Arriving, Surviving and Succeeding: first in family women and their experiences of transitioning into the first year of university.

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Abstract

This article outlines a qualitative narrative inquiry study conducted within Australia that focussed on a group of female commencing university students, all of whom were the first in their family to pursue higher education. During one year of academic study, seventeen women participated in periodic interviews as each moved through the year. By choosing to ‘travel’ with the students, the study reveals a very different perspective on the student experience, one that is often missing in policy documents and university discourse, which can place these students in a deficit discourse. Instead, by approaching this topic from a strengths perspective, the intent is to highlight how this group persist and engage throughout the year. The semi-structured interviews built upon each other and explored themes related to how the participants managed their university studies in relation to other competing demands in their lives as well as how the students reflected upon the transition to university life and the repercussions that this decision provoked. The participants’ reflections reveal an initial disjuncture with the university environment but as the year proceeds, the narratives highlight changes in personal perceptions, from that of exclusion to inclusion.

Keywords: First in family, first year experience, retention, transition, mature aged students

Introduction

The literature on first year transition reveals how beginning university study often initiates feelings of fear and self-doubt for newcomers, as students acculturate to a new and somewhat alien environment. Kantansis (2000) describes how many commencing students experience a ‘…sense of dilemma at the very least and utter confusion at worst, as to their expected role and responsibilities’ (para. 22). For those individuals who have no friends or family members to provide guidance as they adapt to this university culture, these types of feelings can be elevated. Indeed, first generation or first in family students are particularly vulnerable to attrition within the higher education environment; empirical evidence in Canada shows that after financial considerations, parental educational attainment is a strong predictor of academic success (Lehmann, 2009). Equally in America, the National Center for Education Statistics (Chen, 2005) indicates that first in family students are less likely to graduate from

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university when compared to those students who have at least one parent who had post secondary qualifications. The report “First-Generation Students in Postsecondary Education” indicates how 43% of first in family or first generation who entered post-secondary education between 1992 and 2000 left without a degree. While 24% of this student cohort did attain a degree during this period, this is a substantially lower percentage level of graduation when compared to students who have parents who are university graduates (64%). This NCES report also found that first generation students did not achieve as much academically when compared to their peers who had parents with tertiary qualifications.

In Australia, there is no national data set that records first in family status rather the collection of this information is left to individual educational institutions. What data does exist indicates that those individuals who have one or both parents with a degree qualification were more likely to enrol in a university (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009) but the academic success or attrition numbers for this particular cohort are not available on a national level. However, the literature and research in this area derived from the both the United Kingdom and the United States of America indicates that the complex nature of transition and engagement may be exaggerated for those who are the first in family to come to university as Thomas (2002) suggests, the anxiety about ‘… not fitting in and not being able to cope may be reinforced in families and communities where HE is not the norm’ (p.8).

The lack of data on this cohort within Australia and the individual nature of the university student experience both partially provided the impetus for the study outlined in this article. The research was also borne out of a personal desire to understand more about how students who are the first in their family to come to university manage this experience and succeed in this environment. Having worked in the university student support field for over 10 years, I had witnessed these students arriving at university with tangible gaps in knowledge particularly in relation to institutional and academic expectations within this environment; while some did depart others managed to overcome these issues and ultimately achieve success. This study sought to explore how such students individually and personally experience university in order to provide a better understanding of the personal and unique
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trajectory that students who are first in the family may have to negotiate. In essence the research question guiding this study was what assisted students to persist in this environment and how did they enact success. The study is small scale but provides rich data framed by the words of the student participants themselves. The importance of foregrounding student voice is also recognised by West (1996) who states:

... 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)

Within the Australian context, this need has been echoed by Krause (2005) who highlights how there is ‘...remarkably little in the current literature on who our students are...’ (para 3). The study detailed in this article seeks to address this gap by engendering deep and rich levels of narrative description, recognising that local research is ‘critically situated’ and best positioned to ‘generate webs of connections’ as it moves from the local to the global (Quinn, 2005, p.61). The advantage of such qualitative small-scale studies lies precisely in this specificity rather than an attempt at homogeneity.

The students’ stories featured in this article focus on personal journeys and in so doing, contribute to a deeper understanding not only about the challenges but also the encouragements encountered as they move through the academic year. Once arrived at university, the research examined how students defined this environment and also how they integrated this activity with their life. The role of relationships in the enacting of persistence and engagement is also examined in order to explore the impact of existing and new social connections. Finally, the reflections of the students over the year as a whole, provides final insight into both how this decision was ultimately framed and how the research process itself impacted upon this experience.

