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First-in-family learners and higher education: Negotiating the 'silences' of university transition and participation

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This article explores the experiences of students who are the first in their families to attend university. Building upon a decade of research in this field, the author describes the ways first-in-family learners engage and interact with higher education. Both the risky nature of this cohort's engagement with the sector and related issues of intergenerational educational mobility, translate into a defined need to better understand and support these students. The review highlights how widening participation agendas and university outreach activities have resulted in the growth in this population both within Australia and beyond. The key issues and obstacles these learners encounter are outlined and alternative 'ways of thinking' about first-in-family students proposed. Drawing on learners' narratives, the intent is to expose some of the 'silences' of higher education participation for this cohort. The article concludes by providing some recommendations to university practitioners and policy makers, identifying some possible future directions for supporting, engaging and retaining this student cohort.

Keywords: First-in-family learners, higher education participation, student equity, transition to university

1. Introduction

While universities attract students from a wide range of backgrounds, equity of access and participation for all students remains elusive. Access and participation is highly differentiated in the United Kingdom, North America and Australia (Abbott-Chapman, 2006; Couvillion-Landry, 2002–2003;

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Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; James, 2008; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002) with poorer educational outcomes recorded for students who are the first in their families to attend university (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013; Harrell & Forney, 2003; Lehmann, 2009; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). The international research on this group indicates that this student cohort are collectively less likely to go to university and also, after arrival, may not perform to the same level academically as their second or third generation peers (Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2010; NCES, 2012).

The poor educational outcomes for first-in-family students are noted in a number of countries. Within the UK, Croll (2004) points out there are "considerable patterns of continuity between the socio-economic situation of parents and their adult children" (p. 391). Across Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development member countries, those students from a more educated family are "almost twice (1.9)" as likely to attend university (OECD, 2013, p. 3) than those who are the first in their family to consider attendance. Once enrolled first-in-family learners are also reported as having lower educational attainment. Bowen, Chingos and McPherson (2009) found that even after adjusting for high school results, race, ethnicity, gender, family income and university attended, those students with a parent with a degree were 6% more likely to complete a degree within 6 years compared to those whose parents had no college level education.

The literature and research in this field report a range of reasons for varying levels of academic success and educational participation for first-in-family students. Ball, Davies, David and Reay (2002) point to the lack of a generational tradition of attending university, suggesting that this impacts on the educational trajectory of family members. Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak and Terenzini (2004) report that these learners are generally underprepared in relation to the academic expectations and encounter specific difficulties whilst transitioning between school and higher education. These authors describe how first-in-family learners do not simply "confront all the anxieties, dislocations and difficulties of any college student' but more importantly 'undertake substantial cultural as well as academic transitions" (Pascarella et al., 2004, p. 250). Given that this is a growing student population (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013); the need to explore the various constraints and contexts of these learners is important for the higher education sector.

Beginning with an overview of how the first-in-family student demographic is operationalised and defined, this review will examine some of the key developments within the higher education sector that have

impacted upon this student population. The category of first-in-family student will be positioned in relation to broader developments such as the widening participation agenda and the changing nature of university participation. The nature of learners' identities, deficit framings and the implications of intergenerational educational mobility will also be discussed. This article contends that there are 'silences' surrounding this first-in-family cohort particularly with regard to the ways these learners draw upon existing capitals and capabilities to enact success within the HE environment. Drawing on narrative inquiry based studies conducted with first-in-family learners, the focus will move to exploring how individuals reflect upon their unique educational experiences. This discussion then forms the basis for final conclusions as well as possible recommendations for both practitioners and institutions.

2. Positioning first-in-family learners

Globally, the consistent identification of students who are first in their family to attend university is relatively complex as various definitions of this cohort exist. For example, within the US, the term first-in-family or first generation is applied to those learners whose parents have attended college but have not achieved a university degree. Within the literature in the UK, Ireland, France and Australia, few studies focus solely on this group and instead foreground broader issues related to widening participation such as social class background, access and disadvantage. More recently, a small body of research in Australia has emerged that explores the specific character of the first-in-family cohort (King, Luzeckyi, McCann & Graham, 2015; O'Shea, 2007, 2014; O'Shea, May, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015 amongst others). Drawing on these latter studies, first-in-family students are defined as those individuals who are the first in their immediate family including parents, partners, children and siblings to attend university.

