

‘I always wanted to be at university but I wasn’t sure it was for me’

First in family students experience of success at university

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The Presentation

- Background
- Data
- Key findings
- Recommendations

The Research Design

Review of National and International literature to develop Annotated Bibliography of 155 documents relating to the the FiF experience

Analysis of over 5,300 FiF students' expectations and experiences of university

Narrative approach: in-depth interviews with 18 final year FiF students

Is anyone here the first member in their family to attend university?

Do you teach/work with students who are the first members of their family to attend university?

How do you know?

Are they different from non-FiF students?

First in Family defined:

“Students who are the first member in their immediate family, including siblings, to attend university”

(Crozier and Reay 2008; Luzeckyj, King, Scutter and Brinkworth 2011)

But are first in family students really any different?



Proportion of FiF students

	Non-FiF School leaver	Non-FiF Mature Age	FiF School leaver	FiF Mature Age
UniSA (FiF n=1839 : 35%)	28%	39%	34%	40%
Adelaide Uni (FiF n=1610 : 24%)	48%	25%	36%	20%
Flinders Uni (FiF n=1767: 36%)	24%	35%	30%	40%

Are FiF students any different?

	Non-FiF School leaver	Non-FiF Mature Age	FiF School leaver	FiF Mature Age
Live with Parents	71%	24%	65%	16%
Public School	44%	66%	52%	73%
Decision to attend uni	76%	17%	69%	10%
First Preference	78%	82%	77%	84%
ATAR	89.45 (IQR: 79.15 – 96.2)	75.5 (IQR: 60.0 – 87.5)	84.4 (IQR: 73.75 – 93.05)	72.0 (IQR: 60.0 – 85.0)
GPA	5.25 (IQR: 4.63 – 5.88)	5.29 (IQR: 4.70 – 6.00)	5.00 (IQR: 4.44 – 5.63)	5.2 (IQR: 4.50 – 5.88)

Review of the literature

Australian and International literature on First in Family (First generation) students

- ensure the research builds on existing work and is current
- identify themes for interview questions
- develop an annotated bibliography as a resource for practitioners in the field and for future researchers
- also produced literature review

The Annotated Bibliography comprised:

155 qualitative and quantitative

- books, journal articles, reports and websites of government & research organisations and conferences

Published between 2000 - 2014



Themes

The main themes and sub-themes we initially identified:

- *The individual*
 - *Understanding of self*
 - *Individual characteristics*
 - *Skills and abilities*
 - *External influences*
- *The student*
 - *Becoming a student*
 - *Enculturation*
 - *Consolidating identity*
- *The journey*
 - *Motivation*
 - *Choosing 'what' and 'where'*
 - *Enablers/barriers*
- *The networks*
 - *The 'who'*
 - *The 'how'*

These were used to frame and develop the interview questions

Themes – the complexity and subthemes

The 'individual'

Understanding of self

Locus of control
Self efficacy
Self identity
Agency

Individual characteristics

Determination
Independence
Motivation
Perseverance
Work ethic
Resilience
Self doubt
Sense of stigmatisation

Skills & abilities

Academic skills
Coping strategies
Higher order skills
Intellectual ability
Support seeking behaviour
Time management

External influences

Habitus
Cultural context
Social & Cultural capital
Financial capital

The 'student'

Becoming Student

Decision to enrol
Newness
Navigating physical space
Preparedness
Academic culture
Academic discourse
Engagement
Institutional habitus
University expectations

Enculturation

Adjustment
Developing student identity
Extra-curricular activities
Identity tension
Isolation
Sense of belonging
Socio-cultural incongruity
Campus life
University experience

Consolidating identity

Achievement
Attrition
GPA
Mastering role of student
Transformation

The 'journey'

Motivation

Aspirations
Career
Financial freedom
Job prospects
Life catalyst
Pathways – ATAR
Specific job skills
Social mobility

Choosing 'what' & 'where'

Access
Campus location
Course choice
Distance education
HECS debt
University choice

Enablers/Barriers

Financial support
Work/Family/Study balance
Costs
Perceived benefits
External commitments
Previous attitude to education

The 'networks'

The 'who'

Family support
(or lack thereof)
Friends
Influencers
Learning support
Peers
Role models
Support from teaching staff

The 'how'

