

Breaking the Barriers:

Forum on First-in-Family students in university

An OLT Seed Project

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“So how was big school today?”

Exploring the role of family in higher education participation for first-in-family students

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Perceptions of Family: Literature

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

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

Internationally

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

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

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

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

Why these perceptions?

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

Why these perceptions?

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

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

Our Research – what is different?

Tendency to focus **on the obstacles** faced by this cohort

Gaps in understanding about how this group enact success in this environment

A focus on the strengths of students rather than perception of lack may assist in this understanding

Expanding the lens of analysis to include those close to the students as well is useful

‘...the power students attributed to family voices...the entreaties, whispers or growls heard at home.’ (London, 1989, p166)



Our data: The family

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

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

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

Reactions...mixed and sometimes unsupportive

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

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

A smaller number were not supportive (as reported by the students themselves)

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

Reactions by person (Interviews)

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

Reactions: unsupportive

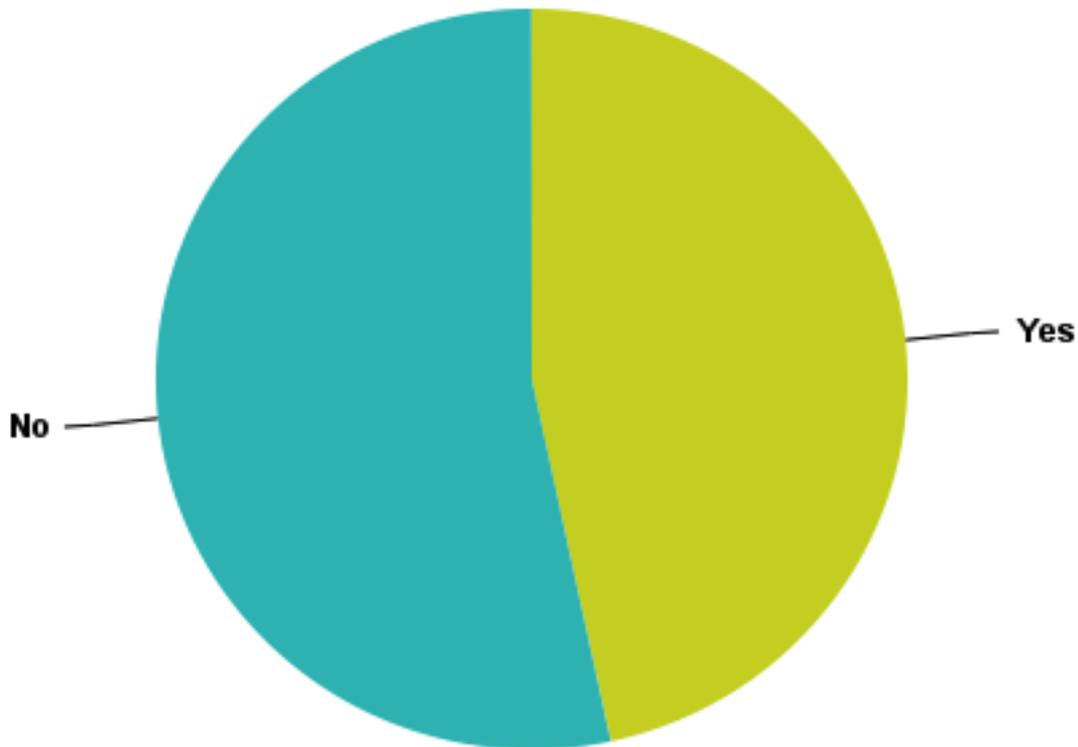
Even those who are less supportive can **provide motivation**, providing a **necessary catalyst for individuals** to prove them wrong or providing a basis for **the resilience needed to continue**:

“I wouldn’t say mum and dad were a help ... I just kind of got on with it. It’s just what I do. I just try not to think about everything else, just get it done and the time will pass and then you come out the other side” (*Lachlan, 24, single, on-campus u/g*)

