

The significance of being first: A consideration of cultural capital in relation to “first in family” student’s choices of university and program. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This presentation explored the differences between expectations of first in family students and students who have immediate family members (parents, care givers, or siblings) who have attended university before them. The authors draw on Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital to examine how being first in family influences student expectations. Data from a large survey of over 3,000 first year students conducted in 2010 across the three South Australian universities is used to explore the demographic make-up of first in family students, and the choices they make as to what type of university and program they enroll in. Based on qualitative and quantitative data, the authors compare choices of first in family students with those made by non-first in family students. Determining these differences provides opportunities for staff at universities to consider how they may better support students who have the ability, drive and determination to succeed at university but lack the cultural capital and may therefore be thwarted by unforeseen hurdles.

Please cite this practice report as:

Luzeckyj, A., King, S., Scutter, S., & Brinkworth, R. (2011). The significance of being first: A consideration of cultural capital in relation to “first in family” student’s choices of university and program. A Practice Report. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 2(2), 91-96. doi: 10.5204/intjfyhe.v2i2.89

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Introduction

We are defining first in family students as those students who are the first member of their immediate family to attend university, which means their siblings, parents or primary care-givers have not participated in any form of university education. This differs from the term used in United States, “first-generation” students, which is defined as “students whose parents never graduated from college” (Ishitani, 2006, p. 867). We will support Martin Lohfink and Paulsen’s (2005) argument that the experience of participating in post-secondary education is “a particularly formidable task for first-generation students ... [as they do not have access to] the intergenerational benefits of information about college” (p. 409).

This presentation reports on the first stage of a larger project that examines the expectations and experiences of commencing first year students, secondary school teachers and university academic staff about the experiences of students entering first year university in South Australia.¹ We build on a number of other studies about student transition that have been conducted across South Australian universities (Brinkworth, McCann, Mathews, & Nordström, 2009; Crisp et al., 2009; King & Thalluri 2006; Thalluri & King, 2009). Scutter, Palmer, Luzeckyj, Burke da Silva, and Brinkworth (2011) provide a general overview of the student expectations material collected for this study, while this presentation specifically focuses on data relating to the choice of

institution and expectations of first in family students and how their choices and expectations differ from students who are not the first person in their immediate family to attend university.

The other sources of data used in the paper include Australian University Alliance websites and Institutional Student Equity Performance Data 2007 (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2007). We have noted that many first in family students also identify as coming from the equity groups and indicate they are from low socio-economic backgrounds and rural or isolated areas. These sources of data contextualise our argument that first in family students are disadvantaged as they do not share the cultural capital of those students who have close family members that have attended university before them, and tend to enrol in universities which acknowledge and recognise the capital that they hold. Cultural capital is related to cultural acquisitions and reflects the way in which knowledge, skills and qualifications are valued. It is associated with the ownership and ability to appreciate cultural artefacts such as paintings, musical instruments and books while emphasising the ability to embody and reproduce culture as part of a personal style such as the way someone speaks, dresses and behaves at public events (Bourdieu, 1991).

In this presentation, we explore whether students are more likely to attend a university that acknowledges and recognises their cultural capital. South Australia is unique as its three universities are each members of the different three main alliances within the Australian university sector—the Australian Technology Network (ATN) which includes the University of South Australia (UniSA),

¹ The experiences of students will also be compared to the expectations they identified prior to commencing.

the Innovative Research Universities (IRU) which includes the Flinders University (Flinders) and the Group of Eight (Go8) which includes the University of Adelaide (UofA). The ATN was formally established in the late 1990s bringing together five universities that had backgrounds in technological education and had derived from a merger between what had been known under the Unified National System (UNS)² as Institutes of Technology and the larger Colleges of Advanced Education (CAEs) (Australian Technology Network [ATN], 2004). The IRU is comprised of seven universities established in the 1960s and early 1970s to provide a way of managing increasing enrolments (Australian Tertiary Education, 2007). The IRU institutions were intentionally different from the long established older universities, most of which are members of the Go8 (Australian Tertiary Education, 2007). The Go8 universities are generally considered Australia's most prestigious as they comprise the country's oldest institutions (all were founded before 1960) and they rank higher in national and international ranking lists (Group of Eight Limited, 2009).

Why the differences between the alliances are important when thinking about equity

Universities work to attract students from "equity" groups and by doing so attract funds from government. A discussion

² A Unified National System (UNS) was developed in 1989 to replace what had previously been known of as a binary university system. The binary system was considered elitist as it comprised a total of seventy three institutions but only nineteen universities (Abbott & Doucouliagos, 2003).

regarding each alliance's commitment to equity is included on their websites. The statements reveal both the alliances' commitment to equity and provide information about how the constituent universities attempt to attract students. The claims included on the alliance websites may not directly influence the expectations of first in family students or their choices of university but the website claims do provide insight into how these alliances and their individual constituents approach recruitment practices. The Institutional Student Equity Performance Data 2007 (DEEWR, 2007) indicates that in 2007, statistics related to access and participation of low socio-economic status (SES) students—a measure which, we suggest, links to first in family access to university—was lower than the sector average for all Go8 and all ATN universities except UniSA yet was higher than the national average at all IRU universities except Griffith University.