Literature Review

Given the diversity of literature in the field of first year transition, this section will focus on three key themes within the literature and explore this not only within an Australian context but also reference literature within the United Kingdom and United States of
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America. The main foci of this review include diversity within the global university sector; first in family students and also, given the focus on women in this study, the specific issues that women encounter on returning to education.

**Diversity in the Global University Sector**

The last two decades have witnessed fundamental changes in the higher education sector, particularly in relation to demographics. Increases in the numbers of students who are mature aged or who have accessed university through non-traditional forms of access is a global development but this has not necessarily negotiated a more equitable educational landscape. Schuetze and Slowey (2002) compared participation rates across ten countries and highlight how increased numbers have not removed ‘…unequal rates of participation by different social groups’ (p.314). Researchers in the UK, North America and Australia have revealed similar patterns in participation rates (Couvillion-Landry, 2002–2003; Forsyth & Furlong, 2003; James, 2008).

In Australia, while little consistent data records the participation of students who are first in family to attend university, the data on students who are derived from low socio-economic status is available. These statistics clearly indicated the inequity in university attendance patterns and also choice of institution. For example, higher participation rates of students from low socio-economic (SES) backgrounds are recorded at regional universities (Centre for the Study of Higher Education [CSHE], 2008) whereas in the more elite universities or ‘Group of Eight’, participation of low-SES students continues to be recorded below the national average of 15.5%. While identifying low-SES status is fraught with inconsistencies, given the census collection districts and postcode indicators currently utilised in Australia, the figures for access and participation remain noticeably skewed towards certain populations. This differential is also noted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) (2010), which estimates that less than one in five students

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2 Prior to 2010, socio-economic status (SES) was measured in relation to postcodes; low, medium and high SES status was calculated by Australian Bureau of Statistics data on factors such as income, educational attainment, employment status and dwelling types. This measure was regarded as crude and flawed. Since 2010, this measurement has been refined by drawing on data within census collection districts, which are more narrowly comprised of 250 households in a common postcode.
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from low-SES backgrounds enter universities compared to one in two from more advantaged or wealthier backgrounds.

To address such inequity in university access, a number of countries have introduced targets for student access and participation. Participation benchmarks have been noted in Germany, Sweden, Ireland, Finland and the United Kingdom amongst other countries (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008). Most of these participation targets recognise the need to attract and engage older students as well as recent school leavers. However, the issue of HE participation is not simply about getting individuals to attend universities but also, about retaining them once they arrive. Non-completion or student drop-out within Australia consistently exceeds 20% of the total student population and while the most recent briefing from the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (Coates & Ransom, 2011) indicates that the number of first year students considering departure dropped by 7% between 2008 and 2010, the percentage who do consider leaving remains a significant 27% of this population.

In order to successfully retain students, it is necessary to research the continually evolving nature of the university experience.

First in Family Students and Higher Education

There is scope for further research that provides qualitative and rich insight into how individuals experience this first year of study. As Lecouteur and Delfabbro (2001) highlight there is a need for ‘detailed discussion with those who are actively involved in teaching and learning practices’ within the HE sector (p.233). Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell and McCune (2008) agree that further studies are needed to ‘...explore the emotional journeys that different students make as they encounter different learning environments’ (p.579). The study outlined in this article further enriches our understanding of these ‘emotional journeys’ highlighting how individual students translate this experience according to personal meaning systems and realities. In order to present a more nuanced description of this process, the study’s participants are all female and all identify as the first in the family to attend university.

For those students who are first in the family to come to university who live perhaps in a community where attending university is not the norm, the difficulties associated with
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Acculturating to this academic world may lead to ‘guilt, pain and confusion’ as students attempt ‘…to live simultaneously in both worlds, while being accepted in neither’ (Couvillion-Landry, 2002-2003, p3). Rendon (1992) succinctly defines the emotions and experiences of students who are the first in the family to attend university as:

…a feeling of alienation that moves the students from the concrete to abstract experience and that takes the student from an old culture that is vastly different in tradition, style and values to a new world of unfamiliar intellectual conventions, practices and assumptions. (p56)

For younger students who have no parental history of university attendance; both parents and students have a steep ‘learning curve’ as there is no one available at a local familial level to provide guidance as students ‘navigate’ the culture of this tertiary experience (Harrell & Forney, 2003, p155). Thayer (2000) suggests sums up some of the disadvantages encountered by this group as including lower levels of academic preparedness, less knowledge or understanding about the college experience, less family or peer support and also postulates that these students are less likely to encounter a ‘welcoming’ environment on campus.