In Australia, statistics on this cohort are not collected systematically and currently these learners can only be identified via parental educational levels rather than complete family biography. The most recent statistics indicate that over 50% of the Australian student population did not have a parent who had obtained university qualifications (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). This figure is not exact as it relies on institutional enrolment data and individuals correctly identifying these education levels. However, even when we consider the possibility of human error, this is a significant proportion of the student population. This high number of enrolments is not similarly matched by high completion rates. A recent study in Australia indicated that 26% of first-in-family students considered leaving university in the first year and this

figure increased to 34% for later year students (Coates & Ransom, 2011). High rates of attrition for this group have been recorded outside of Australia. For example, within the US nearly 90% of first-generation students do not obtain a degree within the first six years of university education (Greenwald, 2012).

The research points to many reasons why this first-in-family cohort does not succeed to the same level as their second or third generation peers. This includes having no significant 'other' in the family or the community to advise or support them in these educational endeavours. This situation can lead to both students and their families experiencing a steep 'learning curve' upon arrival at university (Stone & O'Shea, 2012, p. 23). Research also tells us that after arrival, this cohort find transition into and engagement within university more complex (Mehta, Newbold & O'Rourke, 2011; Oldfield, 2012; O'Shea, 2007, 2009, 2014a). For example, first-in-family students beginning university study report "… feeling isolated and lonely, feelings that were exacerbated by uncertainty related to university language, expectations and protocols of behaviour" (O'Shea, 2016a). Such feelings can be exaggerated for particular cohorts of first-in-family learners such as those from rural/remote areas. As Holt (2008) explains 'mobility' is an ontological absolute for rural young people contemplating university attendance, requiring not only a geographical shift but also shifts in identity and belonging. Indeed, when the literature on the first-in-family cohort is examined collectively, these learners are overwhelmingly constructed as a "group at risk" (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013, p. 329) who have difficulty fitting into the university environment and "mastering the college role" (p. 330).

Previous research has explored the gendered, ethnic and class-based nature of higher education environments (Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Reay, Ball & David, 2002 and others) but little of this existing scholarship considers how students are intersected by various demographic, social and cultural factors. Importantly, we cannot assume that the first-in-family cohort is automatically derived from disadvantaged backgrounds and can also include those who are financially well-resourced. However, those learners who do not have an educational tradition of attending university are strongly represented within other equity categorisations related to social class, location and biography (King, et al., 2015). This is particularly the case for Indigenous students, who have been historically under-represented in the HE sector (Evans & Carr, 2011) with disproportionately higher rates of attrition (Australian Government Department of Education & Training, 2015). Given these lower participation rates and the higher incidence of attrition, most of this commencing student

cohort will be the first in their family to attend university and possibly the first in their broader community networks.

Within Australia, six discrete equity groups[1] define students that are regarded most at-risk educationally but the usefulness of grouping students in this way has been questioned (AIHW, 2014; James, 2008). The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2014) points to the inadequacies of defining learners according to singular homogenous categories as this singularity masks the complex nature of disadvantage. Instead, many learners belong to various equity groups and this 'multiple disadvantage' can translate into a significantly higher risk of early departure (Edwards & McMillan, 2015). First-in-family status currently falls outside Australian equity definitions, yet my research with these learners speaks to this multiplicity, with most participants indicating a range of equity issues impacting upon their HE participation.

It is important to recognize the wider social structures that students exist within and this is particularly the case with first-in-family learners. There is a need to ensure that structural inequalities within universities are not masked as individual deficits. The next section of this review explores how first-in-family learners are perceived within the literature particularly as this relates to university participation and educational ability.