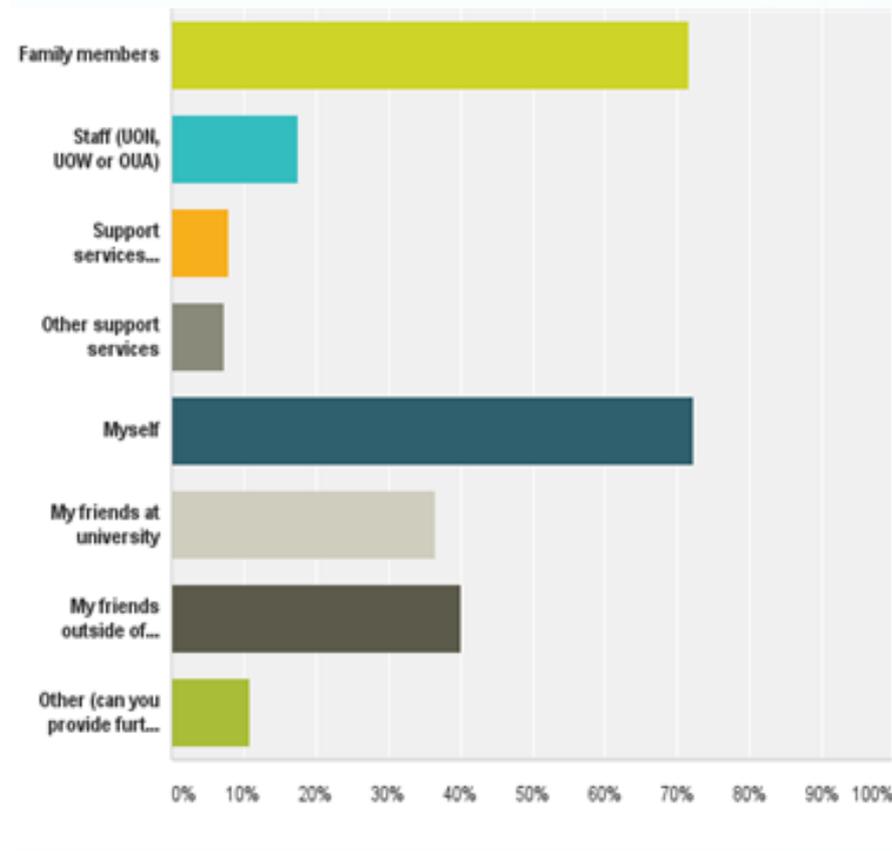
“[Dad is] a man of few words but again, as much as I enjoy other people’s praises or their support and good luck and good luck to your endeavours and whatnot else, you know, it’s what I want to do and I don't need their appraisal to get me through it sort of thing” . (*Nick, 39, partnered with 2 children,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

Q28 Have you ever considered giving up your studies?

Answered: 148 Skipped: 24



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



Who is “doing the supporting” ?

(external to the university)

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



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

Family and university

Family members may provide key elements of support

BUT

There exists a disconnect between the home and the university

- Conversations
- Understandings
- Reciprocity

Conversations in the home

- Often strategic – selecting topics that family members could easily understand.
- Some self-censorship

BUT

Varied and Diverse

Conversations in the home: Strategic

...It's very basic, they ask about things that seem like second nature to me (ie. what a lecture is like and how many people are there etc) they don't really seem to understand the stress of assignments and things like that though, they don't realise that (my degree in particular) is very competitive and everything matters. *(Female survey respondent , 18-21, single, on campus u/g)*

