)
- Surveys with family members of prospective university students (n = 53)
- Interviews / surveys with current first-in-family students (n=274)

**These tips are proposed to provide support for those involved in transition programs; equity and outreach.**

<sup>1</sup>The use of the term family does not imply a traditional notion of the nuclear family instead this term is used to identify those who are significant to the learner. We do not assume that this is a blood relative or a partner but instead use this term in its most inclusive sense being *‘the embodiment of whatever the individual perceives to be family’*.

To read more: [Definition of Family - Inclusive Definitions - Individual, Based, Culture, and Type - JRank Articles](http://family.jrank.org/pages/487/Family-Definition-Inclusive-Definitions.html#ixzz49k2KSn1c) <http://family.jrank.org/pages/487/Family-Definition-Inclusive-Definitions.html#ixzz49k2KSn1c>

## Tip #1: Provide caregivers with authentic and context based advice about the university experience

In survey responses, it was clear that parents / caregivers / significant others value advice and information based on 'insider' perspectives, particularly the stories from existing students and staff members that focussed on authenticity; real-time applicability and contextualised to the actual educational environment.

This appreciation is most clearly highlighted in survey responses from parents who attended a Year 6 student university immersion day:

*It was great to see the connection and relevance depicted in the welcome video of current students both in the backgrounds of the people in the video and their choices" (#45, father of prospective student)*

*[I enjoyed the]...personal introduction of mentors and their story to commence studies (#24, mother of prospective student)*

*[I enjoyed the] ... ways of getting into Uni no matter what your background (#33, mother of prospective student)*

## Tip #2: Focus on demystifying the ‘strangeness’ of university and its environment

As university employees and participants, we have become accustomed to the strange customs and language of these institutions. However, for those new to this environment, the alien nature of this environment can be overwhelming. One first-in-family student, Marilyn, eloquently sums up this strangeness describing how coming to university is like:

*“...moving to a foreign country where you don't speak the language... with university, it is a different language, it is a different way of writing, it is a different way of communicating.  
(Marilyn, 31, B Management)*

Family members also report feeling apprehensive about the university environment, due to differences they anticipate and also, witness. For example, some family members may have had prior negative educational experiences and so may feel apprehensive about the university and its surrounds.

Overall, we need to remain mindful of the unfamiliar nature of university and intentionally unpack the language, ‘customs’, practices and acceptable behaviours within each institution, as each can be quite unique. For parents who participated in a university immersion program, this ‘unpacking’ was particularly noted and appreciated:

*[I] Obtain[ed] an understanding of what options are offered to young children. How the mystery of uni is revealed...  
(#3, Father of prospective student)*

*...realised it is not a school system set up. A lot more activities, NOT just lectures. Library, gym, sports events, programs for school aged children uni connected services etc  
(#10 Mother of prospective student)*

*... just [to] know anyone can do it  
(#20 Mother of prospective student)*

## Tip #3: Concentrate on ‘take home’ messages and immediate actions

Family members who were surveyed indicated a desire to have *hands-on* knowledge about the university that they could apply in a timely way. This needs to be practically focussed to assist the person in their family to undertake this university journey, **examples include:**

- A ‘people map’ of the university: explanations of ‘who’ to go to for different information
- Contact details for key people or areas within the university
- A breakdown of costs and fees associated with university education
- Additional programs that their prospective student family member could undertake prior to making an application to university
- ‘Alternate pathways’ – explanations that include unconventional pathways to university or those pathways that might assist in entry down the track. Such conversations could include:
  - *the ways that recognition of ‘prior learning’ works in your institution*
  - *different qualification levels and how these are tiered (i.e. certificate versus postgraduate certificate)*
  - *the notion of ‘quality’ training providers in your context*
  - *Explanations about different institution types (for example: public and private universities; private training providers; entry level programs such as enabling colleges)*

## Tip #4: Explicitly define the roles that parents and family members can adopt in this educational journey

Our student respondents indicated that it was often the small things that family members did that provided significant forms of support. Yet, those closest to the learners may feel inhibited or 'unable' to provide support given their own lack of knowledge about the university environment. Hence, focus on the small practical ways that support can be offered, some suggested are offered below:

- **Practical support: cooking dinner / looking after children / helping with housework or relieving the student of household chores.**

