

Opportunity through online learning: Experiences of first-in-family students in online open-entry higher education

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Online learning has an important place in widening access and participation in higher education for diverse student cohorts. One cohort taking up online study in increasing numbers is that of mature-age, first-in-family students. First-in-family is defined as those who are the first in their immediate family, including parents, siblings, partners and children, to undertake university studies. This paper looks at the experience of 87 first-in-family students, for whom the opportunity to study open-entry, online undergraduate units through Open Universities Australia made it possible for them to embark on

a university education. Using a qualitative methodology, in-depth interviews and surveys were conducted with these students as part of a wider study into first-in-family students (O'Shea, May & Stone, 2015). Findings include the important role that opportunity plays in providing the impetus for study, as well as the importance of support and encouragement from family, friends, colleagues and institutions in being able to continue the journey.

Keywords: *Online learning; first-in-family; higher education; open-entry*

Introduction

There is increasing evidence that availability of online learning is helping to widen access to higher education, making it possible for more students from diverse backgrounds to study for a university degree (Ilgaz & Gülbahar, 2015; Knightley, 2007; O'Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015). This is particularly the case when there are also open-entry pathways into online university studies (Shah, Goode, West & Clark, 2014; Stone, 2012). The flexibility offered by online learning enables students to combine study with paid work, family and other responsibilities.

This paper examines the experiences of a group of students studying in open-entry online undergraduate units at Open Universities Australia, who have identified as being first in their immediate family to undertake university studies. Open Universities Australia (OUA) is an education company that specialises in facilitating open-entry online higher education in partnership with 13 Australian universities. In terms of student numbers, it is the national leader in online higher education, with an annual enrolment of over 40,000 university students (OUA, 2015). Through OUA, students can enrol in online undergraduate units as open-entry students, thence moving into full degree programs offered by universities in each state and territory of Australia, with the exception of Tasmania and Australian Capital Territory.

Enrolment data from OUA shows that 67.7% of its students enrolled in higher education units of study come from families where neither parent

has achieved university qualifications (OUA, 2015). This is considerably higher than OECD (2012) data, which indicates that around 51% of students enrolled in degree programs at Australian universities are from families where neither parent achieved university qualifications (Spiegler & Bednarak, 2013). Such high numbers, combined with evidence that these students are at higher risk of attrition and poorer academic outcomes (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2013; Coates & Ransom, 2011; National Centre for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012), suggest there is a pressing need to explore their experiences in order to better understand how to assist them to persist and succeed.

Review of the literature

Research into the experiences of online learners indicates that there can be both positives and negatives associated with this mode of study. The positives mainly centre on improved access to higher education and the opportunity to balance study with other demands and responsibilities. For example, Knightley (2007) found in her study conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) at the Open University, that, for the students she surveyed and interviewed, online learning “transcended geographical, physical, visual and temporal barriers to accessing education, and reduced socio-physical discrimination” (2007:281). Other research suggests that having to leave home or change location, or incur significant travel costs to go to university is a significant deterrent for those from families where university education is not the norm. It is expensive as well as time-consuming and disruptive, and many families cannot afford this extra burden (Michael, 2012; O'Shea, May & Stone, 2015; Park & Choi, 2009; Shah et al, 2015). In particular, Park and Choi's study (2009) conducted in the United States (US) found that “Distance learning allows adult learners who have employment, family and/or other responsibilities, to update knowledge and skills... by saving travel costs and allowing a flexible schedule” (2009:207). Similarly, Michael's study (2012) conducted with first-in-family online students in Australia found that online study offered these students “an opportunity to study and work while still enjoying somewhat of a balanced lifestyle” (2012:158).

Additionally, providing an open-entry pathway into online higher education provides the opportunity to enter higher education for those

who do not meet traditional entry requirements. An open-entry pathway “attracts adults from various social and educational backgrounds who frequently do not have the qualifications necessary to gain a place at a conventional university” (Knightley, 2007:269). Shah et al.’s research (2014) with students undertaking the online, open-entry Open Foundation Program at the University of Newcastle, Australia, finds that “the delivery of enabling programs online provide access and opportunity for many disadvantaged students” (2014:49).