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

Conversations in the home: Self-censorship

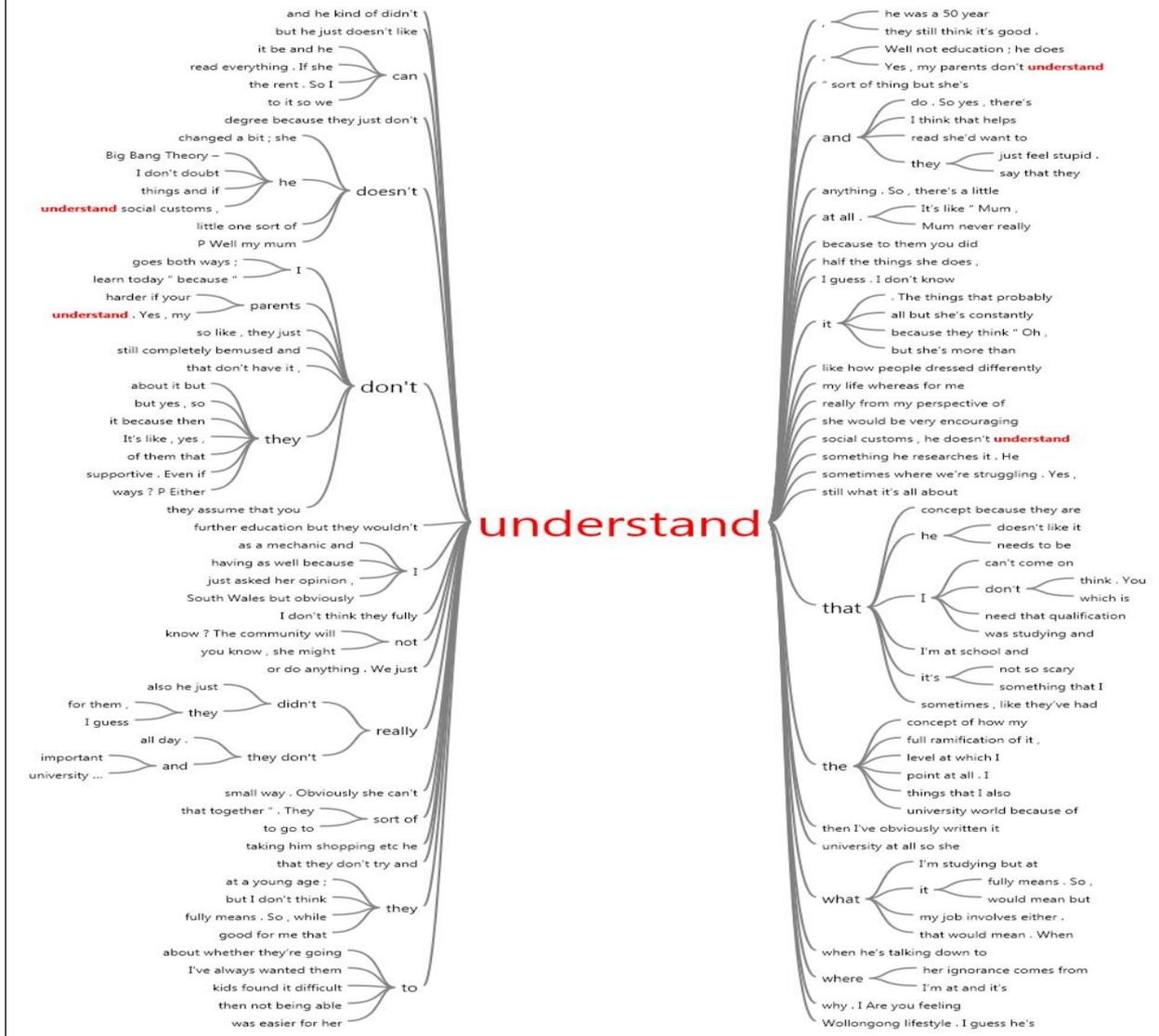
I think just general talk about my day and their day – that’s how we talk. We don't really talk in-depth about it. I tell them certain things that they may not know about uni like “I can have a beer at lunch down here” and they’re like “Oh, I wish I could have a beer during my day” but I think it’s just general everyday conversation. **It’s not too in-depth about what I’m doing.**

(Alison, 22 years, single, University of Wollongong))

The only conversations I have had is my Mum will ask "How's Uni?" I answer saying its going really well... But in all honesty, I'm not even sure she knows what I'm studying. *(Female, Survey respondent, 30-40, online student)*

It's very basic, they ask about things that seem like second nature to me (ie. what a lecture is like and how many people are there etc) they don't really seem to understand the stress of assignments and things like that though, they don't realise that (my degree in particular) is very competitive and everything matters. *(Female Survey Respondent, 21-25, undergraduate)*

I discuss my grades but never the content of the units as not only am I the first in my immediate family to receive a higher education I am also the first to have obtained their HSC, most of the content can be too complex or they do not find it interesting enough to discuss. *(Female, Survey respondent, 21-25, online student)*



Conversations as learning

Conversations as learning: a means to teach 'others in the family'

It's exciting to have conversations about my study with my family - because I'm learning things that they really don't understand, I have to go straight to the basics and talk to them from the ground up. This is exciting **because not only are they learning something new about my life and what I do, I'm also learning more about what I'm doing as talking to other people about it helps reinforce it in my mind.** *(Female Survey, 21-25, on campus u/g)*

I talk to my family about the things I'm learning mostly, I'm really interested so **I try and teach them**, doesn't usually work but they seem to enjoy it...My granddad asks me for some course content because he likes to do maths and things like that which I'm learning, I teach him stuff sometimes. *(Male survey respondent, 18-21, on-campus u/g)*

Reciprocal relationships: home and university

Actually it's been very interesting how it's impacted on the kids. After I'd only done one or two units, my daughter, Naomi she told me how pleased she was that I was studying because I was actually understanding her school work better. (*Susanna, 42, Partnered with 3 children, online u/g*)

Interview with Elle (33) and Elle's Mum (56) (on-campus u/g):

...so she's (Elle) kind of started it off. I don't know whether Nick (cousin) or Belinda (niece) were going to go to uni to start off with but, you know, they...so she's kind of started a... I don't know whether she's actually started a trend or what she has but, you know, it's very encouraging for the up and coming nieces and nephews that she's got :
“Not only Elle can do it, you know, we can do it too” type thing.

The important role of Family Capital

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

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

Final thoughts

A need to recognise that:

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

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

BUT ALSO...

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