As one mother explained, her daughter's decision to attend university resulted in:

*"...less family time. More babysitting for me. Different sorts of conversations.  
(Mother of first-in-family student, Age 55)*

- **Emotional support: listening and being there**

Small things often mean a great deal for commencing students. Amy reflected upon how simply knowing that her parents were at the end of the phone if needed, was hugely reassuring:

*I finally got into the swing of things they [parents] always said "We can meet up in Sydney if you're feeling down or we could come and visit you" and I always felt that they were there to support me even if just wanted a phone call sort of thing. Like they would be there and it was great – I didn't use that support net all the time but it was nice just knowing that I had it.  
(Amy, 22, First-in-Family student)*

*Similarly one of the mothers reflected: "...Mainly I just listen".  
(Mother of first-in-family student, Age 55)*

- **Ask questions: about students' experiences at university or their study and what it entails.**

The parents of current students described possible conversation starters as follows:

*How are they coping? Can we help? What are they studying at the moment?  
(Mother of first-in-family student, Age 48)*

*What the degree entails, what's the class involve? Are you enjoying your studies? What assignment questions do you have? When do your classes finish? Do you have a study schedule? How are you managing your work/life balance?  
(Mother of first-in-family student, Age 56)*

- **Be available to read assignments (bearing in mind that a good assignment should be understandable to a non-specialist audience) or provide advice (life crises do not change or stop at university!)**

The partner of a first-in-family student commented that:

*[I] ... keep informed and engaged in what she is studying and the nature of her distance learning experience i.e on her subjects, her tutors, the actual material, etc. She will often ask me to read her assignments as a sanity check to ensure they make sense - and this results in some good discussions and questions, etc.*

The 19 year old son of a first-in-family student shared:

*...my mother has spoken with me about much of the things she has learnt and will often ask me to explain my understanding of a given text when necessary. As such, I have observed a reasonable portion of her course content as well as that of my own.*

- **Be explicit about any positive changes you witness**

University can be incredibly rewarding but also demanding and difficult at times learners may feel overwhelmed and anxious. Family members can play a key role in encouraging individuals at these points, particularly by describing the positive changes they have witnessed. Some changes family members might notice are not only those related to knowledge levels but changes in self-confidence; self-awareness and also, life perspective. Remind significant others that ‘reflecting back’ these transformations to the learners can contribute to a positive educational experience. The sister of one student clearly articulated some of the changes she’d noticed in her brother:

*His whole outlook on life has changed. He was always a sociable person but now his passion for everything he does has changed the way he interacts with people. He is obviously more content in himself as he walks a bit taller and smiles and laughs often. He has also made some changes in his behaviour that I think have made him a more patient and tolerant individual and I have also noticed that he is starting to take an interest in social issues that never really bothered him before, such as the environment, racism and equality.*

## Tip #5: Anticipate the fears and concerns of family /parents and suggest strategies to address these

Not surprisingly, the family members in this research indicated a number of areas that they had concerns about; the **four key areas** are outlined below:

- Finances
- Moving to a new location
- Ability to cope with the rigours of study
- A sense of 'loss'

### Finances

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

(Mother of first-in-family student, Age 54)

Lets face it, university is **very** expensive and many students will have significant debt after the completion of their degree. However, letting family members know about the possible approaches to saving money can assist in keeping the costs down and perhaps lowering anxiety levels for everyone.

Many campuses have second hand books shops, free BBQs, facilities for students to heat up meals (rather than buying on campus), discount coupons to save on various facilities, earn while you learn opportunities etc. Aside from providing advice and information about scholarships or fee relief, the best way to reveal these cost saving measures is to draw on current student experience. Include actual student perspectives to reveal the 'hidden' cost saving strategies these students have employed during their educational journey.

### Moving to a new location

*Leaving home and living 3 hours away, concerns about finance but glad he was furthering his education with possibly better prospects of a career.*

(Mother of first-in-family student, Age 58)

For the family members of students who may be relocating, the fears and concerns about this relocation can be paramount. Addressing concerns around issues such as campus security, accommodation, support services and the rigours of distance are important. While it is important not to 'bombard' family with information, pointing them to the range of services available to the learner is key. For example, there may be a student group on campus specifically for students who have moved from rural or remote areas or the university counselling service may offer forms of support.