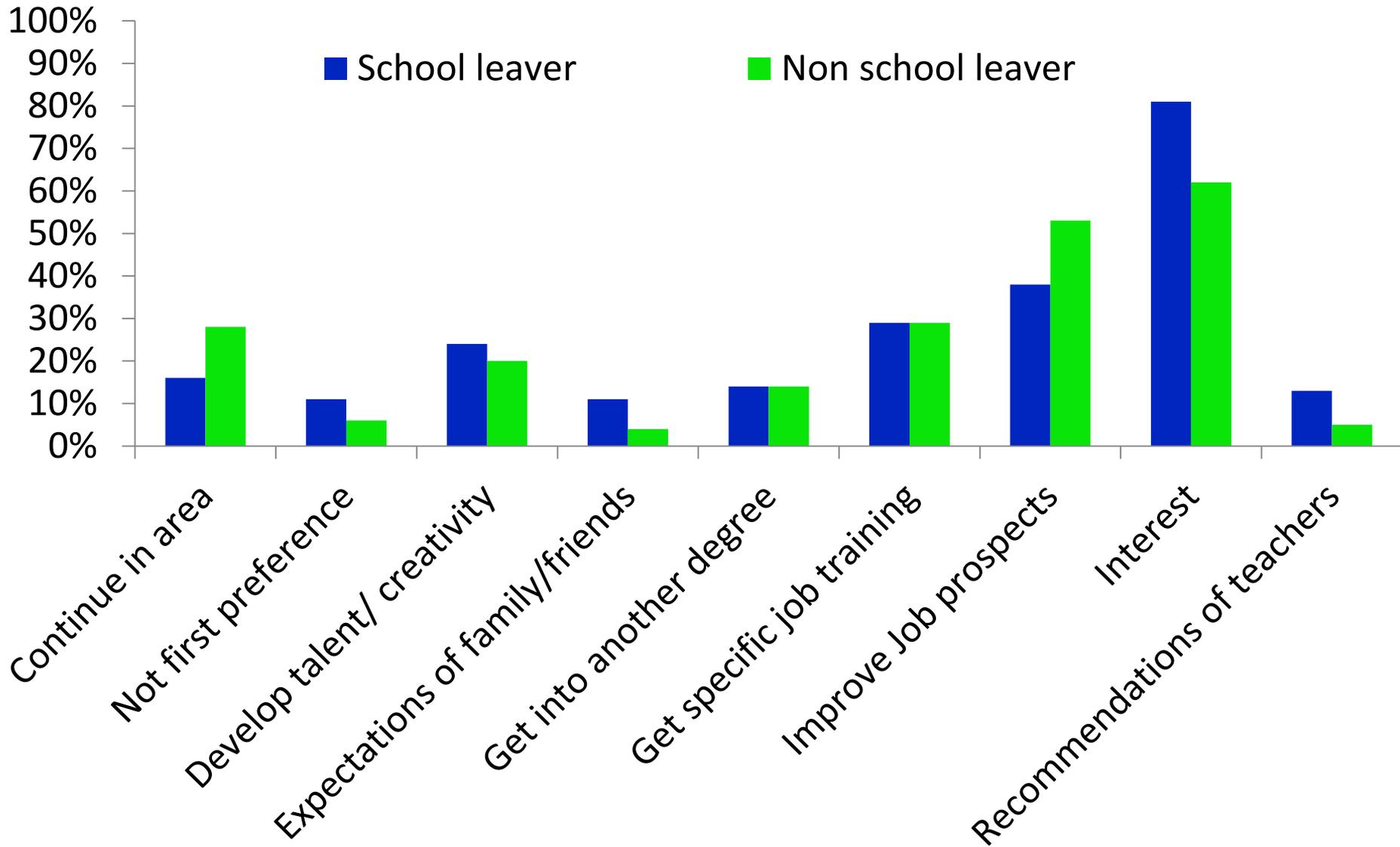
Family expectations
Institutional support
Lack of guidance
Support

Why do students enrol in
university?