3. First-in-Family students and university participation

The literature in the field of higher education participation amongst students from diverse or equity backgrounds is voluminous (Blaxter & Tight, 1993, 1994 & 1995; Lehmann, 2009; Reay, 2003; Reay et al., 2002, 2005; Reay, Davies, David & Ball, 2001, Scheutze & Slowey, 2002; amongst others). This review will focus on how first-in-family learners have been constructed within higher education policy, which will be contrasted with the actual 'lived experience' of being a first-in-family learner as reported by the students themselves. Beginning with a summary overview of the nature of deficit discourses, this review also reflects upon the impact of such categorisations. Literature and research relating to university participation amongst first-in-family students will also be explored, including the deeply embodied nature of this participation for both learners and their families.

The deficit nature of university discourses

The notion of deficit articulated in higher education environments relates to how some learners are perceived as problematic or in need of "fixing" (Smit,

2012, p. 370). Such understanding is often implicitly communicated in institutional and political policies and discourses. One such example is the range of activities designed to widen HE participation, which have emerged as a response to the need to increase access to university. Participation benchmarks and targets have been established in Australia since 2009 (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008) but this is a worldwide phenomenon with many countries similarly seeking to encourage more learners from a greater diversity of backgrounds to attend university (OECD, 2001). Much of these activities have been carried out under the auspices of what is loosely termed the widening participation agenda.

However, even a cursory glance at the literature reveals how widening participation is a contested term that evokes both positive and negative reactions amongst sections of the educational community. widening participation activities have been accused of implicitly trading on notions of 'lack' or 'learning shortfalls' amongst learning cohorts. As Taylor (2012) explains:

> In seeking to "raise aspirations", widening participation initiatives rather problematically situate educational disadvantage as one of motivation alone, which is reflected in and challenged by students' own involvement with and feelings about, such initiatives. (p. 88)

Within Australia, the recurring theme of raising aspirations in university widening participation discourse has attracted criticism (Gale & Parker, 2013). Condemnation has largely focused on the ways that this phrase assumes that those from disadvantaged backgrounds lack educational aspirations (Cummings, Laing, Law, McLaughlin, Papps, Todd, & Woolner, 2012). Such assumptions can lead to outreach and university equity programs <u>working on</u> students to address this gap rather than <u>working with</u> them. This is not to suggest that practitioners in the field are not aware of the limitations of widening participation initiatives but rather that policy and funding requirements stratifies the ways in which these initiatives work. Indeed, such restrictions are both frustrating and demoralising for staff and further amplified by structural constraints that individuals work within. In recent research with academic staff concerning understandings of social inclusion and deficit discourses (O'Shea, Lysaght, Roberts & Harwood, 2016), the complexities of enacting widening participation in a mass system of education were strongly articulated. In surveys (n=272) and interviews (n=32) participants reflected on employability insecurity; limited understanding of students' needs; poor professional development opportunities and lack of personal space as key factors that impacted on

their ability to adequately support and engage with diverse learners. Our conclusions indicating how "academic staff are … also at the edges of the HE inclusion spectrum" (O'Shea et al., 2016, p. 333).

Learners do not come to university as blank slates or empty vessels, yet higher education policy largely trade on notions of lack. Existing research points to the many and varied aspirations and desires people from disadvantaged background hold (Lupton & Kintrea, 2011; St Clair & Benjamin, 2011) but equally recognises that the enactment of these can be constrained by both internal and external factors. For many, it is not the case that university is not considered or known about but rather difficulties arise in placing the self within this space, a sense of dislocation from this sphere. There is often little recognition of such situational contexts within policy, which this can lead to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds being 'othered' and blamed for non-attendance or lack of success.