However, online study has its own particular challenges in terms of student engagement, persistence and success. A recent report from the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2014) looking into completion rates of domestic undergraduate students in Australia, shows that of those students who enrolled in 2005, only 44.4% of fully external students (online) had completed their degree programs by 2012, compared with an overall completion rate in the same time period of 72.3%. The completion rate was higher for multi-modal study, at 69.5%, indicating that perhaps the lack of any face-to-face contact with the institution is particularly challenging. Indeed, much of the literature indicates that the two-fold challenges of understanding e-learning technology, along with a sense of isolation are key issues for online students. For example, Yoo and Huang’s US study (2013) found that the technology associated with online learning could be overwhelming for ‘novice adult learners’ (2013:160). This finding is supported by Ilgaz and Gülbahar’s Turkish study (2015) which concluded that the convenience factor of studying online is diminished by negative factors such as technical problems, lack of interaction with tutors and other students, problems with instructional materials and students’ own difficulties with time management. Lambrinidis’ (2014) research at Charles Darwin University found that the use of online learning tools to assist students to better understand the technology and to connect with other students and tutors more easily, increased student satisfaction with online learning. He comments that “For students from non-traditional backgrounds, social presence in particular is vital to creating a learning environment conducive to students feeling connected to each other and their respective tutors” (2014:257).

Background to the research

A qualitative research project, funded by the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT), was conducted in 2014-2015. Its aim was to explore the experiences of students who were first in their families to go to university, as well as the experiences of their family members and significant others (O'Shea et al., 2015). This project conducted qualitative semi-structured interviews and open-ended surveys, using a narrative approach, with three different cohorts of Australian domestic students, namely, on-campus undergraduates, enabling program students and online undergraduate students. A first-in-family student was defined as the first person in their immediate family to go to university, including siblings, parents, main caregivers, significant partners and children.

This paper is reporting on findings from the data that was collected from the 87 online undergraduate students who participated. Each participant was studying entirely online through a range of Australian universities, having enrolled via Open Universities Australia. The students self-selected to participate, by responding to an email sent to a cohort of students identified from OUA enrolment data as studying open-entry undergraduate units and having indicated on enrolment that neither parent had studied at university level. The email asked them if they were the first amongst their immediate family (parents, siblings, partners and children) to study at university level and if they would be willing to be interviewed by phone, or complete a detailed online survey, about their experiences of their studies so far. A total of 43 students agreed to be interviewed with a further 44 completing the survey.

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone while surveys were completed online. In the 43 interviews, open-ended questions were used as prompts to elicit information around particular themes, including their motivations to begin their studies, their experiences so far, reactions of others around them (particularly family), how they managed their studies, any support that they received and the impact that their student journey so far had had upon themselves and others around them. They were also encouraged to discuss their reasons for choosing online studies, and how they were experiencing this mode of study and any particular study strategies they used. Support that

they received from family, friends and institutions was also explored. In the online surveys, students were asked open-ended questions about their experiences of being students, exploring the same themes as the interviews, and were encouraged to 'tell their stories' in their own words and with as much detail as they wished. Demographic information was elicited from each of the respondents, including age, gender, whether partnered or single and if they had any children.

A narrative method was used to interview the students, to construct the interview and survey questions and to analyse the data. Allowing the participants to narrate their personal stories in their own words resulted in rich and detailed accounts from each. The data was analysed using a combination of NVivo (10), with initial line by line analysis to identify codes and emerging themes, as well as manual analysis in order to delve further into significant themes. This involved reading through individual interview transcripts and survey responses, making notes and highlighting words, phrases and quotes, whilst using a reflexive approach to interpret the data (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). A narrative method recognises that these "first person accounts of experience" (Riessman, 1993:17) from a number of individuals in the same time and place, are culturally located and can reveal a collective experience, in that they reflect on shared life stages. It is therefore possible to tentatively extrapolate this collective experience more widely, to others who are sharing the same time, place and culture (Elliott, 2005; Ewick & Silbey, 1995).

Findings

All names of those interviewed have been changed for the purposes of anonymity. Survey respondents were already anonymous and each has been given a number (e.g. respondent #1) to distinguish them when reporting on findings. Quotes used within this paper were chosen to reflect predominant themes and where possible to provide examples of male and female responses, different age groups and both survey and interview respondents.