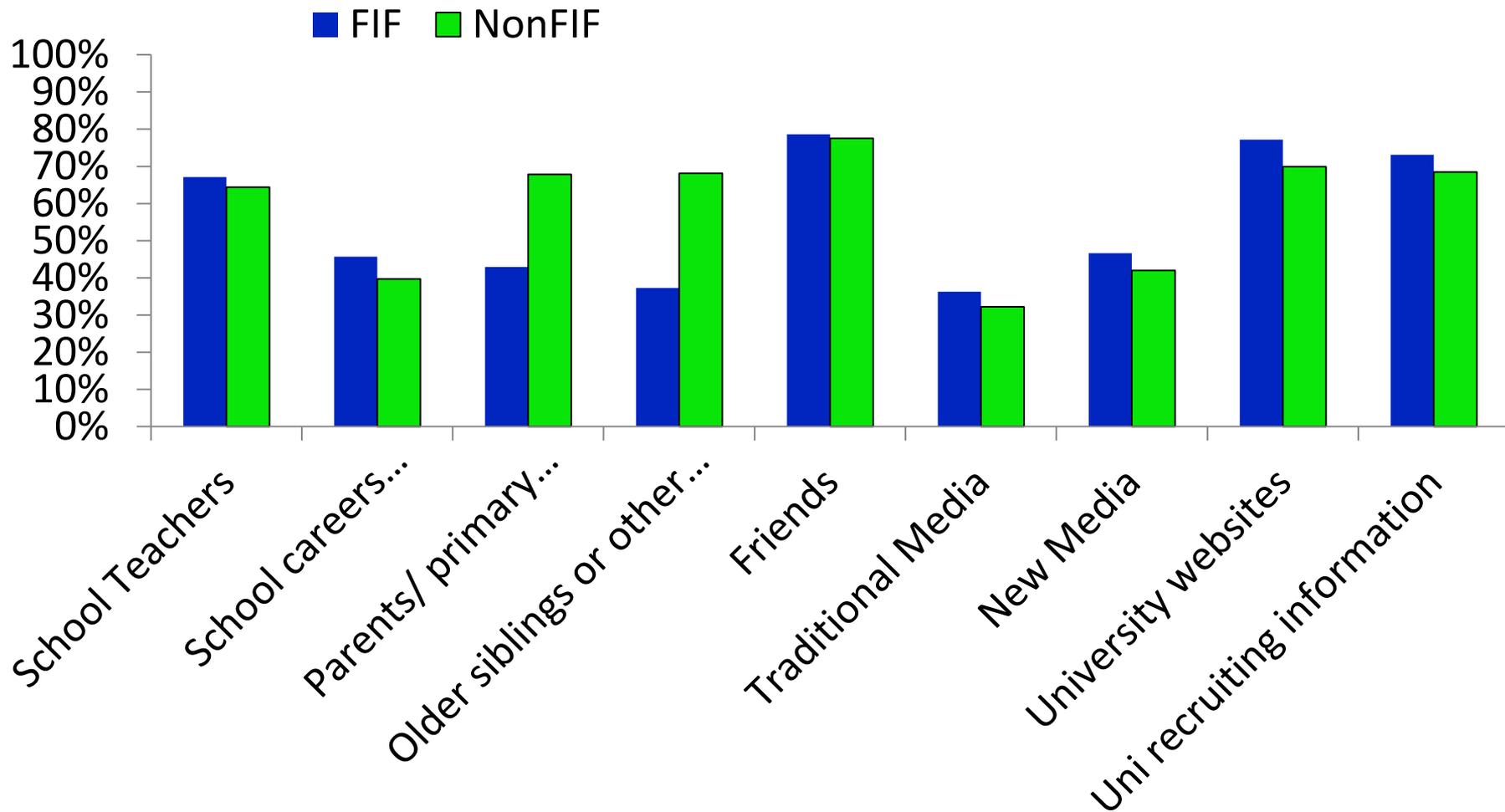
Reasons for choosing Program

1. Continue in area
2. Not first preference
3. Develop talent / creativity
4. Expectations of family / friends
5. Get into another degree
6. Get specific job training
7. Improve job prospects
8. Interest
9. Recommendations of teachers