My own work with first-in-family learners (O'Shea, 2007, 2009, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016a) points to how attendance at university can be stratified by issues related to gender, poverty and ethnicity. For example, in interviews with first-in-family learners from poorer or working class backgrounds, a clear theme emerged around the desire to attend university being thwarted by an uncertainty about how to action this. Often this was related to limited encouragement or understanding of this desire within the home place, this was particularly the case for the older students who had returned to education after a gap in learning. For example, Nina (36) explained how her mother dissuaded her from considering attending university, arguing it was not for the "likes of them":

> …*all us girls were always just taught that our place is in the home—that's where we should be because university isn't for people like us…She* [mother] *says it all the time 'It's not for people like us. Just don't do it'* (O'Shea, 2015c, p. 251)

In a related study, Nigel (26) similarly described how university "…*wasn't spoken about at home, it was just assumed that we would start working…*" (O'Shea, 2014, p. 9).

When exploring the experiences of first-in-family female caregivers, some participant's reflected upon university attendance in terms of 'fragility' this was a desire that had been kept hidden for fear of criticism or negative reactions (O'Shea, 2015c, p. 9). For some of these women, the opportunity to be a university student was implicitly bound up in prescribed gender roles and this "stratification limited personal horizons and marked this decision to attend university as not only different to deeply embedded gender norms but also, a possible threat to expected life course" (O'Shea, 2015c, p. 9).

Once enrolled at university, this delicacy did not diminish as the women described maintaining a complex balancing act between home and study. There was an expectation that their university studies would not impact upon the household or family. The stresses of such invisible constraint succinctly summed up by Ann, a 36 year old mother of two, who described how she "…*work[s] four nights a week so it's come home from uni, get ready for work and off I go. I'm still cooking dinner in between so it's pretty chaotic*" (O'Shea, 2015c, p. 10). Ann is partnered but her narrative clearly situates the responsibility for managing university activities around domestic responsibilities as residing solely with her.

While both these examples are derived from relatively small research samples, the stories of these learners largely point to clear aspirations for higher education but the often hidden or invisible constraints that can disrupt or limit these desires. This is echoed by Reay, Ball and David (2005), who argued that university choice for their young working class participants was largely governed by conceptions of 'fit' with the chosen institution. Such notions not only effecting decisions about which university to attend but also implicitly impacting on whether individuals consider they have this choice at all. Evans (2009) conceives of this as a process of 'self-limitation' (p. 348), which some learners can impose upon themselves when considering educational futures.

Clearly, conceiving of a pathway into university may be quite difficult for first-in-family students, but for those who actually enrol, the experience of attending can be both emotionally charged and deeply transformative (King et al., 2015; London, 1992; O'Shea, 2014a, Stone & O'Shea, 2012; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Rendon, 1992). These types of impacts often remain unspoken about and unacknowledged within the university landscape. Yet, this emotionality can have deep and provocative repercussions for both learners and family members (O'Shea, 2009, 2015). The next section provides some insight into these effects and the possible implications of these.

Exploring university engagement from the perspective of the learner

In order to understand the deeply personal nature of university experience, there is a need to foreground individual student voice. My research in this area responds to West's (1996) assertion that: "… learners themselves have rarely been encouraged to reflect, in a flexible and longitudinal way, on their reasons for educational participation and learning in the context of past as well as present lives" (p. 1). In conducting lengthy interviews with students over the last decade, my intention has been to explore how students'

themselves perceive of their participation in university and how this participation has impacted upon their lived realities outside of the institution.

The most recent study (O'Shea, May et al., 2015) adopted a cross-institutional approach to exploring the experiences of first-in-family learners at various stages of their studies (pre-degree / undergraduate Years 1-3) and also studying in both on-campus and distance modes. Interviews (n=101) and surveys (n=213) were conducted with both learners and their family members, in recognition of the intergenerational implications attending university can have. Being the first to attend university can have profound impacts on those closest to learners and so it is vital to include the voices of others in projects such as this (O'Shea, 2014, O'Shea, 2015c). The study spoke to some of the silences in the university landscape, providing insight into the ways this university experience was imported into and translated within the household.

