

**Breaking the Barriers:  
supporting and engaging  
mature age first-in-family  
university learners and their  
families**

**Dr Sarah O' Shea**

**Dr Cathy Stone**

**A/Prof Josephine May**

# Who we are

**Dr Sarah O' Shea**

**School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong**

**Dr Cathy Stone**

**Open Universities Australia & the University of Newcastle**

**A/Prof Josephine May**

**English Language and Foundation Studies Centre, University of Newcastle**

*Collaborative research between 3 institutions*

# Overview of today's session

- **Background to the research**
- **Summary literature review on first in family students**
- **Research design**
- **Preliminary findings**
- **Paired discussion**
- **Where to next...?**



# Background to the research

- Significant growth in student numbers in Australia and many of these are older learners from a diversity of backgrounds (ACER, 2013).
- Participation benchmarks are in place in Australia: 40% of all 25 to 34-year-olds attaining a qualification at bachelor level or above by 2025 but this attainment target is likely to be reached prior to 2025 (Kemp & Norton, 2014).
- Approximately half the university student population in Australia (51%) are derived from first in family backgrounds (OECD, 2012)

# Background to the research

- **What do we know about the first in family cohort?**
  1. Reported as not achieving to the same level academically as non-first in family cohort
  2. Deficit thinking - a 'group at risk' (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013, p329)
  3. The lack of an educational memory or "transgenerational family scripts" (Ball et al, 2002, p57)
  4. Institutions or students themselves need to 'fill up' with 'forms of cultural knowledge deemed valuable by dominant society' (Yosso, 2005, p75).

# Summary literature review

1. Exploring the literature is hampered by a range of factors and there are gaps in understanding .
2. Focus on school leavers who come to university directly from school
3. The most recent review of literature Spiegler and Bednarek (2013) report that most of the research in this field identify first in family students as simply 'coping' and collectively have a lower sense of belonging within the institution
4. Gaps in understanding can contribute to individuals having a 'lack of entitlement to be there, which may have a negative impact on [...] self-confidence' (Thomas & Quinn, 2007, p77).

# Research design

- For the purposes of this study, first in family status has been defined as **no one in the immediate family of origin including siblings or parents having previously attended a higher education institution or having completed a university degree.**
- Focus on all age groups and both genders
- Inclusion of family members – looking at this return from the perspective of the student and their family members
- Survey and interview methodology
- Three cohort groups – online learners (OUA), Access program participants (UoN) and domestic on-campus undergrads (UoW)

# Research Design

Location	Cohort Group	Numbers
<b>University of Wollongong (UoW)</b>	<b>U/G students Gender mix / FiF/</b>	<b>40 students plus 10–15 family members<sup>^</sup></b>
<b>University of Newcastle (UoN)</b>	<b>Foundation / Access students Gender mix / FiF/ Over 25*</b>	<b>30-35 plus 8-10 family members</b>
<b>Open Universities Australia (OUA)</b>	<b>U/G students in the first year of online studies. Gender mix / FiF/ Over 25*</b>	<b>40 students plus optional survey for family members</b>

**Stage (1):** Interviewed 25 First in Family students (3 interviews later removed as it was the second degree). Funded by an **ESDF grant (2013), UOW**

**Stage (2):** 123\* Student surveys completed ; 25\* Family surveys  
59\* Interviews completed (including 2 family interviews). Funded by an **OLT Seed Grant (2014)**

*Additional interviews n=25 have been funded by a UOW Research Committee Grant and the Early Start Research Institute at UOW*

\* As at 10 June



# Findings (to-date)

## Survey:

- **Participants:** 84% women; 77% studying full-time and 60% in the first year of study
- **Support:** 46% receive Centrelink benefits; 44% work part-time; 43.5% by a partner or family;
- **Giving up?** 48.5% had considered giving up – most were female in the first year of study.
- **What kept you going at crisis points?** 74% indicated “myself” and/or “Family members”
- **Obstacles:** 68.5% = Financial difficulties; 54.5% = Academic issues; 49.5% = Family difficulties

# Findings (to-date)

- **The survey reveals rich deep stories:**

The majority of my adult life I have been a single parent on a minimum income... All my life I have wanted to go to university, and I have always believed my life would have been vastly different had I been able to. For me, this is not about qualifying for employment. For me, this is about finding out if I am capable - I am proving my own personal theory. However, had I not had to quit work for my daughter, I would never have approached the university - I believed I was forever stuck with the life and the lack of skills I had. I am not able to express fully how much my life has changed for the better since I have enrolled in higher education. I am used to poverty, so that is not a problem. Perhaps one day it really won't be a problem. However, financial gain is the least of my concerns.

(Female, 40-50 years, BA, 4<sup>th</sup> Year, UOW)

I was with an unsupportive husband... the more I wanted to better myself, the worse he made me feel. So I left him and got divorced. After I left, I decided to pursue my dreams and gain a career where I could support my children and help others. Good friends supported and encouraged me... I [now] have respect for myself, I am intelligent, I am a great essay writer, I love what I am learning, I love my tutors – they are amazing! The online world is supportive; there is so much assistance for online learning – discussion boards, essay help, Fee-help...

(Female, 30-40, BEd, First year, OUA)

# Findings (to-date)

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

# Preliminary analysis of surveys

- **Conversations around attending university**
  - Conversations avoided
  - Conversations as learning
  - Seeking reassurance / advice
- **Beliefs about university**
  - Not for people like us!
  - Discourse of opportunity and 'betterment'
  - Gratitude – being 'lucky': – *I'm so grateful to be a student at university... it's been my dream for so many years and it's finally coming true every day* (Survey – OUA female student)
- **Reactions from family and friends**
  - Mixed reactions - often pride but concern
  - Overwhelmingly positive from family (n=84)
  - Friends / extended family more questioning / jealous.