Methodology

The first in family students drawn on in the surveys across the three South Australian universities self identified. These students answered yes to the question "Are you the first member of your immediate family (parents / care givers and siblings) to attend University?" The data were obtained from surveys distributed to students commencing study at each of the three universities in South Australia, in the month prior to Orientation Week in 2010. The surveys were scheduled to capture the expectations of students before they had undertaken any on-campus orientation or familiarisation activities. The study had ethics approval from each of the universities participating. Survey data were analysed by SPSS v17 for descriptive

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and comparative analysis using Chi-square or ANOVA according to the nature of the data. Responses to open-ended questions were thematically analysed manually and frequency of themes counted. The alliance websites and DEEWR data were also accessed to identify what alliances claimed in relation to equity and whether these claims were supported by national data. These websites were explored using Bourdieu's (1992) concepts of game, field and capital.

Results

In 2010, 11,240 students commenced at UniSA, 5,229 at the UoA and 3,918 at Flinders. Together, these universities make up almost all commencing tertiary students in the state of South Australia. In our study, 3,091 completed responses to the survey were received, corresponding to a response rate of approximately 15%. Of the responses, 27% of students were attending Flinders, 52% UoA and 21% were enrolled at UniSA. The gender breakdown of responses was 35% male and 65% female. Forty-two percent of students were first in family.

When asked what had informed their expectations of what university would be like, students who did not have family experience (were the first in their family to attend university) based their expectations of university on school counsellors, school teachers, university recruiting material and websites significantly more than students who were not the first in their family to attend university. Students who were not first in family relied significantly more on parents, friends and siblings for informing their expectations (parents: $t=2.3$, $df=3,082$, $p<.01$ $d=.08$; siblings: $t=11.0$, $df=3,082$, $p<.001$, $d=.39$; friends: $t=3.3$,

$df=3,082$, $p<.001$, $d=.11$). First in family students were also more likely to make the decision to attend university towards the end of high school or after working for some time than non-first in family students.

Of the 1,289 students who indicated that they were first in family, 429 (33.2%) were male and 860 (66.8%) were female. While this reflects the greater number of female students responding to the questionnaire, there was a significantly greater number of first in family females compared to males (Chi-square= 4.1, $df=1$, $p <0.05$, $\phi=.04$).

Students who were first in family were more likely to come from rural backgrounds (Chi-square=18.5, $df=1$, $p<0.001$, $\phi=.155$). Of the 718 students who identified that their secondary schooling was in a rural area, 48% indicated that they were the first member of their family to attend university, whereas 39% of students who attended a metropolitan school were first in family.

First in family students were slightly older (22.06 years) than non-first in family students (21.37) (t-test $p<0.05$, $d=.09$), however the difference in age was minimal.

First in family students were more likely to be enrolled at either Flinders or UniSA than at UoA (Chi-square=24.8, $df=2$, $p<0.001$, $\phi=0.2$). While 46% of students were first in family at Flinders and UniSA, this was only the case for 37% of students at UoA. First in family students were more frequently enrolled in education, economics and science, whereas non-first in family students were more often enrolled in law, medicine/dentistry and engineering. However, this trend requires further analysis as there is a likelihood of a number of other variables interacting to

influence program choice, including different program availability at universities and the tertiary entrance score required for admission for some programs.

Conference overview: Assumptions, discussions and reflections.

For the purposes of this conference presentation it was assumed that a university education is of inherent value for an individual student given the premise that university graduates generally have higher average salaries, increased employment rates, greater economic security and social status than non-graduates (Baum & Ma, 2007; Department of Education, Science and Training, 2007). The authors do concede that such an assumption does “buy-in” to the current neoliberal logic that increasing the participation of previously under-represented groups, such as low SES or first in family students, is an essential component of the strategy to increase the nation’s competitiveness, growth and productivity in the global knowledge economy. There are however, wider social benefits for participating in higher education such as greater health and well-being and improved job satisfaction (Murray, 2009) as well as a more critical and considered population.

A great deal of interest was generated amongst conference delegates as to the impact of cultural capital on student’s choices of university and degree program with many delegates reflecting that similar trends were apparent in their own institutions where first in family students are less well represented in high status degree programs such as law and medicine. Discussion ensued in relation to the issues

facing these students. Most notably it was agreed that first in family students often had

- limited knowledge regarding the range of degree programs available;
- unrealistic expectations of university study, for example the time required for self-directed study,
- broader responsibilities, for example needing to work to support themselves through university, or family caring responsibilities.

An important point raised in the final discussion was that first in family students do not lack cultural capital per se, rather they have a “different” cultural capital and that the onus should be on the university sector to change in order to recognise and value this cultural capital. First in family students bring new forms of knowledge and ways of knowing that interact and challenge current dominant understandings and may provide us with opportunities to generate new ways of perceiving and understanding our physical and social world (Gale, 2011). To fully capitalise on this potential, the university sector needs to develop a greater understanding of the capital that students bring to their studies so as to structure experiences in ways that facilitate the success of all, including an expanding first in family cohort.

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