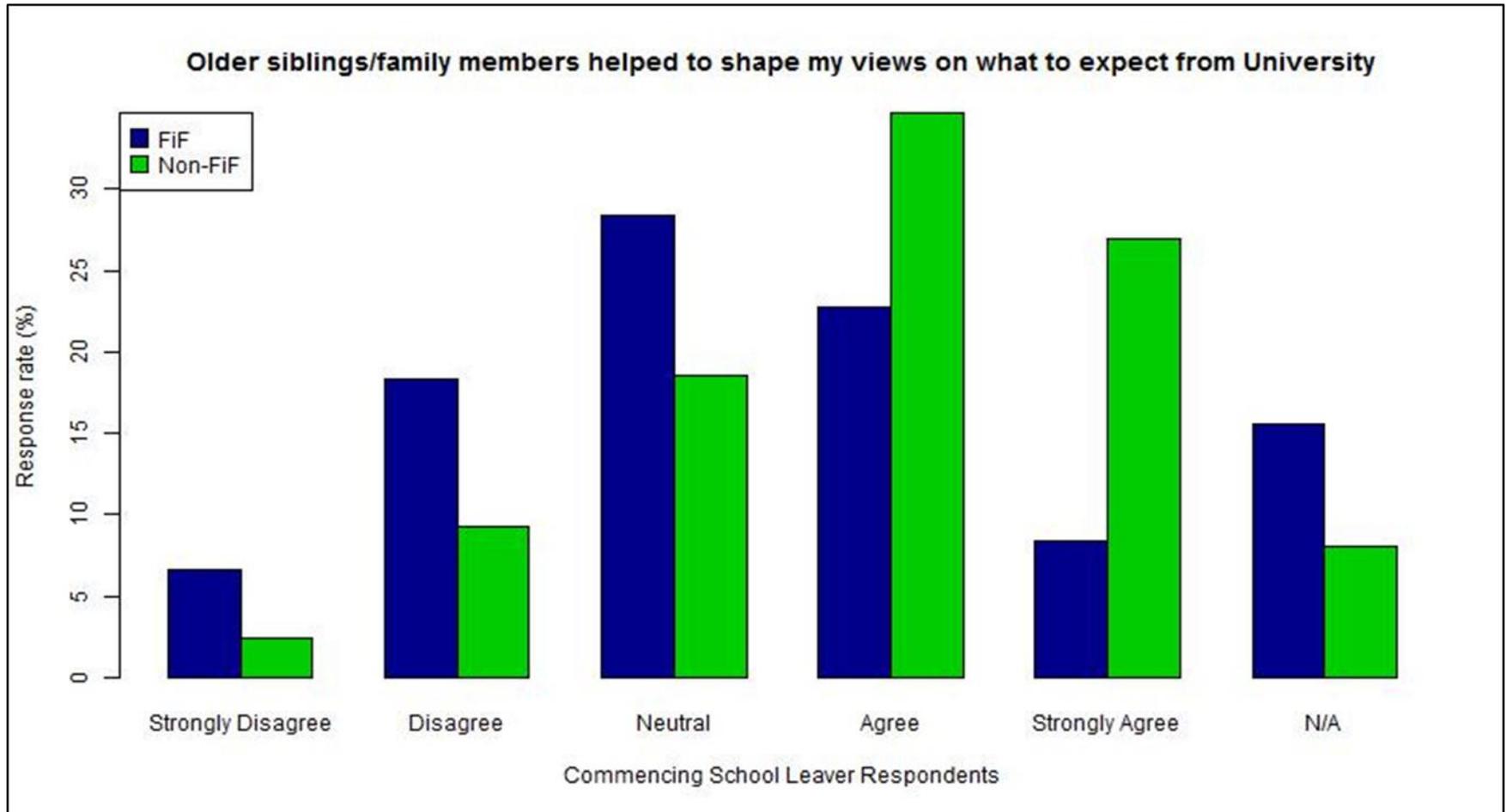
FiF- Reasons for choosing Program



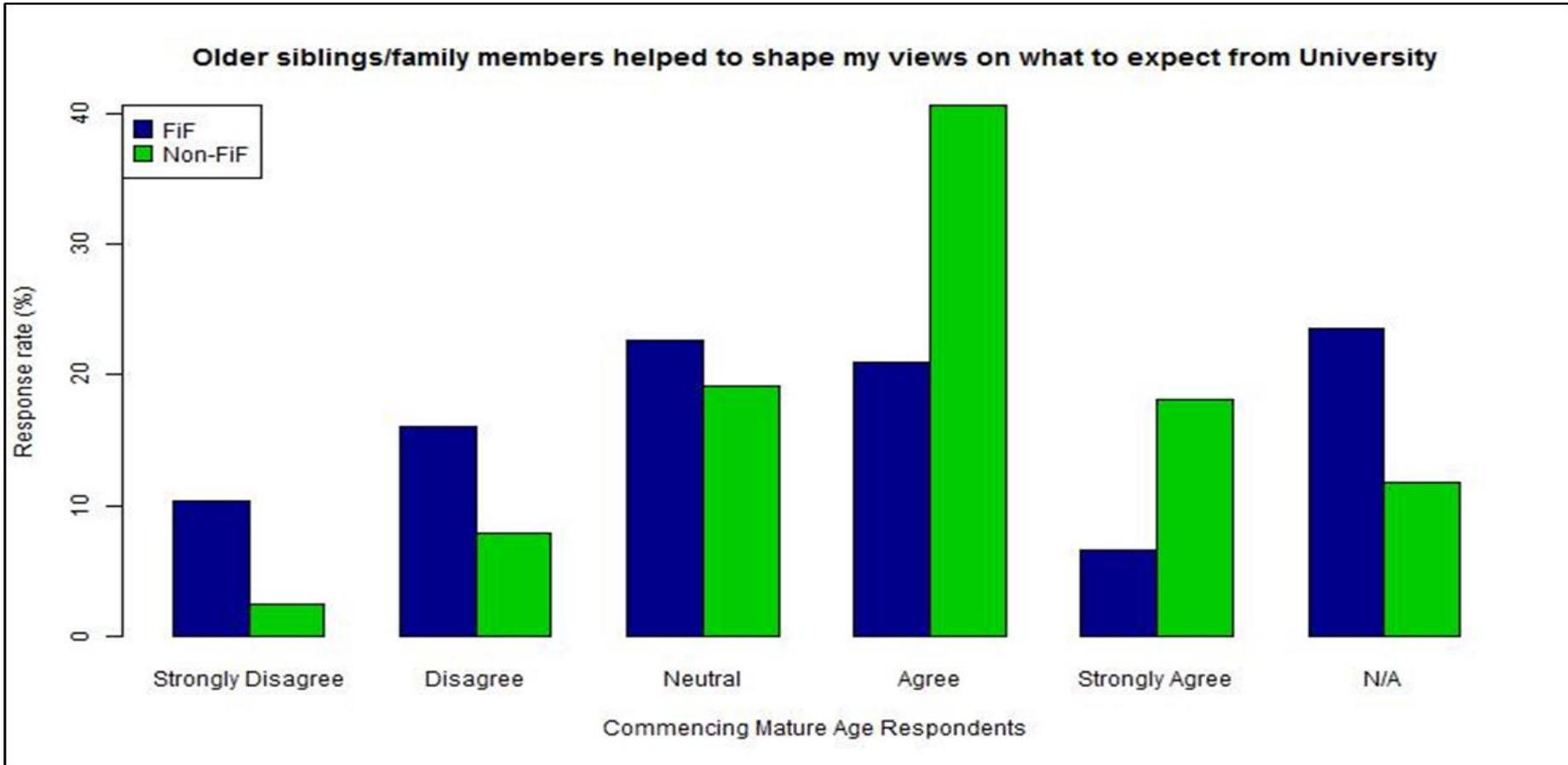
What shaped expectations of Uni?



School leaver respondents



Non school leaver respondents



The Narrative Approach

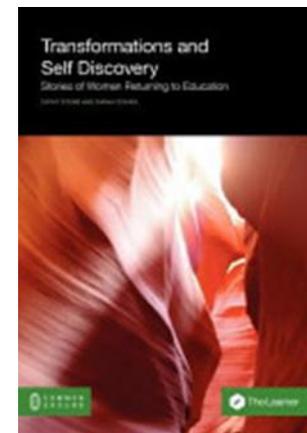
Case studies derived through interviews

Focus on human experience

- narrative inquiry involves the study of lived experience through listening to stories about individuals' lives
- our intention was to present in depth stories of FiF students' socio-cultural experiences at university in order to enrich the existing data on this student cohort

inspired (partly) by the work of Stone and O'Shea

- “[o]ne of the best ways to understand the actions of individuals is to be allowed to hear their personal stories” Stone and O'Shea ([2012](#))



Developing a rich source of data

We used a narrative inquiry approach through

- in-depth interviews
 - open-ended questions
 - 18 interviews (6 from each university)
 - allowed participants to openly discuss their experiences of being at university
- analysis
 - identified themes across the interview transcripts both related to the questions (that had been based on the analysis of the literature) and beyond
 - developed 9 cameos based on the participants

Using Metaphors

Students were sent the questions a few days before the recorded interview :

- to allow more reflection on certain areas (how they felt during orientation week, their initial coping mechanisms', etc.)
 - one question of interest: **“Can you use a metaphor or analogy to describe your university experience so far?”**
 - asked students to encapsulate their university experience via a more reflective process
 - guided by cognitive linguists Lakoff and Johnson [*Metaphors We Live By*, 1980]
 - “In all aspects of life, [...] we set goals, make commitments, and execute plans [...] consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphor.” (p. 158)

Metaphor Responses

I feel like I've walked up a really big mountain and I'm just at the very top now and about to come over the other side. And it's been hard work but it's like that mountain climbing thing, it's just really been really rewarding. (Marg)

It was being on a really high diving board and needing a good shove to take that first dive in. So I got shoved off the diving board, then figuring out that you can swim, then forgetting how, and then remembering again. (Roxie)

Metaphor Responses

The image that comes to mind is those lovely places when people travel and there's those huge amount of stairs?

