

First in family students – what they say about being at university

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Abstract

Exploring what students say in semi-structured, open-ended interviews provides a rich and personal understanding of their encounters with the university. The opportunity to discuss the experiences of First in Family (FiF) students as they progress through their degree or reach its end allows us to gain insight into their reasons for attending university, their determination to stay and what they believe helped them succeed. This paper discusses the three main themes related to the FiF student experience we uncovered as a result of a detailed literature review and through our interviews. These themes are, their 'journey' into and through higher education; their position as 'student' which includes the demographic aspects as well as their own concepts of themselves as students; and, the 'networks' they have used and developed to succeed at university. The students' insights may be used to encourage and help future FiF students to complete their studies.

Introduction

Students who are the First in Family (FiF) to attend university are an under-recognised equity grouping. While they may not necessarily fit all of the following equity categories, many come from either a low Socio Economic Status background, are mature-aged, reside or went to school in areas that are classified as regional and/or remote and/or are Indigenous students (Koshy & Seymour, 2014). Research indicates that although these cohorts may enter university through non-traditional pathways they are highly capable and do particularly well when given opportunities to participate and the support to succeed (Devlin, Kift et al 2012 et al). However, our previous research shows that FiF students experience educational disadvantage because their cultural and social capital does not readily align with that of the university (Luzeckyj, King et al 2011).

This paper draws on previous research (Brinkworth et al., 2013) which investigated the expectations and experiences of over 16,800 first year students from three publicly funded South Australian universities. It also draws on work developed for a National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) grant focussed on gaining an enriched and more personalised understanding of the experience of FiF students. The NCSEHE research has included the development of an annotated bibliography, a literature review and conducting and transcribing semi-structured open-ended interviews.

Through interviews with eighteen FiF students from the University of South Australia (UniSA), the University of Adelaide and Flinders University this paper will articulate the varied student experiences they bring to higher education; their reasons for attending university and the value they place on being able to attend. The interview participants have all been attending university for three or four years. Some have completed their original degree; others are continuing either as part-time students or in the final year of their double

degree and yet others have gone on to enrol in further study. The paper draws on the interviews to develop our understanding of the FiF experience as well as to provide practical advice for FiF students regarding how to negotiate university life successfully.

Our approach to the interviews

We conducted semi-structured open-ended interviews with eighteen self-identified FiF students. Our interview questions were based on themes we identified as we systematically reviewed national and international literature related to FiF students. (These themes are discussed at length in the next section.) We then explored the interview transcripts to develop a set of narrative case studies. In this paper we will discuss our initial insights into the lives of the FiF students.

According to Stone and O'Shea (2012) “[o]ne of the best ways to understand the actions of individuals is to be allowed to hear their personal stories” (p. 2). Through interviewing FiF students we have gained insight into their day-to-day experience of attending university. We have uncovered some of the constraints these students face and the various living and personal costs associated with attending university. Furthermore, we have begun to discover the factors which both shape their aspirations to attend university and impact them most significantly post-enrolment. Our interviews reveal how university life has influenced FiF students’ identity and their extended relationships with family and friends. We conducted these interviews in a conversational manner, allowing participants to lead as much as possible and direct what they wanted to say, rather than being strictly focussed on the questions. We attempted to give up control of the interviews and pass that control to the participants so their stories could more naturally unfold (Barbour & Schostak, 2005; Riessman, 2008).

Eighteen FiF students who had previously participated in surveys related to student experience and expectations of university (Brinkworth et al., 2013) were approached to share their stories (O'Shea & Stone, 2011). Students were invited from several different faculties at each of the universities. We were aware that our selected participants were students who had remained at university (so did not include those who had left through graduation or attrition). We felt that choosing students who were still at university would allow us to gain insight into what had compelled them to stay and enabled them to be successful.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and then in order to support the first stage of analysing the transcripts a framework of the specific themes identified in the literature was developed. The transcripts were then analysed and coded in relation to these themes. The following discussion reflects the insights about being at university and succeeding that were shared during the interviews. Pseudonyms are used to protect students’ identities where direct quotations from transcripts are used.

Findings

Three main themes (the journey; the student; and the networks) which included eight sub-themes were identified across the literature. The sub-themes related to the ‘journey’ were: motivators; enablers/barriers; and, choosing ‘what’ and ‘where’. We determined that individual characteristics and skills; consolidation of student identity; and, life at university, were sub-themes that related to the ‘student’, while the ‘who’ and the ‘how’ were associated with the ‘networks’ theme.