# Findings (to-date)

- **Feeling out of place (fraud or imposter)** - Nina (36) '*...was raised in the "University isn't for people like us" – they're mum's words. My job is in the home and that's where I should be.*'
- **Lacking confidence in abilities** – a need for validation / evidence or proof of belonging (often provided by assessment grades).

*I thought I was going to be overwhelmed (Survey – OUA, Female)*

*I really felt a huge buzz when I obtained that mark for my hard work. Realising that I can actually do this, first and foremost, having the the belief and holding onto it is key. Once self doubt sets on, that is it, I never let fear get in my way. (Survey – UOW, Female)*

- **Opportunity and Betterment** "*...online study is good opportunity for people who feel that they have missed their chance to get a degree". Survey – OUA, male)*

# Findings (to-date)

- **Difficult journeys** many had taken to arrive at university - Need for greater understanding of where students are “coming from”:

*Well, basically uni is completely different in respect that I've actually for half of my kid's lives I actually raised them on my own. I've been divorced since 2000 so... As I said, I've raised them on my own and with me going to uni and you could say it's... how should I explain it? Having kids, raising them on your own, having to be mother, father, care-giver, everything and uni is just me, it's just something else I've actually wanted to achieve. Yes. (Lena, 43)*

- For those studying online, the choice determined by family reasons

*I just made the choice that I was better off doing online studies for the family as a whole (Survey – OUA female)*

*.. allowed me to be close to home and more flexible so the other two kids had support for schooling and so on (Survey – OUA male)*

# Yvonne\* – one story

Yvonne is 45 and is studying a B (Arts) – when this interview occurred she was in the first year of her study. Yvonne has two children (10 & 12) and is a single parent

**Growing up:** *‘...growing up in the family that I grew up – we were very working-class. All my dad’s family bar his eldest brother, they all had trades. Trades were the best thing; that’s what you had to do in life...’.*

**Reactions to her decision:** *“My mum, she can’t understand why I want to be upwardly mobile and moving out of just work and going back to study – “Why do you have to put yourself through all the stress and the anxiety and everything that you put yourself through to do what you want to do?”*

**Prior to starting:** She had never attended a university campus but had completed some TAFE studies

\* Yvonne is the pseudonym of one of the participants from Stage (1) of this study



# Yvonne: Perceptions of University

Yvonne: Well it's the passing and the failing, I'm a fraud – I should not be here...

Int: The belief that you are?

Yvonne: No, it's just that I'm fraudulent so if I'm a fraud how can I possibly be here?

Int: Okay.

Yvonne: ...goes along with it. Just "I'm not good enough to be here. I don't have the brains to be here".

Int: So all of those kinds of things.

Yvonne: All of those types of things.

Int: Yes.

Yvonne: I don't deserve to be here. I haven't worked hard enough to be here.

Int: Yes, that kind of... Has that changed at all over the session? Do you still feel...?

Yvonne: I still do have that... I suppose it's always in the back of my head – those things and I have to try and push them aside and say "Well, you know, you can actually do this. You've proved that you can do this and you do deserve to be here". I have worked hard enough to be here. They wouldn't have let me in if I hadn't.

# Yvonne (contd)

**Expectations:** *“I didn’t think that it was going to be quite like it is. I think I thought that it was going to be a little easier – the transition would be easier but it’s quite different. It feels like I’m in an institution that has a whole different language”*

**Differences to other educational experiences:** *In TAFE “there are not so many middle-class... there’s not a lot of middle-class students; they’re more working class poor students as well, I think that that’s...”*

**Conversations in the home:** *“Since I’ve started to re-educate myself and tried to encourage my children to just not be in that mindset that they can’t do that, it’s absolutely out of their depth to be able to do it but they can actually do it”. Yvonne told her children about university as she felt “there are just some skills that you need to have to be here or a language that you need to have”.*

# Of particular interest

- Explore the types of capitals that FiF students arrive with at university and how they draw upon these whilst at university
- “Conversations around learning”
- Dual perceptions of university attendance – how family members perceive attendance and how learners themselves “translate” this attendance within the household
- Connecting with family – *ripples* of learning

# Paired Discussion

- How do the preliminary findings presented in the workshop reflect your institutional context and responses to student diversity?
- What types of targeted support are offered by your institution for those students who are older and/or first in family to come to university?
- What further strategies for connecting with families and community of first-in-family (*FiF*)/mature learners might institutions implement to improve engagement of these students?

# Where to next....?

## STAGE ONE (Completed)

- Qualitative interviews with 30 first in family / mature age undergraduate students
- Initial analysis of qualitative data with emergent themes providing a 'taxonomy' of support.
- Institutional dissemination via a workshop themed on Engaging and Retaining Mature Age Students.

## STAGE TWO (OLT Seed Grant)

- Interviewing 120 FiF / MA students across three institutions studying in both face to face and online modes.
- Cross analysis of all interview data to develop best practice guidelines for support of MA / FiF students - a range of versions developed depending on learning context
- Dissemination of initial findings via conference paper / workshops. Invitations for institutional partners for next stage.

## STAGE THREE (Future OLT Grant)

- Implementation of developed guidelines
- Follow-up interviews with staff and students to gain feedback /insight into diverse needs of learner cohorts
- Finalise guidelines, produce in hard and soft copy - disseminate hard copies to Deans of T&L and send the weblink out via mailing lists to enable national dissemination.

# Where to next....?

Seeking Expressions of Interest for **Stage (3)**:

- Plan to have a forum early in 2015 to expand upon the study and outcomes
- Please let us know if you would like to hear more about this project (saraho@uow.edu.au)

## **QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS**

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