A number of the student and family responses referred to the important intergenerational implications of this educational endeavour. Some participants described this university participation as representing the collective realisation of long-term generational dreams and ambitions. This movement into tertiary study was tightly bound up with family biographies (O'Shea, Stone, May & Delahunty, 2016). For example, one of the younger female participants explained how attending university was described by her grandparents as an opportunity that had been denied in their youth, the following short vignette describes the deeply biographical nature of this attendance:

> Well my grandparents. I moved in with them when I was in high school and they … wanted myself and my sister to go to uni… 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. I think they think that university and a degree is the best way to set yourself up financially and everything. They thought it was the best thing for us, for our futures. Yes, I think that they think the workforce is changing and that it's kind of hard to get far in life without having a degree of some sort…because they told me I'm better than TAFE, I'm better than that, you know…
> (Abbey, 22)

Abbey's story of lost opportunity was not unique; many of the participants spoke of their decision to come to university as being situated within wider family narratives of learning. Within interviews, the echoes of other voices are omnipresent; attending university was perceived in a very collective sense, a celebration not only for the learners but also for the family and community (O'Shea, Stone et al., 2016). Achieving university qualifications may also be regarded as sending a clear message to all the 'others' who may have assumed that HE was not possible for this cohort.

The data generated across projects has revealed the complexities and intricacies of interactions between first-in-family students, their significant others and the higher education environment. Research has pointed to the importance of developing social networks within the university (Tinto, 1995, 2002; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) but there has been little clarity regarding how social networks outside the higher education environment might assist first-in-family students from a variety of demographic backgrounds. Repeatedly, first-in-family participants spoke to the repercussions of attending university and the deep resonance this had within the household. These ripples included providing the basis for new conversations of learning as well as opening up new educational futures for siblings or relatives. Participants in a number of studies[2] also pointed to various 'family capitals' (O'Shea, 2014, O'Shea, 2016a) as being important sources of both emotional and also, embodied support in these educational endeavours.

Such family capital was particularly noted amongst parenting students. Children featured strongly in narratives as both motivators and champions of academic pursuits. Allana, (30, mother of 2) described how her eldest son (13) cooked meals, made her cups of tea and also, assisted her to navigate around the computer. In this case, this involvement had engendered different conversations in the home about his educational future by "*encouraging him because we always talk about [university] he said to me, 'Mum, I would love to do this and do this and do this'*". The impacts of Allana's academic pursuits rippled throughout the family, providing new academic horizons and possibilities within the household.

This focus on student narratives of attending university can enable alternative perspectives and understandings of this venture to emerge. These are sometimes the untold stories of this participation and yet, need to be deeply explored if we are to cater for increasingly diverse student populations. The next section considers what these insights mean for institutions, particularly the ways in which engagement and success are understood.

4. Rethinking university engagement and success

Overall, this research points to a need to rethink how we discuss issues around university participation so that we move beyond deficit discourses or equity constructs. Instead, exploring the field by drawing on multiple "faces, voices and experiences" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24) enables focus on the assets of individuals, which can in turn facilitate success amongst diverse student populations. If we continue to focus on what people lack there is little opportunity to consider their strengths. Such thinking not only impacts upon actions in this field but also upon the individuals in this space. Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) argue that most first-in-family students are implicitly aware of their own deficits or shortcomings and that this knowledge further informs their university experience. Specifically, such assumptions can result in higher levels of insecurity and displays of "stigma management" (p. 327) which involve "concealing their class identities and cultural tastes" (p. 327).

These deficit-based perspectives also conceal or hide alternative ways of considering learners from diverse backgrounds, such as recognising that these individuals may well be the high achievers of their social class (Gofen, 2009). Equally, first-in-family students may bring with them strengths and capitals that are currently hidden or silenced in the university landscape, For example, older first-in-family learners referred to, what I have termed as, "experiential capital" (O'Shea, 2016b) in interviews, which included capabilities such as resilience; motivation and tenacity. These were often derived from their a priori life experiences but had fundamentally assisted them to succeed and persist in this environment. Clearly, first-in-family students and other learners from diverse backgrounds do not necessarily arrive at university bereft of the necessary capitals to enact success but rather the capitals they arrive with may not always be those traditionally celebrated within this environment.