The themes and sub-themes are represented in Figure 1, which depicts how the ‘student’ and their individual characteristics are intimately connected but may be discussed differently in the literature. The graphic shows the students’ centrality in relation to their university experience, which we have characterised as a ‘journey’ that arches over the student and connects two important sets of ‘networks’ that they utilise. The literature discusses different aspects of these networks and ways in which they are used or accessed by students. The graphic indicates the separation of the two networks and how they are, in fact, closely connected and linked to the student.

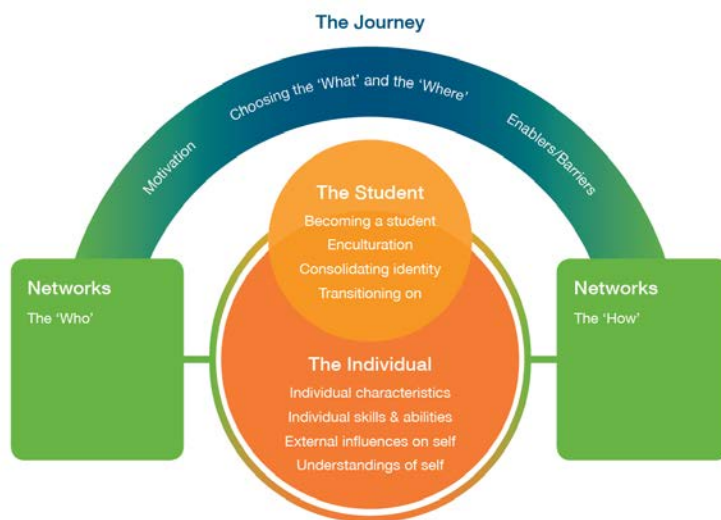


Figure 1: Graphical representation of themes

The ‘Journey’

Our interviews show that the experiences of FiF students in beginning their journey do not necessarily differ from the experience of non-FiF students. The initial step in commencing university regardless of FiF status involves a decision to attend which is linked to motivation to continue with study; the identification of a pathway to admission; and choosing a program or university. While these events may not necessarily occur in the order outlined here, they are all necessary so that the student can begin their studies (or journey).

FiF students’ decision to attend university and their motivations to do so were many and varied. Their responses to questions in relation to these points were not specifically linked to their status as FiF students and included comments such as the following from Sue, a rural student, “it was just an expectation that once you finished high school you go to uni”. Others indicated that they were encouraged to attend by their bosses, by family and/or friends. As stated by Brad, who had been encouraged by his father, who had always regretted not attending university, “it opens up opportunities and yeah I suppose it was just that my dad missed that opportunity”. A number of the participants said it was something they had always wanted to do.

The responses from mature-aged students reflect a notion that attending university would provide greater opportunities for the future. Their reasons included wanting to improve their chances of promotion; desiring a better life after taking a redundancy package; or being bored by their office job. However, in some cases a specific incident encouraged them to enrol. Rowan told us that having a child had motivated him. He said:

... it wasn't until the birth of my daughter that things changed. ... I made that decision to go in 2011, she was born in the middle of 2010 so there was that sort of motivation I suppose.

Other motivations indicated by the participants included: wanting a better paid job or financial security; an interest in learning or passion for the subject area; a desire to help people; enjoyment; and, self-improvement. These comments reveal a range of motivational factors that move well beyond financial gain and include factors relating to personal development, altruism and the pure pleasure of learning. This range of responses is encapsulated when Jess says when asked why she is at university

I use the idea of it being career advancement to justify going to university ... but going to uni is just the emotional [driver], I love to learn ... it's like nirvana.

Likewise, Brad stated that being at university was not just about gaining a qualification but about gaining the skills and growing as person as well. He said,

I would say I'm a dedicated student in so far as I don't just want to get a degree, ... I'd say as a student I want to learn more skills, I want to get better at what I do and as a person I suppose I want to develop as a person, I want to read more, educate myself.

The encouragement of teachers, family and friends was also crucial in helping the FiF students decide to attend university. Rowan discusses how the support of friends helped and encouraged him. He states:

I had friends who said "Look you're smart enough, you should go to uni, you're actually a really smart guy, you should just go on and do whatever you want to do".