Demographics

The survey asked respondents to nominate their age group. The largest number was aged 30-40 (16 students), 15 students were 18-30 and 13 students were 40-50+ (Table 1).

Table 1

Survey Age Range	%	No.
18 - 21	4.55%	2
21 - 25	13.64%	6
25 - 30	15.91%	7
30 - 40	36.36%	16
40 - 50	22.73%	10
50+	6.81%	3
TOTALS	100%	44

The interviewees gave their exact ages, which ranged from 21 to 62, with a median age of 38. Table 2 shows that the highest number of interviewees was in the 41-50 age range (12 students) with 22 students 21-40 and nine students 51-61+ (Table 2).

Table 2

Interview Age Range	%	No.
21 - 25	18.6%	8
26 - 30	16.3%	7
31 - 40	16.3%	7
41 - 50	27.9%	12
51-60	16.3%	7
61+	4.6%	2
TOTALS	100%	43

With only two students (survey respondents) identifying as being 18-21, at least 85 of the 87 participants can be classified as mature-age students. Females were over-represented in both the survey and the interview groups, with 34 of the interviewees (79%) and 36 of the

survey respondents (82%) being women. Amongst those interviewed, 26 (60%) indicated that they had a partner and 23 (53.5%) had children, aged from one year through to adulthood. Eight were single parents. Amongst the survey respondents, 28 (63.6%) were partnered and 22 (50%) had children. Ages of children were not requested in the survey.

More than two-thirds of the survey respondents (68%) were in paid work, either full-time or part-time. Twice as many worked full-time (20) than part-time (10). Amongst the interviewees, 65% were in paid work, with 25 (58%) working full-time and three (7%) working part-time. Indeed as discussed below, employment overall proved to be an important motivator for respondents to engage in their studies.

Motivations and influences – why study and why now?

Predominantly, respondents were seeking to ‘better’ their lives, their children’s lives and their futures. They were seeking practical benefits, through more secure employment and increased income, as well as seeking to fulfil personal hopes and dreams.

Career and employment

The motivations for starting university were overwhelmingly related to career and employment. As has been found in other studies with mature-age students “a desire to get a better job” (Stone & O’Shea, 2012:11) or to improve their career prospects is a significant driver, as illustrated by the quote below:

I’ve gone as high as I can go at work without a qualification so it’s for career advancement and opportunity I think because I’d like to change jobs but it’s a bit difficult unless you’ve got that piece of paper. (*Gemma, 42*)

Similarly, Richard (29) says: “I’m the only income earner in our family so I thought it’d be good if I did actually earn more money than I do as a chef because it’s not exactly a well-paid job”, while for Natalie as a single parent with two children, a desire for self-sufficiency is the overriding concern, “I might one day actually pull off owning my own house and actually have some super – enough to survive on”. Amongst the survey responses, examples include respondent #42 (female, 40-50)

who wanted to “return to the workforce after being a full-time mum... in a career that I am passionate about & a job that I really want to do” and respondent #16 (male, 40-50) who talks about his goal of “career advancement in my current work... to remain contemporary and viable in the workplace”. However respondents revealed that engaging in higher education was also regarded as a springboard for personal change and growth.

Catalyst for change

McGivney's (2006) research into the reasons for adult learners resuming formal study, talks about an “often serendipitous” (2006:85) path that leads them into the decision. For most of the participants in this study, there was a change or an event which provided the impetus for the decision to start their studies. Sometimes it was a personal, internal event, as for Donna (36) who experienced “my own personal epiphany” through which “I realised I'm sure I've got potential to do more”, while for others, such as Bethany below, a change in external circumstances proved to be the catalyst.

When I retired from work, I thought “Okay, this is what I want to do”. I don't know what I'm going to do with it but it's just on the bucket list. (*Bethany, 59*)

This experience that the ‘time was now right’ was also expressed through participation in higher education as an unfulfilled ambition.

A long-held dream

For many, it was a long-held dream that they would one day go to university and get a degree. Molly, now 62, “always wanted to go to university even when I was a kid” and for respondent #21 (female, 30-40) “it had been part of my plan to further my education”. Sometimes a combination of factors aligned. One of the survey respondents describes a kind of ‘awakening’ - a sense that the time and the opportunity had come to embark on a new path in life and fulfil her dream from the past.