We also need to reconsider notions of success and what it means to be successful within this higher education sector. Rather than focus on discourses of meritocracy, which foreground academic achievements, success can be conceptualised in more diverse ways. Fredericks, Kinnear, Daniels, Croft-Warcon, & Mann (2015) report that for participants in an Indigenous pathways program "… success was experienced across multiple dimensions of students' lived experience including 'cultural identity', 'voice', 'self-realisation', 'self-acceptance' and 'pride'" (p. 6). Similarly, my research with mature-aged first-in-family female students (O'Shea, 2014a) indicated how success at university was also measured in terms of very personal changes. This was particularly noted in terms of how university offered a

space to reflect and reconsider possibilities in life. Participation was celebrated in terms of growth in self-confidence and transformations in self-identity, for these learners: "…the transition to university unfolded a range of new perspectives and demands that assisted in rupturing […] gendered roles and exposed the contested nature of such domains" (O'Shea, 2014a, p. 22).

Pyne and Means (2013) describe universities as having great potential to enable engagement with issues of power and importantly offering a space that can value "diverse experiences and ways of knowing and learning" (p. 187). However, as research in this field points out, this potential is not currently being achieved. Instead, learners are expected to conform to pre-existing identity positions that may negate or reduce their sense of belonging in the institution. Also, in striving to achieve an organisational ideal, individuals focus on the self in order to achieve the desired subject position rather than recognising how such positionality is a construct. Such self-attribution means that organisational structures and discourses remain unchanged, instead it is the expectation that the individual will mould and adapt to these implicit requirements. Simply, it is the learners that must learn to change rather than the organisation. Yet if we continue to invite and encourage learners from diverse backgrounds to attend university, then changes and adaptations need to occur at an institutional level rather than solely at an individual level.

Given the issues that have been discussed in this review, the final section provides some considerations for future practice.

5. Recommendations and conclusions

Attending university does not automatically result in decreases in social or economic stratification, particularly for those who are considered to be disadvantaged to begin with. Rather than focus solely on economic reward, there is a need for universities to refocus widening participation activities to incorporate "more expansive understandings of what is valuable in human lives and for human flourishings" (Walker, 2008, p.270). This includes the very embodied nature of these educational activities. Arguably, a tension exists in the university sector, where it is the vocational and economic benefits of this undertaking that are valued rather than the transformations that occur on a personal level. The research outlined in this review details the very personal and embodied nature of this attendance for the learners themselves. Such insight underlines the important of recognising and foregrounding the diversity of benefits that attendance can engender for both learners and their families.

Widening participation initiatives also need to be carefully considered, as these are often unquestionably associated with a moral or social justice agendas, coached in terms associated with access and equality. Resting upon this moral agenda means that those people who choose not to engage in this powerful educational discourse may be positioned as somewhat deviant and wrong – not only refusing to engage in activities to improve themselves but also, refusing to contribute to national prosperity and security. Remaining mindful of the inherently political nature of this agenda is vital, particularly when considering notions of educational aspiration. As practitioners, we need to consider aspirations in a more fluid sense, a concept that evolves and changes over the life course. Similar to Cummings et al., (2012), I suggest that a more nuanced understanding of this term is required that particularly distinguishes between raising aspirations and keeping existing aspirations "on-track" (p. 77). The latter recognises all learners as complete rather than assuming a position of lack.

In considering how best to support diverse student populations, institutions also need to carefully avoid the stigmatization of certain groups. Given current equity funding objectives (HEPP), the need to target support at certain learning cohorts is often a funding requirement, for example, the need to focus on students from low-socio economic backgrounds. However, it is necessary to remain attentive to how such support is framed and delivered. Too often the focus is on the individual learner who is constructed as needing to change or develop. Rather than attributing success or failure to individual learners these programs could actively foreground the structural inequity embedded within university systems. If these stratifications remain unacknowledged or unrecognized within the tertiary environment, then this becomes yet another silence that these learners have to overcome.