Once motivated to attend, students need to actively apply to attend so they may begin their 'journey'. The literature indicates that FiF students' pathways are varied and involve many complex decisions (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Chapman, 2013; Gorard, 2006; Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003; O'Shea, 2007). The pathways into higher education taken by our interview participants reflect those indicated in the literature. The students we interviewed included mature-aged (taking a STAT test and or participating in a Foundations Studies program); those from a rural high school; those entering after a gap year and students who had come directly from high school. Of those who attended straight from school one did not get their first preference, so completed a semester before transferring into the degree that was their first preference.

The next critical stage of the journey is choosing what to study and where to study it. There were a range of reasons for choosing a specific university. Pragmatic choices were based on the proximity of the university to where the student lived or it was the only place in South Australia to offer the program they wished to study. A small number of the students who attended the older and more prestigious of the three universities indicated their choice was based on the reputation of the university, with one claiming it was the beauty of the campus that lured her. As Denise said "I've always loved this place, like architecturally it's beautiful and I thought if I ever went to uni I'd really like to go here because I really loved it". Unlike the majority of the FiF students these few demonstrated an understanding of the value of attending a more reputable institution (Smith, 2011).

The more common perspective reflected in the FiF literature is that students tend to choose a university that is a 'good fit' for them (Gale & Parker, 2012; O'Shea, 2013). As Brendon describes:

I did a little bit of research on the three unis I think Uni C was more the least of it, just purely because of distance it's a fair way away. But I think I just liked the idea of Uni B, it just looked a bit more innovative and certainly I think Uni A is more associated with the theoretical side of things, but not that that's a bad thing, I just think Uni B seemed a better fit for me.

Brendon reflects both the pragmatic as well as the more complex aspects involved in choosing a university. He rejected one university on the basis of its distance from his home and another because it was not contemporary enough (as it is less innovative and more theoretical).

The literature indicates that once students begin the journey they need to possess particular personal qualities, skills and abilities in order to succeed. The student's early engagement with the academic environment and their ability to develop of a sense of identity as a student also contributes to their success (Benson, Hewitt, Heagney, Devos, & Crosling, 2010; Devlin & O'Shea, 2011).

The 'Student'

The second theme is the 'student'. This theme relates to FiF student backgrounds and personal qualities; their identity as a student; and their growth and development after three or four years of study. As the interviews were semi-structured and open-ended not all of the participants revealed the same degree of detail about their backgrounds. Where the information is known there are some background characteristics that participants share; seven are mature-aged and in addition the 71 year old preferred to be called 'old', rather than 'mature aged'. In Pete's words "I would say old – there's a difference to being mature and a difference to being old."

Other common details include: being brought up in a single parent family (four participants); coming from a rural location (four participants, with one being an international student); and growing up in a low socio-economic household (eight participants indicated they came from poorer or working-class backgrounds, but the level of house-hold income was not always mentioned). According to Alison,

My parents paid my rent actually and then so the money the Centrelink gave me went into food and bills and that kind of thing. Yeah they were great. They also had one of those ASG scholarships so whenever I was really low they just took it out of that because that's what the money was there for evidently. I didn't find it too bad.

While Alison discusses the support her parents were able to offer her when she moved to Adelaide, the discussion does not reveal her socio-economic status. In other cases participants were very clear. Brendon openly states his family background "it's interesting coming from a very working-class background and a lot of my friends and stuff being in the same background" as does Travis who has a carer's pension so that he can look after his father. Travis discusses how his father worked hard on an assembly line until he sustained an injury. As his story unfolds Travis reveals that his family was not wealthy when he says "she [his mother] didn't actually want to get a job so my dad pretty much worked himself into the ground trying to support the family".

Another participant is an ex-drug addict. This particular characteristic reflects an ability to persevere and gain a sense of pride for achieving. In Roxie's own words, "So to go from repeated drug overdoses and nearly dying to finishing university, my friends are astonished, they're really proud of me". In discussing her friends' reactions, Roxie highlights her own sense of pride at being able to astonish them and make her friends proud.

Five participants have children; one is a grandfather, two have primary school aged children, another has teenage sons and the fifth parent has seven children (having had three since enrolling). At least one of these parents revealed they are the sole parent while others discuss being married, separated or divorced. Nina finds that although her husband is very supportive her role as the main care giver to seven young children impacts on her focus and ability to manage competing demands. She discusses how she tries to balance her life between university and her children. She says,

I do lots of work between 4am and 7am. So I get up early and get stuff done that needs to be done. ...you've got to have priorities – my priorities are obviously my family. And then you need to sort of fit around that. Luckily being part-time – I'm doing one subject at the moment, so it's not massive. ...setting out days that I can specifically do Uni things and days where it's kid things and everything else.