Well it's lots of steps. So when I first arrived the base of each step was a couple of feet off the ground. So I sort of had to really stretch out my foot and then step up. And so then I'd really stretch out my foot and step up. (Jen)

Over the past couple of years, as I've started to get the tools that I need and I get to know the lecturers, I get to know the tutors because it's who I am, it's how I learn; so as I make connections and networks through that, it goes from a couple of feet and it's shortened to about fifty centimetres or something like that. (Jen)

Metaphor Responses

For some reason I want to describe it like an ocean - going sailing through an ocean – it has its ups and downs. You're always heading towards your destination. But you know where you're aiming to go. You know there's always going to be those challenges. (Calum)

Child birth maybe (Kerry)

It's just a high school redemption basically (Denise)

Metaphor Responses (even when they thought they weren't using them!)

- **That's like putting a Band-Aid on an amputee, it's not going to fix anything** [Travis, in response to the university arranging mid-semester workshops on essay writing rather than pre-enrolment refresher programs];
- **We're kind of like aliens who, you know we go and create our own life** [Sue, on leaving a small country town to enrol at university];
- **I can see the light is quite bright there at the end of the tunnel now** [Marg, on reaching the end of the course];
- **So sort of like an acrobatic tightrope walker [...] you've just got to be able to flip while walking that straight line** [Jen on managing a work-life balance].

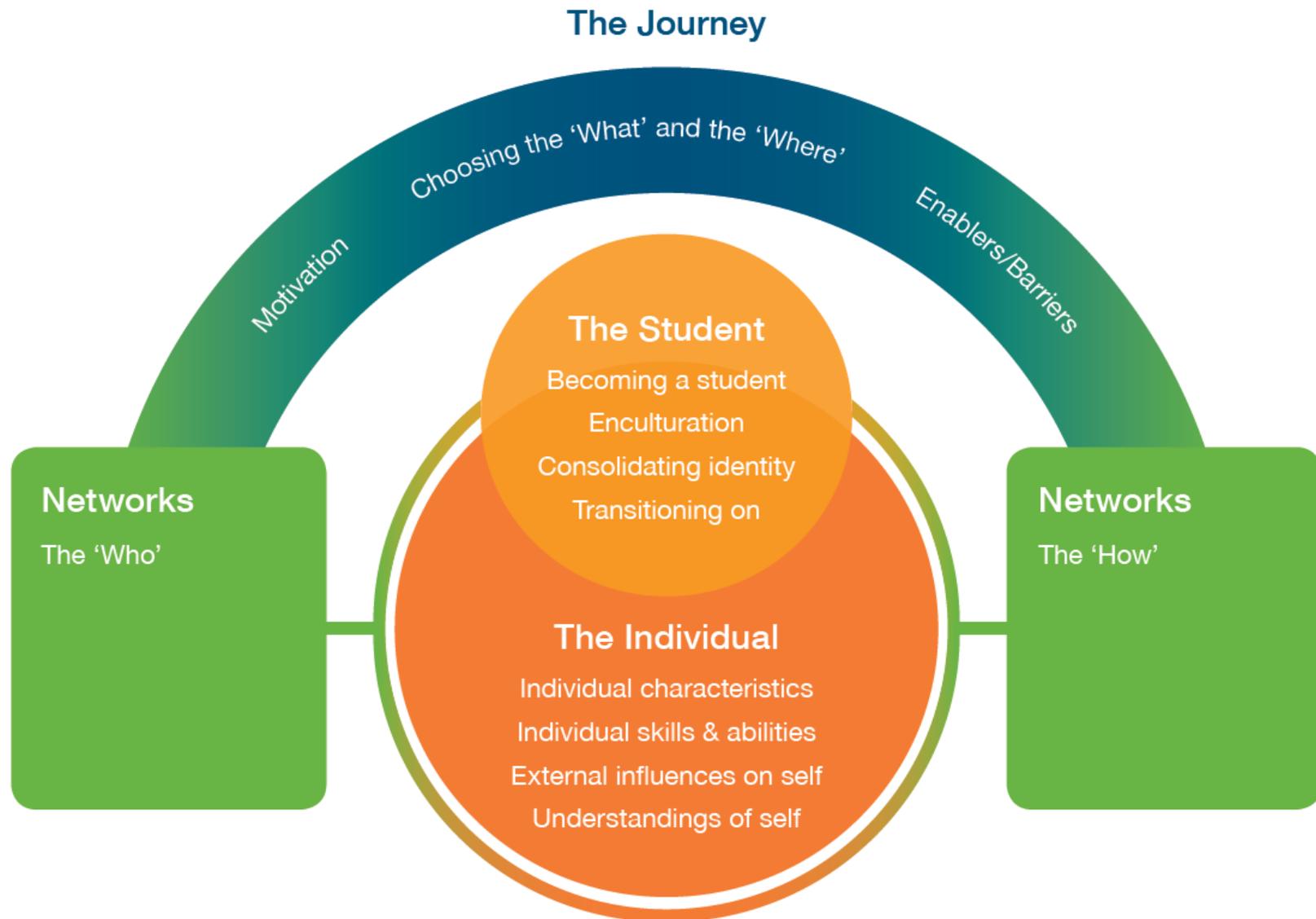


Break time

What other metaphors have you
come across?