Consider how you might engage longitudinally with the families of students who are moving out of home? Could this include a *trickle* of information to family members timed to the various critical stages of the semester (see Tips #6 & #8)? Or is there a university contact person (see Tip#3) who could be available to answer questions or provide reassurances to the family of the learner?

## Ability to cope with the rigours of study

*When my son first started talking about uni the first concern I had was financial, secondly with him being approximately 7 hours away from home was no immediate family back up, going straight from home to living by himself and all that is involved with doing for him self + study i.e. shopping, cooking, cleaning etc..*

(Mother of first-in-family student, Age 46)

Remind family members that their student comes with a wealth of experience and that it is important that individual students draw on this prior knowledge rather than ‘trying to reinvent the wheel’. Sometimes students themselves do not realise the skills they already have that can assist them to progress their studies – family members can play a role in reminding them of their previous achievements and skills.

Ask family to encourage students to make friends on campus - perhaps suggesting that they set themselves a goal of saying hello to one new person everyday. This might seem obvious but for younger students (particularly those who have come from small communities), making new friends may be extremely challenging.

Emphasise the importance of asking questions – again family members may be able provide advice about how to structure ‘that question’, how to phrase it or write it in an email. Simply encouraging them to be brave enough to ask the question is also helpful, as Aria, an 18 year old first-in-family Bachelor or Law student advises:

*Don't be scared to ask people for help or for information, especially like specific things of how to set out study notes and how the exams are going to be different to the HSC. Yes, also don't be scared to approach your tutors and tell them if you have difficulty speaking up in class, especially like me, I waited until they released the mid-session marks and then I went and talked to my tutors so that's probably going to affect my mark a little bit in the end. So yes, just don't be scared because people are there to help you.*

## A sense of loss

Adjusting to the commitment of university study can be tough on family members and they often experience a sense of loss as their lives are also impacted in various ways:

*A little sad to have her move away, sad to not have her around the house anymore, but happy that she was doing something she wanted to do.*

(Sister of student, Age 16)



*My mum has less time for us during her semesters. We have less money now because she cut back on her work. It is difficult to stay quiet and this stresses her out at times. (Daughter of student, Age 15)*

In fact, any change can result in feelings of 'loss', which can be experienced physically, emotionally or materially. Commencing university might mean moving out of home, less involvement in family life, or a loss of time and finances. .

Preparing those closest to the learner about these 'feelings of loss' can help them to recognise and address these – it also normalises the process of transition that is being experienced not only for the student but also for those around them.

## Tip #6: Point to the intense learning curve of the university experience

The university experience can be an intense learning curve, and it is important for family members to be aware of the ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ that can occur over the semester that align with critical stages or turning points. At these points family members may be able to foreground the support services available.

*I think I'm very stubborn sometimes and I just assumed that it wouldn't be hard being away from my family. I had this feeling of independence but I wish that someone had have just been like "Okay Nelson, it's going to be hard being away from your family and you will feel very lonely at times" and I did. Even though I had lots of people around, I would feel very alone and I felt like there was nobody that I wanted to call because there was nobody that would understand.*  
(Nelson, First-in-Family student, 22, B Arts/B Law)

University semesters are intense, punctuated by assignment due dates; assessment tasks, exams and group work. Lecturers are under pressure to deliver a large amount of content in a very short period of time. So what does this mean for the commencing student? In brief, a new student may experience

- An intensity of work they are completely unfamiliar with
- Stress and anxiety about submissions that may be exacerbated by their ‘newness’ in this environment
- The need to self-manage their time and commitments

The family and those closest to the learner are equally on this ‘learning curve’ so it is important to be explicit about the following:

- The relative brevity of most university semesters (12 – 13 weeks)
- The modular nature of programs, which means greater flexibility for the students but may result in assignments being clustered together (rather than staggered)
- The various ‘disciplines’ and how expectations across these disciplines or subject areas can vary
- The need for students to ‘hit the ground’ running – starting with identifying the due dates of assignments and assessments, and placing these dates in a prominent position (so they cannot be forgotten!)
- Assignment marks can fluctuate across subjects and disciplines, family members can encourage learners not to judge their progress on one assignment but rather to wait till the end of the semester to see how they fared across all assessment items

### **Above all, make sure that those closest to the learner are aware of**

- HECS census dates and what these mean
- Academic support services and what they do
- The name of the key support person in each Faculty (Student Support Officer / Dean of Students (or whatever the term used in your institutional context)

## Tip #7: Dispel myths

In our research with first-in-family students, there were many myths that existed in relation to the university environment. Some of these had been derived from prior educational experiences, stories told to the individual by friends / colleagues or obtained via media representations.