I have always wanted to be a primary school teacher, since my first day of kindergarten. I sold myself short through high school, not thinking I was ‘smart’ enough to ever get into university;

however the thought never left my mind to undergo further studies. Straight after school, I moved out of home... which in turn forced me into full time work straight away. The dreams of uni faded... I went through job after job after job. It did not matter how great the pay was, how 'good' I was at the role I was in – I was not happy with whatever I went into and was getting increasingly frustrated in not being where I needed to be in life. After 6 solid years of working job to job full time, I had my first born and it finally dawned on me. OUA! I can give it a shot, whilst I am at home with my little baby. I am surely not that stupid. I tried a unit, and to my own shock, I got a credit! (*Respondent #18, female, 21-25*)

This story illustrates how empowering it can be to have the opportunity to study online while at home; university came to this respondent's home as she cared for her new baby. Each one of the participants had their own particular reasons for choosing to study online.

Why choose online studies?

Overwhelmingly, online studies had been chosen for the flexibility that it offered, making it possible for the respondents to continue going to work, to care for children and meet other responsibilities. For Glenda (36), "It's just perfect because I can study at my own pace and my job gives me the freedom to study when I want" while for Evan (29), he finds he can "structure the study – to suit my sort of lifestyle instead of having to make any dramatic changes to study on campus".

The open-entry undergraduate units offered by OUA made it possible for those without university-entry qualifications to begin university and progress towards their chosen degree.

I initially applied to [another] University as an external student but was turned down. That made me even more determined to find another way and I came across OUA, which didn't require any prior qualifications. (*Respondent #26, female, 50+*)

Impact of opportunity

OUA's open-entry, online university units provided an opportunity

for students who had not previously considered this a possibility. For example, respondent #44 (female, 30-40) "...looked into online courses and found it easy to access University via Open Universities". This student previously thought that she would not be able to manage university.

...it seemed too difficult with the thought of exams, workload, assignments, research. It was quite overwhelming the thought of it, particularly as I have to continue to work full time.

Her family did not encourage her education, nor do they now give her support in her studies.

...my father, who claims that going to uni puts you in a higher class than others, and felt I was 'up myself' for wanting to better my life... [and] in all honesty, I'm not even sure she [mother] knows what I'm studying.

Yet now, this student finds that "It's made my self-confidence sky rocket and truly believe I am cut out for University, even though I come from a family who have barely completed high school".

This story is one of many that emerge from the interviews and surveys, in which participants describe the lack of opportunity for university study previously, and the way in which open-entry, online study now provides that opportunity. Perhaps not surprisingly, the word *opportunity* crops up again and again, both in relation to the lack of *opportunity* in the past:

There's never the *opportunity* and, you know, when I was single and I had a mortgage there was no way I could have done anything else; I was barely keeping my head above water then, you know, so *opportunity* plays a big part. (Hailey, 41)

and in relation to *opportunity* presenting itself now:

...a great *opportunity* and I'm really enjoying it... (Holly, 43)

(Authors' emphasis added in example quotes above).

What role do others play in this opportunity? The evidence shows that

the decision to engage in university study takes place within a social milieu that sometimes positively and sometimes negatively influences the student's experience.

The role of others

There is a wealth of literature demonstrating the importance of student engagement and support from fellow students and staff for academic success, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Devlin, Kift, Nelson, Smith & McKay, 2012; James, Krause & Jennings, 2010; Nelson, Quinn, Marrington & Clarke, 2012; Tinto, 2009; Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005). However much of this is based on traditional on-campus environments. There is relatively little data on the types of support that are important for online students, who are limited to virtual contact with other students and staff. The stories of these first-in-family students indicate that support from family, friends and colleagues outside the institution is just as important as institutional support, if not more so. Families in particular played a significant role, beginning with their inspiration and encouragement to start the journey.

Others as inspirers

Partners, parents and adult children all played their part in inspiring the students to begin. For example, Phil (29) explained how his partner “really got me on there, got me to have a look at the website and see what I could do”, while respondent #8 (female, 25-30) describes how “encouragement and support from my husband helped with the decision to go back and do a degree”. Misti (30) credits her mother with being “always influential in my life in terms of wanting to progress to the next level” and respondent #29 (female, 40-50) describes how her son “inspired me to go on to university” through his own achievement of winning a scholarship to a private school and gaining a place at university.