Nina has clearly identified her family as the priority but indicates that she does try to fit everything in by getting up early and by attempting to earmark specific days for university and others for her children.

When asked to discuss how they saw themselves as students the participants were keen to indicate that they were hard workers. Kerry discussed how she felt it was really important to do well so that she could get a good job. She said “I've set very high standards”. Carl's description of himself is quite similar, he suggests that he should do his “job”, as a university student “properly” going on to say, “And when I know I've got stuff to be done I will sit down and knuckle down and get it done.” Denise who said she spent most weekends in the university library went as far as describing herself as “just very studious, like I'm a nerd.” Cory indicates that he no longer works as hard as he did when he first started university but:

I was probably a little bit more dedicated to my studies than I am now. That was sort of very much my main focus and I spent a lot of time just doing homework and trying to get on with that. Whereas now I feel like I'm just more relaxed about it, I don't stress out as much about the stuff that needs to get done. Yeah, but still I put a bit more effort in than most people I think in to the degree.

Even though he does not work as hard as he used to, Cory believes he still works harder than other students. Even where students believe they could try harder they suggest that the circumstances of their lives make that difficult. Reay, Crozier and Clayton (2009) argue that working-class students feel they receive little support from institutions to develop the skills to succeed and need to rely on their own abilities to acquire these aptitudes and abilities. Working class or low socio-economic status students may perceive their efforts to build these skills as a need to work harder than other students.

Nina (who had seven children) described herself as a bad student, but suggested that it is not that she does not work hard but rather that the circumstances of her life prevent her from spending more time on her academic work “So I think it's just the fact that I've got so much other stuff going on that makes me a bad student”. Contrasting this response with Nina's aforementioned comment suggests that she does indeed do what she can in the time that she has available and is not a bad student. These statements support the notion that the FiF students we interviewed had developed an identity as a student and that it involved working hard (whether they felt they achieved it or not).

The interview participants indicated that they had changed as a result of being at university. Roxie and Pete, who were both mature-aged students, expressed feeling more confident. According to Pete he feels “better equipped to argue what I believed in before I came to

university” and that he has become “more competent in expressing an opinion about – well whatever it may be”. While Roxie states that while she was always confident, since attending university she has also become more ambitious and has “more confidence in myself and I’ve always been a very confident person but, I’m ready to go and take on the world now”. Todd who had left high school and attended university directly discussed similar changes in confidence. He also discussed thinking more deeply; feeling more socially adept and more independent in relation to the way he had changed as a result of attending university. Todd said:

I don’t know, my brain has developed, I can talk and think to a lot deeper level than what I could back in high school. I’ve changed, so confidence one thing, certainly changed in what would it be? ... But certainly in my worldliness, in my view, has changed. Understanding of people, socially has developed immensely, that would be probably the biggest thing. ... ? I guess, certainly my independence as well, my driven-ness to be independent, I was pretty happy to let things be looked after, but now I want to be my own person.... That’s developed hugely over the last couple of years.

Not all of the participants indicated they had become more confident but most acknowledged that they had changed. Travis believed being at university had “definitely broadened my view of things”. This sentiment was shared by Alison who thought university had changed her by broadening her horizons “Now ... I want to travel and I want to live overseas and work overseas and I just want to do so much more than I ever wanted to do”.

Brendon said that although his inner qualities had remained the same many other changes had taken place. He said “I guess handling of pressure, managing social relationships, uni relationships and workloads and things like that ... they have really dramatically changed my life...” Brendon indicated that he had developed some useful life skills.

These students did not develop their skills and abilities or change entirely as a result of participating in the courses at university. Their growth was also dependent on the support they received and the networks they established. The final set of themes we identified explores the way in which students discuss these ‘Networks’. Part of seeking support and utilising networks can include giving advice to others. The next section also discusses advice the students would provide to the network of FiF students who are starting university.

The ‘Networks’

The FiF students discussed the range of support networks that they had utilised. These included specific resources made available by the university such as getting advice from university transition staff; utilising counselling services; and even accessing “food vouchers ... from the financial advisory office” (Roxie). Other participants talked about developing good relationships with university staff, especially those in the departments where they studied, including both lecturers and tutors. Another crucial network that these students used were family and friends.