What about non-FiF students?

Further theme development



Key findings

1. Motivations and ambitions
2. Costs and constraints
3. Health and well-being
4. Managing transitions
5. Transformations of identity
6. Supports and impediments
7. Purposes of higher education

Motivations and ambitions

In our project, the key motivating factor for FiF students was that **they all wanted a better life for themselves:**

- career betterment or advancement;
- financial freedom from parental or other income sources;
- the improvement of post-graduation job prospects;
- Transformative, catalysing power of university

Our participants

*Growing up in, never financially struggling, but an environment where money goes on necessities rather than luxuries. And **I think just financial independence and freedom would be good.***

(Brendon)

*I'd always wanted to attend university when I first left school and for various reasons life just got in the way ... **then part of my work development supported me so I thought it's now or never.***

(Marg)

*A lot of girls that I did high school with have finished high school and then they haven't studied, they haven't worked, many have had a kid soon afterwards and they're living off the system and **I just didn't want to do that.***

(Gail)

Other motivating factors

- **Proximity of campus (also part of the ‘costs’ discussion)**

Why UniSA? Flinders no, purely because of distance ... I liked the idea of UniSA, it looked a bit more innovative ... I think Adelaide is more associated with the theoretical side of things ... I just think UniSA seemed a better fit for me. And particularly with law being a trimester system.
(Brendon)

Other motivating factors

- **Influence of life's events** (new baby, marriage, illness etc.)
- **Influence of friends, family and peers (esp. making up for a lost opportunity)**

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' (Rowan)

Qualities of a FiF student?

- Previous research: FiF students may have deficits in some areas of academic skills, but often strong personal characteristics such as **motivation, perseverance and determination:**

I'm quite organised, I am a compulsive list maker, I set myself targets and time frames because I have to, I've got teenage kids, a house to run, a full-time job. (Marg)

Costs and constraints

A number of costs and constraints were identified by FiF Students

- **Financial Costs**
 - HECs, textbooks, transport, day-to-day living, supporting a family
- **Personal Costs**
 - Balancing study with work, lack of time for friends and family, health and well-being

Financial Pressures

*Coming from the country and having your parents invest a lot of money in you coming to university, I think there's **more pressure**...the idea of making sure I got scholarships and prizes that would help the finances helped me going when the study is difficult at times. So **the financial side of things definitely puts pressure on you to work harder.***

(Brian)

*I had saved money to go to university but I was **naïve in how much it actually costs.** I know I would be able to ask my family for money, but they don't have a lot, so I just can't. (Carl)*

Additional Costs

*I've gone from earning \$65,000 dollars a year to maybe pushing \$20-22,000, so it's been a big adjustment, it's been a **big challenge**. ...Finding a suitable job is hard when university wants you to go to the tutorials and you **get penalised** for not going because your job requires you there. (Denise)*

*My last **assignment cost** around \$200. (Alison)*

*I've got to **pay for child-care** whilst I'm on placement (Nina)*

Costs and constraints

*I was working 15 hours a week during 2011 and doing 4 subjects ... it was **pretty hectic**, balancing out the amount of study I had to do with the amount of work I had to do to **make ends meet**. (Rowan)*

*In terms of other costs, I guess I feel like **I don't have as much time** as I probably used to have when I was at school, just to do my own thing. (Cory)*

***Socially there is certainly a cost** because I will often say no to things because I've got an assignment due or I need to study. I can't say I've lost friends but I've probably just lost that regularity of contact with people. (Kerry)*

Health and Well-being

University students show a decline in health and well-being compared to age-matched peers

- First year is a critical time
- Student know what it takes to stay healthy
- Competing priorities → well-being loses out
- Social networks key to success

Knew what it takes

*Putting my **education first** before other commitments while maintaining a **healthy amount of social/relaxation time**. 23 yo Female*

***Balancing the pressures** of work, study, family life, socialising, and other factors. Also, ensuring **good health and sleeping patterns** will be important. 18 yo Male*

Competing priorities: Well-being losing out

*In high school I was playing soccer and I was just keeping fit in general. But at Uni it's sort of very on and off, so I'll get into a good routine and then we have **heaps of assignments due and then I'll just stop**. I struggle to get back into the routine again.*
(Cory)

Competing priorities: Well-being losing out

Before I started uni I went to the gym about three to five times a week, I had personal training, I ate really well.

*But **being so frantic** meant that I was either working or studying.*

*That didn't leave a lot of room for cleaning the house, for **going to the gym, for cooking healthy meals, for going to the shops.***

*I **went to the deli a lot to get my lunches** so I could then rush back and do what I needed to do.*

*I've gone from a **size ten to a size fourteen**, so it really has been a **cost to my fitness.** (Jen)*

What other health and well-being issues are you aware of with your students?