Managers at work and previous teachers were also influential, for example Evie (34) whose boss “had been encouraging me to try and take on some form of study” and respondent #3 (female, 30-40) whose teacher “knew so much about artists, styles of painting and design, and this inspired me to aim higher for a degree in what I loved”. Sometimes it was a friend who was a particular role model:

I just have a friend a while ago do a university degree and I was sort of proud of her for doing that and thought it would be something I'd like to do in the future. (*Erin, 29*)

Others as critics, encouragers and motivators

Responses from family members to the decision to undertake university studies varied, yet overall there were more positive than negative responses. Some positive reactions were tempered by worry or concern, as illustrated by Lance (46) who reports that "My partner asked me if I was really sure I wanted to do it, given the length of time that it would take".

Approximately half the participants experienced unconditionally positive responses from everyone amongst their family and friends, whilst the other half experienced a mixture of responses, some positive, some negative and some a bit of both. Belinda (31) reports a very positive reaction from her family, with her brother saying to her "It's about bloody time" while respondent #17 (female, 40-50) experienced negative reactions:

My parents have always felt it was a waste of time, ever since I left school in the top 3%... They are self-made people and think that one doesn't need to further education when one can be successful without.

Mostly, there were at least some family members or friends who reacted positively, even if others were negative:

Everybody else has been very supportive and has considered it a good idea... A couple of people thought that I was too old to bother with it and it was a waste of my time kind of thing but that was only a couple out of a lot of people. (*Roger, 56*)

Parents were described by some as not really understanding about university and why the decision had been taken to study, yet proud of their daughter or son for being a university student.

...their opinion was why when you already have a good paying

job and haven't you left it a bit late and why spend all that money you'd be better off putting it into your mortgage... Now my mum is extremely proud of what I am doing she tells everyone she can and my dad I think is impressed with my determination. (Respondent #22, female, 25-30)

Negative or mixed reactions inevitably impacted upon the type of conversations at home. Some participants felt limited in what they could, or wanted to say at home about university:

...they're not into university so it gets difficult to talk about it. They just say "Oh yes, you know, you're just going to be above us" sort of thing and it's not like that at all; I'm trying to achieve a goal. (Sharnie, 57)

However, in other families, participants welcomed the opportunity to have conversations with family members, often their children, to build their knowledge of education and of university.

My son was unsure as to what uni life was all about and we were able to give him a lot of clarity. This is important for all kids today, as uni is a must, not a possibility, for ALL. (Respondent #14, male, 40-50)

Family members were also very important in terms of maintaining motivation and providing ongoing support:

Even though family members haven't studied at university, they do encourage me to keep going, to keep moving forward. (Respondent #35, female, 18-21)

Natalie (26) was one of a number of women who spoke particularly highly of their mothers, saying, "Mum's really, really helpful, like mum proofreads my essays for me... and makes sure my grammar's correct and stuff".

Adult and teenage children who understood the rigours of study and the technology were also a great help:

My daughter, she's wonderful, she's the techno-head so, yes, so if there's something that I'm not sure of she'll come and deal with it

... (*Nadia, 62*)

Last but not least, support from the workplace was frequently mentioned:

...the team that I'm in, they've been just as supportive and encouraging which is great from a work perspective that they allow me to have that time and that encouragement. (*Barbara, 21*)

Park and Choi's study (2009) examining factors influencing online students to persist or to drop out, shows a strong positive relationship between student persistence and both family and workplace support. They conclude that "Adult learners are more likely to drop out of online courses when they do not receive support from their family and/or [work] organisation while taking online courses, regardless of learners' academic preparation and aspiration" (2009:215). Certainly for these first-in-family students, having an external network of support was very important in maintaining motivation.

Family and friends support, push and motivate me to continue going ahead with it. (*Respondent #40, male, 30-40*)

Being offered and receiving institutional help and support was highly valued by these online students. An understanding and motivating approach from tutors was particularly appreciated as well as proactive 'outreach' support, checking how they were going and reaching out to them to offer academic assistance and other support.