Many of the FiF students did not utilise any of the more formal services available from the university. For example, Carl made use of informal networks such as peers and other tutors to look at his work. Acknowledging that he was asking staff who were not required to help him, he said, “I’ve just asked for their opinion on things like ‘is it set out well? Is it grammatically correct? Am I on the right track?’” Feeling able to freely ask for help as it is needed is indicative of an ability to develop networks, which as indicated in the literature is important to the success of FiF students (Benson et al., 2010; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003;

McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Carl indicated that acquiring help from the tutors was possible because he was in a small degree cohort. Roxie who was also in a small degree expressed a similar sentiment about feeling looked after by the staff. She said that she felt “very much taken under the wing of the academics in the Department ... they’ve looked after us all so well, they love us, they look after us”.

Many of the FiF students also developed networks with their peers. Sue discussed applying for a Master’s degree while she was overseas and being placed in contact with another student who was undertaking a similar progression by the person coordinating her undergraduate course. She said that she required the other student’s help in negotiating the transition to Masters “And he’s like “this is what you need”, he was so great”. Similarly Alison found it helpful to have friends around. She discussed how her friends’ families also helped her when she said:

The friends I’ve made are just so easy to get along with and make it easy. Even their families like that first year my parents weren’t around and if I was sick their mums would cook soup for me and that kind of thing.

While Sue and Alison found having the support of fellow students and friends helpful, Travis went as far as saying “If I didn’t have my friends to lean on, I would have failed a long time ago.” While this statement may seem overly dramatic it reflects the importance of the friendships and networks developed by FiF students.

The participants also discussed their outside support networks. Many talked about the support offered by partners, parents and other family. Nina’s husband is her main source of support. She said that although her parents babysit occasionally her husband provides an emotional as well as practical support as he is her “sounding board”. Calem said that over the years his greatest support had come from “probably my mum and other friends”. Gail discusses the way her parents provided support when she was struggling with her workload and considering leaving university. She said “my parents definitely helped me out to get over that wobble a bit and yeah, a bit more supportive at that time”.

Participants were also asked to provide advice to other FiF students starting university, or to consider the advice they would give to themselves if they were starting university now. In spite of staying in her course and getting past the difficult first semester Gail’s advice to herself as a new student or to other students, differs from those students who suggest they should “Just hang in there” (Sue); “Relax, you don’t have to get a high distinction on everything” (Roxie) or “don’t stress it, you’ll do fine” (Jen). Corey’s comment in this regard is to tell students “[Uni] is tough but worth it. I think the transition in - for that first couple of weeks is the hardest”.

In contrast Gail’s advice is very practical. She suggests that students should “research a little more about potential careers. ... just research jobs and what you think would be right and also how in demand they are as well”. Other students also provided practical advice suggesting the development of skills such as good time management (Brendon and Corey) or research skills (Travis). Pete suggested that students new to university (not just FiF students) develop the skills they require by participating in a Foundations Studies program as he had. Other practical advice includes making connections and/or friends in the course so that they have someone to discuss issues with (Denise and Corey). Rowan suggests that FiF students ensure they have sufficient funds to fall back on. He said:

Perhaps spend some time before going to university building up a nice buffer of money and then say, okay I'm going to use that buffer as a way of supplementing my income throughout that journey.

In this advice Rowan is not suggesting students do not work while at university, rather that they have some funds in reserve. The range of advice students provide, developing time management skills; academic literacies and social networks mirrors what is recommended in the literature (Benson et al., 2012; Devlin and O'Shea 2011).

Conclusion

The FiF students who participated in these interviews came from a wide range of backgrounds including: relocating from a rural or overseas location; ranging in age when they started university (the youngest being seventeen and the oldest sixty nine); using a variety of entry pathways; and, they had differing socio-economic status. The one thing they had in common is that none of them had access to insights from family in relation to what being at university might involve. This paper has explored the "journey", their positioning and role as "student" and the "networks" that helped them to succeed in their studies and move into a position where they were able to reflect on their experiences and offer advice to other FiF students.

In conducting and analysing the interviews, as researchers, we have gained a richer insight into the complex lives of these students and in writing this paper believe the comments from these students can be used to develop ideas that will help staff better support this under-recognised equity group. By understanding that these students have complex lives and different support networks than other students, staff may be able to tap into their potential. As Brendon stated

... we're not all just a big farm full of uni students that just come and learn a degree and you're done ... we're not all the same we come in with different values, different backgrounds ...

Many of these students suggested that university was about more than acquiring a degree as it had also helped them develop skills and build confidence. It is helpful to think that providing support for FiF students is also about helping them develop skills and building their confidence and self-efficacy.

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