Managing transitions

As students were not a homogenous cohort they discussed transitioning into university from very different perspectives. These perspectives could be categorised as:

- Practicalities
 - Getting around and/or negotiating space
 - Identifying support mechanisms/strategies
- Managing 'the emotional'
 - Making friends (or not)
 - Being away from home/ independence
- Dealing with expectations
 - Differences from high school
 - The reactions of others

Practicalities

*My first few weeks I was **focused on finding the toilets, where all the toilets were in all the buildings and stuff, and the coffee shop**, so the toilets and the coffee shop.*
(Denise)

*I was very nervous and quite apprehensive, **being older I wasn't sure what support mechanisms there would be at uni**. I hadn't actually written an essay as such or anything like that since I was in high school which was a long time before that, so **I did a couple of those courses that they do for first years** (Marg)*

Managing the emotional

Overwhelmed. Yeah, I think Week 2, Week 3 I'd wondered what I'd walked into, and wondered how I was ever going to do it, with home and work and all the rest of it. So I think at that point I thought ***I've just made the biggest mistake ever.*** But then ***just went through it and soldiered through it, and ... here I am.***

(Nina)

Differences from high school

having to work out stuff for yourself was just a bit different, it ***wasn't quite as guided as it was at school.***

(Cory)

Transformations of identity

University was a transformative experience:

- FiF background shaping experience
- Not a 'real' student: Imagined reality
- Transformations of Self

Background shaping experience

*We've come from a **very blue collar kind of family**, growing up I didn't even really know what university was, **our family saw university as being for rich people, not for people like us.** (Marg)*

*I didn't ever think I would go to uni. **I really didn't honestly think I was capable of doing that.** (Kerry)*

***My boss said to me "You'll never get in". And I said "Oh Really?" Then I changed my preferences and I got in.** (Roxie)*

Not a 'real' student : Imagined reality

*I don't feel I have had the **proper uni experience**. I never lived in residence, I didn't do the social side of the uni scene. I didn't ever really go to all the parties, or join events or uni games or things like that. I never really had a lack of money so I've never felt like I was a proper uni student.* (Sue)

*I find saying "I'm a student" give the impression of this "lah-di dah life" and its all very easy. And I don't like giving that impression because it **takes away from the effort you do put into things**. The title of 'Student' makes you think of those uni ads where it's all lying around on lawns, and then "Oh, I'll roll over and write my essay now".* (Todd)

Transformations of Self

I have a lot more ambition than I used to, I have lot more confidence in myself and I've always been a very confident person but I was just a very 'laidback, relaxed, do whatever you want to do' chick before. Whereas now I'm ready for business, I'm ready to take on the world, my whole attitude has changed. (Roxie)

My ambition for life has changed. Before when I was in high school I kind of had the mentality that finish high school, get a retail job and just kind of 'be there forever'. And now I couldn't think of anything worse to be honest. Now I want to finish uni, and I want to travel, and I want to live and work overseas, and I just want to do so much more than I ever wanted to do. (Alison)

Supports and impediments

The students experienced numerous impediments which they were often able to address and overcome through the supports they either sought out or which were available to them.

The impediments included:

- Academic staff not understanding the difficulties they faced
- Lack of information about course requirements or academic language
- Juggling complex lives
 - Work, family, study, exercise
- Funding issues
 - Needing to purchase of expensive textbooks and/or equipment
 - Paying for childcare while on placement

And the supports included:

- Completing a transition to uni program
- Helpful staff – in smaller courses
- Making friends
- Having access to financial support; counselling services etc.

Impediments – not understanding language

It was really hard to find stuff on-line. The language used is fairly plain but it is assumed knowledge regarding what's being said on that, you understand the purpose of what's being said on the web page but you're coming from a vacuum you don't have that knowledge of what it might relate to (Jen)

using frames like the narrative doesn't posit with the whatever – straight over [the student's head] (Paul)

Supports

*But I think certainly, early on, the key is **the smaller the group, the more intimate it becomes, a better connection you have.** And so certainly, any kind of thing which involves bringing people into the uni in smaller groups is much better than trying to bring everyone all in as one big lump. (Todd)*

*my sister-in-law died very suddenly, very unexpectedly, so **University was great for that support,** I got a lot of – I was in counselling through here for that. (Nina)*

Purposes of Higher Education

A broad range of benefits grouped across three different aspects:

- personal growth;
- social experiences;
- increased understanding of broader society.

Personal growth

Despite initial difficulties, all participants successfully integrated into the university environment and recognised their associated personal growth.

My understanding of people, socially has developed immensely, and certainly my independence, my drivenness to be independent. I was pretty happy to be looked after before, but now I want to be my own person. (Todd)

Personal growth

*It's definitely **broadened my view** of things, I used to be a little too trusting of what the media told me. **I've learnt to open my eyes and look at both sides of the story.** (Travis)*

*I think I'm a **more disciplined person**, I'm a **more confident person**. I kind of feel smart. **I felt dumb at high school but now I feel like a smart adult.** (Denise)*

Social experiences

Broadening of social horizons and making new friends:

*The **friends that I have made are just so easy to get along with**, we all go to the same classes and it makes it just so easy. (Alison)*

*It has probably made me a little bit **more able to converse with different people**, you get **pushed out of your comfort zone**, so I am more confident than I was 5 years ago. (Nina)*

Understanding of broader society...

...and ability to see other peoples' perspectives:

- global citizens
- ethical understanding
- inter-cultural competence

My wife and I can converse at a different level now that I couldn't have done before. Not on science but on life, the universe and everything. We might even stop a TV program and discuss that point and this point – play with the drama and relate that. (Pete)

A mentorship role

Participants discussed the influence that their pathway to HE has had on younger siblings, with university now seen as a viable and valuable option:

*My brother's in year 12 at the moment and he wants to do medicine. Strange because that's **not what anyone else has done in the family** I guess, it's not that usual. And also for the school that we went to as well, **I don't think anyone's gone straight from the school that we went to, to do medicine.** And there's not that many people who have done engineering. (Cory)*

A mentorship role

Impact on children and broader family:

My youngest son has now decided to go to university which wasn't something that he was ever really going to do, it wasn't a part of his idea of where he would be going. (Marg)

I've got a couple of cousins that will now be going onto uni and hopefully my sister. I guess I've been able to help them with the experience as well. (Brendon)

Is there anything missing from these findings (from an FiF student perspective)?