I got an email... telling me that they were here to help... uni is hard so give us a call if you ever want a chat... and then a couple of days later I thought I'm going to call these guys. It was really helpful. I had a chat to a woman over the phone who was really great. (*Corey, 30*)

A Transformative Experience

Reay, Ball and David (2002) in their study of mature-age students on university access courses in the UK talk about "the almost magical transformative powers of education" (2002:402). The transformative power of education has been well-demonstrated in many other studies

in the UK, Europe, the United States and Australia over at least two decades (Beck, 2006; McGivney, 2006; Quinn, 2005; Rendon, 1998; Stone, 2008; O'Shea & Stone, 2011; Tett, 2000).

This is also the case for the participants in this study, despite the fact that they are 'attending university' in a virtual sense. Similar to other studies which have shown that women in particular develop a new sense of themselves through their university journey (Britton & Baxter, 1999; Edwards, 1993; O'Shea, 2014; Paasse 1998; Stone & O'Shea, 2012; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006) it was the women amongst these online students who most eloquently described the ways in which they were seeing themselves differently. One example is Donna, who at age 36 and with two children is experiencing a new sense of herself as a psychology student, instead of 'just' a mother and 'just' a cleaning lady.

And, it's very strange for me because... during the day, I'm just a mother and I'm just a cleaning lady so, you know what I mean, like in the world of the work chain, I'm down the bottom... and then here I am, at night, studying psychology. So, I have a lot of moments where I'm like "Wow, hey, no-one would pick that".

The male students more often expressed this sense of transformation in terms of employment, career and future, such as Paul (47) who says that he will "stay in the workforce a bit longer and... pick up management positions that I'm interested in as a result of that and my experience". This is consistent with other research, such as that by Karmel and Woods (2006) who found in their research with older learners that "for men, it is more about a strategy for maintaining engagement with the labour market" (2006:146); here the influence of the gendered role of 'male breadwinner' is apparent (Stone, 2013).

However, career and employment were not unimportant to the women, who also had definite plans to use their qualifications to help them in the workforce. Susannah (43) for instance, expresses an explicit goal of improving her career prospects. "The more that I go on with it, the more value I see in it.... with a definite plan that in three years that means I've finished a degree and I'm actually going to enter the workforce as a graduate".

Summary of findings

Online education, particularly when combined with an open-entry pathway, is providing the opportunity to access higher education for cohorts of students for whom university has previously been very difficult to access (Knightley, 2007; Shah et al., 2014; Stone, 2012). International research suggests that students who do not have an immediate family member who has been to university are less likely attend university and also less likely to perform well academically once they are there (HEFCE, 2010; NCES, 2012). In analysing the experiences of this group of first-in-family students, studying open-entry undergraduate units online through OUA, there are a number of observations that can be made.

As can be seen from Tables 1 and 2, these students are almost exclusively mature-age, with the majority aged over 30. For various reasons, the opportunity to previously attend university in the traditional on-campus mode was either not available to this cohort in the past or this path was not chosen, whether due to family norms, distance, finances, poor entry scores or other circumstances. In being able to access online education, particularly open-entry, an opportunity has arisen for them to change their lives in significant ways. The desire to 'better their lives' and the lives of their children and partners has been a strong motivator for this particular group to take on the challenge of online studies. External events, life changes, financial and work pressures have all played a part in their decision, and many have been inspired by others to begin this journey. As has been described, other research indicates that these motivations and influences are similar to the motivations of mature-age students generally. However, the difference is that, without the opportunity to study online, many of these students indicate that they would not be studying at all – it is only due to the availability and flexibility of online study that they feel able to embark upon this journey.

Their initial lack of knowledge about university, combined with uncertainty about their abilities – “I have thought on occasions that I wasn't smart enough for study at a university level” (respondent #43, male, 30-40) – means that they particularly value support that reaches out to them, rather than expecting them to find it by themselves. A sense of gratitude for being at university comes across strongly in quotes such as:

This is one of the greatest experiences of my life and 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. I love being able to study at home so I can be with my children and I'm so grateful that the government supports me to study so that I can support my children and myself for the rest of my life. (*Respondent #7, female, 30-40*)

Being 'grateful' may also inhibit students from being too demanding of support and assistance, which further highlights the importance of proactive support and assistance from both teaching and support staff.