The types of myths our participants encountered included:

- The inflexible nature of lecturers and lectures: this includes being forbidden to ask questions in lectures; being told to leave the lecture if late etc
- The idea that university was simply a series of parties
- University as a 'bludge' with little attendance required
- Expectations related to American campuses (such as sorority clubs etc.)

Some of these myths or perceptions can be dispelled with explicit explanations or even short quiz like activities for family or students, but it is important these are addressed. The following quotes reflect how students themselves revisited their assumptions about university:

### Asking Questions

*One of my friends said "Why don't you just go and see your lecturer and I was like "Oh I don't think you can" and then she showed me how to go online and to find it which was really good.*  
(Emily, 18, B. Physics)

### Different Approaches to Learning & Teaching

#### ***Expectations of independent or self-directed learning***

*The way they teach you at school is spoon-fed – "This is the information you need to know, this is how you get the information", whereas down here, this is like "Okay, here's a theory, here's some information on it. Now go and solve problems".*  
(Liam, 20, B Engineering)

#### ***Time on Task: A lot of hard work outside of the lecture hall***

*Studying gets you exhausted mentally after four, five hours of study, I'm drained, I'm having a nap whereas I can go to work and do a 12 hour shift, you know, and I'm fine. Like after that I'm okay but after four or five hours of study, using all that brain, yes, you're tired. It's like, yes, they don't understand that I don't which is always making it hard because the little things like "Oh can you go and pick your sisters up from school", it's like "Mum, I'm behind in uni work" or something, "Oh, you know, go get them please", you know? Just things like that, like little things that can really make a person's life going to uni a lot harder if your parents don't understand*  
(Ahmad, 19, B Business)

### **University is not a 'bludge'**

*...the assumption that university kids don't apply themselves or they don't work. I did want to say actually a good example was I came home one day and, you know, I'd been at uni for a year or something like that and I was talking to dad and one of our friends had just started his plumber's apprenticeship and dad said "Well at least he's having a go", looking at me like I kind of wasn't having a go, like "You're just studying, it's no big deal" and that really got to me. I was like "No"... I didn't say anything but I thought to myself "I'm having a go. It's just that you've got to look at the end result, not..." you know, so that I guess, yes, coming in, I did want to bring up the stigma that university kids don't apply themselves or they don't work hard and I've kind of strived to prove that point wrong. I think it's wrong. I mean, yes, of course there are kids that party but you're going to have tradies who do that, you're going to have anyone – there's going to be a group of anyone who's going to go do that.*

*(Kaleb, 22, B Engineering)*

## Tip #8: Adopt a ‘trickle’ approach rather than an ‘avalanche’

Finally, if you managed to read through all the previous information and take it all in – congratulations! However, don’t expect students’ family members to manage to take on board such a huge amount of information (!). If you intend to engage with the family and parents of students then do so over time, create a long-term relationship that is characterised by a ‘trickling’ of information rather than an ‘avalanche’.

For example, parent and family information sessions or resources should avoid endless ‘speaking heads’ that talk at the audience - instead consider how you can impart some key take-home messages (Tip #3) but endeavour to create a relationship with family members that can be sustained over time. Such a relationship is important to sustain a ‘trickle’ of information timed to specific stages of the student life course rather than only focus on the commencement of studies.

Social media can be one way to do this but also don’t forget the more traditional forms of contact:

- Postcards with simple messages / advice sent to a nominated ‘significant other’
- Invitations to attend events or occasions on-campus
- Regular newsletters that are targeted at the broad category of family and what they can expect at a particular stage in the year or semester
- Phone calls or just contact details of some one who cares!

Such a relationship should be on an **opt-in basis**, not all family members are necessarily interested or involved with a students’ university life. However, providing this opportunity to support this educational journey should be offered and can assist in enhancing the university experience for both learners and those closest to them.