Other consistent emerging themes

- Key influence(r)s
- Struggle and sacrifice
- A better life
- Luck

Key influence(r)s

There were numerous key influences and influencers that the participants mentioned, including:

- Family
 - Parent(s): often mother, but also father
 - Partner
 - Children
- Friends
- Work colleagues
- Teachers

Commentaries & experiences growing up

Support

Encouragement or discouragement

Key influence(r)s - parents

*my dad in particular was a real driving force for me, because I think he'd be the first to admit that he's **not the happiest with his career**. ... he dropped out of school 15, 16 and just went to work because he wanted to help support his parents, it's been something that I guess a generation thing for them. ...*

*[Mum and Dad] said, "**Look we don't want you to have to live the same pressure we're under.**"*

(Brian)

Key influence(r)s – teachers

*my [school] **counsellor** actually refused to sign off because he was **also my home group teacher**, he refused to sign off on my selections and called an interview with my parents and said that I was just – because I always did sciences and maths and tech – and that kind of stuff and he pretty much said that **I would be wasting myself** going through that. So that's where that then changed my **SACE schooling into more of an academic based.** (Carl)*

Struggle and sacrifice

The theme of struggle and sacrifice was discussed as:

- having to rearrange time and find a workable work, life, study balance
- losing friends or changing friendships
- having difficulties communicating with groups (shyness) or generally articulating themselves appropriately
- spending less time with family and friends

Friendships

Family no, for my friends I went to school with yes, because I've moved away from home and some of them stay there and they kind of don't change and then I feel like I've changed a lot because I've been overseas and I've been at uni and I've had to be away from home. So there are a lot of people back home that I probably lost contact with, just because we're moving in different directions. (Sue)

Balance

*I do lots of work between 4am and 7am. So I know – because you can't turn off your head, so I know I get up and – I **get up early and get stuff done** that needs to be done. I think it's just one of those things **you've got to have priorities** – my priorities, obviously, is obviously **my family**. And then you need to **sort of fit around that**.*

(Nina)

Appropriate articulation

*I've used a lot of basic words today there's **a lot more words I know but I can't articulate, I can't actually physically say them without sounding a bit funny**, so there are things I will always struggle with that.* (Jen)

A better life

Participants discussed the notion of university enabling a “better life” in 3 main ways,

- by providing opportunities for **travel**;
- as an avenue for **self improvement**; and
- as a way of **improving career prospects**.

Providing opportunities for travel

*it was good because it gave me the **opportunity essentially, to study overseas** and have that **experience**, that was the base for it. It's a period in my life where **I've matured, and I've grown to be a better person**, and it sort of represents that as well. (Todd)*

*... I [had] lived in Fiji and volunteered in Fiji for seven months... And then after that I was like **there is no way I could have an office job, like I need, tourism would be ideal, I get to travel the world...** (Sue)*

Self improvement

I'm not here for the social aspect I'm just here for the degree basically, I'm here for me. (Denise)

*if I could **stand up in a room full of school leavers** – I'd say to them “**do not waste this opportunity**. Do not be me – do not be a 44 year old woman who's basically got her career, had her family and trying to recreate the wheel now. **You have this opportunity in front of you now, don't waste it**”. And I look at some of these kids and I just think “really?”. (Kerry)*

Luck

The theme 'luck' fell into 4 main categories. Luck associated with

- **University**, where participants believe they are 'lucky' to end up with a particular lecturer or doing a good course, or the way a course was organised
- **Friendship(s)**, where participants believe they are 'lucky' to meet and make new friends, maintain old friends, have opportunities to discuss university with someone
- **Employment**, where participants believe they are 'lucky' to get a particular part time job or to be supported by the work place to attend university
- **Variables (of life)**, this more complex category relates to participants believing they are 'lucky' to live in a particular time, have an opportunity to travel, get financial support from the council to attend university, survive an addiction without brain damage, be in the right place at the right time

Variables of life

*I hadn't really planned any of that. So I think it got to the middle of January and this house with a friend came up so it was very – I was starting to worry but nah **everything fell into place eventually which-... I was very lucky.***

*I think I'm very lucky in the fact that I live with **good people** and the fact that if I can't cook that night or if I don't have time to clean **I'm lucky that I've done what I've done** (left small home town) (Alison)*

University

[My Honours supervisor has] been fantastic. I'm pretty lucky because yeah, I get along with him really well, it's good. (Todd)

luckily I find myself in the library a bit, it sort of helps out, and you don't always have to buy [textbooks] if you see that you can get other resources elsewhere... (Brendon)

Recommendations

- Universities collect and report on first in family data
- Universities provide a dedicated section of their website specifically for first in family resources
- Recognise the diversity of the FiF cohort
- Challenge the myths associated with FiF students
- Provide more scholarships and subsidies for FiF students

Recommendations

- Build a sense of community on campus
- Promote the benefits of social connections
- Embed explicit expectations and support strategies into first year curriculum
- Promote awareness of behaviours that maintain health and well-being

Where to next

- Development of seminars/ resources for commencing students on successful navigation of Uni
- Recommendations for educators and institutions on how best to support FiF students
- Further research
 - Why do some FiF students leave?

Thank you
Any questions?