There also remains an ongoing need for institutions to remain mindful of both the types of messages or information provided to learners as well as how this is conveyed. The provision of information needs to move beyond the campus environs and engage with learners in their own communities. This could include establishing safe spaces in the community where both learners and their families feel secure in initiating contact with the HE provider. There are many examples of excellent outreach programs already occurring and undoubtedly the key to their success is the creation of collaborative partnerships with organisations, primarily schools. However, to broaden reach more diverse collaborations with a range of community facilities such as youth centres; preschools and health centres offer the possibility for greater connection with a broader spectrum of society. Importantly any outreach strategy needs to be complemented by various

forms of 'in-reach' located within institutions, the latter providing systematic and timely support that travels with learners as they move through their university programs. Such in-reach is particularly critical for first-in-family learners who do not have access to the intergenerational knowledge about university systems and procedures. Our research (O'Shea, May et al., 2015) further indicating that first-in-family students generally respond more to support and interventions that proactively engage with them rather than individuals being expected to seek this out.

This review has pointed to various issues experienced by an expanding student cohort namely those learners who are the first in their family to attend university. While the review makes specific reference to this cohort, it must be noted that many of these concerns can equally be applied to students from a range of equity or underrepresented backgrounds. Drawing upon the concept of first-in-family, however, usefully identifies those students who may be experiencing multiple disadvantages in their educational journey. Previous research has indicated that first-in-family can be best conceptualised as a supra equity category that works across the recognised categories of low-SES, regional, gender, disability and Indigeneity (O'Shea, May et al., 2015). Equally, first-in-family status can also be framed in a positive and celebratory manner, rather than identifying students based on lack (wealth, language, ability) how much better to identify them through a celebration of being the first? (O'Shea, 2015b).

The first step to celebrating this is recognising the cultural baggage that first-in-family students arrive with, not as a deficit but as an asset. Such recognition can assist institutions to develop reciprocity between all parties, not only between university and students but also (and importantly) in relation to their families and communities. Such mutuality may begin to address the silences that currently exist between first-in-family learners' lived realities and their experiences of managing and succeeding within the university environment.

6. Notes

1. The six targeted equity groups in Australia include people from 1) low socioeconomic backgrounds, 2) rural and isolated areas, 3) non-English speaking backgrounds as well as 4) women in non-traditional areas of study, 5) Indigenous peoples and 6) those with a disability.

2. Funded grants include: O'Shea, S., May, J. & Stone, C. (2014-2015) Breaking the Barriers: supporting and engaging mature age first-in-family university learners and their families. Office for Learning and Teaching Seed

Project Grant; O' Shea, S. (2013) Exploring the participation of first in family students in university with particular reference to how this impacts upon intergenerational choices around, and perceptions of, higher education. University Educational Strategies Development Fund; O'Shea, S. (2013-2015). Rethinking Capital: Exploring the nature of cultural capital in the context of transition to higher education for first in family university students. University Research Committee (URC) Grant.

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Start by marking "Negotiating Learning and Identity in Higher Education: Access, Persistence and Retention" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving… Want to Read. The longitudinal perspective enabled the students participating in the research to reflect on their transition to university and the stumbling blocks they encountered in their senior years. The contributors show that the school-to-university transition is not linear or universal. Students had to negotiate multiple transitions at various times and both resist and absorb institutional, disciplinary and home discourses. This project aims to bridge the knowledge gap between rural schools and higher education in South Africa and develop inclusive teaching/learning practice. Researchers are collaborating with colleagues based at the University of Bristol and the University of Johannesburg. Together, they have been awarded funding of £550,000 by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the National Research Foundation (NRF). The University of Brighton have a £35,984 portion of the overall grant. Professor Gina Wisker leads on this project for the University of Brighton and it builds on her previous Higher Education Academy International Sir Ron Cooke Scholarship work on 'Education for social justice, critical professionalism and capabilities'.