These students are clearly appreciative of family support and interest where this is forthcoming, but sharing information or having full conversations about their experiences of university is often limited by the family's lack of experience and knowledge. There is increasing evidence of the importance of both family and other external encouragement and support for student persistence and retention (Park & Choi, 2007), particularly for first-in-family students (O'Shea et al., 2015). For online learners, Park and Choi (2007) advocate for the need for course administrators and teachers "to inform learners' family and organisation [workplace] of the advantages of the course in order to induce their supports" (2007:215).

What is interesting and very positive is the growth in confidence and self-esteem evident as the students progress through their studies. For respondent #40 (male, 30-40) his first unit "helped me prepare and develop my skills... It made me realise that I am smarter than I had always thought, helped settle the self-doubt about whether or not I was doing the right thing and was a great starting point for the rest of my studies".

Conclusion

First-in-family students represent a little over half of all higher education students across the Australian education sector (OECD, 2012:5). Online studies offer many of these students, particularly those who are older with responsibilities of family and work, the opportunity they need to be able to study towards a university degree. Institutions that also offer an online open-entry pathway provide additional

opportunities for those first-in-family students who do not otherwise meet entry requirements.

However, widening access is only one part of the story. The findings from this research have implications for the ways in which institutions acknowledge and support this student cohort. The list below is neither exclusive nor exhaustive, but perhaps more of a starting place from which to begin to turn the initial opportunity of online study into a truly successful and positive experience for many more students. So, to conclude, those involved in educating and supporting this cohort at higher education institutions can make a difference by:

1. Understanding that the online student population contains high numbers of first-in-family students who need support to build their confidence and to gain experience of the demands and requirements of university.
2. Recognising that this is a highly motivated cohort, seeking to 'better their lives' through study, who are willing to work hard to achieve their goals.
3. Being willing to try to accommodate the diverse and often complex needs of these students, including the multiple responsibilities and challenges that many have in their lives.
4. Providing appropriate and timely outreach and proactive support, to help them to stay and succeed.
5. Acknowledging that family members, friends and colleagues, play a crucial role in providing first-in-family students with inspiration, encouragement and ongoing support.
6. Seeking and developing strategies to better inform, educate and involve families and communities in the learning journeys of these students, and to ensure their role is sufficiently acknowledged and valued.

Undoubtedly further research is needed to progress these understandings and, in particular, to research ways that most effectively harness the positive contribution of families and communities, which

play such a significant role in supporting and encouraging first-in-family online learners.

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About the Authors

Dr Cathy Stone has many years' experience in developing and managing programs and strategies to improve student success and retention in the Australian higher education, in both on-campus and online settings. Previously employed by Open Universities Australia (OUA) as Director of Student Success, she continues to work with OUA as a consultant researcher and also holds a Conjoint Senior Lectureship in Social Work with the University of Newcastle. A key focus of her research is the experiences of mature-age and first-in-family students.

Dr Sarah O'Shea has worked in the higher education sector for nearly twenty years in both academic and student support roles. Her research focuses on student access and participation within the university sector, with particular reference to those students from identified equity groups. She favours qualitative methodologies and has largely drawn upon narrative inquiry in studies with students from low-SES backgrounds, indigenous students, those who have accessed university from alternative entry points as well as students who are the first in the family to come to university.

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Dr Janine Delahunty is on the Teaching Development Team in the University of Wollongong's Learning, Teaching and Curriculum Unit. Her core interest is in enhancing the teaching-learning experience in higher education. Her PhD study was concerned with the complexities of interaction in the online space and the effect on the learning experience. More recently her interests also encompass how to support academics support students from diverse backgrounds, including those who are first in their family to study at university. Her motivations stem from her own venture into university study, which began later in life, studying part-time for many years and doing the family-study-work balancing act.

Zoë Partington is currently studying her Masters of Social Work at the University of Melbourne, during which she undertook a student placement in 2014 at Open Universities Australia and became involved in researching first-in-family, mature-age online students. Zoë has postgraduate degrees in Psychology and Art History, and has had a ten-year career within the Arts and Entertainment industry, working firstly at Flinders University Art Museum developing relationships within the Australian and Indigenous Australian arts sectors, where she developed her strong interest in social justice and social policy.

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