Defining students into cohort groups such as first in family can be somewhat limiting and simplistic. Instead it is important to remember that most students fall into various categories or groupings. In the literature on first year experience, the usefulness of demarcating students into discrete categories has been questioned (James, 2008; Hillman 2005) and so this study contributes to the field by providing an in-depth analysis of the experience of students who fall into multiple categories. The participants who agreed to be involved in this study are richly diverse and include those who are first in family, who are female, students who are single parents and also, derived from low socio-economic backgrounds. Each of these factors can impact upon the student experiences as the literature in this field attests and exploring this diversity in a richly descriptive manner assists in understanding how we as university educationalists and support staff, can better assist in their educational journey.

Women Returning to Education
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Internationally, the numbers of women attending university has increased to such an extent that in some countries women outnumber men in higher education institutions (Wakeling & Kyriacou, 2010). For example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2009) indicates that the number of females with a Bachelor degree or above is currently 25% of the population whilst the number of men sits at 21%; equally, in the UK 56% of first degree graduates in 2010/11 were women (HESA, 2012) and in the USA, the NCES indicates that between 2000 – 2010, the number of female enrolments rose 39% compared with 35% for men (NCES, 2012). However, this increase in numbers does not necessarily translate into a more equitable environment, as women frequently encounter unique educational issues compared to their male counterparts. A range of literature indicates how women, particularly those who are derived from low SES backgrounds, are restricted in their choice and aspirations relating to higher education (Evans 2009; Gorard, Smith, May, Thomas, Adnett & Slack 2006; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody 2001). Globally, Wakeling and Kyriacou (2010) point out that the gendered nature of female educational participation is reflected in the overrepresentation of women in traditional female ‘caring’ professions such as health and education (Wakeling & Kyriacou, 2010). Female returners or older women also experience issues within the personal domain and these can also impact on their success and persistence within the higher education sector.

Emotions such as ‘self-doubt’ and ‘anxiety’ are regarded as being more pronounced for females who return to education (Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2009). These authors suggest that generally women are more questioning of their ability and right to attend such institutions (pp.11-12). In earlier research, Reay (1998) identifies how women from working class backgrounds may regard movements into the HE environment as ‘…risky enterprises in which the loss could outweigh the gains’ (p.14). This idea of risk or loss for female returners is echoed by Rendon (1998) who suggests that some women may find it necessary to redefine their existing identities whilst relocating to the new university environment. Other losses and risks relate to the more practical aspects of studying, particularly the financial repercussions this decision can have. The literature older women with caring responsibilities returning to
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higher education also indicates the challenges encountered (Edwards, 1993; Reay, 1998). How older women’s higher education engagement impacts upon family and caring responsibilities then warrants closer and more ‘nuanced’ attention (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010, p.163).

Walkerdine et al (2001) suggests for working class women the desire to succeed at education can also be perceived as a move away from the family, a desire to change or transform their subjectivity. These authors argue that such perceptions can engender an ‘emotional toll’ on participants (p.142) engendering a ‘psychic’ removal from family. The female participants in this study all identify as being first in family and are derived from low SES postcodes, hence the ways in which these students persist and indeed succeed in this environment is deserving of closer attention. Whilst Thomas (2011) suggests that it is the institutions responsibility to ‘engage with potential students from communities and groups who are not participating in HE’ (p.10) much insight about the nature of this experience can be derived from the students themselves. The narrative data presented in this study contributes to the existing body of literature on student participation within higher education by highlighting the subjective experience of studying at an Australian university as a first in family female student and the impact this experience can have both personally and relationally.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used to inform his study is based upon the notion of cultural capital and how our understanding of this both influences and directs educational experience. Cultural capital is defined as ‘proficiency in and familiarity with dominant cultural codes and practices…’ (Aschaffenburg & Maas, 1997, p.573). Such codes and practices include those found within the educational system, and in particular within HE. For those individuals who have limited exposure to this environment, this lack of knowledge can limit success and these institutions can act in a gate-keeping capacity within the social system. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) highlight ‘academic qualifications are to cultural capital what money is to
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Economic capital’ (p.187). Bourdieu (1977) questioned the concept of individual educational giftedness and instead pointed to class based factors as a precursor to success in the education system. Individuals enter this system with different types of cultural capital and knowledge, which is based upon their social background. Hence, educational success is not necessarily a result of natural abilities but rather relates to the ‘affinity between class cultural habits and the demands of the educational system or the criteria which define success within it’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979, p.22). This systematic inequality is played out throughout the education system, individuals endowed with the requisite and accepted forms of capital experiencing success; this helps to guarantee their positionality within the social order, perpetuating a class based system.

However, Bourdieu’s theory is not without its critics with the reproductive nature of his theorisation attracting the most critical attention. For example, the concept of habitus is proposed as a means to refer to the ways in which individuals are disposed to behave and react based on cultural affiliations and understandings. This is suggestive of a lack of individual agency and appears to limit the possibility for change and transformation. However, habitus is better defined as a ‘portfolio of dispositions’ such as individual beliefs, values speech, dress which strongly influence actions in any situation’ (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 2000, p589). Similarly, concepts such as cultural capital can be criticized for their limiting nature and so this study has adopted Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth framework that extends and challenges established conceptions of cultural capital.

This theoretical framework moves away from the idea that students are deficit and instead recognises that individuals arrive at university with different levels and types of capital. Yosso (2005) draws upon the tenets of Critical Race Theory and is positioned within a strengths perspective that does not equate ‘disadvantage’ as being without ‘normative cultural knowledge and skills’ (p75). For Yosso, (2005) this perspective simply fails to recognise what the student or the family bring with them to the educational environment and instead expects adaptation and conformity on the part of the individual in order to exhibit the accepted cultural capital. Yosso explains that ‘Traditional Bourdieuan cultural capital
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Instead, this theorist proposes a Community Cultural Wealth framework that includes six defined forms of capital including ‘aspirational, navigational, social, linguistic, familial and resistant’ (p77). This was later extended by Huber (2009) to include spiritual capital that references connection to ‘a reality greater than oneself” (Huber, 2009, p721).

Rather than viewing these students as ‘lacking’ this theoretical framework innovatively recognises the strengths and cultural wealth of diverse communities. This is not to say that the participants in this study did not express a lack of understanding of the capital expected and valued within this institution but rather, as the later participant quotes will highlight, these individuals arrived at university with extensive capital reserves which they drew upon in order to move through and succeed within the higher education environment.

**Research Location and Participants**

The higher education system in Australia has been defined as ‘highly differentiated with more elite research-orientated institutions at the top of the hierarchy and newer, more technologically orientated universities at the bottom’ (Abbott-Chapman, 2006 p.4). This division is largely defined around the so-called ‘Group of Eight’ (Go8), which contains Australia’s leading universities based upon research and teaching rankings. The university where this study occurred is not a member of the Go8 but ranked 11th nationally out of the 39 publically funded universities in Australia. The university has four campuses located in urban and regional areas of New South Wales.

This research study took place at one of these subsidiary campuses (student no = 3,500), located in a region that is recognised as being economically and socially disadvantaged, indicated by educational attainment and employment rates. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) and the State’s Regional Labour Force profile (2008) just under fifty percent (48.1%) of the population leave school with no formal qualifications. Of those who do continue with education, only 31% complete high school (compared to 49% for the nearest metropolitan area) and 9.4% of residents hold a bachelor’s degree compared to
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14.6% for the nearest metropolitan area and 16.4% for the state. At the time of this study, more than half of the campus population was categorised as mature aged (over the age of 21) many of these students had a significant gap in their education and many had used alternative forms of entry to obtain a university place. This includes the university’s access program, which provides a university admissions ranking for entry upon completion. A limited number of degree programs in the Arts, Health, Sciences and Education fields are offered at this campus, which could be termed a ‘commuter campus’ as students largely come on-campus to attend lectures and then leave. The campus has only one small on-campus student residency housing approximately 25 students, who had either rural or international backgrounds. Given the varied locations of campuses affiliated with the university, many of the lecturers commuted between the various locales to deliver lectures and this situation arguably added to the disjointed and deserted nature of the campus environment. Having said that, the small size of the campus also facilitated a level of familiarity between staff and students that is often not possible at larger universities. The women in this study frequently commented upon this friendliness, indicating how they knew on-campus library staff, retail staff and also, student support staff by name.

A purposive sample of seventeen female students was recruited to participate in the study; invitations to participate were distributed at the university commencement ceremony. This university held an official commencement ceremony to mark the beginning of the each first year students’ academic career, all first year undergraduates are invited to attend this ceremony which includes an academic procession led by the Vice Chancellor or President of the university. An announcement about the research was made at the end of the official proceedings, just prior to the students’ scheduled orientation activities. In addition, flyers about the study were available on each of the seats in the hall where the commencement took place, asking for volunteers and requesting that possible subjects register interest by email, phone or by visiting the Student Support Unit on the campus. The study was purposive in the

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3 One student dropped out of university after the first interview and despite attempts made at contact, no further interviews occurred.
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sense that each participant was defined as first in family to attend university and was also female. For the purposes of this study, this status was defined as no one in the immediate family having attended university previously, including spouses or partners, children, parents and immediate siblings. However, categories such as first in family cannot be applied generically or in terms of universality, as otherwise the information presented will be ambiguous and also lack contextual application in any real sense. Many of the interviewees shared, in varying degrees, similar educational and occupational biographies but this was only realised when the interviewing had commenced and each of their biographies emerged. The following table summarises the demographic nuances of this particular group: